

**Book Review:** Anne Holden Rønning, *Hidden and Visible Suffrage: Emancipation and the Edwardian Woman in Galsworthy, Wells and Forster* (Bern, et al: Peter Lang, 1995). 266 pp. ISBN 3-906750-07-8. £28.00 / \$51.95 / €43.50. [John S. Partington]

Although this book is eleven years old, it warrants a review on the basis that it is still in print, it deals with Wells, it is obscure (unavailable in the UK except through direct orders to the publisher) and it is a very useful study. Its author, Anne Holden Rønning, is a Norwegian scholar of British feminist literature, having also published on Katherine Mansfield, Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah Mitchell. *Hidden and Visible Suffrage* aims to contribute ‘to an understanding of the role women played in literature written by male authors who were in favour of and supported women’s rights, and questions the apparent disparity between the non-fiction and fiction writing of these authors.’

In her study, Rønning attempts to read John Galsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga* (1906-21), H. G. Wells’s *Ann Veronica* (1909) and E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910) in relation to writings on

the women's movement during the late-Victorian and Edwardian period in order to try to understand how contemporary readers of the novels would have received them within the existing debate over the position of women in society. This kind of historical approach, using primary sources in the process, is salutary though as much of the primary material is dealt with in the early chapters and the literary analysis largely occurs late in the book, I would question the choice of structure used by Rønning. Much more satisfactory would have been an integrated reading of the novels and the primary sources, looking at themes within the 'Woman Question', with a juxtaposition of newspaper and journal articles alongside excerpts from the novels. Such an approach would have made a more powerful impact on the reader, while the existing structure relies on readers' memories of facts and quotations from earlier chapters taken from journalism when considering the novels later in the study.

Rønning is also concerned to argue against the common misconception that New Woman writing of the 1880s and 1890s is somehow separate from the feminist literature (by both men and women) of the Edwardian period, asking rhetorically 'How can one divorce in a cultural context the wave of writing by both genders in the 1890s on the New Woman and texts such as *Ann Veronica*?' (15).

Although Rønning refers to 'suffrage' in her title, this study covers much more than the campaign for the female franchise. Indeed, 'In this study the word "suffrage" is deliberately used to refer to the whole campaign for women's emancipation, not just the vote' (19). The author successfully defends this position, arguing that many women's organisations of the time, even while the word 'suffrage' appeared in their title (i. e., the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies), sought changes in legal and social laws as well as in electoral reform and, in fact, it was only with the emergence of the suffragette movement (the Women's Social and Political Union) in 1903 that a single-issue 'Votes for Women' campaign came into existence.

Turning specifically to Rønning's treatment of Wells, although *The New Machiavelli* (1911), *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914) and *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) are referred to, her study focuses largely on *Ann Veronica*. As a feminist novel, Rønning has many criticisms of *Ann Veronica*:

One of the structural weaknesses in this particular text is that the writer builds up a plot where freedom through education is a key issue, but fails to sustain his argument through to the end. Ann Veronica never completes her education, but lets her love and sexuality interrupt it. [...] Wells simply presents us, his readers, with a couple who break the rules of society and have to take the consequences as regards social position and work, thereby weakening the argument that education provided freedom, social and intellectual for women. (98)

Indeed, 'It seems that Ann Veronica's independence [...] is only possible abroad; once back in England she becomes Capes' property' (79). A more debatable point in Rønning's analysis is her suggestion that the market was the cause of Wells's pulling back from the brink in the feminist radicalism of his Edwardian novels:

Conscious as he was of the financial side of his writing, it seems as if Wells does not dare in any of his texts to carry the consequences of the characters' actions to their ultimate conclusions. As many of the lives of his characters were unconventional and radical, he knew he would have problems getting his work published. It is as if he puts forward a model for young women to copy only to snatch it away at the decisive moment (99).

