

Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970) p 126.
- 2 Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Gollancz and the Cresset Press, 1934) pp 179 - 80.
- 3 Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* p 347.

The World of H.G. Wells: A Tale of Stimulus and Response

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I would like to begin by posing two simple questions. First, how far was the special nature of the Wellsian Age a factor in explaining the phenomenon that was Wells? And, second, what can the answer to that question tell us for the understanding of Wells today? It is a standpoint of this talk, first, that these two questions have important and positive answers - that certain features of the period from 1866 to 1946, the Age of Wells, are paramount for any real understanding of Wells, and *quite specifically of Wells*; and, secondly, that it is ever more telling for the present generation of Wells enthusiasts to take this leap into the past, so completely has the world that H.G. knew been swept away over the last forty years.

I would like then, at the outset, to make clear what this talk is and is not about. The intention is to light on three specific aspects of the Wellsian period. These are, first, the effect of a total *environment* in which H.G. grew up and in which his most original work was produced - the regional nature of that setting and the prevailing social character of its people. Secondly, the entire period is renowned for an opening-up of the world through a vast scientific, technical, demographic and commercial explosion that forged a powerful though mistaken sense of a limitless future - a future that was to be fractured within a decade. I seek to outline what part the *period* played in H.G.'s development and orientation. I suggest that the age of Wells needs to be brought much more sharply into focus with the life and career of Wells to throw some light on how H.G. developed as he did.

Thirdly, I want to show how it was the *political* evolution of this island in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that made possible H.G.'s unprecedented *world stature* as a man of affairs - unique for a man of letters in modern times - and *also* split his creative period into two distinct parts. So great has been the revolution in life since 1945 that yesterday's world of the twenties, thirties and forties has been blotted out completely, leaving only the

facts of history and the recollections of those who were there to bring a Wellsian past into the full light of day.

I must warn you that I have to bring a few personal details into this story - not because I am deluded enough to think they are of interest here, but simply because by chance, happening to experience some of the forces that acted on Wells *the man*, it is in this way that I can best evoke the atmosphere of his time. In point of fact, I grew up in the countryside some thirteen miles from H.G.'s first home, lived in and felt the social structure and social character of the people of his adopted region until 1947, and spent some years in the environment of Wells's student days some thirty-eight years after he did.

What I am leading up to is that the *environment* and *society* of Wells's formative years offer a first clue to the Wellsian phenomenon. H.G. was essentially a man of the south-east. He experienced very early, and was for life influenced in some degree by, the extremes of deprivation and enlightened gentility that were intertwined throughout the Wealden area of Kent, Surrey and Sussex - the 'garden of England' that is defined physically by the great overarching dome of chalk that was eroded away in Tertiary times to expose those repeating ridges and bands of Cretaceous formations beneath that give the region its special quality. This was, and largely still is, the area of beauty and privilege that has attracted generations of noble families, statesmen, stockbrokers, and men of science and letters to its well-wooded acres. H.G. grew up on the region's northern edge, and later within it, first near the Dickens country, where the Chalk rises from under the London Basin towards the North Downs, and close to the village of Downe, where Charles Darwin had changed the modern world only seven years before Wells was born.

H.G. was in good company in adopting a Wealden setting for his early and seminal writing, moving to Sandgate from a range of Surrey and Kent homes at Sutton, Woking, Worcester Park, Wandsworth and Sevenoaks. If the south-east model of the natural past made it a classic proving-ground for the rise of the sciences of geology, ecology and also of modern agriculture, it offered too a cross-section through English literature. The Wellsian literary associations there are familiar enough, with Joseph Conrad at Postling, Henry James at Rye, Hilaire Belloc at Shipley, George Meredith at Box Hill, Rudyard Kipling at Burwash, and other contemporaries like E.M. Forster at Dorking and Friday Street, Sheila Kaye-Smith at Northiam, Ford Madox Ford at Winchelsea and even Radclyffe Hall at Rye. But start farther back and, without counting Chaucer at Canterbury, we find Shelley at Warnham, Sidney at Penshurst, John Evelyn at Wotton,

Jonathan Swift at Moor Park, Cobbett at Farnham, Jane Austen at Steventon and Chawton, Keats, Thackeray and Hardy at Winchester, Dickens at Portsmouth, Rochester, Folkestone and Broadstairs, Blake at Felpham and, finally, more Wells contemporaries like Tennyson at Blackdown, Lewis Carroll (C.L. Dodgson) at Guildford and the Sackville associations at Knole. I shall return more fully to this regional question a little later.

