

Wells to Stapledon: A New Letter

Robert Crossley

On 16 October 1931 Olaf Stapledon initiated a correspondence with Wells that was to last eleven years. Stapledon's letter was prompted by the many reviews of his first work of fiction, *Last and First Men*, that had compared it to works by Wells. Anxious that Wells might have read the book and "might wonder why I had not the grace to make some acknowledgment of your influence," Stapledon wanted to clear himself from any suspicion of conscious or unintended plagiarism. He insisted in that first letter that he had never read any of the scientific romances except *The War of the Worlds* and "The Star", though he admitted he had learned a great deal from Wells's utopian and polemical writings.¹

Until recently I had assumed that Wells's reply to this letter was lost; the earliest letter from Wells to Stapledon that I could locate for my edition of their correspondence was written in 1936. However, Wells's first letter to Stapledon, found in an envelope in which Stapledon kept responses he had received from readers of *Last and First Men*, can now be added to the surviving correspondence. The letter is brief and offers no detailed commentary on Stapledon's book, but it is of some historical significance as part of the opening exchange between the originator of the modern scientific romance and his most distinguished English successor. Wells's gruffly amiable dismissal of Stapledon's worries is characteristic of the congenial and informal tone of the letters he wrote Stapledon, at least in the earlier years of their association. The letter is dated October 30, 1931 on the letterhead of the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston, Massachusetts. The text reads:

My dear Stapledon,

Thank you for a very pleasant letter but it is all balls to suggest *First and Last Men*[sic] (which I found a very exciting book) owes anything to my writings. I wish it did. I've told people to read it in my *Work, Wealth & Happiness of Mankind*², which aspires to sell as well as the *Outline of History*. (I've been over here superintending its production.) If ever you come within range of either 47 Chilton Court London (Tel. Wilbeck 5544) or Lou Pidou St. Mathieu Grasse (Tel. Gierne 5.52) ring me up & we will meet. Do you know my son Gip Wells. He lectures on zoology at University College & has a hard bold mind.

Yours very sincerely
H.G. Wells³

Notes

1. The complete text of the letter is in my edition of "The Correspondence of Olaf Stapledon and H.G. Wells, 1931-1942" in *Science-Fiction Dialogues*, ed. Gary Wolfe (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1982), p.35. The introduction to this edition which appears under my name (pp.27-33) was rewritten without my consent or knowledge; it contains so many errors of fact and interpretation (and of syntax) that it must be considered unreliable. For a more accurate and

a fuller interpretation of the intellectual relationship of Wells and Stapledon, see my "Famous Mythical Beasts: Olaf Stapledon and H.G. Wells," *The Georgia Review*, 36 (Fall, 1982), 619-35.

2. Wells's recommendation of *Last and First Men* in the final chapter of *Work, Wealth and Happiness* is not unqualified. He was most enthusiastic about the predictive early chapters of Stapledon's book and rather more skeptical of the speculations about the remote future history of the human species which make up the greater part of the work.
3. I am grateful to Mrs. Agnes Z. Stapledon for permission to publish this letter.

Recent Articles on Wells

The following items have come to our notice since the checklist in the *Wellsian* no. 6 (Summer 1983) was compiled. (Readers of the notes to Lyman Tower Sargent's article in the present issue, however, will find some further items which had escaped the editor's vigilant eye.)

Yuli Kagarlitsky, 'The Summing-Up (H.G. Wells)', trans. C. English, in *20th Century English Literature: A Soviet View*, Moscow (Progress Publishers) 1982, pp.41-57.

Robert Crossley, 'The Correspondence of Olaf Stapledon and H.G. Wells, 1931-1942', in *Science-Fiction Dialogues*, ed. Gary Wolfe, Chicago (Academy) 1982, pp.27-57. (But see Note 1 to Dr Crossley's article above).

Kathryn Hume, 'The Hidden Dynamics of *The War of the Worlds*', *Philological Quarterly* 62 no. 3 (Summer 1983) 279-92.

William J. Scheick, 'Exorcising the Ghost Story: Wells's *The Croquet Player* and *The Camford Visitation*', *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 17 (Avril 1983) 53-62.

Murray A. Sperber, 'The Author as Culture Hero: H.G. Wells and George Orwell', *Mosaic* 14 no. 4 (1981) 15-29.

Mulk Raj Anand, 'In Conversation with H.G. Wells', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 18 no. 1 (1983) 84-90.

Robert Shelton, 'The Mars-Begotten Men of Olaf Stapledon and H.G. Wells', *Science-Fiction Studies* 11 no. 1 (March 1984) 1-14.

David Y. Hughes, 'Recent Wells Studies', *Science-Fiction Studies* 11 no. 1 (March 1984) 61-70.