

(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".¹ 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."² 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

maps and time charts of that *Outline* in detail, who wishes to refresh and repair his faded or fragmentary conceptions of the great adventure of mankind.³

By why, precisely, do we turn back to the writer's historical works, with their manifestly obsolete apparatus and data, their nineteenth century rhetoric, their narrative cut short by Armistice Day at the end of World War I?

True enough, the rhetoric is there, occasionally to adorn an optimistic bravado which sounds strained, to say the least, to the modern ear - but there is much more to it than that. In fact, we do turn back to them because history thus conceived culminates in actuality and topicality, alive with what is currently of interest, because of its strictly contemporary overtones and the striking manner in which it incorporates and anticipates the essential realities of our modern era.

The first consideration must be the wide ramifications of Wellsian history.

One has to take in a long breath to keep pace with Wells when he offers his panoramic view of the world in its elemental dimensions, in time and in space, while cosmic distances, at his touch, become perceptible, tangible, and palpable. Do we have to add that this is not merely a feat of scientific reconstruction, but a vision of an artist - our spinning planet in the earlier stage of its history, with boiling seas of molten rock, fiery clouds overhead, the sun and the moon swiftly hurrying past, compared with which Gothic terrors appear shadowy and flat and insignificant?

And then, when we consider our living past and try to answer the question - what was the first great revolution in history in its widest sense, the first fundamentally significant transformation in the story of life? - a narrow reply could perhaps tempt us: it may have been the turn from nomadic wanderings to settled life on the land and the first plant cultures; or from paleolithic to neolithic use of tools; or further back, with Arnold Toynbee, the change from primitive man to *homo sapiens*. To Wells, even this range will not suffice, and he will consequently turn to that area of transition between the mesozoic and kainosoic periods, the age of reptiles and the age of mammals, there to find the first essential instances of difference between the individualistic and the communal mode of existence.

The reptile had been, and remains, an individualist; it laid its eggs and left them to hatch by themselves, taking neither heed nor

care of them. From its very beginning the young reptile had no knowledge of either parent or kin. It had to fare and to manage by itself.

With birds and, especially, with mammals, it was different. Immediately after birth a more or less intimate relationship would develop between parent and offspring and, to a certain extent, even among the young themselves. They would learn to be careful, to look after themselves, to fend off danger by imitation and by joint effort. A new type of existence, collectively controlled, instructive and teachable, would therefore arise.

The mammals are made up of a great variety of families, genera and species; yet here is a distinctive feature common to all.

This single standpoint and attitude has profound repercussions and a fundamental significance for the Wellsian view of history as a whole, since it lays stress on traits and characteristics common to various broad phenomena and processes.

Essentially, the view of history thus shaping up is that of a biologist, a geologist and an archaeologist, and Wells had had a thorough training in all these fields.

When he was beginning to conceive his *Outline of History*, however, Wells was closely involved in the activities of the League of Nations. It was there that he became aware of a profoundly fragmented human consciousness, resulting from a distorted historical perspective due to exaggerated divisions, divergences, variations and differentiations.

He understood the essential need for unity to replace the mosaical diversity he was witnessing. In 1919 he published a pamphlet under the significant title *History is One*. A year later *The Outline of History* followed, three years later - *A Short History of the World*. The latter is no mere adaptation or condensation of the former. It is a broader and more generalized history, more what the French call "l'histoire a thèse". Besides, written as it was, single-handedly, with no need to enter into detailed consultations and discussions with the several experts, it reads like a novel indeed, and for the same reason is more satisfactory from the artistic point of view.

Now what is the shape of Wellsian unity the way it is conceived within the historical process?

It is moulded by factors of economic, social and political integration which are not organized, systematized or even

formalized, but which clearly and unequivocally emerge from the writer's very treatment of his subject.

Scientific and technological development - from primitive paleolithic tools to the steam engine and the electric motor - are the key factor of economic integration; education, its ideas and institutions, make for social integration; the impulse towards a larger framework whose ultimate embodiment must be the World State is the basic factor of political integration.

Associated with these are the people - people with a vision - initiators, organizers, executors - those who design, promote, carry into effect and apply ideas in practice; inventors, discoverers, researchers, seekers; prophets, preachers, educators, encyclopaedists; broad-minded, statesmanlike minds alive and open to common interests and concerns; in short - forerunners and harbingers of the Wellsian ruling élite - the New Republicans in *Anticipations*, the Samurai in *A Modern Utopia*, members of the Modern State Movement in *The Shape of Things to Come*.

