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## H. G. Wells: His History, the People and the Historians

In 1920 a history of the world was published by a man previously known for his science fiction, social problem novels, and utopian tracts. The history's success surprised many people including the author who became a wealthy man as it continued to be purchased (West 66). H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* was the first attempt to write a history of man from the beginning of time up to the Treaty of Versailles. It was an enormous task which only Wells had the "conceit and courage" to take on (Playsted Wood 135). Why had professional historians not written such a history? Why did Wells, a non-historian, undertake the project? (Almost certainly Wells' answer would be "why not?"). Why was it so popular with the general public and criticised by specialists including historians?

After the Great War people were left wondering why the conflagration had occurred. They asked to what extent was nationalism responsible and pondered on how war on such a large scale was to be avoided in the future. Wells, like a number of his contemporaries, believed that they were at the beginning of a hopeful new age and should prepare for a better future. He was a great enthusiast for the League of Nations and supported plans for post-war peace and unity (Playsted Wood, 134). He was a member of the League of Nations Society which had been formed in 1915. However, even before the war had ended he realised that the League of Nations was not going to live up to his expectations. In his autobiography, Wells notes that what struck him most during the Society's meetings was that everybody seemed to have read a different piece of history, or no history at all, and they therefore had different visions of the future (*Experiment* 716). This realisation was central to his philosophy of history.

The teaching of history had been responsible, Wells believed, for many problems in the past. He writes of his own experience of history at school as "so thoroughly and hopelessly bad that it left me with a vivid sense in ignorance." He admits that:

Upon this matter of teaching history, I am a fanatic, I cannot think of an education as even half done until there has been a fairly sound review of the whole of the known past, from the beginning of the geographical record up to our own time. Until that is done, the pupil has not been placed in the world. He is incapable of understanding his relationship to, and his role in, the scheme of things. (*Salvaging*, 153).

Nationalist history or what Wells called the "king and country history" had led people to war. He argued that beginning history point blank with Medieval England is a logical and sensible as it would be to begin chemistry with a study of cookery or patent medicines (*Experiment* 720). He insisted that "We must cease to deal with states, nations and empires as primary things which have to be reconciled and welded together - we must deal with them as secondary things which have appeared and disappeared almost incidentally in the course of a longer biological adventure" ("Poison called History" 525). If, as he advocated, people were exposed to the idea that they all came from a common past, then they could move towards a unified culture and perhaps a unified future.

Wells wrote articles on the discipline of history which discussed how it should be written and taught. Those which are of special interest are "History is One" (1919), "History for Everybody: a Postscript to the *Outline of History*" (1921),<sup>1</sup> and "The Poison Called History" (1921)<sup>2</sup>. He also spoke about the subject in *Joan and Peter, The Salvaging of Civilisation*, his autobiography and a number of other works.

He anticipated later schools and theories of history in his theoretical and historical writings.<sup>3</sup> The first of these was the French *Annales* School which emerged in the late 1920s. Its proponents attempted to create a history of *mentalités* and endeavoured to place people and events in the context of the big picture or what they called the *longue durée*. The *Annalistes* focused on large blocks of time and space. Wells consistently advocated that man should be placed in the context of the whole world historically and geographically.<sup>4</sup>

He certainly was a forerunner of the present trend which advocates the teaching of history in the context of climates, diseases, economics and movements of peoples. These are concepts which do not respect or embrace national boundaries and make up part of the subject matter of world history courses which are rapidly replacing Western Civilisation courses in the United States. A statement which appears in the first issue of the *Journal of World History* in 1990 sounds remarkably like what Wells was saying seventy years ago. The writer of the introduction, James H. Bentley, observes that over the past two or three decades historians "have become increasingly aware of some inherent limitations in historical writing focused on national communities. At the same time they have recognised the challenge and promise of a historical perspective that transcends national frontiers" (Bentley iv).

Wells also foresaw the concerns of later feminist and ethnic historians in that he questioned traditional periodization in history, and its usual focuses on great white

men, nations, wars and dynasties which may not have been relevant to the lives of most people. One historian said of *Outline* "the table of contents does not contain those familiar terms by which we save ourselves the trouble of taking thought - Ancient History, Medieval History, Modern History, Medieval Church, Medieval Empire, Protestant Reformation" (Becker 174). Therefore, the attempt to approach the past, not according to old landmarks and formulas with well used labels, but from an alternate perspective links Wells to modern historians who are still viewed as outside the mainstream. New ways of looking at history frequently provoke the resentment of those who are comfortable with traditional history and its familiar signposts.

