

BOOK REVIEW: Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2010), 405 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7206-1351-3, (HB) £25.00. [Sylvia Hardy]

A major new, comprehensive biography of H. G. Wells has been overdue for some time. The two most often cited ones, Norman and Jeanne Mackenzies' *The Time Traveller: The Life of H. G. Wells* and David Smith's *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* were first published nearly thirty and over twenty years ago respectively, and Michael Foot's more personal perspective, *The History of Mr Wells*, appeared in 1995. New biographies are to be welcomed every twenty years or so for a variety of reasons, not least because ideas and opinions about writers change considerably over time, as do the expectations of their readers, and reassessment is particularly important when new information comes to light. Michael Sherborne's biography makes a valuable contribution to Wells studies because not only is he giving us a twenty-first century perspective on H. G. Wells, he has also had access to an important group of unpublished letters. The book's title, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life*, is taken from the opening paragraph of *Tono-Bungay*, where George Ponderevo asserts that whilst most people live "in character", there is 'another kind of life' in which 'one is jerked out of one's stratum and lives crosswise for the rest of the time.' This is a statement as applicable to Wells himself as it is to *Tono-Bungay*'s narrator, and because of the new material Sherborne incorporates and the reassessment it entails, this really *is* another kind of life.

This is a comprehensive book which gives due weight to the most significant aspects of Wells's long and varied life and career, together with the world events which helped determine them, and also provides a detailed commentary on his personal life as husband, father and lover. Sherborne has a direct, vigorous, often witty style, and the biography is readable and interesting throughout (although a larger typeface would have helped). Each of the twenty chapters has a title indicating a stage in Wells's life, together with the period covered – a clear and explicit chronology is a welcome asset in any biography. 'Family and Childhood 1850-1880', for instance, or 'Historian 1919-1922' are obvious titles, but I was puzzled by the heading, 'Godfather 1922-1926'. This proved, in fact, to be an apt title for a chapter about Wells's relations with two of his growing children, Anthony and Anna Jane, together with an account of his role as 'godfather' for many individuals and causes at this period. The book begins with a brief journey in a time machine, whizzing back through its subject's life before coming to a stop 'somewhere in the middle of 1851'. The machine has arrived at the Great Exhibition in London's Hyde Park, and we catch a glimpse of one of the visitors, a lady's maid called Sarah Neal who, fifteen years later will be H.G. Wells's mother. This vivid introduction sets the tone for a portrayal of Wells as a man of his time, not only reacting to world events but spending much of his life working to influence them. As Sherborne reminds us, 'his formative years were Victorian,

and his life was shaped by many of the forces that the exhibition put on display.’ In general this book follows a smooth progression, but the period 1905 to 1911 presents problems because it encompasses some of the most productive and eventful years of Wells’s life. In two overlapping chapters Sherborne gives an account of his increasing involvement in politics and the Fabian Society and of his extra-marital love life whilst also providing a commentary on a burgeoning literary career – both *Tono-Bungay* and *Ann Veronica* were published in 1909. All this requires skilful manoeuvring. Chapter 10, ‘Fabianism and Free Love’, ends with Wells and Amber Reeves absconding to Le Touquet. Sherborne then ‘parks’ them there while, in chapter 11, ‘The Novelist’, he gives a detailed account of the publication and reception together with a literary analysis of *Tono-Bungay* and *Ann Veronica*. After ten pages we return to Le Touquet. A real cliff-hanger!

No life of Wells can ignore his relationships with women, and here the hitherto unpublished correspondence between Wells, Amber Reeves, and his wife, Jane, sheds a fascinating new light on the actions and feelings of all those concerned, as do the letters exchanged with his and Amber’s daughter, Anna Jane, cited later in the book. For many readers the most interesting item of all this new material is a 1906 letter from Jane Wells to her husband, then in Chicago. It is true, as Sherborne acknowledges later in the book, that there is no way of knowing whether Jane Wells felt resentment about her husband’s ‘intense companionship with other women’, but this letter does help us understand more of her feelings, because for once we get her perspective on their marriage. This ‘rare surviving letter’, as Sherborne describes it, is, therefore, revisionary – and moving – because it gives us a fascinating glimpse into the way a woman born in 1873 and brought up in the way Amy Catherine Robbins appears to have been, saw her role as the wife of such an eminent man. She is touchingly afraid that she will be unable to live up to him.

Wells’s marriages and extra-marital affairs, which have been strenuously castigated by feminist writers, provide difficulties for male biographers. Sherborne treads carefully. He gives Wells credit for taking women’s ideas seriously at a period when most men didn’t, and stresses his undoubted generosity and kindness to his first wife, Isabel, and to former mistresses such as Dorothy Richardson. He is even-handed, too, in his examination of the Amber Reeves, Rebecca West and Odette Keun relationships – well, perhaps less so with Odette. Much later in the book, after an account of the scandalous Hedy Gattarnig affair in 1923, which, had it not been successfully covered-up, could have ruined Wells’s career and reputation, then at its height, Sherborne makes the interesting point that although it would have been prudent for Wells to stop ‘bed-hopping’ at this point he did not do so because ‘he felt a deep connection between literary and sexual potency.’ Wry humour conveys an amused, non-prurient detachment. After the death of his censorious mother, we are told, ‘Wells ceased to behave as though his sexual escapades were a private matter and embarked on a series of outrageous love

affairs that almost amounted to a performance art'. Redressing the balance, we have the image of Odette Keun in Geneva 'homing in on him with the resolution of a heat-seeking missile', whilst Wells himself, torn between Odette Keun, Moura Budberg and other women is seen 'as unable to commit to a single direction as a lump of iron wobbling around between powerful magnets'.

