

## H. G. WELLS AND PENGUIN BOOKS, 1935-2005<sup>1</sup>

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Like many people of my generation, the first Wells book that I owned was a Penguin paperback: the *Selected Short Stories*, first published in 1958 when I was about fourteen. Soon afterwards I got hold of *The War of the Worlds* in Penguin (in the 1956 reprint) and a little later *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in the 1964 Penguin Modern Classics reprint which still cost only 3/6 (or less than 20p). Somewhere in the house was my father's Pelican edition of *A Short History of the World*. So when Penguin approached me in 2003 with an invitation to become general editor of their new Wells series, I was a ready convert. At that time they had only one Wells title still in their lists, *A Short History of the World*, which was first published in Penguin very soon after the firm was founded by Allen Lane in 1935.

Wells's biographers have barely mentioned his Penguin books, nor do the biographies of Allen Lane have very much to say about Wells.<sup>2</sup> Penguin, however, were (together with Secker & Warburg) one of Wells's two principal publishers during the last ten years of his life, and as a paperback imprint they kept his books in the public eye when he might easily have fallen into relative obscurity. Writing to Beatrice Webb in 1940, Wells described Allen Lane as 'one of the greatest educationists alive'.<sup>3</sup> The letter to Webb appears in David Smith's edition of Wells's correspondence, but for the rest of Wells's dealings with Penguin Books one must have recourse to the business correspondence files of the Wells Collection at the University of Illinois. Wells's own letters – usually typed by his daughter-in-law Marjorie, and sometimes signed by her as well – have not been preserved, but the archive contains a very large number of letters to both H. G. and Marjorie Wells from Allen Lane and his colleagues, often with H. G.'s hand-written annotations which formed the basis of his or Marjorie's reply.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of the talk delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the H. G. Wells Society in London on 18 June 2005. It is dedicated to the memory of the Society's late Chairman, Giles Hart, who presided at the meeting. All quotations from the correspondence between Penguin Books and Wells are from documents in the H. G. Wells Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and are reproduced with permission. Special thanks are due to Gene K. Rinkel of the University of Illinois for supplying copies of this correspondence.

<sup>2</sup> For this article I have consulted the following works: [W. E. Williams], *The Penguin Story MCMXXXV-MCMLVI* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956); W. E. Williams, *Allen Lane: A Personal Portrait* (London: Bodley Head, 1973); J. E. Morpurgo, *Allen Lane, King Penguin* (London: Hutchinson, 1979); and Jeremy Lewis, *Penguin Special: The Life and Times of Allen Lane* (London: Viking, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> David C. Smith, ed., *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 4 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), iv: 253.

Although Allen Lane founded Penguin Books in 1935, he did not invent the paperback. Paper-covered volumes go back to the nineteenth century if not before, and they have long been the standard format for a wide range of books in most European countries, though less so in Britain and the United States. William Heinemann, for example, published *The Time Machine* in a paperback edition more than a hundred years ago. Where it differs from the books that Penguin began to publish in the 1930s is that it is no more (and no less) than a normal hardback bound in paper. It is printed from the same sheets as the first Heinemann edition – so that it has ‘1895’ on the title-page – and it seems likely that the sheets were left unbound until the publishers decided to launch a cheaper edition. Significantly, *The Time Machine* is a work of fiction, since it would be hard to find paper-covered works of non-fiction from that period, apart from those (like *The Outline of History*) that were originally sold in separate parts to customers who were encouraged to collect them together in a binder.

