

Experiments in Autobiography II

H.G.Wells

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The second part of a life is never as exciting as the first, at least when it comes to a life of a normal span. The remaining part of it may be excised for a reader, if not for the protagonist himself, who may enjoy the success more than the initial struggle for it.

Wells first part brought him success as a journalist and man of letters with a steady undiminished stream of books, pamphlets and articles issuing out of his pen. This was not, as he protested, the result of excessive energy but only of a sedentary habit. True habit explains a lot, without good habits, as William James admonished us, life would be frittered away by the unending efforts of making trivial decisions. Wells was very professional about his writing career thinking in terms of articles accepted, pay by thousands of words. He and his wife had to make a living, and circumstances forced him to feed himself on his wits. On the other hand the times were very favorable for such a career. For one thing literacy had been greatly enhanced by the Education Act of 1872, and publishers were willing to take losses looking for new talent to feed a public hungry for more to devour and possibly digest. It is remarkable that those books for which he is now chiefly remembered, his science-fiction works, such as the *Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, belonged to his juvenilia and he makes hardly any mention of them. The titles that figure in his account are those which a Modern reader may never have heard of, which for all I know may mostly be out-of-print, unless resurrected in new editions. Those are works of prophecy and propaganda, novels with definite intentions, travel reports and tracts of various kinds, some of which seem a bit intriguing. He lived long enough, and was diligent enough, to in the end produce an impressive oeuvre which reached millions of readers. In his time he was famous enough with a concomitant prestige to travel and have personal meetings not only with American Presidents, particularly the two Roosevelts, but also with Lenin and Stalin.

The second and concluding volume is a hodge-podge. One finds in it a continuation of personal reminiscences of his personal life and marriage to Catherine Wells, a marriage that lasted until her death in 1927, and was interspersed with a variety of sexual adventures and philandering on the part of Wells, escapades which his wife seems to have stoically accepted (did she have much choice?). None of that finds his way into his autobiography, which otherwise would have swollen out of bounds (and finds a different outlet in 'Wells in Love' compiled posthumously by one of his sons). Instead the reader is treated to his so called 'picshuas', drawings on the spur of the moment done for the mutual enjoyment with his wife, commemorating aspects of their lives, and which she collected, and came his way when writing the present experiment. However, it is hard for the reader to share the excitement that Wells obviously feels for them. But those private aspects only occupies a small part of the memoirs, because Wells has a much grander perspective, to which his life and work becomes subservient, namely to draw the necessary conclusions from the way science has revolutionized the power and reach of man and his civilization, especially

during the 19th century. The future was bright indeed, as long as mankind could steer away from the destruction brought about by unbridled capitalism and its run-away cycles, which eventually may never cycle at all, and above all from war. For this to happen there needs to be a planned future in general, and a planned economy in particular. To bring that about there need to be a Samurai class of competent individuals who take command of things, just as in Plato's *The Republic*, sidestepping the ineffectual routes of parliamentary democracy, as well as a general education of the masses, along new lines relevant to the modern world. All of his writing is devoted to that overriding project.

Thus the rest of the book can be divided into different sections of various interest. There are two rather tedious sections, one on the blessings of free love, which Wells enjoyed to the hilt, never being frustrated by the complications due to jealousy, and the second on the modern novel. Wells came into sex relatively late in life but then made up for it with a vengeance, arguing that love should always be sought in the spirit of unabashed enjoyment, and that any propriety considerations should be abolished (which supposedly should do away with jealousy). This caused some scandals and censure, which he took in stride, because for a writer any attention is good for his sales. However, reading through it now one is struck with Wells naivety and lack of any deeper psychological insight. His privileged position and an understanding wife allowed him the best of all worlds, and it is far from clear that hat worked for him, would have worked for everyone. When it comes to the novel, he takes exception to the classical 19th century novel and its realistic and comprehensive ambitions. In particular he distanced himself from the formal and pedantic treatment by a Henry James for whom the Novel was a piece of art, or at least an exquisite piece of craftsmanship along certain lines in which nothing has to be overlooked. For such exercises Wells lacked the proper temperament and patience. His novels were not works of art, but texts put together hastily to prove some point or to give the reader specific instruction. Personally Wells found the novels by James devoid of true passion and artificial in their conceptions (I myself in my youth dismissed them as 'bloodless' at least in comparison with the Russian classics which engaged my 'soul' at the time). Still, he admits, they work as delightful ways to temporarily escape an intrusive reality.

