James Machin, *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939*
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Weird fiction is currently in vogue. Its new popularity has developed out of the ever-burgeoning schools of gothic studies; the new prominence of English 'folk horror' and its recalibration by Brexit and the rise of nationalism; and the ongoing cultural archaeologies of various modernisms. Yet the literary weird remains a nebulous concept, difficult to accommodate in conventional generic categories, closely connected to, yet somehow distinct from, the literatures of terror and horror.

James Machin's book explores the period of 'high weird', from the *fin de siècle* to the 1930s in Britain. Machin is suitably circumspect about defining the weird, resisting any critical assumptions that locate its origins and major expressions firmly and exclusively in the USA, or invest it with 'a sheen of modernist respectability' (p. 1). Instead, his diligent scholarship maps the shifting applications of the word 'weird' in critical and commercial discourse, noting its evasive, intangible mutations of meaning, its overlapping with neighbouring genres from which it seems, nevertheless, to require constant distinction. He posits the weird as a mode, not a genre, and thus distinct from (but connected to) Gothic, science fiction, the ghost story, fantasy, and other cognate genres. Its roots may be in the work of Edgar Allan Poe, but weird fiction may be best grasped as something akin to, clearly influenced by, and bearing many of the stylistic hallmarks of Decadent writing of the 1890s; indeed, the Oscar Wilde trial of 1895 becomes a watershed moment in Machin's mapping of its development. But grasping it at all is, Machin repeatedly concedes, difficult. The mode is 'generically slippery' and thus 'intrinsically problematic for critical discourse' (p. 13). Machin's solution is to shift attention from 'the nature of the texts themselves' and draw instead on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural taste, to examine 'how the mode is used as a process of distinction' (p. 13).

This decision has two effects. It leads to a well-researched, detailed, and clearly useful critical history of the uses of the term 'weird' in relation to an expanding canon. For example, Machin devotes a fifty-eight-page chapter to recuperating John Buchan's largely forgotten weird fiction. However, because the literature itself is given minimal space in the critical history, we emerge from this very detailed discussion with little sense of what weird writing looks like, or what makes it weird rather than, say, horrific, supernatural, uncanny, or otherwise disturbing. Those fifty-eight pages on Buchan pay little critical attention to, and offer few illustrations of, whatever quality of style, language, or content it might be that

makes his texts weird. Buchan's weirdness, furthermore, seems for Machin to be predicated on his evasion of the conveniently 'neat parameters of the Ghost Story or Gothic horror/romance' (p. 165) – generic borders which, in other contexts, might seem far from neat.

Machin asserts that 'the issue of the relationship between literariness, artistic legitimacy, and genre is intrinsic to the function of the term "weird fiction"' (p. 13), but he seems reluctant to subject exemplary passages to sustained analysis in order to demonstrate this relationship. The text of Buchan's *The Dancing Floor* (1926) does receive some attention, eliciting the slightly tautological critical comment that, like the weird mode itself, the work 'remains generically slippery: not quite a thriller, certainly not realism in the widely understood sense, but also lacking a tangible representation of the supernatural' (p. 201). Earlier, Machin describes the language of another cited passage as 'unmistakably that of the Gothic, and of the traditional ghost story' (p. 195). Likewise with Buchan's story, 'No-man's-land' (1899); Machin cites recent critiques by John Wylie Griffiths and Emily Fergus, who compare the tale to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1898) (in a minor editorial oversight, Machin's paragraph occurs twice, on pages 188 and 211). However, he does not quote from Buchan's tale, and thus misses the chance to comment on its weirdly suggestive language (the 'blurred, formless' speech of the Pentland hominins; their 'morbid hideous existence being preserved for centuries amid a changing world'; the narrator's Conradian sense of being 'precipitated into the heart of the past').[1]

This recuperation of Buchan as a weird writer is welcome, but it does reinforce the sense that Machin's eclectic version of the weird canon is predominantly male. Vernon Lee is briefly addressed in the Introduction, but there is no room here for writers like, for example, May Sinclair or Edith Nesbit (or, indeed, any of the authors included in Melissa Edmundson's 2019 Handheld Press anthology *Women's Weird – Strange Stories by Women, 1890-1940*). Algernon Blackwood is conspicuously absent, but we do read of M. P. Shiel, whose generic 'prolificacy has', Machin suggests, 'perhaps attenuated his posthumous regard' (p. 98). Two pages are devoted to the virtually unknown R. Murray Gilchrist, who seemingly and disappointingly lived 'a largely blameless and respectable life' (p. 101). Machin also mentions the well-known Arthur Machen, and the magnificent Eric, Count Stenbock, whose decadent excesses included 'regularly travelling with a life-sized doll,

[1] John Buchan, 'No-man's-land' (1899), in *Collected Supernatural Stories* <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0603071h.html#04> [accessed 14 August 2020].

which he claimed was his son and paid a clearly unscrupulous Jesuit priest to educate' (p. 111).

It is telling that these writers are, in the main, also not English. The Scottish Buchan was born in Fife, and the Welsh Machen in Caerleon. Shiel was born in Montserrat of mixed-race parents, while Count Stenbock, born in Basingstoke, was the son of a German woman and a Swedo-Russian aristocrat with a family seat at Kolga in Estonia, an estate Eric inherited in 1885. Sheffield-born Gilchrist is an exception, but the general tendency aligns British weird fiction with cultural identities other than English, suggesting a shadow canon of works haunting the margins of both generic and national literary categories. This sense is reinforced by the (uncredited and unidentified) painting featured on the cover of *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939* – Caspar David Friedrich's 1837 *Spaziergang in der Abenddämmerung* (*A Walk at Dusk*), which implicitly realigns British weird fiction in relation to a distinctly German and pastoral late Romanticism, rather than the seething commercial modernity of the early-twentieth-century Anglo-American publishing world.

That modernity is selectively presented here. The Great War, profoundly significant for the weird writings of Machen, William Hope Hodgson, Rudyard Kipling, and Walter de la Mare, is markedly absent from Machin's discussion. Nevertheless, he carefully charts the weird and its relations to key historical and intellectual critical categories such as Decadence and Orientalism, with a final chapter that, contra the book's title, veers across the Atlantic to discuss H. P. Lovecraft and *Weird Tales*. Machin's book will surely be essential reading for scholars and graduate students interested in weird fiction and the cultural debates surrounding it.

John Sears