MR. BRITLING, OR 'WAR AS INNER EXPERIENCE'

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Abstract. For the centenary of the First World War, we rediscover *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916), a rare novel in which H. G. Wells powerfully delivers his 'inner experience' of the real world catastrophe, so often announced by this expert in imaginary wars. From the heart of the fight, Ernst Jünger the fierce warrior had sung his *Kampf als inneres erlebnis*. With *Britling* written far from the front, Wells shows how deeply a man of peace can be involved. For the first time, he does not treat a war novel as a literary game. He understands the war as a global event but knows that with *Britling*, the message to be delivered must come from the soul and be deeply personal. The novel is largely autobiographical, the inner experience being enlarged through the heart-breaking death of Hugh, an imaginary son, parallel to that of Heinrich, the German preceptor and friend. Emotion is at its deepest in the dramatically decisive scene between Britling and his wife. This emotion is built gradually through the art of the writer, from a narrative timeline to a vortex; through analogies and contrasts between Matching's Easy's Flower Show and echoes of the coming war in the distance; with the long drive in the quietness of the night; by describing how war, so far totally unknown on British soil, gradually invades 'the common texture of English life'. With the night scenes as echoes of Britling's inner plunge into his experience of war, the novel has a poetic flavour, reminding us that night was always for Wells a great source of inspiration.

From *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* to *Mr. Britling*

2014 was a time of hectic commemoration of the First World War in France, with all kinds of conferences, celebrations, exhibitions. I thought it would be a good opportunity for us Wellsians to review the period of the Great War through the eyes and words of H. G. Wells, even if the commemoration of the Great War in Britain is probably more controversial than in France. So I started re-reading many texts (fiction and non-fiction, correspondence, criticism) but soon realised that, to treat a subject like 'Wells and the First World War', a whole book would be needed and that the title, together with the period considered, was much too ambitious. I thus proposed to focus on what seems to me the most interesting Wellsian item for the period 1914-1915, the novel *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, written as early as 1915, and published by Cassell in 1916.

The questions of dates and title are important here. In the preface to volume 22 of the Atlantic Edition (1926), where the book appears under the shorter title *Mr. Britling*, says that he began writing it 'early in 1915' – that is, just a few months after the war was declared – thinking that it would be over much sooner than it was:

> *Mr. Britling*, first published under the title *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, was begun early in 1915 and written as the war went on. It was a chronicle of contemporary thought and feeling. The author had been under the persuasion that the war would end in about a year's time; he chose his title in that belief, he became accustomed to this title, and he kept it although quite manifestly nothing had been 'seen through' by the time the story ended. People found themselves in this book and it had a great sale.

It must be noticed that this first title, to which Wells declares to have been so much attached, was also the source of several misinterpretations and mistranslations, especially in France, where Wells's works were in high demand and always immediately translated. In my country, the book was published as early as 1917 under the title *Monsieur Britling commence à voir clair* (which would rather correspond to 'Mr Britling sees through it').[1]

So we shall now simply refer to the novel as *Mr. Britling*. But apart from the anecdote about the title, what struck me when I began thinking about this paper was that I had never fully realised how this book, rather too long with its pseudo-religious rambling at the end, is exceptional in Wells's oeuvre. It was the first time in the long life and career of this unique 'témoin de son temps' (according to the words of our late colleague Jean-Pierre Vernier), when he was confronted with **the real**, most exceptional world tragedy and catastrophe ever known (he who had been writing so much already about imaginary world catastrophes), and the only time when he took the risk of dealing with it in a novel. He was forty-nine, in full possession of all his energy and his capacities as a great writer, which would not be the case twenty-five years later at the time of the Second World War.

Ernst Jünger's 'inner experience'

As I was re-reading *Mr. Britling* very carefully, I always had, at the back of my mind Ernst Jünger's book *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, published in 1922 and usually translated as 'War as an Inner Experience'. This title

[1] H. G. Wells, *Monsieur Britling Commence à Voir Clair* (Paris: Librairie Payot & Cie, 1917).

seemed very relevant and applicable to Wells's book, even if the atrociously epic experience of the young German officer, directly engaged from the beginning in the worst fights on the Western front, seemed to run contrariwise to the story of an older man, a father and a writer, very far from the front. With all his peaceful social background around him, that man was nonetheless able to rebuild from within and transmit to the reader his own dramatic experience at the deepest level of emotional capacity.

Ernst Jünger was born in 1895 and died in 1998 at the age of 103. He was an extraordinary actor and witness of both world wars, a fantastic warrior and storm trooper (or rather 'storm officer') in the Great War, which he describes in two parallel books: *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*) published in 1920, a narrative directly rising from his war diary, and 'War as an Inner Experience', an essay written in a more reflexive and lyrical form, and published in 1922. Here again, we can notice a slight mistranslation in the title: 'Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis' would rather mean 'fight as an inner experience'. But the scope thus enlarged, from 'fight' to 'war' (from 'Kampf' to 'Krieg') is perfectly acceptable and has to be assumed: we need only read a few pages, and look at headings within the book, such as 'Blood', 'Horror', 'Trenches', to realise that war at large is the real subject of this article.

What does Ernst Jünger mean when he describes 'war as an inner experience'? And what should we understand by those words? We must remember that this unique writer and philosopher, also well-known as an entomologist who spent a great part of his life at the crossroads between France and Germany (or French and German cultures), was first of all in his early days a soldier and a warrior. Born in Heidelberg, he ran away from home in 1913 (he was not yet eighteen years old) to join the French Legion and fight in North Africa. Engaged in the German army from the very beginning of the war in 1914, he fought as a hero. He was wounded seven times and later became the youngest fighter to be awarded the highest Prussian distinction 'Pour le Merite' in September 1918. He was then a lieutenant at the age of twenty-three.

