

# A Preface to H. G. Wells

John Hammond

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Preface Books



A PREFACE TO  

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H. G. WELLS

JOHN HAMMOND

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## PREFACE BOOKS

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'A description of what the *Preface Books* were intended to be was included in the first volume and has appeared unchanged at the front of every succeeding title: "A series of scholarly and critical studies of major writers intended for those needing modern and authoritative guidance through the characteristic difficulties of their work to reach an intelligent understanding and enjoyment of it." This may seem modest enough but a moment's reflection will reveal what a considerable claim it actually is. It is much to the credit of Longman and to their [founding] editor Maurice Hussey and his authors that these words have come to seem no more than a plain statement of fact.'

(NATE NEWS)

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H. G. Wells, *circa* 1920

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## PREFACE

Half a century after his death H. G. Wells remains a force to be reckoned with. He is now acknowledged as the father of science fiction, as a novelist in the realist tradition of Dickens, as the author of some of the finest short stories in the English language, and as a popular educator and man of ideas. He is studied in universities and widely read by the general reader.

I hope that this Preface volume will fill a need by providing an overview of Wells's life and work and by placing his major writings in their literary and biographical context. I hope also that this introductory volume will whet the readers appetite for the novels themselves and bring his works to the attention of a wider audience. As we enter a new millennium Wells still has much to say to us of relevance to our lives.

He himself was far too modest about his literary achievement, saying 'I wave the striving immortals onwards and step aside'. Yet it is now clear that in his scientific romances, his short stories and novels of English life he made a permanent contribution to world literature and in *The Outline of History* and *A Short History of the World* he established a deserved reputation as a popular educator. The death of any major writer is inevitably followed by a period of adjustment in which his or her enduring achievement is assessed. In recent years we have seen an increasing number of critical and biographical studies of Wells and important collections of his letters. We now know far more about his methods of work and approach to literature than was apparent during his lifetime, and it is now possible to assess his achievement dispassionately. It is my hope that this *Preface to H. G. Wells* will be found useful both by the student and the general reader, and that it will prove of value as an introductory guide and as a source of reference.

## PREFACE

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## INTRODUCTION

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 and biographical 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, the realist novel and the short story but who dissipated his formidable talents on issues which are finally ephemeral.

Wells was a man of many contradictions. Trained as a scientist, he possessed the creative powers and vision of an artist. Profoundly pessimistic concerning the human condition, his name has come to be associated with a belief in the inevitability of progress and the power of science to cure all human ills. A novelist and storyteller of formidable imaginative power, he wished to be remembered as an educationalist and writer on social questions. The central contradiction of his life seems to me that, while he insisted he was the antithesis of James Joyce and that his writings were of contemporary value only, the evidence of his work belies his protestations. The fact is that the bulk of his fiction was written with meticulous care, that he was a compulsive reviser of his own work and that he cared deeply about his literary reputation, despite his public assertions to the contrary. We now know far more about his methods of work than was apparent in his lifetime. From his manuscripts (now preserved at the

University of Illinois), his letters to literary friends and the reminiscences of those who knew him it is possible to build up a picture of a writer who worried away at the drafts of his novels, passing them through revision after revision until he was satisfied. He cared passionately about words and the meaning of words and at his best – in his autobiography and such novels as *The History of Mr Polly* and *Tono-Bungay* – was a stylist of rare accomplishment. Given that he attached so much importance to language, how are we to account for his uncertain literary reputation today and the fact that he is bypassed by so much academic literary criticism?