As early as the summer of 1918, Wells began drawing up prospectuses for his history and approaching publishers. He discussed with his wife whether or not they could afford this project and if he could take time off from novel writing (Playsted Wood 138). Having decided that they could take the financial risk, he set about writing his book.

He points out in his autobiography that:

It was quite open to those worthy teachers [historians] to do the job over and over again and do it beyond measure better, but until they could manage to do that, people had to remain in ignorance of this exciting subject, as one whole, or else go on reading me, or Van Loon, or some such other outsider who had not been sterilised by an excess of scholastic pretension. (*Experiment* 720).

He did not think that historians would write such history because "They lived in an atmosphere of mutual restraint. They would not do anything so large for fear of incidental slips and errors" (717)<sup>6</sup>.

Unashamedly, he admits he wrote the book with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at his side and spent a year working on the project (*Experiment* 718). He engaged a team of experts to help him and utilised the unique approach whereby they would disagree or correct him in footnotes. Among these men were Ray Lankester, Gilbert Murray, Philip Guedella, Sir Harry Johnson, Ernest Baker and Sir Denison Ross (Smith 252) and there were over one hundred advisers to the 1924 edition. Thus *Outline of History* appeared to have academic depth and took an air of a dialectic.

Wells's history was a story which began at the beginning of the world and went in twists and turns up to Wells's present and beyond, as he included a chapter on the

future. He hoped that the book would not be just a history of the western world, but would cover all cultures. Although he did not achieve this, he certainly went further than previous traditional historians. In his oft-quoted introduction he made it clear that he was not just writing a history - he was laying a foundation for future peace. He argued that "there can be no peace ... but a common peace in all the world; no prosperity but a general prosperity. But *there can be no common peace and prosperity without common historical ideas*. Without such ideas to hold them together ... races and peoples are bound to drift towards conflicts and destruction" (*Outline* vi). The fact that the quotation appears in a number of reviews of the book indicates that both he and his reviewers saw it as his central thesis.

*Outline* was first published in "brightly coloured" fortnightly parts which sold at one hundred thousand copies an issue (West 71). It was subsequently published as a complete book in two volumes by George Newnes Ltd of London,<sup>7</sup> and was also published in the United States by Macmillan.<sup>8</sup> Two million copies were sold in the first two years (Draper 7). The American publishers were doubtful that the book (sold at "the rather odd price of ten dollars and ten cents") would succeed and were astounded by its success (*Experiment* 719)<sup>9</sup>. It was translated into many foreign languages and there was a copy "in almost every English-speaking home (often the only historical work)" (Barker 319).<sup>10</sup>

Why was *Outline* so successful with what its author called "Mr Everyman"? Wells believed it was because the "Ordinary man" had been stimulated by the war to a real curiosity about the human past and he wanted to be told the story of the planet and of the race plainly, and vividly, and since the "historians" would not or could not do it, he turned to my book (*Experiment* 719). The public could not understand or was not interested in what the professional historians wrote and the historians themselves did not seem to be interested in writing for the public.

There were other reasons for the book's popularity. The late author Hugh Schonfield in his 1986 address to the H G Wells Society recalled that he "avidly" bought *Outline* when it was published in fortnightly parts. He enjoyed it because there was "no flag waving or superior race contentions that might be right". Moreover, he found that the book not only got him interested in the past but also "what might still be in store". It made him ask "Was there some purpose in history which was working itself out?" (Schonfield 32). Thus, what Wells did according to one of his more recent biographers was to "create an inspirational story - in the positive sense a myth - recounting where we have come from and suggesting where we ought to be headed"

(Draper 109). This is probably what the public needed and wanted to read after the most horrific war humankind had witnessed. Whether or not it was a legitimate historical approach is another question.

Therefore, *Outline* was popular because of its simplicity, its novel-like readability and its logical linking of the past to the present and the future. One reviewer wrote "The book is not intended for scholars. It was written for, and at, that innumerable legion of us who have no claim to scholarship and who are scandalously calm about it".<sup>11</sup> It was too neatly packaged for historians.<sup>12</sup> While many of them would admit that, indeed, history is a story, they would add that it is an incomplete one. There are exceptions, qualifications and differences of opinion. There are whole periods where little or nothing is known about. Wells, by making history simple and understandable to the ordinary man, was producing something, according to the historians, which was full of inaccuracies, distortions and generalisations. It could be argued that one of the reasons why the book was successful with the public was because of its lack of success with the historians. What the public and Wells perceived as history did not necessarily correspond with the historical profession's viewpoint. G A Herrer of the University of North Carolina, in a review in *Classical Journal* in March 1923, declared that "the publishers of Wells' History have made no error in printing, facing the title page, a list of other works, with the word *novels* heading it" (Harrer 368).

