

H.G. Wells and the Liquid Toy Soldier

Scholars of the nineteenth century have often written about masculinity in liquid terms. Herbert Sussman, for instance, describes early Victorian manhood as “consistently imagined or fantasized in a metaphoric of fluid.” This paper extends the idea of Sussman’s “hydraulic body” into the early twentieth century by examining the relationship between fluidity, embodiment, and intergenerational male identity in H.G. Wells’s 1913 war-gaming text: *Little Wars*.

Originally written as a means of systematizing the toy soldier “floor games” Wells played with his two young sons, *Little Wars* has come to be a seminal text of hobby war-gaming. I read *Little Wars* in concert with a history of the toy soldier in Britain, focusing on William Britain’s introduction of the first hollow mass-produced toy soldiers to market in 1893. Stories of toy soldier play throughout the nineteenth century often refer to the liquid potential of the metal, perhaps most famously in the final melting down of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Steadfast Tin Soldier* (1838). Mathilde Meyer, nurse to the Wells children, wrote: “[the family’s] [h]opelessly damaged soldiers were melted down in an iron spoon on the schoolroom floor, and others had a new head fixed on by means of a match and liquid lead.”

I argue that, for Wells, the toy soldier was complicit in a broad cultural fantasy of masculine embodiment that denied both corporeal pain and maturation. The material culture of the toy soldier at the turn of the century encoded a belief that the boy who proceeds into a bright imperial future is both infinitely reproducible and hollow; like lead soldiers, men and boys are essentially the same recombined matter, their lack of interiority rendering them interchangeable. Men and boys are depicted in *Little Wars* as secret sharers concealing or rejecting the dual specters of physical injury and sexual violence. Toy soldiers model the figure of the boy as a delegate for an infinitely expanding number of other, expendable male selves proceeding outward to empire and forward into England’s triumphant future. In tracing his obsession with imagined miniature warfare, I ultimately suggest that for Wells, war-gaming was a powerful and at times distressing figure for the production of fiction.