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Munslow Ong, J

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Imperial Ecologies and Extinction in H.G. Wells's Island Stories

Abstract

This chapter analyses how two of H.G. Wells's island stories, "Æpyornis Island" from *The Stolen Bacillus* (1894), and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), expose the extirpative consequences of human, animal and plant colonization in the context of the British Empire. In both texts, humans, human-animal hybrids, previously extinct and non-native species colonize island locations, dramatically transforming their ecological structures. These new nightmare environments allow evolutionarily "inferior" creatures such as the extinct *Æpyornis* and medically-manufactured Beast People to threaten human domination. Reading Wells's fiction as examples of anti-Robinsonades that are grounded in the realities of Victorian colonial expansion, and in dialogue with scientific writings by Wells and Charles Darwin, this chapter shows how Wells questions scientific and imperialist narratives of development by presenting extinction as a possibility for all forms of life.

Chapter

In two of H.G. Wells's earliest works of fiction, the 1894 short story, "Æpyornis Island", and the 1896 novel, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, imperial and ecological anxieties are combined to reflect on, and anticipate, the extirpative effects of colonialism on diverse global animals and environments.¹ Both texts depict colonialism as a multi-species and environmental issue as human characters attempt to establish dominion over island spaces through activities such as building houses and laboratories, foraging, introducing non-native faunae, and vivisection, hunting and eating animals. These activities do not represent British progress and successful settlement, however, nor are they associated with civilized and civilizing imperial processes in the long term. Rather, the human characters' attempts to colonize are impeded both by environmental hazards and native island biota, and also by the new, imported or previously extinct non-native creatures that they have created or introduced to the island settings. Thus in "Æpyornis Island", a symbiotic relationship between a castaway man and a prehistoric elephant bird turns to deadly antagonism between apex predators; whilst in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, medically-modified "Beast people" (55) reject humans as their masters, thereby initiating a Darwinian "struggle for existence" (*On the Origin of Species*, 60-79). Wells thus

reveals how anthropogenic activity – made possible through colonization - creates nightmare environments characterized by ecologically unstable relationships. In this way, Wells is able to question the dominant Victorian views of science and empire as narratives of conquest, advancement and control by revealing their counter-developmental and connected effects, which can, and do, lead to species extinction.

Whilst the relationships between empire, ecology and extinction are investigated in various examples of Wells's fiction, they particularly resonate with his island stories, which include the two foci of this chapter, "Æpyornis Island" and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, as well as his 1928 novel, *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*. Islands provide the ideal testing ground for Wells's literary-scientific experiments because as Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith note in their analysis of postcolonial literature, islands do not function as "isolated outcrops of meaning in an immense oceanic void", but rather "open up ways of reintegrating islands back into history from which they have frequently been excluded" (2). In a *fin de siècle* context, islands work particularly well to bring together colonial and environmental concerns, not only because "islands seem to be natural colonies [...] islands, unlike continents, look like property" (Edmond and Smith, 1), but because, as Peder Anker notes, "the formative period of ecological reasoning coincides with the last years of the British Empire" as "ecological research grew out of colonial expansion on tropical islands" (1, 4). "Æpyornis Island" and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* deal with precisely these issues and processes as they represent the negative impacts of colonization and scientific research on island biota. After all, the success of European imperialism in the nineteenth century was not only due to the encompassing and systematic exploitation and extraction of people, animals, plants and minerals from the colonies to support its rapidly developing industrial economies; it was also dependent on biogeographical and ecological components, including the introduction of plants, diseases and animals that caused the collapse of colonized populations and endemics (Crosby 234-268).

Traditionally, critics have tended to separate ecological and colonial concerns in their analyses of Wells's writing. John Glendening, for example, suggests that the keynote of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is provided by Wells's depiction of biotic interrelations that he takes from Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. According to Glendening, Wells's novel is best interpreted as "a recreation of Darwin's entangled bank" (39), which signifies the "[c]hance, contingency, unpredictability, indeterminacy [...] inherent in Darwinism [and] reflect[s] the novel's involvement with evolutionary theory" (41). Conversely, Paul A. Cantor and Peter Hufnagel emphasize the role of empire in shaping *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, proposing that its main "source is British imperialism [...] and leaves its narrator Prendick wondering if human beings can be distinguished from beasts" (51-3).² Whilst neither Glendening, nor Cantor and Hufnagel, explicitly links empire to environmental impacts, recent essays by Payal Taneja and Michael Parrish Lee have made some headway in this area by offering new perspectives on depictions of colonial animals across Wells's *oeuvre*. Taneja reads the animalistic British sailors in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* as emblems of imperial commerce, leading her to "argue that the novel employs animal representation paradoxically, both to critique the capture and commodification of exotic animals and to sustain alienating views about animals and human animality" (140); whilst Lee examines representations of meat and anthropophagy across the Wells canon to pose the idea that "meat becomes both something capable of shaping narrative structure and the visceral evidence of an imperial culture" (250). Both critics thus reveal how animals and animal bodies function as commodities, food and symbols in the context of Wells's literature and Victorian imperial culture more broadly. These contentions pave the way for new understandings of Wells's writing in terms of the overlapping vectors of empire and science, as Wells shows how they facilitate exploitative and violent interactions between humans and other species that disrupt ecosystems and cause extinctions.

