Edward James is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Reading and Director of its MA programme in Science Fiction Studies. He is editor of *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* and author of *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (1994). He also maintains the H.G. Wells Society web pages.

Patrick Parrinder is a Professor of English at the University of Reading and a vice president of the H.G. Wells Society. His latest book on Wells is *Shadows of the Future* (Liverpool U.P., 1995) and he is co-editor (with George Slusser) of a forthcoming volume of papers from the 1995 symposium on *The Time Machine* entitled *The Perennial Time Machine* (Georgia U.P.). He is also general editor of the H.G. Wells titles in Oxford U.P.'s World's Classics series (New York).

John S. Partington is editor of *The Wellsian*. He contributes short annotations of secondary material related to 'H.G. Wells and Science Fiction' for the *Annotated Bibliography for English Studies* and is a regular reviewer for the English literature section of *Kritikon Litterarum*. He is currently writing a doctoral thesis at the University of Reading on Wells's political thought.

Laura Scuriatti graduated in English and German from Università Statale di Milano and is now a postgraduate student of English literature at the University of Reading. She is interested in the interdisciplinary study of literature and the visual arts and is currently working on Djuna Barnes. She has translated A. Barzel's "Arte e industria/Art and Industry" (Milan, Marcos y Marcos, 1996).

David C. Smith is a vice president of the H.G. Wells Society. He is retired from teaching but continues to work on his annotated bibliography of Wells's writing as well as a fifth volume of Wells's correspondence.

David C. Smith

The H.G. Wells Society and its *Raison d'être*

The Context

The following piece was written in September 1994. It was not printed at the time as it appeared that the debate referred to was moribund. Five years later, it is clear that the debate is alive and still being argued out, though mainly in a subterranean way. Therefore, it does seem that it is probably worth printing now. Just a word about the context from the point of view of the writer and a few more words that put this ongoing debate into some sort of general context are probably warranted.[1]

It is also worth saying that the retention of Wells's writings in copyright until the year 2017 has diminished the debate somewhat as his books have become very much more expensive and have gradually disappeared from the second-hand bookshops everywhere. To some degree, then, the debate has been truncated, as the major books in print now tend to be the early scientific romances, in which there is a much less obvious political agenda than in his later books.

When I first wrote this piece, I had just retired after spending some 40 years in the classroom (that is, years in which I taught at least one course). As I wrote, I was breaking away from one life's work, moving on to other things, and I was in a pensive mood about the changes. I was also beginning serious work on what would be my next big project, *The Correspondence of H.G. Wells* (London, 1998).

I did not yet know just how many more Wells letters I had to read, but the debate over the purpose of the H.G. Wells Society loomed very large in my mind. As I write these lines, I am contemplating the proposed and possible fifth volume of his *Correspondence*, which will provide another 400 or so letters that have emerged since last

[1] James Dilloway, 'Implementing in Full the Role of the H.G. Wells Society', *The H.G. Wells Newsletter*, Vol.3, no.5; Michael Sherborne, 'Further Thoughts on the Aims and Role of the H.G. Wells Society', Vol.3, no.6; and the summarized views of John Partington, G.W. Denton, Bernard Loing, Tom Miller and Rose Tilly. Also see the report of the AGM, 1994 in Vol.3, no.6. In preparing this piece for actual publication, I looked back through all the H.G. Wells Society 'Official Publications' of one kind or another. This debate has been going on for a long time, and from time to time, some members have stopped attending meetings (perhaps for other reasons, too), but this means that the debate has been spasmodic. I suggest that we have a meeting with a real debate, operating under the dicta that no one will get angry, but that we all will attempt to understand H.G. Wells and what he means to us.

spring. The discussion also appears in a context of finishing "An Annotated Bibliography of H.G. Wells" which lists and describes some 4,200 different items.

The publication of the letters has given reviewers the opportunity to see Wells in a new and strong context. Reviews have been quite positive (and most) reviewers have reviewed Wells, rather than Smith, which is the way it should be. Longish review-essays have appeared in *The Spectator*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and elsewhere. Substantial essays on the meaning of Wells and this collection have appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Science-Fiction Studies* and one or two others are in press. Perhaps these collected letters will energize the debate, as the Society goes forward to the next millennium.