Today his novels, scientific romances and short stories are still widely read but he is paying the price for having written too much of too variable a standard. His tendency to unevenness and over-production has meant that the bulk of his immense output is out of print and largely forgotten. Twenty-two of his novels are currently in print in a variety of paperback and hardback editions (about half his total output of fiction) but virtually all his non-fiction has been submerged by the passage of time. Only *Experiment in Autobiography* and *A Short History of the World* survive from the fifty or so volumes on social and political questions he wrote between 1900 and 1945. The late John Raymond expressed a widely held view when he wrote apropos of his literary reputation:

His generous unwisdom in the cause of human progress was Wells's artistic undoing. But when all his plans and pamphlets have blown away, the best of the novels, the scientific romances and the short stories are still there – wonderful and indestructible. They are alive and kicking.

To concur with this judgement is not in any way to denigrate Wells's ideas, but simply to point out that he expressed these ideas far more effectively and influentially in his fiction than in the flow of blueprints, outlines, pamphlets and manifestos which poured from his pen. If his ideas are to live and influence new generations of readers in the twenty-first century, it is much more likely to be through his novels than his non-fiction.

So far as popular taste is concerned, he remains a widely read author. Thanks to the scientific romances, the short stories and such novels as *Kipps*, *Tono-Bungay* and *The New Machiavelli* he remains a

## INTRODUCTION

figure to be reckoned with, a writer who made a significant contribution to English literature and brought whole cross-sections of life into the novel. His critical reputation is much more difficult to assess. Despite the fact that over the past thirty years we have seen a growing understanding of Wells's approach to the novel his critical standing remains uncertain. The reputation of Joyce, James, Lawrence, Conrad and Woolf seems in no doubt: all their work has the seal of academic respectability and as such is studied and analysed at universities throughout the Western hemisphere. Wells by comparison occupies a somewhat peripheral place on the fringe of English studies, neither wholly respectable nor wholly rejected. The reason for this ambiguity is not hard to find.

Wells was a writer in many different genres. He was a novelist in the English discursive tradition of Fielding and Dickens. He was a scientific romancer in the manner of Poe and Verne. He was a prolific author of short stories. Beyond this he wrote volumes on sociology, history, politics, metaphysics and current affairs. He remains a difficult writer to assess dispassionately largely because it is by no means easy to classify him under any conventional rubric. The position is complicated by the fact that he occupies a transitional place midway between realism and modernism. While for many years he was regarded as a novelist in the realist tradition of Trollope and Bennett, more and more critics now discern elements of symbolism in his work. Writing in 1957 Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* dismissed Wells as 'a low mimetic writer not much given to introducing hieratic symbols'. In the light of the work of scholars such as Bernard Bergonzi, Patrick Parrinder, Robert Bloom, John Huntington and William J. Scheick it would be far more difficult to make that judgement today. My own assessment of his life and work is that he remains an extraordinarily interesting writer who left behind him an imperishable legacy of masterpieces. When he told Henry James 'I had rather be called a journalist than an artist' and insisted that his own writings would not stand the test of time he was doing less than justice to himself. It is now more than one hundred years since the first publication of *The Time Machine*. This little book is imbued with the qualities that will ensure for H. G. Wells a lasting place in literary history: a sense of wonder, poetic imagination, vivid narrative power and the gift of compelling belief. Above all it epitomises that ability to create a myth of

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enduring relevance to the human condition which may yet prove to be his finest contribution to life and thought.

I have followed the general format of the Preface series in that Part One concentrates on biographical material. Part Two examines the main areas of critical debate: his approach to the art of fiction, the distinction between the narrative voice and the author himself and the tension between classical and romantic elements within Wells's personality. Also included in this section is an examination of his contribution to Utopian and dystopian thought: particularly important in view of the widespread (and false) impression that Wells believed in the inevitability of progress.

Part Two also includes a critical examination of two of the most frequently discussed novels: *The Time Machine* and *Tono-Bungay*. Part Three contains background and reference information which will assist the reader to a fuller understanding and enjoyment of Wells's works.