In the sections that follow, I examine how Wells's Victorian island stories present the combined and linked effects of colonialism and environmental crises. I begin by reading "Æpyornis Island" as an anti-Robinsonade that refuses to uphold notions of imperial authority and progress. This argument is developed through analysis of the imperial ecologies of both "Æpyornis Island" and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in terms of the material and economic conditions of the British Empire that was enabled by, and initiated, global trade and scientific research. Where evolutionary theories were often deployed to bulwark imperialist logic by interpreting Western Europeans as the highest point of development, the Beast People in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* are positioned on the racialized evolutionary ladder as a way of querying human exceptionalism and the species hierarchy. This enables Wells to introduce the notion that humans too are vulnerable to extermination. In the final part of the chapter, I turn specifically to Wells's literary representations of island extinctions. As Frank McConnell states that "[w]ithout Darwin they may literally not have been an 'H.G. Wells'" (53) and Steven McLean points out that *The Island of Doctor Moreau* "is strikingly Darwinian" (42), I analyze Wells's science and literature in dialogue with the theories of extinction proposed in Darwin's works. More unusually however, I do not prioritize discussion of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, as I suggest that the most significant ecological and extirpative ideas and motifs used in Wells's island narratives stem from Darwin's *Journal and Remarks: 1832-1836* (better known as *The Voyage of the Beagle*). I use evidence from this to support my claim that the colonial-ecological battlegrounds displayed in "Æpyornis Island" and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* identify British imperialism as an environmental nightmare of cataclysmic proportions that threatens humans and other species with extinction.

“This beastly island”: Anti-Robinsonades, Imperial Ecologies and Evolutionary Hierarchies

The literary cue for all of Wells’s island narratives is provided by Daniel Defoe’s germinal novel, as the protagonist of “Æpyornis Island”, Butcher, makes clear: “When I was a kid I thought nothing could be finer or more adventurous than the Robinson Crusoe business” (87). Like *Robinson Crusoe*, “Æpyornis Island” aims to create an air of authenticity through identifiable historical and material coordinates, so that both protagonists explain how their involvement in the developing trade economies of the British Empire led to the events in the stories. As such, Crusoe has “the wild and indigested Notion of raising my Fortune” by going “on board a Vessel bound to the Coast of *Africa*” (16) to buy slaves, and Butcher “[made] a little fortune” (81) as a result of his employment as a fossil collector for the company “Dawsons” (80). Although Dawsons’ is presumably a fictional organization, Wells does provide real historical grounding by grouping together “Dawsons’ and Jamrach’s and Museums” (84). The real figure of Charles Jamrach was then “the most extensive dealer in wild animals in Victorian Britain” and owner of “[t]he largest and most renowned wild animal shop in Victorian London” (Ritvo, 225, 244). Wells’s short story is thus framed in a recognizably Victorian British context, as various charter companies and other agencies were operating in the late nineteenth century to source specimens from distant locations for scientific research, museum displays and personal collections.

Initially, the stock tropes associated with Defoe’s novel, as well as the numerous other Victorian Robinsonades that followed, such as R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858) and Jules Verne’s *The Mysterious Island* (1874), are apparent in Wells’s story. Yet, of the ten key steps of the “successful Robinsonade” (14) listed by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Æpyornis Island” (partially) fulfils only two: “First, the accidental arrival, via shipwreck, of a Christian, European male (often a boy) to island shores”; and second, “[t]he island is deserted, constructed as a *terra nullius* (empty land), tropical, and extremely fertile” (14). Other stock tropes of the

Robinsonade are deliberately manipulated or distorted by Wells to highlight hypocrisies in imperial ideologies and practices, as well as to express anxieties over the future of the British Empire and its consequences for diverse global environments. Take for example, DeLoughrey's essential chain of events in which the protagonist of the Robinsonade must firstly fear "the arrival of a non-European, non-Christian subject [...] associated with violence to the European in the form of kidnapping, infanticide, cannibalism, or murder", which "in turn justifies a European moral imperative to respond with technological violence (fire-arms)". DeLoughrey goes on to explain how this then enables "the assimilation of the islander into European social mores" as "'the native' is renamed and becomes the primary source of labor" (14). "Æpyornis Island" does not conform to this narrative pattern. Butcher does not encounter native cannibal islanders, nor is he portrayed as a key agent or representative of civilization. As he embarks on his expedition, Butcher already has colonial subjects as servants, specifically the two nameless "native chaps" (82) who help him to find four *Aepyornis* eggs on the shores of a "swamp about ninety miles north of Antananarivo" (81). When, in Butcher's words, "one of my nigger chaps dropped one on a rock and it smashed [...] [s]aid a centipede had bit him" (82), Butcher easily and uncritically admits he "lammed into" the man who broke the egg, "hit him about rather" and gave him a "kicking" (82, 83). Butcher then recalls that as night fell, "these blessed heathen – quite regardless of the tranquil air of things – plott[ed] to cut off with the boat and leave me all alone" (83), so that by the time he realizes that the men have taken the remaining eggs and the only canoe, they are "twenty yards from land" (83).

