

## Sci-fi summaries

### The Land Ironclads

Intro: Herbert George Wells (1866-1946) is a prolific English writer best known for his science fiction novella 'The Time machine' (1895). Wells has produced a series of science fiction novels and stories which pioneered many ideas of the future.

'The Land Ironclads' published in 1903 is a prophetic story about the development of land ironclads- land based battleships, or what we would now think of as a kind of gigantic tanks. The story contributed to Wells' reputation as 'a prophet of the future' when tanks first appeared in the battlefield during the First World War.

Setting:

- a battlefield (somewhere in English soil)
- warring parties:

Defenders	Vs	Invaders
Country soldiers armed with sophisticated weapons; also expert at trench warfare; they have dug trenches as lines of defense.		Townsmen who can write, talk, and do all sorts of things, but poor amateurs at war.

### Part-I

**A young lieutenant** of the defending side and **a war correspondent** (journalist) are talking and idly examining the situation at the frontline. The war had started a month ago but since the first brisk movements after the declaration of war, the things had gone slower and slower because the defending army (horsemen) had held the invader (a cloud of cyclists and cavalry) against their prepared line of defense. Now the things had come to a standstill with neither side advancing or attacking each other.

As the defending army lieutenant says to the journalist, he is confident of his victory against the enemy because the fighters in the enemy side aren't brute enough; they are a crowd of devitalized townsmen made up of clerks, factory hands, students and civilized men, who are poor amateurs at war. They ride their horses as if they were bicycles. On the other hand, the lieutenant's own men are trained soldiers, equipped with rifles and guns, and they are healthy and strong. They have also dug trenches for defense.

It was probably nearing twilight, and except a few 'booms' and 'fluts', the situation was calm. The lieutenant was expecting some kind of attack next dawn. The black machine in the enemy camp that he noticed through his field-glass was nothing to him. The war correspondent also thought he would have nothing to report about the war and decided to write the other article, 'Is War Played Out?' Looking at a file of soldiers marching, he too believed the defending army was going to beat the townsmen at the game of war.

## Part- II

The enemy side began the attack an hour before the dawn causing confusion and uproar in defending army side. The war correspondent, the war artist and the defending soldiers were awakened by the unexpected firing. The firing was steady and loud, as if ten thousand carts were on a bridge of tin. As the disbelieving correspondent and the soldiers move ahead with searchlights amidst the firing in the darkness, they see a large and clumsy insect-like black machine crawling towards their trenches and firing shots out of portholes in its sides. The soldiers hid in the trenches and thought that they would capture those machines once it was daylight, still confident of their victory.

As the day broke, the soldiers in the first line of trenches started firing against the machines, but as the machines advanced, the trench lines had to be evacuated. The soldiers somehow hoped that the machine would not be able to cross the trenches and they would smash up those machines by the day. But as the correspondent watched in amazement, the machines continually moved ahead shooting methodically. These machines were bulletproof as they were clad with iron cover, and like big insects, they crawled over and crossed the first line of trenches. The defending army at the front line was scattered whereas invader's cyclist infantry was advancing unmolested to complete the work of the machines.

## Part-III

The defender –general realized that his infantry were broken and retreating, but the advance of ironclads forced the fight. Out of

total 14 machines, they were able to disable only one ironclad on the left wing through a few effective gun shots. The batteries on the left flanked right and started shooting at the machines, but soon the crawling machines rushed towards them and started firing at them, as the war correspondent watched. The gunners were dropping in heaps about their guns. The war correspondent now realized that the defending army was going to lose. He himself decided to escape or hide rather than surrender because if he surrendered, he would not be able to get a copy off.

#### Part-IV

The land ironclads, although criticized by some authorities, were doing their jobs well. They were "*essentially long, narrow, and very strong steel frameworks carrying the engines, and borne on eight pairs of big pedrail wheels, each about ten feet in diameter, each a driving wheel and set upon long axles free to swivel around a common axis. . . . the captain . . . had look-out points at small ports all round the upper edge of the adjustable skirt of twelve-inch ironplating which protected the whole affair, and . . . could also raise or depress a conning-tower set above the port-holes through the centre of the iron top cover.*" Riflemen are installed in cabins "slung along the sides of and behind and before the great main framework," and operate mechanically targeting, semi-automatic rifles.

