

Justyna Jajszczok

Uniwersytet Śląski
justyna.jajszczok@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-4034-4054

The future-war fiction and the problem of two camps in “The Battle of Dorking” and P.G. Wodehouse’s *The Swoop!*

Introduction

[B]oth the image of the mushroom cloud and that of the spiked helmet inscribe a variety of displaced anxieties, including concerns about industrialism, technological progress, class antagonism and xenophobia. They represent both the fear of the end of civilization and an autoerotic desire to witness that very event, to purge deep-set anxieties through an imaginary act of self-immolation.¹

The above epigraph is taken from C.J. Keep’s article, in which he notes the analogies between propagandist messages from the British future-war stories of the decades between 1871 and 1914 and the contemporary – to him at the time – political threats. Although the article was published in the early 1990s, its point is as relevant nowadays as it was originally. The image of the mushroom cloud has been replaced by other emotive pictures, from

¹ C. J. Keep, “Fearful Domestication: Future-War Stories and the Organization of Consent, 1871–1914,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1990), p. 3.

photographs of refugee children dying on Turkish beaches to turtles with straws stuck in their nostrils (depending largely on what one considers the greatest threat of the 2010s), but the fears (and desires) listed by Keep are still recognisable, especially in Brexit Britain in 2019. His original article draws parallels between narratives a hundred years apart; thirty years on, it seems that nothing much has changed, at least in this particular respect.

What future-war stories revealed, and what has been a constant fixture of political discourse since, are the two approaches that commentators chose when speculating about the future. In the first camp there are those who genuinely believe in the projected threats, be they the foreign military invasion or the nuclear attack, and wish to inform and prepare the public for the worst case scenario. Whether these threats pose reasonable risks or not is irrelevant; it is the call for vigilance and preparedness that matters. The other camp is comprised of those who disregard and ridicule both the alarmist messages and the messengers; here the emphasis is put on common sense and stoicism. Both camps, as expected, consider their approach superior and – in a more problematic way – both thus frustrate their opportunity to establish any thread of mutual understanding, let alone communicate. The resulting gap remains intact, and efforts at building bridges prove largely ineffective.

This division is perfectly visible in the evolution of the invasion fiction of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The article explores two examples of future-war stories as the representatives of these two camps: the alarmist “The Battle of Dorking” of 1871 and the satirical *The Swoop!* of 1909. Both these texts predict an invasion on the British Isles but their conclusions are extremely different. The goal here is to compare and contrast their messages and investigate their impacts, especially in terms of their ability to rouse public opinion.

Camp One: “The Battle of Dorking” (1871)

The consensus among literary scholars is that the genre of invasion literature (also referred to as future-war stories or speculative fiction) was inaugurated in England by George Tomkyns Chesney’s “The Battle of Dorking” in 1871.² The author, Lieutenant-Colonel of the Royal Engineers,

² There had been other literary genres utilising these topics earlier, for instance in France. See: I.F. Clarke, “Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1997), pp. 33–46.

wrote a short prose piece in which he painted a terrifying vision of Great Britain being attacked and conquered by Germans within a few short weeks, inspired by the surprising and efficient victory of the German army in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71.³ I.F. Clarke notes that repercussions of the conflict were of course endlessly discussed “in innumerable articles, tracts and books about the defence of the nation and the future of the army”;⁴ this buzz, however, did not seem to be channelled into one coherent voice of concern until Chesney’s text appeared. As a result, instead of perusing through sheets filled with technical jargon, the lay reader had at last a simple, concise story to read in one sitting – one engaging and convincing enough to clarify and explain the dangers and threats of dismissing dangers that suddenly appeared very real and very imminent. We know that this was precisely the point of Chesney, who wrote the following proposal to John Blackwood in February 1871: “a useful way of bringing home to the country the necessity for a thorough reorganisation [of army] might be a tale [...] describing a successful invasion of England, and the collapse of our power and commerce in consequence.”⁵ Even if his intention was just to cut the noise and speak directly to the reader, in choosing fiction, Chesney could, on the one hand, spread the wings of his imagination, and, on the other, refuse to take any responsibility for either political or social reactions his “tale” may inspire and thus to raise the alarm with impunity, a tactic that might have saved his military career.⁶

“Dorking” was originally published in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, “the mouthpiece of Scotland’s Tory political elite,” which had already established its tradition of printing stirring tales of invasion or dangers

³ Depending on a critic, “Dorking” is classified as a novel, a novella, a short story – and as an article.

