13 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p II

14 H.G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London: Pan, 1982), p 194

15 *Ibid*, p 46

16 *Ibid*, p 108

17 *Ibid*, p 186 (emphasis added)

18 Sontag, *Illness*, p 12

19 Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, p 327

20 Sontag, *Illness*, p 12

21 *Ibid*, p 13

22 *Ibid*, p 22

23 Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, VI, 86 cited in Patrick Mullahy, *Oedipus: Myth and Complex* (New York: Grove, 1955), p 9 (emphasis added)

24 Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, p 169

25 Sontag, *Illness*, p 17

26 *Ibid*, p 13

27 David Lodge, "Tono-Bungay and the Condition of England", in *H.G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed B. Bergonzi (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p 116

28 Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, p 130

29 See, for example, Hubert Bland's review for the *Daily Chronicle*, Feb 1909, reprinted in *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, ed Patrick Parrinder (London: Routledge, 1972)

30 Sontag, *Illness*, pp 13, 14, 15

31 Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, p 35 (emphasis added)

32 *Ibid*, p 36

33 *Ibid*, p 75

34 *Ibid*, p 236

35 *Ibid*, p 82

36 *Ibid*, p 278

H.G. Wells and Votes for Women

Cliona Murphy

Already people are begining to forget the queer fevers that ran through the British community in 1913. For example there was the violent unrest of the women. That may profoundly exercise the historian of the future[1].

On 30 June 1908 militant suffragettes evaded policemen and made a raid on the House of Commons. As they entered they emitted "that memorable war cry"[2] – "Votes for Women", a demand which was being more frequently and more loudly heard throughout Edwardian Britain. In the following year Wells's controversial novel *Ann Veronica* was published; it not only portrayed the raid on the House of Commons but attempted to explain the reasons for women's unrest[3]. Ironically in doing so it became part of the story it was trying to tell[4]. According to one of its more complimentary reviewers: "It was less a story than a study: a study of unrest and dissatisfaction which has entered into the soul of the modern city girl, who from the beginning has been relieved of the need of wage earning and finds herself waiting for the suburban husband"[5]. Through Ann Veronica's revolt and her subsequent flight to London, involvement with the suffragettes and running off to Switzerland with her married science tutor, Capes, Wells was able to discuss the state of what he called "the relations between the sexes".

Ann Veronica and other Wellsian novels of this period attempted to break from the 'Angel in the House' tradition[6]. During the early twentieth century Wells saw himself as the champion of women's emancipation. Wells's feminism, however, was of a confused nature. While he clearly had some wonderful insights into the social, economic and political plight of the female sex[7], these were negated by his visions of women in the role of breeders for the state. These inconsistencies are apparent throughout his "writings on sex" and in particular in his attempts to understand the suffrage movement. They also become clear when one looks at Wells's personal relationships with women – relationships which are not the subject of this article but have been investigated in depth in recent Wellsian research[8].

Wells had his own ideas on how women could become independent. Writing from the perspective of his autobiography in 1934 he stated "the first thing surely for them was to take control of their persons, and how could this happen unless Free Love and neo-Malthusianism replaced directed and obligatory love and involuntary childbearing at the front of their programme"[9]. As well as having control over their sexuality, Wells argued, there was another area over which women must have control. "It seems to me that much of women's difficulties are economic"[10]. Ann Veronica's statement pinpointed the core of Wells's argument on the position of middle-class women. He repeatedly asked in his novels how women can attain any kind of freedom without being financially independent. Most of his female characters at one time or other come up against this dilemma: Ann Veronica needed money if she was to survive in London; Lady Harman (*The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914)) if she was to get away from her husband and Marjorie (*Marriage* (1912)) if she was to help her husband. All examined how they could earn money and all arrived at negative answers. They had no marketable value. Their

education did not provide training or skills which could be exploited economically[11]. Ann Veronica argued that "until a girl can go away as a son does and earn her independent income she's still on a string...If the master pulls, home she must go"[12]. Wells asserted that a demand for suffrage was pointless, unless women made preparations for their economic independence.

