

EDUCATING HEINRICH: H. G. WELLS AND THE GERMANS

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At the age of fifteen H. G. Wells was an apprentice shop assistant with few prospects before him other than hard work and low pay. By seventeen, through a combination of self-assertiveness and good fortune, he had entered the school-teaching profession. By the age of eighteen, in what must have seemed an almost miraculous development, he had received a university scholarship to study at the Normal School of Science in South Kensington. Without this access to higher education, Wells would never have made it into print as a science journalist and it is highly unlikely, therefore, that he would have become H. G. Wells the celebrated science fiction writer, novelist and public intellectual. However, that offer of a university place was not miraculous. It happened for a particular reason – because Gladstone’s government was alarmed that Germany had overtaken Britain in technical education. Indirectly, then, it was the Germans who were to thank for Wells’s degree and for the career that it made possible.

Wells’s lifetime coincides remarkably closely with the rise and fall of Germany as a military power – an important, though largely unnoticed, context for his work. He was born in 1866, a couple of months after the Seven Weeks War established the dominance of Prussia in central Europe. At about the time that little Bertie began to attend Mrs Knott’s dame school in Bromley, another armed conflict, the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1, transformed the Germans’ disparate territories into a unified nation led by the eagle-helmeted Kaiser, the personification of imperial ambition. That ambition became a trigger for both the world wars of the twentieth century. The first of them was a major event in Wells’s life as it was in the lives of so many, eliciting from him a huge amount of journalism, a notable novel (*Mr. Britling Sees it Through*), an overhead transport system for use at the Front and a campaign for a League of Nations. It also led to him taking charge of propaganda to Germany. The Second World War provoked Wells into the hugely influential campaign for human rights that was his last great achievement.

If the Germans gave Wells’s education a boost, shaped his career and helped him attain positions of influence, he does not seem to have been very grateful. In the preliminary version of *The Time Machine* serialised in the *National Observer*, one of the people who listens to the Time Traveller’s adventures is a highly stereotypical German military officer, who contributes nothing to the discussion but a single burst of scorn. When the Traveller’s claims are questioned, he sneers, “Sehr gut! Ha, ha! You are axplodet, mein friend.”¹ The Traveller’s confident refutation elicits the astonished if predictable

¹ The *National Observer* version of *The Time Machine* is reprinted in *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, ed. Robert Philmus and David Y Hughes, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 57-74.

exclamation, “Gott in Himmel!” Wisely Wells removed this one-dimensional character from the finished novel. For a more sustained view of the Germans, we must look to a scientific romance published thirteen years later, *The War in the Air*.

Here it is German aggression, what Wells calls a ‘tradition of unsentimental and unscrupulous action’, that leads to world war.² The Germans have imperial ambitions in South America, but they know that the USA will oppose them. They therefore decide to launch a pre-emptive air attack on the United States and create a base for themselves there, to be called the Eagle’s Nest. This may seem strategically far-fetched, but nine years later, during the actual Great War, the Germans did plan in the event of US involvement, to form a military alliance with the Mexicans, subsidising them to attack their northern neighbour.

In Wells’s version, the German invasion fleet is led by Prince Karl Albert, epitome of Teutonic reaction, regarded by some as the Nietzschean overman. He is ‘big and blond and virile, and splendidly non-moral’, as he proves by his indifference to the suffering of his men and by the horrific execution of one of them. When Wells’s hero Bert Smallways meets the Prince, the great man is posed revealingly. ‘He sat higher than the others, under a black eagle with wide-spread wings and the German imperial flags; he was, as it were, enthroned, and it struck Bert greatly that as he ate he did not look at people, but over their heads like one who sees visions’ (89). These are visions of imperial glory. The Prince exclaims not ‘Gott in Himmel’ but ‘Blut and Eisen!’ (148), an expression popularised by the Prussian leader Otto von Bismark, referring to the blood and iron which a nation state must deploy in the form of troops and weapons if it wishes to achieve its foreign policy goals.

Among the young bloods led by the Prince we encounter the anomalous figure of Luft-lieutenant Kurt. He is the Good German or, more accurately since his mother was English, the Good Anglo-German. Though caught up in the Prussian militarism which eventually leads to his death, Kurt shows a more open and caring nature than his colleagues. Wells concedes that Germany is ‘by far the most efficient power in the world ... better equipped with the resources of modern science, and with her official and administrative classes at a higher level of education and training’ (77). In Kurt we glimpse the possibility that these virtues might be put to better use if only German culture could be made more liberal.