It is a tribute to H. G. Wells's breadth of appeal that he has attracted biographers from a variety of different disciplines, and their particular interests shape their responses to his fiction. The Mackenzies, for instance are sociologists and they assess Wells's novels in relation to their social commentary – indeed, in an otherwise favourable review of *The Time Traveller*, Michael Holroyd wishes that its authors had understood literature as well as they understand politics. It is evident, too, that although historian David Smith admires Wells's novels and provides an excellent account of their biographical links and publication history, he is far less interested in their literary qualities, in fact he devotes only five pages to a discussion of *Kipps*, *The History of Mr Polly* and *Tono-Bungay* as novels. Michael Sherborne, on the other hand, is an English specialist and he gives considerable attention to Wells's fiction – his analysis of *Tono-Bungay* occupies over six pages. In the early chapters of the book, Sherborne explores what he sees as the basis of Wells's creativity as a writer. There is a detailed account of little Bertie's upbringing, in which the tenets of his God-fearing, conformist mother, Sarah, conflict with the easy-going nature of his romantic, imaginative but impractical father, Joe Wells. These contrasting perspectives, Sherborne believes, had a lasting effect because they determined little Bertie's view of the world and gave him a conception of himself which he retained throughout his life: 'His parents would be the *yin* and the *yang* by which his life was shaped.'

The challenge for Wells as a writer, Sherborne claims, 'would not be to choose between the two sides but to achieve a productive mix of them'. His work is judged to be successful, therefore, when – and only when – such a balance has been achieved. *The Time Machine* is an example. Sherborne accepts the general view that the 'double narration' provided by the framing story and the Time Traveller's account of his adventures distances the reader and makes the story more believable, but suggests also that 'at a personal level it is a way of giving a hearing to both sides of the author, the reckless dreamer and the hard-working, practical man...' Similarly, the contrasting viewpoints of Edward and George Ponderevo in *Tono-Bungay* make it one of Wells's greatest achievements because their interaction reflects 'the evangelical and playful sides of Wells'. *A Modern Utopia*, on the other hand, falls short in this respect because it is 99 per cent his 'Sarah' side; evangelical both in its mission to save the world and in its emphasis on faith. The Sarah and Joe dichotomy corresponds to the notion of an unresolved conflict between Wells as artist (intuition) and Wells as scientist (intellect) set out in 1930 by Wells's first biographer, Geoffrey West. This notion has been taken up in some form or other by just about every commentator since - may well, in fact,

have prompted Wells to address the issue himself a few years later, in *Experiment in Autobiography*. West's biography, Sherborne acknowledges, remains one of the most perceptive books in the field, and these dualities, the Sarah and Joe factors together with the scientist/artist, intellect/intuition, realist/romantic; general/particular dichotomies serve as a central interpretive and explanatory principle throughout *H. G. Wells: Another Life*.

This leads me to my one real reservation about this book, which is not with the interpretive idea in itself – although it can become schematic – but with Sherborne's assessment of Wells's later fiction. In an early chapter he discusses the publication of the 1894-5 short stories and claims that whilst some of these can be dismissed as practice exercises or mere light entertainment, a few 'arguably cross the boundary into literature'. 'Literature', of course, is a slippery term which has been much discussed and disputed over, but here it is defined as 'writing that retains interest over the long term and compels and rewards rereading'. This time-honoured dictum – which can be traced back to Dr Johnson's 'Nothing can please many and please long but just representations of a general nature' – has often been challenged for its circularity, but more to the point here, it provides an unfortunate yardstick for assessing Wells's later writings. It is clear that they have not retained interest over the long term, nor, since so little has been republished, are they likely to compel or reward re-reading. Admittedly, it is generally accepted that Wells's later writings are variable in quality, and few readers would quarrel with the suggestion that *Crux Ansata*, his 1943 attack on the Roman Catholic Church is 'an undisciplined mess', but Sherborne appears to agree with the claim made by Bernard Bergonzi in 1961 that the bulk of Wells's fiction has lost whatever literary interest it had and is now of biographical and historical interest only. The 1925 novel, *Christina Alberta's Father* and the 1928 *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island*, for instance, are seen primarily as illustrations of Wells's divided psyche, and although the former fulfils one of Sherborne's criteria for literature – it was well-received – it is dismissed as 'a minor work'. *The Croquet Player* and *Star Begotten*, which have both received favourable critical attention over the last decade or so, are also discounted on the grounds that 'most readers have found [them] a negligible addition to the canon.'

But these are subjective judgements; overall *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* is meticulous and wide-ranging in its research and persuasive in its arguments. Sherborne obviously likes and admires Wells, but this is no hagiography, and he is not afraid to comment forcefully on what he sees as his faults. I enjoyed reading this book. Even when I disagreed – as I often did – with its judgements, I found it thought-provoking as well as provocative. What is more, it has given me an even clearer idea of what fun it would have been to know and spend time with H. G. Wells, to experience at first hand his energy, his generosity, his sheer zest for life. It is a relief to read a biography which does not linger on the occasional gloom and despondency of Wells's final years, and as a reviewer old enough to remember

who the Ritz Brothers were, the image of one of them landing in Wells's lap when he visited a variety show in New York during his last visit to the USA is one to cherish. Christopher Priest in his foreword claims that of all the writers he has known or has known about, the one he really wishes he could have met is H. G. Wells. It is likely that everyone who reads Michael Sherborne's new biography will feel the same way.