As we know, the student years of H.G. Wells were highly formative, bringing some lasting friendships and a new and inspired radicalism rooted in Huxley's teaching. But the significant point - at least for me - must have been the climactic shock of moving from a humdrum existence straight into an exciting mental adventure. This offered far more of a shock than it probably does now, as I can testify. When I became fourteen, and through the efforts of the head-mistress, I too was pitchforked into H.G.'s academic world - from a village school in rural Surrey straight into employment in the Department of Geology and Geography at King's College, London, in the Strand, some thirty-eight years after H.G. had been a student in South Kensington. There had been little change in conditions since Wells's day - except that students no longer wore top-hats - and the University of London's academic environment must have been much as when he left it. The standard introduction to palaeontology was that written by A. Morely Davies, H.G.'s student friend.¹ Professor J.W. Judd, of Wellsian ill-fame, was still a familiar name in geology. We had, too, our Professor Huxley in Zoology, but it was Julian, not T.H. I had to go often to the Royal School of Mines in South Kensington, as it then was, and other haunts of Wells's student life.

Despite the recent war - the First World War - the atmosphere too had been retained. The show-cases that ran along the corridor to the Zoology Department were filled with Silurian trilobites, fossil plants from the Carboniferous and bits of Mesozoic dinosaur that had lain there for forty years, all labelled in the handwriting of Prof H.G. Seeley, FRS, who had been active when Wells was a student and whose 'Story of the Earth in Past Ages' was published in London in the same year as *The Time Machine*. There too were the heart-shaped sea-urchins from the Cretaceous seas, collected from pits in north-east Surrey for A.W. Rowe's classic demonstration of Darwinism to the Geologists' Association - his paper of 1906 on 'The Evolution of the Genus *Micraster* in the English Chalk'. As H.G. had discovered, the past is truly the key to the future, and here it was that I first came on Wells's discourse of 1902 to the Royal Institution on that very topic.

The world was a very different place then. One had to acquire a respect for work very early in life. Students came often from modest backgrounds, with little support except for scholarships, and had serious aims. As an example, one who became a leading geomorphologist came from a greengrocer's shop in the Old Kent Road. Another, working his way through the Department to get a first, went off as a missionary to central Africa. Then there was Robinson the gentle Communist, in a wide-brimmed black felt hat, who would affirm that King George might get a job as a gardener in the better world that lay ahead. He died on his first job, in South America.

This was the period of *The Dream* and *Christina Alberta's Father*. It was also the time of the forged Zinoviev letter. There was still much horse-drawn traffic and, after the General Strike of 1926, Welsh choirs and parties of buskers from the North became a familiar sight in the London streets. Often, as I ran over the North Downs and dropped towards the station, one and a half miles away, I would see below me the top of a great level sea of white mist that stretched across the Weald to the Channel. On arriving at Charing Cross on such days one entered a world of pitch darkness even at noon, with all lights blazing and the prospect, perhaps, of getting home to the country only by midnight.

The south-east as Wells first encountered it, and as it remained in my day, was virtually a *feudal* society - a 'two-nation' affair controlled by well-to-do people with a *relatively* enlightened paternalism in which the employer, because he owned the dwellings the workpeople lived in, could and did drop hints as to who right-thinking people would vote for. Below that lay a solid local culture that was pragmatic, matter-of-fact and self-contained.

