



*Signet Classics*

THE TIME MACHINE

H. G. WELLS

With a New Afterword by PAUL YOUNGQUIST

THE INVISIBLE MAN



**H. G. WELLS**

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**THE TIME MACHINE  
AND  
THE INVISIBLE MAN**

*With an Introduction by  
John Calvin Batchelor*

*and with an Afterword by  
Paul Youngquist*



**SIGNET CLASSICS**

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# Introduction

## I

H. G. Wells, 1866–1946, pursued a career of thunderous triumph, publishing over four million words of fiction and twice that again of journalism. And yet today, in both Britain and America, he enjoys no reputation beyond his so-called scientific romances, and of those only four that he completed in the first four years of publishing are fixed. In truth, Wells is unhappily lost, fashionably forgotten, unjustly degraded, nearly a *homo incognito* to the great-grandchildren of the generations who made him one of the most popular and controversial novelists in English, and arguably the most daring and feared author in European politics since Milton or Voltaire.

How daring was Wells? It was said that by the First World War he could publish in novel form names and ideas that no man in actual power would chance to say in the sanctity of his own club. As a citizen and artist, Wells used this extraordinary privilege, and always at full volume. For fifty years, his books were bought in the millions in every major language because he rendered ideas that might seem inert now but were once considered nitroglycerine. In his fiction as well as his journalism, he flagrantly incited socialistic revolution

under King Edward; he appalled the Church of England by standing for divorce, contraception, abortion, and free lust; he promoted suffrage and equal opportunity in the face of bitterly misogynistic Parliaments; he supported the First World War—which he dubbed “The War That Will End War”—with a sentimental jingoism that is a model for all flacks; he thereafter denounced the Treaty of Versailles as French revenge; he turned against socialism when he believed it had become collectivized tyranny; he advocated Big Business in the 1920’s and then stabbed “Fordized America” in the 1930’s as anti-labor; he dismissed Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler as inept and impotent Oswald Mosleys and bad opera; he urged Winston Churchill on Britain as a deliverer from Neville Chamberlain’s betrayal at Munich, then betrayed Churchill at the Second World War’s end by writing, “If we do not end Winston, Winston will end us;” and in his last published work, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1946), he despaired that mankind had gone mad with the atomic bomb, and that civilization was doomed to a nuclear Armageddon.

Wells attacked in so many directions, and so belligerently reversed himself so often, that an atlas of his thoughts would resemble a New York City subway map. And he was as proud of his personal infamies as he was of his inflammatory conceits. He cheated on more good women than bears recounting, and forced an open marriage on his wife, Amy Catherine Robbins “Jane” Wells, a plucky beauty who had once risked everything for him by eloping with him when he deserted his first wife. And he took unseemly pleasure in prophesying, like a de Tocqueville turned gypsy, a future world that would actually become America in 1959. He seduced, abandoned, stole, defamed, ran away, mercilessly urged bombing the Germany of 1916 and as mercilessly urged the Allies to dispense with the Germany of 1942 so that they could get on to leveling the real enemy, “the Scarlet Woman of Rome.” In his vanity, his hypocrisy, his naked

braggadocio, he resembled no English novelist more than that duplicitous Enlightenment poseur, Daniel Defoe.

Presuming one does not instantly conclude that such a man is better erased, it is fair-minded to consider that throughout all this noise and calumny, Wells continued a man of letters, and a genius at that, demonstrating once more the aphorism that genius is no proof against shooting one's own foot. Wells argued convincingly in his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) that his work is shot through with the mind of a man who believed that alert, strident, perilous participation in the philosophical notion, civilization, was the highest and most courageous sort of endeavor; that progress in science and technology was not a curse; that if humanity was going to survive, it could do so only by relying upon its own hands and brains and not on any mystical tom-foolery; and that whereas mankind was certainly up from the apes—every government was sad illustration—that was no reason that mankind should not act as if fallen from that most happy artistic construction, the angels.

It must be noted that Wells is not a blank to modern America. Enquiring of the amateur reader will elicit a description of a man who wrote about time travel or Mars. Indeed, Wells' reputation as the father of the modern genre, science fiction, is fixed, and presently a pedagogical vogue. However, to concentrate on that aspect of Wells's work is to persist in the same critical myopia about Wells's work rather than to discover something of the man's true artistic identity. That Wells should be known only by those books, however worthy, that represent the very beginning of his career, that is *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War Between the Worlds* (1898), is as if Shakespeare's reputation was forced to hang solely upon the three parts of *Henry the Sixth*, and *Richard the Third*, or as if Dickens's fame had to depend upon *The Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Oliver Twist*.



