

H.G. Wells: Novelist in the Making

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The literary career of H.G. Wells was ostensibly launched in 1895, when four books were published under his name: *Select Conversations with an Uncle*, *The Time Machine*, *The Wonderful Visit*, and *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents*. These works, written by a previously unknown young man of twenty-nine, reveal an extraordinary diversity of style and theme and striking maturity and self confidence. It is sometimes forgotten that Wells the novelist and scientific romancer did not simply appear overnight: his style and self assurance were developed after a long, arduous and at times dispiriting literary apprenticeship extending over a period of eight years.

Something of the flavour of this apprenticeship can be deduced from a letter he wrote to his friend A. M. Davies in 1888:

		£	s	d
Item 1 Short Story	Sold	1	0	0
Item 1 Novel. 35,000 words	Burnt	0	0	0
Item 1 Novel unfinished 25,000	"	0	0	0
Item Much comic poetry	Lost	0	0	0
Item Some comic prose	Sent away, never returned			
Item Humorous essay	Globe, did not return			
Item Sundry stories	Burnt			
Item 1 Story	Wandering			
Item A Poem	Burnt			
	etc etc			
		<hr/>		
Total income (untaxed)		£ 1.	0.	0
		<hr/>		

"Some day I shall succeed, I really believe," he commented, "but it is a weary game."

His apprenticeship as an imaginative writer had in fact begun very much earlier, for as a child he had written and illustrated a number of comic histories, one of which, *The Desert Daisy*, was published in facsimile in 1957.¹ There had always been "some little kink in my mind," he wrote years later, "which made the writing of prose very interesting to me."² *The Desert Daisy* reveals many characteristics of the mature Wells, including an irreverent attitude towards authority and an evident fascination with the details of authorship and publication.

It was not until the launching of the *Science Schools Journal* in December 1886, when Wells was a student at the Normal School of Science (later the Imperial College of Science and Technology) that he had an opportunity to express his growing interest in literary expression in a series of essays, sketches and short

stories. During the years 1886-1891 he contributed some fifteen pieces to the journal, including short stories, satirical verse and philosophical essays. Much of this material is, in his own words, "imitative puerile stuff,"³ yet some of his contributions show evidence of considerable literary promise. They include, for example, 'The Chronic Argonauts' (the first draft of the story which later became *The Time Machine*), 'Walcote,' an interesting short story in the Poe manner, and 'Specimen Day,' a humorous account of a journey by tricycle from Petersfield to Crawley. In all this material Wells was gaining valuable experience in literary techniques and confidence in expressing his ideas in the form of imaginative writing.

During 1887 and 1888 when he was in wretched health, he made a number of determined attempts to write a novel and seems to have worked simultaneously on at least two: *Lady Frankland's Companion*, a romance of 35,000 words, and a much more ambitious novel set in the Potteries, of which only a fragment survives as the short story 'The Cone.' He toiled on the latter while staying with friends at Etruria in the spring of 1888. "And at Etruria my real writing began," he wrote later. "I produced something as good at least as my letters, something I could read aloud to people I respected without immediate shame. It was good enough to alter and correct and write over again."⁴ Clearly he was determined to achieve success as an imaginative writer and despite discouragements and setbacks continued to work away at novels, short stories, romances and poetry whilst earning his living in the world of education.

Geoffrey West in his interesting and stimulating study *H.G. Wells: A Sketch for a Portrait* observes that Wells's "struggle to embody satisfactorily the brilliantly original idea of time-travelling might in itself be said almost to constitute his literary apprenticeship." Dissatisfied with 'The Chronic Argonauts' he decided to rewrite it completely and between 1889 and 1894 produced a series of different versions, "each a deliberate attempt to improve upon its precursor."⁵ Each rewriting brought the work nearer to the familiar text of *The Time Machine* we know today. In all there were at least seven versions before he was satisfied, and it says much for his determination that he worried away at his revisions even during the lonely years when he was working as an assistant master at Henley House School.⁶ The school magazine had been founded by Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe) and Wells contributed a number of short pieces to the magazine whilst simultaneously contributing to the *Science Schools Journal*.

