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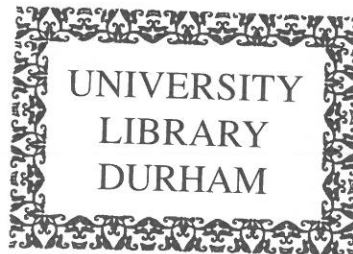
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Contents

J. R. Hammond. H.G. Wells as Educationalist.	1
Michael Draper. Wells, Plato, and the Ideal State.	8
Patrick Parrinder. The Time Machine: H.G. Wells's Journey through Death.	15
Christopher Rolfe. "A Blaze and New Beginnings": The Ironic Use of Myth in The History of Mr Polly.	24
Bernard Bergonzi. H.G. Wells and Henry James: An Unnoticed Item.	36
Book review: J.R. Hammond, An H.G. Wells Companion (David C. Smith).	38

H.G. Wells As Educationalist

J.R. Hammond

At the centre of all Wells's schemes and visions — of his socialism, his ethics, his distinctive view of life and theory of world revolution — lay a passionate faith in education and in the plasticity of the human mind. He believed that *Homo Sapiens* was profoundly influenced by his early education and environment, and that there could be no new world order without a great change in educational methods and ideas.

Wells echoed Robert Owen's view that character is largely formed in infancy. He was deeply influenced by his own environment during his formative years — the depressing house at Bromley, his schooling at Morley's Academy (and the crucial incident of the broken leg), (1) his experience as a draper's apprentice and the stimulating effect of Midhurst and Uppark. "Much of the temper or disposition of the child is correctly or incorrectly formed before he attains his second year; and many durable impressions are made at the termination of the first twelve or even six months of his existence." So wrote Robert Owen in his *New View of Society* (1813); a view which Wells endorsed ninety years later in *Mankind in the Making*.

His keen interest in primary education received a decided stimulus through the birth of his sons, George Philip and Frank Richard, in 1901 and 1903 respectively. The enthusiasm of the new parent lies heavily on the works of this period, most notably *Mankind in the Making* (1903), the short story 'The Magic Shop' (1903), and *The Food of the Gods* (1904).

His sons' governess, Miss M.M. Meyer, has recorded her impressions of Wells as a father in her book *H.G. Wells and His Family*. (2) From these memoirs and her discussions with myself it is plain to me that he took his duties as a parent conscientiously and that many of the ideas put forward in *Mankind in the Making* and elsewhere had been tested in practice. He did not hesitate to administer corporal punishment if he felt the occasion warranted it, but he was above all a jolly father, delighting in his sons and determined to give them the finest possible foundation in life. Upon this foundation, "at or about the fifth year, the formal education of every child in a really civilised community ought to begin". In all Miss Meyer's experience as a governess, H.G. Wells remained the best father she had ever known.

In any consideration of Wells's thinking on education it must not be forgotten that he was himself a full-time schoolteacher for three years, and had experience of teaching at a national school (Wookey), a grammar school (Midhurst), and private schools (Holt Academy, Wrexham and Henley House, Kilburn). He had practical experience of teaching science, mathematics, drawing and English, and was moreover a biological demonstrator and correspondence course tutor for a further three years before embarking on his literary career. He had therefore a varied pedagogical knowledge, and his interests had had an academic and scholastic bent from the time of his early teens. Nor were his academic attainments by any means perfunctory: he was a Bachelor of Science of the University of London, a Fellow of the College of Preceptors and a Fellow of the Zoological Society. As part of his studies for the licentiate and fellowship of the College of Preceptors, he had conducted research into educational theory and history



30 JUL 2004

and submitted theses on Froebel and Comenius.

During the years 1892-3 he contributed serious articles on educational theory to such Journals as *The University Correspondent*, *The Educational Review* and *Nature*. At this time he was also the sole contributor (under a variety of pseudonyms) to *The Educational Times* and was for a short period editor of *The University Correspondent*, a paper owned by the University Correspondence College. He was therefore closely involved with pedagogic discussion and a keen student of educational literature from his earliest years as a journalist.