Economic hardship and other personal troubles drove the Wells heroines into the arms of the suffragettes. The "general feminine insurrection fell in very closely with Lady Harman's revolt"[13]. For a period they were able to explain their own particular problems in terms of the movement's problems and they thus enabled Wells to discuss women's suffrage, the anti-suffragists and the role of women in politics. They usually "came to their senses", saw the faults of the movement, left it and like all Wellsian women returned to their men.

The whole question of women's suffrage was one which Wells examined thoroughly. He attempted to explain "the widespread, confused persuasion among modern educated women that the conditions of their relations to men were oppressive, ugly and dishonouring" in terms of released energy[14]. His interpretation had parallels with George Dangerfield's thesis (*The Strange Death of Liberal England*) which argued that "its unconscious motive was the rejection of a moribund, a respectable, a smothering security"[15]. (However it seems unlikely that Wells shared the latter's insinuation of lesbianism in the movement.)

His portrayal of suffragettes suggests that he was in agreement with other contemporary observers of the movement that it attracted a certain type of female. The popular portrayal in the media of the plain, thirtyish, frustrated spinster waging a battle against all men is reflected in the *Ann Veronica* character Miss Miniver who:

> "looked out on the world through large emotional blue eyes that were further magnified by the glasses she wore, and her nose was pinched and pink and her mouth was whimsically petulant. Her glasses moved quickly as her glance travelled from face to face... On her lapel was an ivory button bearing the words "Votes for Women"."[16]

Wells was irritated by the more extreme suffragettes' faith in what the vote could do for them. Such faith was evident in bland meaningless statements like "we want the vote because the vote means autonomy"[17]. He wrote in 1916 that "it was never possible to find why women wanted the vote. Some, for example, alleged that it was because they were like men, and some because they were entirely different"[18]. He pointed out that they were constantly contradicting themselves: "There is scarcely a single argument in suffragist literature that cannot be completely negatived out of suffragist literature"[19]. The stubborn belief that the vote would cure all was expressed by Kitty Brett, a suffragette, in reply to Ann Veronica's query about their economic plans for women: "That will follow. Nothing was ever done without a certain element of faith. After we have got the vote and are recognised citizens, then we can come to all these things"[20].

Such a faith was particularly irritating to a man who revelled in designing detailed blueprints for the future of mankind. He wrote: "The leaders of the feminist revival

were no more willing than were the socialists to realize where they were going. They were alive to the wrongs which set them moving but not to the ends towards which their movement would take them"[21]. Many did not know why they were in the movement. Such vagueness and aimlessness is apparent in *Ann Veronica*. A judge told Ann Veronica, "I don't suppose you could tell me the derivation of suffrage if I asked you. No! not even the derivation. But the fashion's been set and in it you must be"[22]. This sentiment was echoed by Dangerfield when he asserted that "it would be ingenuous to suppose that the suffragette was ultimately concerned with anything so remarkable as suffrage"[23].

As a person who particularly enjoyed the company of women, Wells disliked the suffragettes' anti-man sentiments. They "had a passionate jealousy and a hatred of the relative liberties of men"[24]. In *The New Machiavelli* (1911), Remington feared that if women got the vote they would "use it vindictively and blindly as a weapon against many things they had every reason to hate"[25]. According to Wells the suffragettes were divided between those "who carried sex like a barrier" and those who aspired to look like men[26]. Their war against men alienated much potential male support. Ann Veronica protested that "One doesn't want to turn the whole thing into mere sex antagonism"[27], but by 1909 it was rapidly becoming so. Some women were in the movement because they had been mistreated in a male world. They rationalized their unhappy position in the 'world of men' by deciding that if they could not love men, they could at least hate them and hate them passionately – a hatred which had the logical consequence of an aversion to sex. This certainly was the conclusion some of Wells's suffragettes came to. According to Miss Miniver, bodies were "Horrible things! We are souls. Love lives on a higher plane. We are not animals. If ever I did meet a man I could love, I should love him ... platonically"[28]. In *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* Miss Alimony declared, "How can women marry! ... I sometimes think that is where the true strike of the sex ought to begin. If none of us married! if we said, all of us 'No – definitely we refuse this bargain!' It is a man-made contract and we have no voice in it. We decline"[29].

