

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, 1938 (AND 1944 AND 1949)

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October 30, 1938 Santiago Quito Red Scare Oldfield Bedford

Many of you have no doubt heard about Orson Welles and his famous Halloween Eve (1938) broadcast of a dramatization of the start of H.G. Wells' book, The War of the Worlds. In spite of the story being rather well-known, the broadcast panicked thousands, believing we were being invaded by Martians (who must have thought we were blocking their view of Venus).

But didja know that people fell for the same trick again, with much, much, worse effects?

H.G. WELLS

Herbert George Wells was born on September 21, 1866, in Bromley, Kent, England. His father was a shopkeeper who augmented his income by playing cricket professionally; his mother was a domestic servant. Young "Bertie" was the fourth of four children. He suffered a bad injury to his leg in 1874 that left him bedridden for a considerable time. His bad luck was good for the rest of us, for it gave him a lot of idle time that Bertie filled with reading, which would inspire him for the rest of his life.

Leg injuries must have run in the family, for his father broke a leg in 1877, which put the Wells family in a financial quandary. The solution: place the boys apprentices in various trades. Bertie hated his, as a draper in Southsea, because he had to work 13 hours a day and sleep in a dormitory with other apprentices.

Bertie's parents' marriage, already strained by lack of money, was further affected when his mother took a position that did not allow her to have living space for her family, so she lived apart from Bertie's father. His home life deteriorated further as a consequence, and he failed as a draper, and in a subsequent apprenticeship as a chemist (pharmacist). The only saving grace of his situation at this time of his life was that the estate where his mother worked had an outstanding library, and she could make a number of its books available to her voracious reader of a son.

Bertie caught a break in 1879, when a distant relative (and his mom) got him a position as a student/teacher (mentor to younger students) at the National School at Wookey (insert your own lame *Star Wars* joke here). He could continue his self-education there, which led to his getting a scholarship at what would become the Royal College of Science in South Kensington,

which would in turn become part of Imperial College London. He actually wound up studying biology under Thomas Huxley. He also excelled at the school's Debating Society, became interested in social equality issues, and was one of the founders of a school magazine, *The Science School Journal*, for which he wrote a story that would later become *The Time Machine*.

Wells continued his "boot-strap" education, eventually earning a B.S. in Zoology in 1890. But he had no job. He stayed with an aunt and began writing short stories to make ends meet (and to court his aunt's daughter). The popularity of his short stories led him to flesh out his earlier work, and he published *The Time Machine* in 1895. It was the first in his series of contributions to the genre of what was then called "scientific romances," which was particularly appropriate for him, because he would have many romantic affairs.

The success of his first full-length book led to many others, including *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*, and the *War of the Worlds*.

Wells wrote the *War of the Worlds* during the period 1895-1897. It appeared first in serial form, in *Pearson's Magazine* in the UK and in *Cosmopolitan* in the USA (sorry, I have to pause and chuckle at the mental image of what the *Cosmo* cover might look like for that one!). There were other books classed as "invasion literature" at that time, and Wells himself has said that his storyline was motivated by, and modeled after, the "catastrophic effect of European colonialization on the Aboriginal Tasmanians." In Chapter 1, "The Eve of War," Wells wrote, "... before we judge the Martians too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species had wrought, not only upon animals such as the vanished Bison and the Dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians ... were entirely swept out of existence by a war of extermination waged by European immigrants..."

The *War of the Worlds* (hereafter *WotW*) in book form has never been out of print. Robert Goddard, it is said, was inspired by *WotW* to develop rocketry with the ultimate focus on getting people to Mars.

And I'll bet [Marvin](#) liked it, too!

WotW has been made into many different [movie renditions](#). The film version most remembered (but not the most [recent](#) (2005), a stinker directed by Spielberg and starring Tom Cruise and Dakota Fanning) was the [1953 film](#) starring Gene Barry, with special effects by George Pal.

But there was that radio performance, eighty-five years ago on October 30...

ORSON WELLES

George Orson Wells was born on May 6, 1915, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Unlike Bertie Wells, Orson's family had money (his father had invented a popular bicycle lamp), but his childhood was disrupted when his parents divorced in 1919. He stayed with his mother, a professional pianist, because his father was an alcoholic. His mother fostered young Orson's interest in music, but after her death in 1924, music lost its appeal. He had a rather hectic later childhood, often traveling with his father. His exposure to public education was minimal, until he enrolled

in the Todd Seminary for Boys in 1926. There he was encouraged to pursue learning that interested him, especially the fact that the school had its own low-power radio station. He wrote and broadcast an adaptation of a Sherlock Holmes story for his first radio gig.

Orson's father died in late 1930; Orson was a minor, only 15. The will allowed Orson to name his own guardian, and he selected Maurice Bernstein, who had lived with Orson and his father for a time. Orson's performance at Todd was good enough to merit a scholarship to Harvard, but Orson declined. His father hadn't quite drunk up all his money, allowing Orson to travel, instead. He wound up in Dublin, where he bluffed his way onto a few roles at the Abbey Theater.

The Dublin interlude didn't last long. Orson returned to Todd and took up the Holmes piece he had done earlier. It became a big success, and he worked it up into a series of illustrated educational books.

Roger Hill, Orson's teacher at Todd, invited him to a party in 1933, where he met Thornton Wilder. Wilder must have been impressed with Orson, because he initiated a set of contacts that resulted in Orson being cast in three plays, touring in repertory in Buffalo, N.Y.

The next year, Orson got his first radio job, with The American School of the Air, which allowed him to meet other important folks and attract them to a drama festival he staged at Todd. After a time-out to get married to socialite/actress Virginia Nicolson, he landed a role in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Beck Theater in New York. He was all of nineteen years old.

