MEETING H.G. WELLS

...a miscellany of first encounters

compiled by Dana Cook

1 Vincent Brome — ***"Palsied and Decayed"***

Wandering through Regent's Park on one of those rare occasions that I broke loose from the shelter of my Bloomsbury stone, I noticed a plump figure just ahead of me bouncing along with a child hanging on either hand. As I overtook the trio something about the man's face seemed familiar.... I steeled myself to accost the great man without introduction of any kind. I knew too well his reputation. He might receive me warmly or he might burst into a wrathful torrent of abuse. And then at last I said: "Excuse me – you are H.G. Wells aren't you?" He replied at once: "I couldn't be anyone else could I? Who else looks quite so palsied and decayed?"

(London, early 1940s)

****

2 Van Wyck Brooks — ***Half-cockney squeak***

(...) ... I met H.G. Wells himself, introduced by [Walter] Lippmann, with whom I had been lunching elsewhere in the [National Liberal] Club. I was almost too excited to speak in the presence of this red-faced man with his shrill asthmatic voice, a half-cockney squeak, pouring forth words like a freshet in spring and looking as if he was on the point of a fatal stroke or apoplexy even as he stood there. I said I was writing a book about him, which evoked from him a benevolent glance, but not till thirty years later did I hear that he had read it. When I then met him in New York he recognised my name. "Yes," he said, "you wrote a book about me when you were young and unwise," and I was ready by that time to accept the verdict.

(London, 1913)

****

3 Charlie Chaplin — ***Affected Tolerance***

I was to meet Wells in the afternoon at the offices of Oswald Stoll Theatres, where we were to see a film based on one of Wells's stories. As we drew near I noticed a dense

crowd. Very soon I was pushed and propelled and shot into an elevator and swept up into a small office where there were more people.

I was bewildered that our first meeting should be under such auspices. Wells was seated calmly by a desk, his violet-blue eyes kindly and twinkling, looking a little embarrassed. Before we could shake hands, a barrage of flashlights and photographers appeared from everywhere. Wells leaned over and whispered: "You and I are the goats".

(...) Wells's attitude to movies was an affected tolerance. "There is no such thing as a bad film," he said, "the fact that they move is wonderful!"

(London 1920s)

****

4 G.K. Chesterton — ***Permanent reactionary***

In those days down at Rye... I saw something of Mr H.G. Wells and learnt to appreciate that in him which, I think made him rebel against the atmosphere of Henry James... (...) I can sympathize in some ways with H.G.'s mutiny against the oak-panelling and the ghosts... He was one of the best men in the world with whom to start a standing joke; though perhaps he did not like it to stand too long after it was started.

...I have always thought that he reacted too swiftly to everything; possibly as a part of the swiftness of his natural genius. I have never ceased to admire and sympathise; but I think he has always been too much in a state of reaction. To use the name which would probably annoy him most, I think he is a permanent reactionary. Whenever I met him, he seemed to be coming from somewhere, rather than going anywhere.

(Rye, 1890s)

****

5 Clarence Darrow — ***Marvellous Mind***

...I met H.G. Wells, who works and plays through the winter months in the beauty and sunshine that has for so many seasons lured the countless generations. It takes but a very short acquaintance for discovering how richly stored is his marvellous mind. The enormous work that he has accomplished arouses one's amazement if not envy. And in spite of it all, he is much more modest and unassuming than most men who have spent their lives dawdling and dreaming and getting ready to begin to

commence to do something worthwhile, perhaps. He is a splendid host, a good fellow, an unusually comfortable and comforting man to be with.

(Grasse, France, late 1920s)

****

6 William Gerhardie ***Impersonal cordiality***

(…) I was dining with Lord Beaverbrook at Stornoway House… the butler came in once more and said: "Mr and Mrs H.--- G.---Wells".

Had the butler let drop a small bomb which, in the ensuing explosion, produced clouds of fire and smoke out of which pyrotechnic display eventually emerged Mr Charles Dickens, my incredulity could not have been greater.