James Dilloway has been arguing for a very long time for a politically and socially active Society, which will have as one of its main purposes the promotion of Wellsian social and educational ideas. As one reads Dilloway's work, especially his 1983 address to the H.G. Wells Society on the creation and meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in his book, *Is World Order Evolving?: An Adventure into Human Potential*,[2] it is quite clear that Wellsian thought is still present and needs support from Society members if we are to escape the black doom which Wells said would be ours unless we chose to exercise our powers against that future. Warren Wagar has also argued persuasively that that Wells is one that should engage much of our thoughts.[3]

Although I suppose that most members of the H.G. Wells Society, and others who find his work good and powerful reading, would agree with the idea that Wells had a view, a prospect, of the future. For many people, though, it is Wells the writer, the master of strong prose and adept characterization whom they feel should be the paramount Wells. Michael Sherborne, speaking from this point of view, argued against the Dilloway idea, pointing out that the H.G. Wells Society, in its current form (there have been Wells societies of one form or another since 1933) under the leadership of John Hammond is made up primarily of academics, who come with an agenda, in the broadest sense, to get Wells into the canon taught today in English, Commonwealth and American schools and universities. Obviously, such an approach would not deny entrance to a political Wells.

[2] A.J. Dilloway, *Human Rights and World Order* (London: H.G. Wells Society, 1983, rev.1998); Dilloway, *Is World Order Evolving?: An Adventure into Human Potential* (London: Pergamon, 1986).

[3] W. Warren Wagar, *H.G. Wells and the World State* (New Haven: Yale, 1962)

The two points of view, although quite different, do not prevent the other from appearing – it is simply in which order one thinks of H.G. and his work.

As an historian, I fall rather between the two ideas. I study and write about Wells because of his politics, which I share and support; and because of his ability to write, which I admire above virtually all twentieth century writers who write not to enlighten but to obscure. I think that there is room for both – I would attempt to get more of his political points of view in front of new readers and thinkers, but always by paying real attention to his ability to compose – as one reviewer once said, "to put it all into a poem." The last two world conferences on Wells have moved into this medial direction, I believe. From the point of view of Michael Sherborne, there has probably been far too much politics; while from James Dilloway's, there has not been enough.

2 December 1998

The Paper

It is mid-September, and all over the United States students of all ages are returning to their studies. Young children, clad in new clothes, clutching the tools of learning, climb onto ubiquitous yellow school buses while older learners leave their homes and dormitories to attend lectures. Nearly all of these persons are ready, even anxious, to learn the mysteries of historical analysis, the wonders of scientific experimentation, the neat logic of mathematics and the pleasures of opening a book and leaving the present for a time past or a time yet to come.

For forty years I have been a part of this autumn ritual at the college or university level. This September, for the first time, however, I am not participating in the minutiae of opening days – registration, discussion of the summer, the introductory lectures, and the camaraderie of the corridors.

In fact, as these rituals go on, I am in northern Maine, on the shores of a lake, watching the birds and, as I have done for much of my life, thinking about and contemplating H.G. Wells. For, I have retired from teaching, and the halls of ivy (which are in fact Virginia Creeper), although still part of my life, are, nevertheless, to be viewed differently from now on.

The day before yesterday I finished, and sent of to a publisher, a work on Wells which has occupied me for a quarter of a century. It is an annotated bibliography of all Wells items ever to appear in print, or every one which I can find. When one counts as a separate item each individual serial part, the aggregate of Wellsian items numbers 3,762. [Not yet published, and the number of items is 4,200+. However, the work is virtually at an end].

In those items, one should certainly find some guidance as to what the H.G. Wells Society might be and do. One can, perhaps, provide an answer to James Dilloway's question, and an answer that will encompass Michael Sherborne's response in the last *H.G. Wells Newsletter*.

