

Patrick Parrinder is Professor of English at Reading University and a Vice President of the H.G. Wells Society. His most recent publication on Wells is *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* (1995).

John Partington is now a Ph.D student at the University of Reading, working on H.G. Wells and politics.

Fernando Porta recently completed a doctorate on Wells's science fiction.

David Smith, a former professor of history at Maine University, is a biographer of H.G. Wells and has been editing a multi-volume edition of H.G. Wells's correspondence which will be published shortly.

Michael Sherborne is Head of English at Luton Sixth Form College. His edition of *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* by H.G. Wells was published in the USA by Oxford University Press in 1996.

**A Chat with the Author of *The Time Machine*, Mr H.G. Wells
edited with comment by David C. Smith**

H.G. Wells must have been a boon for newspaper publishers, reporters and writers searching for a vivid and interesting story. He enjoyed giving interviews and we know of nearly one hundred serious interviews with Wells which appeared in the world press. A few have been reprinted, notably one by John Hammond, "The Romance of the Scientist: An Interview with Mr H.G. Wells," which appeared in *H.G. Wells: Interviews and Recollections*. This important interview was first published in *The Young Man*, August 1897, and was recycled to some extent in *Today* as well. I have probably missed some published interviews with Wells, but the table below does indicate the years of those I have actually seen. They vary widely in content, or course, but many of them provide much new and useful information about Wells and his work.

Table One – Published Press Interviews with H.G. Wells – 1892-1946

1892	1910	1921	1928	1936 (2)	1945
1895	1913	1922 (3)	1929 (2)	1937 (2)	1946 (2)
1897	1914 (3)	1923 (5)	1930 (2)	1938 (6)	
1899 (2)	1915	1924	1931 (8)	1939 (9)	
1902	1916	1925	1932 (3)	1940 (9)	
1906 (2)	1919	1926	1934 (2)	1941	
1909	1920 (7)	1927 (2)	1935 (5)	1944	

These interviews with Wells all provide some new ideas about his work. He was at ease with journalists, frequently referring to his own journalistic background. He was open and responsive to their queries, and provided easily reprintable quotations for them. He did not try to dissemble when faced with tough questions. These interviews range from shipboard conversations to formal set piece press conferences. Half a dozen of them are major statements of purpose and ideology.

The interview which is reprinted here appeared in the 1 December 1895 issue of the *Weekly Sun Literary Supplement*. It probably took place in the early autumn of 1895. The interview is located in what may be the first formal literary supplement ever issued. It is a rare piece. I have seen only two copies of this issue. It is a very scarce item even in the files of the British Library Newspaper Collection at Colindale. In fact, the run of the weekly is very incomplete. The paper also features a story by Morley Roberts, and one by H.G. Wells as well as the usual paraphernalia of literary supplements – reviews, advertisements, book gossip. The Wells short story which

appeared in this first issue was "The Bulla", which underwent a name-change to "The Reconciliation" before it appeared in *Thirty Strange Stories* in 1897.¹ The first book appearance of this story in England was in *The Complete Short Stories*, published in 1927.

The interview is of interest because it occurs just after publication of *The Time Machine* and *The Wonderful Visit*. Wells has just finished and was about to publish *Moreau*. He is now reasonably sure of success. He is prepared to talk about his purpose in writing, although dissembling a bit about the role his political philosophy may play in his fiction. The interviewer may possibly be Grant Allen, as one or two internal clues suggest. Above all, though, it is H.G. Wells, caught relaxing in Woking, contemplative, serious, and good newspaper copy. The interview follows:

There is a young school of English fiction springing up at the present moment whose work is refreshing as a cool breeze on an oppressive day. It is not burdened with a problem, and it is too healthy to be impure. Beyond all, its youth and natural good spirits are incompatible with morbid melancholy, and it faces the light in a cheery manner which that exhilarates and enthral. It was this buoyancy that made Mr Anthony Hope² so attractive to an age that has grown somewhat tired of disease and studies in obstetrics. This, too, it is that accounts for the sudden popularity of a still younger man, Mr. H.G. Wells, the author of *The Wonderful Visit*.³

There is no resemblance between the art or the aim of these two writers. Mr Wells is more serious than Mr Hope; but then he is not so ingenuously gay. Deep down in his nature there lurks the sense of a purpose, and amidst all his graceful fantasies it peers forth, not with a scowl, but certainly with a demure air of sincerity. We are not troubled with this phantom: it lingers in the far shadows of the author's art, and only the quick eye can discern it. But, nevertheless, it distinguishes Mr Wells from many of his fellows. He has a mission – a mission that seems almost to assert

¹ The bulla is the tympanic bone of the ear of most mammals, often demonstrating an inflated appearance. Its Latin root means bubble. Wells is indulging his elementary anatomy knowledge.

