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| **"The Land Ironclads"** | |
| **Author** | [H. G. Wells](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._G._Wells) |
| **Country** | United Kingdom |
| **Genre(s)** | [Science fiction](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_fiction) |

[](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HG_Wells_Land_Ironclads_1904.jpg)

1904 illustration of [H.G. Wells](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.G._Wells)'s December 1903 *The Land Ironclads*, showing huge [ironclad](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ironclad) land vessels, equipped with [pedrail wheels](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedrail_wheels).

"**The Land Ironclads**" is a short story by [H.G. Wells](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/H.G._Wells) that originally appeared in the December 1903 issue of the [Strand Magazine](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strand_Magazine).[[1]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-1) It features "land ironclads," 100-foot-long (30 m) [armoured fighting vehicles](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armoured_fighting_vehicles) that carry riflemen, engineers, and a captain, and are armed with remote-controlled, semi-automatic rifles. (The term "[ironclad](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ironclad)" was coined in the mid-19th century for steam-propelled (driven) warships protected by iron or steel armour plates.) The land ironclads are described as "essentially long, narrow, and very strong steel frameworks carrying the engines, and borne on eight pairs of big [pedrail](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/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.[[2]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-2)

The story contributed to Wells's reputation as a "prophet of the future"[[3]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-3) when tanks first appeared on the battlefield in 1916. For contemporaries, Wells's rather sketchy battle between countrymen "defenders" (who rely on cavalry and entrenched infantry) and attacking townsmen carried echoes of the [Boer War](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boer_War), as well as of his 1898 novel [*The War of the Worlds*](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_War_of_the_Worlds), which also featured a struggle between technologically uneven protagonists.[[4]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-4)

## Plot Summary

The story opens with an unnamed war correspondent and a young lieutenant surveying the calm of the battlefield and reflecting upon the war between two unidentified armies. The opponents are dug into trenches, each waiting for the other to attack, and the men on the war correspondent's side are confident they will conquer, because they are all strong outdoor-types —men who know how to use a rifle and fight—while their enemies are townspeople, "a crowd of devitalised townsmen . . . They're clerks, they're factory hands, they're students, they're civilised men. They can write, they can talk, they can make and do all sorts of things, but they're poor amateurs at war."[[5]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-wells-5) The men agree that their "open air life" produces men better suited to war than their opponents' "decent civilization."

In the end, however, the "decent civilization," with its men of science and engineers, triumphs over the "better soldiers" who, instead of developing land ironclads of their own, had been practising shooting their rifles from horseback, a tactic rendered obsolete by the land ironclads. Wells foreshadows this eventual outcome in the conversation of the two men in the first part, when the correspondent tells the lieutenant "Civilization has science, you know, it invented and it made the rifles and guns and things you use."[[5]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-wells-5)

The story ends with the entire army captured by thirteen land ironclads, with the defenders managing to disable only one. In the last scene, the correspondent compares his countrymen's "strong proportions with those of their lightly built captors",[[5]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-wells-5) and thinks of the story he is going to write about the experience, noting both that the captured officers are thinking of ways they will defeat what they call the enemy's "ironmongery" with their already-existing weaponry, rather than developing their own land ironclads to counter the new threat, and also noting that the "half-dozen comparatively slender young men in blue pajamas who were standing about their victorious land ironclad, drinking coffee and eating biscuits, had also in their eyes and carriage something not altogether degraded below the level of a man."[[5]](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-wells-5)

# Encyclopedia

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http://images-mediawiki-sites.thefullwiki.org/09/7/4/4/3695493113783710.png

1904 illustration of [H.G. Wells](https://www.thefullwiki.org/H.G._Wells)'s December 1903 The Land Ironclads, showing huge [ironclad](https://www.thefullwiki.org/Ironclad) land vessels, equipped with [pedrail wheels](https://www.thefullwiki.org/Pedrail_wheels).



http://images-mediawiki-sites.thefullwiki.org/09/7/4/4/3695493113783710.png

Artist's rendering of Wells's land ironclad

Written by [H.G. Wells](https://www.thefullwiki.org/H.G._Wells), "**The Land Ironclads**" is a short story that originally appeared in the [December 1903](https://www.thefullwiki.org/1903) issue of the [Strand Magazine](https://www.thefullwiki.org/Strand_Magazine) and set in a war similar to the [First World War](https://www.thefullwiki.org/World_War_I). The Ironclads are 100 ft long machines with [remote controlled](https://www.thefullwiki.org/Remote_control) guns and accommodation for 42 soldiers, including 7 officers. The story is notable for its description of a vehicle premonitory of the first [tanks](https://www.thefullwiki.org/Tank), particularly the [Mark I](https://www.thefullwiki.org/Mark_I_tank) which appeared in the later part of [World War I](https://www.thefullwiki.org/World_War_I).