His first full-length works were elementary text-books. From the beginning he made his own views as an educationist perfectly clear. In the Prefaces to Parts 1 and 2 of *A Text-Book of Biology* (written in 1892-3, when Wells was twenty-six) he attacked the practice of cramming, stating that his book had been designed to defeat the superficial examinee. He showed himself, too, to be keenly aware of the disadvantages of correspondence and evening class study: there was no substitute for personal contact with a tutor. "No method of studying — more especially when the objects of study are tangible things — can rival that prosecuted under the direction and in the constant presence of a TEACHER who has also a living and vivid knowledge of the matter which he handles with the student." In the same preface there is a revealing contrast between "the ideal world", in which there was an abundance of such teachers, and "this real world", in which there were but a select few: an interesting and early example of Wells's predilection for Utopian contrasts.

There can be little doubt that Wells was smitten with a deep and lasting distaste for schoolmasters — a distaste which owed its origin, at least in part, to his own experience as both schoolboy and teacher. William Clissold, writing about Wells, observed: "He was, I believe, for some years at an impressionable age, a schoolmaster, and he had shown a pathetic disposition during a large part of his life to follow schoolmasters about and ask them to be more so, but different". (3)

This animus found expression in his earliest works of fiction and he continued to satirise and lampoon the scholastic world throughout his career as a novelist. One of the first instances of this is a biting satirical passage in *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), in which the angel encounters a Philosophical Tramp during his exploration of the village of Siddermorton. The tramp explains that at the national school children are "pithed"; their brains are removed and "rotten touchwood" is put in its place. "Dates and lists and things" are implanted into their minds, and the process is so effective that after leaving school they are submissive, servile and incapable of independent thought. In the same year appeared his essay 'On Schooling and the Phases of Mr. Sandsome' (reprinted in *Certain Personal Matters*), a humorous sketch which derives frankly from his observations as a pupil at Morley's Commercial Academy for Young Gentlemen.

Beneath the humour there is already manifest a mood of angry invective against his wasted years of schooling: a mood which flashes out again in *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), in Hoopdriver's tirade against his schoolmaster. Also in 1896 came his short story 'The Plattner Story', with its sharp revelation of the inadequacies of a private school.

Love and Mr. Lewisham, written in 1898 and published in book form in 1900, is one of the most autobiographical and carefully written of all his works. The opening chapter contains an almost photographic description of his state of mind and physical surroundings as an assistant master at Midhurst Grammar

School at the age of seventeen, and later chapters convey a vivid impression of his environment as a student at South Kensington.

The Cavendish Academy for Young Gentlemen, the private school at Hastings to which Arthur Kipps was assigned, appears to be a caricature of some of the worst features of Morley's Academy — it was badly equipped, pretentious and dishonest, and the tuition (such as it was), was conducted in the most mechanical and uninspiring manner imaginable. Alfred Polly fared little better. He is sent first to a decrepit national school and then to an even worse private establishment; when he finally emerges from "the valley of the shadow of education" at the age of fourteen his natural curiosities are almost completely stifled in a dreary catalogue of facts and dates. The whole of this passage merits careful study by the student of Wells's thought: it is a perfect example of his gift for stinging satire and invective, written with the utmost economy of words.

The New Machiavelli was conceived as a novel on the grand scale. It gives an extremely revealing insight into the social and intellectual forces of Edwardian England, and is indispensable reading to all who seek to understand Wells's thinking on politics, education and sexual morality. In the brilliantly written opening section the narrator, Richard Remington, sketches a concise history of public education, observing that

It gives a measure of the newness of our modern ideas of the state to remember that the very beginnings of public education lie within my father's lifetime, and that many most intelligent and patriotic people were shocked beyond measure at the state doing anything of the sort.

Distrust of government, Remington continues, had been so great in the nineteenth century that the organisation of schooling and pedagogic research had been conducted largely by voluntary effort, and that in consequence the foundations of our educational ideas had been laid in a confused and haphazard manner. Educational organisation in England had grown in this empirical fashion, making compromises and departures in a totally inadequate and unsystematic attempt to keep pace with the manifest needs of the age.

In a long section entitled 'Scholastic' he includes a detailed account of his own tuition at City Merchants, an ancient public school in London. When reflecting on his schooling in later life he is "more and more struck by the oddity of the educational methods pursued, their aimless disconnectedness from the constructive forces in the community". City Merchants offered no key to the tumultuous social and economic changes which were visibly affecting contemporary life; Latin and Greek were taught, in spite of their rapidly diminishing value as media of understanding and intercourse; history teaching stopped short at the year 1815. It was, in fact, a curriculum completely divorced from the modern world; a conception of teaching rooted in tradition and immersed in the classics.