Between 1920 and 1923, and beyond, newspapers, magazines, periodicals and history journals were full of reaction to this history. Books, pamphlets and correspondence were even published in reply (Belloc, Gomme, Downey). The reviewers included novelists, journalists and theologians as well as historians. Some of the well known names in publishing voiced their opinion on the book. Among these were G K Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, E M Forster and H L Menken.

Reviews of *Outline* were many and varied. Among the criticisms were a scepticism about Wells's intimate knowledge of the daily life of prehistoric man, objections to his caricaturization of figures like Julius Caesar and Napoleon (who he describes as a "cockereel on a dunghill"), a sense of disquiet at his perceived anti-Catholicism and his support of Darwinism, a concern with his journalistic and scolding style, and a questioning of his "history with an agenda".

A W Gomme who taught Greek in the University of Glasgow and who wrote a pamphlet called *Mr Wells as Historian*, claimed that Wells's portrayal of classical Greece

and Rome was inaccurate. He was dismissed by Wells who complained of his "close reading method" and described Gomme as "dry-as-dust" (Harrer 362). G A Herrer was not only dismayed by Wells's tendency to belittle Rome, but also by his methodology:

Wells is writing world history. Therefore, Egypt and China are as significant as Rome. He apparently will not see that whatever Rome was, her civilisation in many phases is the direct source of civilisation of today in Europe and America. He wants unity in history, but unity cannot be attained where it does not exist. China's past is of infinite importance to understand her present; Rome is significant for our present. (Harrer 365).

Among the Roman Catholic critics was Hilaire Belloc who wrote *A Companion to Mr Wells' Outline of History* (1926) in which he condemned *Outline* as anti-Catholic and Wells as provincial. "Provincialism means thinking that one knows all about it ... Now this vice of Provincialism runs right through Mr Wells' *Outline of History* from the beginning to end". Belloc revealed his own biases when he added that "Mr Wells' violent and blind reaction against the Catholic Church is a much more important matter. Here he is quarrelling with the very matter of history; for the foundation and career of the Catholic Church is the chief event in the history of mankind" (Belloc 6-7). Wells was spurred on to write *Mr Belloc Objects* in reply.<sup>13</sup>

Another Catholic critic, the Most Rev. Richard Downey, who became Archbishop of Liverpool in 1928, produced three articles in 1921 and a booklet, *Some Errors of H.G. Wells*, in 1933 to counter some of Wells's assertions. He spoke of the work being "badly warped" and "a masterpiece of inaccuracy."<sup>14</sup>

Roman Catholics were not the only ones who found the book objectionable. Wells was also criticised by Marxists. Chinese critics rebuked him for not giving adequate attention to China, even though he pointed that he had gone further than any previous world histories. The Irish were unhappy with him for not giving enough importance to the Irish influence on Medieval Europe and, of course, he did not hide his antagonism towards the Irish Nationalist Organisation - Sinn Fein. "Ourselves Alone", the translation of Sinn Fein, was the very opposite of Wells's vision of future society (*Yale Review* 680-81).

One group among the reviewers who had a particular stake to claim were the professional historians. Among them was Carl Becker a noted historian of the Enlightenment, a prominent member of the American Historical Association and a

pioneer in pushing forward the frontiers of historiography. He was a supporter of what was known as the New History in the early decades of this century, and endeavour which attempted to move from concentration on traditional, political and military history and embrace social, economic and intellectual history (Novick chs 6 and 7). In a review entitled "Mr Wells and the New History", which was first published in the *American Historical Review* in July 1921<sup>15</sup> and later appeared as a chapter in his 1935 book *Everyman and His Own History*, Carl Becker accuses Wells of being biased, especially later in the book showing his intense dislike for diplomats, statesmen and kings (Becker 177). "Why is it that the Neanderthals irritate him less than the Romans; the 'Old Man' of the tribe less than the Pope of the Church; the Heidelberg Sub-Man than Napoleon? ... Of course, it is more difficult to maintain one's equanimity in respect to a man who has left thirty-six volumes of correspondence than it is in respect to a man who has left nothing but his jawbone" (Becker 180). He admits that "Wells has facts enough and is sufficiently accurate for the main purpose". However, he asks "What is that purpose?" (Becker 177):

