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Tom Miller

H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley

The idea of comparing H.G. Wells with Aldous Huxley is not new, and was employed for instance by Sir George Catlin (January 27, 1940) in his review of Huxley's *After Many a Summer* in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Catlin thought that Huxley was "crown prince in the dynasty of H.G. Wells, heir to the novel. . ." Both writers plainly tried to use the novel to project ideas, and in both cases the ideas frequently derived from Darwin.

Since the publication the *The Time Traveller* by Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie in 1973, the vast influence of T.H. Huxley, Aldous's grandfather, on Wells has not been in question. Wells attended Huxley's course on biology in South Kensington in 1884-85, though the contact between the men must have been tenuous in the extreme, as we know from Leonard Huxley's *Life and Letters* of his father that T.H. spent most of the academic year of 1884-85 in Italy, attempting with some success to recover his health.

Huxley appeared in several of Wells's novels, specifically *Ann Veronica*. His most important fictional treatment by Wells came in *The World Set Free*, in which the author foretells the advent of nuclear energy. Huxley's manner of lecturing is brilliantly described as well as his impact on an audience, in Wells's account of a lecture by a Professor Rufus. The identification must be beyond dispute, as the lecture is set in Edinburgh, where Huxley delivered the lectures later published as *Man's Place in Nature* (1862).

In the last years of the nineteenth century Wells founded modern science fiction. As Aldous Huxley grew up, he read Wells's new books as they came out, but he does not seem to have held a high opinion of Wells. On June 30, 1916, Huxley wrote to his brother Julian expressing the hope that ". . . this is THE war that will END WELLS".¹ However, that he did read Wells is signalled by a reference to *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* in Huxley's quasi-autobiographical *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936).

The men met occasionally in the 1920s. Huxley wrote to Wells on March 24, 1927, referring to a conversation about proportional representation which took place on a ship. Their meetings became more frequent in the late 1920s as Wells worked with his son G.P. and Julian Huxley on *The Science of Life*.

Wells was always acutely aware of the latest trends in literature, as in many other subjects, and this fact probably accounts for one of his more obscure books, *Meanwhile*, published in 1927. Aldous had revived the Peacockian tradition of country house novels with his *Crome Yellow* and *Those Barren Leaves*. In *Meanwhile*, Wells seems to be saying, "I can do this too," as well as unburdening himself of his opinions about the coal strike of 1926, delivered through the mouth of an improbably named Mr Sempack. Other characters include a hostess-figure – whom Wells identifies in his introduction as his long-suffering wife, Jane – an engaging Old Etonian coal-owner, who is somewhat easily influenced by the prophetic Sempack, and a precious American called – again a little improbably – Mr Plantagenet-Buchan. This character seems to represent a parody of Huxley's know-alls in *Crome Yellow* and *Those Barren Leaves*, Mr Scogan and Mr Cardan. He delivers himself of a large amount of useless knowledge, such as the derivation of the word "spooning" – a topic on which Wells was something of an expert.

Wells's opinion of Huxley's political views deteriorated in the early 1930s. In the late 1920s, Huxley was very much influenced by two irrationalist thinkers, D.H. Lawrence and the Italian sociologist, Pareto. The first fruit of this influence was the series of political essays grouped under the title *Proper Studies*. These exhibit Aldous's penchant for investigating new ideas in his chosen field, ideas such as the Dalton process of teaching, and the essays contain criticisms of democracy. Aldous refers flatteringly to Wells's work in his introduction, but attacks Utopia writers in the text. *Proper Studies* was followed by *Brave New World* (1932). This book, as Huxley freely admitted,² began as a parody of Wells's *Men Like Gods*, which had appeared in 1923, but later turned into something else as Huxley began to develop his own ideas. Bertrand Russell thought however that *Brave New World* borrowed a little too much from his own *The Scientific Outlook*, and it is true that Huxley may have remembered and used his conversations with Russell at Garsington. A more important source for Huxley may have been *The Marriage of Figaro*. The scene in which the Savage is discovered to be the son of the Director of Hatcheries has something in common with the episode in which Figaro's parents are identified.