In 'War as an Inner Experience', war is seen from within, at close quarters. But from the horror of death in the trenches, with the sound and fury of the battlefields on the Western front, Jünger tends to celebrate war as a total event belonging to our nature. For him, Man is not destroyed but made by war; he is measured by his capacity to sustain pain and sacrifice; war brings cruel death, but also means re-birth, a new approach to a larger life, a new strength and soul, the birth of a new man and of a new world. Following

Heraclitus, Jünger writes a colossal celebration of Polemos (πόλεμος) as War God father of everything. From this inner experience of war, he will derive, in the next decade, his conception of a non-democratic society, totally mobilised, and run by a body of warrior-worker-scholars (cannot we perceive here a faint echo of Wells's 'Samurai' from *A Modern Utopia*?). However, Jünger was never be a Nazi and refused all Nazi involvements proposed to him through the thirties. During the Second World War, he served as an administrative officer, based in Paris, with cultural connections at the highest level (Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau), and with the deepest contempt for Hitler, nicknamed Niebolo in his secret diary. He was not involved but probably aware of the Stauffenberg bomb plot against Hitler at the end of the war. He was a uniquely ambiguous character for whom François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl had a common admiration.

Wells as war expert

Now the reader may well ask: what has all this to do with Wells's 'inner experience' of war, as expressed in *Mr. Britling*, where everything, in terms of narrative, characters, situations, style, is so different, even radically opposed? Indeed, from Jünger to Wells, we seem to go from one extreme to the other, from the warmonger to the pacifist. For deep at heart, **Wells was, and always remained a pacifist.**

Yet the question becomes relevant if we remember that, as war is declared in 1914, Wells can be considered as a war expert, with a combination of technical, but also literary, imaginary, prophetic experience developed on hundreds of pages devoted to war over the previous twenty years. War and fight, old strategies and new weapons, wars of the future, have been dominant themes throughout his work since the beginning, with several novels or romances – *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), *The Food of the Gods* (1904), *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), *The War in the Air* (1908), *The World set Free* (1914) – with short stories such as 'The Empire of the Ants', 'The Land Ironclads', 'The Flying Man', 'The Argonauts of the Air', 'A Dream of Armageddon', with sociological works like *Anticipations* (1902), *Mankind in the Making* (1903), *A Modern Utopia* (1905), to which we must add *Little Wars* (or how to fight with toy soldiers) published in 1913, where he sets the rules of the game on the lawns of his country house at Easton Glebe.

As I. F. Clarke shows in his book *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749* (1993), war had become a mainstream element of popular literature in Europe during the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870; as we have

seen, Wells explored the invasion trope from his 'scientific romances' onwards.[2] In any case, the theme of ultimate war was dominant from the start in SF at large, the best example being the well-known shortest short story of all, full of the unbearable suspense of 'what happens when the world ends?' This is the story: 'After the last atomic war, Earth was dead; nothing grew, nothing lived. The last man sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door…'[3]

Over his first twenty years as a writer, Wells continued to play the game of 'what would happen if...?', wherein war granted him many opportunities: it was his food for thought, a 'booster of invention'; a field where he could resource his imagination, his prophetic stories. For Wells, war was a game of the mind and of the pen, giving him great fun, as in a well-known letter to his friend Elizabeth Healey which he wrote when working on *The War of the Worlds*: 'Also between ourselves, I'm doing the dearest little serial for Pearson's new Magazine, in which I completely wreck and destroy Woking – killing my neighbours in painful and eccentric ways – then proceed via Kingston and Richmond to London, which I sack, selecting South Kensington for feats of peculiar atrocity…'.[4] His predictions about the future of warfare, such as the atomic bombs dropped from the air in *The World Set Free* (1914) and his 'land ironclads', which became the first tanks on the battlefields in 1917, were sometimes dramatically fulfilled.

More generally, Wells started (as early as 1902) with the postulate that 'the great change that is working itself out in warfare is the same change that is working itself out in the substance of the social fabric' where 'the old broad labour base' was being replaced 'by elaborately organised mechanism'. In warfare also, horse and private soldier would soon be replaced by elaborate machines. And Wells took great pleasure in inventing them in detail, as well as inventing new strategies to put them to their better use. Thus, he became a sniper with the new rifle 'provided in the future with cross-thread telescopic sights, the focusing of which, corrected by some ingenious use of hygroscopic material, might even find the range, and so enable it to be used with assurance up to a mile or more'. Wells predicted that, at the frontier

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[2] I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3] Qtd. in Sam J. Lundwall and Dean Ellis, *Science Fiction: What It's All About* (New York: Ace Books, 1971), 13.

[4] To Elizabeth Healey [late Spring 1896], in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, ed. David Smith (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), vol. 1, 442.

between opponents, there would be no definite army, no great general in the field but

> a vast duel between groups of skilled marksmen, continually relieved and refreshed from the rear [...] somewhere far in the rear the central organiser will sit at the telephonic centre of this vast front; [...] behind the thin firing-line that is actually engaged, the country for many miles will be rapidly cleared and devoted to the business of war; big machines will be at work making second, third, and fourth lines of trenches that may be needed if presently the firing-line is forced back [...] and all along great motor-roads there will be a vast and rapid shifting to and fro of big and very long-range guns.[5]

I have chosen these short passages from *Anticipations*, written in the first year of the century, less to check their degree of accuracy some fifty or even a hundred years later, than to show how keen Wells was in his interest for a future war in the making.