' Biographies never become as entertaining as when they descend to gossip. And there are a lot of people to gossip about. Editors such as Frank Harris, writers such as Gissing, Shaw, Bennett, Ford Maddox Ford, James, Conrad and Crane, not to forget the circle connected with the Fabian Society, which he tried unsuccessfully to turn into his Samurai, and military men, diplomats and politicians, most of them earning his contempt. In that context his admiration for the two Roosevelts and Lenin and Stalin may startle the reader. His attempts to get his idea for a planned society across, with endless memoranda quoted at length, provide the most tedious parts.

When it comes to gossip about writers, Gissing is first in line. Although a few years older than Wells he is like the cases of Shaw and Bennett to be considered as a contemporary. Gissing had strange sexual tastes. He had first taken up with a prostitute, from whom he had been saved by friends by being sent to Canada. This had not cured him of his obsession and he had later married on the spot a servant girl with whom he suffered through a most unhappy union. He escaped her a few times traveling to Italy with Wells and his wife, and where he proved to be an excellent guide, as he had acquired a deep

Classical education as well as a mistrust of, not to say snobbish disregard, for science. Eventually he met up with a French woman who was translating his works, and for the first time apparently he met a woman with some culture. He was taken by her and spent his last years in France with her and her mother. A union not exactly felicitous either, ending in his death from an infection in southern France. Wells went down there and found nothing but incompetence surrounding him.

With Shaw there were mutual respect and friendliness, but he admits that their differences were even larger than those between him and Henry James, whom he found a stock-up character, so set in the supposed mores of social life (which he after all made a living out of). He describes the various outfits, hats and matching canes, James had provided for him, in order to meet any contingency. How much more American and informal was not his brother William, who on a visit, intensely curious about the neighbor Chesterton, simply put a ladder to the garden wall to climb in order to get a glimpse. Such behavior Henry found abhorrent, but Wells thought it delightful.

Conrad was a strange bird and he found him overrated. His idiosyncratic use of the English language, without the usual stereotypes and hackneyed phrases, charmed and seduced readers who thought that there was more to his writing than mere sentimentality. Wells dismissed Conrad and other writers as basically uneducationable, because by temperament they put too much emphasis on vividness of impression, and thus on the particular and the individual, making them incapable of grasping generalities. To Wells on the other hand things were never interesting by themselves only in their relations with other things. Conrad would worry about what precise words to use to describe say a boat bobbing in the sea, such problems never occurred to Wells, to him the question was why would the boat be interesting to his story, if it was not he would ignore it, and if it was he would delineate its relations to other things and ideas. Thus, while he had appreciated the principles of biology, not to mention the structure of physics and mathematics, he had been 'turned off' by mineralogy, consisting of individual facts and impressions with no relationship to each other. Wells goes even so far as to speculate as to the differences between a writer such as he, and a more sweeping kind such as Bennett, more liable to take on unstructured associations. He goes into a rather embarrassing speculative mood talking about blood supplies in cerebral arteries and ganglionic differences. Bennett incidentally was an interesting mind, or brain, as Wells prefer to refer to in most of his character descriptions. He did not have the usual sentimental illusions about women one so often finds in males, he was not in any deep emotional need of them and set about marrying in the same way as house hunting (not that you cannot be emotional about house hunting I would add). Yet, Wells feels obliged to stress, he was not by any means a cold-hearted man.

Good writing cannot be learned, Wells claims, it is a gift. Thus he never bothers about it, focusing on getting his messages across. Thus he does not think of himself as a literary writer but as a journalist. Finally as to writers he thought that Stephen Crane was underrated. He was picked up by an enterprising woman, much to his detriment and eventual early death. She later ran a brothel in Florida.

Other, even spicier gossip is had from his association with the Fabian society. On Beatrice Webb he remarked that she had the style of an experimental dogmatist, being in the habit of throwing out bold generalized proposition in the most aggressive manner,

much to the delight of Wells himself. She begged to be contradicted and it was all great fun. Her husband Sidney was a paler apparition altogether, intent on persuasion rather than truth, more political than philosophical. Graham Wallas became a good friend whom he thought was grossly undervalued as a writer and a thinker. But most tantalizing of all was the couple Blands, who by chance lived in a nearby Dymchurch, a suitable excursion by bike to which the Wellses had got attached (and in vain tried to interest Gissing in bicycling as well). They had a so called open marriage, in which Mrs Bland under the pseudonym E.Nesbit supported the family by writing successful children's books, while Mr. Bland was set free to philander in his overbearing manner. Wells describes him as a Tory Socialist, in view of his championship of traditional patrimony of landowners, and takes exception to his elaborate ways of dressing, including that of his monocle, obviously in order to play a part bordering on the outright theatrical. Only later does he realize that many of the children in the house were the fruits of the husbands extra-marital affairs, some of which went on for a long time. In fact he needed the spice of the 'illicit' as well as a lot of intractable complications to get sexually excited. So much for Victorian stuffiness.