Remington acknowledges shrewdly that "it is infinitely easier to begin organised human affairs than end them". He is fully alive to the fact that the weight of inertia and tradition rendered it almost impossible to effect any lasting change in the curriculum of the public school; the schools were not only unchanging institutions but reproductive ones. Moreover, the classical subjects had behind them the immense weight of custom, respectability and academic esteem; the proposals of the reformers, in contrast, were untried and experimental. So it was that City Merchants embodied a conception of

rote learning utterly detached from the swirling life of the new century.

Wells's thinking on education, then, rested on the following propositions: Firstly, a belief that the majority of British schools were in need of far-reaching reforms, most urgently in the modernisation of the curriculum and extensive improvements in teaching methods. Secondly, that the initiative for achieving these changes would be taken most probably by propagandist societies financed by private donations, since there was little prospect of an initiative from within the academic world itself. With the publication of *Mankind in the Making* came his first sustained analysis of schooling and of the formative influences on the mind of the child.

He commenced his fifth paper, 'The Man-Making Forces of the Modern State', with a careful examination "of the great complex of circumstances which mould the vague possibilities of the average child" into the reality of an adult citizen. Wells was in no doubt of the great importance of home influences on the character and outlook of a child. Sound conduct and example in the home were of immense value in the formation of habits, attitudes and beliefs. Parents, brothers and sisters were in constant reaction upon the infant and would largely determine his "initial circle of thought". This initial core of responses and behaviour patterns would later be modified, but its essential nucleus would be almost unalterable: home influences constituted, indeed, "a sort of secondary heredity".

It was not simply personalities who were decisive in the home environment. Social conceptions and attitudes tended to shape ideas relating to class and one's standing in life; moral assumptions and the general temperament of the home also left an indelible impression. The home was not an unchanging factor; it was constantly evolving under the pressure of economic forces, changing systems of thought and the rise of new social classes. Its influence on the moulding of character could be summarised under the following heads: tradition, economic conditions, and the interplay of fresh ideas and interpretations of life.

He went on to discuss the problem of ameliorating poor home conditions through legislation, housing reforms, trade union action, and the widening of educational opportunities. The central question in the making of man, he believed, was "the preservation and expansion of the body of human thought and imagination": to that all other issues were secondary.

Turning now to the school, he argued that it was but one formative influence out of many — it was certainly in the school, however, that the individual received whatever systematic intellectual training he acquired. The moral development of the child was also deeply affected by schooling; "the habit and disposition towards industry, the sense of thoroughness in execution, the profound belief that difficulty is bound to yield to a resolute attack" — all these things would be acquired in a good school. These words were written long before Wells encountered the ideas of Sanderson of Oundle, but here we have a plain anticipation of his matured thinking on educational reform.

Religious instruction, he continued, should be removed from the curriculum altogether, on the grounds that it was "too intimate and subtle for objective treatment". A subject so vast and complex could not be taught in daily lessons of one hour: to attempt this would lead to a misuse of religion. His opposition to religious instruction was based, indeed, on a deep respect for the special importance of religion — "the crown of the edifice

we build" — and he went on to draw a highly unflattering description of an atheist, with his blindness to anything but material facts.

Every child had his own personal preferences and desires; these were part of his unique individuality, "different from every human being, and quite outside their range". This fact of unique idiosyncrasies had still to be acknowledged by many schoolmasters. The temperamental differences between the pedagogue and the artist were incompatible; it would be wiser to teach nothing of art rather than have a child's natural mental bias in favour of observation stifled by orthodox conceptions of beauty.

In his sixth paper, 'Schooling', he embarked on a detailed scrutiny of elementary education, commencing with the premise that the two main functions of the school were to initiate the future citizen into the world of literature and ideas (the teaching of reading and writing), and the exhaustive teaching of one's native language. His initial criticism of schooling in the English-speaking world was his charge that Latin and Greek were still widely taught — these he castigated as "a reasonless survival" — and taught in an entirely unimaginative way; that there was no deliberate training in logical thought; and no training *in expression* in any language, in the majority of schools.

He insisted on the crucial importance of the teaching of mathematics, observing presciently that the new mathematics was in a sense a supplement to language, and that in the future a knowledge of computation and the ability to think in analytical terms would be essential to the understanding of the complex modern state. A high proportion of science teaching was conducted in an undesirable manner, imparting nothing of the romance of scientific discovery nor of the vast implications of modern developments; it was merely a teaching of allegedly useful knowledge, a catalogue of miscellaneous and imperfectly understood facts.

