

## NOTES

1. H.G. Wells A Modern Utopia (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1914), p.79
2. Ibid. pp 36-37
3. Ibid. p 184
4. Hans Freyer Die politische Insel (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1946) p.38
5. Thomas More Utopia (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1955) pp 183-184
6. Freyer op.cit., pp.37-38. Translation mine.
7. Wells op.cit., p.15
8. H.G.Wells The Shape of Things to Come (London: Hutchinson, 1935) p.224
9. H.G.Wells Anticipations (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1902), p.267
10. H.G.Wells Men Like Gods (New York: Macmillan, 1923,) p.303
11. Andreas Voigt Die sozialen Utopien (Leipzig: Goschensche Verlagshandlung, 1906), Preface. Translation mine.
12. Wells A Modern Utopia, p.15
13. Ibid. pp 201, 224
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. p.238
16. Ibid. p.17
17. Ibid. p.121
18. Wells Men Like Gods, p.173
19. Wells The Shape of Things to Come, p.327
20. A.L. Morton The English Utopia (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952), p.183
21. Stopford A. Brooke and George Sampson, English Literature (London: Macmillan, 1935), p.209
22. Ernst Bloch Freiheit und Ordnung. Abriss der Sozial-Utopian (Berlin: Aufbauverlag, 1947), p.203. Translation mine
23. Wells. A Modern Utopia, p.316
24. Wells. Experiment in Autobiography (New York: Macmillan, 1934) p.204
25. Wells. A Modern Utopia pp.84-85

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## The Cromie-Wells Controversy, 1901-02

### David Lake

In December, 1901, one month after *The First Men in the Moon* appeared in book form, Wells was accused of gross plagiarism by Robert Cromie, Irish author of *A Plunge into Space* (1890). Four letters to the Editor appeared in *The Academy* magazine, December, 1901 to January 1902, and then the affair fizzled out. But more was going on behind the scenes. Cromie wrote three private letters (never yet printed) to Douglas Sladen, literary editor of *The Queen*, complaining of the treatment he was receiving. Wells apparently sent a solicitor's letter to Messrs Frederick Warne, Cromie's publishers, threatening legal action if Cromie repeated his charges in a preface to a planned new edition of *Plunge*. No new edition of *Plunge* ever appeared, in 1902 or later; possible Wells's threat had some effect, possibly not - Cromie by now was not on good terms with his publishers. Anyhow, no sarcastic preface got into print, which is probably why the whole affair is largely forgotten today.

I now propose to re print the entire correspondence, with the minimum of explanatory comment. There are in all eight texts, five printed in *The Academy*. I shall give "diplomatic" transcripts of the Cromie-Sladen letters, omitting apostrophes and stops just as Cromie does. "Sic" is to be understood in many places.

The first text is the anonymous review of *First Men in The Academy*, mostly favorable, which provoked Cromie. From this I will give only brief extracts.

1. *Academy* 61, 7 Dec, 1901, p.541

*The First Men in the Moon*. By H.G.Wells (Newnes 6s)

HERE Mr Wells returns to the kind of subject in the treatment of which he first won success...

The hero of this book is the law of Gravitation. Mr Wells, making his morning meditation upon this dogma of Physical Science, has hit upon the happy hypothesis: Suppose just one thing in the world were to break loose from the law... That, we believe...is the germ of the story. The journey in the isolated sphere abounds in ... delightful consequences ... The voyagers land upon a body whose "pull" is no more than one-eighth (sic) that of the earth ... to fall over a thirty-foot cliff is to float down like a snowflake...

2. (Cromie to Sladen)

Private

113 Park Road, Belfast  
9 December, 1901

Dear Sir,

From your remarks in a kindly paragraph you wrote some months ago re my "A Plunge into Space" (new illustrated edition still in the publishers hands) I gathered that you remembered its first appearance ten years ago. I venture therefore to draw your attention

to current issue of *The Academy* page 541 in which you will find a special article on Mr Wells *First Men in the Moon*. The reviewer gives Mr Wells the sole credit for the Gravitation idea:- "Mr Wells...has hit on "the happy hypothesis"&c.