As this suggests, Wells had considerable respect for German creativity and organisational ability. As an undergraduate, he had after all been something of a disciple of Thomas Carlyle, a celebrated exponent of German Romanticism. Recognising that the German language was an important source of scientific knowledge as well as literature, Wells studied German for his matriculation examination in 1888. However, when in his first major work of non-fiction,

² *The War in the Air: And Particularly How Mr. Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 77.

Anticipations, he discusses which European language is likeliest to dominate in the future, German does not come out well. In the very long term Wells postulates American English or even Chinese as the global winner, but for now he thinks the French have the cultural seriousness and organisation to prevail. While Germany publishes more books than other European nations and exercises considerable influence in the centre of the continent, its despotic government inhibits critical intelligence and creativity, and it has alienated the nations to the east. The unwieldy syntax of German makes it, in any case, an unappealing tool.

Despite these reservations, Wells continued to take an interest in Germany and the Germans, as to some degree they did in him. According to the timeline in Patrick Parrinder and John Partington's book *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe*, the first of his books to be translated into German was *The War of the Worlds* in 1901, by which time his work had already appeared in ten other languages.³

Wells was keen that his children should understand German, as well as French and Russian. In 1908 he hired a French- and German-speaking Swiss governess, Mathilde Meyer, to home-school them. She reports that Wells's wife, Jane, who liked to holiday in Switzerland, had 'a good knowledge' of German.⁴ In 1910 Miss Meyer accompanied the Wells family to Neunkirchen, visiting also the Rhine, the Odenwald, Heidelberg, Dusseldorf, Cologne and Mannheim.

After the War, Wells visited Germany in 1923, when he stayed in Marienbad with Rebecca West. While there he also paid a visit to Berlin. In 1929 he was invited back to give a lecture at the Reichstag. By 1933 the Nazis were burning his books, and his sole return to the country was a brisk overnight stop in Berlin in 1934 while flying to Moscow to interview Stalin.

Given his holidays in Germany and Switzerland, it is not surprising that Wells's reaction to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 was more measured than that of many contemporaries. Wells's initial response, the series of articles collected as *The War That Will End War*, has often been characterised as the work of a strident warmonger on the grounds that Wells gives the war his full support, yet he repeatedly claims that the British are not motivated by any hatred of the German people and have no desire for a vindictive settlement. Indeed, in his view, the Allies are fighting for the Germans' freedom as much as their own. The Germans, Wells explains, are 'naturally kindly, comfort-loving, child-loving, musical, artistic, intelligent'.⁵ One suspects that he has in mind here the German he knew best, Miss Meyer's successor, the family's violin-playing tutor, Kurt Bütow.

³ Patrick Parrinder and John S. Partington eds. *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe*, London and NY: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), xxiv.

⁴ MM Meyer, *H. G. Wells and his Family* (Edinburgh: International Publishing, 1956), 12.

⁵ *The War that Will End War* (London: Palmer, 2014), 10.

Unfortunately, Wells explains, since the victories of the 1860s and 70s, much of the German public has succumbed to the blood and iron propaganda of their government, reinforced by the German press and universities, protected from criticism by state censorship, and financially underwritten by Krupp, the giant steel and armaments manufacturer. To Wells, the Great War was only incidentally a war between nation states like Britain and Germany. Its true significance was that it was a war between world views: on the one side, the authoritarian and racist nationalism of the Kaiser, on the other, the open, global society favoured by Wells himself. He was so confident at this stage that history was on his side that he declared the war would be won in two or three months.

As the years passed, Wells's optimism became more desperate and his faith in the war aims of the Allies less sure. By 1916, in the last chapter of *What is Coming?*, titled 'The Outlook for the Germans', we find him pinning his hopes on the German middle class breaking away from militarism once it has led to defeat. He argues that imperialist racism is not native to German culture, but has been imported from Frenchmen like Gobineau and Britons like Houston Stewart Chamberlain and his soul mate Lord Redesdale.

