

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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***Human history becomes more and more a race  
between education and catastrophe.***

—H.G. Wells



**H.G. Wells**

**(1866-1946)**

David Langford

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## THE HISTORY OF MR. WELLS

**W**ith the release of a new film version of the science fiction classic *The War of The Worlds*, interest has been revived in H.G. Wells, the father of the modern genre. Science fiction author and commentator David Langford takes a look back at the life and career of one of the key figures in 20th-century literature.

Everyone remembers Herbert George Wells as one of the greats of science fiction—indeed as the father of the modern SF genre, whose classic tale of interplanetary invasion *The War of the Worlds* appeared in 1898 and has its latest film incarnation this year.

Perhaps not so often remembered is that Wells became a celebrity on a scale that today's SF authors can only dream of (unless they happen to be Sir Arthur C. Clarke). Wells clawed his way to fame from working-class beginnings, despite being frequently scoffed at by Establishment snobs as a "vulgar Cockney."

He was born on 21 September 1866, in Bromley, Kent. (For nearly 20 years from the mid-1980s, his birthplace celebrated him with a Wells-themed mural in its market square, recently whitewashed over, alas, and scheduled for replacement with a more respectable Darwin mural.) His father was a gardener who moved into shop-keeping, with a special line in cricket bats; his mother was a maid and later a housekeeper. In 1880, they apprenticed the young Herbert to a firm of drapers. He loathed working as a clerk, though, and yearned to become a scientist. One short month as a chemist's assistant convinced him that this was a dead end; instead he took the academic route, becoming a student-teacher and then undermaster at Midhurst Grammar School. By 1884 he'd achieved a scholarship to the Normal School of Science, South Kensington, where he studied a range of subjects. He learned his biology from the celebrated T.H. Huxley, the natural historian who popularised Darwin's theory of evolution.

Wells' genuine intelligence and capacity for hard work duly brought him a B.Sci. degree. Success as a writer, however, required not just ability but, even then, a considerable helping of good luck. It was a course that Wells nevertheless set out on, and a gloomy but determined letter to a friend in the late 1880s records how he had burnt two unfinished and unsatisfactory novels totalling 60,000 words, not to mention "sundry stories." When it came to his unfinished serial fiction "The Chronic Argonauts," Wells went to the length of buying up and destroying the back issues of the *Science Schools Journal* where its three instalments appeared in 1888. (A waste of money: copies were preserved for the mockery of future generations in the archives of Imperial College, London.) This amateurish and poorly titled work, starring a mysterious 'Dr Moses Nebogipfel,' was his first stab at *The Time Machine*.

One stroke of luck was that his popular-science article "The Rediscovery of the Unique," though not very enthusiastically received

by the editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, impressed another contributor who felt and insisted that it should be published. The name of the secret benefactor: Oscar Wilde.

It was now the Naughty 'Nineties, and Wells' notorious randiness began to emerge. In 1891, he wed his cousin Isabel Mary Wells, after lamenting at plaintive length her wish to marry before leaping into bed: "I didn't believe in marriage anyhow, I insisted. The great thing was not marriage but love. I invoked Godwin, Shelley, Socialism." (*Experiment in Autobiography*, 1934.) Alas, even after marriage Isabel proved to be less than keen on sex, and Wells' first extra-marital affair soon followed. In 1893, he went further and eloped with "Jane"—Amy Catherine Robbins, one of his students.

Though not able, or willing, to marry at once, they ended up as husband and wife until her death. But many more Wellsian lapses were to come.

His first truly influential publication as a pop-science writer was the 1893 essay "The Man of the Year Million," which introduced that potent SF image of a far-future man with his overdeveloped head, eyes and brain perched on top of a shrunken, atrophied body—the ultimate Darwinian triumph of couch-potato over jock. Many SF authors were to borrow this image of a hyper-evolved Homo Superior, which is most famously echoed in Dan Dare's implacable foe the Mekon.

Then, came 1895: a truly magic year for Wells. Divorced at last, he married his Jane, met Bernard Shaw, and published four books—including his first unmistakable masterpiece, *The Time Machine*. This made his reputation: Wells would never be obscure again. Two more books followed in the next year, one being *The Island of Doctor Moreau*; four in 1897, including *The Invisible Man*; and in 1898 came *The War of the Worlds*.

