

# NOTES AND QUERIES

H. G. WELLS<sup>1</sup>

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**(translated from the Arabic by Hind F. Shahin-Hindi)**

No other writer has been as successful at depicting the zeitgeist of his own age as has Herbert George Wells, with the exception of his friend Bernard Shaw. Truly, their names live in the world, owing to their role in awakening England from its Victorian age, and in bringing the glad tidings of – perhaps even hastening – a new age, that is, the age of science, more specifically, the age in which thought escaped its shackles and emerged free and sound.

Wells – the first anniversary of whose death was commemorated on Wednesday, the thirteenth of August [1947] – was closer to the people than was his friend, Bernard Shaw. He was born near London in 1866 to parents of the lower middle class, as his father was the owner of a small shop. Wells knew only poverty as a child, and that period of his life left its mark upon the rest of his days, as well as a special imprint upon his work. Wells left school at thirteen and worked as an assistant in a drapery shop for two years. At sixteen, he became a teacher and soon won a scholarship to join the Royal College of Science, from which he graduated with honours. He practised teaching for a while and began writing for journals, then he published his first successful novel and soon devoted himself entirely to literature.

This is but a glimpse of the first part of Wells's biography. However, merely to lay down the bare facts provides little understanding of the fierce struggle and the bitter strife Wells had to put up with in order to fulfil his heart's desire because of his poor conditions and inferior birth. Needless to say, he persisted in writing and reading with much diligence and hard work until he produced some eight novels and collections of stories in two years, thus attaining fame while not yet past thirty years of age, despite the obstacles thrown in his way by his lowly birth.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the transcript of a radio talk on the BBC Arabic Service given in 1947. We are grateful to Professor Mohammad Shaheen of the University of Jordan for bringing this long-lost piece to our attention and for overseeing the translation.

While most writers are satisfied with fame in one department, Wells achieved multifaceted fame due to his hard work, wide-ranging interests, and many talents. Let us begin here with the novelist, whose career started in literature and who is known by most people as a writer of stories. At the Royal College of Science, Wells studied under the renowned Thomas Huxley, and there he developed his love of scientific enquiry at a time when science was promising great opportunities. Like his contemporaries, Wells was interested in the ample prospects that modern science unveiled, hence, he wrote his first novel, which brought him fame, in the mode of science fiction. The novel met the desire of many and was, therefore, read by thousands of readers; his novels, such as *The Time Machine* and *The Invisible Man*, continue to be read with pleasure and delight. The latest of Wells's books of fantasy is *The Shape of Things to Come*, which he wrote in 1933, and which was made into a film. The novel predicts a war, not much different from the last war, and the rise of an idealist regime thereafter. In this novel, Wells follows in the footsteps of the French writer Jules Verne, who predicted aeroplanes and submarines and whose writings were considered, at the time, to be figments of imagination. The materialisation of the future that Wells envisaged in his books, such as *The Shape of Things to Come*, is not far-fetched; however, he is more likely to be commemorated as a writer of stories because of his four social comic novels published at the turn of the twentieth century: *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, *Kipps*, *The History of Mr. Polly*, and *Tono-Bungay*.

There is much in common between Wells and Dickens with regard to the conditions of their upbringing, as well as their novels. Wells wrote his social novels in a Dickensian manner, and he populated them with likable middle-class characters. By their power of expression, the novels represent different types of people, and while they provide a wealth of knowledge on the nuances of life in the years of transition from one century to the next, they also portray the class to which Wells belonged. Primarily, these are the stories of ordinary men – honest, good, faithful – who have struggled to escape the wretchedness of their birth, their political immaturity, and their lack of education. Conversely, if we were to look at the novels from a purely literary perspective, we would find flaws; unlike authors, such as Henry James, who paid attention to form prior to all other concerns, Wells lacked their patience. His novels, however, compensate for this defect with their charming humour, realistic depiction, and great candidness. In writing these novels, Wells drew on his life experiences; his novel *Kipps*, subtitled *The Story of a Simple Soul*, relates the story of how an assistant in a drapery shop came to inherit and lose his fortune. Such was Wells's interest in the life of

the common man in his early novels that he became his mouthpiece, articulating his hopes, love, and hate as no other writer has done. As previously mentioned, Wells cared little for the novel's form or structure; in 1911, he authored a treatise on *The Contemporary Novel*, in which he expressed his opinion that the novel should not be considered as a means of relaxation. Wells followed his own advice later in his life; he tried to make the novel a means of presenting his different theories. Other writers, such as D. H. Lawrence, adopted the same approach but failed in the attempt. E. M. Forster observes in his great work, *Aspects of the Novel*, that the novel includes a story, but that once it becomes a medium for expressing a set of views which can otherwise be expressed in a non-fictional work, it loses its appeal and becomes long and tedious. Therefore, Wells's later attempts at writing will not earn him the fame his earlier novels did, such as *Kipps* and *Tono-Bungay*, which he wrote without affectation.

Few men have had such extensive interests and farsighted views as Wells. In addition to his novels, he wrote many short stories, including 'The Country of the Blind', which should not be missed. Yet, his most famous work is *The Outline of History*, which was first published in 1920 and has sold around three million copies to date. According to Wells, the purpose of the book is to correct the manner in which history is taught, replacing limited, national histories with an overview of the universal history of humanity.

It is difficult to predict which of Wells's works will endure; possibly none, only the future will tell us. Nevertheless, Wells as a figure will stand the test of time, as a major influence in a crucial time in the history of the West, a time when people began to express their discontent with the religious and political systems of the day. Wells, Shaw, and other men of their standing helped to break the restraints on thought enforced by traditions and nurtured by ill motives and frivolous folly. It fell to these men to set up the foundations of a new life, a life that rests on the soundness of thought and the integrity of literature. Like Bernard Shaw, Wells was a revolutionary; he held important views on politics, labour, marriage, and a variety of other topics, even though such views were not generally accepted. Wells remained committed to reason and excellence, and he was always in favour of the common man in the street. In an introduction to one of his later works, *The Outlook for Homo Sapiens*, he admitted to loathing the restriction of science and the distortion of knowledge more than anything else in existence, and that in this modern world he believed that there was no greater crime than that of starving the mind of a child.