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EDITOR

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### Contents

Editorial	1
Brian Aldiss — <i>In the Days of the Comet: An Introduction</i>	1
Lord Stewart of Fulham — Human Rights	7
R. T. Stearn — The Temper of an Age: H.G. Wells' message on war, 1914 to 1936	9
C. E. C. Greely — <i>The War of the Worlds</i> in the Classroom	27
M. S. Ray — Wells, Ford and <i>Tono-Bungay</i>	28
Bernard Loing — H.G. Wells at Work (1894-1900): A Writer's Beginnings	30
List of Contributors	38
Recent Books on Wells	38
Recent Articles on Wells	39

### Editorial

In the *Times Literary Supplement* last year, Philip Larkin concluded an appreciative review of *H.G. Wells in Love* and Anthony West's *H.G. Wells: Aspects of a Life*, by wondering whether their biographical emphasis might not have the side-effect of distracting attention from Wells's real achievements as a writer and thinker. The 1985 *Wellsian*, I'm happy to say, testifies to a continuing interest in the full range of Wells's work. Brian Aldiss notes the undiminished topicality of Wells's fiction, and the same might be said of Wells's interest in warfare and in human rights, topics ably discussed here by Roger Stearn and Lord Stewart.

It's pleasing to see that our Contributors' List shows a wide variety of backgrounds and that our Checklist of Recent Books and Articles reveals an international interest in Wells Studies. With the symposium planned for next year, the recent Hogarth Press reprints of Wells's fiction and a number of books on Wells (my own included) at present in the pipeline, interest in Wells is clearly flourishing. One of the people most responsible for this state of affairs, it almost goes without saying, is Dr. Patrick Parrinder who, among his many activities, has edited this journal for the past four years. I'm sure I speak for many Wellsians in taking the opportunity of my first editorial to thank him publically for his efforts. I shall do my best to maintain his high standards and, as always, comments and suggestions from readers will be much appreciated.

M.D.

### *In the Days of the Comet: An Introduction*

Brian Aldiss

Of recent years, we have had to adjust our views of Herbert George Wells. It was becoming easy simply to dismiss him as a failed prophet, or to classify him with such writers of a fading epoch as Arnold Bennett, Gissing, or Hilaire Belloc. But Wells is amazing; Wells had a time-bomb waiting. In 1984 was published — thirty-eight years after his death — his secret story of his love-lives, under the title *H.G. Wells in Love*.

Wells wanted to be happy, that most immodest of ambitions. He took great pains to be happy, and devoted much of his remarkable energy to that end; what was rare in his striving was that he tried to make the women with whom he so regularly got himself involved happy too. He set them up in houses, paid their hotel bills, and for many years put up with the most difficult of them (there the palm goes to Odette Keun) in a vague placatory way which must have aggravated as much as much as it mollified. The most famous of these involvements, apart from that with his breath-takingly tolerant second wife, Jane, was with Rebecca West. There was, of course, Rebecca West's side of the question; but our later age can see sympathetically that many of the vexing stratagems these lovers were put to, as for instance the occasional pretence that Wells was merely his son Anthony's uncle, were forced upon them by the social conventions of the time.

This great amorous warfare of flesh and spirit comes fresh to mind as one reads *In the Days of the Comet*. The book was first published in 1906, at a time Wells has labelled "the promiscuous phase of my life"; not that he was able exactly to stay chaste until well into his seventies. By 1906 Wells was extremely famous in a way that writers these days are not, who sink instead into obscurity, produce plays, or become 'media personalities'. Wells went travelling about the world, enjoying intercourse of one kind or another with presidents and prostitutes, reporting and being reported on. He was confident that a new world was emerging, uncertain how it would emerge, eternally lively and curious. A natural advocate of free love.

Once his book of essays, *Anticipations*, had been published in 1901, Wells was listened to increasingly as a prophetic voice, competent to speak about the real world, rather than to indulge merely in his ingenious fantasies. *In the Days of the Comet* is a balance between the dissatisfactions and hope of the real world and constructive fantasy. It's a visionary novel. Visionary novels are always disappointing in some way, since words never correspond exactly to either facts or wishes; but this is a prize exhibit of the species.