Whilst this partial synopsis indicates that a conventional imperialist-racist conception of colonial subjects as traitorous is certainly in play, the beatings and behaviors that prompt the abandonment of Butcher, the excessive use of racist language, and the tone, invite a more nuanced understanding of the colonial power dynamics of the text, the economic context, and *fin de siècle* fears of a declining empire. Deviating from the usual narrative pattern of the

Robinsonade, the non-European characters are already in service to the British Empire at the start of the expedition. This is not an expression of imperial success however, because Butcher is not depicted as an advanced or paternalistic colonist or civilizing force. He is self-obsessed, violent, and bullying, and not only lacks the empathy to be able to imagine that his companions may not interpret the “tranquil air” of their location exactly as he does, he is also unable to anticipate his companions’ flight. Butcher never refers to either of the men by name, and shifts from the initial description of them as “native chaps”, to “nigger chaps”, “heathen” and “nigger” when they smash the egg and depart in the boat (82-84). Although in the Victorian period, terms such as these were in wide usage and not necessarily considered particularly derogatory or cruel, the context suggests a shift from a genial to hostile attitude that can be mapped on to the increasing deployment of racialized language. Moreover, when Butcher eventually arrives on the island anticipating a Defoesque adventure, he quickly realizes “that place was as monotonous as a book of sermons” and “Robinson Crusoe don’t make near enough of his loneliness” (87). The hypocrisy of Butcher’s description of the “heathen” men is keenly felt here, whilst the references to Crusoe identify a clear difference in tone between the moralizing, serious practicality of the conventional Robinsonade versus the “aesthetic and farcical [...] lightness of tone” (Yoonjoung Choi 192) that characterizes “Æpyornis Island”. This indicates that the short story functions as an anti-Robinsonade, designed to defamiliarize the imperialist adventure narrative by drawing attention to the brutality and pretensions of the British Empire, whilst anticipating its decline.

If Butcher represents the blind arrogance of the European colonizer, and the complacency and cruelty of the British Empire at its apogee, then the fleeing men are the new colonial competitors for commodities and resources. As such, Wells expresses a concern that colonial expansion and associated economic globalization might not always work to benefit only the British Empire, as it seems the Malagasy men have well-established imperialist sensibilities

that mean they recognize the commercial value of the eggs and intend to take advantage of these products even at the cost of human life. In desperation, Butcher swims out to the departing canoe, and only just manages to kill one of the men with “a precious lucky shot for a revolver” (84). Whilst in a sense this enacts the European “technological violence” that DeLoughrey requires of the Robinsonade, Wells neglects to provide the associated ideological justification for empire, as the shooting is not governed by a clear “moral imperative” (14), and does not lead to successful indoctrination of the remaining non-European to European ways of life. In the representation of the Malagasy men as colonial competitors, and in the depiction of Butcher’s tenuous grip on life as dependent on technology as much as chance, Wells looks not only towards the end of British dominance, but also signals how the deadly effects of colonialism may then turn upon the colonizers themselves.³

Whilst the recognizable material context and interplay of human relations clearly identify the colonial concerns of “Æpyornis Island”, the main thrust of the narrative focuses on the environmental consequences of economic imperialism. Indeed “Æpyornis Island” and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* seem less concerned with issues of nation and race, and more concerned with exploring the effects of anthropogenic activity on animals and environments – hence why the Malagasy men are positioned as victims of colonization as well as colonizing forces themselves. From this perspective, Wells is able to reveal how colonized environments resist human intervention and geomorphic modifications of varied kinds, irrespective of anthropic markers such as race and nation. This is played out on a small scale in “Æpyornis Island”, as Butcher describes how it took “all day to dig in the slush” to recover the *Aepyornis* eggs, which covered him and his companions “with beastly black mud” (82); and again on a much larger scale in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, where the inhabitants are confined to “this beastly island” (106) by “three sides [...] [of] coral reefs [...] fumaroles to the northwards” and an expanse of ocean, with the threat of disaster always present: “[n]ow and then a faint quiver

of earthquake would be sensible, and sometimes the ascent of the spire of smoke would be rendered tumultuous by gusts of steam” (81). Not only is this island bounded, it is covered in “dense thicket” (92) that prevents humans and Beast People from moving around by “retard[ing] our movements exceedingly [...] fronds flicking into our faces, ropy creepers catching us under the chin or gripping our ankles, thorny plants hooking into and tearing cloth and flesh together” (92). Thus although the animals that are used to form the Beast People are themselves slaves of empire, forcibly taken, tortured and biologically transformed; in ecological terms, they are constructed as another colonizing species. In this way, Wells shows how settler colonialism also involves the settlement of plants and animals. The name of the schooner that brings the humans and animals to the island emphasizes this point, as *Ipecacuanha* is a mainland South American plant traditionally used in medicine as an emetic. In the choice of this name, Wells suggests the invasion of non-native species, and also insinuates that when the boat’s contents are *implanted*, the island will become sick.