Wells thought highly of Charles Dickens. In one of his pieces on the novel, published when H.G. was forty-eight, he maintained that even the long works of Dickens were not long enough for him. I am not aware of any evidence that H.G. consciously modelled his work on Dickens, but it may be worthwhile to spend a few words on characterisation in his earlier novels and 'fantasies of possibility' - novels, like *Mr Polly* or *The Wheels of Chance*, that gripped unforgettably at the national conscience and the newly-awakening awareness of his time.

Wells was truly a man of the south-east. Then, and to some extent now, the indigenous social character of the region could be described as practical, empirical, well-intentioned and even jaunty, for it owed

much to a strong Cockney tradition immediately to the north, softened though it had been by long association with the countryside and the mark of urbane prosperity. I speak here of a truly *indigenous* working and small shop-keeping population. Between it and the region's more privileged elite there existed a rather one-sided interdependence - a mutual accommodation that sufficed to maintain something of a *de facto* consensus that endured even in the face of appalling poverty and hardship.

Such, broadly speaking, was the social structure and character of the everyday culture in which Wells grew up. And, when one comes to think about it, that is not such a bad description of some of the best-loved characters drawn by Wells. Perhaps one can go even further, and say that it hints at a sketch of Wells himself. Though he did not set out to model his characters on Dickens, a flavour of an updated, more homely and more pithy Dickensianism is not too far away from the character-portrayal and the semi-caricature of his use of "Mr" in the earlier works of fiction.

But H.G. did not spend much time on self-conscious stylizing in the manner, say, of Henry James. He had no need to. Once having mastered the trick of writing gripping, incisive, convincing prose that was highly saleable and backed by a rich fund of knowledge, he turned both to the urgent task of earning a living. A reviewer of a recent work on English literature has argued that "... literature's history is a continuous debate between past and present. What makes writers write is the writing of their predecessors, which they seek first to emulate and then to supersede"². That is not true of Wells, who saw himself more as a formulator of ideas, an elucidator, a journalist in the best sense. So far as the novel went it was for him a vehicle for ideas far superior to the theatre, of which he thought that one might as well write up memorable thoughts on walls! The novel (and I quote) "... is to be the social mediator ... We are going to write about it all ... until a thousand pretences and ten thousand impostures shrivel in the cold clear air of our elucidations. We are going to appeal to the young and the hopeful and the curious, against the established, the dignified and defensive. Before we have done, we will have all life within the scope of the novel"³. That was in 1914, but twenty years later he realised that such an aim was not realistic. There are two faces to Wells, and this is one of them - the earlier. The other was that moulded by technical, scientific and socio-economic trends that ushered in the modern world, and to that aspect we should now turn.

As we know, the nineteenth century saw the rise of a worldwide struggle for territory and resources that sprang from a burst of geographical discovery, population, colonisation and markets. Their interweaving forms a rich tapestry of material progress, bigger and better wars and an awakening to the notions of a long geological past, a seemingly assured future, and a painful coming to awareness of hitherto unsuspected social obligations. Among many other things, Henry Dunant's view of the Battle of Solferino in 1860 led to the founding of the International Red Cross in 1863 and to some humanising of the conditions of war through the Geneva Conventions, which were further updated as recently as 1949 and 1977.

By the time Wells came on the scene in 1866 a spate of new ideas, theories and inventions of every sort, from the natural and physical sciences to philosophy and law, and from technology to medicine and sport, was becoming a torrent. And it was all happening in the country of Wells's birth! In 1870, and still in 1880, with six per cent of the *industrial* world's people, Britain's manufactures, banking and trade exceeded those of any other country, both in volume and per inhabitant. The same was true of its consumption and output of coal, iron and steel. It had the world's largest navy and the biggest merchant fleet - but not the greatest military expenditure, for its rule was peaceful. Migration from these shores followed trade and settlement worldwide. Europeans were colonising the globe and between 1800 and 1920 their numbers rose from 24 to 39 per cent of the world's population - a trend that has been strongly reversed ever since.

