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### How Green was my *Utopia*?: A reflection on William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, H G Wells's *Men Like Gods* and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*

*Men like Gods* was published in 1923 and was the second of the Wells Utopias, the first being *A Modern Utopia* (1905). However, the latter was not a fully perfect world since Wells states that: "... the Modern Utopia must not be static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages" (*Modern Utopia* 5). It is therefore to the first mentioned book that I have turned in order to attempt to answer the question in the title of this article. In addition, it is a later work and should therefore reflect Wells's mature thoughts on the subject of humankind's ecological predicament. At the outset I feel I should clarify what I mean by "green". In the context of this article I limit the term purely to the concept of a sustainable world achieved via the use of renewable resources and the elimination of pollution as far as practicable. Such a society would affect the balance of nature as little as possible without, however, being merely conservationist. Discussion is thus on these specific green issues, leaving aside others such as the social and political.

Given that Callenbach's book *Ecotopia*, published in 1975, is the archetypal green Utopia, I wish to examine how far on the way Wells had gone towards this vision and compare it to Morris's *News from Nowhere* from 1890, which is considered by some environmentalists as being ahead of its time in its depiction of a green society. So at the end, perhaps, we shall be able to ascertain how much Wells was influenced by Morris's thinking and how much he rejected, and whether *Men Like Gods* can be regarded in any way as a green Utopia.

Beginning with Morris; in the late 1890s Wells used to visit Kelmscott House, Morris's riverside home at Hammersmith "where socialists, communists, Fabians and anarchists argued the present and the future into the night in a haze of tobacco smoke" (*Time Traveller* 62). Here his own personal brand of socialism was formed and he of course read Morris's works including *News from Nowhere*. Indeed he refers to this tome in *Men Like Gods*, where he described it as a "graceful impossible book". He felt that the work reflected the outlook of an artist rather than a scientist, which he considered too biased. Nevertheless, the book does incorporate what would now be

called green concepts, which Wells himself would espouse in later life, as we shall see towards the end of the article.

So, how green was Morris? Like Wells, Morris was critical of the market system which he considered extremely wasteful and *News from Nowhere* describes a world which produces only wares that are actually needed by the populace. These are manufactured by individuals in what can be described as cottage industries where craft handiwork is the norm, although factories exist where the larger scale or energy savings are required. Morris's view was holistic, in that he was concerned with everything that happened to a commodity from the time of its extraction from nature to the end of its useful life (*Ending of the Journey*). It appears that minerals are mined with minimum pollution and there is widespread use of wind and water power, although these are not described in detail except in as far as to mention that electricity is thereby generated. In addition there are enigmatic "force vehicles" which replaced steam-powered water transport such as barges, but the nature of this force is not detailed. Presumably it is non-polluting.

The early part of the book describes a trip along the Thames and the visitor to this transformed vision of London, William Guest, comments on the clarity of the river water; it turns out that it is now so unpolluted that salmon have returned. He also remarks on the fact that unlike in the London of old, the stone bridge they pass under shows no sign of grime, apparently a result of the demolition of the "smoke vomiting chimneys" of the old soap works. This industry, together with those of glass production and textile manufacture, were responsible in the unregulated 19th century for the venting forth of highly corrosive hydrogen chloride, and Morris would have been only too familiar with this scenario. It is against this background that he describes an alternative vision of a world comprising "a healthy, unpolluted and pleasant environment of small communities, pleasant workshops, clean air and water, decent housing, gardens fields and woods" (*End of the Journey*).

Morris's idea of decentralised socialism produces a vision of a society with a sense of community which had evolved into a steady-state condition in which production is for needs which are met by goods which are of high quality and durability. In instances such as the felling of timber to make products, pollarding and coppicing are practised under a scheme of careful rotation. This emphasis on the minimisation of the destruction of the natural environment is achieved by the elimination of surplus goods which, under capitalism, use up so many resources.

There is a strong sense of a new relationship with the natural world, which is attractive to modern day Greens, and some areas of the countryside are maintained in a natural state in order to emphasise this to the population. Children often spend their holidays in woodlands, where they experience the wilderness and get acquainted with wild creatures as well as gaining much enjoyment from such pleasant surroundings during their periods of recreation. As an old man says: "The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overwhelming love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves ... more akin to our way of looking life was the spirit of the Middle Ages, to whom heaven and the life of the next world was such a reality that it became a part of the life upon the earth" (*News from Nowhere*).

Thus this was the philosophy which led, through stages according to Morris, to his Utopian world of green fields, small communities, beautiful houses and a pollution-free environment. As such it is a very green society and, given the time it was written, prophetic of the kind of ecological ideas around a hundred years later. But what now of a book written in our modern polluted age - *Ecotopia*, first published in 1975?

"Reconstruction of social and personal relations from the roots up is what Ecotopia is all about. In a blending of socialist and anarchist ideas he (Callenbach) creates the most dramatic vision of a possible future since William Morris's *News from Nowhere*". In a sense, there is not much to say about the novel, since it portrays the ultimate green vision. Recycling is the norm, people make and repair things themselves wherever possible, there are no cars, although certain motor vehicles are permitted, and pollution of the environment is virtually eliminated. An important point not addressed by Morris, although events had not reached a critical stage in 1890, is that of population. Since Ecotopia was formed from the former West Coast of America which broke away from the rest of the USA, the population steadily dropped by about 65,000 a year. There are arguments amongst the citizens of Ecotopia as to how far this should go, but there is general agreement that lower population has a beneficial effect on the environment.