² Anthony Hope Hawkins (1863-1933) who wrote under the name of Anthony Hope was an Oxford graduate who practised law, until he had a great success with a novel, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, which appeared in 1894. Hope continued to write his romantic fiction of "Ruritania" – a mythical central European country.

³ This novel had just appeared, dedicated to the memory of Walter Low, Wells's joint editor on *The Educational Times* and a very close friend. Low had recently died.

itself by diligent self-effacement; it is such a mission as Parson Adams had, that never interfered with the joy of life or appeared at table.⁴

Mr Wells lives away in the country, at Woking. The district is certainly flat, perhaps also low; but it is peaceful, pleasant and cheerful. Here, in a pretty house, the author dwells, with the sympathetic companionship of his wife, and devotes his days to literary work.

It was not in the house, however, that we talked. We strolled forth along the quiet canal that bends its way between wooded banks, and peacefully smoked our pipes on the trunk of a fallen tree, surrounded by the rosy-tinted fungi that abound in this low-lying region. And there with much diffidence, and after many exhortations, Mr Wells told me the story of his life.

He was a science student and used to be seen much in South Kensington. He became a "coach," and spent his days in preparing candidates for examination. But there came a day when his health – never very robust – broke down, and he found it necessary to take to literary work.

"At first," said Mr Wells, "I wrote general articles on chance subjects – fanciful, descriptive, humorous, according to the mood, and I am thankful I found so few difficulties in my way. *The Pall Mall Gazette*⁵ published the first contribution I sent it, and has refused nothing else. I wrote to other journals and magazines, and meanwhile I was engaged on my first book – *The Time Machine*. It was well-received, and I fancy that about 10,000 copies have been sold."

"There is a tide of Socialism running through it," I interposed. "You are not of course a propagandist?"

My host smiled as he repudiated the suggestion.

"I had ideas that might be called Socialistic; but they represent a socialism that is scientific rather than political. In *The Time Machine* I got the idea of time as the fourth dimension of space. That, of course, suggested that a man might travel in time,

⁴ Parson Adams is a leading character in Henry Fielding's novel, *Joseph Andrews* (1742). This novel is a parody of Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). Fielding also wrote *Tom Jones* (1749). Parson Adams is the prototype of the English curate character, noble, hard-working, and naïve.

⁵ None of these early pieces are signed. His first piece might be "Influenza by a Victim," *Pall Mall Gazette* 6 June 1893, p.3, where he describes the problems of this illness: the inability to read, the thoughts of suicide and the delicious pleasure of convalescence. A second piece, "The Pathology of Cramming by a Patient Sufferer," 22 June 1893, p.11, is equally or perhaps even more likely to be his first article in this magazine. The author says that the crammer may be more important than the teacher and goes on to say, "He might justly compare the ordinary master to a stoker, who has nothing to do except shovel in fuel which works the engine of the brain, while having nothing to do with the machinery itself."

and obviously into the future. I had to describe the world as it might be after several thousand years, and I found my several theories creeping in. I did not attempt to enumerate them. It was only when the book was finished that I found out that they stood out more clearly and connectedly than I had intended."

It should be mentioned that this book is quite fanciful, and in no way a polemic. Mr Wells has drawn a picture, delicate, hazy, and attractive, but so remote that conviction becomes ill-defined and vague, and does not trouble the reader. The author's opinions are abstract and unassertive.

"It is singular enough," went on Mr Wells, "how fiction is widening its territory. It has become a mouthpiece for science, philosophy and art. That is the natural tendency of things. You cannot blame science for welcoming so popular an expression, and then speculation itself is so romantic. The dream of the philosopher has all the richness and variety of imagination necessary to a fascinating novel. The only difference is that the scientist builds his airy palace on solid ground. Thus his speculation becomes the recreation of other men."

"It has its vogue today," I said.