However, Wells's best prophecy about war, one that really makes him, if not the 'prophet of his time' but at least one of the best far-sighted thinkers of his time, is to have perceived war as becoming global in the twentieth century, and to have even seen – a new avatar of 'Polemos as father of everything' – that **war would be the first source of globalisation**. This prophecy was to be fulfilled in terms of not only armament, technology, networks and economy at large, but also in terms of a new consciousness for the individual. This is very clear for instance in the first chapter of *The World Set Free*, written in 1913, where, through the meditation and experiences of Holsten, the scientist who discovers the incredible power of atomic disintegration, we can follow the crisis and disruption of the world economy. This crisis is due to the fast, uncontrolled expansion of this new energy and leads to a great world war, 'the Last War' in 1956.

The world of today resonates with such stories. The older ones among us have lived and experienced the changing horizon of globalisation. We knew in 1945 that we were coming out of the second great disaster of the century; we knew it had been a world disaster, from Europe to Japan, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But many of us – at least the younger ones like me – felt that, for better or for worse, we had become global, that we came out of it as 'Citizens of the World'. It was a beautiful dream, a dream that Wells had announced, even if, as an old man of almost eighty in 1945, he

[5] H. G. Wells, *Anticipations, and Other Papers*, Atlantic Edition, vol. 4, 157-161. *Anticipations* was first published by Chapman & Hall in 1901.

could no longer be very optimistic about it, and rather considered that the dream was turning into a nightmare. I must admit that, as an old man of over eighty, I tend to share the same impression.

Wells as public voice: novels with a purpose

If one comes back to the year 1915 when Wells begins to write *Mr. Britling*, another important element to assess his attitude as regards war is to consider his position as an author, or rather as a public voice in Britain and elsewhere. For several years now, he has become a different kind of author, a novelist with a purpose, a story-teller with a message. The story of this evolution of Wells towards the discussion novel is well documented and I shall not comment upon it here. Even if the movement had started earlier, we can consider that the first book in which he completely assumes this new approach is *The New Machiavelli*, published with difficulty – even refused at first by publishers – in 1911. Literary critics all agree to underline his failing prestige at the time. For instance, John Batchelor writes about *The New Machiavelli*:

> This novel and the subsequent 'prig novels' are marked by absence of humour, hasty composition, and a solipsistic conviction that the central figure in each of them is exclusively possessed of truth and righteousness. The novels become moves or gambits in Wells's struggle to shore up his failing prestige; these were the years during which the former admirers of his fiction came to see him as largely a spent force.[6]

Wells had been submitted to a virulent campaign against the immorality of *Ann Veronica*, published in 1909. *The New Machiavelli*, completely assumed as a novel of ideas, could be seen as a counter-attack. But reviewers later denounced in the same vehement way the weaknesses of *The Passionate Friends* (1913) and of *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914). Wells found himself caught in a trap from which the writing of *Mr. Britling*, so different from the so-called 'prig novels', would enable him to escape, as is clearly shown by the success of the book – 'a huge success particularly in America, where it earned about £20,000', as Wells claimed proudly in *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934).[7] It was in fact the most profitable novel he ever wrote, earning some £50,000 in the first eighteen months.

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[6] John Batchelor, *H. G. Wells* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 95.
[7] H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 503.

During the same period, the prestige that Wells had been losing among his former readers as a novelist and storyteller was somehow regained in the capacity of a leader of opinion. He was becoming more and more influential for public opinion, was even acknowledged as a guide by the less conservative part of society. His opinion was sought after. He considered himself invested with a mission and felt committed to delivering important messages to the world. This 'commitment' almost became a sort of 'engagement' in the military sense of the word in the early days of the Great War. Thus, although completely surprised by the war declaration in August 1914, he felt he had to deliver his opinion on the very first days in a series of articles for the London press, published in October under the title *The War That Will End War*. 'I shouted various newspaper articles of an extremely belligerent type', he says again in *Experiment in Autobiography*.[8] At this moment, the pacifist found himself in an awkward position, which would last for a few months; he had become a war supporter because he felt he had to approve Britain's involvement in fighting German imperialism (the 'personal imperialism of the Hohenzollern') and to support the 'little states', Belgium and Luxembourg unduly attacked and invaded.

Of course, this initial public position in favour of the war had nothing to do with 'inner experience', or even with the 'actual' experience of the war. But those articles reveal his consistent knowledge of the subject. In them, he delivers a very clear analysis of the five causes of the war, as underlined by John Partington in his study of H. G. Wells's political thought: 'These five issues, private armament manufacture, secret diplomacy, monarchical government, nationalism and the teaching of nationalist history were the main factors which Wells believed brought about the Great War.'[9]

Wells at the crossroads: the scope of autobiography

As Wells started writing *Mr. Britling* in 1915, he found himself at a triple crossroads: a) between momentary bellicosity, on the one hand, and his deep-rooted pacifism, on the other; b) between prophetic stories of imaginary invasions and exotic fights, on the one hand, and the daily news from the front of massacres in a terrible world war, on the other; c) between his assumed mission as public opinion maker, and a growing consciousness that the message to be delivered would have to be of another nature, more personal and profound. Wells certainly began to feel the 'profound change'

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[8] Ibid., 670.