Wells was more than a mere writer. He had visions and he wanted certain things done. In fact one may credit him with being one of the few public spokesmen who clearly understood that the great advances of science, especially its technological applications would have profound consequences not only for the way we lived as individuals but for society as a whole. Hence his vision of the scientifically planned society which would make war impossible. something we have already touched upon, but bears well repeating if for no other reasons than to make sense of his life. The Great War, as the First World War was to be known until its sequel, had a profound effect on him, as it did on others of his generations, not to mention those of the subsequent who were to be butchered on the fields of Flanders. He was not a pacifist, which of course does not imply that he was for war, and saw Germany as the main aggressor and source of it, although he was definitely not carried away by the popular outcry against the 'Kaiser' the symbol of German bellicosity. On the contrary he was disgusted by such public manifestations making him loose his faith in the common man and wonder whether democracy was worth it, whether the masses really deserved it.

As to the war effort he had an idea of a technological innovation having to do with communications which describes sketchily (it is difficult from his account to figure out what he is up to), and which he did not have the skill to develop on his own. He tried to get the military interested but met with no appreciation at all. Military men live for wars, especially those of the past, and their profession is no different from other privileged occupations naturally tending towards conservatism. New weapons certainly was not something they savored (and Wells mind you was an inventor of weapons in his early fiction, having soon seen the potentials of airplanes in bringing about aerial war, and even prophesied 'atomic bombs' although not in the way they would eventually come into existence by fission) nor was any other new way of doing things. His contempt for the military, especially in view of their bungling matters on both sides of the front, unnecessarily prolonging actions and the huge lists of casualties, was only matched by a corresponding disgust of the diplomatic corps, any one coming out of the Foreign Office was extraordinarily warped with a narrowness of outlook and an underdevelopment of brain that was truly remarkable.

For special contempt, due to his influence in world affairs, he singles out Grey. And in fact holds him partly responsible for the war by not being clear enough to the Germans about the possible actions of the British. In fact he had wanted the war at that time he thought to be the most propitious, and had wanted the Germans to attack. Grey had everything going for him. He was classically educated into a privileged position. He was handsome, an excellent tennis player, and had written by far the best book on fly fishing there was. But, Wells remarks sarcastically, who can lead who is not in motion? The whole debacle of the war showed to him that a new kind of education needed to be imposed. For democracy to work, the masses needed to be profoundly changed. Democracy is not about voting, with which it is often confused, but about asking questions. Among labor politicians he found little understanding for the need of education. They did not grasp that there were different kinds of educations, that it was not just some nice polish but that it went to the core. And besides who could they, they had gone by on very little themselves and done splendidly. In particular he felt a need for a new kind of history, less focused on so called Great Men (although of course he did believe in some, such as Lenin, deserving the epithet) not to mention monarchs and their ilk. To that intent he conceived of an Outline of History (later to be followed by a shortened 'short history of the world'¹) which he sat about to write with no expectations of any commercial success, although that would follow. By not being a historian he figured that he would be able to supply an entirely new perspective unhampered by tradition. In those broad sweeps of histories he would do away with the irrelevant detail and focus on general trends and unifying themes. But he differed in fundamental aspects from those extensive works by the likes of Toynbee and Spengler, who have earned the dis-appropriation of professional historians for their unwarranted generalizations, by being much more sober in scope. The point of being educated in history is to avoid the mistakes of the past as well as not being too caught up in it but to get a more vivid appreciation of the future and its potentials. The future cannot of course be predicted in the same way that the past can be reconstructed, but one may nevertheless get a good sense of the conditions it will be determined by. As to history Wells thought that the British Monarchy could well have been abolished in the early 19th century as being totally outmoded, and that it would have taken away the patriotic element of the British empire. In fact his aversion of the monarchy had taken on a personal aspect during the First World War during which he found many public displays to the effect that the war was that of the King and that the common soldier fought for him and his war against the 'Kaiser'. This was surely simply preposterous.