His performance in R&J attracted the attention of John Houseman (you might remember him from the 1970s movie and TV show, *Paper Chase*). Houseman was a theatrical producer, looking to cast the lead for a play called *Panic*, by Archibald MacLeish. He became adamant that Orson should take the role. The play lasted only three performances. But the partnership between Welles and Houseman would flourish, helped in large part by funding via the Federal Theater Project, a Depression-era government program to promote the arts. By 1938, the pair had left the FTP and created the Mercury Theater production company that pushed the boundaries of then-traditional theater.

The Mercury Theater was popular enough to land a weekly slot on the CBS radio network. Billed first as "First Person Singular," then "Mercury Theater of the Air," Welles and Houseman first planned to broadcast a version of *Treasure Island*. But Welles wanted something more dramatic, and overruled Houseman to produce a take on *Dracula*, with Welles in the title role.

Orson Welles went on to become one of the greatest and most influential filmmakers of all time. But today, what he is most famous for came before that, on October 30, 1938.

WAR OF THE WORLDS - 1938

Orson Welles had read H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, and decided to do a Halloween presentation of it on CBS radio. He wrote the teleplay (changing the location of the Martian invasion from England to New Jersey), directed the program, and was its narrator. Much of the program was done in the style of progressively-concerned news reporting. Even though a short

note was read at the start of the program stating that it was fiction, and no other radio station was covering the invasion from Mars story, Welles' program generated quite a stir.

Just how much actual panic ensued from the Mercury Theater production is subject to debate. It is certain that a number of people were fooled, and that the CBS switchboard was swamped, and that the show is well known today, 85 years later. I suspect that some of the memories of the news of Mars' invasion and panic came from the 1953 movie version of the show, which had a lengthy and highly-visual scene of people panicking upon the news of the Martian's arrival.

Citizen Kane and other movies won Welles a lot of awards, but *War of the Worlds* is what many of us remember most! [That and his ads for Paul Masson!]

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS – 1944 AND 1949

One would think that, after the famous 1938 broadcast, no radio show could ever get away with telling people we were being invaded from Mars, without them immediately catching on.

And you would be wrong!

Dateline, Santiago, Chile, November 12, 1944: A radio station in Santiago broadcast a show modeled closely after Welles' 1938 version of *WotW*. Hundreds went to the streets in panic, news and official offices were flooded with calls, and one person suffered a fatal heart attack in all the excitement. This particular incident is not well-covered in the historical record. It's obliquely referred to in several of the 1948 stories, but I could find only one newspaper clipping about it, from the *San Bernardino County Sun*.

Dateline, Quito, Ecuador, February 12, 1949: A much more serious panic resulted when Radio Quito pulled the *WotW* stunt. Publicity-minded, the radio management planted fake news items about UFOs the week before. At 9 PM that night, a newscaster broke into the normal music program and announced that an attack on Ecuador was underway, near the little town of Cotacollao. The dramatization was apparently more real than in 1938; the police and the military were immediately dispatched. **Ten people died in the panic!** When the station realized the extent of the reaction, they announced the hoax on the radio.

Too late.

People were angry. A mob gathered at the radio station and set it afire. It was in the same building as the newspaper, *El Comercio*; both were destroyed in the blaze. The fire department was out chasing Martians and the building kept on burning. Army units rushed back to the site, and had to use tear gas to disperse the angry folks.

Several people were criminally charged for the stunt, including Eduardo Alcaraz, the station's drama director, Leonardo Paez, director of art (who dreamed up the stunt), and Eduardo Palace, a voice actor on the show. I couldn't find evidence that any of them served time.

Paez had to jump from the burning radio station to save his own life, and he was able to evade the mob and the police and went on the lam for six years before leaving the country forever. He wrote a book about the experience in 1982.

His girlfriend and his nephew were not so lucky – they died in the panic.

THE RED PLANET, THE RED SCARE, AND SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES OF THE 1950S

I mentioned the popularity of “invasion literature” in the section above about H.G. Wells. A movie version of it was alive and well after WWII, especially with the development of the atomic bomb by the USSR. Hollywood was particularly affected, what with the HUAC and the Blacklist.

What could possibly be a better metaphor for an invasion by the Russkies than an invasion from Mars? After all, it is the “RED Planet!” Not every Red Scare film of that era involved Mars/Martians, but many did.

Another version of the *War of the Worlds* was created, in 1953, starring Gene Barry [the voice-over announcer in the movie was by the guy who would later voice Boris Badinov, what a give-away!]. It was preceded by *Red Planet Mars*, starring Peter Graves, in 1952.

Other films came out in 1953, *Invaders from Mars*, and *It Came from Outer Space* (Gilligan’s *Island* star and war hero Russell Johnson was in that one), and the years that followed. It’s a hoot to look at the cast list for these stinkers to see names that would later appear in 1960s TV shows (e.g. Carolyn “Morticia Addams” Jones, Lloyd Bridges, Joi Lansing (Lester Flatt’s wife on *The Beverly Hillbillies*), Beaver’s Mom Barbara Billingsley, and more.) A couple of the films are about us going to Mars as something horrible, such as *The Angry Red Planet* (1959).

And who wouldn’t want their own [Illudium Q-36 Explosive Space Modulator](#)?

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Wikipedia: *Invaders from Mars*: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045917>; Remade in 1986: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invaders_from_Mars_\(1986_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invaders_from_Mars_(1986_film)) - with a much better cast, including Timothy Bottoms, Louise Fletcher, *SNL*'s Laraine Newman, and [Jimmy Hunt](#), who also played in the 1958 version.

General Red Scare Filmography: <https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=341346&p=2303736>

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