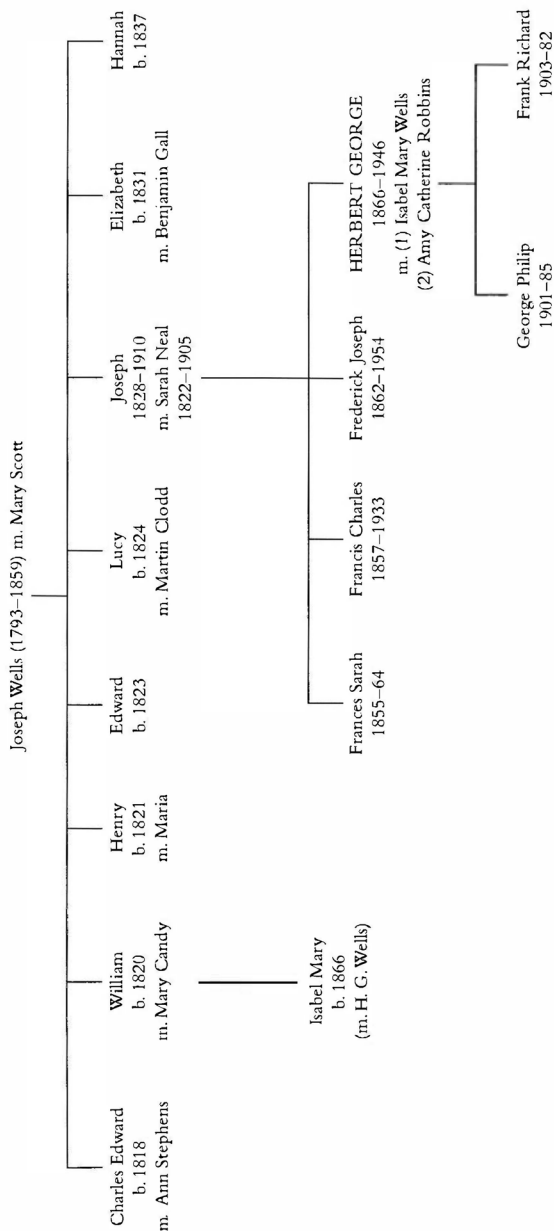
John Hammond

PART ONE

THE WRITER AND HIS SETTING

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## The Wells Family



## Chronological table

Life and works	Related events and background
1866 Herbert George Wells, the youngest of four children, born 21 September to Joseph and Sarah Wells, at Bromley	War between Austria and Italy. Nobel invents dynamite. Dostoevsky's <i>Crime and Punishment</i> , George Eliot's <i>Felix Holt</i> , Elizabeth Gaskell's <i>Wives and Daughters</i> . Birth of Ramsay MacDonald and Roger Fry
1867	Volume One of Marx's <i>Capital</i> is published. Trollope's <i>Last Chronicle of Barset</i> , Zola's <i>Thérèse Raquin</i> and Ibsen's <i>Peer Gynt</i> . Birth of Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy
1868	Foundation of the Royal Historical Society and the Press Association. Dostoevsky's <i>The Idiot</i> and Wilkie Collins's <i>The Moonstone</i> . Birth of Maxim Gorki
1869	Suez Canal opened. Invention of margarine and celluloid. First electric washing machine. J. S. Mill's <i>The Subjection of Women</i> , Matthew Arnold's <i>Culture and Anarchy</i> and Jules Verne's <i>Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea</i> . T. H. Huxley coins word 'agnostic'
1870	Franco-Prussian War begins. Forster's Education Act establishes board schools. Invention of the dynamo. Work begins on Revised Version of the Bible. Death of Charles Dickens and publication of <i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> . Birth of Lenin. Alexander Dumas dies
1871 Attends dame school at 8 South Street, Bromley, run by Mrs Knott and her daughter Miss Salmon. Here he learns to read and recite his tables	End of Franco-Prussian War. Stanley and Livingstone meet at Ujiji. First women students at Cambridge University. Darwin's <i>The Descent of Man</i> , George Eliot's <i>Middlemarch</i> and Lewis Carroll's <i>Alice Through the Looking Glass</i> . Birth of Marcel Proust and Stephen Crane
1872 Amy Catherine Robbins, later Wells's second wife, born	Entente between Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary. Thomas Edison invents