⁴ Clarke, “Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*,” p. 40.

⁵ George Tomkyns Chesney, quoted in: *Ibid.*

⁶ Kirkwood notes that this was exceptional rather than typical. “Remarkably, despite Dorking creating such public controversy and having earned its creator the enmity of much of the government front bench, George Tomkyns Chesney continued to be promoted through the ranks. This experience stands in stark contrast to that of others who sought to ‘raise the alarm’ about the unpreparedness of the nation for war. Charles Metcalfe Macgregor, for example, was ‘exiled’ to the Punjab frontier and lost his job as head of British military intelligence for India following his publication of *The Defence of India* (1884), which criticized Britain’s supposed lack of preparedness in the face of Russian encroachment from Central Asia. One can explain this divergence in part due to Macgregor’s exposed position, but also Chesney’s choice to shroud his purpose through fiction. Although his story effectively influenced public and elite (military and political) debates, he could claim he was not guilty of unduly swaying civilian decision-making.” Patrick M. Kirkwood, “The Impact of Fiction on Public Debate in Late Victorian Britain: *The Battle of Dorking* and the ‘Lost Career’ of Sir George Tomkyns Chesney,” *Graduate History Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fall 2012), pp. 10–11.

to “public morality” that were supposed to rouse its readers.⁷ It was an unexpected success, having sold first in seven reprints of the issue and then in over 110,000 standalone pamphlets in the summer of 1871.⁸ Chesney’s piece highlighted not just his personal apprehensions which, as a military man, he felt deserved due attention, but it also channelled the fears and anxieties with whom a number of his reading public identified. Here in fictitious form was what many were fearing was about to happen, and the frustration with the inaction of the authorities stirred “such indignation in the United Kingdom,” I.F. Clarke reports, “that the prime minister, William Gladstone, felt he had to speak out against the ‘alarmism’ of ‘a famous article called *The Battle of Dorking*’.”⁹ In his speech, Gladstone expressed his criticism of “Dorking,” pointing to its dangerous potential to, on the one hand, undermine British position on the global arena (“that such follies could find currency or even favour with portions of British public”), and on the other – to push for more unnecessary (at least in his eyes) spending on defence.¹⁰ The Prime Minister’s remarks prove that Chesney’s text, even though it was a speculative tale, was treated as a work of non-fiction, worthy of political and public attention.

“Dorking” inspired a genre which thrived until the beginning of the Great War, and in the four decades of its existence, invasion literature produced some great works (among them perhaps the most famous *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad published in 1907) and some truly shameful examples of “the most extraordinarily sensationalist, chauvinist and insidious if the future-war novels” by William Le Queux.¹¹ Critics of the genre point out the recurrent use of two buzzwords: “preparedness” and “conscription” – and these are most emphatically reiterated in Chesney’s narrative. As I.F. Clarke notes, preparedness, or the “need for the intelligent anticipation of future possibilities – external or internal dangers, new weapons or new political alignments – is the leitmotif echoing through most of the future-war stories that have followed from the unprecedented and extraordinary effect of Chesney’s *Battle of Dorking*.”¹² Showing the

⁷ Ibid., p. 1, n. 6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

⁹ Clarke, “Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*,” p. 40.

¹⁰ Kirkwood, “The Impact of Fiction on Public Debate in Late Victorian Britain,” p. 3.

¹¹ Keep, “Fearful Domestication,” p. 7.

¹² Clarke, “Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*,” p. 33.

only available defence of the British borders as unprepared volunteers who do not stand a chance with modern, conscription-raised army of the attacker, the author expertly bares the weak points of the British military protection system.

However, while Chesney's competence as an expert of warfare is beyond doubt, his literary talents are severely lacking in comparison. While an influential and widely popular at the time of publication, "Dorking" is a horrible little book, full of pathos and stylistic clumsiness. The storyline is set from the very beginning as an account of failure and disgrace, of future events that already happened fifty years prior, which would set the action in the 1920s. It begins with the narrator, now a grandfather, lamenting the lost paradise that England was before the invasion, a land of plenty and prosperity: "What a proud and happy country was this fifty years ago! Free-trade had been working for more than a quarter of a century, and there seemed to be no end to the riches it was bringing us. [...] We thought we could go on building and multiplying for ever."¹³ Bearing in mind Chesney was describing in such terms the reality that he knew first hand, it is no wonder that sceptics rejected his story as nothing more than a crude propaganda piece. In light of this, even more astonishing is the fact that it was so widely read and, crucially, that its pro-imperialist message seemed to have spoken not to its intended readership, the middle- and upper-middle classes who had the power to influence defence policy, but to the lower-middle classes – with possible military repercussions. Although it would be very difficult to prove definitely, Keep speculates that the most significant consequence of the future-war narratives was their role in convincing 2.5 million lower-middle class volunteers to enlist in 1914.¹⁴