Wells's first readers were most struck by his vision of the new world emerging, a world of free love and social equality. We in our generation are more likely to be impressed by his portrait of things as they were — and by their resemblance to today. The comet has yet to come.

A profile of the novel appears disarmingly simple, a case of "Look here upon this picture, and on this". We are shown the old world; the comet passes; we are shown the new world. There is a Biblical directness in the parable: "We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye". The comet is the mechanism which carries us from the one picture to the other, and Wells is properly off-hand in his pseudo-scientific talk of the nitrogen in the comet's tail having its benevolent effects upon mankind.

This sensible method of argument by contrast is one that others have followed, before and since. We hope for a better world, we see it clear. But how to get there? Wells in 1906 could see no bridge to utopia; he forged a miracle instead, with legitimate didactic intent.

This forging is performed with great literary skill — something with which Wells is too little credited (though Nabokov and Eliot have acknowledged Wells's powers). The strengths of the book have also been widely underestimated, even by those writers and readers who traffic in comets and similar wonders.

The story is told in Wells's easy manner. After a crisis, we get the throwaway remark, "Then, you know, I suppose I folded up this newspaper and put it in my pocket", which catches without pretention the absent-minded listlessness following a lover's quarrel. The prose grows more spirited when Wells's traditional dislikes are paraded. Despite many attempts at it since, no one has bettered Wells's description of places where commerce has invaded nature — perhaps because he finds a kind of desolate beauty there. When Leadford, the central character, arrives at a seaside town, we come on the following passage:

The individualistic enterprise of that time had led to the plotting out of nearly all the country round the seaside towns into roads and building

plots — all but a small portion of the south and east coast was in this condition, and had all the promises of those schemes been realised the entire population of the island might have been accommodated upon the sea frontiers. Nothing of the sort happened, of course; the whole of this uglification of the coastline was done to stimulate a little foolish gambling in plots, and one saw everywhere agents' boards in every state of freshness and decay, ill-made exploitation roads overgrown with grass, and here and there at a corner, a label, "Trafalgar Avenue" or "Sea View Road". Here and there, too, some small investor, some shopman with 'savings' had delivered his soul to the local builders and built himself a house; and there it stood, ill-designed, mean-looking, isolated, ill-placed on a cheaply fenced plot, athwart which his domestic washing fluttered in the breeze amidst a bleak desolation of enterprise.

Of course we recognise it. What was happening in Shaphambury in 1906 is happening in Florida today.

The plain tale of Leadford's thwarted affair with Nellie, and of his love which turns to hatred, is enough to allow Wells to string out before us a series of ghastly cameos, the finest of which is probably the picture of the industrial Midlands, when twilight settles over a tawdry scene of sheds, factories, terrace houses, and blast furnaces. "Each upstart furnace, when its monarch sun had gone, crowned itself with flames, the dark cinder heaps began to glow with quivering fires, and each pot-bank squatted rebellious in a volcanic coronet of light. The empire of the day broke into a thousand feudal baronies of burning coal."

Such passages brim with imaginative energy. In his book, *Language of Fiction*, David Lodge makes an eloquent defence of *Tono-Bungay*, which Wells was to publish only three years after *In the Days of the Comet*. Lodge points out that there is a way of reading Wells, just as there is of reading Henry James, and speaks of *Tono-Bungay* as a 'Condition of England' novel: a novel neglected because its style, its whole thrust, does not accord with preconceived ideas of the English novel as formulated by James and F.R. Leavis. To a large extent, the same principle applies to *In the Days of the Comet*.

All its vivid imagery of physical chaos serves a purpose directly geared to the meaning of the novel. It links the tangible world with the chaos of mankind's thinking, and in particular with Leadford's lost and murderous state of mind. As we are told, "the world of thought in those days was in the strangest condition, it was choked with obsolete inadequate formulae, it was tortuous to a maze-like degree with secondary contrivances and adaptations, suppressions, conventions, and subterfuges. Base immediacies fouled the truth on every man's lips." Clarity was blocked as thoroughly as the way to the sea.

