



H. G. Wells and the Modern Novel

J. R. HAMMOND



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J. R. Hammond

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# Preface

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David Lodge in *The Novelist at the Crossroads* observed that 'The centenary in 1966 of the birth of H. G. Wells found the literary and intellectual world still divided and perplexed as to how to assess his importance.' The years since then have seen the publication of a number of important critical, biographical and bibliographical studies resulting in a wider understanding of Wells's methods of working and his approach to the art of fiction. Despite these significant advances in Wells studies he remains an extraordinarily difficult writer to assess dispassionately and one about whom critical opinion is still deeply divided. The prevalent conception of him is of a writer who made a permanent mark on English literature through his contribution to science fiction and the short story but whose novels in the realist tradition are no longer relevant to the twentieth century.

The present study begins by questioning whether Wells was a novelist in the realist tradition at all. An introductory chapter giving an overview of his approach to fiction is followed by a reassessment of his debate with Henry James and an examination of his distinctive contribution to the modern novel. These chapters are followed by a close study of ten of his novels, beginning with his first full-length work of fiction, *The Time Machine*, and culminating in his last, *You Can't Be Too Careful*. The central thesis I hope to demonstrate is that Wells's work has far more in common with Kafka and Conrad than with Bennett and Galsworthy, and that he can properly be regarded as a transitional figure between realism and modernism.

In writing this book I have acquired many debts. My principal debt is to the members of the H. G. Wells Society for allowing me to share with them my discoveries about Wells and for the stimulus of many helpful discussions. I am particularly grateful to their Secretary, Mr Christopher Rolfe, who first drew my attention to the extensive use of mythological imagery in *The History of Mr Polly*. I am also indebted to Dr Patrick Parrinder of the University of Reading and Professor David Smith of the University of Maine who, by their untiring enthusiasm for Wells, have helped me in ways they may not fully appreciate.

I should like to make it clear that the interpretations of Wells's

novels outlined in the following chapters are offered as possible readings without any sense of finality. His fiction is so rich in hermeneutic potential that it would be presumptuous to claim that any one reading could be definitive. I have tried throughout to bear in mind David Daiches's observation that literary criticism 'is not an end in itself, but a means to greater understanding and appreciation of literary works'. If this book encourages more readers to return to Wells's novels and to read them with heightened insight and enjoyment then my end will have been served.

J. R. H.

### **Author's Note**

The text used for the extracts from the works of H. G. Wells is that of the first English edition in each case.

As the novels are available in a wide variety of editions quotations from his works are identified by chapter and section in each case, rather than page number.

# Acknowledgements

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# Part One

## Overview



# 1

## Wells and the Novel

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*My conviction is that Wells the novelist, not merely Wells the scientific romancer, or Wells the prophet, or Wells the educator, or Wells the anti-utopian utopian, or Wells the thinker, or Wells the saviour, will have his day. If it be not now, yet it will come.*

(Robert Bloom, *Anatomies of Egotism*)

*Circumstances have made me think a good deal at different times about the business of writing novels, and what it means, and is, and may be; and I was a professional critic of novels long before I wrote them.*

(H. G. Wells, *The Contemporary Novel*)

In his influential essay 'Technique as Discovery' Mark Schorer observes: 'as James grows for us . . . Wells disappears'.<sup>1</sup> This assessment is based on current critical attitudes towards Wells as a novelist. During his lifetime his novels enjoyed wide popularity but since his death, while his science fiction and short stories continue to be widely read, his reputation as a *novelist* has been almost totally eclipsed. He himself had no illusions concerning the transitory nature of his fame:

So far as I am concerned I find that thinking about the qualities of my work and my place in the literary world, or the world at large, an unwholesome and unprofitable employment. I have been keenly interested in the discussion of a number of questions, I have been a haphazard and pampered prophet, I have found it amusing and profitable to write stories and – save for an incidental lapse or so – I have never taken any very great pains about

writing. I am outside the hierarchy of conscious and deliberate writers altogether. I am the absolute antithesis of Mr James Joyce.<sup>2</sup>

This was written by H. G. Wells in 1930. By that time he had become a world figure, known and respected throughout the English-speaking community as a prophet, historian, educationalist and seer. As a novelist he had long ceased to command a world audience, his most ambitious effort in that direction – *The World of William Clissold* (1926) – having, in his own words, marked ‘the collapse of an inflated reputation’. His heyday as a novelist had been during the years 1900–14 when, with *Kipps*, *Tono-Bungay*, *The History of Mr Polly*, *Ann Veronica* and *The New Machiavelli* he had fascinated and entertained an audience of millions. After the First World War there was no longer a world readership for his fiction. He was still very widely read – *The Outline of History* and *A Short History of the World* sold more than two million copies and were translated into many languages – but as a novelist his influence on the reading public had virtually evaporated. The commanding position he had once shared with Bennett and Galsworthy was now occupied by a new generation of literary idols – Joyce, Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and Virginia Woolf. At the end of his life he commented wryly that the novels he wrote in the 1930s did no more ‘than make his decline and fall unmistakable’.<sup>3</sup>