If Penguin Books did not invent the paperback format, they hugely changed its scale and importance. All the early Penguins were the same size and shape, they had simple, uniform, and instantly recognisable cover designs, and they were specially reset rather than being printed from existing blocks of type. The standard initial print run was 50,000 copies, selling at sixpence per copy. Sales had to be very large to make a profit, and for the most part they were very large. Take the example of *A Short History of the World*, Wells’s longest-running Penguin title. When it was first published by Penguin in 1936 it had already been available for some years as a cheap hardback in the Watts ‘Thinker’s Library’ series. Nevertheless the first 50,000 copies of the Penguin edition sold out in less than five months.<sup>4</sup> In 1949, thirteen years later, it was still selling 25,000 copies a year. But selling 50,000 copies of a Penguin edition did not make an author rich. Wells’s initial agreement with Lane gave him a royalty of £1 10s per thousand copies, later reduced to Penguin’s standard royalty of £1 per thousand. The author’s profit on a complete 50,000 print run would be precisely £50, admittedly a sum that went further in 1936 than it does today.

The standard Penguin cover design was printed in orange, but soon they began to appear in a range of colours, green for crime, red for drama, dark blue for biography, purple for travel, and so on. Of all these series, the most influential was the pale blue-covered non-fiction series of Pelican Books, launched in May 1937. The first Pelican was by Bernard Shaw – not for the first or the last time, Wells’s old rival had stolen a march on him – but the *Short History* was reprinted in pale blue and published in the first batch of Pelicans at No. 5. The bias of the early Pelican list was heavily socialist and scientific, with authors including G. D. H. Cole, J. B. S. Haldane, Julian Huxley, Sir James Jeans, Harold Laski and Olaf Stapledon in addition to Shaw and Wells. Above

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<sup>4</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 22 August 1936. Wells Collection.

all, the Pelican series fulfilled Wells's ideal of education as the provision of up-to-date knowledge and speculation in plain non-specialist language, and in a format accessible to everyone. Pelicans had a global reach, being exported throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. In 1937 Penguin was receiving urgent orders for the *Short History* from Egypt, Japan and South Africa, three countries in which Wells's work enjoyed the status of a government-recommended textbook.<sup>5</sup>

Once the *Short History* had become a steady seller, Lane's next project was to reprint some of Wells's classic novels, but this took much longer than he had foreseen since the cheap edition rights mostly belonged to other publishers who did not want to part with them. (For example, many of Wells's novels at the time and for long afterwards were published in cheap hardback editions by Collins.) Lane also showed interest in Wells's most recent fiction, suggesting a single omnibus edition containing such short novels as *The Croquet Player* and *Star Begotten*, an intriguing possibility that came to nothing since the hardback publishers (Methuen and Chatto & Windus, respectively) were not interested.<sup>6</sup> In August 1938 Penguin published *The Invisible Man*, to be followed in 1941 by *Kipps* and *The War in the Air*; the latter contained Wells's specially written introduction commenting on the Second World War and the Blitz in his much-discussed 'epitaph', 'I told you so. You damned fools'.<sup>7</sup> By this time Wells was deeply involved in another highly innovative publishing venture, the Penguin Specials.

Launched in November 1937, the early titles in this series were described on the back cover as 'books of topical importance published within as short a time as possible from the receipt of the manuscript'. Most of them were original titles, commissioned by Penguin in response to the growing public anxiety about fascism and the approaching war. The fact that Penguin were no longer simply a reprint house brought Wells into a much closer relationship with them than before. Between 1939 and 1943 he published four Penguin Specials, admittedly works of political journalism rather than art, although they certainly contain some of his best later journalism. The first was *In Search of Hot Water*, or to give its full title *Travels of a Republican Radical In Search of Hot Water*, a volume that was first suggested by Lane in a letter to Wells on 26 May 1939. The two men met a week later, and a contract was signed for a collection of Wells's 'criticisms of world affairs' basically consisting of articles written during his recent trip to Australia and already published in the *News Chronicle*.<sup>8</sup> The book was ready in early September when the Second World War broke out, prompting Lane to persuade his author to make some last-minute changes. After

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<sup>5</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 1 July 1937. Wells Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 8 August 1938. Wells Collection.

<sup>7</sup> See H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 279.