The teaching of one or more modern foreign languages had now become indispensable, but in too many schools it was taught purely as a vulgar necessity, with no regard for its wider application to literature and an understanding of alien cultures.

During his visit to Nottingham in 1937 to attend the British Association conference he had seen some of the new schools in that city and been greatly impressed. His enthusiasm for the "work-study-play" method of schooling was voiced in a *News Chronicle* article published in December of the same year, 'Ask for Your Schools, and See That You Get Them'. Welcoming the *News Chronicle* Schools Exhibition at Dorland Hall, he wrote "the educational organisation of a modern community is the very core of that community" and that "without a vigorous educational renaissance from above downwards and from the communal school outward" democracy would be stunted and undernourished. The school, he asserted, should be the living nucleus of a new social order, a focal point in the life of the community.

His faith in education was reiterated in *Guide to the New World and Phoenix*, and finally in "42 to 44: A Contemporary Memoir". It is significant that even in the latter work, written in the midst of his slow decline to senility and death, his faith was quite unimpaired. He retained to the end his invincible belief in the plasticity of the mind, in the power of human potentialities, and in the school as a means to world regeneration.

The picture which emerges, then, from a study of his writings on pedagogic reform is one not merely of negative criticism but also of essentially

practical suggestions for change. He always attempted to be constructive in his criticism, not merely negative. In *Mankind in the Making* and *World Brain* there are detailed proposals for curricular reform, and in *The Salvaging of Civilisation* we find proposals for the standardisation of teaching aids and for the use of the gramophone and cinematograph in schools. Most remarkable of all, in *Joan and Peter* Wells recommends the creation of an "educational map", an agency to advise parents on the respective merits of schools, an idea which materialised in 1963 with the formation of the Advisory Centre for Education. The fact that many of his proposals have since become commonplace does not detract from his achievement but rather underlines the value of his pioneering efforts.

But he was not content merely to advocate reforms: he made serious and determined attempts to put his ideas into practice. Through his friendship with F. W. Sanderson and his candidature for the University of London constituency he sought to bring his influence to bear, if only in a small way, on the public school and university education of his day. In 1918 the Progressive Education Association (later the American Education Fellowship) was formed in the United States, devoted to the study of educational practices and the stimulation of new values in the school; from the outset Wells was a member of its advisory board. Through his membership of the British Association, his journalistic work and his contacts with professional educationists he did his utmost to disseminate these fundamental ideas and to secure their adoption by teachers and intellectual workers. And in order to prove that world history could be brought within the compass of a school or college course he produced his monumental *Outline of History*; and, having written it, urged it upon the academic world with all the energy at his command.

If at times he seemed to suggest that world citizens could be produced as if out of a mould, it was because of his transparent enthusiasm for universal history and his deep awareness that millions of children were receiving only a miserable travesty of education. The sense of educational opportunities wasted, of talents unused and questing minds deformed through crippled lives never ceased to haunt him. He wished to see a world in which no distinctive aptitudes would ever be untapped, no latent gifts unexplored, no curiosities thwarted by prejudice or miseducation. He wanted, indeed, nothing less than an educational renaissance of planetary dimensions: a renaissance which could only begin with a vigorous expansion and rebirth of schooling upon the basis of a reorganised curriculum and a transformation of teaching methods.

The essential function of the school was to expand the mental horizons of the child and equip it for intelligent citizenship in a modern community. Schooling was a civilizing, socializing process, "the process of taking this imperfectly social, jealous, deeply savage creature and socializing him.... Education makes the social man". The narrow instincts of the individual were broadened by reading and writing, languages and history; gradually the child became a participant in a greater life beyond the self and the family, he became a citizen of the world. It was only through the school that the range of understanding could be extended, that the personal mental life could be merged in a wider whole and become part of the undying Mind of the Race.

NOTES

1. *Experiment in Autobiography*, Chapter 2, para. 5.
2. International Publishing Company, Edinburgh, 1956.
3. *The World of William Clissold*, Book 5, para. 14.

Contributors

J. R. HAMMOND has resigned his post as secretary of the H. G. Wells Society in order to devote more of his time to authorship. His most recent book is *H. G. Wells: Interviews and Recollections* (Macmillan, 1980).

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