It comes to this, that Wells is too much aware of being himself a part of the cosmic process, is too intent upon shaping and improving that process, is too much wrapped in the blanket of intellectual curiosity, on the side lines, with no other purpose than to observe the intricacies of the play as it goes by. Interested primarily in the "may be's" rather than in the "has been's",<sup>16</sup> the didactic instinct more and more overcomes the scientific instincts; so much so that in the end he seems not so much sitting at the feet of history in order to learn what she has to say, as to be holding the rod over her, and somewhat threateningly pronouncing her answers inadequate (Becker 185).

Becker replies to other historians who argued that *Outline* is not history by suggesting that instead of calling it history if could be called "the adventure of a generous soul among catastrophes!" (Becker 190).

Historians continued to be annoyed as Wells's book was reissued. In 1937, in an address given before the Division of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago on "The Subjective and Objective of History", Avery O Craven condemned *Outline* as a "horrible example" to be held up to young historians. He argued that since Wells was not objective he had committed a "historical crime". "He used history to give perspective to his argument for a better world". Craven argued that it took more than a year or two to write a scholarly book and stated that Wells's facts were weak and his history poorly written (Craven 6-17)<sup>17</sup>.

A J P Taylor, probably the greatest and certainly the most prolific twentieth century historian of modern Europe, wrote an article about Wells, twenty years after his death, for the *Listener* in 1966. It was called "The Man Who Tried to Work Miracles". His article lacks the hostility of other historians towards *Outline* although he too has reservations. On the positive side, he declares that *Outline* "is not only still read, it is the best general survey of man's history that there is". However, Taylor goes on to find fault with Wells's thesis: "*The Outline of History* was written to demonstrate that all recorded history had been moving fumblingly towards a planned world-state. It totally fails to demonstrate anything of the kind. It shows men have always been in conflict and that the rich have always exploited the poor ... Most people, including Wells, sentimentalise their views of the past. They like to think the Better Side Wins. It doesn't. The Stronger Side Wins" (Taylor 133). Taylor went on to question Wells using history to predict the future:

... he wrote *The Outline* in order to show that history was going this way, in fact he demanded that men should abandon all their historical habits and behave in exactly the opposite fashion to that in which they had behaved throughout all recorded time. And of course they may. That is why it is so pointless to ask a historian to tell the future. He can only say what will happen if men go on behaving as they have done in the past ... If you want the future to be different, the best thing to do is to forget history, not to try to extract morals from it (Taylor 134).

Supporters of Wells and *Outline* might well argue that criticism of the book arose out of envy at Wells's accomplishment. Wood Grey of George Washington University expressed the territorial as well as the professional concerns of historians when he wrote that until professional history is reclaimed from amateurs "Clio [the muse of history] is going to be just a gal about town on whom anybody with two bits worth of inclination in his pocket can lay claim" (Novick 193). One of Wells's biographers reached the same conclusion: "It [*Outline*] had not come out of the established tradition under the proper academic auspices" (Playsted Wood 139). This concern about Wells, a non-historian, writing a history of mankind may have been behind much of the hostility he received from the profession. While his unorthodox approach, ambitious subject matter, and admitted agenda drew criticisms with some justification, it was more than likely compounded because he had not jumped through the hoops of becoming a professional historian.<sup>18</sup>

While Wells was delighted with the *Outline*'s popular and commercial success, he was bitter about its reception in the scholarly and education world. He had hoped it

would be used as a school and college text book (Playsted Wood 139).<sup>19</sup> Instead, while it was avidly read by the public, it did not receive academic acclaim. Wells devoted time to defending his work. His article "History for Everybody: a Postscript to the *Outline of History*" which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1921 and across the Atlantic in the *Yale Review*, a month later, contains some of his reactions to critics. While he agrees there were mistakes, he declares that he has "stepped in and done something urgently necessary that would not have been done at all". He admits that "*The Outline of History* may presently be superseded in that work of replacement by some better Outline" and added "but the writer has taken no risks in that matter; if no other and better Outline appears, his *Outline* will go on being revised and repolished and republished". It critics may rest assured that "nothing but a better Outline will put an end to its career" (*Fortnightly Review* 890-1).

