

## Food for Thought

Michael Draper

David C. Smith *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* New Haven and London (Yale University Press) 1986, 634 pp

Robert Crossley *H.G. Wells* Mercer Island, Washington (Starmont House) 1986, 79 pp

Michael Mullin ed *H.G. Wells: Reality and Beyond* Champaign, Illinois (Champaign Public Library and Information Centre) 1986, 91 pp

The most important book on Wells to be published in the last twelve months is undoubtedly *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal*, the long-awaited biography by David Smith, Professor of History at the University of Maine, a figure well-known to members of the Society both for his genially trenchant wit and for an encyclopaedic knowledge which extends far beyond the field of Wells studies. No one could be better qualified to undertake a fresh appraisal of Wells's life's work, and what we have here is biography on the grand scale, over six hundred closely packed pages, turned out handsomely by Yale University Press under the supervision of Robert Baldock.

Before examining the text of the book, I think we should give some attention to the thirty three, mostly photographic, illustrations. Along with many familiar items like 'Bertie Wells, aged ten', never more sharply reproduced, come several pictures new to me: Wells in his later years lounging against a bookcase in his study, a surprisingly amiable-looking Odette Keun relaxing on the terrace at Lou Pidou, a draft page for the *Outline of History*, unused 'picshuas' intended for *Boon* and, rather mysteriously, a protest march through London by a number of Indians carrying a banner declaring 'Down with H.G. Wells Short History of the World.' In addition to a chronology of Wells's life, and his formulation of the Rights of Man, the accompanying documentation includes a select bibliography, a valuable Note on Sources, a great many acknowledgements (one of which is to me, so I suppose I had better declare an interest here) and a hundred and twenty pages of notes in small print, the last a substantial source of references for future scholars.

Turning to the text, we find an enormous amount of information, much of which has not previously been available. From who else but Professor Smith could you learn such slight but treasurable items as the nickname of J.F. Horrabin, illustrator of the *Outline of History* ('Horrid Ben' – of course)? Who else could casually disclose so major a discovery (not mentioned in any other biography of Wells that I can recall) as the birth to him in 1907 of a stillborn child by the novelist Dorothy Richardson? For that matter, who else has furnished such detailed accounts of Wells's work routines and methods of composition, not only with respect to his published writings, but even covering the way he dealt with his correspondence? For those of you who have been wondering how Wells managed to write so prodigiously, this is how it's done.

"He slept very lightly, especially when at work on a novel, and his study always had a primus stove and supplies of tea and biscuits, so that when he rose in the night, to work for an hour or so, he could refresh himself before returning to his bed."

(For more dietary tips for authors, incidentally, see Wells's amusing essay on 'The Literary Regimen' in *Certain Personal Matters*.)

Professor Smith is not one of those biographers who prefers his own voice to his subject's. On the contrary, he enjoys quoting from Wells's texts – fictional and non-fictional books, letters, speeches and uncollected journalism – so that his study incorporates an anthology of Wellsian observations, surprisingly few conveying the warmth and humour of the author of *Kipps* and *Polly*, but many bitingly prescient. "What sort of black man do you want to have to face when the inevitable adjustment comes?" he asked South African whites in 1943.

"If you let up these poor devils now, you will get a civilized deal. If not, race rebellion ... I ask you, when all the rest of the world is made equal and free, how can the petty white tyranny of your system escape a convulsion?"

Back in 1909, when he was one of Britain's best known socialists, he voiced a fear of the "ungainly, self-righteous, almost conscientiously dishonest side to modern socialism" which, if it was not held in check by a strong tradition of personal freedom and independent art and discussion, might "because of the very completeness of its organization, become the ugliest and most stagnant tyranny the world has ever seen ..." Presumably he was thinking of the Fabian 'Old Gang,' not the Bolsheviks and their admirers, but the observation remains a pertinent one. Wells's positive beliefs are usefully summarised in a six-paragraph credo, privately circulated but hitherto unpublished, which Professor Smith has made available to us from the treasure trove of the Wells Archive at Illinois. Where previous commentators on Wells have tended to write patronisingly of his politics and philosophy, Professor Smith is determined that Wells's ideas, career and influence should be taken very seriously indeed. The result is a biography of which Wells himself would surely have approved. In its defence of its subject against all comers, it actually reads more like an 'authorised biography' than does Wells's own *Experiment in Autobiography* – and here I have to voice a couple of reservations.

Like Anthony West, whose *Aspects of a Life* elicited some critical remarks from him last year in this journal, Professor Smith is so keen to champion Wells against his detractors he seems almost to believe his hero can do no wrong. Neither Wells's egotistical unfaithfulness to his wives nor his fascistic lapse in *Anticipations* at the turn of the century, to take just two instances where he might be thought to be on shaky ground, receives adequate consideration. Still more regrettable is the elevation of Wells the Rationalist intellectual at the expense of Wells the Romantic artist. The preference is a legitimate one, but in a biography the sheer size of which suggests a shot at the definitive such a one-sided approach is bound to be a limitation. Whatever Wells's importance in the creation of our modern political climate – and the book stakes his claims persuasively – his literary achievements are the chief source of his present fame and they deserve more sustained and thoughtful treatment than they get here. The remarks on *The Time Machine*, for example, are decidedly flimsy: "what Wells was doing in this book was putting evolutionary theory into fictional practice. That was all." All? Dozens of implications clamour for attention, only to be brusquely sent packing. Nor has

Professor Smith really understood G.K. Chesterton's profound existential objection to Wells's utopian fantasy, *The Food of the Gods*. He aims to refute Chesterton, but misses the point, that morality is rooted in common human experiences, not in hypothetical alien ones secretly shaped by personal prejudice and wish-fulfilment. In dealing with *When the Sleeper Wakes* he has to little to say about the book's incoherences and inadequacies. I could go on ...