Here belong Aristotle, Plato, Duns Scotus, William Occam, Roger Bacon, Leonardo da Vinci, Copernicus, Galileo; Buddha, Francis of Assisi; Philip of Macedon with his magnanimity and enlightened view of government (but *not* Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, or Napoleon). And here belong also hosts of minor, anonymous figures.

Does Wells's relentless insistence and reiteration of global considerations, of broad links and universal interdependence, applying to our origins and affecting our future - do these represent a strictly modern viewpoint and outlook? A few quotations might help us to an answer.

One of the distinctive facts about contemporary history is that it is world history and that the forces shaping it cannot be understood unless we are prepared to adopt world-wide perspectives (...) the civilization of the future (...) is taking shape as a world civilization in which all the continents will play their part.⁴

Increasing stress is being laid on universally planned action (...) on a universal framework of human affairs (...) so that (...) the human community should be able to face the great problems of the world (...) in order to promote rationality on a global scale (...) and, finally, that (...) seeing the world as a whole must be insisted upon among our intellectuals.⁵

Throughout history, according to Wells, the comparative failure of every human generation has been that of the inability of those living to think of life as a single consciousness, of which each individual is a miniature extension, and not a world unto himself or

herself.

We invent petty group loyalties and hide behind all kinds of mental barriers, made up of what Wells calls "aggregatory ideas", which to illustrate I shall quote from *A Modern Utopia* (the passage, by the way, is a fine specimen of Wellsian humour):

For example, all sorts of aggregatory ideas come and go across the chameleon surfaces of my botanist's mind. He has a strong feeling for systematic botanists as against plant physiologists, whom he regards as lewd and evil scoundrels in this relation; but he has a strong feeling for all botanists, and, indeed, all biologists, as against physicists, and those who profess the exact sciences, all of whom he regards as dull, mechanical, ugly-minded scoundrels in this relation; but he has a strong feeling for all who profess what is called science as against psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and literary men, whom he regards as wild, foolish, immoral scoundrels in this relation; but he has a strong feeling for all educated men as against the working man, whom he regards as a cheating, lying, loafing, drunken, thievish dirty scoundrel in this relation...etc.⁶

History thus becomes a struggle between two aspects of human life, between two principles, the collective and the particular, or, as Wells puts it towards the end of his *Modern Utopia*, between "great and individual" that underlie the incongruity, the incompatibility he was unable to resolve.

Wells the educationist did feel that what was required was some kind of mutation of the human consciousness. At the end of his *Outline of History* he wrote: "History is becoming more and more a race between education and catastrophe." In a more avowedly pessimistic mood, however, as in *Mind at the End of its Tether*, his last published work, a similar enunciation takes on a distinctly ominous ring:

Man must go steeply up or down and the odds seem to be all in favour of his going down and out. If he goes up, then so great is the adaptation demanded of him that he must cease to be a man. Ordinary man is at the end of his tether.⁷

To Wells the prophet, history mattered primarily as a prelude and pointer towards the future. Whether his judgement was sounder in this respect in his early and hopeful *Anticipations*, or later, in the despairing *Fate of Homo Sapiens* - the destinies themselves will have to vouch for that.

Notes

1. Kenneth B. Newell, *Structure in Four Novels by H.G. Wells*, The Hague (Mouton), 1968, p.7.
2. Quoted in Ingvald Raknem, *H.G. Wells and His Critics*, Oslo (Universitetsforlaget), 1962, p.201.
3. H.G. Wells, *A Short History of the World*, Leipzig (Tauchnitz), 1929, p.5.
4. Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, Harmondsworth (Penguin), 1981, pp.2, 264.
5. Jozef Pajestka, 'Will there be room for all?', *Polityka* No.37 (1974), (translation mine, J.K.P.).
6. H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, London (Chapman & Hall), 1905, pp.223-4.
7. H.G. Wells, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, London (Heinemann), 1945, p.30.

Bryan Cheyette Beyond Rationality: H.G. Wells and the Jewish Question

An address to the H.G. Wells Society at its Annual Residential Conference, Tufnell Park, London, 23rd September 1990

"...I have always refused to be enlightened and sympathetic about the Jewish Question. From my cosmopolitan standpoint it is a question that ought not to exist."

H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, Volume I (London, 1934), p.353.

Introductory

George Orwell, in an article on 'Antisemitism in Britain' (April 1945), predicted with startling prescience why discussions of the