# Steampunk Show Time:
# Review of Robert Rankin's *The Japanese Devil Fish Girl and Other Unnatural Attractions: A Novel*

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**Robert Rankin*, The Japanese Devil Fish Girl and Other Unnatural Attractions: A Novel***
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Robert Rankin's steampunk romp envisages a space-age Victorian Britain where, in 1895, freak shows co-exist unproblematically with inter-planetary travel and where the ownership of cultural artefacts is contested not between nations but species. Following a Wellsian Martian invasion, Britain has conquered and settled the Red Planet, employing the aliens' own appropriated spaceships, "back-engineered" by none other than Charles Babbage and Nikola Tesla (p. 13), those regularly resurrected steampunk favourites. That conquest in turn prompts other alien, secret visitors from Venus and Jupiter to disclose themselves and establish formal political and trade relations with Earth, exclusively controlled by Britain, which restricts other countries' access to spaceflight technology and trans-world treaties. In a curious echo of current debates about the dangers of resurgent nationalistic protectionism during the lingering financial crisis, "The British Empire would build the Earth's first *and only* spaceport. In London" – leaving the Americans especially "not best pleased" (p. 80, original emphasis).

Lest any reader misinterpret this tongue-in-cheek inversion of today's global power dynamics as advocacy of 'glorious' British neo-imperialism, Rankin swiftly undercuts this implication by exposure of a duplicitous government agenda and genocidal conspiracy, conceived by a youthful Winston Churchill. The Martians, it turns out, were not fairly routed in heroic battle by the Queen's Own Electric Fusiliers, but viciously expunged by underhand biological warfare, involving the dispatch of 1500 un-consulted "incurables", unfortunate civilians "in the advanced stages of

any sexually or otherwise transmitted or transmittable diseases" to Mars aboard three "plague ships" (p. 12). Months later, the Fusiliers arrived on a "now lifeless planet" (p. 13) as the publicly avowed conquering heroes of Mars, thereafter incorporated into the Queen's imperial domains. Rankin's adaptation of the historical Churchill, indelibly linked to Britain's resistance to the Nazi regime during WWII and thence to British moral condemnation of the Holocaust, seems intended to critique the selectivity of British cultural memory, which, like that of most nations, tends to privilege the heroic aspects of its history over its own colonial outrages, pursued as part of the nineteenth-century project of global advancement. (Notoriously, of course, the real-life Churchill is alleged to have supported the use of poisonous gas against rebellious 'natives' in Mesopotamia.) It is no coincidence that, in Rankin's novel, Gladstone initially suggests redeploying British troops from Middle Eastern theatres of war: "At present we have several thousand men serving in Afghanistan. Soon that errant nation will be brought to book and no more trouble will this world know from it" (p. 11). In effect, the opening genocide of the Martians by the British replaces the Holocaust as a limit case of inhumanity, the latter not having happened (yet), as well as rendered improbable (in future) by this steampunk Britain's likely longer-lived political and economic hegemony, unchallengeable by the USA and other would-be global powers. The moon, for instance, is "Her Majesty's moon, where the first flag planted was the Union Jack" (p. 28).

Other steampunk novels, however, often feature Queen Victoria as arch-manipulator of her country's intelligence networks and imperial expansion (see, for example, George Mann's Newbury and Hobbes and Gail Carringer's Parasol Protectorate series). In contrast, Rankin's empress never becomes privy to her government's machinations, naively enjoying the 'official' version of history, "told in a manner that was altogether favourable to all involved" – bar the Martians, of course, which are represented as figures of "callous cruelty and innate cowardice" – and appropriately immortalised in Gilbert and Sullivan's "evocation of British vim and valour" in their "cosmic operetta […] *Of Mars and Mankind*" (pp. 3, 15, 2-3). The icon of nineteenth-century Britishness, who gave her name to the age, is thus preserved untarnished for our own present's cultural memory, and later in the novel, Britain is vindicated in so far as the reader discovers that the original Martian invasion was caused, however inadvertently, by *American* connivance, namely that of the impresario P.T. Barnum.

Whether intentionally or not, Rankin's related main storyline again evokes present-day concerns and international debates, this time about cultural appropriation and 'stolen' works of art, ranging from Greece's demands for the return of the Elgin Marbles, through legal proceedings to reclaim Holocaust victims' expropriated possessions, to the resurgent controversy surrounding the ownership of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It seems no coincidence that the devious sideshow con-artist, the ominously named Professor Cagliostro Coffin, makes his living from exhibiting a dead Martian, whose deteriorating state of preservation makes it necessary for him to find an urgent replacement for the prime attraction among his rolling cabinet of curiosities.