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Life and works	Related events and background
	the telegraph. Samuel Butler's <i>Erewhon</i> , Hardy's <i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i> , Jules Verne's <i>Around the World in 80 Days</i> . Birth of Bertrand Russell, Max Beerbohm and Louis Bleriot
1873	Financial crisis in America and Europe. Invention of first successful typewriter, and colour photography. First oil well sunk. Tolstoy's <i>Anna Karenina</i> and J. S. Mill's <i>Autobiography</i> . Death of Edward Bulwer-Lytton and John Stuart Mill. Birth of Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford)
1874 Breaks his leg and while convalescing reads voraciously, including Wood's <i>Natural History</i> and bound volumes of <i>Punch</i> . Enters Thomas Morley's Academy, High Street, Bromley, as a day boy. He remains here as a pupil until 1880	Universal Postal Union established. First impressionist exhibition in Paris. Hardy's <i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i> . Birth of Somerset Maugham, Robert Frost, G. K. Chesterton and Winston Churchill
1875	Britain buys shares in Suez Canal. Completion of London's main drainage system. Foundation of London Medical School for Women. First experiments on electrical responses of the brain. Charles Kingsley dies. Birth of John Buchan
1876	Invention of the telephone and the phonograph. Henry James's <i>Roderick Hudson</i> and George Eliot's <i>Daniel Deronda</i> . Birth of G. M. Trevelyan
1877 Joseph Wells falls while pruning a grapevine and fractures his leg. The accident leads to a decline in the fortunes of the Wells family	Russia declares war on Turkey. Britain annexes the Transvaal. First public telephone. Discovery of Mars's satellites. Henry James's <i>The American</i> . Leon Trotsky born
1878 Begins writing a humorous illustrated story, <i>The Desert Daisy</i>	Turkey signs armistice with Russia. Invention of filament lamp and the microphone. First electric street lighting in London. Salvation Army is founded. Hardy's <i>The Return of the Native</i> and James's <i>Daisy Miller</i> . Birth of Upton Sinclair and John Masefield

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Life and works	Related events and background
1879	British–Zulu War. First electric railway. London's first telephone exchange. Saccharin is discovered. Henry George's <i>Progress and Poverty</i> , Herbert Spencer's <i>Principles of Ethics</i> . Publication of R. L. Stevenson's <i>Travels with a Donkey</i> and George Meredith's <i>The Egoist</i> . Birth of Einstein
1880 Sarah Wells becomes housekeeper at Uppark, West Sussex. Wells is sent to Rodgers and Denyer, drapers, at Windsor on one month's trial. He is dismissed at the end of his trial month, and spends a brief period as a pupil-teacher at the National School, Wookey, Somerset	Transvaal declares itself an independent republic. Electric street lighting in New York. Zola's <i>Nana</i> and Disraeli's <i>Endymion</i> . Invention of the half-tone block for reproducing photographs in newspapers. Death of Flaubert and George Eliot
1881 Serves for a brief period in a chemist's shop owned by Samuel Cowap, Church Street, Midhurst. Moves to Southsea where he is bound apprentice at Hyde's Drapery Emporium, King's Road, Southsea. Here he remains for two years	Transvaal Boers revolt against British rule. Natural History Museum opens at South Kensington. Publication of Revised Version of the New Testament. Foundation of <i>Tit-Bits</i> by George Newnes. Death of Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli and George Borrow
1882	Married Women's Property Act gives married women in Britain the right of separate ownership of property. Regent Street Polytechnic opened in London. Gottlieb Daimler builds a petrol engine. First hydro-electric plant constructed. Oscar Wilde's <i>Lectures on the Decorative Arts</i> outlines aims of aesthetic movement. Birth of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Death of Longfellow and Charles Darwin
1883 Walks from Southsea to Uppark and pleads with his mother to cancel his apprenticeship indentures. Sarah Wells reluctantly agrees. Leaves Southsea and becomes a pupil-teacher at Midhurst Grammar School, resuming his full-time education	Kruger becomes President of Transvaal. First skyscraper is built in Chicago. Orient Express first runs. Death of Karl Marx and Ivan Turgenev