The only work which threatened to end *Outline's* success in the next few decades was Wells's own *A Short History of the World* (1922), an abridged and more compact version of *Outline*. Wells remained the predominant popular historian and his history continued to be the most widely read for some time to come. While there were problems with Wells's outlook on history and its purpose, its achievement was that it brought people to history. That history at times may have been skewed, biased and agenda-ridden, but was this any different from the final product of those historians who represent Marxism, Feminism, Liberalism, Conservatism and other ideologies? Wells was not alone in having an outlook. However, he was alone in bringing history to the masses. If the masses were not discerning enough to be critical, this was not Wells's problem. However, judging from the number of reviews, there was no danger that his history would be accepted uncritically. The significance of *Outline* was that it was read, it created controversy, and it made people confront their past in a troubled present and allowed some of them to think about the future with some optimism.

The last work should go to a historian: "It is well known that 'fools rush in'; it is well known that Mr Wells rushes in; but it is well known that Mr Wells is no fool. We cordially welcome his performance. It may well be that more people will read his book than ever read Voltaire or Macaulay or von Ranke" (Becker 173).

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>This was first printed in the *Fortnightly Review*, June 1921, It was also published as a pamphlet under the title "The New History: with a reply to some recent criticisms of *The Outline of History*: London: Cassel and Co. 1921. In July 1921, it was published in the *Yale Review*.

<sup>2</sup> This was originally a lecture delivered at the League of Nations International Teachers' Conference, April 24, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> A review of *A Short History of the World* (1922), an abridged version of *Outline*, spoke of the potential impact of Wells's methodology on the discipline of history. "This kind of work will kill Carlyle and the physical force historiographers, and out of it we shall get a new meaning of history, a new attitude and a totally new method of estimating the past, present and the future", *English Review*, December 1922, 578. See Michael Draper, "Opinion: When the Historian Awakes", the *Wellsian*, Summer 1989, 46-48.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the *Annales* see Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1829-1989*, Cambridge: Polity, 1990. According to the historian Geoffrey Barraclough, the evolutionary conception of society found its supreme expression in Wells's *Outline of History* (Anthony west, 11).

<sup>5</sup> See Wells's article "The Poison Called History", 525. Historian of the Renaissance and Women, the late Joan Kelly has argued that the periodization and historical sign-posts traditionally used in history were not part of the power structure. Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. 2-4.1

<sup>6</sup> According to the Playsted Wood (137-8), he invited historians to help him, but they refused as they did not want to be associated with the project.

<sup>7</sup> A one-volume of *Outline* was published by Cassell.

<sup>8</sup> "Macmillan has put out the American edition in two handsome volumes of 1300 pages in all at twice the price of the English edition. Unfortunately the coloured plates and halftone illustrations of the English form have been left behind" (Slosson, review in the *Independent*, December 11, 1930, 361-62).

<sup>9</sup> "H G Wells *Outline of History*, issued at an exorbitant price in 1920, sold one and a half million copies: one copy per every twenty homes in the country, within twelve years." (John Higham with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History*, Prentice Hall, 1965 74).

<sup>10</sup> See David C Smith, H G Wells *Desperately Mortal* 259-260 for more details on different edition and publications of *Outline*.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Harrer 361.

<sup>12</sup> Playsted Wood makes a similar argument (140).

<sup>13</sup> See Bachelor 157 for more on this

<sup>14</sup> Downey see 1 and 66. See also appendix 2 on correspondence by Wells and Downey. Downey's comments first appeared in 1921 in three instalments in *The Month*. The fact they were republished in a booklet form in 1933 suggests that Downey continued to be bothered by the appearance of *Outline*. He also published a reply to Wells's article "History for Everybody" in the *Fortnightly Review* in July 1921 (a month after Wells's article).

<sup>15</sup> *American Historical Review* xxv1, July 1932, 641-58. See also Charlotte Watkins Smith, Carl Becker: *One History and the Climate of Opinion*, (68) where she discusses Becker's reaction to *Outline*.

<sup>16</sup> Beake's punctuation.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Novick also refers to Craven's comments on Wells in *That Noble Dream, the Objectivity Question and The American Historical Profession* 271.

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting that the very popular and well researched history books of Barbara Tuchman have also received criticism from historians.

<sup>19</sup> See David C Smith for some instances where it was used as a text book, 258.