Wells, however, true to his duologue habit of attempting to present all sides of the argument, also defended the suffragettes against their enemies. Arguments of the anti-suffragists appeared in his novels. For the most part Wells, as the "defender of women", portrayed these as absurd, negative and unconvincing. When Manning in *Ann Veronica* expresses the traditional view that women's involvement in politics would ultimately lead to their degradation, he is made to appear pompous and ridiculous.

> "Women to me are something so serene, so fine, so feminine, and politics are so dusty, so sordid, so wearisome and quarrelsome. It seems to me that a woman's duty is to be beautiful and behave beautifully and politics are by their very nature ugly...Why should you who are queens come down from your thrones? If you can afford it we can't. We can't afford to turn our Madonnas, our St Catherines, our Mona Lisas, our Goddesses and Angels into a sort of man. My politics in that matter is that women shouldn't be given the vote"[30].

Other antisuffragist beliefs were also voiced in these novels. It was argued that

women were well catered for already under existing legislation and their enfranchised husbands represented their interests. Some believed that if women had the vote there would be contention between spouses. Wells disagreed that women would vote as a sex, feeling that "the end of the world by collision with some other planet a far less remote possibility than the lining up of two separate sexes in flat opposition"[31]. Paradoxically, he was to complain in 1924 (when women over thirty had been enfranchised for six years) that had women voted as a sex, there would have been a significant difference in housing and educational legislation. He lamented "the drive for better education is no stronger than it was before women had the vote. Disarmament is a question of minor importance to women"[32].

The antisuffragists believed that their strongest argument was that women could not defend their country. This point was discussed between a rabid antisuffragist and a fantical suffragette in *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*; "Sir Isaac would ask if women were prepared to go as soldiers, and Georgina would inquire how many years of service he had done, or horrify her mother by manifest allusions to the agonies and dangers of maternity and things like that"[33]. Wells believed that the defence argument was made invalid with the advent of World War 1 when women became a major source of labour in the ammunition factories[34].

Despite his attempts to answer some of the antisuffragist arguments Wells did share their horror of the violence committed by the suffragettes. "I am one of those people who agree with the ends and detest the means of the currrent suffrage agitation"[35]. In his essay on the war and women, Wells wrote that "a small number of women were apparently bent on rendering the vote impossible by a campaign of violence and malicious mischief"[36]. His novels conveyed, often with heavy irony, the extent of their militancy. "These were the days of the first enthusiasm of the militant suffrage movement, and an occasional smashing of a Downing Street window and an assault upon a minister kept the question of women's distinctive intelligence and character persistently before the public"[37]. He was annoyed at the militants' "fanatical zeal and desire to be martyrs"[38]. "I have always longed for prison service", said a voice, "Always. From the beginning. But it's only now I'm able to do it ..."[39]. Their violence permeated every aspect of life and affected everybody, so much so that even in *The History of Mr Polly* when one ruffian received a blow in the ribs his automatic reaction was "'Suffragettes', gasped Uncle Jim with the ferule at his throat! 'Everywhere'!"[40].

Such violence led to ministers curtailing schedules of public appearances in 1910, and in 1912 "to gossip assassinations of the Prime Minister Asquith and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George"[41]. In *Marriage* "a small lady with glasses" refers to Asquith trying to "bully women down". She describes how their various attempts to bring home to him the "eminent reasonableness of their sex by breaking his windows, interrupting his meetings, booing at him in the streets and threatening his life had time after time baffled his arrogant hope"[42].

Wells believed Asquith was so much the object of unnecessary attack that he felt obliged to send an article to the feminist journal *The Freewoman* on the subject. It was titled 'Mr Asquith will die'.

> "The whole campaign is presented as the creation of mental states of Mr Asquith. He has become the antagonist of Women. He has become the State Husband, the official Wretch of the Women's movement, the Depository of Feminine Repartees, the Public Hen-peckee. He plays the role of the devil just as the two Misses Pankhurst are the radiant angels in the struggle for this emancipation."

Wells was not defending Asquith out of loyalty or friendship, "he scarcely exists for me", but he felt that the women focused needless attention upon him, so much so that he was rapidly becoming their *raison d'etre*. Wells warned that unless they changed, unless they forgot his existence – when Asquith died the woman question "if it is indeed as parasitic upon him as it seems to be, will then die too"[43].

