THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

H.G. WELLS

Edited by
PATRICK PARRINDER

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London and New York

First published in 1972
Reprinted in 1997 by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE
&
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Printed in Great Britain by
TJ Press, Padstow, Cornwall

Printed on acid-free paper

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

ISBN 0-415-15910-5

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

General Editor: B. C. Southam

The Critical Heritage series collects together a large body of criticism on major figures in literature. Each volume presents the contemporary responses to a particular writer, enabling the student to follow the formation of critical attitudes to the writer's work and its place within a literary tradition.

The carefully selected sources range from landmark essays in the history of criticism to fragments of contemporary opinion and little published documentary material, such as letters and diaries.

Significant pieces of criticism from later periods are also included in order to demonstrate fluctuations in reputation following the writer's death.

General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

Preface

Wells's critical reception has already been exhaustively studied by Ingvald Raknem in *H. G. Wells and his Critics* (1962). I am indebted to Dr Raknem's volume generally and in particular to his excellent bibliography of reviews and articles on Wells. The amount of contemporary material on Wells is so great, however, that in preparing this book I have read over two hundred items not previously listed, and inevitably more must remain to be found. My principles of selection are described in the first part of the Introduction.

Acknowledgments

Careful attempts have been made to locate the owners of all copyright material included in this volume. Acknowledgments are due to the following: the *Spectator* for Nos 2, 6, 16, 37, 50, 55 and 87; Professor Oliver Zangwill for No. 4; the *New Statesman* for Nos 8, 9, 12, 17, 25, 54 and 63; *Nature* for No. 20; the Estate of H. G. Wells for Nos 21 and 55(b); the British Library of Political and Economic Science for Nos 27, 49 and 59; the Society of Authors as the literary representative of the Estate of Havelock Ellis for No. 30, and as the literary representative of the Estate of John Middleton Murry for No. 91; Miss D. Collins and the Bodley Head Ltd for No. 34; the Fabian Society for Nos 35 and 45; Lady Rothschild for No. 36; Mrs Dorothy Cheston Bennett, Rupert Hart-Davis and the University of Illinois Press for No. 42, and Mrs Bennett and Doubleday for No. 51; the Directeur Général of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* for No. 46; the Trustees of the Estate of H. L. Mencken for Nos 58 and 82; the *Atlantic Monthly* for No. 65 (Margaret Sherwood) and No. 80 (Conrad Aiken); Dame Rebecca West for No. 66; Mr Walter Lippmann for No. 71; Gladys Brooks for No. 72 (extract from the book *The World of H. G. Wells* by Van Wyck Brooks); the Estate of Virginia Woolf, the Hogarth Press and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. for No. 76 (copyright © 1965 by Leonard Woolf Estate); the Trustees of the Estate of E. M. Forster for No. 77; Lesley Milne for No. 79; the *Saturday Review of Literature* for No. 81 (Mary M. Colum); the Keynes Trustees for No. 83; Mr Lance Sieveking for No. 85; the *Nation* for No. 86 (Freda Kirchwey); Dr F. R. Leavis for No. 88; Valerie Eliot for No. 89; the editor of the *The Times Literary Supplement* for No. 90; University of Texas Press for No. 92; William Heinemann Ltd for extract from *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, ed. G. Jean-Aubry (No. 14); The Artemis Press Ltd for No. 69.

I should like to thank Eric Homberger for his advice, Lesley Milne for her translation and my wife for her help with preparing the text. I am also indebted to the long-suffering staffs of several of our national libraries, to Mr C. J. Allen of the British Library of Political and Economic Science and to the Librarians of the *New Statesman* and *Spectator* for their identification of authors of unsigned reviews.

Contents

Introduction

There are many sides to H. G. Wells. Today he belongs to literary history and is best known as a novelist—the author of romantic social comedies, the bold and opinionated critic of Edwardian England, and the creator of modern science fiction. His political and sociological books, his Utopias, encyclopaedias and prophecies once had an immense impact but are now largely unread. Wells was a prolific and versatile writer, the author of over a hundred books as well as pamphlets and journalism, who attempted to give a complete commentary on the world in which he lived. He came to prominence as a novelist, and much of his commentary came through fiction, but a mere glance at the extent of his contemporary influence shows that 'novelist' is too narrow a classification for him. For Wells during his lifetime provoked as large a volume of criticism and discussion as any writer who has ever lived.