But an enormous price was being exacted by the grotesque inhumanity of *laissez faire* economy and government, and that price was being paid by this country's great urban work force. Epidemics of cholera, rampant tuberculosis and appalling overcrowding, plus a lack of public health policies or competent medical aid, were the norm during H.G.'s early life and even up to the early years of this century. It is difficult to realise that when books like *The Time Machine* or *The Invisible Man* appeared, Britain's infant mortality rate exceeded those of *today's* poorest states in Africa or Asia, with around 130 child deaths per thousand births. Literacy was not a lot better. In 1850 64 per cent of adults in England were recorded as able to write, and by 1881 that figure had reached 84 per cent, about the same as for Thailand in 1976! The point is that in Wells's early years there was a great *contrast* between private trade and public spending on essential services. Consumption here was higher than elsewhere but taxation was relatively lower. However, as more people learnt to

read, more books were produced. Between 1830 and 1866 the number of new titles trebled. By the latter year there were about 3220 new titles annually, and by 1880 this figure had risen to 5770, with an average run in those days of 1000 copies.

The year 1880, when H.G. was fourteen, was a turning point for this country, although the fact was not visible at the time. The following summing-up was written in 1884 by Michael Mulhall:

"... although this (the year 1880) is probably the last time that Great Britain will occupy the highest rank in the industrial nations of mankind, there is no symptom of decline, no diminution of force or energy to cause us any anxiety. On the contrary, the productive labour of our people shows every year a higher ratio per inhabitant, and as compared with other European nations Great Britain is leaving them farther behind"⁴.

The point of these facts and figures is to make clear the mental climate in which Wells developed. His origins, and his perception of stark social contrasts accepted as normal in his earlier years - see, for instance *Tono-Bungay* - were quite definitely calculated to produce in him a radical stance to the world. On top of that the rush of new ideas and discoveries was such as to bring a time-centred orientation to his thinking. There is no time now to review this factor as it should be reviewed. But, to give substance to a Wellsian view of the human adventure, consider just a few of the developments during his first forty years. Thirty-odd years before H.G. came the railways and telegraphy, followed in 1866 by the first transatlantic cable. Typewriters were first put on sale when he was eight, the telephone arrived when he was ten, public electricity supply and hydro-electric power at age fifteen, the steam turbine when he was eighteen and the petrol engine at nineteen. He was thirty-five before transatlantic radio was invented and thirty-eight before flight by powered aircraft became possible. The first transatlantic flight did not occur until 1919, when Wells was fifty-three, and regular air services one year later⁵. It was in 1934, the year of *Experiment in Autobiography*, that the first airway timetable was issued, when H.G. was already sixty-seven.

Here, I think, we need to turn aside for a moment to see precisely how these changes due to advancing science and technique were combining with the special role of this country and the effects of Darwin's theory to fire a Wellsian vision of anticipation and plan.

First of all, the idea of Evolution was being transplanted from an organic past to a psycho-social future. We are struck today by a great contrast between *The Time Machine* of 1895 and a new perception of time in *Anticipations* (1901) and in *The Discovery of the Future*, H.G.'s discourse to the Royal Institution in 1902. Our Chairman, Patrick Parrinder, has recently pointed to some essential differences between the first and last of these works.

To glimpse the new, more glowing atmosphere I quote from Wells's discourse of 1902: "Worlds may freeze and suns may perish, but there stirs something within us now that can never die again ..." And a little later: "The reorganisation of society that is going on now beneath the traditional appearance of things is a kinetic reorganisation ... We are in the beginning of the greatest change that humanity has ever undergone"⁶.