For these statements are, it seems to me, the poles of Wellsian existence. In fact, as I write and think about Wells, and think of the various Wellsian meetings I have attended, I find much of great value in both positions. In a sense, one is faced with the dilemma which Wells himself faced virtually all of his active life.

When I began to write my biography of our leader,[4] it seemed completely true to say that Wells was first and foremost a teacher – a pedagogue. I entitled the four parts of my book "Student", "Author", "Teacher", and "Prophet". All of these are aspects of the life of learning, and Wells himself always thought of his work as being part of an educational experience.

In the first tentative pieces in the 1880s, Wells ran the gamut of his life's work as he talked about the purpose of writing "To the Average Man." His first articles described the life of Socrates, the great martyr to the battle between truth and sophistry, discussed Democratic Socialism as a possible way to enhance the lives of all members of our species, and included little pieces in which the "literary" aspects of his life can be clearly seen.

And, if one studies his last important book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, it is clear that the idea of education remains as much a part of his work at the end of his intellectual life as at its beginning. *Mind at the End of Its Tether* began its life as a reworking of the last chapter of *A Short History of the World*, and the title appeared first as a cross-head (which Wells may not even have written!) in that book. It then became a small book, and finally appeared as three articles in *The Sunday Express*.

[4] David C. Smith, *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (London and New Haven: Yale, 1986).

In these various versions, Wells remarked that he could still foresee "a new humanity, capable of an adaptation to the whirling imperatives about us, sufficient to see out the story of his life on earth to the end." He said, "like Landor he has warmed both hands at the fire of life" while offering his mind and his experience to *homo sapiens*, whom he described "as at his best, curious, teachable, and experimental from the cradle to the grave." These characteristics of our species lacked only leadership, and "That is the darkest shadow upon the hopes of mankind."

I take it as a given that from both the beginning and the end of his writing, as well as most of that between, H.G. Wells believed that our species could be redeemed – in the sense of adapting to this earth in an ecological way. (He once described this state of being as "a eutrophic society".) In addition to this belief, moreover, Wells also clearly believed that the **COULD** of the first sentence of this paragraph must be **SHOULD** – and if not, we had not lived up to our potential. We have this imperative in our destiny, and it falls to those who see this most clearly to act as leaders, instructors, path-breakers, forerunners, even if this means adopting the role of Socrates. As an example, Wells himself did not leave London during the time of the Blitz and later the rocket bombs, other than to undertake one last educational speaking tour in the United States. It was his role in life.

Wells understood that humans are driven by different impetuses, and that individual differences among and between the members of this species means that we will not all take the same path, nor go at the same rate. In fact, these differences are what set us apart from other animals, and the conflicts and consensuses that arise will eventually lead to the correct road.

So, I suggest that the H.G. Wells Society attempt to adapt as much as it can to both James Dilloway's prescriptions and Michael Sherborne's analysis. We can and should work for the better world. It is imperative that we take up this challenge. Life is clearly the "race between education and catastrophe" that Wells saw. The recent Cairo conference on world population coupled with the events in Rwanda, Cuba, Bangladesh, Iraq and the streets of Los Angeles all provide the clearest indication of this need.

We must learn to live within our means, but at the same time, extend those needs to all our brothers and sisters on this planet. We need, it seems to me, to use nationalism (whether one is Hutu, Croat, a Kentish man or an Australian) to provide lessons on how to live together as a species, in which the sum of the parts are greater than the parts themselves, and in which all contribute to that greater aspect. Here James Dilloway is

absolutely right, and H.G. Wells would, I believe, have thought that such actions were perfectly reasonable things to do.

However, I believe that Wells would also have welcomed the scholarly, academic and pleasurable interest that has been so much a part of our Society and life itself. He continued to revise his works to make them better. There is an author's last revision of "The Country of the Blind" published in the late thirties as an example. *The Time Machine* was always an "unfinished book;" all one has to do is read the 1931 Wellsian introduction to know that. There are four different introductions to *The War in the Air*.