[9] John S. Partington, *Building Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H. G. Wells* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 71.

later mentioned in his autobiography: ‘no intelligent brain that passed through the experience of the Great War emerged without being profoundly changed’. It would probably have been more accurate to speak of ‘soul’ rather than ‘brain’. But even when speaking of inner life and personal experience, Wells was always ill at ease with the word ‘soul’ and reluctant to use it. Remembering his early days at the Normal School of Science, he would rather refer to the ‘brain’, which one could always dissect in the lab. According to the subtitle of *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells proposed to deal with ‘the discoveries and conclusions of a very ordinary brain’. But the ‘profound change’ brought about by the Great War is what he made us feel throughout the Britling story, and we would rather follow it as the dissection of a soul.

In 1915, Wells certainly understood that his mission was to not only analyse and explain what was happening, but that the challenge lay elsewhere; confronted with such tremendous events, he knew he had a deeper message to deliver; **he had to express how war was felt and lived from within**. Nothing much is said about *Mr. Britling* in Wells’s autobiography. He liked the book, probably because of its success, but considered it inferior to *Joan and Peter* (1918). It also seems that in 1934, Wells did not want to acknowledge the detailed autobiographical content of the book:

> Before the end of 1914, I had already set to work upon a record of my mental phases, elaborated in a novel, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. It is only in the most general sense autobiographical – and I lost no son. But the story of Mr. Britling’s son and Mr. Britling’s grey matter could be repeated with ten thousand variations. Mr. Britling is not so much a representation of myself as of my type and class, and I think I have contrived in that book to give not only the astonishment and the sense of tragic disillusionment in a civilized mind as the cruel facts of war rose steadily to dominate everything else in life, but also the passionate desire to find some immediate reassurance amidst that whirlwind of disaster.[10]

Gloria Fromm notices in her remarkable article about Dorothy Richardson’s lifelong relation with H. G. Wells revealed in *Pilgrimage*, ‘Wells was a tireless – and protesting – autobiographer [...]. He certainly did all he could both to multiply his likeness and to discourage autobiographical reading.’[11]

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[10] Wells, *Experiment*, 503, 670.

[11] Gloria Glikin Fromm, ‘Through the Novelist’s Looking-Glass’, in *H. G. Wells: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976), 157.

In fact, most critics agree that *Mr. Britling* is the most autobiographical of his novels. In his excellent article about Wells and the Germans, Michael Sherborne considers that 'Wells's most powerful response to the Great War is *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*', adding:

> 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.[12]

For John Batchelor, who qualifies *Mr. Britling* as a 'central' work,

> one reason for its centrality is its autobiographical content: it could equally have been called *Mr Wells Stands Up to It*. Britling, like Wells, is a successful writer with a somewhat cool marriage enlivened by sexual adventures outside, and his house, Matching's Easy, is closely based on Easton Glebe. 'Lady Homartyn' in the novel is based on Lady Warwick, Wells's neighbour and landlady, and 'Heinrich' is based on Karl Büttow, the German tutor that the Wellses had engaged for their sons. There are two little boys who match Gyp and Frank Wells. This novel then moves beyond its sources: the most important member of the Britling family, Hugh, the son of his first marriage who is killed in the war is not based on a particular person. It is as though having recorded the home that he loved as the setting for his story, Wells found that his imagination produced a stronger reality: the treatment of Hugh's young life and death is extraordinarily moving and persuasive.[13]

Hugh's death is indeed the absolute climax of the story. However, the irony of the situation is that instead of losing a son in 1915, Wells had just become the father of a new one, Rebecca West giving birth to Anthony Panther West on the very day the war was declared (4 August 1914).

Mr. Britling as a work of art

In any case, the question for us is not to measure the exact percentage of autobiography in *Mr. Britling* – whether Wells is as bad a car driver or if Britling's mistress, Mrs Harrowdean, lives at the same distance as Rebecca West from Easton Glebe. Instead, we are to comprehend how the novel

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[12] Michael Sherborne, 'Educating Heinrich: H. G. Wells and the Germans', *The Wellsian: The Journal of the H. G. Wells Society* 37 (2014), 34.

[13] Batchelor, 108.

reveals his 'inner experience' of the war, the evolution of his 'inner consciousness'; and how he manages, through his literary genius, to involve the reader in this inward movement.

Our purpose is to trace the growth of this inner experience and find how it is revealed through the art of the novelist. *Mr. Britling* is a great novel and a work of art in spite of its imperfections, and we can agree with Patrick Parrinder when he says, in the introduction to his apology of Wells's later brilliant tale, *The Croquet Player*:

> Wells did not altogether cease to be an artist in 1915 or thereabouts – that he did so is a myth which he must take some of the blame for fostering – and the conflicts of his personality, as well as his capacity for detaching himself from them, are splendidly mirrored in a brief tale which inaugurates the final decade of his life, *The Croquet Player* (1936).[14]

Mr. Britling is a deeply moving novel; it was felt as such by millions of readers. In a way – and in spite of its weaknesses which we shall point out – it displays the novelist's art at its best, in terms of structure, characters, style; it is well worth trying to analyse it as such – something which unfortunately is too rarely done.

Place and time. The story takes place in Essex, at the heart of the most traditional British countryside, and rarely gets away from the tiny village of Matching's Easy where Mr Britling lives. The book is divided into three parts (or three 'books'): 'Matching's Easy at Ease', 'Matching's Easy at War', and 'The Testament of Matching's Easy'. The first part – by far the longest since it covers about one half of the novel – in which England is not yet at war, includes a period of about six weeks, going from the end of June to the first days of August 1914, when the war breaks out.