Here we should remember that Wells was quite capable of tailoring his product to his market. But this new vision differed from any Victorian extrapolation of 'Progress'. Fully to grasp this new view of the future we must look both to technical trends of the time and to prevailing currents of thought. Just then T.H. Huxley's view of organic evolution, transformed by its co-discoverer Alfred Russel Wallace to encompass evolution's special role in man, was being expanded in every direction. Here it is important that in 1901 Britain's greatest social scientist, L.T. Hobhouse, had produced his *Mind in Evolution*, to be followed quickly by *Democracy and Reaction* (1904) and the far-reaching *Morals in Evolution* of 1906. The products of much more new thinking in economy, society, anthropology, town planning and psychology were clustered together in the years between 1895 and 1910. It will suffice to mention a few more names - like Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, Sir Patrick Geddes and Victor Branford in social analysis and city planning; J.A. Hobson in political economy; Karl Pearson in statistics; and Sigmund Freud, Edward Westermarck and Havelock Ellis as a further selection from many others.

Wells kept in touch with much new work in these fields. This can be sensed, for example, from his comments at a meeting of the Sociological Society of London in 1904 on a paper by Sir Francis Galton dealing with eugenics⁷. Mendel's great work on genetics, completed in 1865, had remained unknown until 1900, but H.G.'s main points, in confronting the great Galton, were so pointed, aware and up-to-date that they showed clearly a watershed between the old thinking and the new.

But how does the march of inventive technique fit into all this, rounding off an incipient turn towards the future? The main point can be illustrated from the case of public electricity supply. In its early stages, from 1881, electric energy was produced on a very small scale and at the point of use. But as time went on output became concentrated, its scale of operation increased and by 1900 the idea of a transmitted system had begun to emerge. The great thermal power plant installed at Sardinia Street in London by 1896 was a harbinger of things to come, though it took another thirty years before the idea of a national grid system was finally adopted here in 1926, when Wells was already sixty. Such, however, was the *economic pattern* of a march to modernity, creating as it did a *new awareness of the future* through an expanding need to plan ahead. Other main inventions produced their own distinctive changes of equal magnitude.

These were some of the basic technical and intellectual advances that changed the world during H.G.'s formative years, and I could mention many more. Before we look at some other influences one is reminded here of two unexplained mysteries about Wells. The first is the enormous pace of his published output and reading, despite indifferent health. Over a fifty-year period he maintained an *average* of more than two and a quarter books per year, plus innumerable articles and other productions.

A second mystery concerns his range of *travel*, in the midst of all his work and play, at a time when means of transport were far more rudimentary than now. H.G. used air travel when it became available, but regular passenger flights started from Croydon Aerodrome, today's Heathrow - and in a small way from Gatwick - only about 1930.⁸ The Imperial Airways Handley Page 42 was a comfortably appointed plane, with formal meals, a chat with the captain, and passenger lists as exclusive as the Orient Express. But it took three hours or more to get to Paris and two weeks to Australia. In my youth I would watch these planes pass slowly over the North Downs on their way from Croydon to the continent. When booking Wells would ask for Captain Tweedie (Jill Tweedie's father) because his flying record had been faultless. Before that travel by sea and train must have taken a lot of H.G.'s much-filled time.

As well as technical inventions in Wells's lifetime there were, as we have seen, great changes and advances in other fields, including psychology, psychoanalysis and political economy. Take just two of H.G.'s major pre-occupations - the nature of time and education. Time measurement advanced greatly during his early life. Greenwich time became obligatory throughout Great Britain in 1880 and

International Time Zones for the world were adopted in 1884, when Wells was eighteen. A little later, between 1905 and 1915, Einstein's time-oriented theory of relativity was developed. The commercial cinema dates from 1895, the year of *The Time Machine*, and a host of radio advances from shortly after - radio direction-finding and picture telegraphy from 1907, news by radio from about 1920 and radio time-signals from 1924.⁹ H.G. had been ruminating and writing on the nature of time since his student days, and he went on doing so, influenced by J.W. Dunne, Albert Einstein, Sir James Jeans and A.S. Eddington, until 1942 at least.