Nonetheless, Mr Wells appeared on the threshold, with Mrs Wells. For many years I had silently communed with him through a long series of books, and now the man, rotund and on the small side, with humorously sad eyes under brows that were almost naïve, came towards us. Lord Beaverbrook introduced me to Wells as he might have introduced me to Julius Caesar, Count Leo Tolstoy, or Martin Luther. Mr Wells inclined his head and, shaking hands with cordiality essentially impersonal, passed on to the person beside me, thus testifying to the nullity of his impression.

(London, early 1930s)

****

7 Julian Huxley ***Supercharged Fury***

In 1926 I met H.G. Wells. He had just finished the publication, in weekly instalments, of *The Outline of History*. Though infuriating to many professional historians, it was deservedly a great public success. The first attempt to present history on a world-wide scale, it was also the first undertaking of the sort to be accomplished by a group of professionals working under the direction of an amateur. I had been greatly impressed by it, and when H.G.W. invited me to participate with him and his son G.P. Wells (then a young zoologist at University College, London) in a similar encyclopaedic work on biology, to be called *The Science of Life*, I was deeply interested (…).

Supercharged and as if indestructible, H.G. worked, talked and played with a sort of fury. He had guests to meet us, with whom we played tennis and charades, and the famous Barn Game. This was a special ball-game played in the Long Barn when the weather was wet. The rules seemed to be made up by H.G. as we went along, but there was tremendous enthusiasm and plenty of exercise, a good game that left no post-mortems. Meals were gay with witty quips – H.G. never repeated a comic story – and his retorts were sharp, quick and very funny….

H.G.'s curious, atonic, thin voice remains psychologically inexplicable. No eunuch was he for sure. Equally uncharacteristic was his small, neat and undemonstrative handwriting. Small and witty drawings often accompanied his notes, like a shorthand comic strip. His figure was not impressive, more in the tubby line, with small hands and feet. Though he had a remarkable brain, his head was several sizes smaller than most of his friends.

(London, 1926)

****

8 Corliss Lamont ***Fascinating***

While in England I managed to make good use of my letters of introduction my parents had given me (…)…I spent a weekend with H.G. Wells and his wife…. On first contact, H.G. Wells seemed an unimpressive little man, but once he got talking he became a fascinating figure, discoursing extensively in his squeaky voice on politics, history and international relations.

(London, 1925)

****

9 Harold Nicolson ***Beaverbrook's brain***

H.G. Wells talks to us after lunch about Beaverbrook. He says that he is really alarmed lest B. should have hardening of the brain. He contends that he is showing the first symptoms, namely a dislike of contradiction and an avoidance of all people who are likely to contest anything that he says.

(London, 1931)

****

10 Derek Patmore ***Things to Come***

…I had started writing the series on famous writers and I asked H.G. Wells whether I could write one about him (…).

His house was a low stone one in the Provençal style, was comfortably furnished and had a fine view of the rolling hills around, but its interior revealed that H.G. never had any feeling for art. Indeed, I was amused to notice that he had all the typical British middle-class prejudices against new movements in painting.

He was rather thoughtful during lunch and said little. When the meal was over, he suggested a walk in the garden. As we strolled up and down the paths, he said suddenly, "You asked me during lunch what I was writing. It is a secret, but I might as well tell you. I am doing a 'History of the Days to Come' [later published as *The Shape of Things to Come*] – an outline of the world during the next hundred and fifty years. The present generation must reconcile itself to the fact that it is living through a period of reconstruction. These hopes of immediate recovery have no real foundation…".

"But these things seem to be getting better," I murmured.

"These little booms are only temporary. I think it will take three generations before the world recovers properly, " he added.

He then spoke of many things that afternoon – his views on world peace, his opinions of Soviet Russia – and he made some bitter criticisms of the Labour Party. Then his mood changed and became more philosophical and he talked about himself. He began discussing the problems of love. He was always tolerant about sexual matters. (Grasse, France, 1933)

****

11 J.B. Priestley ***Public laundry***

With Wells I think I enjoyed as much friendship as great fame and seniority, nearly thirty years, could possibly allow. Though irritable, with a lightning detonator and a full charge of explosive, he was one of the friendliest of men. He had never bothered about a persona. He was with you, not performing at you. In any company he thought aloud; and many of his books are simply this excited thinking aloud. If he couldn't stand up to Shaw in debate, that was because his emotions were involved and Shaw's weren't. Of all the English writers I have known, he was the most honest, the

frankest, the one least afraid of telling the truth. If he often offended public opinion, this is chiefly because English public opinion feeds itself with cant and humbug. He had no more dirty linen than most other authors, but, with a kind of innocence, he did his laundry work in the open. His genius was entirely literary not scientific, but his early training, his discovery of a wide rich world through science, gave him permanently the air of a man making some hasty last-minute experiments in a lab. He was an artist gasping for breath in a scientific climate.