During one of his last visits to the United States he gave a long interview on the role of art in books and film and although he said that he had never climbed up to the academic ivory tower, preferring to live as a journalist, still he spent much of the interview talking about aesthetic matters in his and others writing.[5] In 1942 he reminded an old friend that his attack on Henry James had come about because James's attempted dominance was so stifling, and because James had written so unfairly about Arnold Bennett, much more than because of any special attacks on H.G. himself.[6]

When the world becomes too oppressive, and Wellsian goals seem unattainable, I always return to two aspects of his thought. Taken together, they mirror the needs and the purpose of the H.G. Wells Society. The first set of remarks occurs in the last words of what many think to be his greatest novel – *Tono-Bungay*. Certainly Wells tried harder in this book than any other to come down on the side of art for art's sake, and many, including Henry James, thought that he had proved his case. However, at the end of the book, he provides us with a gnomic, Delphic statement in which art can be taken as a means to a greater end, when he says,

> Through the confusion sounds another note.
> Through the confusion something drives.....
> Sometimes I call this reality Science, some
> times I call it truth. But it is something we draw
> by pain and effort out of the heart of life....

[5] R.V. Van Gelder, 'H.G. Wells Discusses Himself and His Work', *New York Times* (27 October 1940), *Book Review Section*, pp.2, 21.

> I have come to see myself from the outside,
> my country from the outside – without
> illusions. We make and pass. We are all
> things that make and pass, striving upon
> a hidden mission, out to the open sea.

The second of these Wellsian guides to human activity occurs in one of the two novels of his which I think most clearly warrants reprinting. (The other is *Meanwhile*). In *Babes in the Darkling Wood*, Wells opens the book with a long essay on the reasons why he writes. He rehearses his life in letters, and adverts to the Henry James/Virginia Woolf concept of "art for art's sake," while rejecting that view. Wells says that the purpose of writing or intellectual life is to teach, to make better, and he says that he chose the dialogue novel with its heavy freight of message about life deliberately to achieve these goals. He invoked Plato and Socrates and without apology.

In the book itself, he and his characters think of life as a block of alabaster – white, pure, virginal, but vibrant. Those who are part of sculpting team must allow the mineral to become what is latent in the uncut stone. Set in the early days of the war, his characters, Stella and Gemini, leave for their duty stations as the book closes – she to a nurses post, and he to his minesweeper. They have immediate work to do, all part of the greater work to come.

> They will pass.... All that will pass.
> We fight by the way. To get rid of
> a dangerous nuisance. It is not our
> essential business. Incidentally our
> world may be blown to pieces and we
> with it. That cannot alter what we

[6] H.G. Wells to Herbert Read, 30 July 1943, in *Collected Correspondence*, vol.4, pp.421-2, letter no.2644.

are while we are alive, nor what we

have to do.

When I first began my advanced graduate work, one of life's jokes placed me in Ithaca, New York, studying alone, without much money, and my family back in Maine, working to help me financially and to provide a way to what we all thought of as our life's work, the act of teaching and instruction. Late at night, drained by the preparation for my impending comprehensive examinations, wandering in the library hoping to find something which would stimulate sleep, I looked up at a little shelf filled with books by H.G. Wells. I knew the early scientific romances well and had found *The Outline of History* a great help to understanding my earlier world as a sailor in the U.S. Navy. As I scanned this shelf of unknown titles, *Babes in the Darkling Wood* captured my eye. I pulled it off the shelf and began to read that lead essay on the purpose of writing.

Some time later, the custodians came and told me that the building was closing, but I could take the book with me. I read through the night, and returned at the end, to the lead essay. At that moment I knew what my life's work must be – to provide as clear an access to truth as possible, no matter what that truth might be. In a sense, one needs to use the tool of Occam's razor on all intellectual effort. However, I also knew that one had a duty to produce as beautiful a product as possible and THAT THERE WAS NO NECESSARY DISTINCTION in these two goals. The ends did, and must, justify the means. But the means must always have the ends in view, or the end is smoke – vapor and vagrant.

10 September 1994