The island animals and environments are not only able to withstand and slow the processes of scientific and colonial control in both narratives, they are also able to exert more direct and deadly attacks. When, in “Æpyornis Island”, Butcher swims out to the men in the departing canoe, he finds that the man who was earlier bitten, “was as dead as a door-nail and all puffed up and purple [...] I held an inquest on him, brought in a verdict against some snake, scorpion, or centipede unknown, and sent him overboard” (85). This death foreshadows the deadly interaction between Butcher and the *Aepyornis*, and even resonates with the deaths of the “six Kanakas”⁴ (75) in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. As Moreau recalls, “one died of a wounded heel that he poisoned in some way with plant-juice”; another was killed by one of Moreau’s creations, “a limbless thing with a horrible face” (77); and the remaining four were drowned or suspected drowned as they sought to escape the island. With only one exception, the deaths of the South Sea Islanders in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and the Malagasy men in “Æpyornis

Island” are not the result of direct conflict between humans, and so do not evoke the triumphs of British dominance and progress that would normally be associated with a Robinsonade. Instead, the deaths undermine conventional Victorian notions of human exceptionalism, the species hierarchy, and the evolutionary ladder, because most of the men are killed by animals, plants and water. In this way, Wells makes colonialism the context for the idea that environmental hazards, and small, microscopic or manufactured life forms could wipe out superior life forms. He returns to this idea repeatedly across his early texts. For example, the invading Martians in *The War of the Worlds* are “slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared” (161); and the collection in which “Æpyornis Island” appears contains a range of stories that reflect “the geography of empire” (Parrinder, 86) and describe violent and deadly confrontations between humans and other organisms. Thus an anarchist attempts to spread deadly Asiatic cholera in London in “The Stolen Bacillus”; a Bornean colugo attacks a man in “In the Avu Observatory”; and plants attempt to, or are successful in, killing men in “The Flowering of the Strange Orchid” and “The Treasure in the Forest”. What all of these texts imply then, is that even diminutive, seemingly insignificant or man-made biota encountered or developed through processes of colonization cannot always be assimilated into established cultural, evolutionary or ecological hierarchies. Instead, they challenge or destabilize these models by exposing how anthropogenic activities conducted under the banner of empire and science can threaten all forms of life.

The Island of Doctor Moreau is in some senses a rewritten and developed version of a number of texts in *The Stolen Bacillus* collection, including “Æpyornis Island” as well as “The Triumphs of a Taxidermist”. In this text, the Taxidermist claims that he has “*created* birds [...] *New* birds. Improvements. Like no birds that was ever seen before” (37), meaning that one of his “bogus stuffed bird[s]” (38) was accepted by ornithologists as a hitherto undiscovered species. Through the character Moreau, Wells takes this remaking and remodeling to new and

terrifying heights, as the vivisector medically modifies conscious animals in an attempt to turn them into humans, who are then governed by Moreau and made to learn his “laws”. It is possible then, to read the Beast People as Cantor and Hufnagel do, when they claim: “[t]he Beast People Moreau creates correspond to natives in the British colonial imagination” (52). This comparison draws on Victorian cultural and scientific thought that sought to explain and justify the imperial project through a notion of racial supremacy. For example, in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin argues that the great apes and humans exist in a chain of direct descent in which sub-Saharan Africans and Australian Aboriginals are positioned at lower rungs of development than the Western European. In one passage, he discusses how the growth of empire will cause extinction of certain groups on this evolutionary ladder:

Breaks [in the organic chain] often occur in all parts of the series, some being wide, sharp and defined, others less so in various degrees; [...] At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes [...] will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla” (201-202)

Wells too subscribed to a notion of continuity between humans and other species, describing man in an 1896 essay on human evolution as “the culminating ape” (217), though crucially, his Victorian literature does not draw on this model to enforce imperialist ideologies. Whilst evolutionary theories that embedded scientific racism were commonly used to bulwark notions of European dominance and its civilizing missions, the suggestion of shared corporeality and lineage also induced anxieties over interpenetration of race and species. Associated ideas around miscegenation and degeneration are embodied in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by the

Beast People, and most particularly the Ape Man, who is described as having “a black negroid face” (28), as well as M’Ling, who is repeatedly described as “the black-faced man” (13) and “the most human-looking of all the Beast Folk” (83). Indeed M’Ling’s position in the organic chain is made clear in his first appearance, as he is “standing on the ladder” (13) of the ship between the caged animals on the deck and the cabin inhabited by humans, Prendick and Montgomery.