Wells's heroines got involved in militancy. Lady Harman smashed a window out of frustration with her own personal situation and when arrested declared that it was in support of the women's cause. Ann Veronica took part in a raid on the House of Commons. However it is significant that the heroines came to view the violence and the movement as distasteful. For Marjorie in *Marriage* "the new insurrectionary movement of women attracted her by its emotion and repelled her by its cruelty"[44]. When Ann Veronica "heard Miss Miniver discoursing on the next step in the suffrage campaign or read of women badgering Cabinet ministers, padlocked to railways, or getting up in a public meeting to pipe out a demand for the vote and be carried out kicking and screaming, her soul revolted. She could not part with dignity"[45]. Ann Veronica, towards the end of the novel, declared that her involvement as a suffragette was only a "phase". She thus revealed Wells's assessment of the movement. Though he supported enfranchisements for women, he did not take women involved in the battle seriously – they were a nuisance and hopefully they would soon go away.

Wells, however, must be given credit, for the part he played in encouraging his generation to question their traditional notions on women. He attempted to expose the situation where the large majority of middle-class women were leading purposeless lives. He hoped to change this, and draw them into "the collective purpose of mankind". Both in his novels and elsewhere he challenged the anti-suffragist position and, though he shared some of their fears, for the most part he attempted to reveal the weakness of their arguments. Nevertheless one can discern his obvious doubts about women's ability to rectify their situation and one cannot help wondering about his convictions concerning the equality between the sexes. One suspects that what he meant by independence of women was not the same thing as some women meant. He was extremely impatient with the women's movement which was neither as broad nor as radical as he would have liked. Their omission of birth control from their programme and their conservativism on, or in some cases antagonism towards, sex clashed with his personal views: "I have been disposed to take sex rather lightly"[46]. He lamented in 1934 that his opinions with regard to birth control must have been too far to the left to be acceptable to the Edwardian women's movement[47].

Wells was unable to see the complexity of their situation. It would have been risking complete failure on the suffrage issue to add anything else to the suffrage goal. The fate of Wells's most independent-minded woman, Ann Veronica, may

provide the key to understanding Wells's ambivalent feminism. When she was well on the way to being independent, she threw her ambitions to the wind and ran off with her married instructor, Capes. It could be asserted that Wells saw this as the supreme assertion of independence for a woman: to disregard society's *mores* and live with a married man. But how did Wells end the novel? Her lover got a divorce, they married and the last few pages of the novel find them in quiet domesticity entertaining Ann Veronica's father and aunt — the type of life she had been rebelling against. Did Wells write such a conclusion because of publication problems or was it his lack of faith in women's ability to be completely independent of men?[48]

In his essay 'The Endowment of Motherhood' Wells made it quite clear that he believed that a woman's role in society was primarily as a mother. He believed in an independence for women which would be made possible by an endowment from the state – an endowment for their services as mothers[49]. Such a viewpoint was hardly compatible with total support for women's economic and political independence (especially when many women did not view the vote solely in terms of legislation which affected them as women alone). In reality it would have meant the replacement of one master by another. It seems reasonable to suggest that, though Wells may have wished women to have the vote, it was because he felt it would emphasise their position as women in the traditional role of mother and helpmeet rather than lessen it[50]. As for independence he believed in it, or so he liked to think, to the extent it was independence from individual men, not independence from being a woman. He believed in a woman's cause because he felt it would change women from being women into women citizens.

It would be unfair to conclude with the implication that Wells had no part, or merely a negative part, to play in this period when the relations between the sexes was undergoing intense examination. Even though his solutions could be regarded as absurd and a step backwards rather than forwards for women, his work did have the effect of drawing attention to what was wrong with women's lives. It expressed the confusion many women were experiencing because alternative ways of living were becoming possible. Ward Clark's comment in 1914 probably summed up Wells's role in the complicated feminist issue best: "He offers no solutions to insoluble problems but he tries to point a way wherein a partial solution after innumerable attempts may be found"[51].