<sup>8</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 26 May 1939. Wells Collection.

some discussion Wells deleted an article attempting to foresee ‘The Map of Europe in 1949’, and substituted the presidential address he had intended to give to the PEN International Congress in Stockholm on 4 September 1939.<sup>9</sup> (Wells went to Stockholm, where he met the great German novelist Thomas Mann, but the PEN Congress was cancelled and he had to return home in a plane that was shadowed by Nazi dive-bombers.)<sup>10</sup>

*In Search of Hot Water* is admittedly a disappointing book, the best things about it being its title and its spectacular Penguin cover. By November 1939, when it was published, Wells was engaged in the production of another, far more important Penguin Special. While the great majority of Penguin books have always been reprints, there have been certain original titles in the firm’s seventy-year history which can be said to have changed the world, and this is one of them. On 26 September 1939 Wells’s letter on ‘War Aims’, calling for a full and free discussion of proposals for a ‘world revolution’, appeared in *The Times*.<sup>11</sup> This letter was read out and discussed at a meeting of the Penguin Editorial Committee a few days later.<sup>12</sup> Wells’s ideas about war aims took a much more concrete form in a second letter to *The Times* on 23 October. Here he called for a ‘Declaration of Rights’ in the tradition of Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights and the French revolutionary declaration of rights. The letter concluded with a ten-point draft declaration which was intended to become the ‘fundamental law’ of the world after the war.<sup>13</sup> Allen Lane made it clear from the beginning that he wanted a book on the topic, so that it was in response to his encouragement that Wells added a series of commentaries, revisions and further suggestions to the original declaration. The result was published as a Penguin Special on 8 March 1940 with the title *The Rights of Man, or What Are We Fighting For?* By the end of May it had sold 58,000 copies.<sup>14</sup>

This was the beginning of Wells’s human rights campaign, which involved a drafting committee chaired by Lord Sankey, correspondence with intellectuals and political leaders all over the world and numerous redraftings before the final version was reached in 1942. Called the ‘Universal Rights of Man’, it was translated into thirty languages. Historians now agree that it was one of the most important precursors of the Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The story has been told by James Dilloway in his pioneering H. G. Wells Society pamphlet on *Human Rights and World Order*.<sup>15</sup> Today there are very few areas of our society and politics which

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<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Wells to Allen Lane, 6 October 1939. Wells Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, iv, 237n.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, iv: 235-38.

<sup>12</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 3 October 1939. Wells Collection.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, iv: 242-44.

<sup>14</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 29 May 1940. Wells Collection.

<sup>15</sup> James Dilloway, *Human Rights and World Order: Two Discourses to the H. G. Wells Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Nottingham: H. G. Wells Society, 1998).

remain untouched by the discourse of human rights, a discourse which came back onto the agenda of twentieth-century politics largely thanks to the efforts of Wells, his collaborators and correspondents, and to that meeting of the Penguin Editorial Committee at the beginning of October 1939.

Four months after *The Rights of Man*, Wells published his third Penguin Special. *The Common Sense of War and Peace* is a more substantial book than its two predecessors, though once again it reprints the Declaration of Rights. Unfortunately, it could not be reprinted in 1941 due to the wartime paper shortage.<sup>16</sup> Later in the war came Wells's fourth original Penguin title, which is probably the most controversial and polemical of all his books. Once again it was commissioned by Penguin, though neither Allen Lane's latest biographer Jeremy Lewis nor Wells's hardback publisher Fredric Warburg seem to have been aware of this fact.<sup>17</sup> Warburg claimed in a 1949 memoir that he had turned down a collection of Wells's 'indifferent and wildly partisan essays on the Catholic Church' which the author then palmed off onto Penguin Books.<sup>18</sup> Publishers' memoirs are not always to be trusted. The book referred to is *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church* and it was Allen Lane who persuaded Wells to write it.