Whilst the interpretation of Beast People as substitutes for colonized subjects functions by drawing on the discourse of scientific racism so prominent in *fin de siècle* writings on degeneration, race and eugenics, it lacks a certain attentiveness to the economic context and ecological concerns of the novel. After all, the animals that Moreau vivisects are not native island species. Moreau’s scientific experiments are thus economically linked to the expansion of empire and British dominance in global trade, because they are only made possible by the “once in a year or so” that Montgomery, “go[es] to Arica to deal with Moreau’s agent, a trader in animals there” (83). Most of Moreau’s animals tend to be either exotic captives from colonial sub-Saharan Africa and South America, or otherwise domesticated animals found on British farms and in households as pets. The labelling strategies adopted by Prendick make this clear, as whilst most of the Beast People are known by their dominant animal component followed by “man” or “woman” - hence Leopard-man, Ape-man, Swine-woman and Wolf-woman – many others are described as a combination of exotic and domestic species, as in the Hyena-swine, Horse-rhinoceros and Bear-bull. Once again, this supports the notion that there is a continuity of species, even across the rigorously policed boundaries of human/animal, culture/nature, domestic/foreign and primitive/civilized that Victorian culture worked so hard to maintain. These amalgamations can therefore be read in light of a proposition made by John Miller, when he writes that: “shared, or at least related, bodiliness leads to a recognition of the interpenetration of self and other; the inevitable susceptibility of this bodily nature and its

embeddedness in the biosphere points also to a shared fate” (188). This idea that the shared fate of the human/animal characters in the nightmare environments of Wells’s island fiction may in fact be extinction, thus provides the focus of the final part of this chapter.

“I didn’t mean to be chased about a desert island by any damned anachronisms”: Colonization, Competition and Extinction

In 1796, Georges Cuvier delivered two precedent-setting lectures on extinction. In the first, he grouped together a number of fossils and fossil skeletons, claiming that they were from an extinct species of elephant (later named the *Elephas primigenius* or woolly mammoth), whilst in the second, he identified a single set of skeleton remains as an extinct *Megatherium* (giant ground sloth). These lectures prompted a host of new theories of extinction that drew heavily on island-based research because these locations were typically ecologically unique, and due to their isolation from continental biota, had more vulnerable ecosystems with higher proportions of species extinctions. Indeed both the *Elephas primigenius* and *Megatherium* were island dwellers, as the last known populations of the woolly mammoth inhabited Wrangel Island in the Arctic, whilst the giant ground sloth was native to South America when it was an island continent in the Cenozoic Era. Following the work of Cuvier, the *Elephas primigenius* and the *Megatherium* came to inhabit a particular prominence in the Victorian cultural imagination, and this was enhanced by the recovery of additional fossils across the nineteenth century, including Darwin’s discovery of a *Megatherium* skull in Argentina during his travels on *The Beagle*.⁵ These creatures began to feature in Victorian novels too, as Gowan Dawson notes, *Megatheria* “appear[ed] regularly in Thackeray’s writing” (211), whilst in Wells’s *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveler enters the Palace of Green Porcelain to find:

standing strange and gaunt in the centre of the hall, what was clearly the lower part of a huge skeleton. I recognised by the oblique feet that it was some extinct creature after the fashion of the Megatherium. The skull and the upper bones lay beside it in the thick dust, and in one place, where rain-water had dropped through a leak in the roof, the thing itself had been worn away. (64)

These prehistoric giant ground sloths appear once again in Wells's 1928 novel, *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*, as a live, degenerating strain of "dreary *Megatheria*" that inhabit the islet but "have passed and are passing away [...] So that far from Evolution being necessarily a strenuous upward progress to more life and yet more life, it might become, it could and did evidently in this case become, a graceless drift towards a dead end" (118, 125). In both *The Time Machine* and *Mr Blettsworthy of Rampole Island*, Wells uses the *Megatherium* as a symbol of a deceased or dying species that is emblematic of anxieties around degeneration, and presents the readers with reminders of their own mortality and possible extinction.

Wells wrote extensively on extirpation in the Victorian period, often in the context of empire, and it is worth looking at some of these passages in extended form as they reveal not only Wells's specific interest in large ratites such as the dodo and *Aepyornis* as prime figures of extinction, but also how he uses extinct animals to introduce, and reflect on, the precarity of human life. In one of Wells's earliest scientific articles, the 1893 essay "On Extinction", he writes:

In the last hundred years the swift change of condition throughout the world, due to the invention of new means of transit, geographical discovery, and the consequent "swarming" of the whole globe by civilised men, has pushed many an animal to the very verge of destruction. It is not only the dodo that has gone; for dozens of genera and hundreds of species, this century has witnessed the writing on the wall.

[...] The list of destruction has yet to be made in its completeness. But the grand bison is the statuesque type and example of the doomed races.

