

H. G. Wells (1866-1946)

By Karl Williams



"The trend of modern thought is entirely against private property in land or natural objects or products, and in Utopia these things will be the inalienable property of the World State. Subject to the rights of free locomotion, land will be leased out to companies or individuals, but - in view of the unknown necessities of the future - never for a longer period than, let us say, fifty years."

It's impossible to neatly classify H.G. Wells, for his life explored so many new fields and broke countless old boundaries. Here's a shot at it, though – prodigious author, futurist, essayist, economist, historian, the father of science fiction, pacifist, literary critic, teacher, political commentator, traveller, celebrity and (it has to be said) a "pants man" who fathered children to numerous women.

Like so many movers and shakers in world history, Herbert George Wells came from a challenging background which served as his University of Life and which bestowed an accident which set him on his course to fame and greatness. But let's start at the start.

The youngest of 4 children, Wells was born in a Kent village to parents who strived but failed to escape their working class roots. He had a frugal upbringing and, though never destitute, the threat of outright poverty always loomed. His parents lurched from one financial threat to another, variously working as a gardener, maid, crockery shop owner (above which Wells was born) and professional cricketer. Wells had to leave school at age 14 because of

family finances, and his encounters with the world of work in those early years were largely unsuccessful.

It was only by a combination of luck and his innate intelligence that allowed Wells the opportunity to escape from this intellectual cul-de-sac, winning a scholarship to begin a degree in biology. The "luck" was a broken leg at age 18 which left him bedridden so, to pass the time, he started reading books from a well-stocked local library, brought to him by his father. This ignited his devotion to the other worlds and lives to which books gave him access, and soon also stimulated his desire to write. His world – and ours, eventually – would never be the same.

In the next few years, Wells was occupied in the day with part-time teaching and studying, and at every opportunity he continued his self-education, particularly in the sciences. Moving to London and marrying, he finally became a full-time writer at age 27.

The breadth and output of Wells' works is nothing short of astounding – almost 300 works on science and science fiction, novels, political commentaries,

visions of a utopian society that is still one of the most visionary, a classic history of the world, and articles on just about every imaginable subject.

Interestingly, it was probably his science fiction which made him most famous, and his great sci-fi works came at the start of his writing career. The Time Machine is a breathtaking leap of imagination that predated much of the work of Einstein and has served as a blueprint for hundreds of stories since. As in so much of Wells work, he used his science fiction as a metaphorical device, particularly to mirror the inequities he saw about him, as well as to comment on the danger of unchecked scientific progress.

The Island Of Dr. Moreau is an obvious precursor to the concept of genetic engineering, telling as it does of a scientist who has surgically altered the jungle beasts of his isolated island into mockeries of the human form. The War Of The Worlds is best known as a sci-fi tale of a Martian invasion but the subtext of Wells plot was "how do you like to be at the receiving end of a very large stick, just as many real people had genuinely suffered under the British colonial yoke?"



In his 1914 novel, *The World Set Free*, is notable for the use of the phrase "atomic bomb" and his description of the methods being sought by Al Qaida. It's worth quoting a passage which illustrates Wells' foresight before the World War One has erupted and points to the underlying reasons for his anti-militarist stance "...nothing could have been more obvious to the people of the earlier twentieth century than the rapidity with which war was becoming impossible. And certainly they did not see it until the atomic bombs burst in their fumbling hands. Yet the broad facts must have glared upon any intelligent mind. All through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the amount of energy that men were able to command was continually increasing. Applied to warfare that meant that the power to inflict a blow, the power to destroy, was continually increasing. There was no increase whatever in the ability to escape. Every sort of

passive defence, armour, fortifications, and so forth, was being outmastered by this tremendous increase on the destructive side. Destruction was becoming so facile that any little body of malcontents could use it; it was revolutionising the problems of police and internal rule. Before the last war began it was a matter of common knowledge that a man could carry about in a handbag an amount of latent energy sufficient to wreck half a city."

His critical writings on the aggressive "Krupp cum Kaiser" Imperial Germany coupled with his blistering attacks on Adolf Hitler and his accomplices earned H.G. Wells the distinction of having his "anti-German" books burned by Goebbels during the infamous book bonfires at German universities. The name "H.G. Wells" also appeared very near the top of a list compiled by the SS/SD command staff of those intellectuals and politicians slated for immediate liquidation upon the invasion of Britain by the Nazis. Besides atomic bombs, he foreshadowed robotics, World Wars, aerial bombing, the use of tanks and chemical weapons and nuclear power. While his most popular works tend to show a bleak future for humanity, he was not without his sardonic and dry wit, exemplified in his quip "Every time I see an adult on a bicycle I no longer despair for the human race". I reckon he would have been a Greens voter!

He was not an absolute pacifist – for instance, he actually supported Britain's

involvement in the first world war, however he believed politicians should use this opportunity to create a new world order. Wells was encouraged by the news of the communist revolution in Russia. He visited the country and lectured Lenin and Trotsky on how they should run their country. Yet, unlike many of his contemporaries who visited that country, Wells was disillusioned by what he saw in Russia and in 1920 he published *The Outline of History*. The book described human history since the earliest times and attempted to show how society had evolved to the present state. Wells illustrated the triumphs and failures and pointed out the dangers that faced the human race, the main theme being that the world would be saved by education and not by revolution.