Whatever its origins, there is plenty of evidence that Wells was hurt by *Brave New World*. A critical letter was supposed by Gerald Heard to have been sent to Huxley, but such a letter has not been located. However, in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), Wells referred to Huxley as "one of the most brilliant of reactionary writers" and *Brave New World* is described as an "alarmist fantasy". Nevertheless, he sets

Huxley's death in 2004, a prophecy which turned out to be generous since Huxley died in 1963. Wells was more severe in one of his strangest books, *Star-Begotten* (1937), which was dedicated to – of all people – Winston Churchill, the villain of *Men Like Gods* and *Meanwhile*. In *Star Begotten*, Aldous appears as Harold Rigamey, who, we are told,

was a peculiarly constituted being, he had a mind that did not so much act as react. He disbelieved everything and then doubled back on his disbelief. From a sound historical and literary training he had recoiled in a state of unsympathetic curiosity to science and had achieved a respectable position on the literary side of journalism by writing about science in a manner that caused the greatest discomfort and perplexity to men of science. He found wonders for them when they saw nothing wonderful and incredible triumphs of paradox in their simplest statements. He mated them to the strangest associates.

Rigamey had an infuriating openmindedness to every unorthodox extravagance. He hated dogma and he was full of faith. He was always reconciling science and religion, spiritualism and behaviourism, medicine and Christian Science, and this reconciling disposition won him quite a large following of readers eager to keep their mental peace amidst the vast, the incongruous, alarming, and sometimes far too urgent suggestions of our modern world.

They were all a little uneasy with him and that was part of his charm. There were stimulants in all his sedatives. When he asked his readers to come and meet spiritual worth, they were never quite sure whether that meant the dear Archbishop of Canterbury... or whether it meant a rather repellent, though no doubt equally edifying encounter with some unsanitarily pure and indecently stark fakir on a bed of nails; and when he remarked upon the stern veracities of science, whether it would be a fresh explosion in the mathematical engine room, a vitamin of incredible potency, or a breathing exercise from America that at once confirmed and completed the remarkable inhalations of ancient Tibet, he had in mind. . . .

This is a cruel parody, but accurate enough to identify Aldous, who, by 1937, was the pupil of the mystagogue Heard and the Australian physical trainer F.M. Alexander.³ The Rigamey sequence is the only passage of any importance in *Star-Begotten* which indicates Wells's despair. The only hope for the future seems to be that dwellers on other planets may help humanity by the administration of cosmic rays.

By 1937, Huxley was on his way to permanent settlement in the US, and there is no evidence that he read *Star-Begotten* at that time or that he ever met Wells (who died in 1946) again. Huxley's second work of science fiction, *Ape and Essence*, published in 1949, was one of the first post-Hiroshima disaster novels. In other respects it resembles somewhat Wells's anti-utopian *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* (1928). In both

novels, disagreeable savages parody the worst excesses of modern civilisation. *Ape and Essence* was badly received in Moscow, but was not unpopular in the English-speaking world, where its most severe critic was Wells's son, Anthony West, who took exception to the format – an introduction followed by a film script (*New Statesman*).

West's objections seem, in retrospect to be narrowly based. It is likely that Huxley never had any thought of having *Ape and Essence* screened, though it has since his death been both televised and adapted for radio. As a screenplay it is much better than Wells's *The King Who was a King* (1929) which has been largely forgotten. West's real objection may well have been to Huxley's specific denunciation of the idea of progress. The essential difference between the books is to be found in their authors' treatment of this idea, one in which both were keenly interested. In his last lectures, Huxley referred favourably to J.B. Bury's book on the subject (Macmillan 1921). Wells, as the Mackenzies point out, feared the doom of humanity, but he hoped that a science-oriented elite could put off the end of the species and ensure growing prosperity for mankind for centuries. Huxley was much less optimistic. In *Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island* and *Ape and Essence*, savages denounce the idea of Progress, but in his conclusion, Wells, who appears as one Lyulph Graves, reflects that there is real hope only if people can be persuaded of the nature of their best interests. No such political optimism transfigures *Ape and Essence*.

Huxley's role as all-purpose critic between 1945 and 1963 resembled that of Wells after 1919, though Huxley never retreated into despair. After the death of Stalin in 1953, the political state of the world looked slightly more promising, and Huxley turned his attention to the environment. His concern now seems far-sighted in the extreme. Like Wells, he was a critic of the Roman Catholic Church, although this did not prevent him from being received by Pope John XXIII. He was, nevertheless, worried by the prospect of over-population.

Aldous Huxley's religious interests changed from an eclectic mysticism to Buddhism – a shift which may have had some connection with his interest in drugs and the publication in 1954 of *The Doors of Perception*. This book, which enjoyed a *succès de scandale*, like its writer's early novel, recounts an experience with Mescaline. *The Doors of Perception*, too, has its parallel in Wells's writings. During World War One, Wells underwent an overtly religious phase, which found expression in a novel called *The Soul of a Bishop* (1917), a text which has importance in relation to Aldous Huxley, if in no other context.

