

## Experiment in Autobiography I

*H.G.Wells*

February 19–22, 2018

Wells is in his mid sixties when he starts thinking of writing his autobiography. He expects to have another ten to fifteen years left to live. The upper limit would turn out to be accurate at the conception of the project, the lower at the end. He wants to spend that time as efficiently as possible. He is a writer foremost and he has a few projects he wants to finish. In a rather tedious introduction he spells out his need for peace and quiet, and for a few distractions, but only when voluntarily sought out, and above all, even back then, he rejects any distraction or information foisted upon him without his consent. Even in those relatively quiet days, there were intimations of information overload (how would he have dealt with the modern internet?).

When he gets down to it his narrative becomes arresting enough. He is not content with just straightforward reminiscences; his experiment, as he puts it, has a wider purpose, namely to present his life as an exemplary tale, and concentrate on what has general significance not merely personal. Coming to think of it, his is after all the traditional motivation for writing your autobiography, starting with St. Augustine. Hence he becomes pedagogical in his approach, explaining what he is doing and why he is doing it, and thus he starts with his parents with a brief glance at his grandparents dead before his time. This is standard procedure for most writers of autobiographies, which may satisfy the curiosity of the author, but seldom of the reader, who normally would like to postpone this encounter until his or her curiosity has been whetted by a closer acquaintance with the protagonist, just as we normally would not like to be introduced to the parents of a prospective partner right away. However, Wells has a purpose. Both his parents were denizens of the 18th century, while they were born well into the 19th. 1822-05 for his mother, and 1827-10 for his father. Thus they were fairly old parents his mother being 44 at his birth which turned out to be of the youngest of he family. He had some older brothers and an older sister who died unexpectedly at around seven, a pious girl by all accounts (and thus according to Wells not very healthy), whose loss was a trauma his mother never got over, just as with so many others parents of the past. His mother had served as a ladies maid, while his father had been a gardener. They had been born into a lower station in life to serve their betters. This old-traditional way was breaking up in the 19th century in connection with the industrial revolution. The landed gentry was being replaced by industrialists, the price of land fell, and the abolishing of the corn law, enabling the industrial masses to be fed properly and relatively cheaply, impoverished landholders. His mother was pious, a piety which was very simple-minded and exasperating to her son, while his father was freer in his outlook, and dealt with life by being an expert cricketer, allowing him to escape the drudgery of a store whose wares could not compete with those of larger stores, just as in our days the small retail stores cannot hold their own against the big supermarkets. Life was indeed a drudge for the family surviving at the edge in very dismal circumstances, most of their life being spent in a subterranean kitchen. Eventually there would be a break,

the father would fall in an accident and break his leg which put a stop to his cricketing, which would make things come to a head. Some years before Wells himself had broken a leg, and that turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it allowed him uninterrupted leisure to read.

Wells was a bookish little boy who longed to widen his horizons and get out in the world. He did of course well in school, there being no serious competition as he realized, but then his way was barred. His mother had no more ambition for him than to be a draper, and consequently he was apprenticed to some, which he hated. Many attempts were made, but unlike his elder brothers he resisted. He was able to get some more schooling, and his abilities were recognized and he got the ultimate break, to enlist in a new science institution, whose object it was to improve the teachers, of whom he had become one after his elementary schooling. This institution based in Kensington would eventually merge into the emerging Imperial College. This was a very different teaching institution than the traditional universities like Cambridge and Oxford, much less romantic, much less privileged and intended for the devoted students who wanted to get ahead in life. Although, as Wells would learn, getting ahead in life is seldom compatible with a real disinterested approach to learning, one which is driven by a passion of curiosity.

