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Editorial

I wonder when a decade was last greeted with as much optimism as the 1990s. Perhaps it was as long ago as 1790, the heyday of the French Revolution, though the parallel is not an entirely heartening one if you recollect that the most noticeable consequence of that revolution was the Napoleonic Wars. Amid the considerable possibilities and dangers of the present situation, we send special greetings to the Wells Society's members in the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania, and hope that when Issue 13 of the *Wellsian* reaches them the opportunities unleashed by perestroika will still be stronger than the dangers.

The present global trend away from socialism might suggest to some sceptics that Wells's advocacy of the socialist world state is a matter of rapidly diminishing significance. Wells's work as a writer of fiction is certainly my own main area of interest, and the examination of his fiction the chief function of the *Wellsian*, but I would not be too quick to fling Wells's political ideas into the junk room of history and slam the door on them. Note, first, that developed capitalism incorporates many features which would have been thought outrageously socialistic at the turn of the century: national insurance, medical care, the financial and legal equality of women, state education to sixteen and beyond, legislation to regulate the quality of goods and protect the environment, and of course full adult suffrage (though Britain is one country which has still to answer Wells's call for proportional representation). Note also that the great issues of our time - the environment, arms proliferation, demarcation of sovereignty and so on - can only really be tackled collectively, through supranational agencies. To move toward a global political framework designed for the common good, while preserving maximum choice and autonomy at local and individual levels, is going to be a long and involved process, and we will not always find Wells's speculations a reliable guide. Nonetheless, he foresaw the general direction in which things are moving and his opinions are still worth pondering as a stimulus to further thought.

One forecast Wells certainly got right was that the world would be

brought together, and the political consciousness of the human race revolutionised in the process, by the development of modern communications networks. From Manila to Bucharest the TV station has proved to be at least as important a target for contending political forces as the presidential palace, and what course of action have Vaclav Havel and his colleagues pursued for the last twenty years if not Open Conspiracy?

Whether the *Wellsian* has any significant part to play in stimulating the world brain may be open to question. In the knowledge that every constructive act helps the world along, however, we shall continue to bring you informed and informative articles on the subject of that very interesting (and pertinent) writer, H.G. Wells. Please make sure you circulate this copy of the *Wellsian* to anyone who might be interested in its contents, and if you live in Britain do encourage your friends and colleagues to attend the Wells Society's meetings. We're always pleased to see new faces and hear new voices.

M.D.

David Lake

Mr Bedford's Brush with God: Fantastic Tradition and Mysticism in *The First Men in the Moon*

"He had read his H.G. Wells and others. His universe was peopled with horrors..." So C.S. Lewis describes his hero Ransom's reading, in his novel *Out of the Silent Planet* (p 39); and it is obvious that in many respects *Silent Planet* (published 1938) is a polemic reply to Wells, especially to Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Lewis, like Wells, has a spherical spacecraft; his two evil characters, Weston and Devine, correspond one-to-one with Wells's protagonists - one scientist, one capitalist; in each book the capitalist seeks gold on the strange planet; and each book climaxes in a confrontation with the planet's monarch (the Grand Lunar; Oyarsa). Indeed, at one point Ransom explicitly recalls the end of Wells's novel as a warning to himself to behave differently (p 81). The differences between the two books spring

from Lewis's deliberate reversals of, or additions to Wells: the Christianity of the third voyager, Ransom, and of the Malacandrian "aliens"; the vertebrate, non-squishy, non-horrific nature of the Malacandrians; Lewis's sunny "Heaven" versus the black of Wells's interplanetary Space. Thus it looks as though Lewis read *First Men* as being mostly Wells's usual sort of SF novel, with threatening environments and horrible aliens, as in *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*; and it is possible for us also to read it in that way.

But I believe that such a reading is a misreading. *First Men* is not cosmic tragedy (like the *Time Machine*) or evolutionary melodrama (like the *War of the Worlds*). It is rather a 'satire' in the old Roman sense, a *satira* or hodge-podge dish whose main flavour is comedy, with dabs of fantasy and mysticism. Bedford and Cavor, unlike Devine and Weston, are figures of fun, and neither is a totally consistent character. Moreover, *First Men* is in many respects "on the same side" as *Silent Planet*, not in opposition to it. For one thing, it too is anti-imperialist; it too draws not merely on modern science but on older and more fantastic traditions; and it is not even irreligious. Bedford, like Ransom, has his period of contact with the Eternal; and some readers may even find Bedford's experience more convincing, because more mystical and ambiguous. I am not sure whether we should call *First Men* "mythopoeic": but it is a fine (perhaps underrated) romance, a wonderful blend of up-to-date science and venerable fantasy - as I hope now to demonstrate.

1. *Wells and the seventeenth century tradition*

In the standard Atlantic Edition of his *Works*, volume 6 (1925), Wells claimed that, apart from the anti-gravity metal Cavorite, there was no impossibility in *First Men*. "There are no doubt details of a high degree of improbability but nothing that a properly informed science student can contradict flatly. The book had the honour of a review in *Nature* by Professor Turner, who discussed its ingenuities very sympathetically" (p ix). Professor H.H. Turner, F.R.S., was a prominent astronomer; and his (unsigned) review in *Nature*, 9 January 1902, praises Wells's "Lunar Romance" as more scientifically plausible than Jules Verne's moon novels of 1865-70 (218). In a subsequent letter he even goes far toward clearing Wells of the lack-of-free-fall mistake: when the Cavorite blinds of the sphere are rolled back, the occupants fall toward the attracting planet with full *g* for that distance, but part of the sphere's mass (on its sides) is still shielded by Cavorite, so the sphere