The machines could crawl up the hillock. They were directed by engineers under the command of a captain who gave directions through a speaking tube: 'Concentrate fire forward on gunners' or 'Clear out trench about a hundred yards on our right front.' The captain was young and intelligent. His riflemen were also calm and reasonable. They thought their enemies were some kind of natives, and lacked imagination. The Land Ironclad No 10 was damaged, and the remaining thirteen were in action to finish up the broken defending army. The war correspondent stole down his gully.

#### Part-V

The war correspondent, who had somewhat sided with the defending army, now decided to surrender because he realized that the enemy was east, west, and south of him. He had been watching the army being defeated by the ironclads hiding himself in the

bushes. He saw many of them being shot down, and many surrendering. He emerged with white flag out into the open saying 'Checkmate' meaning that now the whole of the defending army had been defeated and captured. The recent developments had been very unexpected and surprising for him because just 24 hours ago he had thought that the war was impossible. Even if the war happened, he had been certain that the defending army would defeat the townsmen. But now he thought "there is no end to the surprises of science." He wondered what might have happened to the lieutenant, as he watched the lined-up soldiers who had surrendered. They looked sturdy in comparison to their lightly built captors. He meditated whether the title of his article should be "Manhood versus Machinery" or "Mankind versus Ironmongery".

### **Shorter summary**

The story, told from the point of view of a war correspondent, begins in the middle of a war between two nations. Neither nation is named, instead, they are referred to as "the invader" (devitalized townsmen pressed into the role of a soldier) and "the defender" (tough soldiers and old-school patriots). The invader had attempted to march straight for the defender's capital but was stopped by a prepared defensive line of trenches. The invasion ground down to a stalemate as both sides attempted to beat the other back. This stalemate was soon changed as the invader brought 14 Land Ironclads. With the use of these massive landships, the invader had assaulted the defender's trenches. Having no artillery immediately available, the defenders could only plink the ironclads with their rifles as they got cut down by automatic fire. The defending forces relied on these machines being unable to cross the gap of their trench network, but they were proven wrong as the ironclads effortlessly crossed the gap and continued onwards. Eventually, the defenses were overrun and the heavy guns of the defender destroyed before they could be a serious threat. The entire defending army was reduced to ruin by a technologically superior force.

### **Comments**

#### **A Story Ahead of its Time**

Few people have influenced the world through works of fiction like Herbert George Wells. Through his famous classics like The

War of the Worlds and The Time Machine, he has set the foundations for the genre of science-fiction. He, along with other early science-fiction greats like Jules Verne foresaw many technologies that would shape the 20th century. One of his lesser-known works is "The Land Ironclads", a short story from 1903 published in "The Strand" magazine. It was a story written in the time when the next great European war loomed over the minds of many people and speculative stories exploring possible European conflicts of the future were as popular as they were provocative. H.G Wells' story served as inspiration for Winston Churchill, one of the people that helped establish the Landships Committee. In the story, two sides find themselves locked in a trench warfare stalemate which is broken with the use of the titular Land Ironclads, 30 meter long heavily armed and armored behemoths powered by steam. This early vision of a future battlefield not only helped inspire the development of tanks but also foresaw the style of trench warfare in which real tanks would be fighting 13 years after it was written.

### **Tactics of the Near Future**

The disparity between the opposing forces was notable. The defenders were professional soldiers, the invaders were civilians pressed into the military. This disparity is noted by one of the defenders the war correspondent talks to before the attack: "Their men aren't brutes enough: that's the trouble. They're a crowd of devitalized townsmen, and that's the truth of the matter' They're clerks, they're factory hands, they're students, they're civilized men. They can write, they can talk, they can make and do all sorts of things, but they're poor amateurs at war. They've got no physical staying power, and that's the whole thing. They've never slept in the open one night in their lives; they've never drunk anything but the purest water-company water; they've never gone



short of three meals a day since they left their feeding-bottles. Half their cavalry never cocked a leg over a horse till it enlisted six months ago. They ride their horses as though they were bicycles—you watch 'em! They're fools at the game, and they know it. Our boys of fourteen can give their grown men points....”