The hook was baited for Wells in a letter from Lane on 18 February 1943. He began by describing his plans for a series of Penguin Encyclopedias to be produced after the war – one of the few Penguin educational projects which did not come to fruition. He then turned to

another matter on which I'd like your advice and that is on the question of a book on Anti-Catholicism. At recent Editorial meetings we have talked over a book on the lines of the CATHOLIC CHURCH IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS and if you had the time to write a short book on the subject yourself this would of course be ideal, but failing this, could you suggest a possible author?<sup>19</sup>

Lane has been described as being personally indifferent to religion<sup>20</sup> and Wells's first reaction was that his ideas on the Catholic Church might be considered too polemical. Though he was willing to write the book, he warned Lane that he was 'intensely *anti-Roman Catholic*'. Maybe, he suggested, his

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<sup>16</sup> Eunice Frost to H. G. Wells, 5 August 1941. Wells Collection.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Lewis accounts for Lane's decision to publish *Crux Ansata* with the careless observation that 'it was unlikely that Penguin would have spurned suggestions from Wells or Bernard Shaw, however eccentric' (Lewis, *Penguin Special*, 172).

<sup>18</sup> See John Hammond, ed., *H. G. Wells: Interviews and Recollections* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 100.

<sup>19</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 18 February 1943. Wells Collection.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Allen Lane*, 26.

work should be published side by side with a defence of the Church – ‘The Case For’ and ‘The Case Against’.<sup>21</sup> But Lane reassured Wells that ‘it was your known views on the subject that prompted us to write to you in the first instance’.<sup>22</sup> Wells wrote the book, which contains a history of the Catholic Church from its beginnings, with extraordinary speed. It took him barely five weeks and Lane personally collected the manuscript from the author at the end of March. As a special present in those days of rationing and food shortages, Lane sent Wells a jar of honey from what he called his ‘secret hoard’ immediately after their meeting.<sup>23</sup> This is possibly a unique gift from a publisher to one of his authors and it clearly reflects the personal warmth that had grown up between Lane and Wells.

The Catholic Church was officially neutral in the Second World War but there has been much comment, at the time and since, on Pope Pius XII’s alleged appeasement of Hitler. Moreover, while cathedral cities in both England and Germany were bombed (including Canterbury in June 1942), the Allies had agreed not to attack Rome, the capital of Mussolini’s Italy, because it contained the Vatican City. This is the background to the first chapter of *Crux Ansata*, based on Wells’s 1941 newspaper article ‘Why Don’t We Bomb Rome?’.<sup>24</sup> The manuscript was sent immediately to Penguin’s legal expert, who produced a two-page report on its potentially libellous and defamatory contents.<sup>25</sup> Wells agreed to a few small changes and offered to indemnify the publishers against legal costs, an offer that Lane very honourably refused to accept. Once again, this episode reveals the warmth of Lane’s relationship with Wells. Untroubled by the opinions of his legal expert, Lane told the author that ‘I must say that I enjoyed the book immensely and look forward to a lively reception’. Wells’s annotation for reply says that ‘Its delightful to find one publisher exists who does not suffer from contagious cold feet’.<sup>26</sup>

The best sentence of Penguin’s legal report runs as follows: ‘The abuse of the present Pope would probably be actionable in the almost inconceivable event of an action being brought by him’. Wells was overjoyed by this. To be sued by the full might of the Catholic Church with its claim of papal infallibility was the polemicist’s ultimate dream: it would, he thought, be ‘the suicide of the Church’.<sup>27</sup> In the event, Pope Pius XII did not sue for libel, but *Crux Ansata* had a predictably stormy reception in the Catholic press. Some booksellers refused to stock it and Penguin USA refused to publish it. This tiny closely-printed book

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<sup>21</sup> H. G. Wells to Allen Lane, 23 February 1943. Wells Collection.

<sup>22</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 26 February 1943. Wells Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 30 March 1943. Wells Collection.

<sup>24</sup> H. G. Wells, ‘Why Don’t We Bomb Rome?’, *Star*, 19 January 1941, 6. Information from David C. Smith.

<sup>25</sup> Penguin Production Dept. to H. G. Wells, 14 May 1943. Wells Collection.

