

A Man of Parts

D.Lodge

September 16 - 27, 2014

This is a fictional rendering of the life of H.G.Wells, based no doubt on extensive studies in the archives as well as a harvesting of the vast secondary literature. Why fiction and not yet another biography? And if fiction, what is made up and what is fact? To write a biography puts more demand on your imagination than writing a novel, according to the serial biographer Ackroyd. Why? Obviously because a biography puts restrictions, while a novel allows you far more freedom. Only when constrained is true imagination provoked. Obstacles and restrictions stimulate, while an imagination that encounters no resistance, becomes flabby and predictable. A mere retelling of facts never brings a life alive, unless of course, those give the impetus for an imagined one. Thus one may read Lodge attempts to imagine the life of Wells, given the facts, as a documentation of his efforts. As usual he writes with aplomb and you race along the pages, never being slowed down, never encountering any resistance, yet the result is curiously hollow. If you before have had some fair feeling for the personality of Wells, as seen refracted by his contemporaries, or in the general legend that has resulted from this, by the time you have finished the book those are effectively washed away. What is left is not much, save that of a small man with a large prick, who obsessively beds any woman he can get his hands on, while his wife shows admirable, or should one say detestable tolerance. Why does she put up with it? Why does he get away with it? Could it be his fame and concomitant wealth, that makes women be attracted to him, and his wife indulgent? Sex is at the very centre of the book, the writing of books and article takes second place. Wells thought of sex as a recreation from the hard work which was his essence, but of his hard work we get very little sense, maybe because it is so hard to convey. It is much easier to convey the glamor that comes with being a famous intellectual, at least in those times, loved by the public, who does not skimp on buying his books en masse, to the eternal envy of his at times neighbor - Henry James, whose time would eventually come, but only after his death. So we are treated to name-droppings. Edith Nesbit, the successful writer of children's book, Shaw, the great Fabian, with Sidney and Beatrice Webb having repeated come-on appearances. But in spite of it all, it does not make up an interesting and arresting panorama of Edwardian England.

The charm of Lodge lies in his portraiture of the contemporary scene, to which most of his readers are able to relate to. Born in 1935, he has no first hand experience of the time which was Wells. Those small details that give you a sense of location are simply not there. Lodge is necessarily reduced to the perspective of a mere passive reader. He cannot bring forth out of himself a personal view. It is all second-hand, handed down from others.

More seriously though one has little sense of a development. The years pass but it is very hard to pinpoint where you are, except when there are obvious pointers, such as the onset of the First World War. In fact this may be inevitable, when the invariable focus is on his love-affairs, which by nature involve endless repetitions, which only old age and

impotence may mollify. It is maybe symptomatic that the regular chronicling of Wells life ends by the first postwar years, the twenties, thirties and beginning forties seem not to be part of his life at all. What happened? Did he cease to publish? Did he cease to matter, so his fame (and wealth) took a nose-dive? Or was it simply that his many love affairs dried up?

Wells had a difficult childhood reared in poverty and with no prospects than to be a drapers assistant. Strikingly similar to the case of Dickens, who may have been an inspiration. But Wells managed to lift himself by the hair, acquiring an education and getting on, until he discovered that he had a flair for writing, which could be tapped for commercial benefit. He was slow to waken up sexually, and was in fact a virgin before his first marriage, save for a satisfying experience with a prostitute just before the wedding. A rite of passage expected of the male in Victorian times. His first wife, a cousin to boot, proved herself to be frigid. The lurid expectations awakened by the depravity of his encounter with the prostitute were not satisfied. To him sex was predominantly a question of release and unbridled lust. Soon he set his hopes on a student in his class, but even that turned out to be disappointing. No dirty play, no abandonment. But there were children, two boys, and the marriage, due to her exemplary (?) forbearance, or just total indifference, lasted until her death from cancer three decades later. He soon started to look elsewhere, and with growing fame, and the self-assurance that came with it, he found himself having no problems finding opportunities for so called *passades* among the smart set he was moving in, including that of the Fabian society. Most were mere moments, one-night stands, in a later terminology, but occasionally he could not help falling in love. Youth was fair game, not always, not to say never, tolerated by parents, no matter how good friends they may have been initially. There was Rosamund, the daughter of E. Nesbit, a young woman who just longed to have him introduce her to the secrets of life and love. He soon did tire of her, but gallantly agreed to keep his word on a promise once frivolously tossed her way. But on their way to their secret tryst in Paris, they were intercepted by her father and the suitor he had designated for her. The whole scene not without its farcical elements. More serious was the case of Amber Reeves, a brilliant undergraduate, with whom he could find intellectual satisfaction as well. They eloped to France with her pregnant, but Wells quickly tired of the uncomfortable situation, used as he was to be catered to by his wife as to creature comforts. Rather brusquely he foisted her on a young admirer and left the scene. Incredibly the poor young woman did not seem to think the worse for him for that, but retained her admiration and to some degree her love. But above all, the affair with Rebecca West, even younger at the time and more brilliant than even Amber, caught him deeply. He was not immune to the clutches of love and the ravages of jealousy, which he in principle so much derided. Love was too much, definitely more than you had bargained for. The ideal was the extended *passade* with a respectable woman, with a strong sex-drive and good relations with his wife. One such example was the successful novelist Elisabeth von Arnim, who was very wealthy and had built herself a chateaux in Switzerland, to which he was always welcome, as long as the affair continued. The problem was that it was conducted on her terms. She had a partition built between their rooms, but one which could only open from her side, so he was reduced to dependence on her whims, she took the initiative, not he. As he started to show interest in the young

West, she quickly lost patience, and he was kicked out of her life (which unbeknownst to the reader would involve a disastrous marriage to the elder brother of Bertrand Russell).

And so and so it can go on to the titillation of the reader. Titillating maybe, but hardly instructive, the years go by, the one book after the other gets mysteriously written. Most books you have never heard of. Maybe the novel could serve as an inducement for the innocent reader to go for the real thing, to look for his books, to read him and marvel at one of the last strongly believing in the blessings of advanced technology, as well as foreseeing their perils, soon to outweigh them. Wells was a writer and intellectual who took technology seriously, which I guess to a large degree accounted for his success with the public, although the briefs Lodge gives of the plots of his books, most of which as noted are now forgotten, seem to indicate rather insipid ones. His early stories of science fiction may very well be the only ones to survive,

September 28, 2014 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se