The invaders are devitalized townsmen, very much like the Boers who stood in stark contrast to the professional British army in the BOER WAR (1899-1902).

However, despite their lack of skills with war, the invading forces and their ingenuity proved more than a match for the less advanced but more skilled defender. H.G Wells vividly showcased modern war as a place where science and technology triumph, over strength and martial prowess.

### **Trench Warfare**

Trench warfare is another very critical element of the story. While trenches have been used in warfare for far longer, mostly in sieges, in Wells' story they took on a much more important role. Here too he drew notes from the Second Boer War which saw the use of trenches. However, in his fictional war, trenches take on a much more notable role, very reminiscent of the one they played in the Russo-Japanese war and World War 1 on many fronts. Furthermore, the Land Ironclads, like tanks in *World War I*, were used in the role of breakthrough, being able to cross trenches with ease and resist small arms fire. In the later parts of the story, invader cyclists and cavalry can be seen following the Ironclads after the breakthrough was made, taking care of the surrendered defenders and securing the advance. This too is very similar to the planned way that tanks were to be utilised on the Western Front. British commanders envisioned cavalry being used to exploit the gaps that tanks would create. In reality, that idea never

materialized but it did reflect upon post-war tank tactics with fast tanks of the Russians and cruiser tanks of the British.

### **The Technologies**

There are a number of technologies featured in the story. To skim over more minor ones, there's the idea of **bicycles** being used alongside cavalry, and indeed bicycle units did exist in armies of the time albeit on a smaller scale. Notable is also the presence of large guns or **howitzers** in the defender's ranks, artillery pieces that would come to later define the battlefield.

The ironclads themselves feature three different technologies which ranged from mere prototypes to (at the time) complete fiction.

*The most striking of these is the **pedrail wheel** which was mentioned earlier.* It was invented by Bramah Joseph Diplock in 1903 sometime before the story was written. The wheels were designed to aid in the crossing of muddy or otherwise treacherous terrain. Some more advanced versions even had suspension for every individual 'foot'.

The weapons the ironclads were armed with were, on their own, technologically ahead of their time. In 1903, **self-loading magazine-fed rifles** were mostly prototypes with the exception of the 1902 Madsen which, by that time was in production. The automatic weapons of the period were few and mostly either pistols or belt fed heavy weapons.

The Land Ironclads were 14 large landships built by the devitalized townsmen to assault the defender positions. The machines consisted of a large steel framework borne upon eight pairs of pedrail wheels, a predecessor to tracks which actual tanks would use. On top of the iron-armored roof was a **retractable conning tower** with vision ports for the ironclad's commander.

The land ironclads were pushed forward by **compact steam engines** which allowed them to travel at the speed of at least 6 mph. The entire thing moved on eight pairs of pedrail wheels.

Overall, the land ironclads can be considered more akin to wheeled naval warships on land than they would be to even the earliest tanks. However, some of the concepts and ideas behind them, like **gun ports on all sides** and **large heavyweight chassis**, can be found present in designs of actual landships some nations experimented upon. Perhaps the most similar real-life counterpart could be the Flying Elephant, a design made by the British Landships Committee.

### **Influence on reality**

H.G Wells was a great thinker and, before war broke out in 1914, he had written many wars of his own, mainly global in scale, and Land Ironclads is no different. He always believed that we have overdone war and that the march of technology will create such powerful weapons that could obliterate mankind.

The dimensions and design aspects of ironclads were not very realistic, but the idea they presented was. The Land Ironclads did indeed inspire the British Lord of Admiralty, Winston Churchill. He read the story and was convinced it could work in reality. He was an important figure in pushing the Landships Committee into action in 1915. First tanks rolled out in 1916, and, in 1925, during the Royal Commission testimony, Churchill testified under oath that the first person to foresee tanks was H.G Wells.