This was a formative experience for the young man, and he thanked his lucky star that he came to science relatively late in his youth, thus being carried away with a new found love, which unlike that of more precocious children had not been worn down. He was also lucky enough to have the legendary T.H.Huxley as a teacher of biology, whetting his interest and passion for the subject. It must have been heaven for him, and he did very well. However, when it came to physics he had a certain Frederick Guthrie, who turned out to be a real disappointment. Guthrie was simply uninspiring, maybe because he was uninspired himself, already marked by a cancer of the throat which would soon kill him in his early fifties. But the problem went deeper, Wells intimates, he was simply not a very original scientist. And, he adds, the professorial scientist is no more a man of science than the run of the mill curate is a man of faith. Guthrie spoke slowly, too slowly for Wells taste (while his assistant spoke far too fast), and nothing what he said could not be found in the text-book. To his idiosyncrasies belonged his idea that the students should learn to make their own instruments (handy if you were stranded on a deserted island, Wells remarks sarcastically). Wells, never practical, struggled in vain to make something halfway decent. For such work he was simply not cut out, although he acquired a mastery of dissection (for obvious reasons). While biology was a structured science, Wells muses, physics at the time was not, and anyway Guthrie had never, like Huxley, thought things through. But the worst teacher was John Wesley Judd instructing them in geology. Geology, at least the way it was taught, was in shambles. Students were forced to learn isolated facts and Wells was bored to tears. As a result he flunked out and did not properly graduate and saw his burgeoning scientific career come to naught. He regrets that teaching institutions did not have a professor of pedagogy, just because a man is a good scientist does not necessarily mean that he is a good pedagogue, although that is usually assumed, and that teaching comes with nature. Science is a culture not a club, Wells remarks. True, but the matter is more complicated than Wells naively thought (or rather being innocent of future developments). Huxley was an excellent teacher, not because he had studied pedagogy but

because he was passionate about this subject taking a wider view. In fact, as Wells admits, there is no sharp point where good teaching ends and original research begins, after all they are both driven by curiosity and interrogation. A teacher who takes pedagogy literally runs the risk of becoming a Judd, because as Wells observes, Huxley presented engrossing material, but he did not care how the students learned it, that was up to them. Judd was very different, he wanted the students to learn the material in a certain way, the way he had learned it, and that of course is a gross misunderstanding of the true nature of pedagogy to focus on the formal transmission not the heart of the subject, and ended up boring to the point of exasperating and ultimately alienating Wells. And once again, it was not entirely the fault of Judd, but also Geology itself would have to take the blame. There was a heroic period marked by men such as Lyell, but after that the subject became a vast assessment of facts without any attempts of relating it all to some general ideas about the Earth itself, which the science is meant to illuminate.

How could he make a living? He had to teach. At the time there were a lot of private schools in England, and no regulation whatsoever, a total *laissez-faire*. Wells thought of this as primitive and in the future standards would be higher once they were unified under governmental authority as on the continent. He had to teach at dismal institutions where the teachers were badly educated, not to say ignorant. One from which he escaped only by having his kidney smashed and showing symptoms of consumption. Was he at the end of his tether? Was he going to die young? He did not turn out to be consumptive after all and slowly regaining his strength, getting a new lease on life. But before that the threat of death frustrated him, but did never scare him as such. What he feared was not extinction *per se*, but to be unable to do things he wanted to have his plans and projects stymied, to have his life cut short before it could properly unfold. He married a cousin, the only young woman he came into normal contact with, and started to act as a tutor under a certain Briggs, learning how to present material in books in such a way as to make cramming easy and natural, while despising it all. They were not giving their students a proper education, just a sham one. Nothing wrong with examinations, they make the students focus their minds and force them to understand by imposing a method to their studies. Gifted people who have not been subjected to rigorous examinations tend to have large lacunae in their learning and be hampered by personal obsessions and lack a sense of proportion between details and generalities. But examinations should not be the major object of an education, it has little value for its own sake, just as is the case with the various citation indices which now invade academic life in an effort to make it more efficient. And just as citation indices can easily be manipulated and thus subverted by the unscrupulous, examinations tended to recycle a rather limited number of questions and problems, and the good cramming book took note of that fact, teaching the purposeful student to concentrate on what would be most likely to appear on tests, a stratagem as prevalent today as it was then. Wells remarks that students who are not really interested in what they are studying should be weeded out from higher education. There is simply no place for them there. He also observes, rightly I think, that the emphasis on practical applications is misguided, in particular in mathematics. Teaching at a school led by a certain J.V.Milne, incidentally father of the well-known writer A.A.Milne, he skipped the tradition of involving arithmetic with chores of weights and measures and business calculations, as obscuring the real core

of the subject, and going directly to elementary algebra. Finally he observes that the great growth of educational institutions has been more quantitative than qualitative. There has been no rethinking of what should be taught, and the expansion he likens to the great expansion of London with its poor quality jerry-built housing,