The unnamed narrator of the story, referred to only as "Volunteer" in criticism, points to the ease and the relative lack of resistance from the English and the unforgivable complacency of the authorities, blamed for this sorry state of affairs. As he notes bitterly, "A little firmness, a little prevision on the part of our rulers, even a little common sense, and this great calamity would have been rendered utterly impossible."¹⁵ In a manner typical of a populist genre, a great and complex issue is presented as having a very simple and straightforward solution. In the concluding

¹³ George Tomkyns Chesney, *The Battle of Dorking* (London: Grant Richards, 1914), pp. 17–18.

¹⁴ Keep, "Fearful Domestication," pp. 9–15.

¹⁵ Chesney, *The Battle of Dorking*, p. 52.

paragraphs of the novella, the narrator spreads the responsibility more evenly: the ruling classes are blamed for not having spotted the danger and for allowing themselves to lose power; the lower classes for taking power not knowing what to do with it, and being “uneducated, untrained to the use of political rights, and swayed by demagogues”; the rich for being “idle and luxurious” and the poor for “grudg[ing] the cost of defence.” In general, the nation failed as a whole, and in essence got what it deserved.¹⁶

There are two avenues of interest with regard to the impact of future-war stories but specifically “Dorking”: its effect on defence policy and its lasting influence on the tradition of public argument. When it comes to the former, the story does not seem to have succeeded in its original intent. The furore surrounding “Dorking” exploded and fizzled out by the end of 1871. Kirkwood notes that in the same year a series of military manoeuvres on a large scale were organised in England, to appease fears raised by the novella but which ultimately were nothing more than posturing.¹⁷ Even more crucially, Chesney’s literary plea for conscription was not heeded, which Clarke calls “the final irony” as British forces powered by conscripted soldiers “might well have prevented the outbreak of war in 1914.”¹⁸ The most important vestige of “Dorking,” however, is that it put an end to the “tradition of argument by tracts” and introduced a speculative fiction narrative with a clearly defined agenda as a way of putting forward arguments in public debate.¹⁹

Camp Two: *The Swoop!* (1907)

Brett Holman notes that serious spy and invasion genres contained warnings of danger so inflated – “Charles Lowe pointed out that the claimed size of the secret German army – anywhere up to 350,000, on some accounts – far exceeded the number of Germans resident in Britain as revealed by the 1901 census”²⁰ – that parody was utilised as one of the ways in which sceptics could undermine the populist messages spread by these narratives. Thus, *The Swoop!*, shifts its tone from fear to farce. Compared

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁷ Kirkwood, “The Impact of Fiction on Public Debate in Late Victorian Britain,” p. 1.

¹⁸ Clarke, “Before and After *The Battle of Dorking*,” p. 45.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain’s Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), p. 179.

to the relentless propaganda of “Dorking,” P.G. Wodehouse’s little novel is perhaps not a breath of fresh air – but a lungful of helium, elevating and inflating the figurative balloon of doom more, instead of bursting it. It paints a ridiculous picture of England being simultaneously attacked not just by Germany but eight more enemies: the Russians, Mad Mullah, the Swiss, China, the army of Monaco, a band of Young Turks, Morocco, and Bollygolla. As the unaffected narrator remarks, “England was not merely beneath the heel of the invader. It was beneath the heels of nine invaders. There was barely standing-room.”²¹ What compounds the situation even more is the realisation that – of course, because the government refuses to be prepared and introduce universal conscription – the only military defence the country has at the time are Boy Scouts. This, however, may not necessarily be undesirable: unlike hapless volunteers, scouts are already arranged in army-like formations, with a clear chain of command and – as it turns out – terrifyingly competent headquarters.