<sup>26</sup> Allen Lane to H. G. Wells, 31 May 1943. Wells Collection.

<sup>27</sup> Penguin Production Dept. to H. G. Wells, 14 May 1943. Wells Collection.

of 96 pages of very thin paper was almost the last fighting and campaigning book that the ageing and ailing Wells would produce. To give a sample, I will quote without comment its final words, from the chapter entitled ‘The Pretensions and Limitations of Pope Pius XII’: ‘the Pope, any Pope, is necessarily an ill-educated and foolish obstacle, a nucleus of base resistance, heir to the tradition of Roman Catholicism in its last stage of poisonous decay, in the way to a better order in the world’.<sup>28</sup>

Wells was very ill (could he have been struck down by the Almighty?) for a year or more after *Crux Ansata* was published. His correspondence with Lane and his assistants now principally concerned the long-delayed plans for reprinting the full range of his classic fiction. Negotiations with the publishers who controlled the rights in Wells’s early novels went on for almost three years, but by late 1945 Lane had put together a series of ten titles to be published simultaneously on Wells’s eightieth birthday, 21 September 1946 (which also happened to be Lane’s forty-fourth birthday).<sup>29</sup> 100,000 copies of each title were printed, making a total of a million copies. Penguin had earlier brought out a set of ten titles by Shaw and would later pay the same tribute to Agatha Christie, Evelyn Waugh, and (of course posthumously) D. H. Lawrence. Unfortunately, Wells’s tribute also turned out to be posthumous. He died on 13 August, some six weeks before publication date, so that the planned birthday celebration became a memorial.

The ten titles published in 1946 were for their time a splendid edition of Wells. *The Invisible Man*, *Kipps* and *The War in the Air* were reprinted; the other seven books, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The History of Mr Polly*, *Love and Mr Lewisham*, *The New Machiavelli*, *The Time Machine*, *Tono-Bungay* and *The War of the Worlds* came out in Penguin for the first time. Some of these titles would stay in Penguin editions for many years afterwards, while others passed to rival paperback publishers such as Pan Books once the initial agreements had lapsed. From a textual point of view, it is notable that the Penguin *Doctor Moreau* incorporates at least two typographical corrections recommended by George Orwell, setting right errors which had persisted ever since the first edition of 1896.<sup>30</sup> *The Time Machine* was published, at Lane’s suggestion, as *The Time Machine and Other Stories*, consisting of the title text and fourteen short stories chosen by Wells. This led twelve years later to the enlarged volume of *Selected Short Stories*, containing a different version of *The*

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<sup>28</sup> H. G. Wells, *Crux Ansata: An Indictment of the Roman Catholic Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943), 96.

<sup>29</sup> Allen Lane to Marjorie Wells, 21 November 1945. Wells Collection.

<sup>30</sup> For the 1946 Penguin corrections see H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), xxxi-xxxii. A letter from George Orwell detailing the errors to be corrected reportedly survives in the archives of Penguin Books, though I have not seen it. Wells’s side of the correspondence with Penguin has not been located in the firm’s archives.

*Time Machine*, which I referred to at the beginning of this paper.<sup>31</sup> It was last reprinted in the 1990s, just before the extension of Wells's UK copyright from fifty to seventy years post-mortem.

Today we are at the beginning of a new chapter in the story of Wells and Penguin. I have been too closely involved with the titles now republished in Penguin Classics to discuss them objectively, but I do believe that they are fully in the tradition of the firm's long involvement with Wells. All the evidence suggests that H. G. would have been delighted by the new interest in and commitment to his works on the part of Penguin Books. Sir Allen Lane would surely have welcomed it, too.

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<sup>31</sup> *The Time Machine and Other Stories* reprints the 1895 Heinemann version of *The Time Machine*, while *Selected Short Stories* substitutes a revised text based on the 1931 Random House edition. See H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), lxxxi-lxxxiii for the difference between these texts.