

## Book Review

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Brandon, Ruth. *The New Women and the Old Men: Love, Sex and the Women Question* (1989. London: Flamingo, 1991)

Hammond, J.R. *H.G.Wells and Rebecca West*. (London: Harvester, 1991).

In one sense, biography is not very different from fiction. Writing a biography entails similar processes of selection and rearrangement, and no matter how sedulously the biographer attempts to be objective and neutral, he or she is inevitably involved in interpretation and judgement. Facts do not speak for themselves - and what constitutes a fact anyway? Things happen to people, events occur, but which are the most significant? What is the relevance of any event to the overall pattern of life? Rebecca West, who figures in both these books, was renowned for her ability and willingness to rewrite the past events of her life - a tendency commented on by her son, Anthony West and her biographer, Victoria Glendinning, but there is no reason to believe that H.G.Wells is as detached and reliable a commentator on his past life as he would like us to believe - even his apparent candour can be seen as disingenuous. Autobiography too entails selection and rearrangement and no matter how forthright and honest the writer strives to be, reinterpretation and reassessment is bound to occur. This would explain why John Hammond's *H.G.Wells and Rebecca West* and Ruth Brandon's *The New Women and the Old Men*, both well-researched and well-referenced, both, no doubt, seeking to present an accurate and unbiased view of their subjects, offer such very different interpretations of similar events, and invite us to draw very different conclusions about H.G.Wells's relationships with the women in his life.

Admittedly, the two writers set out with different objectives. Hammond's book declares itself to be a literary biography, and its expressed aim is to present "the story of a partnership between two of the most significant literary figures of the twentieth century and how their fiction, their attitudes and their lives were affected by each other" (Preface). Brandon's book, on the other hand, is concerned as its subtitle indicates with "love, sex and the woman question". The scope of the two books is thus very different. Hammond provides a brief account of the early lives of his two subjects, but other people and external events are mentioned only when - and insofar as - they are directly linked with their relationship. Brandon, on the other hand, is concerned with a number of unconventional love affairs, particularly those of Olive Schreiner and Havelock Ellis, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling. Wells's affair with Amber Reeves figures prominently in the book, but his relations with his wife, with Rosamund Bland, Rebecca West and Margaret Sanger are also examined in some detail.

Quotations from *A Modern Utopia* and *The New Machiavelli* setting out Wells's ideas of sexual freedom are juxtaposed with an account of his behaviour, leading Brandon to conclude that Wells "thought and hoped he was persuading women that the world was well lost for principle. But in fact all he succeeded in doing was to persuade them that the world would be well lost for

Wells" (207). One of the advantages of Brandon's approach, insofar as an understanding of Wells is concerned, is that his relationships with women are set in a social as well as literary context. Although she has recourse to Wells's own account of events, particularly in *H.G.Wells in Love*, his comments - on his marriage, for instance - are juxtaposed with those of Shaw and Beatrice Webb, which often provide an ironic if not acerbic commentary.

The thesis of the book is that although all of these people considered - men and women - saw themselves as free spirits, challenging social convention and the accepted view of sexual behaviour, only the men were truly free. "It is remarkable," Brandon comments, "how few of these brilliant, forceful and ambitious women - and nearly all of them were that - managed to avoid living their lives on the terms of a male lover or husband" (249). And she includes "even such obviously successful women as Beatrice Webb and Rebecca West." in her conclusion that "none of them managed to live their lives as they would have done had they been entirely free agents" (249). This gives the title of the book, *The New Women and the Old Men*, particular connotations. Since its terms are drawn from different paradigms - old/new: old/young - we are invited to see male and female experience as taking place within a number of contrasting and often conflicting social contexts. The men in these partnerships were already established in their careers, the young women still had their way to make in the world. The unconventionality which could be absorbed by the men deprived women of their chances. As Ruth Brandon puts it: "whatever Amber's intellectual potential may have been, she was never given the chance to realise it. By the time the obsession with H.G.Wells had abated she had a husband and, more to the point, a baby" (187).

Ruth Brandon sees it as a paradox that although Wells was interested only in modern, intellectual women, he never really saw them as equals and "he was extremely old-fashioned in many of his attitudes once he had, so to speak, got them" (188). *The New Women and the Old Men* is, of course, written from a feminist perspective, and it stresses for instance, the ways in which Rebecca West's own writing was affected by Wells's instructions about household arrangements - she was, after all, hidden away in the country, cut off from friends and intellectual stimulation, in charge of a baby. But although John Hammond's perspective in *H.G.Wells and Rebecca West* is very different, and at times he is perhaps too ready to accept Wells's view of events, he too is critical of his subject's behaviour towards Rebecca West. He gives a detailed account of the early years of the relationship and comments on Wells's unreasonable irritation when Rebecca "bothered" him with domestic problems: "she was after all," Hammond points out, "only 21 and unused to running a household" (86).