Since his death there has been considerable critical interest in his science fiction and short stories but the prevailing attitude towards his novels is one of faint embarrassment. Today he is regarded as a somewhat old-fashioned figure, a writer who continued to repeat until well into the twentieth century the conventions and techniques of the Victorian realist tradition, a novelist who cannot be regarded as in any sense experimental and whose works are in a totally different category to those of Lawrence, Conrad and Joyce. Thus Bernard Bergonzi in his otherwise excellent study *The Early H. G. Wells* (Manchester University Press, 1961) states: ‘I am assuming as axiomatic that the bulk of Wells’s published output has lost whatever literary interest it might have had, and is not likely to regain it in the foreseeable future, whatever value it may possess for the social historian or the historian of ideas.’ And Robert Barnard in his *A Short History of English Literature* (Basil Blackwell, 1984) writes disparagingly of Wells ‘whose bouncy, punchy fiction in the realistic tradition has aged badly. With his incurable curiosity about life and his active social conscience he ought to be enjoyable still.’ The thesis

I wish to argue in the present work is essentially twofold: first, that despite superficial indications to the contrary, his work has more affinity with the modernists than the realists – that is to say, he was much more consciously experimental in his work than is generally acknowledged and, secondly, that his novels are much more complex and diverse than a first reading would indicate. But first it will be useful to ‘set the scene’ by offering a concise summary of his novelistic career.

Wells graduated to writing novels after a long apprenticeship of producing short stories, essays and miscellaneous journalism. His first real breakthrough came in 1895, when he was 28, with the publication of *The Time Machine*. This was quickly followed by a series of ‘scientific romances’ including *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) and *The Food of the Gods* (1904). In these he made skilful use of the teeming possibilities of science to create a series of mythopoeic visions and speculations concerning man and his place in the universe. His first realistic novel – as distinct from the romance – was *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), a bicycling idyll notable for its evident nostalgia for the rural peace and beauty he had known as a young man. This was followed by a number of novels in which Wells discussed topical sociological themes – *Love and Mr Lewisham* (1900), *Kipps* (1905), *Tono-Bungay* (1909), *Ann Veronica* (1909) and *The New Machiavelli* (1911). These novels both fascinated and exasperated Henry James who, while admiring their abundant energy and craftsmanship, felt that they offended against his canons of artistry. ‘You must at moments make dear old Dickens turn – for envy of the eye and the ear and the nose and the mouth of you – in his grave’, he wrote, ‘you are a very swagger performer indeed.’<sup>4</sup> Throughout this phase of his work Wells was still finding his way as a literary artist, uncertain as yet of his direction or his true *métier*, deliberately trying over a range of styles and themes.<sup>5</sup> Then followed a phase he described as the ‘Prig Novels’ – novels in which a solipsistic hero (usually the narrator) comments extensively on political, social and moral questions and in which the quest for a purpose in life is a predominant element. *Marriage* (1912), *The Passionate Friends* (1913), *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914) and *The Research Magnificent* (1915) belong to this phase. They remain readable and interesting today, though inevitably with the passage of time the discussion of contemporary social problems has dated. The finest of this group is probably *Marriage*, if only because it is

written with such evident care and because its central character, Marjorie Pope, is one of his most vital and convincing heroines. During the middle period of his life – the years from 1916 to 1930 – he experimented with a number of novels on topical issues of the day including *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916), *The Secret Places of the Heart* (1922), *Christina Alberta's Father* (1925) and *Meanwhile* (1927), stories which, Mr Britling excepted, did little to enhance his literary reputation and confirmed many critics in their judgement that he had severed himself from literature. In his final decade he embarked on a series of promising experiments – including *The Croquet Player* (1936), *Brynhild* (1937), *The Brothers* (1938) and *Apropos of Dolores* (1938) – in which he deployed allegory, satire and irony to ventilate his growing pessimism concerning the human condition and his continuing interest in problems of personality and character. He continued to write fiction until the end of his life, his last novels, *Babes in the Darkling Wood* (1940), *All Aboard for Ararat* (1940) and *You Can't Be Too Careful* (1941), revealing an abiding concern for humanity and a refreshing willingness – in a writer in his seventies – to experiment with new styles and themes. Critical opinion is sharply divided on the merits of the fiction of his final decade. To some it is simply additional evidence of his abdication of any major role in English literature and further proof of his steadily declining powers. To others the novels of his last period offer extraordinary riches of characterisation and insight and reveal a masterly writer completing 'the great imaginative work of a lifetime'.<sup>5</sup>