And in Wells's 1897 novel, *The War of the Worlds*, the narrator reflects:

[W]e must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (6-7)

The consilience between Wells's science and literature extends from the shared examples of the dodo and bison as icons of species extinction caused by colonization, to links between animal and human extirpation. In the 1893 essay, Wells shows how the devastating ecological impact of colonization is facilitated by economic and technological factors, so that European colonists occupy uniquely privileged positions as hunters capable of mass slaughter, and key agents in the introduction of non-native, invasive species to diverse locations. Yet at the same time, this assertion is embedded in a decidedly literary language specifically designed to explore the realities of extinction for all forms of life. By flattening out the species hierarchy in his descriptions of "civilised men" as zoomorphized "swarming" insects, and bison as anthropomorphized "example[s] of the doomed races", Wells is able to imply that humans are not impassably divided from, or unquestionably superior to, other animals. He develops this idea in the passage from *The War of the Worlds*, using the specific example of the Aboriginal Tasmanian people to make clear his argument that humans are merely one of many organisms and hence are equally susceptible to extirpation. Christina Alt provides a neat analysis of this aspect of the novel when she writes: "the history of imperialism, although typically driven by

one human group's belief in its superiority over others, ultimately refutes rather than confirms human exceptionalism and highlights human beings' vulnerability to extinction" (26-27). Although Alt focuses on *The War of the Worlds*, the point also applies to Wells's island narratives, that make the link between advances in science and technology enabled by intensified capitalist development, the expansion of empire, and extirpation. In this way, colonization and developing scientific knowledge are shown to represent potential sources of both environmental- and self-destruction.

The dodo that features in Wells's 1893 essay and 1897 novel is just one of many giant birds that appear in his Victorian writings. Whilst in the words of Victorian geographer, Israel Cook Russell, "[t]he dodo furnishes the best-known example of the extermination of a species by the agency of man" (12), Thomas Anderson points out that the dodo's fame was also "directly linked to the plight of other flightless birds such as the moa and *Aepyornis*" (692). Ratites such as the moa and *Aepyornis* were widely discussed in evolutionary writings of the nineteenth century, including in the work of Darwin, who "considered the geographical reach of giant birds crucial to the development of his theory of natural selection" (Anderson, 675). Certainly it seems that *The Voyage of the Beagle* provided a number of key ideas, plot points and motifs for Wells's island narratives. For example, just as the scientist Darwin spends time in Chile on his way to conduct scientific research relating to animals on the Galapagos Islands (*The Voyage of the Beagle*, 442-443), so too does Montgomery pick up animals from the Chilean port of Arica before taking them to a different Pacific Island for Moreau's scientific experiments (*The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 83). There are also extensive references to rhea and ostrich in *The Voyage of the Beagle* that correspond to the various giant birds that appear in Wells's *The Stolen Bacillus* collection: moa, dodo and auks are mentioned in "Triumphs of Taxidermist", ostrich are the titular species and focus of "A Deal in Ostriches", and the elephant bird dominates in "*Aepyornis* Island". This last, the *Aepyornis*, is uniquely placed to tie together

Wells's interests in island ecologies and extirpation. This is because the *Aepyornis*, like the *Megatherium*, was an iconic example of insular gigantism, evidencing the ecogeographic rule that small mainland species evolve larger bodies when isolated on islands. Island megafauna were renowned for their vulnerability to human colonization, and indeed, both the *Aepyornis* and *Megatherium* were brought to extinction by human activity: through hunting, an extended phase of anthropogenic environmental modifications, and/or the introduction of disease via domesticated animals (Turvey, 23, 32-34). In creating a fictitious genus of the *Aepyornithidae* then, Wells tests and reveals how colonization (particularly of island locations) leads to extinction, though he takes this one step further by using the endling bird as a comparator to reflect on precarity of human life too.

When Butcher is first cast adrift, it seems that the species hierarchy is assured, even if Butcher's survival is not, as he manages to stay alive by consuming two of the three remaining *Aepyornis* eggs, finding to his astonishment, that both contain embryos at different stages of development. When Butcher's boat eventually runs aground, he incubates and hatches the remaining egg, and names the bird "Man Friday" (89) in yet another nod to *Robinson Crusoe*. Unlike in Defoe's novel, Wells's Friday is not a colonial servant, rather it is Butcher who serves the *Aepyornis* by providing him with food and shelter, and in return benefits from his peaceable companionship for two years. However, when Friday reaches maturity, at "fourteen feet high to the bill of him, with a big, broad head like the end of a pickaxe", Butcher reveals that he has "two huge brown eyes with yellow rims, set together like a man's – not out of sight of each other like a hen's" (90). This uncanny physical feature (not typical of the real *Aepyornithidae*) identifies Friday as predator rather than prey, and consequently as a competitor for island food and resources. A "struggle for existence" (*On the Origin of Species*, 60) ensues, as after a period without food, Butcher and Friday come to blows over a fish, forcing Butcher to flee "full tilt" as Friday "kept landing out at me with sledgehammer kicks and bringing his pickaxe down on

the back of my head” (90-91). With Friday now firmly established as the apex predator, Butcher is obliged to retreat into uninhabitable island spaces, and he spends his days submerged in the lagoon or high up in palm trees to escape the bird’s attacks.