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| Contents  * [1 Plot summary](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#Plot_summary) * [2 Inspiration](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#Inspiration) * [3 See also](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#See_also) * [4 References](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#References) * [5 External links](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#External_links) |

## Plot summary

The story opens with a war correspondent and a young lieutenant surveying the calm of the battlefield and reflecting upon the war. The two enemies are dug into trenches, each waiting for the other to attack, and the men on the war correspondent's side are confident in their coming victory. They believe that they will win because they are all strong outdoors-type men who know how to use a rifle and fight, while their enemies are towns people... "a crowd of devitalized townsmen... 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."[[1]](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-0) The men agree that their "open air life" produces far better men for war than their opponents' "decent civilization," and the story does not prove that fact wrong.

In the end, however, it is shown that the decent civilization, with men of science, engineers ways of winning the war, over the better soldiers who instead of developing land ironclads of their own, had been practicing getting better at shooting their rifles from horseback, a tactic which became outdated the second the land ironclads entered the battlefield. Wells foreshadows this eventual outcome in the conversation of the two men in the first part, when the correspondent tells the lieutenant "Civilization has science, you know, it invented and it made the rifles and guns and things you use," and the lieutenant responds "Which our nice healthy hunters and stockmen and so on, rowdy-dowdy cowpunchers and nigger-whackers, can use ten times better..."[[2]](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-1)

The story ends with the entire army captured by a dozen or so of the land ironclads, and the last scene is of the correspondent comparing his countrymen's "sturdy proportions with those of their lightly built captors."[[3]](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-2), and thinking of the story he is going to write about the experience, noting both that the captured officers are thinking of ways they will defeat what they call the enemy's "ironmongery" with their already-existing weaponry, rather than developing their own land ironclads to counter the new threat, and also noting that the "half-dozen comparatively slender young men in blue pajamas who were standing about their victorious land ironclad, drinking coffee and eating biscuits, had also in their eyes and carriage something not altogether degraded below the level of a man."[[4]](https://www.thefullwiki.org/The_Land_Ironclads#cite_note-3)

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| The Land Ironclads by H. G. Wells | Review by Robert Wilfred Franson |
| Strand Magazine, December 1903  collected in — The Time Machine and Other Stories | |
| The Short Stories of H. G. Wells | April 2007 |
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| The tank breakthrough  "The Land Ironclads" is H. G. Wells' prophetic science-fiction story of armored tanks in combat. His tanks (he doesn't use that later word) are large for land vehicles, more like small warships. Some of the design features are far in advance of 1903, not just imaginative propulsion but scientific fire-control.  A key concept is that the land ironclads may be used to break through hostile trench systems, of the kind that established the long dispute on the Western Front during most of 1914-1918. It is not merely the surprise of the tank attack, but the inability of riflemen or artillery to counter the tanks, and the lack of specialized anti-tank weapons or tactics, that give the victory to the ironclads in Wells' story. It signals a change in the strategic balance on battlefields, hence in war generally.  "The Land Ironclads" is told vividly from a viewpoint on the defending side. The sense of place is strong, after the attack beings we find ourselves right in the midst of the lines being overrun; although I found it harder to visualize the battlefield tactically. It's a good story, a brisk and quite readable mini-documentary.  Industrious tank drivers versus brave outdoorsmen  Unlike The Battle of Dorking and other war-prophetic stories, Wells does not name the countries who are battlefield antagonists, allowing us to focus on the nature of the ironclads and their unexpected breakthrough, rather than nationalistic clichés. This works nicely, although there is an interesting undertone. The defenders are described as nationally more vigorous and soldierly, coming from backgrounds as sportsmen and outdoor workers. The attackers are suggested to be less obviously of toughened soldier material, indoor city fellows from offices and factories.  I take this unlabeled contrast to be of defenders: British Empire active outdoorsmen headed by sunburnt veterans from colonial wars, plain soldiers of the classic type; versus attackers: German Empire industrial workers who may not be dashing chargers-on-horseback but have invented something better, the bringing of industrial machinery to war-fighting. It is this applied inventiveness, the industrial-mechanical superiority on the battlefield achieved by the land ironclads, which brings victory.  This is an analysis by Wells that would have been useful to the chateau generals in the coming First World War, could they but heed it. It's not a new idea really, that technology may overweigh skill and bravery and other soldierly virtues: it surely goes back to the first use of distance weapons in battle, the bow and the spear outreaching sword and club. As Leo Tolstoy earlier had pointed out in War and Peace, artillery does not care how brave you are. | |
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