Notes

1 H.G. Wells, *Joan and Peter* (London, 1918), p 284

2 H.G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli* (London, 1911), p 209

3 H.G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (London, 1909). This book was completed in July 1909. The novel was not only controversial because of its content, but also because the affair portrayed in the book was, many believed, based on Wells's relationship with Amber Reeves. Beatrice Webb felt that it was most distasteful of Wells to have written a novel based on the affair and wrote when it was published "I shall not regret it if he is permanently 'broken up' as a social leader". *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Vol. II – Partnersip*, Norman MacKenzie, (Cambridge, 1978)

4 Macmillan's refused to publish the novel on the grounds that "the plot develops on lines that would be exceedingly distasteful to the public which buys books published by our firm". 19 October 1908 – quoted in Lovat Dickson, *H.G. Wells: His Turbulent Life and Times* (London, 1969), p 166

5 R.A. Scott James, *Daily News* (4 October, 1909), p 345

6 This is a reference to the nineteenth-century ideology which owed its name to Coventry Patmore's poem. It held that the middle-class woman's place was in the home – this was her sanctuary. This poem is quoted in Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven, 1957), p 345

7 H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography, Vol. II* (London, 1934), p 467

8 G.P. Wells ed *H.G. Wells in Love: Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography* (London and Boston, 1984)
Anthony West, *H.G. Wells: Aspects of a Life* (London, 1984)
David C. Smith, *H.G. Wells, Desperately Mortal: A Biography* (New Haven and London, 1986)

9 H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography, Vol II*, p 483

10 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 189

11 Cliona Murphy, "Wells; Educationist, Utopianist and Feminist?", a paper delivered at the International Wells Symposium, Imperial College, London, July 1986 – to be published in the symposium proceedings

12 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 62

13 Wells, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (London, 1914)

14 Wells, *The New Machiavelli*, p 301

15 George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1936), p 138

16 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 27

17 Wells, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*, p 88

18 Wells, 'What the War is doing for Women', *What is Coming?* (London, 1916), pp 160-189

19 *Ibid*, p 70

20 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 189

21 Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p 483

22 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 189

23 Dangerfield, *op cit*, p 141

24 Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p 485

25 Wells, *The New Machiavelli*, p 301

26 Wells, 'What the War is doing for Women', *op cit*, p 184

27 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 189

28 *Ibid*, p 176

29 Wells, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*, p 87

30 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 40

31 Wells, 'What the War is doing for Women', *op cit*, p 78

32 Wells, 'Youth and the Vote', *A Year of Prophesying* (London, 1924), p 147

33 Wells, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*, p 72

34 Wells, 'What the War is doing for Women', *op cit*, p 173

35 Wells, 'Mr Asquith Will Die', *The Freewoman* (7 December, 1911), p 47

36 Wells, 'What the War is doing for Women', *op cit*, p 173

37 Wells, *Marriage*, p 146

38 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 191

39 *Ibid*

40 Wells, *The History of Mr Polly* (London, 1910), p 148

41 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals* (Oxford, 1975), p 1

42 Wells, *Marriage*, p 177

43 Wells, 'Mr Asquith Will Die', *op cit*, p 47

44 Wells, *Marriage*, p 177

45 Wells, *Ann Veronica*, p 119

46 Wells, 'Mr Asquith Will Die', *op cit*, p 47

47 Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p 485

48 In her essay 'Mr Wells's Sexual Utopia' Patricia Stubbs argues that Wells chose this ending to show Ann Veronica was not being punished for her misbehaviour. Her conclusion does not take into account Wells's efforts to guard reputation by having a respectable ending. Patricia Stubbs, 'Mr Wells's Sexual Utopia', *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Sussex, 1979), pp 79-92

49 Wells, 'The Endowment of Motherhood', *An Englishman Looks at the World* (London, 1914), pp 229-311

50 This is how Rita McWilliams Tullberg viewed nineteenth-century legislation affecting women. Much of the progress women had made legally was in the domestic sphere. Such legislation instead of signifying a leap forward could be seen as re-emphasising women's position as superior moral beings within the home. Rita McWilliams Tullberg, 'Women and Degrees at Cambridge University, 1862-1897', *A Widening Sphere-Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Indiana, 1977), pp 117-45

51 Ward Clark, review of *The Passionate Friends* in *Bookman* (New York) xxviii, (January, 1914), pp 554-7