The novel begins with the classical technique of **close-up**, scenery and characters being at first seen from afar, then becoming more precisely delineated by a gradual approach. War is nowhere in the landscape at first; it will become visible only very slowly, as the camera moves closer. In the beginning, the camera is in the eyes and perceptions of Mr Direck, an American visitor who has come over to invite Mr Britling, a great writer and essayist, for a series of lectures on behalf of the Massachusetts Society for

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[14] Patrick Parrinder, 'Experiments in Prophecy', in *H. G. Wells: Reality and Beyond: A Collection of Critical Essays Prepared in Conjunction with the Exhibition and Symposium on H. G. Wells*, ed. Michael Mullin (Champaign: Champaign Public Library, 1986), 19.

the Study of Contemporary Thought. It is Direck's first visit; he discovers the 'true Old England' and gradually adjusts his American preconceptions to Britling's eccentricities, his family, Dower House, a large country house with its beautiful garden and the peaceful Essex countryside around.

The general tone at first is that of **light comedy**, a tone which will slowly move later, in an extremely measured way, into the serious and the tragic. Comedy comes in many scenes in this first part, with Britling driving his car in the most unpredictable way and delivering his theories about everything with the great authority of his jerky voice. Comedy additionally plays itself out at Lady Homartyn's manor in the heated debate with the 'triumphant' ultra-conservative Lady Fensham denouncing Socialists, Irish patriots and Home Rule. There is also comedy transpiring in the festive atmosphere of the family life and its large circle of friends around the Britling family, engaged in all kinds of parties, and the compulsory games of hockey on Sundays. Mr Direck falls in love with the young Cecily, and Britling tries to compromise between his family life and his precarious relation with a mistress who lives twenty miles away. Life as usual!

The first allusion to war comes after fifty pages from the beginning and concerns a possible civil war with Ireland. On page 60 (Atlantic Edition), Fate begins knocking at the gate with a first mention of Sarajevo; on page 97, there is 'a very loud report [...] too far off the curve of this round world to be either heard or seen at Matching's Easy'. It announces that the bombing has happened (28 June 1914). On page 112, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand's murder is mentioned in the press, implying that war might break out in Europe. The balance between comedy and this darkening timeline is carefully kept, with a growing tension.

War comes nearby in the second half of the novel, with a gradual involvement of the main characters, eventually leading to the heart-breaking death of Hugh, son of Britling from his first marriage, a boy of nineteen whom he loved more than anybody else. This tragedy is paralleled by the death of Heinrich, the German preceptor engaged as tutor of Britling's two younger sons until the war declaration. Although not precisely dated, the death of Hugh certainly happens in September 1915, other dates and names being mentioned in between to follow the timeline: the battle of the Marne in September 1914, Antwerp and Calais with the 'Race to the Sea', the battle of Flanders, Gallipoli and the Dardanelles in Spring 1915, the sinking of the *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915, the Battle of Champagne in September 1915. Overall, the action of the novel covers a little more than one year, the first year of the Great War.

From timeline to vortex

But **rather than a line, or a timeline,** the structure of the novel should be best described as **a vortex** in which Britling is being caught as war gets nearer. This circular movement of war getting closer and sucking everything and everyone into its maelstrom is carefully built in the story. Chapter 4 'Mr. Britling in Soliloquy' prepares this with a sudden plunge into his inner life, a deliberate attempt at self-analysis, and the revelations of the weaknesses of 'a man of impulse and too much imagination', with 'thoughts too quick and acts not slow enough'. In a long passage of Chapter 5 'The Coming of the Day', Wells develops an objective analysis of all circumstances leading to the war during 'that sunny July'. Here, he underlined the full responsibility of Germany and the immediate European scope of the battle: 'From the hour the ultimatum (from Austria to Serbia) was discharged the way to Armageddon lay wide and unavoidable before the feet of Europe.' He also shows that the consciousness of impending war becomes universal at an individual level, that the turmoil growing in 'the seething pot of Mr Britling's brain' is shared by millions of others:

> indeed while Mr. Britling lay awake and thought of his son [...], of God and evil and a thousand perplexities, a multitude of other brains must also have been busy, lying also in beds or sitting in studies or watching in guard-rooms or chatting belatedly in cafés or smoking-rooms or pacing the bridges of battleships or walking along in city or country, upon this huge possibility the crime of Sarajevo had just opened, and the state of the world in relation to such possibilities.

Thus, the closer encircling of his mind goes on ineluctably during the month of July 1914: 'his mind remained curiously apprehensive throughout July. He had a feeling that things were not going well with the world, a feeling he tried in vain to dispel by various distractions. Perhaps some subtler subconscious analysis was working out probabilities that his conscious self would not face.' The vortex quickens when on 1 August there is mobilisation everywhere; Herr Heinrich has to leave for Germany to do his duty, war is at the door of Dower House in Matching's Easy, and the two younger Britlings are vigorously mobilising with their toy soldiers on the play-room floor. On Monday 3 August, Matching's Easy Flower-Show is in full swing in Claverings Park, with 'the roundabouts very busy and the shooting gallery popping and jingling' and sending all the ironically childish echoes of the approaching war. As Mr Britling arrives with his two boys, he is suddenly 'swung round by a loud bang. It was the gun proclaiming the start of the

balloon-race.' Meanwhile in the sunshine, the newspaper headlines proclaim: 'The Great Powers at War; France invaded by Germany; Germany invaded by Russia; 100,000 Germans march into Luxembourg; Can England abstain?'; war is there:

> less than four hundred miles away with a front that reached from Nancy to Liège more than a million and a quarter of grey-clad men, the greatest and best-equipped host the world had ever seen, were pouring westward to take Paris, grip and paralyse France, seize the Channel ports, invade England, and make the German Empire the master-state of the earth.