At the time of the war he took part in a kind of half committee and half discussion group, in which Bertrand Russell also took part until he resigned in disgust. Wells was not a quitter, even if he had the same reason to quit as Russell, but persevered. There he came into contact with Haldane, the uncle of the note biologist J.S.Haldane, who admittedly was a very good organizer but had been ousted out of office for ostensible German sympathies but who earned Wells ire. Haldane for one thing, was unable to see in science anything but technical cleverness being blind to the clear vision it provided. Curzon was another representative of the institution of the Foreign Office he resented. He had in vain, after his visit in 1920 to Russia, tried to get him involved in giving aid to the chaotic country, where

¹ Reviewed in these volumes in the fall of 2006

the present regime was the only viable alternative. Curzon had listened to him in the same way a man listens to a foreign language incomprehensible to him, but being loath to admit it. To Curzon, as with his colleagues, countries were simply individuals like your own aunt and uncle, whom you could like or not like. As long as the Russians made propaganda against us in Persia, he explained to Wells, nothing of the sort he suggested could be done. Wells is aghast realizing that the incompetence of the British officials is world wide, and that there is little hope for an improvement as long as the state of the world is in the hands of those who think of countries in childish abstractions we call nations. The likes of Grey, Curzon and Tyrrell (another target for his scorn) may present fine and impressive appearances to the world, but in fact they are nothing but infantile detectives, who should be removed from any influence whatsoever as incapable brains. Only one of the pre-war politicians earns his respect and that is Balfour for his intelligence and open-mindedness. But where did those admirable qualities lead to? To that we will return.

Wells meets the mighty. He is full of expectations that he will bring his ideas to those with the power of act as well as potentially being in sympathy with him. He a private citizen with his vision? But of course he is a renowned writer and with a systematic view of life and how everything fits together and what is to be done. Back in 1906 he found Theodore Roosevelt a most sympathetic and lively President. A President maybe more of chance than deliberation who had been sprung on the American scene revitalizing it. The greatest American President since Lincoln. But Roosevelt was not yet ready for the idea of Socialism, organized economy on a grand scale that was something beyond his imagination, grounded as he was in the idea of individualism. Convinced that any man who seriously sought work would find it. As to restraining capitalism he went no further than to limit its tendency to monopoly and to create nature reserves beyond their commercial reach. He had read *The Time Machine* and taken note of the pessimism inherent in it, but he came back to the fact that 'the effort is worth it', which he kept repeating in his, according to Wells, unmusical voice.

Many years later he would meet Franklin Roosevelt. The New Deal was a Big Deal back then and engendered hopes that Socialism would come to America as well, and that the two movements, one in the Soviet Union and the other in the States somehow would converge (and save mankind). At least Wells harbored those hopes. Of the Roosevelt he formed the highest opinion. He found them extremely open-minded, and of course he himself was well-received and listened to. The White House once again gave the impression of being a private home after the period of Harding and Hoover, with whom Wells had never been able to make any kind of more personal contact. Roosevelt was open-minded implying that he had no set ideas, in particular no clear ideas, such as those of Wells about a planned world of scientific principles. On the other hand they had a practical sense, they did not only think and entertain opinions, but they knew how to act and implement, and here they differed from Balfour, who also was open-minded, but had no desire, let alone ability, to change the world as he had found it, so congenial to his own comfort. Realizing that Roosevelt is not set and had not thought things out, Wells dispelled his original fears that he would be disposed of after his first term. But Roosevelt is more than that, he is much more flexible and powerful, and he has the ability to reach the common man on common grounds of common sense over the heads of experts, businessmen and journalists

and other pundits.

Lenin he admired and got to talk with him at length during his visit to Russia in the early 1920's, a visit which would result in a book *Russia in the Shadows*. As he had earlier regretted the lack of real planning and action in the Fabian Society, a group of artists and intellectuals more devoted to highflown discussion than action, in Lenin he found somebody who indeed did not shy away from action. Wells never had any high opinion of Marxism, and even less of Marx, but conceded of course to Marx the real contribution of his, namely the duty of philosophers not only to describe the world but to change it. In Lenin he found someone who could use the dogmas of Marxism in a flexible way as to serve his purposes, wielding it into something much superior and subtle, namely Marxism-Leninism. Of course, dogmatism served a purpose, without it there would have been nothing to hold the revolution together, without Lenin's unifying influence, the Russian revolution may just have petered out or collapsed after a period of military autocracy. Lenin acquired such strong prestige that when in trouble everyone ran to him be it in fear or doubt. He had a lucid vision and simplicity of purpose, which combined with the subtlety of his thought enabled him always to give sound advice. Imperceptibly he changed Marxism from a philosophical fuzzy cloud into Leninism geared towards action, turning a fatalistic creed into flexible creative leadership. They talked about the need to substitute large scale cultivation for the present peasant one. And Wells had never tired of pointing out that recent scientific advances had caused a change of scale, people had been slow in appreciating. But Lenin clearly had long before the first Five Year plans. Another thing that obsessed Lenin was electrification, which at the time of the meeting seemed so unrealistic, but as Lenin said, just come back ten years from now (by which time we now know he would be dead). Lenin was a realist, after the revolution he urged his followers, now is the time to learn Business (Wells remarks wistfully that in America it is the other way around, the business man now needs to learn Socialism). And as we know the NEP followed, much to the retroactive embarrassment of those pure in thought. Many years later Wells would visit his embalmed body by the Kremlin. He found his expression very dignified and simple and also a little pathetic in its combination of childishness and courage. Furthermore he found the decorations about him plain and noble. He could well understand that Russian women prayed there. Wells cannot but think that the Russian mind is queer in the way it has emotionalized Socialism and made a messianic religion out of it, and hence how necessary it is that western winds should blow through the country afresh.

