

pursuing his present blind and suicidal path. I will not develop these matters further this morning. But this afternoon I intend to ask your chairman to suspend your regular proceedings so that we can debate them fully. If I am not here to do so, you will know that I have got my own body back and that I am busy expounding the same themes to the 1932 conference of the Young Fabians. You will, no doubt, wish to carry on this crucial debate in my absence.

Let me end, however, on a more personal note. Of all the many science-fiction writers who have claimed to be prophets, I am the first one to have actually visited the future. It is, I admit, a rather unnerving experience. But once I have got my own body back from Mr Watson it is plain what I shall do. I shall set to work on a novel describing this queer world of 1987, how it came into existence and where it is leading. Then I will travel round the world and unfold the results of my researches to Mr Roosevelt and Mr Stalin. No doubt they will see the necessity of amending their policies instantly. Now I realize that if I tell my readers *exactly* what I have seen in the year 1987 they will not believe me. I shall have to make some of it up. I shall certainly not mention anything so undignified as my appearance at this Convention.

I think I shall call this new novel of mine *The Shape of Things to Come*. Rather a good title, don't you think? I expect it to be published in 1933, and I shall then talk to Mr Alexander Korda about the film rights. Before I go I must confess that, after all, I am rather beginning to enjoy this world of 1987. There is something pleasantly informal about it. Some of your young ladies would, I suspect, make extremely congenial company. But I think I had better go back and write *The Shape of Things to Come* before Mr Ian Watson steals my idea. I am sure he is an expert on 1987 but he would be bound to make a frightful mess of writing about it. Besides, I am beginning to find his body rather a tight and uncomfortable fit. In my mature years I have needed a good deal more room to bulge and sag and flop about in than Mr Watson's body seems to provide.

By the way, I see that I must be a little more modest than you may have thought, since I have still to tell you who I am. My name probaby means as little to most of you as does Mr Watson's, to whatever audience he is currently addressing himself. But, ladies and gentlemen, my name is – or was – H.G. WELLS.

## The International Wells Symposium, July 1986

W. Warren Wagar

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The site of the symposium, 'H.G. Wells Under Revision,' was in many ways the perfect choice: the Imperial College of Science and Technology, where the young H.G. Wells had studied and, one hundred years ago, had founded the college's literary journal. In its pages he serialised 'The Chronic Argonauts,' the tale he later transformed into *The Time Machine*. Our sessions took place in a modern building just around the corner from the college hall, now a wing of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in which Wells learned his biology from T.H. Huxley, grandfather of Julian and Aldous.

But symposia stand or fall on the merits of their symposiasts, and ours fully measured up to the site – if not always to the man we honoured. As one speaker late in the proceedings put it, in justification of reading to us a few lengthy excerpts from Wells, most of the best things he had heard at the conference were quotations from Wells anyway.

Most perhaps, but not all. The symposium included among its speakers two of Wells's chief literary successors, Brian Aldiss and Arthur C. Clarke, both vice-presidents of the H.G. Wells Society. Aldiss had been expected, and he was the keynote speaker at our opening session on the afternoon of 24 July. He also attended and participated in all the other sessions through mid-Saturday. Clarke appeared without advance notice and played an important part in our activities Saturday evening.

Of the eighty-odd other symposiasts, what can I say? Some were, unsurprisingly, professors of English at various British and American universities, people like Patrick Parrinder of the University of Reading, who is also Chairman of the H.G. Wells Society, and John Huntington of the University of Illinois, both authors of significant books on Wellsian topics. A mystifying (or revealing) sidelight on the English specialists is that at least five of them, including Parrinder himself and Christopher Rolfe, Hon General Secretary of the Wells Society, are also James Joyce scholars. One of the American Joyceans told me she had flown over to attend conferences on Joyce and on Samuel Beckett. Since the Wells symposium, fortuitously, fell just between the two, she had decided to drop in. Stranger and stranger!

But Joyce? As Wells put the matter in 1930, "I am the absolute antithesis of Mr James Joyce." Some of us pondered the paradox among ourselves, and came up with the thought that despite their radically different literary agendas, Wells and Joyce were the writers whose prose is kinetic, full of animal vitality, by contrast with the laborious lifelessness of Wells's true antithesis, Henry James.

A fair number of social scientists were on hand, too, including at least four historians, three sociologists and an anthropologist. Many others were not

academics at all, such as John Hammond, the founder of the Wells Society, a freelance critic from Nottingham who has published three books on Wells and has recently completed a fourth slated for publication by Macmillan in 1987. It was good to see John again whom I first met in 1963, and good also to renew my acquaintance with the still hale and youthful Peter Hunot, a prominent member of an earlier H.G. Wells Society that flourished in the 1930s. Peter sprinted from room to room taking rolls of photographs, which will no doubt find their way into the Society's archives.