### **Billion – J . G. Ballard (1930-2009)**

*Billion + Millennium = Billennium (a millennium with billions of people)*



*Billennium* (or *Billennium*) is a short story by British author J. G. Ballard, first published in the January 1962 edition of *Amazing Stories* (Volume 36, Number 1). The story makes reference to the time in the future where population will be biggest problem for the human race.

### **Setting**

The story is set in the future (possibly 21st century - see billennium) where the world is becoming increasingly overpopulated, with a population of around 20 billion...so much so that in order to feed everyone, humans are squeezed into megacities and the rest of the land is used for farming, and as a result the world does not have a food problem, nor wars - since all governments devote themselves to addressing the problems caused by overpopulation. In the city inhabited by the two protagonists, **John Ward** and **Henry Rossiter**, there is a mass shortage of space and the people live in small cellular rooms where they are charged by ceiling space, the legal maximum decreasing to 3.5 square metres (38 sq ft) per person. The city streets are enormously crowded, resulting in occasional pedestrian congestions that last days at a time. Most old and historical buildings have been taken down to make way for new battery homes or divided into hundreds of small cubicles.

### **Summary**

The story centers around two friends, John Ward and Henry Rossiter. They live in the distant future as the title *Billennium*, would suggest. There are nearly twenty thousand million (20 billion) people and they are squashed into a city. Having this many people has put an enormous amount of pressure on space. The city council meets and decides that the amount of space an individual can occupy is only four square meters. Single people live in such

small cubicles. Only if they are married and have 3 children, they are allocated a room. So people looked forward to getting married.

Ward had a job in a library in the city and lived in a cubicle on a staircase of a multistoried building. His cubicle was 4.5 square meters or almost five. He had moved here 2 months ago in search of some privacy, leaving his room on the ground floor below, which he had shared with 7 other people. His friend Rossiter, who had a job in the Insurance Department and had a narrower room, was often envious of the space in Ward's cubicle. But soon, Ward's landlord announced that he wanted extra-half rental for it. So, Ward and Rossiter teamed up to rent a double cubicle in a semiderilict house near the library.

While they are at work one day, they decide to knock down their cubicle. During this time, Ward finds a forgotten room. The two friends are so excited to find this room, because they have never had this much space before. They are overwhelmed by the new space. They manage to decorate the room with furniture and shelves.

But the trouble begins when they decide to invite their friends (Judith and Helen, who had been thrown out of their own cubicles for using a broom cupboard for reading space) to live with them, who in turn, invite their families. Judith invites her aunt and Helen invites her mother and father one after another. Rossiter had to divide and re-divide the room every time a new member arrived. With so many people now living in the room, eventually the room becomes so crowded that it is no better than the cubicle they had before.

Eventually, Ward decides to become the landlord. He has always hated landlords and thought they were unfair and only after the money. The more he starts making money, the more he becomes

just what he always hated. He left his job at the library, and started charging the people who lived with him. He has now put making money over enjoying and living in the new found space. The old people living in the room also appear to be a bit selfish. Instead of being grateful to Rossiter and Ward, towards the end, they start indirectly suggesting that Ward move out (probably because he had no job now). For example, Mr. Waring, Helen's father says within Ward's hearing , 'If you ask me there's too many people in here. Down below they've only got six to our seven, and it's the same size room.' Thus, instead of sharing and caring for each other, people become selfish even in the times of crisis.

This story really is a wake-up call for people. It makes us question how society has become so money hungry and only wanting more and more. Though published in 1962, the story has many elements of today's time. How are we treating each other? Is money more important than enjoying our life and friends? These are just a couple of questions this story makes us ask ourselves.

The other interpretation may be crisis does not make people friendly to each other; it makes them more selfish.

### **Plot**

Ward lives in a future dystopian (a society full of suffering) with his close friend, Rossiter. After being kicked out of their homes, they decide to move in together so that they have space and split the payments. The story revolves around Ward and Rossiter's combined discovery of a secret, larger-than-average room adjacent to their rented cubicle. This is mildly important, as they have never been in a room where there were no people. As the two bask in the extra personal space that they have never known, things become complicated when they allow two other close friends to share the space, and the ensuing snowball effect of their invitees bringing

family to live in the room. In the end, the "luxurious" space comes to be the same type of crowded cubicle that they were trying to escape from in the first place. Ward becomes the landlord when there are so many people. He has always hated landlords and thinks that they are greedy and rude. He slowly starts to become what he always hated.