Suspecting that mechanical advances and simulacra will soon push displays of 'genuine' (un)natural marvels out of business, the Professor speculates, "Perhaps we have become an anachronism" (p. 68). Rankin's own revelling in anachronism is not limited to the projection of advanced technologies backwards in time, but also produced by the blatant revision of the temporal settings of documented events. For instance, the 1885 council of war, in which Babbage participates, is footnoted as follows: "History records that Charles Babbage died in 1871 – but history, as Henry Ford so aptly observed, 'is bunk'" (p. 5). Similarly, P.T. Barnum remains in existence three years after his documented death, which the unnamed narrator simply rejects as "Ludicrous!", while Darwin "clearly did *not* die in 1892, as history so inaccurately records" (pp. 71, 86, original emphasis). The novel even renders anachronism as *mise-en-abyme* in an encounter with one of P.T. Barnum's displays, a mechanical "diaorama of the Battle of Waterloo", viewed by Coffin and his assistant, the ingénue George Fox:

> 'I do not recall, when studying history at school,' said [George], 'that dirigibles were involved in the Battle of Waterloo.'
>
> 'Poetic license,' explained Professor Coffin. 'The iron-sided gunboats are perhaps a mite too modern also.' (pp. 116-117)

Later, the concert hall aboard the ultimate in dirigible engineering, *The Empress of Mars*, is described as "an exact reproduction of the interior of the Hackney Empire Theatre", something the narrator notes might give

"future architectural historians" food for thought, "in that the Hackney Empire Theatre was not built until the year nineteen hundred and one" (p. 165).[1] Official history is discredited as highly unreliable and untrustworthy, legitimising its fantastical re-writing or, as Coffin would put it, "imaginative reimaging" as farce (p. 233).

Neither anachronism nor lack of significant funds, however, prevents Coffin from one last push to procure the greatest sensation ever, namely the legendary Japanese Devil Fish Girl, also known as Sayito, a living goddess linked to the Venusians' bible "*The Book of Sayito*" (p. 27). Enlisting the unsuspecting Fox in his devious designs, Coffin convinces him to take passage on *The Empress of Mars*, on a tour advertised as "AROUND THE WORLD IN SEVENTY-NINE DAYS" (p. 79), going one better than even Jules Verne's heroes. They set off in prominent company, including among others, Babbage, Tesla, Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, and Charles Darwin (times two, since Lord Brentford travels with a monkey butler of the same name, who later becomes Churchill's aid during the second 'War of the Worlds'). Aboard ship, George re-encounters another by now staple character of steampunk, the mathematical genius Ada Lovelace, who earlier used George to trick her way into the Crystal Palace and now claims to be fleeing to America to seek scientific employment commensurate with her "prodigious talents" (p. 109). The love-struck but, throughout the novel, very much out-of-place and out-of-his-depth George seems intended as the modern-day reader's stand-in, "want[ing] to experience the zeitgeist" and wondering at whatever marvels the showman Rankin pulls out of the hat next (p. 44).

I want to focus on just one of many madcap happenings which follow, so as to convey a better sense of Rankin's ambiguous and sometimes unexpectedly biting playfulness vis-à-vis what might be called his 'back-engineered history'; that is, a nineteenth-century alternative history that ferociously rebounds on our own time. A terrorist attack – where else but in New York, as the dirigible is parked above Central Park (close by, presumably, to the one-time future location of the Twin Towers) – leads passengers to throw themselves from the ship in fear of burning alive, as "[i]n the ballroom the band played on" (p. 142) in a simultaneous evocation of the *Titanic*. As George and a bootboy rest precariously atop the burning ship, the lad offers an uncanny echo of today's anti-immigrant rhetoric encountered in parts of the USA, as well as in and on British politics and

streets. He asserts his sympathy with the likely religious (but here Fundamentalist Christian as opposed to Muslim) organisers of the attack and identifies with the terrorists' animosity towards resident aliens. He claims "[t]hey should all go back to their own vile worlds" and expresses his desire to "live in peace" – but only "[o]nce we've sent those alien swine back to where they come from" (pp. 144, 145). The bootboy's feelings are even repeated by the otherwise likeable Ada, who cynically suggests that "People are bigots, religious or racial or both. I do not like Venusians, I admit it. I do not wish to kill them, but in truth I wish they were not here" (p. 161). Her confession takes on darker connotations when the bootboy is eventually identified as an Austrian named Adolf Hitler (p. 175). Yet the amiable, loving-all-humanity George is himself not exempt from bigotry. Sympathising with the monkey-butler about the discrimination Darwin faces simply on account of his non-humanness and difference, George nonetheless assumes, with arrogant unconcern, that Darwin "would rather be back in the jungle, swinging about in the trees with [his] relatives" (p. 177). "Darwin," the narrator remarks acidly, "who was born in Brentford and preferred the wearing of fine livery and kid gloves to the prospect of naked ramblings in the treetops, had no comment to make" (pp. 177-178). Inevitably, this evokes the racist discrimination suffered even by second or third generation citizens of ethnic minorities, who are as much British or American as their detractors but, on account of their perceived 'difference', are assumed to be somehow less so. Still later, marooned with Ada on a paradise island inhabited by cannibals and wallowing in the prospect of playing "Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden", George muses that "[h]e would just have to grin and bear it while the natives were put down" (p. 202), symbolically linking him back to Churchill's cunning 'invasion' of Mars.