All too often, science fiction writers are misread as prophets, and are judged by predictive success or failure rather than literary accomplishment and impact. Wells himself later made several attempts at self-fulfilling prophecy, creating utopian-socialist visions of how he felt the future ought to be in *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923). Would pure reason and altruism be enough to bring about such reforms? Significantly, *In the Days of the Comet* (1906) resorted to changing human nature by means of personality-improving gases shed by a comet's tail, as the most plausible way to usher in his Utopia of universal free love. Perhaps

more significantly, none of these idealistic novels is widely remembered today.

Neither, strangely enough, is *The World Set Free* (1914), which 'predicted' nuclear weapons—or rather, dramatised a possibility that had been widely discussed ever since Einstein's theory of special relativity appeared in 1905 and gave us the iconic equation  $e=mc^2$ . Wells' atomic bombs are armed by biting a stud, and are then flung by human hands from the open cockpit of a two-man aeroplane (albeit a plane powered by an "atomic engine as noiseless as a dancing sunbeam"). Thanks to pardonable confusion about the operation of radioactivity, these doomsday weapons don't simply explode but continue to explode, releasing volcanic heat for many half-lives of their "Carolinum" cores. Stephen Baxter's Wellsian homage *The Time Ships* (1995) features bombs with this unusual behaviour—not to mention a friendly Morlock called Nebogipfel.

More remarkable, on the whole, was Wells' prediction of tank warfare long before the outbreak of World War I, in "The Land Ironclads" (1903), in which he saw the possibility of assembling known technologies of guns, armour and the internal combustion engine into a powerful new weapon of war. Additionally, there's a delayed-action surprise in the aiming system used by the gunners in those ironclads, who track the image of each target in a camera obscura and deal out death with what we'd now call a joystick and fire button. Here, Wells anticipated not only today's distanced, remote-control slaughter but the interface of a million computer games.

So much for prophecy; Wells' genuinely great achievement was to use the apparatus of science to take a long, bleak view of the human condition; to show how tiny we appear through the reversed telescope of eternity, dwarfed by the grandeur of a purely materialistic Universe. The real hero of *The Time Machine* is not the Time Traveller or his wonderful device, but the concept of deep time itself—hundreds of thousands of years in which humanity is warped and divided by evolutionary pressures into effete Eloi and sinister Morlocks, and then billions more before that final, unforgettable vision of Earth's last crab-like and tentacled inhabitants on a barren shore under the bloated, blood-red, dying Sun. No utopian cheer there.

The then-subversive notion that humanity is not the pinnacle of evolution but perhaps just another passing phase is more delicately finessed in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Here, the obvious horror

of Moreau's brutal and hubristic experiments to "uplift" animals to human form and intelligence is underpinned by a disquieting sense that—given the story's premise—the gulf between human and animal cannot be very great. In his final chapter, Wells deliberately echoes the alienation of Lemuel Gulliver in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, who, after living in a society of superior, enlightened horses sees fellow-humans as degenerate 'Yahoos'—or in Wells' novel, precariously civilised beings who show the mark of their beastly origins and could all too easily revert. We ourselves are cryptozoology.

Our chronic delusions of superiority are satirised in Griffin, the megalomaniac antihero of *The Invisible Man*. After painfully gaining his tiny advantage over the rest of mankind—a difference which, punningly, cannot even be seen—he wildly proclaims himself as Homo Superior, "Invisible Man the First," with a manifest destiny to rule lesser mortals through "A Reign of Terror." The despised masses of ordinary English townsfolk and policemen may be less intelligent than this archetypal mad scientist, but they successfully combine against him.

(Incidentally, several SF authors who should have read their sourcebook with more care have taunted Wells for failing to realise that "an invisible man would be blind"—since light would pass uselessly through the invisible retinas of his eyes. In fact, Wells deserves credit for spotting this difficulty and getting around it as best he could, with the explanation that retinal pigments are resistant to the invisibility ray's influence. In Griffin's experimental cat, for example, "there remained the two little ghosts of her eyes.")