The full title of the work is *The Swoop!, or How Clarence Saved England. A Tale of the Great Invasion* and Clarence is the name of a Boy Scout who seems to be the only person in the whole country who takes the warning – and later the fact – of invasion incredibly seriously. The way the protagonist is introduced both mocks and exposes the hollowness of the brave heroes of “Dorking”: “In a word, Clarence! He could do everything that the Boy Scout must learn to do. He could low like a bull. He could gurgle like a woodpigeon. He could imitate the cry of the turnip in order to deceive rabbits.”²² His skills are presented as obviously non-transferrable in the time of war – and later on in the story proven to be of vital importance, because in the universe of *The Swoop!* Boy Scouts are stand-ins for the mythical, ever-prepared, universally conscripted army. To the characters in the story, Clarence is positioned as a boy full of imagination and childish enthusiasm; to readers, he is presented as a troubled child poisoned by the propagandist messages he has been fed with all his life, in a way serving as an extreme example of what kind of consequences such a diet may have on young developing brains.

But in *The Swoop!* it is the adults who are hare-brained, not children. The emphasis on preparedness, so obsessively reiterated by invasion genre

²¹ P.G. Wodehouse, *The Swoop! or How Clarence Saved England. A Tale of the Great Invasion*, Project Gutenberg, P. 1., Ch. 3., accessed 6 October 2019, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7050/7050-h/7050-h.htm>.

²² Ibid. P. 1., Ch.1.

writers, is ceaselessly mocked by Wodehouse. This is perfectly visible in the opening scenes of the novel, when Clarence is exasperated by the pointless activities his family engage in in the face of an incoming war:

Glancing up for a moment, he caught sight of the other members of the family.

“England, my England!” he moaned.

It was indeed a sight to extract tears of blood from any Boy Scout. The table had been moved back against the wall, and in the cleared space Mr. Chugwater, whose duty it was to have set an example to his children, was playing diabolo. Beside him, engrossed in cup-and-ball, was his wife. Reggie Chugwater, the eldest son, the heir, the hope of the house, was reading the cricket news in an early edition of the evening paper. Horace, his brother, was playing pop-in-taw with his sister Grace and Grace’s fiancé, Ralph Peabody. Alice, the other Miss Chugwater, was mending a Badminton racquet.

Not a single member of that family was practising with the rifle, or drilling, or learning to make bandages.

Clarence groaned.²³

His groans would perhaps echo those of Chesney’s Volunteer witnessing the rich being idle and luxurious in action. Just as Chesney warned some forty years earlier, everyone disregards and dismisses the dangers and chooses selfish entertainment instead. In England under nine-fold siege only a young Boy Scout displays enough common sense and sense of duty instilled in him by his organisation and popular literature to save his beloved country. Propaganda aside, Wodehouse’s comic novel paints an even darker vision than “Dorking”: the absolute lack of sense of play and humour manifested by the child army and especially by Clarence, who later on in the story uses the invaders’ attachment to the arts against them, bring to mind dystopian visions of society of droids who see no need for or purpose of such luxuries. Chesney’s Volunteer laments the loss of commerce and power, but *The Swoop!* predicts the annihilation of culture as a result of propagandist brainwashing of the new generation.

Unlike “Dorking,” Wodehouse’s fiction retained its popularity, largely because of the incomparable quality of literary style and humour. By contrast, along with other invasion tales, Chesney’s novella faded into

²³ Ibid., P. 1., Ch. 1.

oblivion after the First World War. In fact, future-war fiction of the period between the Franco-Prussian conflict and 1914 turned out so short-lived that 70 years later, when *The Swoop!* was first published in the United States, the reviewer T.C. Holyoke summed it up in these two sentences without any reservations:

a delightfully ridiculous and flippantly satirical novella about the simultaneous invasion of England by nine foreign armies, the diffident curiosity they arouse, and the country's rather anticlimactic rescue from a largely unrecognized fate by fourteen-year-old Clarence Chugwater and his fellow Boy Scouts, who constitute the sum and substance of England's military might. The story, published four²⁴ years before World War I, might have been intended as a warning about preparedness.²⁵

It is fascinating to note that what was a blatantly obvious satire at the time of publication lost its ridiculing edge to such an extent that the American reviewer regards it as an example of the very genre it originally lampooned. In 1979, it seems just an amusing story of a brave Boy Scout influenced by the teachings of Baden-Powell's youth organisation who saves the day with his skills and cleverness, and the invasion – nothing more than an absurd ploy used just to showcase his mettle. Nonetheless, Holyoke is not entirely wrong here: it *was* intended as a warning about preparedness, just not in the sense he sees it. What Wodehouse seems to warn against is allowing alarmist messages to penetrate through common sense. His comic novel placates the invasion anxieties, in a way showing them to be nothing more than imaginary.