Education offers a similar example from among the social inventions. Only when Wells was four was the principle of public schooling accepted, albeit of a deliberately inferior kind, and not until 1918, when Wells was fifty-two, could the school-leaving age be raised to fourteen - six years before I myself left school. H.G. was seventy-eight before the principle of secondary education for all was finally adopted, in 1944. This is part of the background to Wells's concern for the uneducated, or rather miseducated majority that began very early and can be traced first of all in the 'schoolboy' section of the *Autobiography*¹⁰. A similar story could be told about his view of feminine independence, or of the related question of how to bring some rational order into economy and government. Reaction against the nineteenth-century principles of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Jeremy Bentham - resurrected today by Mrs Thatcher - got to the Age of Wells by way of John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, Peter Kropotkin, J.A. Hobson and the physicist Frederick Soddy, and it was by this route, rather than through Marx, Engels or the political Left, that H.G. came to seek a re-ordering of society.

I am sure this historical outline of facts, far too short though it is, may have taxed some of you more than a little. One has to reach some conclusions and all this is leading up to that point. But there are still two questions to be broached before that can be done.

H.G. Wells, as we know, grew up in a country that was the birthplace of modern industry, gave the world its main international language, its main economic system, parliamentary government, much of modern science and technique, and virtually the world's entire code of sport. Wells lived his life in a state with one per cent of the world's people which administered some 23 per cent of the earth's land area and population. This it did, not mainly through conquest from a home base, but almost absent-mindedly and often against the opposition of the British government of the day¹¹.

There is another point, one not generally known, that is significant for our purpose. London, like Paris, lies close to the theoretical centre of gravity of the earth's land surface and population. In other words it lies near the pole of a hemisphere that includes over 90 per cent of the land area and is thus the optimum centre of travel and communication to the rest of the globe¹².

The Empire reached its zenith in Wells's first twenty-five years and it remained there, as the Commonwealth, for the rest of his life. Between 1872 and 1890 the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Egypt, Zanzibar and much of southern Africa had been brought into the British sphere. Wells recognised the Empire's uniqueness and the fact that it was no jingoistic creation. It had, he thought, to be given unity, and the only means to hand was through an international language.

Why am I stressing this rise of the British Commonwealth? For two reasons, mainly. First, this country reached the peak of its world role precisely at the time of Wells's first major achievements. This, I think, is significant. Given what I have said earlier, and given H.G.'s creative flair during his first fifteen years of writing, we can thus gain some inkling of how it was that he was able to become, and remain, not merely an important writer, like many others, but uniquely a *world figure of major stature*.

But there is something else that calls for explanation. Why did Wells reach this peak of varied achievement between 1895 and 1911, between *The Time Machine* and *The New Machiavelli*, and thereafter confine himself more and more to elaborating on a single theme? One part of the answer, I suggest, follows from common experience. H.C. Lehman's comparative study of major literary, musical, artistic and scientific work in this and other countries shows clearly that in literature the period between ages thirty-two and forty-seven forms a common apex, with major work declining strongly in frequency thereafter. A similar apex, between the ages of thirty-seven and forty-three, is found in economics, political and educational theory and a range of scientific discovery¹³. From this standpoint, and if we regard the years between 1895 and 1912 as H.G.'s major period, he followed fairly closely a normal time-scale of high achievement. But there is more to be said on his second thirty-five years of output, and for this I suggest that we have to form a single perspective view of certain Victorian and Edwardian trends.

So long as Britain enjoyed great power and renown there was an unspoken national consensus, particularly in the south-east, between the working people and the privileged classes. This unity survived

appalling misery and exploitation and lasted up to the General Strike of 1926, and even beyond. On the one hand the country's success gave credence to an apparently higher competence on the part of a comfortable minority. Lack of general education enhanced this picture since no one knew better, while a certain paternalism among the governing elite *did* produce a gradual spreading of social betterment.

