

I did not expect any gratitude from her. In that, however, I was wrong" (71-72). In providing him with companionship and solace Weena evokes a reciprocal response from the Traveller and thus provides the narrative with a human perspective it would otherwise lack. In contrast to the anonymity of the effete Eloi and the repellent Morlocks Weena stands out precisely because of her human qualities. As the Traveller comments in a revealing aside: "She always seemed to me, I fancy, more human than she was, perhaps because her affection was so human" (107-108).

Without Weena *The Time Machine* would still be a gripping narrative and a vividly written account of a journey through time but, with Weena, it is a haunting depiction of a quest; a quest to free the sleeping princess of legend from the clutches of her pursuers. In rescuing Weena from drowning, befriending her, taking her side against her enemies and journeying with her across a landscape beset with dangers and obstacles, the Traveller calls upon all his resources of strength and intelligence. Beyond this, despite his inclination to regard himself as a sceptical man of science, he is forced to acknowledge the presence within his own makeup of feelings and tenderness and compassion. It is this which adds a humane perspective to *The Time Machine* and enhances its power as an allegory of the human adventure.

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Gareth Davies-Morris

Looking for Lou Pidou

To lift a phrase from the Great Man himself, I intend to write journalism rather than criticism – in this instance at least. My living and working in Marseille inspired me to take advantage of the relative proximity and to try and find Lou Pidou, the house that Wells had built, and where he had lived with Odette Keun from 1927 until 1933. I did not expect to unearth any critical trove concerning Wells's Grasse years, but I had been intrigued by the accounts of his relationship with Odette given in the Mackenzie biography and in Anthony West's memoir of his father, *Aspects of a Life*. The affair between Wells and Keun, with his ambivalence towards her and her combativeness over him, made a story curious enough to merit a tangible backdrop. Besides, it gave me an excuse to take my fiancée on a driving tour of the region – and, as Wells would surely have testified, one doesn't need much of a rationale to see more of the South of France.

I must admit that my resources were sketchy: a sixty year-old address offered in a letter Wells wrote to Olaf Stapledon, and a photo of Lou Pidou included in the Mackenzie book (illust. 42), which, I realized to my chagrin, I had forgotten to pack. I had no clear idea of how to conduct my search, so coming into Grasse in the late afternoon, I first visited the *syndicat initiative* (one wonders how that term was ever construed as "tourist office") in hopes of finding information. Sadly, the young woman at the counter, although charming and *au courant* in English was not as up-to-date on her Wells' scholarship. The name Lou Pidou meant nothing to her, nor to her older colleague, who pointed out that the prefix was common to many houses in the area. As for the name H.G. Wells, her only response was "Orson Welles?" I was not encouraged.

Luck, as I discovered, can move in more mysterious ways than God. "Let me ask my husband," the older woman said, turning to a grey-haired man who had evidently come to meet her when she got off work. The man's name was George Corbelli, and without him this account would have remained unwritten. At his wife's question he lit up and told me that he did indeed know the house. His father was the mason who had actually built it, he declared, and had once met Charlie Chaplin there. More important to Wellsians – though not, perhaps to the Corbelli family – he had been given an autographed Wells book as a present: *Esquisse de l'Histoire Universale*, the French translation of *An Outline of History*.

To compound my good fortune, Monsieur Corbelli showed me (on a vague tourist map, no less) the general location of the house, although, he said, we should plan for a lot of walking in order to track it down since the streets had altered over the years. In bad but earnest French, I expressed my gratitude and left, feeling exulted. Our conversation had lasted barely a minute, but in that time the success of my quest had become attainable. It was too late in the day to continue, but buoyed up by this extraordinary piece of luck we chose a hotel and went in search of a restaurant instead. Grasse shuts down earlier than most French towns, which are hardly renowned for late-night service, but the *centre ville* held a certain promise. However, a policeman we approached warned us away with a telling expression. "You don't want to go down there," he said, gesturing towards the old town below us. "That's for Arabs. Go along here and you'll find some restaurants which are more European."