Although superficially standing on the opposite ends of the spectrum, one being a genuine call to action and the other – a ridicule of that call, “Dorking” and *The Swoop!* share a number of similarities. Chesney's piece appealed to its original readers' emotions, but so did Wodehouse's – even if the emotive language and reactions are different. More importantly, ultimately their impacts cannot be said to have been significant. Even if we accept Keep's conjecture that future-war stories inspired lower-middle classes to enlist in greater than expected numbers in 1914, it is impossible

²⁴ In fact, the publication date of Wodehouse's novel is 1909, that is *five* years before the outbreak of the First World War.

²⁵ T. C. Holyoke, Review of “*The Swoop! And Other Stories* by P. G. Wodehouse and D. A. Jasen,” *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Autumn 1979), p. 503.

to trace the cause and effect chain specifically to Chesney's pamphlet some forty years earlier. In comparison, Wodehouse's story has an even lower social impact, in essence contributing to the consolidation of the status quo through mocking attempts at introducing changes. Finally, they both ultimately fail in their intensions: "Dorking" remains a call to action that is never realised and *The Swoop!* outlives its originating satire and becomes the genre it was supposed to undermine.

Conclusions

In his opinion piece on offensive jokes, contemporary British stand-up comedian Jimmy Carr notes as follows:

Far from being fearless mavericks, riding roughshod across popular sensibilities in pursuit of a laugh, most stand-up comics, and most "offensive" jokes, are not taboo-busting at all: they are inherently conservative. By mocking situations that we would otherwise find uncomfortable, by legitimizing our anxieties about people who are different and hard to relate to, these jokes perpetuate the status quo. They don't make things worse for the people they mock, but nor do they help us to understand them. That's not their job: they are jokes. It isn't the function or purpose of jokes to enlighten. Their only use is to amuse.²⁶

Of course, literary satire and offensive jokes in stand-up comedy are nor necessarily analogous, but these two instances of comedic response work for the purpose of the present discussion. Both Wodehouse's satire and offensive jokes are time-specific expressions of a conservative viewpoint in which who and what is being made into the punchline depends largely on the position of the one dealing the punches. This is another example of the problem of two camps: one comprising people who in one way or another stand against the rules of the majority, and the other which unites those who mock and dismiss these attempts. However, unlike the clearly defined camps of the future-war era, the contemporary camps are ephemeral and fuzzy, aligning and realigning according to necessity and then dispersing when no longer needed. What has remained their constant feature, however, is the unalienable belief that one always belongs to the superior,

²⁶ Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves, *Only Joking: What's So Funny About Making People Laugh?* (London: Penguin, 2006), eBook.

the “correct” camp while the opponents are always wrong and worthy of ridicule.

When Wodehouse satirised the fearmongering future-war stories which were so popular among lower-middle classes, he seemed to align with anti-alarmist values of the ruling classes. Ridicule is a powerful tool of persuasion, and here it is used precisely: to approach the inflated claims of danger and appeals for alertness as nothing more than expressions of invasion paranoia and chauvinism. The moment expressions of genuine fears for safety and future anxieties are being not just dismissed but ruthlessly mocked, a dialogue and a polite exchange of arguments is impossible. At the time of peak future-war stories, the resulting impasse was overcome by the outbreak of war. One begins to wonder if a similar desire lies behind the contemporary polarisation and encampment of opposite political views. It seems that the “act of self-immolation” mentioned by Keep in the quote opening this paper, still remains the unavoidable consequence of – and apparently the only possible solution to – this deadlock.

Justyna Jajszczok

The future-war fiction and the problem of two camps in “The Battle of Dorking” and P.G. Wodehouse’s *The Swoop!*

The aim of the article is to compare and contrast two examples of the short-lived conservative literary genre of future-war fiction (also known as invasion literature) popular in Britain between the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The analysed texts, “The Battle of Dorking” of 1871 and *The Swoop!* of 1909, are examined as manifestations of two camps with which commentators of projected future seem to identify: the camp comprising of people expressing genuine fears and future anxieties, and the camp of people mocking and dismissing these apprehensions. The article explores their social and political impacts and their potential legacy.

Keywords: future-war fiction, invasion literature, “The Battle of Dorking,” *The Swoop!*, satire

Słowa kluczowe: literatura gatunku *future-war*, literatura inwazji, “The Battle of Dorking”, *The Swoop!*, satyra