Despite its paranoia and grotesquerie *The Invisible Man* ultimately provided comfort by showing, in miniature, the fate of a would-be fascist dictator when the common people unite against him. Wells gave the Empire-loving British a contrasting shock with *The War of the Worlds*, in which the fondly cherished Victorian mandate to colonise and civilise the world was inverted. His imperialist Martians—"intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic"—set about colonising Earth without regard for its tiresome natives, debunking that complacency that assumed the superiority of British firepower to be equivalent to the moral high ground, if not God's will. As Hilaire Belloc wrote in his sardonic *The Modern Traveller*: "Whatever happens we have got / The Maxim Gun, and they have not." What to do, though, when even the Maxim gun proves useless against the alien invaders' all-powerful walking Tripods, Heat-Rays and Black Smoke?

As we all know, the Earth of *The War of the Worlds* is eventually saved from Martian domination by sheer luck and provident bacteria. But imperialistic smugness is gone forever from Wells' imagined England, as indeed it was to sink in the real-life morass of the Great War. The narrator, himself a Wells-like visionary, is personally humbled when the horror is over and he returns to the manuscript he abandoned on the eve of invasion, to read its unfinished, excessively confident ending: "In about two hundred years, we may expect—."

Meanwhile, another potent Wellsian influence can be detected in his Martians who, like the Man of the Year Million, are physically feeble and powerful only when linked, cyborg-fashion, with their war machines... thus anticipating everyone's favourite cyborg nightmares from Doctor Who, the Daleks.

In the wake of this amazing series of novels, Wells was now a literary success. A tangible result of the resulting affluence was that in 1899-1900, he had a fine new home built specially for himself and Jane: Spade House at Sandgate, Kent. His recurring utopian dream of a socialist World State inevitably led him into politics, and in 1903 he joined the gently socialist Fabian Society (which, as unkind people remarked and Wells happily agreed, had plenty of nubile female members). The Fabians had named themselves for Fabius Cunctator, the Roman general who made shrewd use of the tactics of delay. The Fabians took a similarly long view, aiming for a gradual, almost imperceptible introduction of socialism into English politics. A traditional gibe was the supposed Fabian rallying call as the crowd was whipped into a frenzy of moderation: "What do we want?" "GRADUAL CHANGE!" "When do we want it?" "IN DUE COURSE!"

Wells' burning urge to save the world made him too impatient for such an approach: he gathered allies and staged a communistic coup within the Society, which failed, his in-person debating tactics being no match for Bernard Shaw's. Eventually, sulkily, he left the Fabians in 1908. His eventual attempts to enter Parliament, as a Labour candidate for the London University seat in 1922 and again in 1923, were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, the fame of Wells' books had already crossed the Atlantic. 1906 saw him following the traditional path of British literary lions like Dickens and Wilde, with a visit to America. There he exchanged words "at high level" with President Theodore Roosevelt. Needing a break after this doubtless exhausting task, Wells called a cab, asked to be taken to a brothel, and was given the in-

teresting choice of white or black. "It seemed to me that I should experience the local colour at its intensest," he decided impartially, and opted for black.

Although Wells had extravagant political ideals, a gargantuan ego and a sexual appetite to match, he was never a fool. Another international celebrity trip, this time to Moscow in 1920, led to a meeting with Trotsky and Lenin. "What a little bourgeois! What a philistine," said Lenin afterwards... for Wells had asked some shrewd, awkward questions. Very soon he published *Russia in the Shadows*, which examined the country's plight without (like most other Western visitors, Bertrand Russell excepted) going overboard in either uncritical praise or condemnation of the Soviet regime. Perhaps his worst blasphemy was to mock the cult of Karl Marx, expressing a particular dislike for that "vast solemn woolly uneventful beard that must have made all normal exercise impossible... It is exactly like *Das Kapital* in its inane abundance." With this picture in mind, Wells planned, though never wrote, a debunking book to be called *The Shaving of Karl Marx*. Later he was one of the first to speak out against Italian fascism, denouncing Mussolini for "bloody filthy terrorism" in 1924.

Meanwhile, Wells enjoyed many less public conquests. Much is revealed in his third, posthumously published, volume of autobiography—too hot to be published until 1984, 50 years after *Experiment in Autobiography*, when it appeared as *HG Wells in Love*. Numerous mistresses are relentlessly named, sometimes as many as four to a page. Amber Reeves, daughter of a prominent Fabian couple, wanted—and got—his child. The author Rebecca West wrote a stinging feminist review of his 1912 novel *Marriage*, and somehow became his mistress as a direct consequence. She too produced a Wellsian baby. That first Russian trip featured a visit to the great author Maxim Gorky; our hero was soon in bed with their beautiful interpreter Moura Benckendorff (who was not only already married but also Gorky's lover at the time; she was later to remarry and become Baroness Budberg. "Moura," or Maria, was widely rumoured to be a Soviet spy), an affair which continued intermittently for many years. "She is the woman I really love," Wells wrote in his secret autobiography.