About the same time he had met Roosevelt in the White House he also flew with his eldest son, a biologist, to meet Roosevelt's Russian counterpart Stalin. He marvels at how easy it is to fly to Moscow nowadays as compared to back in 1900 when he wrote *Anticipation* when it would have appeared as out of Thousand and One Night. Moscow turned out to be very different from the Moscow he had known from the old, a city being vigorously expanded. In particular he is awed by the immense fleet of planes he sees from above. He wrote about such future things in his *War in the Air* but he never thought he would experience it in his life.

In spite of all the technological advancement of society, when it comes to talk to Stalin, he needs an interpreter. This is frustrating. He admits that he approached the

man with skepticism and prejudice, having been influenced by Trotsky's autobiography, and thus expecting to meet a tyrant, whose primitive spirit still remains that of a Georgian highlander. Wells is charmed. At first he is struck by his ordinariness and shyness (and also lack of that curiosity with which he had been viewed by Lenin) and then touched by his politeness in asking for permission to smoke a pipe. He concludes that he has never met a man more candid, fair and honest, with not the slightest trace of the occult and sinister about him. His enormous prestige and power is not due to people being afraid of him, Wells notes, but because no one is afraid of him, and everybody trusts him. The interview as such, in spite of being far extended beyond the original forty minutes assigned to it, must be reckoned a failure as far as Wells' ambition to get his views across, appreciated and accepted. Stalin did not understand the convergence of the American and The Russian ways, nor Wells' exalted plans for a planned society, which he must have brought forth with great insistence. To a some extent he blamed the interpreter who had not been able to render his phraseology but instead substituted his own. What he had been trying to say must have come across as flat and crude. Yet he realizes that Stalin's conception of Socialism, as opposed to that of Trotsky, was of a more narrow and patriotic kind. And that he lacked the detached and flexible way Lenin was able to view Marxism, and was more set in its dogmatism.

If the encounter with Stalin was the high point of the visit, as any approach to power is bound to prove, the subsequent days in Moscow damp Wells' initial enthusiasm. He wants to establish a branch of the P.E.N. Clubs in Moscow, but meets with no enthusiasm for free opinion, the champion of which is the sole purpose of the P.E.N. His encounter with Gorky is particularly disappointing. Gorky whom he had met during his Italian exile before the Revolution, now has lost whatever smattering of foreign tongues which he may have had and has to be approached through an interpreter. He is celebrated in the Soviet Union to a degree that is far beyond what is justified, and is now unable to do anything but echo official party lines in his golden cage which has been built for him, where he has been installed as a monument to correct literary thought. Looking at the expansion and rebuilding of Moscow he can only find it shoddy and marked by incompetence, and whenever that is acknowledged he is given the set response: 'Come back in ten years time'. He had of course heard it from Lenin, but than it was imbued with optimism and promise, now it becomes just a hackneyed excuse. Relief is found when visiting Pavlov at his new Institute built for him in St-Petersburg. The man is still active at 85 and has nothing but scorn for the new regime, which he simply finds in bad taste. He himself continues the old life, having governesses for his grandchildren. It is like visiting another country, not the past, and alas nor the future, but simply Pavlov country Wells' son remarks. Leaving Russia he is disappointed, not only about his illusions about the Bolshevik revolution being to some degree shattered, but above all about his own ability to reach across and to make his own Open Conspiracy come off ground. He realizes though that he has been far too sanguine, the obstacles are just too great, and that Stalin is much to set in his ways to become a conduct for Wells' visions.