

17. Volume 4, p.358.
 18. W.M.S. Russell, *op.cit.*, p.7.

Residential Conference 1983

The topic of this year's weekend conference is to be "H.G. Wells and George Orwell". It will once again be held at P.N.L.'s Tufnell Park Hall of Residence, on 17th and 18th September. The cost of the whole weekend, including full board, will be £15.

As usual, there will be three speakers, audio/visual material, books, good food and a convivial atmosphere. This will obviously be a popular occasion. Members wishing to attend should make sure of a place by sending a £3 deposit per person to the Hon. General Secretary.

Contributors

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Imaginary Dialogues

Leon Stover, *The Shaving of Karl Marx*, Lake Forest, Illinois (Chiron Press) 1982. \$10

H.G. Wells is a congenial companion in Dreamland. Unfortunately, his scorn and contempt for all who profess to interpret his works (myself in particular) are sometimes extreme, so it was with a little trepidation that I raised the subject of Professor Stover's recent discussion novel, *The Shaving of Karl Marx*.

MD. How do you react to it then, H.G.?

HGW. React? If I were alive I'd sue the fellow! Do you know his title is filched from my *Russia in the Shadows*? When I went to Russia in 1920 I was so infuriated by constantly seeing portraits of old Karl Marx with his patriarchal beard and his Victorian pretentiousness, I vowed to retaliate one day with a book called *The Shaving of Karl Marx*....

MD. Yes, I think Stover should have explained the title. I suppose the point of using it is that you didn't need to write such a book. You'd already 'shaved' Marx by converting Lenin, his most influential follower, to Wellsianism. Stover thinks modern Russia isn't a Marxist state at all, but a Wellsian one.

HGW. If only that were the case....

MD. Is there no truth at all, then, in the ideas that Lenin was one of your biggest fans, that while in England in 1902 he came to you for English lessons, and that you then took the opportunity to explain to him the political implications of your early science fiction?

HGW. In a word, 'Niet' — though I must admit this Stover chap has made it all seem very plausible. My work did have a certain vogue in Russia from quite early on; they even used to translate my books from the serialized versions in British periodicals. Gorky and Zamyatin were among those who had a liking for my stuff. I visited the country in 1914, then again in 1920 after the revolution. On the second occasion I did meet Lenin and he seemed to me refreshingly practical and open-minded, for a Marxist. In 1934 I returned to interview Stalin, who seemed rather the opposite.

MD. I've heard that Lenin actually ordered a new edition of your works to be published, and carefully annotated his private copy of *Russia in the Shadows*!

HGW. I suppose he wasn't entirely bad.

MD. I'm not sure whether to believe you or Stover. The Professor correlates the careers of Wells and Lenin so deftly.

HGW. As befits an anthropology professor at the Illinois University of Technology, research is obviously one of the gentleman's strong points, along with breadth of interest. Examine his list of publications: *La Science Fiction Americaine*, *The Cultural Ecology of Chinese Civilization*, *Stonehenge and the Origins of Western Culture*. His versatility is little short of my own. We're even promised, if that's the correct word, a forthcoming volume on *Socialism and the Science Fiction of H.G. Wells*....

MD. But how thorough do you find the research on H.G. Wells published here to be?

HGW. It's highly impressive. The external matters — where I lived and so on — are simply not to be faulted. Like all truly educated men, Professor Stover has clearly spent many hours with my *Experiment in Autobiography*. What I find most pleasing of all is that many of the speeches he attributes to me incorporate material from my lesser-known works, the books you critical whippersnappers of today so badly neglect, particularly *Anticipations* which is really the keystone to the main arch of my work.

MD. So he makes no mistakes?

HGW. Oh, there are some unimportant ones. I would never have used an Americanism like "some guy I read in college", for instance. My degree was a B.Sc., not a B.S. (Blasted sauce!) While it's true I was disappointed that I never received an FRS, my disappointment belonged to the early 1940s, not 1902. Some of Stover's explanations of the symbolic names in my scientific romances are far-fetched, but on the other hand his explanations of 'Eloi' and 'Moreau' seem to match my memories quite well.

MD. What seemed far-fetched to me —

HGW. I haven't finished speaking yet!