"Yes. Sherlock Holmes, for instance, is a creation based on strict scientific principles. His methods of investigation follow the rules of modern science. Grant the minute evidence of a case, you can build up your general theory. Darwin himself was a glorified Sherlock Holmes!"

"What is the main benefit," I asked, "to be derived from this new departure in fiction?"

"It is this. The world may have been often enough described. The intricacies of human conduct may even approach exhaustion. But the modern fanciful method takes the novelist to a new point of view. Stand aside but a little space from the ordinary line of observation, and the relative position of all things changes. There is a new proportion established. You have the world under a totally different aspect. There is profit as well as novelty in the change of view. That is, in some small way, what I aim at in my books."

"In your first book your point of view is many thousands of years removed from us."

"Yes. I do not wish to teach. I try to draw a picture of what may be. There is no sermon in it, far less a moral. In *The Wonderful Visit*, I have another aim. I don't

care to use Bulwer-Lytton phraseology,⁶ or I might describe it as a study of man in his relationship to the beautiful. The angel from the world of art visits an ordinary English village. He sees it from his ideal point of view. Here again I do not wish to convert. I have aimed at a study rather than an indictment. Do not imagine," and here he laughed, "that I am ambitious. I am no prophet!"

"Alas!" I murmured sympathetically, and glanced around at the plain which stretched out on all sides, "There is no hill-top; not so much as a hillock in view!"

Mr Wells maintained a discreet silence on this head.

"Mr Grant Allen –," he began after a pause.

"Who was speaking of Mr Grant Allen?" I asked.

"No-one. But let us do so.. I am on friendly terms with him and sent him my *Wonderful Visit*. He wrote, in reply, remarking on the strange affinity its central idea had to that which was completed in his last novel – not then published."⁷

"There is not the remotest resemblance in your treatment of the idea," I remarked, "and your worst enemy could not say that you share his philosophy."

"No, of course that is so. In both cases, however, comes a strange visitor to this earth. But Mr Grant Allen deals with matrimony and I with the beautiful."

"Two widely different things," I observed reflectively.

Mr Wells looked reproachfully at me. I hastened to change the subject.

⁶ Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) was an important writer, best known for his *Ben Hur* (1834). In later life he served in Parliament for several terms before being made baronet. *The Wonderful Visit* is supposed to be based on a remark of Walter Pater (1839-1894) to the effect that if an angel were to descend in England, it would find itself in great danger from hunters hoped to bag a new species. Pater adopted a strongly aesthetic style of writing, most notably in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).

⁷ This is an interesting exchange with much behind it. One wonders just slightly if the interviewer was Grant Allen. Allen (1848-1899) was a remarkably prolific author of fiction and "popular" books on religion and philosophy. He and Wells became close friends after Wells reviewed Allen's interesting novel, *The Woman who Did* (*Saturday Review* 9 March 1895). Allen replied to the review, all in the anonymous mode, in the issue of 16 March 1895. In Wells's letter to Allen of this summer – undated – sending him *The Wonderful Visit*, he confessed to the review, but Allen told him he had known it all along, and was not offended. Wells's review said that the novel failed because the heroine, who was delivered of an illegitimate child, was a cardboard creature and the idea of her rebellion was not realised. Wells reprinted the review, along with several pages of praise for Allen's work in *Experiment in Autobiography* (one volume edition) New York, Macmillan, 1934) pp. 462-67. Wells, Allen and Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947) who had written *Quest of the Golden Girl* (1896) which Wells also reviewed, had a long lunch and a serious discussion of the purpose of literature in late August 1895 in Hindhead, as a consequence of these letters and reviews. This encounter and the books involved have a place in the development of modern feminist writing. Allen and Wells continued to correspond after the Wells family moved to Heatherlea in late 1896. The families bicycled together and were good friends. Wells reviewed four other of Allen's books, including *British Barbarians*, a sequel to *The Woman who Did*, and hoped to review a third in the series, but Allen died before it could be published. These letters are at Yale and Illinois, and Wells's letters appear in volume one of my *Collected Letters of H.G. Wells* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997). It is marginally possible that this interview was conducted at Hindhead, or at the time of that visit.

"And this is the village into which your angel fell?"

"Don't be severe on Woking," he said with a smile. "It is a pleasant and wholly respectable place."⁸

"And how did you come to choose it as a place of residence?" I asked.