My publishers know that Wells has practically lifted the first 9 chapters of my *A Plunge into Space* but they don't think it worth bothering about. They know that this is not the first time Wells has 'lifted' my "Sphere" and in fact my whole modus operandi. They know that this book *First Men in Moon* is being reviewed in England and America as though the gravitation idea was Wells own invention - and when I write to them they do not so much as acknowledge receipt of my letters. If you would look at the *Academy* article to corroborate what I say and make a paragraph on the subject for your literary column it would be a great kindness to me and might help to get me - the credit of my own work! It would be no use my writing to *The Academy*. They have a paragraph regularly once a week booming Wells and would not print my letter. So much for the Outlanders chance in the Republic of Letters!

With apologies for this intrusion,

Yours very truly

Robt Cromie

The Literary Editor  
"The Queen"  
London

Since writing I have decided to try Messrs. Fred Warne & Co once more to urge them to take some action

RC

(Notes - Cromie is here exaggerating his own case, the "booming" of Wells, and the discrimination against him. In his novel he calls his spacecraft a Globe, not a Sphere. *The Academy* certainly did not have a "paragraph once a week" booming Wells. I have scanned *Academy* throughout November 1901 and found nothing whatever on Wells in the issues of 2, 9 and 16 Nov. In 30 Nov. there is a line about Wells's "monsters" in a quotation from Chesterton, otherwise nothing. Cromie was probably annoyed by the issue of 23 Nov., which has (a) a long review of *Anticipations* (anon.) pp 476-8, mostly favorable; (b) a brief notice of *First Men* (one para.), p 484; (c) a brief competition-review, one long para. of *Anticipations*, by J.P.Finchley. Printing it just after the prizewinner (on Gissing), the editor says it would have won the prize if Finchley had observed the set word limit. Finchley was not uncritical: he found Wells's stern Efficients "not real". As for *Academy* not printing Cromie's letters, the upshot will show how wrong he was.)

(3) *Academy* 61, 14 Dec. 1901, p 597.

Rights in Gravitation. (Editor's title)

SIR, - In the article on Mr Wells's book, *The First Men in the Moon* (the *ACADEMY*, December 7, page 541), your reviewer says: "Mr Wells has hit on the happy hypothesis" of an interference with the law of gravitation. Will you allow me to say that in my *A Plunge Into Space*, published in 1890 by Messrs. Frederick Warne and Co., I "hit on" the same hypothesis. I also hit on the construction of the sphere, the appearance of the firmament from a point outside the earth's atmosphere, the comic effect of lighter gravity on a smaller planet, which you mention, and other details which you do not. In a preface to a new edition of my book which is in preparation, I have made a suitable apology for having sub-consciously plagiarised beforehand the work of other writers on a similar plane whose inventions and ideas I had inadvertently embodied in my book. - Yours, &c.,

Belfast

ROBERT CROMIE

4) *Academy* 61, 21 Dec. 1901, p 618.

Rights in Gravitation.

SIR - I have never heard of Mr Cromie nor of the book he attempts to advertise by insinuations of plagiarism on my part. - Yours, &c.,

Spade House, Sandgate

H.G.WELLS.

(Note - I believe Wells was entirely truthful here, if undiplomatic (a more courteous answer might have terminated the controversy at once). Many of the space-travel effects Cromie referred to were commonplaces of a long tradition, and low-gravity leaping on the moon goes back as far as Bishop Francis Godwin's *Man in the Moon*, 1638).

5) (Cromie to Sladen [enclosing cut-outs of items (3) and (4)])

Private

113 Park Road  
Belfast  
28 December, 1901

Dear Sir,

Mr Wells

I am most grateful for your letter of 26th inst and the kindness which prompted you to write to me. Since I wrote to the Queen the matter has developed. I was able to get the enclosed letter into the *Academy* and I send you Mr Wells reply. There is another letter in the current\* issue which gives my case up to the present with some detail with this important exception - while Mr Wells was ostensibly replying to me in the paper he sent a solicitor's letter to my publishers containing a threat (in my "lay" opinion a grossly illegal threat) with a view to procure the suppression of a preface which in the same letter he claimed was no concern of his. His letter in the *Academy* you will see was only a couple of lines; His solicitors letter contains over 150 words. I will not comment on this at present but if Mr Wells does not withdraw his charge of bogus self advertisement

against me I will ruthlessly use the weapon which he has so conveniently placed in my hands.