The company further included the well-known bookseller Eric Korn, former librarians and headmasters, two peers of the realm (both Labour peers, of course!), a radio journalist collecting interviews for a programme on the BBC World Service, and some of Wells's grandchildren. I had a long chat with Oliver Wells, son of G.P. Wells. G.P., who died recently, was a marine biologist and collaborator with Julian Huxley and his father in *The Science of Life*. Oliver is a microscopist with IBM in upstate New York. His own son is a 1986 graduate of Cornell, the latest in four consecutive generations of scientific Wellses.

Another dimension of the symposium was its authentic internationalism, reflecting Wells's worldwide literary popularity and his many contributions to the growth of a secular world consciousness. Two scholars from the University of Naples read papers. The distinguished French student of Wells's early fiction, Bernard Loing, attended, and we reminisced together about his friend and mine, the late Jean-Pierre Vernier, a major figure in Wells studies at the Universities of Caen and Rouen. Tributes were paid to Wells near the end of the conference in a panel featuring a Sikh scholar from the National University of Singapore, Kirpal Singh, and M.Y. Shaheen of the University of Jordan. The language of the symposium was English, but spoken in a grand goulash of accents from the plangent Somerset of Arthur Clarke to the musical brogue of Ireland, from Liza Doolittle cockney to the luxuriant tones of Oxbridge, and (in the North American contingent) from the soft r's of Maine to hard r's of the Great Plains.

One accent from a distant land that we keenly missed was Yuli Kagarlitski's. Yuli is a very special case. Author of *The Life and Thought of H.G. Wells*, editor of a resoundingly successful collected edition in Russian of Wells's writings (Wells is one of the two or three most popular British authors in the USSR), he had been invited to address the symposium Saturday evening. His acceptance was conditional, however, on his receiving permission to travel abroad from the Soviet authorities. Because his son is a suspected dissident, and he himself has lost his professorship at the Moscow State Institute of Theatrical Art, this was not something he could count on. As he wrote to me in January, he was not hopeful of being able to come. Then, shortly before the opening of the conference, Patrick Parrinder got the good news that Yuli would be joining us after all. A few days later, the news turned again to bad. No permission. No explanation. Nyet. Yuli's place was taken Saturday evening by Arthur Clarke, who led a discussion of the issues in the Kagarlitski case, which broadened into a discussion of what Wellsiens should be doing, as Wellsiens, to make the world a safer place for human habitation in the rest of this century.

But the absence of Yuli Kagarlitski from a symposium where he, as much as anyone on Earth, belonged, cast a shadow over our proceedings. On Sunday morning all of us signed a letter to Yuli expressing our regrets, and it was resolved that the H.G. Wells Society through its President, Lord Stewart of Fulham, a former British Foreign Secretary, should communicate on this matter to the Union of Soviet Writers.\*

Of course most of our time during the symposium was spent delivering and hearing papers. Scholars both in and out of academe are infamous for what the Germans call *Sitzfleisch*, an untranslatable term meaning "the capacity to stick to something forever and enjoy it." The horror is that we really *do* like sitting and listening for days and days. I did not miss a paper, except early Saturday afternoon when we divided into two groups for concurrent sessions. Not even Wellsiens can manage to be in two places at the same time. But attendance ranged from good to full at every session, and the weak papers were few and far between.

The conference organisers were puzzled by the shortage of proposals for papers expressly devoted to Wells's science fiction. Except for one on *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, one on Wells and C.S. Lewis, and another on Wells and futurity, the symposiasts stayed clear. But few Wellsiens these days subscribe to Bernard Bergonzi's tempting thesis in *The Early H.G. Wells* that after his first 'scientific romances' Wells lost his bearings and lapsed into artistic inconsequence. Most of us see Wells's work as a single span of writings, whether science fiction, belles-lettres, journalism, philosophy, history, science, sociology or biography, embodying a single consistent world-view and mirroring the sensibilities and anxieties of a single, coherent, rational and passionate mind. The success of his science fiction resulted not from a Henry Jamesian concentration on 'perfection' along chosen path, but from the breadth, depth and strength of an intellect that took the whole world for its subject.

The tone of the symposium was set by Brian Aldiss's magnificent keynote address on Wells, "great general of dreamland," given on Thursday 24 July, opening the conference. I sat there spellbound, not taking notes as I had planned to do, but I jotted down a few the day after. As one might expect, Aldiss – himself quite clearly something of a romantic – charted the romanticism in Wells, in his fantasy and science fiction and in the social novels and utopias. He spoke of the abundant visions of great cats in Wells's fiction, lions, tigers and leopards, strong and yet strangely peaceful, who haunted Wells's literary imagination. He called to mind Wells's love of beauty, and his scorn for dirt and confusion and dogs. Wells summed up his aesthetic vision, said the author of *Hothouse*, in the image of the garden, which he hoped one day the whole planet would become. Like Wells, Aldiss is the kind of romantic who knows his Darwin and Huxley, but I have no doubt that the ultimate Wells, the utopian Wells, *was* a romantic, who saw a garden-world on its way beyond the smoky squabbles of modern times, a world of beauty and adventure and peace.

