

David Shackleton, “H. G. Wells, Geology, and the Ruins of Time.”
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H.G. Wells’s (1866-1946) first novella *The Time Machine* (1895) is a fantastical work of proto-science fiction that inspired the time travel sub-genre that proceeded it. David Shackleton evaluates Wells’s geological imagination and decodes his “implicit critique of the commodification of deep time” (839), a notion developed in the eighteenth century by Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726–1797), and later embedded by Wells in his fictional story of the Traveller. Shackleton analyzes the ways in which Wells deployed tropes of ruin “from geological literature . . . to imagine a new form of deep time” within his frame narrative (845). He also reflects on various critics who considered “evolutionary biology and thermodynamic physics but . . . generally overlooked geological discourse” (839), particularly in relation to Wells’s adventure story across time.

Shackleton outlines a brief historical overview of Charles Lyell (1797-1875), noted Scottish geologist, and evidences how Wells repurposed the geological timescales found in Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) before integrating them within the “early stages of the Traveller’s journey” (840). As Shackleton notes, “Lyell forged a close association between geological and architectural ruins”, which is illustrated metaphorically in the frontispiece of *Principles*. The image depicts a solitary figure observing the ruined Temple of Serapis at Pozzuoli. Much like the ruins described in Lyell’s geological study, *The Time Machine*’s ruins provide “both the Traveller and the reader with a means of comprehending the immensity of [deep] time” (846) and assessing the Anthropocene, a more recent theoretical term that was popularized by chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Josef Crutzen (1933-) and has been used since to describe the degenerative effects of human agency on Earth’s history and disposition.

Through their illustrative and narrative examples, Lyell and Wells each represent Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) assertion that we recover “only fragmentary evidence of the ‘infinite number of generations’” that preceded us (qtd. in Shackleton 848). By similarly stressing the narrative incompleteness of our geological past, Lyell established his defense against the theoretical claims of catastrophists, such as nineteenth-century French scientist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), who attributed Earth’s geological changes to unanticipated, violent, and irreversible events. The “incomplete history of the world”, reported in various geological records, was replicated by Victorian writers including Wells, whose Traveller similarly voices Darwin’s earlier contention: “Looking at these stars suddenly dwarfed my own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life . . . all the activities, all the traditions, the complex organizations, the nations, the languages, the literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man as I knew him, had been swept out of existence” (qtd. in Shackleton 846).

Shackleton argues convincingly that Wells allowed the narrative gaps in his novella to “function [much] like geological unconformities” (850). By directing his readers through these unconformities, Wells enabled them to simultaneously glimpse their geological past and future in order to analogize the negative effects of human-environment interaction. Shackleton misses the opportunity to correlate the readers’ self-realization with Wells’s own self-awareness of melancholia, which is not mentioned. In *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Wells alludes to his bouts of

periodic depression, which might have influenced his bleak, futuristic view of humanity and its “insignificant and precarious position within a hostile universe” (852).

Although Shackleton comments briefly on the “variety of interpretations” (851) that might offset his reading of the novella and its unconformities, he does not provide sufficient critical counter-interpretations to his argument. These counter arguments might have served as an evaluative mechanism for his readers. He poignantly concludes his essay by arguing that, “through its resistance to narrative organization, the geological time of *The Time Machine* remains inhuman; it forms part of a universe that is eminently inhospitable to humanity” (852). Through his insightful comments, Shackleton, much like his Victorian predecessor, tries to direct his readers through the fictional, geological, and historical incongruities that have inspired our investigative interpretations of deep time and our placement therein.

This theoretical essay adds to a voluminous field of study on H.G. Wells and *The Time Machine*. Shackleton synthesizes a close reading of the novella with supplementary accounts of the scientific studies and literary imaginations that inspired it. In so doing, he traces the effects of geological deconstruction on the romantic tropes of ruin found in Wells’s novella as well as on Victorian conceptions of time, which were being scientifically and fictionally mediated across an evolving human timescale.

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