Wells also strongly supported the League of Nations that was established after the First World War. He stressed that society needed to establish structures that ensured that the most intelligent gained power, and broke from many socialists who criticised Wells claiming that he was now preaching a form of elitism.

A World State was a necessity to Wells. In his 1905 book, *A Modern Utopia*, he wrote of the World State taking control and creating a "sane order," and how they maintained a central records system in Paris which they used to keep track of every person on Earth and aided the state to eliminate the influence of the unfit.

"The World State in this ideal presents itself as the sole landowner of the earth, with the great local governments I have adumbrated, the local municipalities, holding, as it were, feudally under it as landlords. The State or these subordinates holds all the sources of energy, and either directly or through its tenants, farmers and agents, develops these sources, and renders the energy available for the work of life."

Wells was hostile to population growth, unfettered capitalism and democracy which led to the rule of the ill-educated mob. On a more personal level, he was socially liberal, and none of his contemporaries did more to encourage revolt against Christian tenets and accepted codes of behaviour, especially as regards sex. Both in his books and in his personal life, he was a persistent advocate of an almost complete freedom. Though in many ways hasty, ill-tempered, and contradictory, Wells was undeviating and fearless in his efforts for

social equality, world peace, and what he considered to be the future good of humanity. As well as lengthy tomes, he could also express his ideas in great one-liners, such as:

- Advertising is legalized lying.
- Our true nationality is mankind.
- Moral indignation is jealousy with a halo.
- Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.

Wells was also passionate about history and politics and developed a reputation as a reformer, joining the Fabian Society, a socialist group whose members included writer George Bernard Shaw (who himself became a great admirer of Henry George) and running for Parliament as a Labour Party candidate. As an internationally celebrated writer, he travelled to many countries including the United States, where he met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and discussed, among other topics, the implications of *The Time Machine*. Wells was also a supporter of the League of Nations (a precursor to the United Nations), serving on its Research Committee and penning books about its aims.

"Every time I see an adult on a bicycle I no longer despair for the human race"

He soon fell out with the Fabians - more over their timid tactics than principles - and later grew staunchly critical of them as having a poor understanding of economics. Wells is often called a socialist, but that's too clunky and broad a term for someone who has such radical and original ideas. Wells professed loathing for the "idle, parasitic rich," and advocated an aggressive social agenda for the competent, humanistic and educated class to take charge of human society and bringing about a fairer society. He

was extremely critical of the role that privilege and hereditary have in capitalist society, and in his utopia people gain power as a result of their intelligence and training.

You'd expect an incessantly curious and well-read person like Wells to discover and adopt the geoist paradigm, wouldn't you? That's just what Wells did, although wrapped in his own form of centralized World State. In his autobiography, he put the geoist perspective thus, "Why are things monopolized? Why was everything appropriated and every advantage secured against me before I came into the world?"

Wells' particular take on geoist implementation was explained thus, "The local authority will be the universal landowner. ... In Utopia we conclude that, whatever other types of property may exist, all natural sources of force, and indeed all strictly natural products, coal, water power, and the like, are inalienably vested in the local authorities".

Wells also wrote with admiration of Henry George, attributing him as having "a clearer realization of the strangulating effect of restrictive property as distinguished from the stimulating effect of exploitation". Later he also wrote, "Henry George's book came in like a laboratory demonstration to revivify a general theory, with his extremely simplified and plausible story of the progressive appropriation of land, his attack upon the unearned increment of private rents and his remedy of a single tax to make, in effect, rents a collective benefit.

His was an easy argument to understand, as he put it, and I was able to modify it and complicate it for myself by bringing in this or that consideration which he had excluded. It was like working kindred mathematical problems of progressive complexity under a common Rule. It was quite easy to pass from the insistence of Henry George upon the inalienable claim of the whole community to share in the benefit of land, to the

simpler aspects of interest and monetary appreciation." Wells attacked the reigning capitalist system as, "a complex of traditional usage, uncontrolled acquisitive energy and perverted opportunities, which was wasting life for us this was due not to a system but to an absence of system".



"the world will be saved by education, not by revolution."

Wells certainly appreciated the need to collect the rent from land for the public purse, but felt that Henry George hadn't explained the political system and its taxing authority that would be successful in collecting the rent. Fair comment, but perhaps Wells' own World State solution would first require a magic wand to establish?

The great man never ceased to throw up new and challenging perspectives, but his actual influence may be debated. Wells himself complained that, "I do not seem to have had a suspicion that there was such a force as social inertia to be reckoned with." Ain't that the truth, eh? And reformers like Wells didn't have to contend with those devices that rot brains known as televisions. Fittingly, Wells died in 1946, a year after Hiroshima, while working on a project that dealt with the dangers of nuclear war. ■