Bluntly, Wells is wronged, and wronged most wastefully and unwisely, when he is regarded only as a tinkerer in sci-fi. More properly, he must be seen as the twentieth century's first great practitioner of the novel-of-ideas—a tradition of the novel with twice as rich a history as that contemporary favorite, the novel of manners, and a tradition that dates at least to the first great fiction artist writing in English, Geoffrey Chaucer.

What caused the fall of Wells? Gravity is too glib an answer. Fashion is a credible solution, and is neither condemnatory of Wells nor irreparable. In this century, American critics have drifted from, returned to, and then started to drift again from the giants of the English novel, Austen, Dickens, James, and Conrad. It is probable that the current critical disrepair of such English novelists as Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and Arnold Bennett will not be permanent. Yet for a man as loud and audacious as Wells, who was once said to have an article or novel excerpt on the desk of every editor in Europe, there are more instructive root causes explaining the present disfavor. His decline was partially self-invited ("What I write goes now!"). But Wells also entangled himself with the ideas of modernism, 1895–1946, and the heat and rush of those times, in statehood and art, no longer grab or hurt us—though they do profoundly signify.

Reading his autobiographical work, it is evident that Wells wrote in anticipation of disfavor, and drew his pugnaciousness and plain cruelty from this opinion. He was an angry young man. He determined to be an angry old one. He did declare that his epitaph should read, "God damn you all: I told you so." He liked to romanticize his lower-class origins as the youngest son of a disabled professional cricket player and a woman in service. His birth was "down-stairs." His boyhood was Dickensian: twice apprenticed to a draper, and once to a chemist, he ran away from his keepers each time. He suffered an inferential and inexact education. He took great pride in the

fact that he had been plucked by the nascent welfare state in Britain to be enrolled in what is now the Royal College of Science, to study briefly under the great advocate of Darwinism, T.H. Huxley. Bad luck, a bad marriage, and a football injury that frightened him with a bleeding kidney, obliged him to quit itinerant teaching and to try to write his way out of penury. He lived by his wits, and by the opportunities provided by the legendary editor and scoundrel, Frank Harris. Wells absorbed the popular mood of the *fin-de-siecle*—atheism, sensual solipsism—and trained himself to write commercially successful fiction by reviewing popular novels (Hall Caine, Rider Haggard, negatively; Hardy, Crane, George Gissing, positively) in the same weekly magazine in which George Bernard Shaw, ten years Wells's senior, was theater critic. Wells stumbled upon one of the earliest literary agents in Britain soon afterward, and after *The Time Machine* proved a success in serial form, he drove himself to produce.

Wells wrote easily, with humor and energy, and often more with cockney and slangy dialect than with the King's English. He thought of himself as an "ordinary brain," and "Insignificant Man." The secret to the wide success of his early works of fiction is not their scientific content, which is minimal, and is largely kaleidoscopic Darwinism; it is rather their intrinsic, mundane, effortless pessimism, their unrelieved conviction that privileged society and the British Empire's great works were doomed, that European hubris was an invitation to a fall, and that all civilization and truth would come to nothing.

Once relieved of poverty, Wells toyed with travel, sex, property, society, and the avant garde in politics. With security and a wider experience, he did overcome his more naive pessimism about history. He never overcame his defensiveness over his bad education or his contempt for the fact that some men were born titled while most men were born owned. He joined that polite, socialistic cabal, the Fabian



Society. He preached a reform eerily parallel to that with which his junior contemporary, V.I. Lenin, would turgidly and darkly mold the soviet state in Russia. Wells befriended the Edwardian artistic avant garde; he became the leading, because the most commercial, light among the Irish Shaw, the Catholic G.K. Chesterton, the Americans Ford Maddox (Hueffer) Ford and Stephen Crane, the Polish Joseph Conrad, the haunted George Gissing, the Francophile Arnold Bennett. They all envied Wells greatly, because, with all his rude wind, he really had pulled himself up by his bootstraps.