As I hope to write to you again if I may, I will not intrude further on you now save to repeat the expression of my most grateful thanks

Yours very truly  
Robt Cromie

Douglas Sladen Esqre.

\*Crowded out I suppose by Christmas pressure. If it does not appear in next issue I will publish it elsewhere RC.

- 6) Academy 62, 4 Jan. 1902, p 659 (Ellipses in this letter are original.)

#### Rights in Gravitation

SIR, - As Mr Wells says he never heard of me or my book, I accept his statement unreservedly, and wish to express my regret for any annoyance that may have been given him by my letter, the intention of which, however, was not to charge him with conscious imitation. But I must ask your permission to deny that I abused your columns by the introduction of an advertisement in the guise of an ostensibly genuine letter to the editor, and to support that denial circumstantially.

The salient features in the first nine chapters of *A Plunge into Space* are: - The supposititious discovery of the secret of gravitation - The manufacture of a structure to exploit this - The building of the machine in the form of a sphere - The arrangement for renewing the air while the sphere was flying through space - The start from the earth - The flight through space, and the appearance of the firmament when outside the earth's atmosphere - The anxiety as to being able to breathe Martian air - The comic effect of lighter gravity on a smaller planet, &c.

The features in the opening chapters of *The First Men in the Moon*, which might seem to some to offer points of similarity, are - The supposititious discovery of the secret of gravitation - The manufacturer of a structure to exploit this - The building of the machine in the form of a sphere - The arrangement for renewing the air while the sphere was flying through space - The start from the earth - The flight through space and the appearance of the firmament when outside the earth's atmosphere - The anxiety as to being able to breathe Lunar air - The comic effect of lighter gravity on a smaller planet, &c.

When two or more writers are working on the same general theme there will obviously be some similarity in the choice of incidents, and this similarity will often be of phrase as well as fact. For example, where I describe a detail: "By a simple device of double doors any...article can be expelled with only a trifling loss of air," Mr Wells gives the same as: "An airtight manhole is all that is needed ...so that things may be thrown out, if necessary, without much loss of air." Even when the themes are totally different, the same writers will often show points of similarity. Thus, in a short story. 'In the Abyss,' by Mr Wells in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1896, the sphere comes in under very different

conditions. The illustrations of this particular sphere, indeed, reminded me of the picture of the sphere in my frontispiece. I hope I have expressed that with sufficient modesty. I certainly do not wish to evoke another accusation from the artist, even though it may carry with it another advertisement. If in this story Mr Wells had not made his diving bell a sphere, and called it a sphere, and if the illustrations had not reminded me of my sphere, no other similarity would have struck me, for none such would have existed. The one sphere was sunk in the sea; the other was plunged into space.

It would serve no purpose to pursue this unduly, but I hope I have said enough to prove that my object in writing to you in the first instance was to forestall any charge of writing conscious imitations of Mr Wells into the new edition of my book. What would any critic who, like Mr Wells, had never heard of me or my first edition, say? And surely there must be many such. The foregoing explanation would sooner or later be demanded. I have give it now, and am glad to be done with it, albeit at the charge of unworthy advertisement, the value of which Mr Wells possibly overrates. - Yours, &c.,

ROBERT CROMIE

(Note - This purports to be pure self-defence, but surely it is not. It makes the original charge of plagiarism in *First Men* more detailed, and adds another insinuation about 'In the Abyss'. This latter is probably what Cromie had in mind when he said in Item 2 "This is not the first time Wells has 'lifted' my 'sphere'" - an absurd complaint, as if Cromie had a copyright on all spherical man-carrying vessels in space or under sea.)