### **Who can replace a man?-Brian Aldiss**

In *Who Can Replace a Man?*, Brian Aldiss describes a futuristic world in which machines are capable of thinking based on the tasks they have been designed to perform. One day the machines realize that the few remaining humans have died, leaving the machines to fend for themselves. Although the humans in this story have potentially gone extinct because of their own shortcomings, it is questionable whether the machines will be able to survive without the ability to express human-like emotions, such as empathy and compassion.

In *Who Can Replace a Man?*, the reader is introduced to Earth in the future. In this world, machines can talk and think for themselves. The Earth has been ravaged by human-created wars and terrible environmental disasters. One day the humans who give orders to the machines are gone, leaving the machines to fend for themselves. In this situation, some machines run amuck, unable to do anything about their situation. But for those machines with higher-class brains, analyzing their new condition and trying to solve their predicament is not beyond them. When the penner says, "We have only ourselves to look after," the reader realizes that machines of his class see this differently, feeling that they are now free and now no longer have to take care of those humans.

However, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that even these higher-thinking machines are missing important characteristics that could hinder their ability to create their own society. Most importantly, the machines show an inability to feel empathy or compassion for each other. This is first illustrated when a group of machines, led by the penner, decide to leave. As they do, a locker follows them. Because it was not instructed to follow, the penner decrees that the locker must be destroyed. The machines do this even as the locker cries, "My only desire was..." leaving the reader wondering what the locker wanted and why the other machines wouldn't take the time to find out, which shows a lack of caring for others' ideas and a focus on the literal rules.

This same thinking continues as the machines think about their futures. When the penner says they will start their own city, he says, "All who oppose us will be destroyed." Like the humans who created him, the penner can think only of dominating, not working together with others. His thoughts and actions sound very much like those that caused the wars that did so much destruction to Earth.

The importance of caring about others is brought home to the reader when we learn the fate of the penner. Because it was the penner who showed no compassion to others in their "revolution", the reader is surprised at the end of the story. His gyro breaks and he can't move, so the others leave him. "Therefore I shall lie here and rust", the penner cried, "although I have a Class Three brain." "Therefore, you will be of no further use," agreed the operator. Even though he was one of the leaders of the expedition, the machines don't care and leave the penner behind. This is ironic because it was the penner who thought it was better that there were no humans left even though the humans could have fixed him. This



demonstrates that with their logical thinking, unlike humans, the machines have no sense of camaraderie or loyalty.

Another irony of the story is that the reader questions whether the inability to empathize or care for others is the reason human beings and their world are in such peril in the story. There are numerous references to the wars and abuse of the natural world that caused such devastation. As the machines move through the Badlands, they find that “man’s talent for war, coupled with his inability to manage forested land, had produced thousands of square miles of temperate purgatory, where nothing moved but dust.” Since these same humans created the machines now in control, is it the humans’ fault that the machines have no emotions? This idea makes the reader question if either human or machine would be able to control society in a positive way.

In the end, the machines encounter a human being who commands them to find food for him. As soon as he does, they comply. “Yes, Master,” said the machines. “Immediately!”

This shows that although the machines thought they were free, as soon as a human commands them, they instantly obey. They are not free, but are still controlled by the humans. This also demonstrates that in the story humans have become so used to machines doing everything for them that they can’t survive without their machines. They believe whatever command they give will result in getting whatever they want. The man commands the machines to get food even though they are in the Badlands where nothing can grow. Therefore, the machines may not be able to give him what he wants.

In this story, humans have damaged Earth, but unlike the machines, they also have the ability to grow and change if they try. The machines may do all the work but they have no feelings for each other and can’t repair themselves without human intervention.

Could they create their own machine society without these skills? Will the human beings learn from the mistakes of their violent past? The reader is left questioning whether either machines or humans will be able to survive in this inhospitable world created by human hands and kept going by the machines.