MD. Sorry H.G., but this is my dream. What struck me as far-fetched was this idea of your social thought being formulable in terms of the Hindu trinity, Vishnu, Siva, and Brahma.

HGW. Allow me the pleasure of correcting you, then. I used precisely that formula in *The World of William Clissold*, Book III, Chapter 16. You should read it some time. I used the idea again in *Whither Mankind?*, an unpublished scenario for the film which eventually turned out as *Things to Come*. Heaven knows how Stover could have got hold of that! As I've said, his research is impressive. I hadn't worked out the formula as early as 1902, of course, so he's let in another anachronism there....

MD. According to its subtitle, Stover's book is written "After the Manner of Thomas Love Peacock." Does that approach appeal to you?

HGW. It does indeed. I was always attracted to the discussion novel after the fashion of the ancient dialogue. My *Modern Utopia*, *Boon*, *Undying Fire*, and *Anatomy of Frustration* are all stabs in that general direction. I like a sort of shot-silk texture between philosophical discussion on the one hand and imaginative narrative on the other....

MD. Ah but you tend to lack the necessary detachment, H.G. When you deal with ideas head-on, you lose most of the supple playfulness and balancing out of implications which make your best work so wonderful.

HGW. That's an extremely back-handed compliment, I must say. If you think my handling of ideas is a little wooden, I don't know what you'd have to call Stover's. The spy-story framework of his discussion strikes me as clumsy and hard to follow, and his style is nothing short of barbaric. Imagine me saying, "We've come so far, yet Volginism you love all the same." It sounds like a bad translation.

MD. Stover does say that his narrator Tersoff, who is reconstructing the dialogues between yourself and Lenin, has a "telegram style."

HGW. Blaming a fictional character is no excuse. Tersoff yourself, is what I say!

MD. I agree the style doesn't help the characterization. Lenin comes over as a simple-minded stooge, a funny foreigner given to undeleted expletives. His dialogue reminds me of the sentences made up by chimpanzees who've been taught

sign-language. As for you, you're depicted as a cold-hearted, single-minded elitist who identifies completely with his evil creations Dr. Moreau, the Invisible Man, and the Martians, as they try to overturn the old order.

HGW. My ideas about changing the world were not offered as gospel. They were experimental, for other people and myself to make use of as they saw fit. I often expressed a degree of contempt for the masses, for example, but I also walked with hunger marchers to forestall the police baton-charging them. I envisaged a world state to control the communications media, but I struggled against Stalin and Gorky for a PEN Club to achieve free speech for Russian authors. My beliefs were not made for long-term contemplation, but for my campaigning needs, like the knapsack and water bottle of a ridiculous Cockney soldier invading some stupendous mountain gorge. Stover simplifies me. Graham Hough did something similar in *The Last Romantics*, in his Yeats-Wells dialogue. That distinguished reactionary poet and I both had a keen sense of our own absurdity, of a rebellious rippling of the grotesque under our gravity. If you leave that out of account and treat us as mere intellectuals, you reduce us to schematic, rather uninteresting figures.

MD. It's certainly true that Lenin wasn't known for having a keen sense of his own absurdity. For him the end justified the means. Now, Lenin's means included the deaths of millions of people and his end was the creation of a vast totalitarian regime, which may yet destroy the human race. Are you really sure your ideas didn't point in that kind of direction?

HGW. I am not completely sure. I wish I was.

MD. And are you sure Lenin really didn't get some of his ideas from you?

HGW. There were others tuned much closer to his wavelength, I think: Chernyshevsky, Zaichnevsky, Dzerzhinsky, even Stalin.... Lenin and I were both part of a general current of thought. If his actions took a form akin to some of my speculations, the real reason may be that I grasped more accurately than others the social pressures at work. Unlike Marx, I knew revolution would resolve into the will of an elite who would consciously impose their utopia on the world, if necessary through centuries of conflict. You might say I wanted to capture them for true progress.

MD. And you don't feel compromised by modern Russia?

HGW. Young man, if I had been a Russian, I would have been one of the first executed by the Cheka, not a complacent beneficiary of the revolution such as Gorky turned into. To think what I did for that man when he was a friendless exile....

MD. You are a hard man to pin down, H.G. Wells.