His first works were scientific romances, and for all their originality these books were based on orthodox beliefs about the imaginative autonomy of fiction. In common with much writing of the 1890s (the great period of the romance and the short story) they were far closer to pure entertainment than to pure didacticism. Their immediate success brought Wells into a literary milieu where he was welcomed as a fellow-artist by George Gissing, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and others. He found the role of the literary artist increasingly restrictive, and became something broader and less easy to define—a journalist, a social prophet, a great educator and communicator. Given that in later life he repeatedly affirmed his commitment to journalism and public debate as against the disciplines of art, it may seem paradoxical that he continued to write novels and remained essentially a man of letters. He began publishing fiction in 1895, and the last of his novels for which his admirers could make major claims was *The World of William Clissold* in 1926. The dates are suggestive when we recall that the future Lord Northcliffe founded the *Daily Mail* in 1896, while the British Broadcasting Corporation was constituted in 1927. These thirty years represent the first phase of modern mass communications and mass entertainment in Britain, during which the written word had yet to be challenged by film, radio and television. The dedicated literary artists of Wells's acquaintance viewed

the emergence of fiction as a mass medium with defensive mistrust, and resigned themselves to addressing a small minority audience untouched by the general 'vulgarity'. But Wells lacked their firm aesthetic convictions and saw the huge potential audience for fiction, and the number and variety of newspapers and magazines which reviewed or serialized it, as an opportunity and not a threat. With Chesterton and Bernard Shaw as his only rivals, he set out to influence the thoughts, the feelings, the morals and politics of the new public. Whatever their concrete achievements, these three came to represent a new (and possibly short-lived) type of the democratic man of letters. Moving freely between literature and journalism, they augmented creative gifts with the earnest commitment of the political ideologist and the professional showmanship of the television personality.

There was no ready-made audience for Wells. He was essentially a provocative, crusading writer, whose conscious purpose was not to give the public what it wanted but what it needed. In political terms he declared himself a socialist, a scientific materialist and an advocate of sexual freedom and of world unity; and as he did so some of his early admirers deserted him. His public was at first rather specialized, as he ruefully wrote to his publisher in 1904, in a letter suggesting where review copies of his latest romance might be sent: 'My public is a peculiar one, and the electro-technical publications, scholastic papers and especially the *Schoolmaster*, medical and nursing publications—the *Positivist Review*—truck up sections of it. The women don't read me.'[1] This was written before his politics became widely known; yet a few years later he had both become more outspoken and achieved a much broader readership. 'Back in the nineteen-hundreds it was a wonderful experience for a boy to discover H. G. Wells', George Orwell later wrote (1941).[2] After *Ann Veronica* this manifestly applied to girls as well. Discovering Wells was a romantic and liberating experience, a revelation of the vast possibilities of individual experience in the immediate future. It is difficult to separate his role as a teacher in this from his role as a visionary. What he taught was the necessity and imminence of social change. Technology was bringing the human race into an era of unimagined dangers and opportunities, and the old conventions and ideas of Western society must undergo drastic revision. To those willing to emancipate themselves from traditional beliefs Wells expounded a modern world-view opening out to a Utopian vision of the new social order. This world-view was notable for its intellectually synthetic character and for the basis in the natural sciences (particularly evolu-

tionary biology) which gave it a widely influential position in twentieth-century popular thought. Wells saw the scientific spirit as the motive force of human progress, and he became the foremost missionary of modern science. The elaboration of his world-view led him from the science fiction and the social novels with which he made his reputation to excursions into ethics, politics, history, sociology, theology, metaphysics, education and film. There was little system in these excursions, and the zigzags of Wells's literary career reveal a mercurial energy which treated each book as an intellectual gamble, a staking of perpetual repetition of his beliefs against perpetual self-renewal. While the sheer difficulty of keeping up with Wells was one of his attractions, another was the creative gift which made his attempted synthesis far more an imaginative feat than a rigorously intellectual construction. The world-view he expounded was contagious not merely on account of its scientific character, but also because it was a vision of repressed individual energies—energies which must be released from social restriction and cast into a new form as man's only hope of survival. Tales like *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds* are concerned with the immense resources of untapped human energy and the perils of exploiting them; and the result of applying this speculative insight to the realities of contemporary society can be seen in *Tono-Bungay* and *The New Machiavelli* where the powerful cognitive instincts and sexual drives of the Wellsian hero are engaged in a relentless struggle with existing social forms. While in the overcrowded and post-Freudian culture of today we are exhorted to find self-realization in the 'inner space' of personal experience, the psychic resources Wells depicts express themselves outwardly, in the exploration of time and space and the construction of new societies; they look for their fulfilment to the idea of Utopia. Hence the range of his work and the profound ambiguity of the response it evoked, for although his sociological books invariably involved a creed and some suggestions for immediate action, they were far more effective as visionary works than as political exhortations. Wells's attempts to engage in direct political activity, most notably his campaign to reform the Fabian Society, often ended in fiasco. He wished to influence the praxis of the twentieth century, but his real contribution was to its dreams. And so it is his novels that remain both the essential introduction to his mind and its more durable products.