This consensus arose from informal sources and one of those sources was the sporting code. *Amateur* sport, and notably soccer and rugby, spread first to the middle-class areas from the older public schools, thence throughout the country and finally across the world. By looking at the present-day membership of the AFA or, say, the Southern Amateur Football League, one can still pick out the sporting areas of middle-class comfort around London and the midlands as they existed in Wells's youth. For the past sixty-three years I myself have followed the fortunes of an amateur team - Reigate Priory - that was a great sporting name in H.G.'s early days. It was founded in 1864 and today is possibly the world's oldest soccer club with a continuous history. Sportsmanship, from Henley to pigeon-fancying, became a powerful national bond throughout the Wellsian Age, though H.G. did not, curiously, give much thought to it in his writings, maybe because it was a foul in a football match at Holt that caused his life-long malady!¹⁴ It is interesting, nevertheless, to think of the late-Victorian code of sportsmanship as perhaps an early precursor of what later became a world code of human rights ...

But consensus was not enough. As the world advanced in knowledge and complexity the problems facing statesmen became far more taxing. The sense of inevitable progress faltered as alternatives called for wider choices. Urbane omnipotence could no longer suffice.

Different interpretations have been placed on this fundamental change, which was becoming visible to Wells by 1901¹⁵. Perhaps the best outline of social character among the British, and particularly southerners, is that given by George Orwell in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941). Orwell consciously tried to write like Wells and in this book he perhaps came nearest to success. His theme was a disastrous decline among Britain's ruling elite, which had to be countered by radical means. While the Empire, as he and Wells both saw it had been a great and creditable achievement (and here I quote)

“... England was ruled by an aristocracy constantly recruited from parvenus .. And yet somehow the ruling

class decayed, lost its ability, its daring, finally even its ruthlessness, until a time came when stuffed shirts like Eden or Halifax could stand out as men of exceptional talent. As for Baldwin, one could not even dignify him with the name of stuffed shirt. He was simply a hole in the air”¹⁶.

Wells too subscribed to this idea of decline but saw it as due to changes that overtook an unadaptable ruling class. While the position had changed, the rulers could not. Since H.G. was shaped in the last years of the Victorian age this new inadequacy of existing governments appeared to him gradually during his first forty-five years. He came on the two nations problem early in youth. His experience was reinforced through his mother's relationship to Uppark, and clinched by the First World War. Thereafter he faced a world that was evolving to a new modernity with rulers lacking any sense of a global vision. I suggest that *under these conditions*, and for *him* - in the starkness of this perception of tragic impotence - it was natural that it should become an obsession to fight for a radical re-education and a re-orienting of world affairs, and to that, in fact, he devoted the rest of his life.

And now for the summing-up. All would agree that Wells was a phenomenon of major magnitude. So far as his genius went he was a sport, a chance coming-together of genes acted upon by unique experience in an unique setting. Once given his amazing energy, ability and disposition, the general lines of what came out can, I think, be largely explained by the impress of his place and his time.

Except for a certain impatience and a non-Wellsian squeaky voice, H.G. reflected quite clearly the prevailing character of the south-east - a perky, pragmatic, well-intentioned, semi-Cockney directness - that is equally mirrored in the characters of his best-known fiction. While no egalitarian he believed that real education - and not the deliberately inferior kind imparted by the Education Act of 1870 - should be equally accessible to all.

I quote: “I have never believed in the superiority of the inferior ... but it was an equality of position and opportunity I was after, and not equality of respect or reward ... So far as the masses went I was entirely of my mother's way of thinking ...”¹⁷

So much for the man and his origins. Once you have him in the full range of his radical, questing, synthesising, anticipatory function, all set in train by the sweeping time-panorama of Victorian and

Edwardian England with its revolutions and the coming of twentieth-century war, the Wellsian obsessions are to be seen as *entirely logical and almost predictable*. What I am here saying is *not* that topics for his attention - re-writing history, women's advancement etc. - simply presented themselves as they arose. That is not the essential point. What was happening was that the *forces* at work in a surge of socio-economic change were for the first time coming into view and that Wells was on hand *uniquely equipped* to probe, describe and project those changes in their full significance.