"I am fond of boating," he explained, "and found it out as I was rowing along the canal. It seemed so quiet and soothing, and indeed I have found it so."

"But surely lonely?"

"Wells, I do miss my friends, certainly. The water was let out of the canal a few days after I settled, and then I found there was a railway in front of my house; and, really, do you know, the South-Western is a remarkable active company."

"You find the country a source of inspiration?"

"The quietness is perhaps suited to romance. I was rather solitary in London, and here one can do a great deal of work. But I shall not remain long. I fancy that the people of Woking regard me with suspicion. I don't go to town by a ten o'clock train, and I don't return to dinner at night. Not to do these things is to loaf. A season ticket is the outward mark of respectability and business habits!"

"You work here," I observed. "May I know something of your future plans?"

"I have finished another book which will appear in January. It also has a scientific basis, and perhaps you will accuse me of having serious motives. It would not be quite accurate to say so. I am simply a story-teller who happens to be a student of science. If a man writes the best that is in him, he cannot help some of his serious speculations appearing. But they are not conjured forth. They issue more by accident. The work I shall next issue may be regarded as in some degree sociological, and will be published by Heinemann. It is a study in vivisection. I call it "The Island of Dr. Moreau." Perhaps it is a little gruesome. But it is founded on a scientific principle, and is in some way a romance of surgery. In confidence..."

And here he told me the story, which I heard with some shuddering and much interest. Man as developed from a brute – an artificial evolution; that was the main point. But the details may not be so much as whispered.

⁸ Wells may not have thought of Woking in this novel, but he was certainly severe enough on the town a bit later, for the first portion of *The War of the Worlds* is set in Woking, and much of the town is destroyed by the invaders. Wells took some pleasure in destroying these areas, in fact, as he remarked to Elizabeth Healey in an undated letter of late spring, 1896: "...I completely wreck Woking – killing my neighbours in painful and eccentric ways – then proceed via Kingston and Richmond to London...". The novel had just begun to appear in serial form in *Pearson's Magazine* at the time of this letter to Healey, one of his close friends from his student days.

"I shall not produce another volume next year," explained Mr Wells. "I am accused of writing too fast. I don't know if it is really so, but I am going to take a rest now."⁹

A rest! I presume it is, and yet on inquiry I found that the "rest" was not incompatible with the writing of two stories to run as serials in magazines.¹⁰ However, the reviewer will have his last chance for twelve months in January.

There were many other things we talked of, and in particular of the development of a new literary personality by the modern novel-reader, which forms its views under the stimulus of hysterics and the glow of emotional climax; and men and things came under review, about all of which my host spoke with vigour and modesty. Then we returned home, and lay content under the seductions of hot muffins and tea.

I noticed a tottering pile of books crudely new, and with all the blatant air of the modern binding of fiction. Mr Wells reviews, it seems. But he groans under the task; 70 books in one month becomes monotonous. And so he intends to renounce the work.

"And write stories only," he explained, as he shook my hand in farewell, "if only the public will let me."

I really think it will.

Works Cited

- Hammond, John, ed. *H.G. Wells: Interviews and Recollections*. Totowa NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980.
- Wells, H.G. "The Romance of the Scientist: An Interview with Mr H.G. Wells." *The Young Man*. August 1897: pp. 254-57
- . *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Benn, 1927.
- . *Thirty Strange Stories*. New York: Arnold, 1897.

⁹ Wells may have contemplated a rest, but he wrote and published *The Wheels of Chance* (London: J.M. Dent, 1896) and collected and edited the pieces which made up *The Stolen Bacillus* (London: Methuen, 1896) in the next ten months. He had just finished *The Wheels of Chance* at the time of the interview and was negotiating with Methuen and Dent, who finally took the book at the very beginning of 1896.

¹⁰ *The Wheels of Chance* was serialised in *To-day*, but nothing else of his was serialised until *The War of the Worlds*, which began appearing in January 1897. There was some correspondence about serialising both *Moreau* and *The Invisible Man* but none has been located to date. Wells, of course, was writing steadily, both articles and reviews, for *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Saturday Review* as well as placing short stories elsewhere at this time. However, he was clearly working too hard, and his health failed under the strain, creating the necessity for moving to the channel coast, under physician's orders.