- 7) Academy 62, 11 Jan. 1902, p 678

#### Rights in Gravitation

SIR - Mr Cromie still claims more than he is entitled to do. There is nothing whatever in my book, I am glad to say, about "the supposititious discovery of the secret of gravitation" or "the manufacture of a structure to exploit this." And excepting the point about lighter gravitation which was popularised ever so long ago by Sir Robert Ball, all the other trivial points of resemblance Mr Cromie specifies - including the amazing coincidence of the manhole - are to be found in *A Trip to the Moon*, by M. Jules Verne, to whom we are all indebted and to whom I unreservedly do homage. - Yours, & c.,

H.G.WELLS

(Notes - Wells's references are to (a) Sir Robert Ball's *In the High Heavens* (London: Isbister, 1893) pp 47-48; (b) Jules Verne, *Autour de la lune (Round the Moon)*, 1870, end of chapter 5. Wells is misleading here, as I shall explain in my concluding remarks.)

- 8) (Cromie to Sladen) 113 Park Road Belfast

21 January, 1902

Dear Sir,

Mr Wells's reply to my letter in *The Academy* was so weak it was hardly worth answering.

I sent however a short note to the editor asking him to publish it unless Mr Wells would consent to make a private apology to my publishers. The letter did not appear and I do not know whether my publishers received any apology and as our relations are rather strained I do not care to ask them. So the matter stands and I don't know whether it is worth pursuing. What do you think? I should be greatly obliged for your opinion which of course I would treat with the strictest confidence. A curious feature of Mr Wells's reply to my letter was the astonishing statement that there was nothing in his book about the supposititious discovery of the secret of gravitation or the manufacture of a structure to exploit it when his first four chapters deal with little else and I see these features specially advertised in American papers. He is rather audacious therefore in disowning these matters but to the boomed all things are possible. I hardly like to trespass further on the *Academy* after the really very fair show they gave me - who am an Outlander.

I trouble you with the foregoing owing to my previous declaration that unless Mr Wells withdrew his charges I would use the weapon he had given me. I have used it but it seems that have broken short in my hand.

With apologies and best regards

Yours truly

Robt Cromie

Douglas Sladen Esqre

And so concludes our whole evidence on this matter. For more particulars of the career and works of Robert Cromie, see Darko Suvin, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK, 1848-1900* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983). He died in 1907; his letters to Sladen are held in the Sladen collection, Richmond Borough Library, but not Sladen's letter(s) to Cromie. One presumes the dispute fizzled out immediately after this last letter of 21 January, 1902. The "weapon" which Cromie refers to in this letter seems to be Item 6, which probably parallels the preface Cromie projected for his never-to-appear edition.

On the substance of Cromie's charges against *First Men*, I think neither Cromie nor Wells gives a satisfactory account. There are certainly more coincidences between *Plunge* and *First Men* than Wells admits. I do not count the two anti-gravity devices. Anti-gravity devices were two-a-penny in nineteenth century science fiction and Wells's device is markedly different from Cromie's. Cromie's navigator merely turns "two screws", and his *Globe* plunges "almost instantaneously" to Mars (p60). More interesting is the fact that both Cromie's and Wells's crews include a businessman who hopes to make a good profit out of the trip. That idea, however, could certainly have occurred to Wells independently. But Wells is disingenuous in referring to Verne. There is very little of Verne in Wells - or Cromie. The fact is that both writers were indebted to the tradition launched by Percy Greg in his *Across the Zodiac* (1880). The marks of the Greg-type novel are three: (1) the interplanetary journey is a secret adventure for one or a few men (2) rendered feasible and cheap by a secret discovery of anti-gravity, and (3) "closed off"

by the death of the inventor who takes his secret with him, so that the adventure cannot be repeated. All these features are in Cromie and in Wells and thus arise most of the resemblances between *A Plunge into Space* and *The First Men in the Moon*.

#### Acknowledgements

I am indebted for this article first, to my colleague in Queensland University, Dr Chris Tiffin, who alerted me to the Cromie-Sladen letters, while he was researching the Sladen Collection for other reasons; second, to the Richmond Borough Library, for permission to publish those letters; and finally to Catherine Stoye and Martin Wells, trustees of the Wells Estate, for permission to reprint the Wells letters in *The Academy*.

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