In fact, one of the most commendable things about this interesting study is the extent to which Hammond - President and founder of the Wells Society and an unflagging Wellsian - does nonetheless present the relationship from Rebecca West's point of view as well as from Wells's. He records, for instance, that what West found "distasteful and intellectually dishonest was that in novel after novel (Wells) appeared to be pleading for the equality of men and women when in reality, she suspected, he wanted nothing of the kind" (75), and in his analysis of the fiction, shows this to be the case. Here though I come to my only real criticism of this book. There are a number of opposed schools of thought in the literary world about the ways in which the author's life relates to his or her work. Should we assume a close relationship between the author's life and his or her literary output, or should we accept that once a work is published, the author is 'dead', that the site of meaning and interpretation is within the text itself or the reader? In the

Preface to *H.G. Wells and Rebecca West* John Hammond firmly aligns himself with the former approach. His book about Wells and West he explains, "frequently draws on their fiction to account for, explain and illustrate aspects of their lives". This assumption can be disconcerting at times. I checked one reference, for instance, to discover that what is recounted as Wells's comment on his mother is in fact from the *New Machiavelli*, and is Richard Remington's account of his mother, and surely George Ponderevo's comment on Bladesover - "it is one of those dominant explanatory impressions that make the framework of my mind" - cannot be equated unequivocally with the influence of Uppark on Wells, since it could be argued that in this novel the difference between the "framework" of George's mind and that of his creator is a major source of interest in the narration. It is true nonetheless that Hammond's knowledge of Wells's life and of his work is so impressively comprehensive that he is able to speak with more authority than most writers on these issues.

This is perhaps the first book on this subject to bring out, with sensitivity and insight, the positive aspects of the relationship between Rebecca West and H.G. Wells as opposed to the acrimony and recriminations of the later years which are the focus of Gordon N. Ray's book - a book which is seldom referred to in Hammond's study. The later quarrels are documented in the concluding chapters of *H.G. Wells and Rebecca West*, but what stays in the reader's mind is the persuasive description of the very real love which must have existed between the two, and of the many periods of happiness they enjoyed together. Above all, Hammond stresses and seeks to demonstrate the multiplicity of ways in which West and Wells influenced one another as writers. His conclusion is, in fact, not very far away from Brandon's, although she stresses the deleterious effects upon women in unconventional liaisons whilst Hammond sees it as a mutual problem. "The partnership between Rebecca and Wells came to an end," he suggests, "because in the last analysis neither could reconcile the tensions inherent within it; between their respective careers, their life together, and his marriage" (146).

Both these books, then, are of interest to anyone who wants to know more about H.G. Wells. They offer detailed descriptions of some of his closest personal relationships and give interpretations - different interpretations, but each backed-up by well-documented evidence - of the ways in which these relationships affected and influenced his work as a writer.

## Recent books and Articles on Wells

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**Robert A. Colby** 'Not Merely a Novelist: H.G. Wells's Relations with Paul Reynolds' *Columbia Literary Columns* 39:3 (1990) pp.10-19.

**Robert Crossley** 'In the Palace of Green Porcelain: Artefacts from the Museums of Science Fiction' in *Fictional Space: Essays on Contemporary Science Fiction* ed. Tom Shippey [Essays and Studies (1990)] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) pp.76-103.

**Michael Draper** 'Essays on Wells' [Review of Huntington's volume listed below] *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 35:2 (1992) pp.221-224.

**Steve Giles** 'The Science Fiction Novels of H.G. Wells' *Book and Magazine Collector* 89 (August 1991) pp.4-12.

**J.R. Hammond** *H.G. Wells and Rebecca West* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

**Christopher Harvie** 'A Manifesto Written to Intrigue' [on *The New Machiavelli*] *Times Higher Education Supplement* 955 (22 February, 1991) p.15.

**Roslynn Haynes** 'H.G. Wells in Australia' *Australian Literary Studies* 14:3 (May 1990) p.336-358.

**Kathryn Hume** 'Eat or Be Eaten: H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*' *Philological Quarterly* 69 (1990) pp.233-251.

**John Huntingdon** ed. *Critical Essays on H.G. Wells* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991) xi + 186 pp.

**Steven Lehman** 'The Motherless Child in Science Fiction: *Frankenstein* and *Moreau*' *Science-Fiction Studies* 56 (March 1992) pp.49-58.

**Colin Manlove** 'Dualism in Wells's *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*' *Riverside Quarterly* 8:3 (July 1990) pp.173-181.

**Brian Murray** *H.G. Wells* (New York: Continuum, 1990) 190 pp.

**Harold Orel** *Popular Fiction in England, 1914-1918* (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992). [Chapter 16, pp.191-202, is on *Mr Britling Sees it Through*].

**Giulia Pissarello** 'Un apologo darwiniano: "The Country of the Blind" di H.G. Wells' *Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Comparate* (Pisa) 43:4 (Oct-Dec 1990) pp. 399-409.