So much is familiar. What is not so familiar is the seriousness with which Wells himself regarded his novels. Despite his statement that 'I am outside the hierarchy of conscious and deliberate writers altogether' and the disingenuous aside in his autobiography that 'the larger part of my fiction was written lightly and with a certain haphazardness', the fact is that he regarded his novels with great seriousness and took immense pains over their writing. In a letter to his friend Arnold Bennett in 1901 (Bennett had published a study of popular novelists, *Fame and Fiction*, which omitted reference to Wells) he complained: 'For me you are part of the Great Public, I perceive. I am doomed to write "scientific" romances and short stories for you creatures of the mob, and my novels must be my private dissipation.' And to Frederick Macmillan in 1908 he wrote: 'As I told you long ago I want to specialise as a novelist. I think now my opportunity is ripe, and that if new novel follows novel without anything to distract people's attention – any other sort of work by

me, I mean – it will be possible to consolidate the large confused reputation I have at the present time.' What distracted him from his laudable ambition to 'specialise as a novelist' was the First World War and the immense social, moral and intellectual ferment this engendered. But it is significant that during the last 30 years of his life when he was increasingly obsessed with the need for world unification and for fundamental changes in educational and political ideas he continued to write fiction, producing no fewer than 15 major novels between 1916 and 1946 in addition to novellas, sketches and short stories. The writing of fiction remained one of his primary concerns throughout his literary career and almost his last work, 'The Betterave Papers', was an ironic review of his literary achievement in which he looked back with whimsical detachment on his entire corpus as a novelist.

The evidence provided by his manuscripts and letters suggests that, far from having been written 'lightly and with a certain haste', his fiction was written and revised with great care. Much more is now known of his creative methods than was apparent during his lifetime. We know from the evidence of posthumously published works and from his correspondence with James, Gissing and Bennett that the writing of his novels involved a lengthy process of revision during which each work underwent a series of drafts until he was satisfied. In 1960, for example, a critical edition of *The History of Mr Polly* was published containing a reproduction of several pages of the original manuscript. In 1969 a hitherto unpublished novel, *The Wealth of Mr Waddy* (an early version of *Kipps*) was published in a scholarly edition containing much new material on Wells's methods of composition. From these and other sources it is abundantly clear that, whatever else he was, Wells was a painstaking and demanding artist who approached his work with thoroughness and care. Writing apropos *Love and Mr Lewisham* he observed: 'There is really more work in that book than there is in many a first class F. R. S. research, and stagnant days and desert journeys beyond describing.' Wells's restlessness – his interest in a wide range of diverse subjects, his tendency to be working on several different projects at any one time, his ability to assume at will a style appropriate to the work in hand – has led to an assumption that he wrote hastily and with little attention to language or aesthetic considerations. It is becoming increasingly clear that this assumption is based on a superficial reading of his work and that the more closely his novels are studied the narrower the gap between



Wells and Joyce becomes. A number of recent studies have demonstrated convincingly that as a novelist Wells devoted the closest attention to language and imagery and that he is very far from being the careless writer he is so often held to be. Robert Bloom in *Anatomies of Egotism: A Reading of the Last Novels of H. G. Wells* (University of Nebraska Press, 1977) closely examines the novels of his final period and finds in them no diminution of his powers as a creative artist. David Lodge in *Language of Fiction* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) discusses in considerable detail the language of *Tono-Bungay* and concludes that it is a coherent and much underestimated work of art. Frank D. McConnell in *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells* (Oxford University Press, 1981) examines the scientific romances and finds ample testimony to their literary and imaginative qualities. The evidence provided by Wells's own writings, then – including his manuscripts, drafts and letters – belies the view that his works were produced carelessly and suggests on the contrary that most were written with considerable (and in some cases meticulous) attention to language.

In the light of this testimony to his conscientiousness as a writer some explanation must be found for the widespread critical ambivalence towards Wells and for his perfunctory treatment in so many reference works on the English novel. There are, I suggest, four principal reasons which account for his comparative neglect in modern literary studies. First, he has been taken too readily on his own estimation, that is, his claim to be 'the absolute antithesis of Mr James Joyce' has been taken at face value. Second, his prolific work in other fields, what he termed in his letter to Macmillan his 'large confused reputation', has militated against his acceptance as a serious novelist. Third, the fact that he lived to be almost 80 and wrote some 50 full-length works of fiction has inevitably weakened his stature as a man of letters. In a word, he lived for too long and wrote too much to be retained readily in critical focus. Fourth, and most significantly, he is still widely regarded as a realistic novelist in the vein of Arnold Bennett, and as a writer whose novels have little relevance to the needs and concerns of the latter part of the twentieth century.

His own published estimation of his standing and attitudes has been accepted for many years as the definitive statement of his position. Because he insisted again and again that 'I had rather be called a journalist than an artist'<sup>8</sup> this has been taken to be a statement of the truth – instead of what it so patently was: a piece of