Mr Britling is amazed and furious: 'we must smash or be smashed!' War has finally reached him and it is a great shock. At night, he tries to escape from it with his car, in a long drive in the moonlight. Along the flower-show, still in full progress with the roundabouts churning their relentless music, the shooting-galleries popping, the swing boats creaking through the air, the motor-cars flickering around, he stops a little while and whispers: 'On the very brink of war – on the brink of Armageddon; do they understand? Do any of us understand?' Uphill and downhill in the immense quietness of the night, he drives to the seaside. 'Even now, the battleships may be fighting.' But all is quiet on the sea front where he stops and sits for a long time, thinking of armies gathering, battleships coming out, and aviators preparing to fly. He nearly gets lost on his way back, pondering 'how he could best help England in the vast struggle for which the empty silence and beauty of this night seem to be waiting'. Back home in the middle of the night, he goes straight to his room and keeps writing, until dawn, at a pamphlet entitled 'And Now War Ends', the exact replica of Wells's essay *The War That Will End War*, written in the same circumstances.[15]

From then on **during the second part of the novel**, the grip of war on Mr Britling's mind and soul becomes tighter and tighter, and in the middle of his book, **Wells clearly unveils his purpose**, which is precisely to reach and express the 'inner experience' of the war:

> This story is essentially the history of the opening and of the realisation of the Great War as it happened to one small group of people in Essex, and more particularly as it happened to one human brain. [...] If this story could be represented by sketches or pictures the central figure would be Mr. Britling, now sitting at his desk by day or by night and writing first at his tract 'And Now War Ends' and then at other things, now walking about his garden or in

[15] H. G. Wells, *The War That Will End War* (London: Frank & Cecil Palmer, 1914).

> Claverings Park or going to and fro in London, [...] All Mr. Britling's mental existence was soon threaded on the war [...] He did not really believe with his eyes and finger-tips and backbone that murder, destruction and agony on a scale monstrous beyond precedence were going on in the same world as that which slumbered outside the black ivy and silver shining window-sill that framed his peaceful view. [...] It was still outside the range of Mr. Britling's thoughts all through the tremendous onrush and check of the German attack in the west that opened the Great War. Through those two months he was, as it were, a more and more excited spectator at a show, a show like a base-ball match, a spectator with money on the event, than a really participating citizen of a nation thoroughly at war. . . .[16]

However, after those two months of August and September 1914, **Mr Britling turns from spectator into actor,** and the new inner grip of war on his mind and soul can be followed gradually during the second half of the novel, as events begin to touch him directly. He goes to London with a strong desire to 'engage', to get a 'brassard', with a mixture of exalted voluntarism and fear for the young men, his secretary Teddy and his son Hugh. In fact they will soon leave, Teddy for the front and Hugh, who is younger, to join the Territorials. Then Britling himself becomes a 'special constable', a sort of night watcher who is to spend his nights walking in the Essex countryside. War again gets nearer with the arrivals of Belgian refugees, who have been direct witnesses of fights, deaths, and atrocities. At Christmas time, England has become a country full of soldiers, military supplies, and the Britlings have to accommodate twenty-five soldiers in their barn. Britling is now permanently obsessed; his ideal of civilisation is completely disrupted: 'after some months he had to believe in the grim reality of systematic rape and murder, destruction, dirtiness, and abominable compulsions. . . Germany is in a blind fury.' Britling is astonished at his own hatred of the Germans, the only relief coming from an occasional letter from Heinrich transmitted by his American publisher, bringing memories of the 'good Germany' he had known in the past, like the far away dream of a lost world. Then there are the battleship fights, the Zeppelin raids over eastern England where even children are killed, the submarine war with the sinking of the *Lusitania* close to Liverpool in May. The malignity of war has reached Essex, Matching's Easy and Mr Britling's soul. He meditates on evil and cruelty, thinking of a future essay entitled 'The Anatomy of Hate', where the questions would be:

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[16] H. G. Wells, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (London: Unwin, 1926), Atlantic Edition, vol. 22, 260-2.

‘is the whole scheme of nature evil?’ ‘And isn’t there some sort of rightness lurking below cruelty, a creative and corrective impulse behind all hate?’

Hugh leaves for the front and through his letters we shall live the war with him, first in a village, then in the trenches. In those letters which are somehow improbably too long, too well written, Wells is carried away by his desire to make us **live the war with him at grass-roots level**. It is seen and experienced from within, a war with no heroes but just ordinary soldiers, like Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) – so much admired by Wells; and like Fabrice del Dongo at Waterloo in *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), or like the unknown American soldiers dying under the waves at Omaha Beach on 6 June 1944, in the famous first twenty minutes of Steven Spielberg’s film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Here, Wells as a novelist is at his most modern! Hugh’s letters are a tremendous weight on his father’s mind; the monstrous absurdity of the war propels him into a state of mental confusion and intellectual emptiness: he stops writing about the war. After a last letter in which Hugh describes his engagement in a real fight – very similar to that of Ernst Jünger – his rushing out of the trenches, the excitement and the scare that involve his taking of two German prisoners, and the death of his friend Ortheris at his side, there is a silence of several weeks. Then comes the telegram announcing Hugh’s death. The shock is tremendous and Mr Britling is devastated. But this scene of bereavement, so common in thousands of families in England, France, Germany and elsewhere, gives Wells the opportunity of writing, with the most commonplace words and gestures, **the very best pages of his novel**, pages in which Britling and his wife Edith, so far apart in ordinary life, suddenly break through the wall and get together. She goes to his room where he has retired late at night, tries to stroke his head, but with a great sense of failure:

> And suddenly her stroking hand ceased. Suddenly the real woman cried out from her. ‘I can’t *reach* you!’ she cried aloud. ‘I can’t reach you. I would do anything. . . . You! You with your heart half broken. . .’ She turned towards the door. She moved clumsily, she was blinded by her tears.
>
> Mr. Britling uncovered his face. He stood up astonished, and then pity and pitiful understanding came storming across his grief. He made a step and took her in his arms. ‘My dear,’ he said, ‘don’t go from me. . .’.
>
> She turned to him weeping, and put her arms about his neck, and he too was weeping. ‘My poor wife!’ he said, ‘my dear wife. If it were not for you – I think I could kill myself to-night. Don’t cry my dear. Don’t cry. You do not know how you comfort me. You do not know how you help me.’ He drew her to him; he put her cheek against his own. . . .

> His heart was so sore and wounded that he could not endure that another human being should go wretched. He sat down in his chair and drew her upon his knees, and said everything he could think of to console her and reassure her and make her feel that she was of value to him. He spoke of every pleasant aspect of their lives, of every aspect, except that he never named that dear pale youth who waited now. . . . He could wait a little longer. . . .
>
> At last she went from him. 'Good night,' said Mr. Britling, and took her to the door. 'It was very dear of you to come and comfort me,' he said. . . .

Then, Britling goes down into the rose garden and keeps staring blankly into the darkness: 'He made his way to the seat in the arbour, and sat down and whispered a little to himself, and then became very still with his arm upon the back of the seat and his head upon his arm.'[17]

Those are the last words of the second part 'Matching's Easy at War', and for me **the novel should have stopped here**, on this climax of sorrow and new understanding. Apart from the pleasant return of Mr Direck as a Canadian officer (since the USA is yet very far from entering the war) and the unexpected resurrection of Teddy, I find very little to retrieve from the third part of the book entitled 'The Testament of Matching's Easy'. Most of it is devoted to long, heavy and boring developments where Mr Britling finds God, thinks of writing an essay on 'The Better Government of the World', and calls for a World Republic in an interminable letter of consolation to Heinrich's parents.

The poetry of *Mr. Britling*

Fortunately, the book has other beautiful moments. It can be praised, for instance, for the **night scenes** recurring as a way of poetic scanning of the story. Knocking at the gate of the reader's imagination, they come as echoes of Britling's increasingly deeper plunge into the inner experience of war, as an obscure mirror of the minds and souls involved, and as a framework for meditation. Let us consider three examples, among others.

I have already mentioned his long drive after the village Flower Show on the night of 3 August when the war breaks out, and the countryside around reverses a perfect picture of peace:

> [T]he evening seemed as light as day, a cool moonshine filled the world. The road was silver that flushed to pink at the approach of Mr. Britling's headlight, the dark turf at the wayside and the bushes on the bank became for a moment an acid green as the glare passed. The full moon was climbing up

[17] Wells, *Mr. Britling*, 466-70.

> the sky, and so bright that scarcely a star was visible in the blue-grey of the heavens. Houses gleamed white a mile away, and ever and again a moth would flutter and hang in the light of the lamps, and then vanish again in the night.[18]

We feel in Wells's words the pleasure of the painter putting the final touches of colour on his canvas in the form of a question mark: is there room for war in such a beautiful world?

Later on, we find Mr Britling doing his duty as a 'special constable' by watching at night vulnerable points such as bridges and fords in the hilly country to the north-west of Matching's Easy: 'He prowled the lonely lanes and paths in the darkness, and became better acquainted with a multitude of intriguing little cries and noises that came from the hedges and coverts at night.' Here, night provides music rather than colours and helps at meditation: 'As he prowled the countryside under the great hemisphere of Essex sky, or leaned against fences or sat drowsily upon gates or sheltered from wind and rain under ricks or sheds, he had much time for meditation, and his thoughts went down and down below his first surface impressions of the war. . .'[19]

Then, there is the night after the Zeppelin bombing when, among many civilian casualties, his Aunt Wilshire is grievously wounded and dies. This time, as Mr Britling walks through the scene of the bombing in that small seaside resort, night provides the perfect setting for the tragedy:

> The night was cold and bleak, but full of stars. He had already mastered the local topography, and he knew now exactly where all the bombs that had been showered upon the place had fallen. Here was the corner of blackened walls and roasted beams where three wounded horses had been burned alive in a barn, here the row of houses, some smashed, some almost intact, where a mutilated child had screamed for two hours before she could be rescued from the debris that had pinned her down, and taken to the hospital. Everywhere by the dim lights of the shaded street-lamps he could see the black holes and gaps of broken windows.[20]

Night meant peace and paradise, as presented in our first example; here it definitely means hell!

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[18] Ibid., 222.
[19] Ibid., 313.
[20] Ibid., 365.

I do not know if Wells was afraid of darkness all his life, much more than of bombs, as he had said to Elizabeth Bowen one night during an air raid of the Second World War, when she vainly tried to persuade him to leave his house near Regent's Park and take shelter underground.[21] But what I am sure of is that – maybe because of this early childhood fear – night was always for him a great source of inspiration.