HGW. Because you set yourself a fruitless task. It takes generations to clean up after the Lenins of this world, the men of action. I have left you something different from them: a fund of impersonal visions. As for the accident of my personality, forget all about it. The man Wells is dead.

MD. Not to your readers. We meet you in every sentence of your books, converse with you in Dreamland. You still live for Professor Stover, for example.

HGW. I admit it's pleasing to see someone taking my work seriously, even if he adopts a rather perverse line. Stover knows his Wells very thoroughly and offers a highly original, penetrating reading of the stories he discusses.

MD. We agree on this then: *The Shaving of Karl Marx* is a valuable contribution to Wells studies. I'll add that it also gives an extremely partial view of Wells and needs to be read with great caution. The scientific romances are exuberant, many-sided entertainments. To treat them as political allegories brings out some of their implications at the price of real distortion.

HGW. You know, when I read critics like you and Stover, I remember what Jesus said to me in Dreamland. (You'll find our conversation recorded in Chapter Five of *The Happy Turning* — recently reprinted by the Wells Society). "Never have disciples.... What a crew to start upon saving the world!.... They would misunderstand the simplest metaphors."

MD. As a prophet, you always seem to have the last word, don't you?

HGW. Oh yes. I do. Even in other people's dreams....

Michael Draper

Advance Notice: International Wells Symposium

Scholars from all over the world will be convening in London in the summer of 1984 to discuss George Orwell. It has now been suggested that two years after this — 1986 — might be an appropriate year in which to hold an International Wells Symposium in London. This would aim to bring together all those, in many different disciplines, who are contributing to the current reevaluation of H.G. Wells's work and legacy for mankind. It would be on an altogether bigger scale than the Society's annual residential weekends which have proved a popular forum for Wellsians in the past. Comments and offers of participation, please, to the Editor or the Hon. Secretary.

Recent Books and Articles on Wells

Note. This occasional feature last appeared in *The Wellsian* n.s. 2 (1978). Review copies, offprints, and bibliographical information will be gratefully received. Books reviewed elsewhere in *The Wellsian* or the *Newsletter* will not normally be listed here.

Gloria Glikin Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography*, Urbana (University of Illinois Press) 1977.

J.R. Hammond, ed. *H.G. Wells: Interviews and Recollections*, London (Macmillan) 1980.

Patrick Parrinder and **Robert M. Philmus**, eds. *H.G. Wells's Literary Criticism*, Brighton (Harvester Press) 1980.

John Batchelor, *The Edwardian Novelists*, London (Duckworth) 1982.

Jefferson Hunter, *Edwardian Fiction*, Cambridge, Mass. (Harvard University Press) 1982.

John R. Reed, *The Natural History of H.G. Wells*, Athens, Ohio (Ohio University Press) 1982.

John Huntington, *The Logic of Fantasy: H.G. Wells and Science Fiction*, New York (Columbia University Press) 1982.

Nicholas Delbanco, *Group Portrait: Conrad, Crane, Ford, James and Wells*, London (Faber & Faber) 1982.

Leland Fetzer, 'H.G. Wells's First Russian Admirer', *Foundation* 11-12 (1977) 39-48.

Robert M. Philmus, 'H.G. Wells as Literary Critic for the *Saturday Review*', *Science-Fiction Studies* 4 (July 1977) 166-93.

John Ower, 'Theme and Technique in Wells's "The Star"', *Extrapolation* 18 (May 1977) 167-75.

Melvin G. Storm, Jr. 'Thematic Parallelism in *Tono-Bungay*', *Extrapolation* 18 (May 1977) 181-5.

David Y. Hughes, 'The Mood of *A Modern Utopia*', *Extrapolation* 19 (December 1977) 59-67.

Jefferson Hunter, 'Orwell, Wells and *Coming Up for Air*', *Modern Philology* 78 (August 1980) 38-47.

David Parsons, 'H.G. Wells and the Psychology of Utopianism', *Stand* 22 no 1 (1980) 40-9.

Linda R. Anderson, 'Self and Society in H.G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 26 (Summer 1980) 199-212.

Carlo Pagetti, 'The First Men in the Moon', *Science-Fiction Studies* 7 (July 1980) 124-33.