The book describes the experience of Edward Scrope, the bishop of Princhester, a northern industrial city, who suffers a nervous breakdown early in the war. Having foolishly sworn off alcohol and tobacco for the rest of the war, he visits London in order to obtain a dispensation from his doctor. His usual doctor is unavailable and he sees a Dr Dale, who prescribes a new drug of his own formulation which sends Scrope off into two remarkable dreams in which he has conversations with an angel. Anglicanism, he is told, is unfortunately incorrect, whilst the theories supplied by Wells are presented as better. When Scrope returns for a fresh prescription, his wife having accidentally destroyed the original batch, Dr Dale is dead, and Scrope's old doctor is either unable or unwilling to furnish any more. Fortunately – possibly because there is enough of the drug in Scrope's bloodstream – he has one more vision, which serves to propel him out of the Church. At first Scrope plans to set up on his own, and he is encouraged in this enterprise by Lady Sunderbund, a glamorous war-profiteer, who is evidently interested in more than his teaching. She wants to build him a temple at Golders Green, but Scrope, on reflection, decides that no priesthood or ceremony is required, and he retires into religious journalism, thus anticipating Huxley's conclusions a quarter of a century later.

Scrope is an attractive hero and, unlike most of Wells's characters, does develop in the course of the novel. His rejection of Lady Sunderbund may have something to do with the fact that she is almost certainly based on Wells's former mistress, Elizabeth von Arnim, who had previously appeared in *Mr Britling Sees it Through*. Scrope is one of the few Wells's heroes to resist temptation at any level, and the book may represent a perhaps unconscious attempt by the writer to reverse the story of the Fall of Man. It may not be a coincidence that in *The Doors of Perception* Huxley reported seeing a flower arrangement: "I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation – the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence".⁴ Both books take seriously the idea that a drug might, so far from limiting the mind's consciousness of the world, actually expand its capacity to take in material shut out by its normal operations.

It is probable that after Huxley had experimented with mescaline and planned to write a book about it, he recalled and reread *The Soul of a Bishop*, which he had read as a young man. This is likely, I would suggest, for several reasons. In *The Doors of Perception*, for instance, Huxley refers to Wells's short story "The Door in the Wall", which is about an imaginary, semi-mystical experience, and also, in his novel *The Genius and the Goddess*, published a year after *The Doors of Perception*, he quotes with

feeling the line "He giveth his Beloved sleep", which appears also in Wells's novel. It is striking, too, that one of the many crosses that Scrope has to bear as Bishop of Princhester is contact with a tireless incumbent with eccentric views on sexual matters, who has been much influenced by a nineteenth century American called John Humphrey Noyes, founder of a colony which used as its social cement the contraceptive practice of *coitus reservatus*. Interestingly, Noyes is also the hero of the final essay in a collection published by Huxley in 1956 under the title *Adonis and the Alphabet*.⁵ Huxley could, of course, have found out about Noyes from several sources, but the timing of his appearance in Huxley's work is suggestive. It may also be relevant that in *The Genius and the Goddess*, Huxley has a character say that H.G. Wells reminded her of the rice paddies in her native California: "Acres and acres of shiny water, but never more than two inches deep". This is not up to the standard set in *Crome Yellow* and *Antic Hay*. Perhaps Huxley had, by this time, read some more of Wells, particularly the portrayal of Harold Rigamey in *Star-Begotten*, and had not been pleased. We shall never know, since Huxley's notes were destroyed, together with his correspondence with Wells, when his house burned down in 1961.⁶

Huxley's last work of fiction is *Island* (1962), a utopian text which also has its counterpart in Wells's corpus. *Island* is set in an imaginary Indonesian island called Pala where the intelligent rulers employ modernised Buddhism, Noyesian sexual techniques, Sheldonian psychology and drugs to ensure social stability and well-distributed prosperity. The regime collapses not from internal tensions but through the exercise of external power, when greedy neighbours invade to seize the island's oil deposits.⁷

Huxley's inspiration may have come in part from the cinema; there are parallels with *Lost Horizon* (1937) and with *Tarzan Triumphs* (1943). In the latter film, Tarzan saves a threatened Utopia called Palandria from the Nazis. Huxley's most important source, however, was most likely *Men Like Gods*. This book opens with Mr Barnstaple, a sympathetic journalist on the verge of a nervous breakdown – a familiar pattern with Wellsian heroes. Determined to escape from his family and the problems of the post-war world, Mr Barnstaple sets out on a holiday in his small car, the "Yellow Peril". As a result of his accidental presence in a spot where inhabitants of a Utopian planet are making an experiment with Newtonian physics, he finds himself on their planet, together with characters who are based on such contemporary figures as Balfour, Churchill and Eddie Marsh, who just happen to be in the same spot at the same time. Churchill despises the Utopians and decides to seize their planet. Barnstaple is horri-

fied, and tries to frustrate this foolish plan, which comes to nothing. Eventually the earthlings are expelled, and they are sent home by the same technique that led to their arrival.