The range of contemporary comment which might in principle have been considered for this volume is very wide indeed. Among those who listened to Wells, read some of his books and expressed opinions about

him are scientists and theologians, economists and politicians—who included Stalin, Lenin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Like other famous modern writers, the record of his reception includes gossip and scandal, moral outrage and political abuse. My intention has not been to make the most of his place in the history of his times, but rather to show the reception of his more important books as they appeared and the emergence of understanding and critical judgment of his work. Thus a reasonable standard of critical responsibility has been required of the items included (some more sensational material is cited in this Introduction). While a selection of the most significant notices of Wells's non-fiction has been included, neither these books nor their reviews have tended to wear very well. Political controversy and discussions of specific Wellsian prophecies have been omitted, and there is nothing in this volume which is not 'literary criticism' in the catholic sense I believe this term demands. Indeed, much of it is very orthodox in method and approach: and if further justification for concentrating upon Wells's literary reception is needed, it must be sought in the quality of the contemporary response itself. Although Wells eventually defied literary orthodoxy in the person of Henry James, and presented himself as a new kind of communicator adapting the fictional medium to his own ends, few of the critics could follow him in this. The majority continued to judge him primarily as a creative writer answerable to existing critical standards. The image persisted despite his efforts to belittle the merely imaginative portion of his work, and it now seems unlikely to be challenged. The present volume traces the growth of an understanding of his work and of a field of argument about it which have not indeed been essentially altered or superseded in the quarter-century since his death.

EARLY PUBLICATION

Wells came from the lower-middle class, and his childhood struggles are told in his *Experiment in Autobiography* and reflected in many of his novels. He escaped from his early environment by means of a scholarship to the Normal School of Science in South Kensington, where he trained as a science teacher (1884–7). His first book was a *Textbook of Biology* (1893), and he joined the reviewing staff of the scientific periodical *Nature* in the following year. His biology book had been based upon the course that he taught for the University Correspondence College, but

already in 1893 he had abandoned teaching under the stress of ill-health for the risks of a career in journalism. He began writing humorous sketches for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which had just been revitalized under the editorship of Harry Cust. Despite his social and literary inexperience, he was soon serving a brief period as Cust's theatre critic (1895), and a longer one as fiction reviewer on Frank Harris's *Saturday Review* (1895–7). Harris was another member of the flamboyant new generation of editors in the 1890s, and, like Cust, had just replaced a whole staid and respectable staff with bright young men of whom Wells was one. As his humorous sketches were followed by short stories and then scientific romances, Wells, after years of poverty, quickly became prosperous and socially successful. In November 1893 he received £14 13*s.* for a month's contributions to the *Pall Mall Gazette*; but his income for 1894 totalled nearly £600, and by 1896, when he exceeded £1,000 a year, he was firmly established as a professional writer.

After 1896 the bulk of his earnings came from fiction, and he only wrote occasional pieces of journalism. His initial anxiety to launch himself as a creative writer independent of journalism is recorded in his *Autobiography*,[3] and it is evidenced by the fact that he published no fewer than four books in 1895, the year in which he first became known to the general public. They were put out by four different publishers, all newly established—Methuen, John Lane, Heinemann and Dent; his prolific output and his impatience and opportunism meant that throughout his life Wells would continually be changing his publishers. These books earned him very moderate sums: a £20 advance for *The Stolen Bacillus* (short stories), £50 for *The Time Machine* and £75 for *The Wonderful Visit*. What really enabled him to devote himself to fiction in the 1890s was the ease of serial publication and the publicity it yielded. In 1894, at the invitation of W. E. Henley, he contributed a series of 'Time Traveller' articles to the *National Observer*. The articles derived from 'The Chronic Argonauts', a serial he had published six years earlier in the college magazine he had edited while a student. Shortly afterwards Henley lost editorial control of the *National Observer* and took over a monthly, the *New Review*, to which Wells was again asked to contribute a story about time-travelling. He was now paid £100 for the serial rights of *The Time Machine*, which soon became the most talked-about feature of Henley's magazine. It was published in book form in July 1895 and had sold 6,000 copies by Christmas.

The *New Review* under Henley combined political articles with a list of literary contributors who included Stevenson, Kipling and Yeats.