Wells always wanted to be a writer, but like so many would-be writers it took him some time to get on his own, initially being too self-conscious about his writing, thus being stilted and often incomprehensible, with a weakness for fake sophistication and fancy words. The young writer is too self-centered, offering to the world his own philosophy, which the world is not interested in at all, but rejects as too vague and boring. Only when he realized that you should focus on concrete things, writing in a simple way, did he get into his stride. At this time there were a lot of periodicals looking for material, and an enterprising writer had a hey-day, and soon commissions started to come his way, the one article after the other was written and handsomely paid for. There is real satisfaction in living on your wits in this way, and soon he found himself steadily earning more and more and coming up in life. He divorced his first wife and took up with a student on whom he was on much better intellectual terms (if not, as it would later turn out, on better emotional or even sexual terms). And so the first part of his experiment ends.

This makes out the basic outline of his first part of his autobiography, which is usually the most interesting part. Hence dying young is not such a disaster after all, you will not miss out on much. To this bare account one may add a few things, mostly in the form of *obiter dicta*.

In the beginning he muses on the quality of his brain, as becomes a no-nonsense materialistic writer. His brain has its strength and weaknesses, not very quick, but well-organized and consistent. Not good at doing sums, but finding Euclidean geometry congenial as he would later take to Latin for the same reason. Not easily excitable but easily bored. For most things he does not care a damn, he confesses. He has often been lauded for his energy, but in fact it does not take my energy to write a lot of books and articles, only sedentary habits. People with a lot of energy end up as the Hitlers and Mussolinis of the world, and generations are needed to clean up after them, while there will be little need to clean up after him.

Plato was a great revelation to him. He was made aware that even the most basic facts and traditions of society could be questioned as in 'the Republic'. With Plato came the realization that society was not ordered in an optional way, that there were great gulfs between the privileged and the poor. This breeds resentment, but resentment is nothing to cultivate and he turns against Marx as being fueled mainly by resentment, in addition to being uninventive, and that the world would have been better had he never been born. There is no point in crushing the capitalist system because as Wells saw it, there is no system to Capitalism, and that is the very problem. Socialism as 'practical Christianity' has a long pedigree Wells notes.

As to science Wells comes up with Popperian insights, which must have been in the air at the time. He writes: 'Hence every scientific generalization is tentative and every process of scientific reasoning demands checking and adjustment by experimentation'. And further on he remarks that 'The most beautifully reasoned deductions in the world, the most elaborate mathematical demonstrations collapse and must be made over again before

the absolute veto of a single contradictory fact, however small this fact may be.’ He also admits that although we assume that identical causes have identical effects (it is hard to think otherwise, although it is easier to think that different causes may have the same effect), nature never repeats itself, so there has never been exactly the same cause and the same effect. With Marx, Wells admits reluctantly, there came a realization that the present social system could be abolished, it was not God-given and permanent. To Wells the encounter with socialism came through the Fabian society, which was a very ineffectual body of individual often at cross purposes. What they all had in common though was the aversion against profit. Rebelling at the vision that gain was the fundamental drive in human endeavor, to possess more and more. What Wells finds most disturbing was the romantic attitude of the Socialists in general and the Fabians in particular. For socialism to work it had to be scientific, to take a hard unsentimental look at economics. To be more materialistic. As it was it tended to be Utopian. Marx was against economic planning, but Lenin had to change all that. Communism was led by an elite, the ideas of democratic egalitarianism, may have been paid lip service to, but in reality the elect ran the show. In the Soviet union state capitalism was created as a result. Wells invites the reader to compare the project of Socialism with that of flying. The former never took off ground, while as to flight from a most inauspicious beginning, a mere dream with little if any substance, through hard work, detailed invention, patient gathering, it now animates the world, as he puts it. In the 80’s and 90’s Socialism held out hope for young people like him, and it seems to eminently feasible to be brought into existence.

February 23, 25, 2018 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* [ulfp@chalmers.se](mailto:ulfp@chalmers.se)