Tea followed. An hour later Brian himself, who had kindly offered to shepherd some of the symposiasts through the mysteries of the English pub, let us into a nearby winding street where we found a suitable specimen preparing to open for the

evening. At half past five, on the dot, the proprietor unlocked his doors, and we trooped inside for a round of beers and Beaujolais in a context of oak and brass that no American bar can duplicate.

Then we all scattered to meet our respective fairy godmothers and dress for the evening's extravaganza, dinner at the House of Lords by invitation of another vice-president of the H.G. Wells Society, the Baroness Birk. Lady Birk got her start as a Wellsian in the 1960s by living in the elegant house at 13 Hanover Terrace where Wells spent his last years and died in 1946. (Earlier in the week my son John and I had already visited Hanover Terrace, a short walk from the 'site' of Sherlock Holmes's rooms on Baker Street, and noted with dismay that the current residents have painted over the '13', a number in which the fiercely unsuperstitious Wells took a special glee.)

The fare at the House of Lords Thursday evening was typically English. Roast lamb with mint sauce was followed by an indescribable dessert apparently borrowed from an episode of Monty Python. The cuisine left much to be desired, but Lady Birk was charming, Big Ben tolled the hours high above us, and as barges drifted lazily by on the Thames, we could have dined on peas porridge hot or peas porridge cold and still been quite content.

Friday was another day. We settled down to serious business requiring all our reserves of *Sitzfleisch*. The morning's principal address came from John Hammond, who drew up a plausible indictment of the conventional literary wisdom about Wells, showing that in many respects his fiction was experimental, an art of flux and indeterminacy far removed from the static certainties of nineteenth-century realism. Three shorter papers followed on humour, Dickensian motifs and the Joycean accumulation of 'trivial' detail in Wells's fiction. The afternoon sessions turned to Wells the ideologist, with papers on Wells and T.H. Huxley, Wells and ecology, Wells on positivism, and Wells on women, the last phrase explained in a good-natured aside by Brian Aldiss as elliptical, not literal. Wells had many views on the subject of women and passed for years as a founding uncle of feminism, but he also had many affairs with women, forcing Wellsians to choose their prepositions with care.

In the evening came yet another lecture, but not at Imperial College. We shifted our headquarters temporarily to the National Film Theatre south of the Thames, for a slide lecture by Leon Stover of the Illinois Institute of Technology, followed by a public screening of *Things to Come*, the film produced by Alexander Korda in 1936 with a screenplay by Wells spun off from his novel *The Shape of Things to Come*. Earlier in July the NFT had already presented eleven other programmes of films based on stories by Wells. *Things to Come* was the appropriate grand finale of the series.

Aficionados of the film will be sorry to hear that even for this special occasion the version originally released in 1936 with a running time of 113 minutes was not shown. We had to settle for the now familiar 97-minute abridgment. Nevertheless the print was clear, Leon's lecture was instructive and the open discussion that followed stimulating.

Saturday was our longest day, devoted chiefly to Wells the utopian. The morning session was launched by a lecture of my own on the interaction between Wells's scientism and his political and educational thought, followed by others on Wells's concept of sociology as utopia, the conflict in Wells's fiction between the personal and the utopian, and Wells versus Orwell. In the last, Jonathan Rose of Drew University developed some useful and dead-accurate contrasts between the two writers, so much alike at first glance, so fundamentally different on closer scrutiny.

And the day continued. In the afternoon six more papers were read, on topics ranging from Wells's failings as a feminist to the fan mail he received. I was especially touched by this last presentation, made by Robert Crossley of the University of Massachusetts, which gave us a glimpse of the way Wells moved the common reader, the kind of people sedulously ignored by most scholars.

The symposium resumed its work Sunday morning with an engaging paper from Kirpal Singh. Kirpal compared Wells with Rabindranath Tagore, reminding us that the modern Western ideal of the artist living on Mt. Parnassus far from the madding crowd is just that, a Western ideal little understood in Asia, where writers are viewed rather as seers or sages responsible for the instruction of their fellow men. In this sense H.G. Wells conformed more to Asian ideals than Western.

The final word belonged to David C. Smith of the University of Maine, who has been working for many years on a new biography, now published as *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* by Yale University Press. He regaled us with stories about his long labours and concluded with a plea for Wellsians to follow Wells into the future. The agenda Wells set for us, he said, is still valid: an open conspiracy to create a new world order, revolutions in teaching, the building of socialism, closing the gap between the sciences and the humanities, the study of things to come.

Some of the symposiasts left for a day trip to Uppark, the estate in Sussex where Wells's mother was once housekeeper and her son an occasional 'downstairs' denizen. The rest of us had lunch together and said our farewells. It was a grand and glorious symposium, organised with loving care by Patrick Parrinder, Chris Rolfe and their associates in the H.G. Wells Society. Of the fifty or so academic conferences I have attended in my life, it was unquestionably the best.

\* We are delighted to report that Professor Kagarlitski was able to make his deferred visit to London in April 1987, and spoke to a meeting of the Wells Society at Conway Hall on Saturday 11 April. MD.