(…) His talk, all in that squeaky voice which was almost intolerable coming from a platform, was wonderfully far-ranging, rich in meat and fun, glittering with a malice that had no real harm in it. He escaped both the pompous complacency of the successful author and the dull caution of the scientist, making the best of both his worlds. He was, what is surely rare, a great figure who could exist in a sort of family atmosphere of cheerful indulgence, give-and-take, affection.

(London, 1920s)

****

12 Bertrand Russell ***Fellow coefficient***

… in 1902 I became a member of a small dining club called the Coefficients, got up by Sidney Webb for the purpose of considering political questions from a more or less Imperialist point of view. It was in this club that I first became acquainted with H.G. Wells, of whom I had never heard until then. His point of view was more sympathetic to me than that of any other member. Most of the members, in fact, shocked me profoundly. I remember Amery's eyes gleaming with blood-lust at the thought of a war with America, in which, as he said with exultation, we should have to arm the whole adult population.

(London, 1902)

****

13 George Seldes ***Un-Wellsian sentimentality?***

… I was writing an exposé of the international armaments makers, which I proposed to call *Merchants of Death* – this title was vetoed by Harpers – and needed permission to quote Mr Wells. I wrote him. He invited me to visit him. Friends, an artist and his novelist wife, drove me over.

We were introduced to the beautiful Levantine, Odette Keun, with whom Wells was then living. We thought it conventional, un-Wellsian sentimentality when we read, cut into the stone mantel of his fireplace, the words "TWO LOVERS BUILT THIS HOUSE". Then, later in the day, Odette took my friend, the novelist Virginia Davis, to see the upstairs rooms, and there was another fireplace, and again in the stone there were the words "TWO LOVERS BUILT THIS HOUSE". We did not get to see the third-floor rooms but we suspected a third fireplace.

(Grasse, France, 1931)

****

14 William L. Shirer ***World Government***

(…) Wells had brought Baroness Budberg, a charming Russian, who was also the lover of Maxim Gorky, to Vienna when I was stationed there; and John Gunther and I saw a lot of them during that visit. Wells was still hopeful that a world government would bring peace and happiness to the world….

(Vienna, 1938)

****

15 Upton Sinclair ***Hopeful socialists***

For myself I had good company that summer; a man whom I had met two years before, at the time *The Jungle* was published. An Englishman twelve years older than I, he had come to New York and sent me a letter of introduction from Lady Warwick, our socialist countess. H.G. Wells was the traveller's name, and I had been obliged to tell him that I had never heard of him. He sent me his *Modern Utopia*, inscribing it charmingly "To the most hopeful of Socialists, from the next most hopeful". I found it a peerless book, and wrote him a letter that he accepted as "a coronation". I had him with me that summer in the Adirondacks by the magic of eight or ten of his early romances, the most delightful books ever made for a vacation. *Thirty Strange Stories* was one title, and I smiled patronisingly, saying that a man could write one strange story or maybe half a dozen – but thirty! Yet there they were, and every one was strange, and I knew that I had met a great imaginative talent. Since then I have heard the highbrow critics belittle H.G. Wells; but I know that with Bernard Shaw he constituted a major period in British letters. (Lake Placid NY, 1908)

****

16 Leonard Woolf ***Terribly Irritable***

At the first dinner [of the League of Nations Association] I sat next to H.G. Wells, and we got on extremely well together, and this was the beginning of a friendship with him which was very pleasant and lasted until his death, though it was broken, as friendship with H.G. often was, by interludes of storm and stress….

(…) his temper was always uncertain for he was a terribly irritable little man, and never knew when you might not unwittingly cause an explosion….