Given Wells's difficulties with his publishers over some of his novels, especially *The New Machiavelli* which was rejected by two publishers before getting into print once Wells had made certain legal guarantees to Bodley Head, it would seem more likely that the progressively radical treatment of the 'woman question' in his novels from *Ann Veronica* to *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* was, indeed, Wells's considered position; he explored female liberation thus far, but could not see a way of satisfactorily forwarding female emancipation further during the *belle époque*.

Rønning also criticises Wells's writing style in *Ann Veronica*, maintaining that 'in this text, as in so many other works by Wells, the cramming of too many factual details tends to swamp the reader. A first reading can only skim the surface of the complexity of the issues

included for consideration by a potential reader' (98). In addition she feels that 'Wells' characters do not elicit sympathy from the reader [...] because his didactic aim is too obvious. [...] [C]haracter drawing is not his *métier*' (226-27).

If Rønning identifies a conservative ending and technical flaws in the writing of *Ann Veronica*, she nonetheless argues that its strengths far outweigh these weaknesses. In *Ann Veronica*, 'the argument Wells makes, and makes successfully, is that women, as the bearers of the new generation, should be empowered to choose their mate, and such institutions as marriage should not block this. The novel ends conventionally, with the couple married and Capes again working in education (and Ann Veronica's father back on good terms), but the way Ann Veronica wins her man is altogether radical and the point Wells seems to have set out to make' (98). Wells's major discovery in his feminism, and one that Rønning implies makes his ideology more radical than the single-issue feminists of the suffragette movement, is that, 'Like several male feminist supporters Wells saw the fundamental link between suffrage and sexuality, and was thus critical of suffragettes who pretended that their sexual life and needs were irrelevant in the question of the vote. As long as social laws also governed a woman's life to such a large extent, especially the marriage laws, sex could not be excluded from the issue, in Wells' opinion' (203). On Wells's feminist ideology, Rønning continues: 'Basically, Wells' theory is that a society in which the laws assume all men and women think and act in the same manner, totally overlooks the physical and psychological differences between the genders in questions of sexuality, and between individuals within people of the same sex' (135).

In concluding her analysis of Galsworthy's, Wells's and Forster's feminism in their Edwardian writings, Rønning considers Wells's ideology as expressed in *Ann Veronica* as the most radical: 'The attempt at freedom made by Wells' protagonist is the most provocative of all the fights for liberty in some form or other made by female characters in the works chosen, as *Ann Veronica* too fails as she is unable to fight the conventions of society when her husband is once more admitted to social circles, and motherhood approaches' (79). Despite identifying *Ann Veronica*'s pregnancy and marriage to Capes at the end of the novel as a conservative conclusion, Rønning decides, nonetheless, that *Ann Veronica*'s failure to achieve the promise of her earlier science education contains the radical message in the novel, as it clearly demonstrates the poor choices open to women and the fact that, even where women can chose their sexual companion,

their decision to enter into motherhood closes other doors behind which a degree of sexual equality lies.

Rønning's analysis of Edwardian writers' feminism with reference to contemporary periodicals is a useful approach to understanding the sexual politics of the time. Although her conclusions are generally sound in regard to the novels she considers, it is unfortunate that she chose not to look at a wider range of the authors' works from the period. This decision particularly restricts our understanding of Wells's feminism, as *Ann Veronica* was simply the first of a string of novels looking at gender relations, continuing with *The New Machiavelli*, *Marriage* (1912), *The Passionate Friends* (1913) and *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*, not to mention such non-fiction as *A Modern Utopia* (1905), *Socialism and the Family* (1906) and 'The Endowment of Motherhood' (1910). This criticism aside, *Hidden and Visible Suffrage* is a fine study of Wells's feminist ideology, and it also sits nicely alongside William Bellamy's *The Novels of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy, 1890-1910* (1971) and Linda R. Anderson's *Bennett, Wells and Conrad: Narrative in Transition* (1988) as comparative studies of Edwardian writers.