

J.R. Hammond  
**The Timescale of Tono-Bungay: A problem in literary detection**

To work out the timescale of a novel can be a fascinating exercise in literary detection. This is particularly true of H.G. Wells's novel *Tono-Bungay*, which was completed in the spring of 1908 and published in January 1909 when Wells was forty-two. Scattered throughout the story are numerous references to dates and ages which make the task of calculating the chronology of the main events comparatively simple.

At the beginning of the novel the narrator, George Ponderevo, tells us that twenty-two years elapse between the inception of *Tono-Bungay* and its collapse due to his uncle's bankruptcy ("I fell again, a little scarred and blistered perhaps, two and twenty years older", Book 1, Ch.I § 1). The collapse of *Tono-Bungay* takes place immediately after the abortive raid on Mordet Island, and it seems clear that the latter event occurs in the year 1905 (the voyage lasts from January to May, and George's account of the episode appears in the *Geological Magazine* for October 1905). Working backwards from 1905, then, we arrive at the year 1883 as the date when *Tono-Bungay* was launched. We know that George was twenty-two at that time ("I came to live in London, as I shall tell you, when I was nearly twenty-two," Book 2, Ch.I § 1). We can thus calculate that George was born in 1861. Taking these as our fixed reference points it is possible to construct a reasonably consistent timescale of the principal events in the narrative:

Age of George Ponderevo

1848	Birth of Edward Ponderevo	
1861	Birth of George Ponderevo	
1875	George banished from Bladesover	14
1875-80	George at Wimblehurst	14-19
1880	George matriculates	19
1880	His first visit to London	19
1880-83	Science student in London	19-22
1883	Joins forces with his uncle	22
1885	Marries Marion	24
1891	Marriage breaks up	30
1891	Flying experiments begin	30
1898	Awarded F.R.S.	37
1901-05	<i>Tono-Bungay</i> "Boom"	40-44
1904	Flying accident (October)	43
1905	Mordet Island (January-May)	44
1905	Collapse of <i>Tono-Bungay</i>	44
1905	Death of Edward Ponderevo	44
1906	Writes novel	45

This timescale tallies with most of the clues we are given in the novel. We know, for example, that George was nineteen when he matriculated, that he was twenty-four when he married Marion, that he was forty-five when he was writing the account of his marriage (presumably 1906), that in 1906 he is looking back at the break up of his marriage "with an interval of fifteen years to clean it up for me," and that seven years intervene between the launch of *Tono-Bungay* and his decision to embark on flying experiments.

There are, however, a number of points where it does not quite hang together. At an early stage in the novel George tells us that he is forty ("I don't see why, at forty, I shouldn't confess I respect my own youth," Book 1, Ch.3 § 2). It is difficult to reconcile this with his statement in the 'Marion' chapter that he is forty-five. Again, George tells us that the early years of *Tono-Bungay* coincide with "the lamplit room of the early nineties" (Book 2, Ch.3 § 1). This cannot be if it was launched in 1883. If we assume that these are simply slips on the narrator's part - he is after all trying to weld together a long and complex narrative which he warns the reader at the outset "isn't a constructed tale" but "unmanageable realities"

(Book 1, Ch.I § 2) - we are left with a framework which enables us to digest the events of the novel by placing them within a coherent pattern of fixed reference points.

One of the abiding impressions left in the mind by reading and re-reading *Tono-Bungay* is its extraordinary *detachment*. It is as if the narrator is looking back on the events he is describing from a perspective remote in space and time. By placing the main events of the story within a framework of chronological time the reader is able to share with the narrator both his verisimilitude and his sense of retrospectiveness.

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### On the Contemporary Relevance of Wells's Conception of History

*An address to the H.G. Wells Society at its Annual Residential Conference, Tufnell Park, London, 23rd September 1989*

"Among scholars of Edwardian literature," Kenneth B. Newell writes, "H.G.Wells is undergoing a boom".<sup>1</sup> It would, however, seem proper to stretch the statement somewhat and to add that it applies not merely to the literary Wells, but also to Wells the encyclopaedist, in the present particular case - the writer of history.

A contemporary French critic described *The Outline of History* as "le dernier roman de M. Wells."<sup>2</sup> Wells himself was inclined to agree, quite un-ironically on his part:

This *Short History of the World* is meant to be read straightforwardly as a novel is read. It gives in the most general way an account of our present knowledge of history, shorn of elaborations and complications. From it the reader should be able to get that general view of history which is so necessary a framework for the study of a particular period or the history of a particular country. It may be found useful as a preparatory excursion before the reading of the author's much fuller and more explicit *Outline of History* is undertaken. But its especial end is to meet the needs of the busy general reader, too driven to study the