I don't suppose David Smith will be too put out to find his labour of love being criticised from a literary standpoint. It has long been his intention to save Wells's reputation from relegation to a minor wing in the Palace of Art and give it an honourable position in the Progressives' Hall of Fame. Accordingly his book is an attempt to make good the omissions and correct the biases of earlier commentators, and in these terms its success is considerable. I am irresistably reminded of the sun making good the lunar desert in *The First Men in the Moon*: light spreads across the neglected scene and growths that seemed dead suddenly quicken and flourish. The harvest in this case is a polemical, corrective study of enormous interest, but we are still in need of a biography which does equal justice to Wells the ideologist and Wells the artist, and which can trace a way through the intricacies of his identity to produce a balanced, unified picture. In the meantime the formidable *Desperately Mortal* can be added to the very select shelf of indispensable studies of Wells.

Having called for more balanced accounts, I feel honour-bound to squeeze in some appreciative words about two recent books which make some effort to deal with Wells even-handedly. Robert Crossley's *H.G. Wells* is hardly in competition with *Desperately Mortal* when it comes to originality or scope, being a brief survey of the best-known science fiction writings, produced as part of a series called the 'Starmont Reader's Guides to Contemporary Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors.' (It's surely a tribute to Wells's far-sightedness that his books can still be 'contemporary' forty years after his death!) The survey covers well-trodden ground, but it does so in a clear, sensible way, supplying first-rate plot summaries, textual analyses and critical reflections. Dr Crossley, whose paper on 'Wells's Common Readers' was one of the highlights of last year's International Symposium in London, is able to discuss the science fiction with great authority because he is also familiar with Wells's social novels and non-fictional writings and has his own informed ideas of what Wells was about.

"Contrary to some critical truisms, Wells is neither a man of irreconcilable 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' phases nor a writer unable to decide between the claims of art and ideology. He is the great disillusioner for the post-Copernican, post-Darwinian, post-Christian, post-humanist world who offers his readers the bracing dose of reality and the liberated imagination necessary for building and inhabiting a viable future."

And again:

"The old man who created a literary dynasty, whom people as various as Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, Hilaire Belloc and C.S. Lewis have attempted to kill off by polemic and parody, whom academics have tried to suffocate by excluding his works from the classroom and

literary histories, whom every major writer of speculative romance must acknowledge by imitation, extension, or repudiation, Wells cannot be evaded. He survives. He is big. His impact on the development of modern fiction (the term 'science fiction' will soon be both an archaism and a redundancy) is so massive that it beggars description in a couple of paragraphs."

Note the colloquial touch here. Dr Crossley has an enjoyable gift, not only for pointing out the relevance of Wells's science fiction to the age of the nuclear arms race, terrorism, feminism and animal rights, but for translating Wells's concerns into American demotic. The Invisible Man is "a bored and ill-paid teacher in the boondocks" and the husband and wife reunion which ends *The War of the Worlds* is so feebly conventional that a "made-for-TV movie could have done no worse."

The criticisms I can make of the book are few and marginal. It is rather misleading to say the narrator of *The War of the Worlds* kills the curate with an axe, or to summarise the plot of 'The Late Mr Elvisham' without mentioning its final, ironic twist. The annotated bibliography is one of the best I've seen, but I can't help feeling his comments are overgenerous to a couple of the books cited, which come nowhere near Crossley's own high standards. His survey of the science fiction doesn't quite replace Bernard Bergonzi's seminal *Early H.G. Wells*, but I warmly recommend it to anyone seeking a more up-to-date account of Wells's most popular, and most artistically accomplished, books.

*H.G. Wells: Reality and Beyond*, edited by Michael Mullin, is a splendidly produced volume of essays and illustrations, put together to accompany a travelling exhibition of rare Wells items from the Illinois Archive. (Copies should be available to British members of the Society at this year's residential conference.) Its contents include Leon Stover's pugnacious essay on 'Wells, Huxley and Darwinism,' so memorably delivered at the International Symposium, a biographical meditation on Wells by Richard Hauer Costa, a consideration of Wells and utopian fantasy by Mark Hillegas and a brief piece on Wells and the cinema by Frank McConnell. And for those of you who may be thinking that all Wells criticism is now being produced in the United States, Wells Society Chairman and former *Wellsian* editor Patrick Parrinder contributes a piece on Wells and prophecy (not, incidentally, the same one he had in last year's *Wellsian*). I sometimes wonder just how Professor Parrinder (and Professor Smith, for that matter) manage to produce so many essays, lectures and books for publishers and conferences around the world. Could it be that they're working that trick with the Primus stove and the biscuits?

## Contributors

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