Wells never relented in his quixotic iconoclasm. His wind-mills were the British government at Whitehall, the British clergy at Canterbury, and British royalty at Buckingham Castle. His Sancho Panza on all of his adventures was that unseen journalistic invention, everyman. In half a century of fame, Wells insulted every adult of consequence in his articles and books; and in person, this short, squeaky-voiced, temperamental man arranged audiences in which he exasperated and charmed Teddy Roosevelt, Lenin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Neville Chamberlain, and Winston Churchill. Owing to his cranky nature, Wells was not knighted, the academic community decried him as a hack historian, the Royal Society thought him an upstart when he tried to get in at seventy-eight, and the Nobel Committee for Literature ignored him for four decades, preferring the less pyrotechnical British likes of Kipling, Shaw, and Galsworthy. For those same decades, Wells confounded his opposition by declaring that he was more a journalist than an artist, but that as an artist, however, he knew he was right!

A legion thought of Wells as fat-headed—not only because of his politics, but also, and most damagingly for his literary reputation, because of his art. Early on, there developed a sport best called Wells-shooting. It started playfully and scatter-shot: Wells was called a second Bulwer-Lytton, a second Verne, a second Dickens, a second Barrie, a second Kipling,

a second Diderot, a second Carlyle, a second Rousseau (Wells detested Rousseau's work, adored Voltaire's and *Tristram Shandy*). George Bernard Shaw, a lifelong Wells ally, sighed, "I have never met such a chap. I could not survive another." Arnold Bennett, another ally, tried to get Wells to read the French and the Russians to improve the verisimilitude of his fiction. Wells replied to Bennett, "Balzac is an Egyptian temple, and damned dark and stuffy in places, to Turgenev's corinthian capitals. Dickens is a barn with astonishing gargoyles. And the English novel, like the Gothic cathedral, is too big a thing for a complete specimen to ever get itself done."

Others hit Wells harder, calling him a propaganda novelist, and also calling him—much later—a literary Hitler. The terms of the battle were established best in the twenty-year correspondence between Wells and the American expatriate, Henry James, whom Wells had met in 1895, the very night of James's only attempt at (and humiliation in) the theater, with *Guy Domville*. Later, in a letter, James opined that Wells was to literature what Francis Bacon was to philosophy. Wells countered that James was to literature what Immanuel Kant was to philosophy. This was not strictly the pre-psychological novelist of Wells warring with the proto-psychological novelist of James, for Wells had studied William James, Havelock Ellis, C.G. Jung, and was informed if suspicious of Freud, and filled his later novels with talk of his characters's brains and their "mental hinterland."

James criticized Wells further for pushing his characters around, requiring them to love, marry, traduce, and die in order to advance their creator's opinions. Wells replied, "The novel of the completely consistent characterization . . . no more exhausts the possibilities of the novel than the art of Velasquez exhausts the possibilities of the painted picture." Wells struck James a low blow in 1915 with his novel, *Boon*, in which Wells (as George Boon) mocked a character who stood for the novelist Henry James: "He sets himself to pick

the straws out of the hair of life before he paints her. But without the straws she is no longer the madwoman we love.”

More mischievously, Wells later wrote James that, though he thought *Boon* “just a wastepaper basket (of my ideas),” this did not alter his thrust in the book: “My Dear James . . . to you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use.” James was deeply wounded by *Boon*, replying by letter, “My Dear Wells . . . it is when history and curiosity have been determined in the way most different from my own that I myself want to get at them—precisely for the extension of life, which is the novel’s best gift.”

The irony in all this sniping, is that Wells agreed with what James was saying in the most profound way—he wrote novels that were capable of going places he had never been, and that were explosions of ideas that he did not entirely understand. Afterward, however, critics erected a James camp and a Wells camp, leaving many young novelists to wander confused between. In America, the influential critic, Van Wyck Brooks, blessed Wells to the public by claiming that Wells possessed a mind as disinherited, pragmatic and non-traditional as that of the Republic. Not surprisingly then, Wells was supported happily by Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In Britain, after the First World War, regard for Wells sagged. The Bloomsbury Group thought Wells as arcane as Kipling. The Irish avant-garde might seem disinclined to Wellsian fiction, and often was, and yet Arnold Bennett reported that it was Wells’s enthusiasm for *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) that convinced many young readers that James Joyce mattered. D.H. Lawrence, whose notorious sex scenes seem calculated updating of drama that Wells was denounced for sketching as early as 1910, complained that Wells slighted the emotional life of his characters. Virginia Woolf held that Wells and Lawrence were her liter-



ary antagonists. The English Marxists joined with Lenin himself in dismissing Wells and his utopian constructions as "incurably middle-class."