Wells discovered the advantages of being famous and hobnobbing on equal terms with the mighty when one spurned mistress arrived at his London flat, more or less unclad, slashed her wrists (though not fatally), and was removed by the police. A cautious word to press barons Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere ensured that this particular Wells scandal never made it into the papers: the

helpful lords issued the instruction that, for the next fortnight, "HG Wells is not news."

Not all of Wells' celebrity contacts remained friendly. His sense of mischief led to trouble with the revered American novelist Henry James, whom he mercilessly sent up in a now forgotten book called *Boon* (1915). Unfortunately, there was a certain stinging accuracy in the description of James's laborious literary style: "It is like Leviathan retrieving pebbles. It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost of its dignity upon picking up a pea..." In *Men Like Gods* (1923), Wells satirised the foreign policy of Winston Churchill himself.

With the coming of World War I, Wells fell out with Bertrand Russell and his old Fabian Society sparring partner Bernard Shaw. They were fierce pacifists, while he felt this war was necessary, and coined the ringing phrase "The War That Will End War." (This slogan was to haunt him in later life, especially when World War II became inevitable.) He detested the Catholic Church, and was unflattering about its role in history when he produced his masterwork of non-fiction, *The Outline of History* (1920)—leading to a series of outraged attacks from another former friend, the Catholic apologist Hilaire Belloc. This assault was weakened by Belloc's general ignorance of science, and Wells made him look a fool in his devastating reply, *Mr Belloc Objects to "The Outline of History"* (1927). One lasting irony, though, was that the 'scientific' evidence so crushingly quoted by Wells included Piltdown Man, which was later exposed as a hoax.

Of course there were more meetings with remarkable men. Wells got into further hot water when he interviewed Stalin in 1934 and, besides other unpopular remarks, stressed creative writers' need for free speech. Stalin trotted out the old hypocrisy: that free expression flourished in the USSR, under the name "self-criticism." Western pro-communists (again including Shaw) abused Wells for questioning the perfection of Soviet Russia. His meeting in the same year with President Franklin D. Roosevelt was less controversial. Altogether more light-hearted was a 1940 encounter with Orson Welles... though, characteristically, H.G. was sceptical about the uproar claimed for Welles' now legendary *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast: "Are you sure there was such a panic in America?"

Several Wells stories were filmed, beginning with the 1932 adaptation of *Moreau* as "Island of Lost Souls"; these movies are discussed elsewhere in this issue. Wells himself made his cinema



debut in 1936, having written his own scripts for film versions of his fantasy "The Man Who Could Work Miracles" (1898) and his best-known utopian vision *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933). Although one line from Alexander Korda's production of the latter is still a beloved catchphrase among SF fans—"The Universe, or nothingness? Which shall it be, Passworthy? Which shall it be?"—Wells had no flair for screenplays. *Things to Come* owes its classic status to futuristic imagery rather than the author's ponderous dialogue. His ingenious excuse at the time was that he couldn't write properly without a bracing dose of sex at least twice a day.

Screenplays, essays, satires, polemics, popular science, history and even (somewhat eccentric) theology... taken as a whole, H.G. Wells was far more of a literary all-rounder than indicated by his remembered legacy of apocalyptic SF and less successful utopianism. There are several effective social comedies, usually dealing with English class distinctions and class war, such as *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910)—both filmed, with the former later becoming the successful musical "Half a Sixpence." And Wells' large output of thematically interesting stories provides plenty of food for thought for readers of a forteen bent.

One for the cryptozoologists is the short "Aepyornis Island" (1894), a comic romp about the folly of hatching out and rearing an "extinct" bird whose adult form is bigger than the legendary roc. Much more sinister is "The Empire of the Ants" (1905), introducing a new South American ant species whose special deadliness is not size or venom but increased hive-mind intelligence. They spread unstoppably: "By 1920 they will be half-way down the Amazon. I fix 1950 or '60 at the latest for the discovery of Europe."