The nightmare environment engendered by Friday’s maturation as a superior colonizing force and competing predator is met with fear and frustration on the part of Butcher, which he conveys in evolutionary terms, describing Friday as “this blessed fossil”, “extinct animal” and “[a] great, gawky, out-of-date bird”, railing: “I didn’t mean to be chased about a desert island by any damned anachronisms” (91-92). The light-hearted and humorous nature of these epithets make it possible to read the text in line with Peter Kemp’s contention that although “[e]xtinction is a frequent topic in Wells’s early writings”, he demonstrates little “unease” about the topic, and this is reflected in “the tone of Wells’s early essays on extinction, [which] also, tends to be unperturbed” (142-3). Yet the horror of Friday’s death, alongside the torture and bloodshed of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, do point towards a rather more anxious and fearful attitude to empire and ecological collapse than Kemp acknowledges. Thus in “Æpyornis Island”, Friday and Butcher become intent on killing one another, and it seems the bird may succeed until Butcher hits upon a plan that once again seems to draw inspiration from *The Voyage of the Beagle*. In the journal, Darwin recalls riding around the pampas in South America, trying to catch rhea, “so shy, wary and solitary, and although so fleet in its pace, it falls a prey, without much difficulty, to the Indian or Gaucho armed with the bolas” (105). In “Æpyornis Island”, Butcher fashions his *bolas* out of fishing line, seaweed and lumps of coral, throwing it around Friday’s legs:

and as soon as he went down I was out of the water and sawing at his neck with my knife [...] I felt like a murderer while I did it, though my anger was hot against him. When I stood over him and saw him bleeding on the white sand, and his beautiful great legs and neck writhing in his last agony...Pah! (92)

This graphic description of the unwilling hunter *butchering* the body of his two-year companion stresses the human and animal costs of colonial expansion, and expresses anxieties about its extirpative effects. Matthew Whittle's work on representations of colonial hunting in twentieth-century literature and art is applicable here, when he writes that at the point of death, "the hunter's violent conquest over the natural environment is realized and exposed" (202) and registers as "loss, rather than triumph" (207). Where previously Butcher was able to cling to the logic of economic imperialism, always "think[ing] how I could make a living out of [Friday] by showing him about if I ever got taken off [the island]" (89-90), now he recognizes his own brutality and mortality, and the limits of colonial power, and this leads in turn to suicidal ideation as Butcher contemplates "walk[ing] out into the sea and finish up business that way" (93). Although Butcher is eventually reintegrated into imperialist culture by his rescue and the sale of Friday's bones, his knowledge of the precarity of human life remains. This is delivered via an idiom in the penultimate line of the text, where Butcher states that the discovery of "more *Æpyornises*" might cause "some scientific swell" to "burst a blood-vessel" (93). In-keeping with the light-hearted tone used earlier to defamiliarize the ideological underpinnings of the Robinsonade genre, Butcher here conjoins science and empire by suggesting that the colonial practice of fossil collection initiates a damaging or even deadly response in the body of the imagined scientist. This isomorphism between an extinct creature and a living human, brought to light through the activities of empire, thus emphasizes once more that the fate of humans may indeed be the same as the fate of the *Aepyornis*.

Like "*Æpyornis Island*", *The Island of Doctor Moreau* explores issues of extinction through depictions of various human and man-made endlings, and the consilience between Wells's science and literature is again apparent. In an 1891 essay, "Zoological Retrogression", Wells writes that "rapid progress has often been followed by rapid extinction and degeneration" (167); and in an 1894 essay, "The Extinction of Man", he posits that "[i]n the case of every

other predominant animal the world has ever seen, I repeat, the hour of its complete ascendancy has been the eve of its entire overthrow” (179). Both of these assertions bear out in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* as the vivisector exemplifies the pinnacle of imperial control and scientific advancements in his colonization of the island and establishment of laboratories. Moreau’s belief that his highest creation, the vivisected puma, is “drawing near the fastness” (78), ends up being the moment of his, and the island’s, decline, as the puma breaks free and manages to turn colonial violence back on the colonial perpetrator by killing Moreau before succumbing to her own deadly wounds. Without the imperial authority of their master, the Beast People begin an accelerated reversion back to their animal origins as “the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again” (77). This in turn causes the rapid decline of social and ecological structures of island life.

Already a nightmare environment, the island now enacts the Darwinian rule that “competition should be most severe between allied forms” (*On the Origin of Species*, 76) so that Montgomery and his colonial servant, M’Ling retreat into drunkenness and are killed by the hairy grey Beast Man, who is found by Prendick also “dead, but still gripping Montgomery’s throat with its curving claws” (110). As the last remaining human, Prendick becomes increasingly animalistic as he engages in “the great battle for life” (*On the Origin of Species*, 76) in direct competition with the Hyena-Swine. When Prendick’s loyal companion, the Dog Man, is killed and eaten by his nemesis, Prendick manages to shoot the Hyena-Swine just as “the thing rose straight at me in a leap [...] and it had died even as it leapt”, forcing Prendick to “[crawl] out from under its unclean weight” (126). Where Moreau and Montgomery are themselves killed as they kill the puma and the Grey Man, Prendick only narrowly manages to avoid extinction. Like each of the unique Beast People, Prendick is an endling. As there are no other humans, and the Beast People seem to conform to the predominant biological rule that hybrid species are infertile, the continuation of humanoid forms on the island becomes