Over the chaos shines the comet, growing larger night by night. It forms a contrast to the 'dark compressed life' on which it shines. Wells wrote with the predicted 1910 appearance of Halley's comet in mind. Equally topical for us is the miner's strike, with its pickets and attacks on cars. Wells's power as a fantasist derives from his firm grip of the world-as-it-is.

Since *In the Days of the Comet* was not well-received when it first appeared, as frequently happens when visionary books are set before a largely unprepared public, it seems appropriate to offer a new reading of the novel to a new set of readers.

This is not a 'Condition of England' novel, though in some respects it may be seen as a precursor of *Tono-Bungay*. Rather, it is a skilfully conducted 'condition of mind' novel. The Change effected by the comet is a change of mind. Striking descriptions of physical states are always linked to mental states — as when the hideous towns are designated "cities men weep to enter". The sick mind of the people before the Change is dramatised cunningly in a variety of ways as it drifts towards war, the ultimate waste, the ultimate confusion. "Humanity choked amidst its products."

This sickness of mind is nowhere better embodied than in the character of its central figure, Willie Leadford, who tells the story. On the first page of his narrative, Leadford speaks of his "crude, unhappy youth". Throughout the story until the Change, he reveals himself as brutal, troubled, murderous, and ineffective. This is precisely the state of the world in which he lives. Despite the tide of bottled emotions, everything is reduced to pettiness. "It seems to me even now", says Leadford after the Change, "that the little dark creature who had stormed across England in pursuit of Nettie and her lover must have been about an inch high...."

Leadford is deliberately not elaborately characterised. The same applies to the few other actors — a point to which we return later. But on the details encumbering Leadford's physical existence Wells is sharply precise. We particularly understand the nature of this "dark and sullen lout", as he calls himself, by his treatment of his mother, the woman who endures much to ensure her son's comfort, minimal though that comfort is.

The portrait of Mrs. Leadford is undoubtedly based on Wells's memory of his mother at Atlas House in Bromley, Kent, where he was born. The exasperated love he felt for her is always present, nowhere more so than in the description of the old woman's dreadful kitchen. Even George Orwell never bettered that kitchen of Mrs. Leadford's, where the business of deforming the human soul is carried on quite as efficiently as in any factory. Mrs. Leadford is growing old in her foul kitchen. Her hands are distorted by ill-use. She coughs. She shuffles about in badly fitting boots. Even her son wants nothing to do with her.

Wells turns to the historic present for the climax of these scenes of domestic misery. Leadford, betrayer and betrayed, says, "And while she washes up I go out, to sell my overcoat and watch in order that I may desert her."

*In the Days of the Comet* is full of such compelling moments, which crystallise the whole point of the book while being sufficiently powerful in themselves as moments of tragi-comedy in Wells's best manner.

So the entire first part of the novel represents an acute and brilliantly drawn picture of the mind of England and the industrialised countries at the turn of the century. Leadford, taken up with his wretched emotional relationships and his socialism, pays little attention to the comet drawing nearer to Earth. His counter-weight, Parload, is the astronomer; it is through Parload that we see the contrast

between earthly squalor and heavenly beauty, while Leadford is still having trouble with his boots.

The comet arrives and brings the Change. Wells now draws the utopia that could be. He was always a master of symbols, in his swift, careless-seeming way. Among the first objects the changed Leadford sees are a discarded box of pills and a wrecked battleship, a "torn and battered mass of machinery" now lying amid ploughed-up mountains of chalk ooze. From the destruction of the old mind grows a better one.

Despite all these excellent preparations, the utopian world of might-be is a shadowy place when we come to it. Wells has to resort ultimately to traditional stereotype, of a place with trees of golden fruit and crystal fountains, tenanted by people who look exalted. He confronts a difficulty that Dante and Milton faced before him; the Inferno and Paradise Lost have more readers than a thousand Paradises and Paradise Regaineds. Not only is a better world hard to realise, even on paper, but Wells had addressed himself particularly to that subject in the previous year, with the publication of *A Modern Utopia*.