H.G. Wells, then, was the last of the great generalists. He bestrode the 'two cultures' before the timid demarcationists took over, just as he opened new global vistas before the diplomats and the political wire-pullers got to work. He introduced only one successful social invention - a world code of human rights. And that was pinched without acknowledgement by some English-speaking politicians.

Elsewhere I have suggested that H.G. Wells stands in the line of prescient individuals, seemingly far ahead of their time, that stems from Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century, to Leonardo da Vinci in the fifteenth and John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century. It was Roger Bacon, in 1266, who proclaimed (and I quote):

"All the sciences are connected; they lend each other material aid as parts of one great whole; ... none can attain its proper result separately, since all are parts of one and the same wisdom."¹⁸

In this century, and openly since 1948, we have been groping towards a recognition of that truth. And I hope you will feel that H.G. Wells's far-reaching reaction to the stimulus of his Age was a first big step in that direction.

Notes

Where only the titles of H.G. Well's works are mentioned in the text, no full reference is given.

- 1 In his Preface to the second edition of the *Introduction to Palaeontology*, written on 17 August 1946 (the first edition had appeared in 1920), Morley Davies had this to say: "I must particularly mention the four drawings of restored extinct land-vertebrates, permission to reproduce which was readily given both by the artist, Mr J.F. Horrabin, and by the author of the work for which they were drawn, the *Outline of History*. That author was my old friend and fellow-student, Dr H.G. Wells, whose death as I was writing this preface deprives me, among greater things, of the satisfaction of showing him the finished work, in the preparation of which, as of my other books, he took a kindly

interest." Following this second edition, issued in 1947, a third edition, partly rewritten by Sir James Stubblefield, Director of the UK Geological Survey, appeared posthumously in 1961, again published in London by Thomas Murby.

- 2 Peter Conrad, 'Life in the Old Dog Yet', *The Observer* (26 April 1987).
- 3 Wells 'The Contemporary Novel' in *An Englishman Looks at the World* (London: Cassell, 1914).
- 4 Michael Mulhall *Balance-Sheet of the World for Ten Years* (London: Stanford, 1881).
- 5 James Dilloway *Is World Order Evolving? An Adventure into Human Potential* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1986).
- 6 Wells *The Discovery of the Future* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902).
- 7 Contained in *Sociological Papers*, published for the Sociological Society by Macmillan, London, 1905
- 8 For some details on early flying from Croydon, see Alexander Frater, 'The Imperial Way', *The Observer* (24 August 1986), extracted from his book *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (London: Heinemann, 1986).
- 9 Lawrence Wright *Clockwork Man* (London: Elek, 1968).
- 10 Wells *Experiment in Autobiography* Vol 1 (London: Gollancz and the Cresset Press, 1934).
- 11 Empire Information Service *Origins and Purpose* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1946).
- 12 James Dilloway 'The Spirit of Geneva' in Dilloway et al. *World Encyclopedia of Peace* Vols. 1 - 2 (Oxford: Pergamon, 1986).
- 13 H.C. Lehman *Age and Achievement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, for the American Philosophical Society, 1953).
- 14 W.E. Greenland *The History of the Amateur Football Alliance* (Harwich: Standard Publishing Co, 1965).
- 15 See Wells *Anticipations* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1901).
- 16 George Orwell *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1941). Though justified, Orwell's strictures do not tell the whole story; and 1934, a year of recovery from the Great Depression as well as of *Experiment in Autobiography*, was perhaps a belated turning point in that regard. Late in the year, in a half-empty Queen's Hall, I had heard Sir Edward Elgar conduct the London Symphony Orchestra - then seen as a Victorian relic - in what proved to be his last rendering of the brilliant 'Enigma Variations.' But, strange to realise today, in that same year had come the virtual beginnings of organised civil aviation; and six months later I myself was destined to join a Whitehall Geographical Section, as a civilian, to help prepare for a possible 'War in the Air' that was to become reality only four years afterwards.
- 17 Wells *Experiment in Autobiography*, *op. cit.*
- 18 Roger Bacon *Opus Majus*.