With the possible exception of the *Outline of History*, Wells's most powerful response to the Great War is *Mr. Britling Sees it Through*, published in 1916. The novel traces the developing thoughts and feelings of an intellectual named Hugh Britling as he attempts to make sense of the first two years of the war. The title of the novel reflects Wells's continuing optimism that the war will soon be won. He assumes Britling has virtually seen it through to the end. Since he manifestly hadn't, in the Atlantic edition, produced after the war, the title was awkwardly shortened to the inert *Mr. Britling*.

Hugh Britling is closely based on Wells himself, down to his car, his house and the fond memories of his holiday in the Odenwald which help him to resist demonization of the German nation. Britling responds to the outbreak of war with an article called 'And Now War Ends', equivalent to Wells's own 'War that will End War', but his hopes for an efficient, enlightened crusade by Britain and the swift collapse of Germany are soon dashed. Meanwhile, letters from Britling's son, Hugh Jnr, convey the dismaying horrors of the Western Front. Ultimately Hugh is killed, as is the family's German tutor, Herr Heinrich. Britling attempts to console himself and others with a belief that these young men, made into enemies by a perverse political system, live on together in the transcendent Mind of the Race, which he envisages as an emergent god, the Captain of the World Republic.

If Wells himself had problems with the phrase 'sees it through', many of his translators were baffled by the idiom and, for want of a better solution, rendered it as 'Mr Britling Sees Through It'. Ikes Broeder, the translator of the German version, published in Switzerland in 1917, opted for an elegant variation, *Mr*

Britlings Weg zur Erkenntnis: ‘Mr Britling’s Path to Understanding’.⁶ My biography of Wells repeats the standard claim that this translation contains tactful omissions for the German market, but when I consulted a copy in the British Library recently the only substantial cut I could see was the removal of an abusive passage libelling the Kaiser’s eldest son as common, sly, lascivious and a petty thief.⁷ The translation retains accusations of treaty violation, racism, atrocities and mass rape, albeit with a footnote from the translator disclaiming responsibility for these views: ‘Such accounts were widespread in England at that time and hugely influential on English public opinion, so that in this book describing the feelings of the English during the war they cannot be omitted. Whether these accounts correspond to the truth or not, the translator leaves open.’⁸

Like Kurt in *The War in the Air*, Herr Heinrich, the Britlings’ tutor, is a Good German whose presence is a counterbalance to the Bad Germans of Prussian militarism. His appearance may be stereotypical (cropped hair, glasses, rucksack), as are his rigidly methodical attitudes and constant bowing, but his kindly treatment of Britling’s sons, his crush on a local barmaid, his touching belief in Esperanto as a solution to international conflict and, above all, his care for the pet squirrel Billy make Heinrich a very positive figure. In addition, and more subtly, he functions as a foil to Britling and his circle. While Heinrich may be robotically formal and obsessed with the correct ordering of everything, their contrasting informality is possible only because of their privileged position in an essentially conservative social order. A range of evidence from Britling’s dangerous driving to the methods through which the wealthy evade rationing imply that this social order is an archaic, irresponsible one, which could well benefit from the German challenge – hence the novel closes with the revolutionary sound of a worker sharpening a scythe.

If Heinrich is Wells’s most convincing depiction of a German, that is surely because, like so many of the characters in the novel, he was based on a real person. Kurt Bütow replaced Miss Meyer as the Wells family tutor in July 1913. Just like Heinrich, he was a Pomeranian, a student of philology and a keen violinist, who won the heart of the family by his care for their pet squirrel. He was called up for military service on 2nd August 1914, after fighting had begun across the continent but before the British declaration of war and, again like Heinrich, he sent reports of his progress via correspondents in neutral countries.

We learn from these that Kurt travelled via Rotterdam to Berlin, where he trained for three weeks before joining the horse artillery. He spent a few days in Belgium, billeted on a local family, and some weeks outside Warsaw, before

⁶ H. G. Wells, *Mr Britling Sees it Through* (1916), trans. Ikes Broeder as *Mr Britlings Weg zur Erkenntnis* (Lausanne: Payot, 1917).

⁷ Michael Sherborne, *H. G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen, 2010).