Then again. J.B. Priestley, Bertrand Russell, Conrad Aiken, Alec Waugh, Edwin Muir, A.A. Milne, Vera Brittain, C.P. Snow, Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Spender, Graham Greene, Olaf Stapledon, among the multitude, continued to find vitality if also straw-dogs in Wells. An impressive consideration in assessing Wells's oeuvre is how he obliged at least three generations of book critics to confront, dispute, and acquire his work. There is evidence that he read all his reviews; and he was never above dispatching abusive telegrams to dissenters. In 1941, George Orwell published a piece stating that Kipling would have stood up to Hitler better than Wells, and that he believed that Wells had squandered his gifts after 1920. Still, Orwell acknowledges that to fault Wells was "a sort of parricide." Seven months later, Orwell recorded in his diary that Wells had sent him a scatological hate letter.

After Wells's death, the Wells-shooters scored heavy hits. The critic Mark Schorer has written, "as James grows for us, Wells disappears." V.S. Pritchett, who as a young man reviewed several of Wells's late novels, wrote disparagingly in 1947 that the young Wells simply responded to the front-page situation of his time, that the later Wells escaped into a dream world of effervescent schemes and social alchemy, that the best Wells "is the destructive, ruthless, black-eye dealing and house-burning Wells who foresaw the violence and not the order of our time," and that "anarchists like Wells, Kipling, Shaw, and the pseudo-orthodox Chesterton . . . were too fascinated by their own bombs." Martin Seymour-Smith, reporting British literary opinion in the 1970's, noted that, while Wells was thought versatile, poetic, ambivalently positivistic and justifiably pessimistic, his gifts were thought self-abused, and consequently, "it is the fashion to denigrate Wells." In keeping with this dreary opinion, the English

scholar Bernard Bergonzi, editor of a collection of critical essays on Wells in 1976, has written that soon after 1900 Wells ceased being an artist and became a propagandist.

Wells was acutely aware of his troubles with literary critics, and joked that he kept a file, "Whether I Am A Novelist." He claimed that after *The Undying Fire* (1919), a theological discourse, he discovered that his talent was with the so-called dialogue novel, a form of fiction that he argued began with Plato. He addressed the controversy of his worth one more time in an introduction to a late novel, *Babes in the Darkling Wood* (1940): "My early life as a naive, spontaneous writer was much afflicted by the vehement advocacy of Henry James II, Joseph Conrad, Edward Garnett, and Ford Maddox Hueffer of something called *The Novel*; there were all sorts of things forbidden for *The Novel*; there must be no explanation of the ideas animating the characters, and the author himself had to be as invisible and unheard of as God; for no conceivable reason. Novelists were arranged in order of merit that made the intelligent reader doubt his own intelligence, and the idea of 'progress' was urged upon the imaginative writer. Conrad was understood to be in the van of progress. Robert Louis Stevenson had 'put the clock back.' Quite inconspicuous young writers were able to believe that in some mysterious way they were leaving Defoe and Sterne far away behind them."

Wells continued, "There has been no such progress in human brains. Against this sort of thing, I rebelled . . . All writing should be done as well as it can be done, wit and vigor are as God wills, but pretentious artistry is a minor amateurism on the flank of literature."

Christopher Isherwood, writing in 1950, achieved a patient, mid-twentieth century vantage on Wells that seems most useful in considering the myriad directions in which fiction is moving in the 1980's and beyond: "You can't make experi-

ments without explosions. The novel-of-ideas is out of fashion at the moment, but it will come back—and when it does, Wells will be read with admiration and excitement.”

## II

*The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Invisible Man* (1897) are not only wondrous works of the imagination, inviting the reader in the first instance into the distant future to explore the fate of mankind, and in the second sharing with the reader the crumbling mind of a genius obsessed by his hope to become all-powerful by becoming non-seeable. They are also shrewd *tour de forces* by a young writer who was attempting to portray his feelings of curiosity for his craft and anxiety for his career through the prism of the written word.