Like *Island*, *Men Like Gods* has a predictable plot: nervous exhaustion in the principal character, attractive Utopians, long speeches in which characters set out their ideas and defend their positions, and an unappealing tendency to regard opposition as a medical condition rather than a genuine difference of opinion between equals. There is also the intervention of hostile outsiders. Huxley's ending is probably more likely than Wells's, but the likenesses between the books are substantial, extending even to the presence of tame animals in both utopias – in Pala, mynah birds utter helpful injunctions, and in Wells's utopia, domesticated lions and tigers wander about freely. Of the two books, Huxley's is the superior because there are several sensitively written scenes, whereas Wells merely addresses the human race, so to speak, with Dick Emery: "You are awful".⁸

Wells and Huxley, then, were both political Darwinians in the sense that they considered humanity as a species and recommended courses of action consistent with that insight. Both specifically deplored petty nationalism. They parted company, however, on theological issues. Wells, as the Mackenzies point out, was a Puritan who employed Enlightenment symbols; Huxley, in contrast, was impressed by eastern religions and had no wish to impose western opinions on other civilisations. This difference between them can be exemplified, for instance, by their likely responses to the Gulf War of 1991. Huxley, a pacifist, would not have countenanced the coalition's use of force to liberate Kuwait. Wells, on the other hand, thought the League of Nations a talking shop, and would no doubt have been pleased by the vigorous action taken against a dangerous dictator – through the UN – by nations that he would have considered relatively enlightened.⁹ What Wells failed to see was that his political doctrines were ultimately religious and therefore were likely to break down when exported to non-European cultures such as that of India.

Despite their evident differences, then, there are interesting links between H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley, and it could be argued, as I have sought to show, that the work of the younger writer was influenced in various ways by that of the elder.

Footnotes

- 1 Huxley's letters, edited by Grover Smith, Chatto & Windus, 1969.
- 2 See for example, Sybille Bedford biography of Huxley, volume 1, Chatto & Collins, 1973.
- 3 The name 'Rigamey', which rhymes with 'bigamy', may hint at something. Wells was a bigamist in all but name, needing two women to be available at any one time. Huxley's private life was also unorthodox, as he relied on his lesbian wife, Maria, to provide him with women for one-night stands. It may well be that Wells, who was always well-informed, wanted to suggest that Huxley shared his own tastes.
- 4 Although *The Doors of Perception* is a much more engaging book than *The Soul of a Bishop*, it must bear some responsibility for the Californian drug culture of the 1960s, with its evil results. Dame Helen Gardner once told me that she thought *The Doors of Perception* 'the most dangerous book ever written'.
- 5 Noyes is an improbable hero and his technique of doubtful value. Huxley does not tell us – he may not have known it – that Noyes, after the collapse of his colony, fathered eight children after the age of fifty-eight. See Philip Thody, *Aldous Huxley*, Studio Vista 1973.
- 6 Some years earlier, Huxley had prepared for this setback in the sense that he had written a magazine article about what books he would set about acquiring if his library were ever destroyed by fire. Wells's science fiction is on the list.
- 7 Huxley evidently had little faith in the UN as there is no suggestion that a coalition sponsored by the UN might come to the assistance of Pala, as happened in the comparable case of Kuwait.
- 8 The influence of *Men Like Gods* on Huxley is considerable. At one point, Mr Barnstaple finds himself whistling the Barcarolle from the 'Tales of Hoffman', a song which is also sung in fragmented German by Mercaptan, immediately after the restaurant scene in Huxley's *Antic Hay* – a novel which was written just after *Men Like Gods*. Mercaptan may be a self-portrait but he is certainly no Wellsian. A few pages before this incident he had remarked: 'And as for Homo a la H.G. Wells – *ça ne pue pas assez ...*'. He also considers Gumbriel's pneumatic trousers 'Too Wellsian ... Too horribly Utopian'.
- 9 In his film, *Things to Come*, Wells has the altruistic airmen from Basra destroy a petty dictatorship in Everytown – an almost exact inversion of events in 1991, and in the film, as in the Gulf War, there was talk of the deployment of gas and the taking of hostages.