It is not, however, the terrorists who finally destroy New York (or at least large swathes of it), but rather the British and their airship's "heat ray" defence system, which sets the park and city alight, commented laconically by Ada with "They started it" (p. 148). Thereafter the novel seems to evoke the sanitised language of the on-going War on Terror (though no longer officially called that), which both euphemises casualties as 'collateral damage' and, if possible, represses their full extent. When George demands to know the actual number who perished aboard *The Empress of Mars*, he meets with obstinate prevarication:

> 'Dead?' said the wine waiter. 'Dead? Dead is such an ugly word, isn't it? I myself prefer the term "non-dining passengers".'
>
> 'How many *dead*?' George demanded to be told.
>
> 'I believe there will be one hundred and eighty-nine vacant seats in the dining hall tonight, sir. […]' (p. 150, original emphasis)

Later, the ship's captain too refers to "the toll of non-dining passengers", by then standing at 202, and promises to post "[a] full list of the non-diners" the following day (p. 166).

After various further disasters, Coffin, George, and Ada are taken prisoners by Martian survivors inhabiting an underground city on a strange island, who mistake Ada for the incarnation of the holy statue of Sayito they guard, which eventually enables her to arrange their escape. Upon first sight of the magnificent statue "wrought from gold and silver, bronze and copper and lapis lazuli" and "surpassing all of Western art", Coffin sees only fame and fortune, announcing "I *claim it* on behalf of the British Empire"– which is exactly what he proceeds to do (pp. 228, 229, original emphasis). Following their return to London, Coffin pirates the commandeered Martian airship to return to the island and steal the statue, committing the prophesied "Great Blasphemy" that precipitates the next human-alien war (p. 261), for all the different species claim Sayito as *their* sacred relic. Yet Ada's earlier discussed master-plan, namely to provide the British authorities with Martian technology and the location of the island, so that they can launch a pre-emptive strike, serves as a sinister echo of the novel's opening section (and obliquely references the invasion of Iraq, with its many looted treasures during the US and British occupation). Indeed, Ada hopes that "high explosives dropped from the airship into the crater" might result in "all the Martians […] be[ing] killed with one single stroke" which, though regrettable, would be "for the best, if Mankind is to survive" (p. 267). The novel's utopian ending, where mankind and aliens will be saved by 'love', jars against the darker strains of Rankin's steampunk fantasy, which revels more in the mayhem and grand-scale destruction that has gone before than the rather too tame final restoration of peace and harmony.

Rankin plays as readily and irreverently with steampunk conventions as with political (in)correctness. The assembled elite at Gilbert and

Sullivan's musical, commemorating the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Mars, sport "the very latest thing: tiny silk hats adorned with inlaid evening goggles" (p. 2), in direct opposition to the preferred functionality of steampunk artefacts. Indeed, the love of mechanical intricacy is parodied outright when George and Coffin gush incomprehensibly about a Martian contraption:

> 'I like the champhered grommet mountings,' said George.
>
> 'And I the flanged seals on drazy hoops,' said the professor, in an admiring tone.
>
> Both agreed that the burnished housings of the knurdling gears had much to recommend them, aesthetically speaking, yet mourned for the lack of a rectifying valve that would have topped the whole off to perfection. (p. 242)

Most readers will likely applaud the Martian who abruptly curtails their conversation by "clobber[ing] George on the head" (p. 242). Early on, when Churchill makes as if to identify two unnamed observers in funereal dress attending the council of war, Gladstone admonishes him, "One does not disclose the names of the Gentlemen in Black" (p. 9) – in an apparent reference to *Men in Black* (1997), the science fiction comedy starring Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith, the latter of whom also starred alongside Kevin Kline in the later steampunk cult classic *Wild Wild West* (1999). When George attends a séance, where the medium foretells that he will be charged with saving not the world but worlds, the Gentlemen in Black reappear, peremptorily carting off the spiritualist and advising George, "Forget all about this […] You saw nothing, you heard nothing" (p. 57) – a warning literalised in Coffin's later criminal application of "the Scent of Unknowing" (p. 94) to both George and Ada to render them compliant with his schemes.

Yet if Rankin's novel refuses to take itself or the genre seriously, it also indicates the way that steampunk can lend itself to unexpectedly resonant socio-political critique, analogous in some ways to Magic Realism. The often buffoonish light-heartedness of his writing incorporates unforeseen unsettlements of readers' ways of viewing the world we inhabit and disturbing reflections of and on our own progressive global order.

## Notes

[1] Fittingly, the Hackney Empire website describes the original building, like *The Empress of Mars*, as "a technological wonder of its time", hosting Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, and Marie Lloyd, the 'Queen of the Halls' and mistress of double entendre, an art form Rankin has clearly mastered himself (see http://www.hackneyempire.co.uk/4/about/history-of-the-hackney-empire.html). Indeed, Ada's ruse of urgently needing the ladies' room to get past the Crystal Palace ticket collectors might allude to Lloyd's famously controversial lyrics '*I sits among the cabbages and peas*'.