Wells was very much a fledgling writer at the time these two books were written. Indeed, *The Time Machine* is his first novel, a compilation of several short stories on the same theme he had already published in magazines; and *The Invisible Man* is his third novel, following the success of the terrifyingly Darwinian *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Wells was just beginning to experience the contrariness of popularity and yet—for a man who felt a debt to society to effect change—an odd purposelessness. Both books were written while Wells still felt the anxiety of his early life of grubbing and false starts, and represent excellent examples of a man still very shaky about this new venture, fiction writing. Both



were written in a fever by a man fleeing his past and intimidated by his future.

Considered in this fashion—a modern critic might call this existential reduction—the unnamed Time Traveller in *The Time Machine* is more akin to a new writer speculating about the future than he is to a scientist. And Griffin, the albino chemist in *The Invisible Man*, is less a rendering of a mad scientist than he is a clever illustration of what the fiction writer feels each day before his growing manuscript: that he or she is alone in a room; that no one sees or cares about him or her; that his or her talent to vanish inside the story being told in order to permit the voices of the characters to emerge is of little use as a tonic for the author's own wandering spirits.

This is not to suggest that Wells at any point repressed his power of invention in these two novels in order to present his own experience of writing them. It is rather to propose that a fuller reading and contemplation of these two books can lead the reader to understand that autobiography is more than the recording of one's actual experiences and that every passionate writer of fiction records his or her own deeper feelings in the conception, plotting and working through of whatever story he or she is creating. Wells was alone, ambitious, desperate to triumph, and pursued by phantoms. He pounded out these books, and indeed all his work, with the experience of his own life in the disguise of storytelling.

## III

*The Time Machine* and *The Invisible Man* continue to excite and dazzle a world-wide audience in all languages. Why? Because they are fun. And because they are full of a profound sense of mystery about mankind's future and soul.

In *The Time Machine* the first major puzzle is, Did the Time Traveller actually leap ahead to the year 802,701 A.D., or did he lie to his guests, and manufacture his version of the future out of his own political theories?

The story is told by an unnamed narrator who, with a number of other important personages in a tidy English village by the sea, gathers routinely each Thursday evening at the Time Traveller's home for dinner and talk. This is the Victorian version of the intellectual salon; among the participants, over the two Thursdays in question, are an unnamed Medical Man, Psychologist, Provincial Mayor, Editor, Journalist, very young man, and silent stranger—in all, representatives from the second, third, and fourth estates.

On the first Thursday, the Time Traveller, known to them as an inventive genius and political pessimist, surprises them after dinner by taking them into the smoking room to expound a theory of time that includes speculation that, like the three dimensions of height, width, and breadth, time is a dimension, a fourth dimension, that a man can travel through. To bolster his argument—and because they disbelieve him—the Time Traveller brings forth a model of what he says is a

Time Machine that he is building. And while they gather close to him, a lever is pushed and the tiny machine vanishes into the air. The trick is applauded, and gasped at, but it is still regarded as chicanery.

The next Thursday evening, the guests return in the promise that the Time Traveller will prove to them that a man can travel forward and backward in time. However, the Time Traveller is not present, and dinner is nearly done before he appears, dishevelled and haunted-eyed. He begs them for time to recover himself. And after he eats greedily of the mutton, and retires to wash and reclothe himself, he reappears to his guests in the smoking room. He claims to have travelled through time and into the future. And his intimation, as he begins to narrate his own tale, is that he has seen and done things that shock him, and make him sorrowful.

The second mystery is not just whether he has been in the future, but whether to believe what he says he found there. That morning, he claims, he climbed into the saddle of his squat, brass, ebony, ivory, and translucent quartz machine much as a man climbs on a horse, and pushed the lever forward. He saw the sun rise and fall so fast above him that the seasons were moments. Importantly, he was not travelling in space, but in time, so that the events around him were those that will befall this spot in England. And when he pulled the lever back to stop, he was heaved head first into the future of 802,701 A.D. And all was green and sublime, peaceful and healthful, a world of glass and metal towers and of childlike human beings, fruit-eating, frolicking in the sunshine, sleeping together in happy abandon. And there were no wars, no twisted lives, no vermin or plagues or tyrannies. In fact, what he thought he had found was paradise.

Or had he? And who had taken the Time Machine and pushed it into the pedestal of a White Sphinx so that he could not return to his own time? And why were the humans so extremely unchildlike in their lack of curiosity, their mewing