I was struck by the irony of searching out the home of an egalitarian visionary in a town of unabashed racists. The irony was compounded – and contradicted, in keeping with the dualistic spirit of Wells, perhaps – by the gendarme's use of the code-word for "white", and by his obvious sincerity in wanting to steer two people away from trouble. We compromised and found an eatery on the heights of the narrow spiral of streets that plunges into the historic city centre. The next day, though, we felt more confident and made the full pedestrian tour. I had been disappointed by Grasse at first, as whatever Provençal appeal H.G. had found in its ancient facades seemed to have fled before the encroaching cars and graffiti. But the city revealed its charm the next day; the scent of its trademark perfume rich in the air, the bustling streets full of shoppers. In front of the cathedral overlooking the valley that descends towards Cannes and the Mediterranean, I wondered whether H.G. had enjoyed this same view. Undoubtedly, I concluded, although not as part of a visit to the church itself.

The euphoria of the previous day's luck had by now drained away. We decided to make the hunt for Lou Pidou our last project, but were both wondering how to find one house amidst a thousand like it. My doubts were only confirmed by the place where we ate lunch. One of the city's most charming restaurants, it had been done up in a "Hollywood Stars" theme of movie posters and black and white promotional photos. Who should I see watching over our table? Orson Welles, in his youthful days of the Mercury Theatre and *War of the Worlds* uproar. My nemesis it appeared. "Everyone remembers you," I accused the bluff face, "but how about the other one?"

Once we started searching the terraced banks of houses in the residential quarters, we saw that Monsieur Corbelli had been correct. The actual street no longer existed but

had given its name to a clearly affluent area of fine houses and large gardens. A well-meaning gardener directed us to the wrong neighbourhood, but once again we had good luck. Seeing us wandering in obvious confusion, an old woman came out of her house and, recognising the name Lou Pidou, directed us back the way we had come, saying we'd see the house listed on a street plan. Following her advice, we were soon walking along a lane towards a rise lined with trees. The wall and steps that formed part of the hill showed their many years in the moss and slime that stained them, and for a moment I feared we'd come upon a ruin. But a new driveway, gravel-lined, went off to the left, and with a slight sense of trepidation we mounted and approached Lou Pidou from the side.

There was no mistaking the house once we arrived. It was in excellent repair and clearly inhabited. On the terrace, a man in the bloom of a hearty middle age was lounging at a patio-table, enjoying a coffee. An immense black dog, some sort of Satanic Pyrennese, loped up, making us glad that we had taken the more public route, where its master could see us first. We started talking, and though I discovered that he was the owner of the house, and his name was Maximilian Grone, his poor French and English kept us off-balance until his wife Barbara came out to rescue the grand event. From then on it was easy. I was a scholar, I told them, interested in visiting the former residence of the author I was studying. The new owners were Germans who had moved to France, and yes, they knew of Mr Wells and were happy to have bought his old house. They let us look round, both inside and out, then invited us to stay for coffee. During the conversation they showed me the documents that, upon Odette Keun's death, had returned the usufruct to Wells's heirs, together with a photograph of Keun, Wells and Anthony West (the one which appears in the books already mentioned). A note on the back of the photograph identified the other woman in the group as the wife of the local doctor. They also had letters from a more celebrated academic, asking for information about Wells's occupancy of the house. For those interested, the address is as follows: Maximilian Grone and Dr Barbara Bauer-Grone, Lou Pidou, Chemin de Blumenthal, Grasse 06130. Although they do not want to be besieged, the Grones would have no objection to the occasional further visitor.

Wellsians will perhaps be interested in the changes Lou Pidou has undergone. The former owner had attempted to make the house into a casino, and his conversions, though tasteful, were made at the expense of the airy intimacy Wells had intended. They included enlarging the living room by knocking out most of the interior walls on the ground floor, and offsetting this new spaciousness by glassing-in the covered patios and wings to create several more rooms. Last, and anything but least, he had

removed the famous fireplace lintel with its message. Instead, outside the front door he had mounted a marble plaque bearing the inscription of the legend, which with unintentional irony had been rendered in error: "Two lovers built this house" had become "This house was built for two lovers." The unique testament to the stormy love affair between Wells and Keun had been replaced by a tombstone with the wrong epitaph. Furthermore, the substituted assertion was ascribed to Wells, a mistake in authorship.