impossible. Here Wells anticipates the longer-term consequences of imperialist expansion and anthropogenic activities, because as he argues in two of his early essays on degeneration and extinction, “in no case does the record of the fossils show a really dominant species succeeded by its own descendants” (“The Extinction of Man”, 173), and “Nature is, in unsuspected obscurity, equipping some now humble creature with wider possibilities of appetite, endurance or destruction, to rise in the fulness [sic] of time and sweep *homo* away into the darkness from which his universe arose” (“Zoological Retrogression, 168). The Introduction to *The Island of Doctor Moreau* provides a literary example that bears out this theory. It is presented in the hand of Prendick’s nephew, and infers that the island that hosted Moreau’s laboratory is “Noble’s Isle, a small volcanic islet”, which was re-discovered three years after Prendick’s departure and found to be “uninhabited [...] except certain curious white moths, some hogs and rabbits, and some rather peculiar rats” (5). The nightmare environment, it seems, culminates in the extinction of all dominant humanoid forms, and the island is inherited by organisms considered to be lower down the evolutionary ladder. It is interesting too that the surviving mammals are also colonizing species: non-native hogs and rabbits brought over for Moreau’s experiments and Montgomery’s food, and stowaway rats famous for being, in Donald R. Drake and Terry L. Hunt’s words, “the original invasive ‘species’ – from the colonization of the Pacific Islands to the global expansion of Europeans” (1483). Thus in the Introduction Wells shows how humanity as whole is threatened by colonizing activities, and this may be initiated by, or facilitate, the rise of seemingly more “humble creature[s]” (“Zoological Retrogression, 168).

Both of Wells’s Victorian island narratives expose economic imperialism and associated scientific innovations as anthropogenic forces that radically endanger the conditions that make human life possible. The introduction of humans to island locations is not presented as a triumph of British imperialism, but rather sets the stage for increased competition and deadly battles between native and non-native biota. Moreover, the resistance to human exceptionalism

and dominance enacted by non-human biotic forms in both “Æpyornis Island” and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* suggests that colonization is not solely an anthropic pursuit, but is also carried out by other species in association with human intervention, and can lead to human extinction. As such, the nightmare environments of Wells’s stories question scientific and capitalist-imperialist narratives of development by dramatizing the potentially disastrous consequences of human, animal and plant colonization on all forms of life. The implications of these representations are provided in the various deaths that occur in the texts, and in the damage suffered by Prendick and Butcher as a result of their island adventures. Their scarred bodies, physical changes, and emotional traumas provide lasting reminders of the destructive effects of colonialism on humans and other species, whilst their tentative hold on life expresses the need for greater ecological awareness and responsibility in order for humanity to survive just that little bit longer.

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Notes

¹ "Æpyornis Island" was one of many short stories to appear in the *Pall Mall Budget* in 1894, following editor Lewis Hind's request that Wells write a series of "single sitting stories" (Hammond, 12). These were then collected and published as *The Stolen Bacillus* in 1895.

² Other articles and book sections that focus on either imperialism or animals in Wells's writings include those by Gold; Rieder (104-110); Kerslake; Rohman.

³ It is worth noting that these ideas are echoed in other of Wells's stories, including "Through a Lost Window" in *The Stolen Bacillus* collection, as well as the chapter "How I Stole the Heaps of Quap from Mordet Island" in the 1908 novel, *Tono-Bungay*. The former depicts a colonial servant who abandons his post and runs amok along a river in the Home Counties stabbing people with a Malaysian krees knife. He is eventually killed through a combination of gunshot wound delivered by his master, Young Fitzgibbon, and a blow to the head with a medicine bottle, delivered by a convalescent man in bed with two broken legs (45-54). As in "Æpyornis Island", the rebellious servant is described in racist terms, represents a very real threat to British life, and is only narrowly defeated by an ailing Englishman as the embodiment of an empire in decline. The chapter from *Tono-Bungay* is described by the narrator, George, as an "expedition to Mordet Island [that] stands apart from all the rest of my life" (320), and indeed operates as an isolated island-based vignette to comment on the degenerative effects of imperialism through the example of mineral extraction in the colonies. In the chapter, George embarks on a voyage to a small African island in search of the newly-discovered mineral, "quap [...] the most radioactive stuff in the world" (224). Whilst there, he kills a local African man in "the most unmeaning and purposeless murder imaginable" (333) in order to prevent him from notifying others about the colonial theft of the mineral. George's destructive imperial activities are presented as a degenerative force with lasting consequences, as the stolen quap

causes the returning ship to disintegrate before it reaches British shores, and with it sinks George's colonial capital and justification for the British imperial enterprise.

⁴ "Kanaka" is now seen as an offensive term to describe South Sea Islander workers.

⁵ This is noted by Wells in his co-authored study, *The Science of Life* (390-391).