*A Modern Utopia* is a full-fledged blueprint for a better, healthier, and happier world, in which a regulated capitalist economy is presided over by an elite (the 'samurai'). Since it appeared in 1905, *A Modern Utopia* has been much sneered at. Many of the book's ideas are sensible and rational — in a word, Wellsian; but an irrational streak in us prevents our putting our knowledge into practice on any effective scale. Wells was essentially rather a simple person (an adjective he applies affectionately to Kipps), and it was this simplicity which gave him the confidence to put forward his less-than-simple plans for mankind, generally in the expectation that they would be immediately taken up.

The rather shadowy utopia to which we are introduced at the end of the present book contains two well-dramatised elements not markedly present in *A Modern Utopia*, the death of warfare and an outspoken argument for free love. The argument for free love is carried on into the 'frame' of the story for extra emphasis.

Critics have accused Wells of wanting war. Certainly he was obsessed with war, almost as greatly as we are in our time. Certainly in 1914 he applauded the call to arms, as many people did — and wrote a rather silly book whose title coined a cliché, *The War That Will End War*. But nobody reading *In the Days of the Comet* would call him a war-monger. I am thinking particularly of the lovely moment after the Change when the common soldiery, on its way to war — as it might be, in Flanders — returns to consciousness by the roadside.

The men do not fall into ranks. They discuss the causes of war with incredulity. "The Emperor!" they exclaim. "Oh, nonsense! We're civilized men .... Where's the coffee?"

It did not work out that way in 1914. Halley's comet passed without effect.

But the new thing in Leadford's utopia which caught the attention in 1906 was love, not war.

Wells advocates free love: cleverly, he has a woman put forward the argument. Nellie is changed from a rural faceless creature to a "young woman of advanced

appearance" (to borrow a description jokingly applied to Christina Alberta in Wells's later novel *Christina Alberta's Father*). She puts forward the argument tentatively at first, but in the end conclusively: marriage is not what she wants; she wants to love where she chooses; she wants both Leadford and his rival. "Am I not a mind that you must think of me as nothing but a woman?"

What infuriated the righteous, and Wells's enemies in the Fabian Society, was that Wells not only advocated free love, but had the cheek to practise it. He defied the conventions of the time. There is an amusing example of this in *H.G. Wells in Love*. Before the first World War, Wells was enjoying an affair with the Gräfin von Arnim, the Irish lady whose book, *Elizabeth And Her German Garden*, was beloved in stately and less stately homes up and down the land.

One day Wells and von Arnim found something in the correspondence columns of *The Times* which amused them. It was, says Wells,

a letter from Mrs. Humphrey Ward denouncing the moral tone of the younger generation, apropos of a rising young writer, Rebecca West, and, having read it aloud, we decided we had to do something about it. So we stripped ourselves under the trees as though there was no one in the world but ourselves, and made love all over Mrs. Humphrey Ward. And when we had dressed again we lit a match and burnt her.

A word should be said finally about the form of *In the Days of the Comet*. Although it has been referred to here as elsewhere as a novel, it is in fact a separate if allied form, a novella. A novella, as properly understood, restricts itself to a single situation or event. It has few characters, and they mainly function in a symbolic role: the protagonist, the woman as love object, the rival, the mother, the statesman, and so on. Goethe's *Elective Affinities* is a good example of a novella. And *In the Days of the Comet* is a rare English example of the mode — a much more perfect example than has hitherto been recognised.

In it, H.G. Wells shows his characteristic dissatisfaction with the existing order, his spirited hatred of the mess we have got ourselves into, his striving for better things. No doubt if he were alive today he would still find ample reason for dissatisfaction, hatred, striving.

☆ ☆ ☆

*In the Days of the Comet* has been republished by the Hogarth Press (Chatto & Windus); *H.G. Wells in Love*, edited by G.P. Wells, is published by Faber & Faber.