As in *News from Nowhere* there is a proliferation of windmills and there are also many rooftop wind-driven generators providing energy for the home. On the larger scale, energy that can be tapped without affecting the biosphere has been adopted and includes wind, tide and solar power as well as geothermal. What waste products are

produced in Ecotopia are wherever possible biodegradable, even their plastics. Chemical fertilisers have been dispensed with, aided by sewage recycling, composting, and the use of animal manure. Trees are in evidence almost everywhere, including their appearance in streets, which are otherwise full of pedestrians, cyclists, fountains, gardens and sculptures.

Description of Ecotopia could go on, but suffice to say that this is the green Utopia par excellence and I recommend anyone to read the book for themselves. One detail in particular would have been very appealing to Wells - the sexual freedom. Examples are scattered throughout the book. But what about Wells' thoughts on the environment? How does *Men Like Gods* measure up to the two green worlds just described? The first thing to note is that Wells says very little about green issues. Secondly his viewpoint is still that of man's domination over Mother Nature. Uthred, a Utopian, states: "We have taken over the Old Lady's Estate. Every day we learn a little better how to master this little planet" (*Men Like Gods*). This reflects Wells' perhaps unconscious acceptance of the Judaeo-Christian concept via Genesis that humankind is placed on earth to lord it over the natural world. This is at odds with Morris's perception that we are here as stewards to live with the minimum destruction of the environment and to have an almost spiritual partnership with nature, which is also the outlook endemic in Ecotopia.

Wells's Utopia has also eradicated all noxious diseases and every living species is assessed according to its usefulness or the harm it causes. If it is found that more harm comes from its existence than good, then it is exterminated. However, due regard is given to those species dependent upon it, which would also disappear at the same time. For instance, there are now no more swallows since there were no more gnats or midges. Nevertheless, reserves were maintained which kept condemned species in secure isolation presumably for scientific purposes and possible reintroduction should things change in some way.

Recycling seems to take place to some extent, for we hear that unread books are returned to the pulping mills, but the energy used to work these mills is not described. Whether there are numerous windmills, as in Morris's world, is not stated. However, there is obviously much use of water power since there are two instances where this is mentioned. Firstly, as the Earthlings are transported by aeroplane to their new Utopian abode in the mountains, Mr Barnstaple notes: "There were Cyclopean turbines athwart the mountain torrents" (*Men Like Gods*), and secondly, when they are being flown to their place of quarantine, the Earthlings can

see that: "Every torrent, every cataract was a working turbine." Of course, these were the days before nuclear power, but it is interesting to note that Wells does not predict any kind of such power, as he did with nuclear bombs in *The World set Free* of 1914. It is likely though that had solar power been mooted in his day, Wells would have incorporated its use in his Utopia, just as it was to be, fifty years later, in *Ecotopia*.

It is clear also that in *Men Like Gods*, Wells was concerned with the population problem. The Earthlings' aeroplane flights revealed to them the relative paucity of people in Utopia. Mr Barnstaple muses, "There were more people, he thought, in the highland country than in the levels below, though still far fewer than he would have seen upon any comparable countryside on earth." Towns had virtually disappeared, but gatherings did take place for certain activities such as studying in "great series of communicating buildings." He, therefore, foresaw the possible disasters that over-population could cause and adjusted his Utopia accordingly. Wells's advocacy of birth-control is well known and he became vice president of the National Birth Control Council. His views, therefore, accord well with the declining population scenario of *Ecotopia*.

This sums up the evidence for Wells' green ideas in *Men Like Gods*. Even though influenced early on by Morris, Wells' scientific outlook would not allow him to encompass Morris's holistic attitude to nature and by 1923, *Men Like Gods* appears as a world much less concerned with humankind's relationship with the natural world. This is not to say that Wells was ignorant of ecology. As Professor W. M. S. Russell points out, *Food of the Gods* (1904) describes a chemical escape into the environment which spread through the food-chain and, in such detail, was the first work to highlight the problems which would concern later ecologists studying the effects of pesticides (*H.G.Wells Under Revision*).

However, it is very likely that Wells, had he lived longer, would have seen the importance of green issues and, indeed, have recognised that the ecological crisis which we have heard so much about in recent years is, in its broadest sense, the world's most important issue as we approach the 21st Century. Evidence that this was increasingly of concern to Wells appears in an article he wrote for the *Picture Post* of 4th May 1940:

We are not only burning up our coal and oil, and sweating and degrading the workers who are employed for that service, but we are rapidly stripping our planet of its forests and so turning a wholesome mitigated rainfall into an

alternation of droughts and soul-destroying torrents. We are exterminating hundreds of precious and interesting species that can never be replaced - whales, elephants, penguins, seals and the like - and we are turning millions of acres of grasslands into dusty deserts. All this is ascertainable fact. (qtd in *Index of Possibilities*)

So, would Wells have eventually written an *Ecotopia*? Even though there is not such an emphasis on the environment in *Men Like Gods* as in *News From Nowhere*, we have seen that it does contain some green concepts. These ideas were obviously coming more to the forefront of his thinking as he grew older and it is not impossible that he could have written a third Utopia had he lived longer. Even if it would have not been quite *Ecotopia*, I feel that it would have progressed a fair way towards embracing its ethos. At all events, were he alive today, I am sure he would be at the forefront of modern green thinking, but no doubt putting his own personal "Wellsian" stamp upon it.

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<sup>1</sup>From the publisher's notes to the 1978 English paperback, Pluto Press.