Whilst working as a teacher and correspondence course tutor during 1891-93 he was successful in placing a number of essays on educational and scientific topics including articles in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *Globe*, the *Educational Times* and the *University Correspondent*. These range from the whimsical humour of 'The Subtle Examinee' and 'The Examiner Examined', which question educational practices of the time, to satirical articles on natural history and quasi-scientific speculations.

His first real breakthrough came in July 1891 when the respected *Fortnightly Review* under the editorship of Frank Harris published his essay 'The Rediscovery of the Unique'. This was a daring and original piece of writing which, by insisting

on the uniqueness of individuals, implicitly challenged conventional morality with its insistence on universally applicable standards. Wells was elated with his success. "Is this the dove with a sprig of bay?" he wrote to A. T. Simmons. "Is it poor Pilgrim's first glimpse of the white and shining city? Or a mirage?" Alas, it proved to be a mirage, for when he attempted to follow up his success with an outline of a four dimensional time-space system, 'The Universe Rigid', this was rejected by Harris as incomprehensible.

It was the serious breakdown in his health in May 1893 which compelled him to abandon a career as a teacher and follow his literary leanings instead. Whilst convalescing at Eastbourne after a severe haemorrhage he read J. M. Barrie's *When a Man's Single*, which contains a fictionalised account of Barrie's experiences as a journalist, and reading it made him realise he had been setting his sights too high. Instead of writing essays on philosophy and ethics he realised he would have more prospect of success if he wrote about matters much more closely related to everyday life. Forthwith he wrote 'On the Art of Staying at the Seaside', a facetious account of Eastbourne and its holiday visitors. This was immediately accepted by the *Pall Mall Gazette* (August 7, 1893) and the editor, Harry Cust, wrote back asking for more. "At last I found myself with the knack of it," he wrote in his autobiography. "In a couple of months I was earning more money than I had ever done in my class-teaching days. It was absurd. I forgot all the tragedy of my invalidism ..."⁷

For Wells the years 1893-95 were a period of intensive creative activity. In addition to writing no less than six books⁸ he produced more than 120 essays, of which 53 have been published (fourteen in *Select Conversations with an Uncle* and thirty-nine in *Certain Personal Matters*.) This incredible industry does not include the numerous book reviews he prepared for the *Saturday Review*, of which there are at least 92.⁹ Some of the best of this material, but by no means all, is included in *Select Conversations* and *Certain Personal Matters*. It must not be assumed, however, that when compiling these volumes he simply reproduced the texts of the essays and articles as they had first appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and other papers. A comparison of the original texts with the book versions reveals that Wells carefully revised them for book publication.

Throughout these journeyman years, then, he was slowly but surely gaining mastery in the art of the novelist. "I had been learning the business of writing lightly and brightly for years without understanding that I was serving an apprenticeship," he wrote. He grasped that his early literary efforts including his prolific articles and letters "had been releasing me from the restricted vocabulary of my boyhood, sharpening my phrasing and developing skill in expression."¹⁰ Between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-nine Wells produced an enormous amount of writing, much of which deserves a far wider audience than it has yet received. Through a long process of trial and error he perfected his gifts of expression with a patience and endurance which commands respect. In the process he transformed himself from an unknown school master to one of the foremost writers of his times.

Notes

1. *The Desert Daisy* ed. Gordon N. Ray, Urbana (University of Illinois) 1957.
2. 'Mr Wells Explains Himself' *T. P.'s Magazine* (December 1911).
3. Quoted in Geoffrey West *H.G. Wells: A Sketch for a Portrait* London (Howe) 1930 p.287.
4. *Experiment in Autobiography* London (Gollancz and Cresset) 1934 pp.308-9.
5. West *op. cit.* p.289.
6. See D. J. Lake 'The Drafts of *The Time Machine*, 1894' *Wellsian* 3 (1980) pp.6-13, and Bernard Loing 'H.G. Wells at Work (1894-1900), Part 1, *The Time Machine*' *Wellsian* 8 (1985) pp.30-34.
7. *Experiment in Autobiography* pp.374-5.
8. *Select Conversations with an Uncle, The Time Machine, The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents, The Wonderful Visit, The Island of Doctor Moreau and The Wheels of Chance*.
9. See *H.G. Wells's Literary Criticism* ed. Patrick Parrinder and Robert Philmus, Brighton (Harvester Press) 1980.
10. *Experiment in Autobiography* p.374.