Mr. Britling and _Boon_ revisited together

In conclusion, I would like to raise one last question. It concerns *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, which also concerns its connection with *Boon, the Mind of the Race and the Wild Asses of the Devil*, a closely contemporary work. This question concerns the coincidence between the period when Wells was actually writing the novel, and the fragment of history, covered by the story of *Mr. Britling*. As we have seen, this fragment covers a period of about fifteen months, from the end of June 1914 (a few days before Sarajevo) to mid-November 1915, two months after the death of Hugh, when Mr Britling, who has just heard of the death of Heinrich, writes to his parents in Pomerania. But the novel is not a diary and the writing of it occurs over a shorter period in 1915, beginning in spring and probably ending in November. The question is: why those dates? Why not begin earlier and finish later, at the end of the war? And what was Wells doing during the previous seven or eight months, between the beginning of the war and the spring of 1915?

If we consider first **the end of the period**, November 1915, several reasons seem to explain why Wells finished his novel at that moment. The first and main one is that the first year of the war had been the most violent and murderous in sudden attacks, open fights, advances and retreats, with millions of casualties already; now troops on both sides were blocked in the mire of the trenches on the Western front, the movement somehow ground to a halt, and no immediate end was in view. 'War is in deadlock', Wells wrote to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle* in January 1916.[22] Wells had personally experienced the turmoil described in *Mr. Britling*. He had been very much divided during this inner journey into his own consciousness, and according to Dorothy Richardson, he could never bear being divided; he had to recover his inner consistency; he had made an ultimate attempt as a

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[21] Richard Hauer Costa, 'H. G. Wells and the Palimpsest of Time', in *H. G. Wells: Reality and Beyond*, 68.

[22] To the Editor, *Daily Chronicle* [c. 30 January 1916], in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, vol. 2, 442.

'prophet' in pretending to 'See It Through' in the title of his book, but he already knew he had failed. As a prophet (be it the Cassandra or the Moses type, to refer to Parrinder's relevant categories),[23] he had nothing to say about the near future; he preferred to look further and escape the 'Godexit way' in the last pages of the book. Moreover, generally speaking, he hardly ever worked more than six months on a book and he therefore chose to return to his activities as thinker, polemist, journalist and war correspondent: he would soon be visiting the frontline in France and Belgium and be a direct witness of the war.

As regards now **the beginning of the period** – that is, the eight months from the war outbreak to the time when Wells wrote the first pages of *Mr. Britling* (June 1914 – March 1915), we have to consider his tremendous activity at that time. Privately and publicly, he was on all fronts at the same time: with Jane he had to look after the heavy works of renovation engaged to redecorate the family house at Little Easton; apart from Jane he had to find comfortable, convenient but discreet accommodation for Rebecca who was pregnant – first in Hunstanton, (Norfolk), then at Braughing (Hertfordshire), some twelve miles from Little Easton. But most of all, there was the flow of letters to be written and answered, the articles, papers, memos sent to various newspapers and correspondents, especially after the war began, the incessant intellectual activity of the writer with several books still in hand and to be published soon (*The World Set Free*, *The Research Magnificent*, *Bealby*, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*), and more relevant than all for our topic today, even if it is probably the shortest work in spite of its long-drawn title, *Boon, the Mind of the Race, the Wild Asses of the Devil and the Last Trump*.

In his paper, 'Wells Breaks Out: Reflections on the Centenary of *Boon*', delivered at the AGM of the H. G. Wells Society in 2014, Patrick Parrinder made us discover the close relationship between *Boon* and *Mr. Britling*, even if the two works are very different in matter, style and purpose. Rarely read, except by Wells scholars, *Boon* is mostly known as the conclusive deadly stab in Wells's quarrel with Henry James, who was to die a year after. The book was published in May 1915. A large part of it had been written many years before, but Wells completed it at the beginning of the war in the summer of 1914, 'while the Germans were driving towards Paris' (as he writes in the preface to vol. 13 of the Atlantic Edition); and/or in December 1914 as he told Henry James in a letter: 'Some of it was written before I left my home in Sandgate, and it was while I was turning over some

[23] Parrinder 'Experiments', 8.

old papers that I came upon it, found it expressive and went on with it last December.'[24] In this exchange of letters with James following the publication, Wells claims it to be 'waste-paper basket' literature. This strange book of parables is supposedly composed from unpublished scraps of writing left by Boon, a deceased Author, in his attic and drawers, and collected for posthumous publication by his literary executor Reginald Bliss. But as such it can be considered, by far, as the most modern – even post-modern – of Wells's books, a book made of bits and pieces like a cubist painting, in which he is much closer to James Joyce (mentioned in *Boon*) than to Henry James.

The greatest interest for us in this strange work is that *Boon* begins and ends with the First World War and provides, as it were, a programme of action, **a roadmap for the writing of *Mr. Britling***. As Parrinder established, 'Wells's tortuous and spiritual journey during the War years, partly reflected in *Boon*, still had much farther to go, as would be seen for example in his 1916 novel *Mr. Britling*.' To overcome the nightmare propagated by the Wild Asses that have escaped from Hell and are running amok, to reach a higher state of civilisation according to the Mind of the Race, people and especially writers will have the duty to resist 'the black evils of this war'. Such a mission is in the end the result of Mr Britling's 'inner experience', of his inner voyage into the black hole of war. In the last pages of the novel, as Mr Britling is reading the letters sent by Heinrich and Hugh, and looking at their photographs, we find this very clear echo of *Boon*:

> The letters reinforced the photographs in their reminder how kind and pleasant a race mankind can be. Until the wild asses of nationalism came kicking and slaying amidst them, until suspicion and jostling greed and malignity poison their minds, until the fools with the high explosives blow that elemental goodness into shrieks of hate and splashes of blood. How kindly men are – up to the very instant of their cruelties![25]

[24] To Henry James, 8 July 1915, in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, vol. 2, 430.
[25] Wells, *Mr. Britling*, 526.