(London, 1918)

****

17 Virginia Woolf ***Secure in his powers***

He is getting to the drowsy stage: the 60s. Seems well wishing but not so spry as he used to be. He talked about his new book, the thoughts one has at 60. (…) He said sometimes he wrote all day for days; sometimes not at all. He struck me again as an odd mixture of bubble & solidity – likes to blow a phrase out now & then. (…) …he got up to go: we asked him to stay & tell us about Henry James. So he sat down. Oh I should be delighted to stay & talk the whole afternoon, he said. Henry James was a formalist. He always thought of clothes. He was never intimate with anyone – not with his brother even: had never been in love…. In all this he [Wells] showed himself… perfectly content to be himself, aware of his powers – aware that he need not take any trouble, since his powers were big enough. (London, 1926)

******

18 Stefan Zweig ***Debate with Shaw***

(…) I had the special and truly unforgettable pleasure of hearing those two cleverest brains, Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, engage in a brilliant discussion which was outwardly perfectly courteous though highly charged with a concealed current. It was an intimate luncheon at Shaw's…. Wells persisting in practical idealism, indefatigably perfecting his vision of the future of mankind, Shaw on the contrary increasingly viewing the future with the same scepticism and irony as the present, as

stuff for his amused, superior play of intellect.... Wells, feeling the joy of life at seventy, more epicurean, more easy-going than ever before, short, red-cheeked, and inexorably serious behind his occasional cheerfulness.... At once I had the impression that Wells was present, not merely for a friendly luncheon chat, but for some sort of fundamental discussion.... Wells, with his little red cheeks and his quiet masked eyes was more caustic and direct; his mind also operated at extreme speed but he did not seek to make sparks fly, his thrust was limber and made with a light assurance... this flashing exchange went on so rapidly, back and forth, with its parry and thrust, thrust and parry, always within the bounds of fun, that the outsider could not but admire the play of the foils, the sparkle, the give and take. But behind this swift dialogue maintained on a high level there was some kind of intellectual irritation which in the English manner grandly disciplined itself into urbane dialectics. What made the discussion specially interesting was the serious way in which they engaged in sport, and the sporting way in which they were serious in this opposition of two polar characters which only seemingly flamed up because of something pertinent but really because it was immutably fixed. In any event, I had seen the two best men of England in one of their best moments.

(London, 1936)

******

Sources

1. Brome, Vincent. *Confessions of a Writer*. London: Hutchinson, 1970 p.50.
2. Brooks, Van Wyck. *An Autobiography*. New York: Dutton, 1965 P.221.
3. Chaplin, Charles. *My Autobiography*. London: The Bodley Head, 1964 pp.294-95.
4. Chesterton, G.K. *Autobiography*. London: Hutchinson, 1937 pp. 222-23.
5. Darrow, Clarence. *The Story of My Life*. New York: Scribners, 1932 pp.324-25.
6. Gerhardie, William. *Memoirs of a Polyglot*. London: Macdonald, 1973 p.284.
7. Huxley, Julian. *Memories*. Vol.1. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970 p.204.
8. Lamott, Corliss. *Yes to Life: Memoirs*. New York: Horizon, 1981 p.33.
9. Nicolson, Harold. *Diaries and Letters 1930-1964*. Ed. Stanley Olson. London: Collins, 1980 p.24.
10. Patmore, Brigit. *My Friends When Young*. Ed. Derek Patmore. London: Heinemann, 1968 pp.32, 34.

11. Priestley, J.B. *Margin Released: Reminiscences and Reflections*. London: Heinemann, 1962 pp.167-69.
12. Russell, Bertrand. *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: The Years 1872-World War I*. New York: Bantam, 1967 p.202.
13. Seldes, George. *Witness to a Century*. New York: Ballantine, 1987 p.300.
14. Shirer, William L. *A Native's Return 1945-1988: A Memoir of a Life and Times*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990 p.322.
15. Sinclair, Upton. *The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962 pp.145-46.
16. Woolf, Leonard. *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-18*. London: Hogarth Press, 1964 pp.192-93.
17. Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol. III 1925-1930*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. London: Hogarth Press, 1980 pp.93-95.
18. Zweig, Stefan. *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography*. London: Collins, 1943 pp.297-98.