Musing on this small revision of history and how, by its manifest concreteness, it would become accepted as truth, I went to explore the upstairs, which, with its snug bedrooms and long central corridor, had remained relatively unchanged. I stood for a few minutes on the landing, hearing from below the uncertain moves and haltings of polite conversation. Perhaps it was just my awareness of the place's history, but I seemed to feel a sense of familiarity, like one has on arriving at an old friend's house. The hallway stretched on either side of me, cool and still, and in it a presence seemed to gather. Was it their ghosts who passed me, arguing as they walked, anger recalled from another era? Perhaps H.G. would step from one of the rooms, I mused. Stroking the cat on his arm, he'd walk up dapper and cheerful. "Keeping the faith?" he would ask me, thrusting his face forward. "We're still hoping for the world state," I'd answer with a shrug. He'd nod and walk on down the hallway, glancing back with the briefest of winks. "Just so long as you enjoy yourself while you're waiting," *le Petit Dieu* would add. "I always did."

At the end of the house tour, the Grones' two young sons showed us the grounds. Recalling that Wells had planned the property himself, I was struck by how its layout embodied his fascination with structural oppositions. Lou Pidou occupies a ridge and consists of two main sections, the conventional house and a lower cellar-cum patio, once open but now glassed-in. The two halves are separated externally by a tiled promenade that forms the roof of the lower part, and the resulting step effect is continued by the lawn, itself set off from the house by hedges. The property on the wings contrasts the natural with the artificial, the hill side rich in trees and flowers, the other a car park and driveway. The drive is flanked by the old wall that we passed on arrival, probably all that remains of the farmhouse that stood there when Wells acquired the land from Felicie Goletto, his French housekeeper. At its end, steps lead up to the bottom of the lower garden, where more changes have been made. The tennis court that Wells installed below the house has gone, replaced by a swimming pool and a child's swing set. The Grones have stated that they plan no alterations themselves and that if they ever move, they would want the house to go to someone who could appreciate its Wellsian

legacy – a comment worth remembering when one plans to retire in the South of France in thirty years or so.

Before leaving Grasse, we took the Grones' advice and visited a neighbour who, they said, had known Wells in passing. Mme Lazard Poggio-Abbo, herself a painter and sculptor, regaled us with stories of the society types who had come from Nice and



The troublesome plaque

Cannes to visit, and told of how she'd often seen Wells, whom she recalled as a handsome, good-humoured man who was always dashing about. Sadly, my poor French could get us no closer to any anecdotes than her fond impression of him, which was distorted by her age, both then and now – she is now elderly but must have been a very little girl at the time that they had known one another – but at least she helped dispel the idea that he had been forgotten by the locals.

My fiancée and I made our goodbyes and drove out of town into the approaching sunset, cheered and relieved by our ultimate success. The Var region was lovely, Grasse was still charming, and we had found Lou Pidou. It was strange to have seen the house with all it represented, to have walked in the rooms and hallways which the two lovers had planned and furnished, and where they had grown estranged with spite replacing passion, and the passage of time pushing them back at last into the immortality of history. Stranger still, though, to have strolled the flagstones where Wells once paced away



Lou Pidou – plus us!

the evenings, monogrammed cigarette in hand, musing on the ideas that would become *The Open Conspiracy* and *The Science of Life*. Those words have long since been housed on library shelves, but a new family, *etrangers* like Wells and Keun, have entered Lou Pidou to share its history and keep its spirit alive. Lou Pidou has aged well, and though it is no longer Wells's house, as long as he is remembered, it will remain his home.

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Footnotes

- 1 See Mackenzie, chs 21 (342-47), 22 (355-56, 367-73), 23 (385-88), and 24 (407-408); and West, chs 5 (105), 6 (*passim*), and 7 (141-42).
- 2 See Crossley 38.
- 3 The Grones did not mention the name of this owner, but I assume that they bought the property from Robert Joriot, who acquired it some time after Odette Keun's death. Only the state agent would know Lou Pidou's entire history of ownership.