THE WRITER AND HIS SETTING

Life and works	Related events and background
<p>1884 Wins scholarship to Normal School of Science, South Kensington. Leaves Midhurst and commences three years as a science student at the Normal School (now part of the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine). In his first year, studies biology under T. H. Huxley</p>	<p>Germany occupies S. W. Africa and the Cameroons. Third British Reform Bill. Fabian Society is founded. Discovery of the tetanus bacillus. <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> published for the first time. Ibsen's <i>The Wild Duck</i>. Birth of Sean O'Casey</p>
<p>1885 In his second year, studies physics under Professor Guthrie</p>	<p>Invention of internal combustion engine. <i>Dictionary of National Biography</i> is begun. Meredith's <i>Diana of the Crossways</i> and Zola's <i>Geminal</i>. Death of Victor Hugo. Birth of D. H. Lawrence</p>
<p>1886 In his final year, studies geology under Professor Judd. Becomes editor of student magazine, the <i>Science Schools Journal</i>, and contributes articles</p>	<p>Gladstone introduces Home Rule Bill for Ireland. First English edition of Marx's <i>Capital</i>. Gissing's <i>Demos</i>, James's <i>The Bostonians</i> and Stevenson's <i>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i></p>
<p>1887 Fails final examinations. Becomes schoolmaster at Holt Academy, Holt, near Wrexham, North Wales. Badly fouled on the football pitch and suffers haemorrhages; spends several months convalescing at Uppark. Writes a number of short stories. Joseph Wells gives up the shop at Bromley and moves to Liss, Hampshire</p>	<p>Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Britain annexes Zululand. Zamenhof invents Esperanto. Invention of artificial silk. Hertz produces the first radio waves. Birth of Julian Huxley</p>
<p>1888 Continues convalescence at Uppark and at Stoke on Trent, where he stays with his friend William Burton. Returns to London in the summer, working as a teacher. <i>The Chronic Argonauts</i> is published in <i>Science Schools Journal</i>. Continues writing short stories and begins work on a novel, later abandoned</p>	<p>Invention of the electric motor, the box camera and the pneumatic tyre. Foundation of <i>Answers</i> by Alfred Hamsworth. Edward Bellamy's <i>Looking Backward</i>. T. S. Eliot and T. E. Lawrence are born. Matthew Arnold dies</p>
<p>1889 Becomes schoolmaster at Henley House School,</p>	<p>London dock strike. G. B. Shaw's <i>Fabian Essays</i>. Brussels conference on abolition</p>