Necrology buffs should note the bizarre, grisly deaths by blast-furnace in the very cruel "The Cone" (1895), and by electrocution in "The Lord of the Dynamos" (1894), featuring a one-man cult of dynamo worship which culminates in "a Martyrdom and a Human Sacrifice."

A classic movie sequence, the discovery and use of the bone club in Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968), was anticipated in Wells' prehistoric fiction "A Story of the Stone Age" (1897), whose doomsday weapon is a club with inset lion's teeth. Little did he know that this pioneering work would one day lead to Jean M. Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear*.

Our man's most powerful influence on the fringes of science is probably the gravity-shielding material Cavorite, introduced in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) as an incidental device to allow a low-budget Moon expedition. This would have all sorts of useful applications in perpetual motion machines. General relativity implies that Cavorite is impossible, since gravity is inherent in the local curvature of space rather than being a force that might be blocked by some special kind of matter. It's a wonderful dream, though, that led to the establishment in 1948 of the Gravity Research Foundation to seek out real-world Cavorite. Eventually, the GRF abandoned its cranky origins in favour of an annual competition for essays on gravity—a prize won several times by wild-eyed fringe theorist Stephen Hawking.

Remote viewing, that parapsychological favourite, is very literally imagined in "The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes" (1895), whose London-dwelling protagonist becomes functionally blind, seeing only real-time images of a penguin-infested antipodean island. Another unfortunate in "The Plattner Story" (1896) is blasted out of our reality and returns as his physical mirror-image—rotated through the fourth dimension. Like a good fortune teller, Wells offers no explanation of these anomalies. Strange and marvellous things happen. Take it or leave it, as you please.


Wells also wrote various supernatural tales, and anticipated the kind of logical, quasi-scientific fantasy that later became a staple of the US magazine *Unknown*. In the comic tale "The Truth About Pyecraft," the obese title character follows a magical recipe to lose weight. Alas, he should have specified fat rather than weight: though bloated as ever, he ends up floating like a balloon... A better-known example in this vein is the climax of "The Man Who Could Work Miracles," whose protagonist foolishly halts the Sun in the sky—that is, he makes Earth stop rotating, but without specifying its atmosphere or "the trifling movables on its surface," which disastrously continue to travel at several hundred miles per hour. Gales! Chaos! Disaster!

The gentler supernatural story "The Magic Shop" (1903) featured not only the wish-fulfilment of toy soldiers that come magically to life—echoed by many children's authors, from John Masefield to Diana Wynne Jones, and in several films—but the famous fantasy notion of the magic shop itself, the weird emporium that sells Wonderful Things yet somehow isn't there when you try to find it again. This idea was frequently recycled in slick-magazine fantasy, and spoofed at least twice in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* saga.

It was rare for Wells to write outright supernatural horror. "The Red Room" (1896), describing an abstract haunting by disembodied fear rather than any specific ghost, is the best-known example. Much odder and more obscure is *The Croquet Player* (1936), which evokes a powerful sense of ancient evil infesting the accursed region of 'Cainsmarsh'—H.G. Wells doing H.P. Lovecraft.

Such effective but conventional horrors are eventually stripped away to reveal a grimmer vision of the brutal, unreconstructed caveman within us, a Moreauesque skull beneath the skin. That was how Wells channelled his sense of the world in the later 1930s.

Indeed the long, harsh anti-utopia of World War II depressed Wells. He was in London during the Blitz, and his last few years were clouded by illness, but he kept writing to the end. The actual coming of nuclear weapons, many of whose horrors he had imagined in *The World Set Free*, added to the gloom. So perhaps did C.S. Lewis's occult fantasy novel *That Hideous Strength* (1945), briefly but viciously caricaturing Wells as "Jules," a pompous Cockney author with out-of-date scientific training and no comprehension of the technological evils which he foolishly promotes.

Famously, Wells' last book *Mind at the End of its Tether* (1945)—written before Hiroshima—expresses morbid fears that the human race is doomed. But, despite everything, it ends on a cautious note of hope. For all his would-be prophetic warnings, Wells was also one of the great optimists of literature; having so many eager groupies probably helped. 

**David Langford** publishes the science fiction newsletter *An-sible*, is a regular columnist for *SFX* and *Interzone*, and has won many Hugo Awards for writing about SF. His latest book is *Different Kinds of Darkness*.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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