⁸ The edition in the British Library is (Zurich: Europäische Bücher, 1918), 245.

going south to the Carpathian mountains. Unlike Heinrich, who was captured there by the Russians and died in captivity, Kurt was neither captured nor wounded. He was sent close to the Russian front, to Galicia, which is now in the western part of Ukraine, but was fortunate to find himself in a relatively quiet area. In the final year of the war he took part in the offensive at the Chemin des Dames, eventually retreating to Sedan, where he found himself stationed at the time of the armistice. Shortly before this, on 19th July 1918, he read about *Mr Britling Sees It Through* in an article, and wrote to Wells, ‘What you write about Mr Britling’s eldest son, I hope it is not truth but fiction. Mr Heinrich is still alive and further going to do his duty.’⁹

At the end of the war Kurt returned to his home town of Kolberg, where his mother was dangerously ill. She survived the operation, but in the chaotic era after the war Kurt had cause to fear the coming winter with no coal for the fire, food shortages and steep price inflation. He decided he had better abandon philology for engineering and got some training in a factory in Köslin, spending his weekends at the hotel his parents ran in Rützow, before heading off to a technical school in Berlin. A letter of 28th Nov 1919 laments how much he misses hearing the Wells’ pianola, playing Wells’s hockey game and enjoying the company of the family’s squirrel.

In October 1921, he wrote to Wells asking for financial assistance for his parents, which he promptly received. His mother having died after a further operation, Kurt put the money into the purchase of a 32-room sea-front hotel in Ahlbeck, the Dünenschloss, for which Jane Wells would be a mortgagee. Kurt intended to pay back the loan in small instalments, which would increase once he no longer had his father to support. Given the collapse of the Mark two years later, it seems doubtful whether he would have been able to keep up these payments. He later converted the hotel into a place where poor children could stay as a kind of holiday refuge. An internet search of hotels in Ahlbeck suggests it remains in existence as the Hotel Ostende, which looks very much like a renovated and extended version of the building shown in Kurt’s photograph.

How did Kurt fare under the Nazis? We have just one letter in evidence, written to Wells in August 1935 from Copenhagen. Kurt had by now lost the hotel and one of his two sons had died in an accident. He was working for a shipping line and writing some uncontroversial journalism that would keep him in funds and out of trouble. Although he was still the old Kurt, or Heinrich, he notes ‘everybody has to be silent.’ He says he is enjoying the ‘free air’ of Denmark, implying that it is only his temporary location outside Germany that enables him to write. He asks Wells to intercede for some of his imprisoned friends. He finishes, ‘Don’t never mention my letter [*sic.*]. I hope you are in good health and

⁹ Kurt Bütow, unpublished letters to H. G. Wells in the H. G. Wells Archive, University of Illinois.

can still work long years for a better world.’ That is the last we hear of Kurt. (I note, however, the existence of a cartoonist and critic called Buzz Bütow, born Burkhard Bütow in 1943 in Kurt’s home town of Kolberg, who seems likely to have been a relation.)

Wells could indeed work many more years for a better world, but as Kurt’s letter emphasises Germany had not become the liberal state for which Wells had hoped. The punitive Versailles Treaty and the Great Depression led to the rise of Hitler’s so-called National Socialist party. In his speech at the Reichstag on 15th April 1929, ‘The Common Sense of World Peace,’ Wells told his audience that there would have to be a ‘long and complicated struggle’ before global peace could be attained. It would take the growth of federal institutions, perhaps including a United States of Europe, and a Kulturkampf, a cultural battle, before narrow nationalism could be replaced by a global perspective, in Germany and elsewhere.

Wells was repeating what he had said back in 1901, in *Anticipations*, when he foresaw by the beginning of the twenty-first century a European federal community centred on the Rhine and noted that, if this development was retarded by German imperialism, a series of wars might have to occur before Germany could be integrated. Before Wells’s death in 1946, the Prussian ambition to subdue Europe and the world beyond was dead before him, interred in a bunker in Berlin. Greater Germany was torn up, Kurt’s home town of Kolberg becoming part of Poland. After the Second World War a reduced Germany became at last the country Wells had forecast in *Anticipations*, a social democracy integrated into a European union, no longer bent on military acquisition. The Karl Alberts, Kurts and Heinrichs had completed their education in the reality of the new international order. As for Wells’s other prophecies – the world state and the end of war – it seems we will have to wait for these with considerable patience.