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Life and works	Related events and background
	of the slave trade. Birth of Adolf Hitler
<p>1890 Leaves Henley House School and becomes lecturer and correspondence course tutor for the University Correspondence College. Teaches biology in classes at Booksellers Row, London. Obtains degree of BSc of London University</p>	<p>First electric power station in Britain and first underground railway. Completion of the Forth Bridge. Free elementary education in England. Frazer's <i>The Golden Bough</i>, William James's <i>Principles of Psychology</i> and Ibsen's <i>Hedda Gabler</i>. Birth of Karel Čapek</p>
<p>1891 Marries his cousin Isabel Mary Wells and moves to 28 Haldon Road, Wandsworth. <i>The Rediscovery of the Unique</i> is published in <i>Fortnightly Review</i>. Works on revised version of <i>The Chronic Argonauts</i>. Writes articles for educational journals</p>	<p>Public Health Act in Britain. Trans-Siberian Railway begins construction. Discovery of electrons. Gissing's <i>New Grou Street</i> and Wilde's <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>. Herman Melville dies</p>
<p>1892 Continues full-time work as lecturer and tutor. His classes move to Red Lion Square, Holborn. Meets Amy Catherine Robbins for the first time</p>	<p>Shaw's <i>Widowers' Houses</i>, Wilde's <i>Lady Windermere's Fan</i>. Death of Walt Whitman and Alfred Lord Tennyson</p>
<p>1893 Publication of <i>Text-Book of Biology</i> and <i>Honours Physiography</i>. Breakdown in health terminates his employment with University Correspondence College. While convalescing at Eastbourne writes <i>On the Art of Staying at the Seaside</i>, the first of a series of humorous articles. Becomes full-time writer. His marriage deteriorates. Sarah Wells is dismissed from her post at Uppark and rejoins her husband</p>	<p>Formation of Independent Labour Party. Gissing's <i>The Odd Women</i> and Wilde's <i>A Woman of No Importance</i>. Wilfred Owen born</p>
<p>1894 Leaves his wife Isabel and moves into lodgings in</p>	<p>Benjamin Kidd's <i>Social Revolution</i>, the Webbs' <i>History of Trade Unionism</i>,</p>

## THE WRITER AND HIS SETTING

Life and works	Related events and background
Camden Town with Amy Catherine Robbins. Writes numerous articles and short stories. Publication of <i>The Stolen Bacillus</i> , the first short story to be published over his name, and a series of papers on time travelling. Contributes regularly to <i>Pall Mall Gazette</i> and <i>Saturday Review</i> . Spends several months at Sevenoaks working on <i>The Time Machine</i>	<i>Shaw's Arms and the Man</i> Death of R. L. Stevenson. Aldous Huxley and J. B. Priestley born
1895 Publication of <i>The Time Machine</i> , <i>Select Conversations with an Uncle</i> , <i>The Stolen Bacillus</i> and <i>Other Incidents</i> and <i>The Wonderful Visit</i> . Divorces Isabel, marries Amy Catherine Robbins and moves to Lynton, Maybury Road, Woking. Meets Bernard Shaw for the first time	London School of Economics is founded. Trial of Oscar Wilde. Marconi invents wireless telegraphy. Invention of the cinematograph. Discovery of X-rays. Freud founds psycho-analysis. Conrad's <i>Almayer's Folly</i> , Wilde's <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> . Death of T. H. Huxley
1896 Begins writing <i>The War of the Worlds</i> . Publication of <i>The Wheels of Chance</i> and <i>The Island of Doctor Moreau</i> . Moves to Heatherlea, Worcester Park, Surrey. Meets George Gissing and Dorothy Richardson for the first time	S. P. Langley conducts experiments with a flying machine. Nobel prizes established. Hardy's <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , Stevenson's <i>Weir of Hermiston</i> , Chekhov's <i>The Seagull</i> . Alfred Harmsworth founds the <i>Daily Mail</i> . Death of William Morris
1897 <i>The War of the Worlds</i> begins serialisation. Publication of <i>The Invisible Man</i> and <i>The Plattner Story and Others</i> . Begins corresponding with Arnold Bennett	Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Conrad's <i>The Nigger of the Narcissus</i> , Kipling's <i>Recessional</i> , the Webbs' <i>Industrial Democracy</i> , James's <i>What Maisie Knew</i>
1898 Spends holiday in Italy with his wife and George Gissing. Back in England has serious breakdown in health and convalesces at New Romney and Sandgate. Publication of <i>The War of the Worlds</i> . Begins corresponding with Henry	Discovery of radium by Pierre and Marie Curie. Zeppelin's airship. The first petrol-driven tractor. James's <i>The Turn of the Screw</i> , Wilde's <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i> , Shaw's <i>Caesar and Cleopatra</i> . Death of Lewis Carroll and W. E. Gladstone