

An Appreciation of H. G. Wells, Novelist

Mary Austin

Table of Contents

<u>An Appreciation of H. G. Wells, Novelist</u>	1
<u>Mary Austin</u>	1

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THE very ancient conception of a genius as one seized upon by the waiting Powers for the purpose of rendering themselves intelligible to men has its most modern exemplar in the person of Herbert George Wells, a maker of amazing books. It is impossible to call Mr. Wells a novelist, for up to this time the bulk of his work has not been novels; and scarcely accurate to call him a sociologist, since most of his social science is delivered in the form of fiction.

There are people who call him a Socialist, and that, with some definition, is what Mr. Wells calls himself; there are others who call him a revolutionist; but, under whatever caption, he is distinguishedly a maker of books, informing vitalizing, indispensable books; and when one attempts to account for the range and variety of Mr. Wells' product, the first inescapable inference is that behind them is a man of broad and specific learning.

It is not possible, by naming the schools where he has been educated, to give any notion to an American audience of the quality of Mr. Wells' scholarship. He is not, as we understand it, a University man, but so far as his learning relates him to his time, better educated than most University men dare profess to be a scholar of human conditions. Chiefly, besides finding out how the things that are came to be, Mr. Wells' preparation for his work consists in living.

He has lived, not episodically nor by proxy, as so many literary men tend to do, but consciously and actively, for forty odd years. How many American men one knows who let their wives and children do half their living for them! But Mr. Wells has done his own living, which probably accounts for his having done so much of his own thinking. At any rate he has never clouded his genius with the obscurations of an "Art Atmosphere."

All the time I knew Mr. Wells in London I never persuaded him to speak but once of Art.

"An artist," said he, "has nothing to do with success; neither must he concern himself whether he is read by one or one million; he must just do his work." And Mr. Wells has demonstrated that, if an artist does that sincerely, success will have much to do with him.

The first book of Mr. Wells to attract attention in America, though it was not his first writing, was "The War of the Worlds," published in 1898, the first of a group of singular but irresistible romances in which Mr. Wells, by anticipating the bent of scientific discovery, or by deflecting it slightly from its present course, created an original background against which he worked out the socialistic remedy for the economic disorder.

It was just here that the Powers seized upon Mr. Wells. The pressure of economic discontent in England, so much greater than the home-bred American can realize, the chafing of regenerative forces against the social superstitions (conservatism is the stately word for it, but really there is a lot of it on a par with the objection to sitting down with thirteen at table) produced the electrical conditions which demanded a man as the medium of discharge. No doubt Mr. Wells was primarily a novelist, but then and for a long time the social forces were too much for him. All through his earlier work the artist can be seen shaken in the teeth of the Social Consciousness. Even in his latest work, "The New Machiavelli," it runs neck and neck with the story until the reader is left a little in doubt which of the two had the better of it. But in 1900 Mr. Wells wrote "Love and Mr. Lewisham," and gave

An Appreciation of H. G. Wells, Novelist

the first intimation of what his work might become when he had subordinated the reforming impulse to the simple mastery of human life. "Love and Mr. Lewisham" is the story of a very usual young man and the struggle of his ambitions and egoisms with the mating instinct. It is so satisfying as a story that it is not until a long while after reading it you discover that what Mr. Wells has been saying all the time is that it is only our disordered social system that sets the mating instinct at war with a man's personal development. The real trouble with Mr. Lewisham was not that he was in love or ambitious, but that he found it difficult to make a living. That, in one way or another, is the crying difficulty of Young England, and none sees more clearly than Mr. Wells the relation of all our so-called immoralities to the economic condition and the impossibilities of remedying one without correcting the other.

Socialism is Mr. Wells' remedy, but it must be understood that his particular brand of it is not so much a system as a state of mind; a kind of awareness, a realization of the pain of social maladjustment in the farthest, least little toe of the social organization. Earlier in his career Mr. Wells was active in the society of Fabians, and the various tentative measures by which the growing pains of social discontent manifested. But of the theory of Socialism as it exists now in England he says, "It has gone up into the clouds and the practice of it into the drains." Those who are interested can find the best explication of Socialism as it appeals to Mr. Wells as a "plain human enterprise" in "The Misery of Boots," first published as a Fabian tract. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion, on reading it, that you are some kind of a Socialist yourself.

Mr. Wells is the most contemporaneous of writers. He has more and more sensitive tentacles laid along the lines of growth of Modern England than any other writer, and they outreach the budding tendency by so much as makes his work hopeful. When Mr. Wells writes about a no more striking person than a draper's clerk bicycling for a holiday, you perceive not only how he came to be just there in the social order, but also how he might have been bettered in the making. In this Mr. Wells differs from his contemporaries, Mr. Galsworthy, who leaves the reader under the impression that things are so bad that something ought really to be done about it if anybody only knew how, and Mr. Bennett, who sets you wondering if it ever occurred to him that anything could be done.

In nothing is this contemporaneous character of Mr. Wells' work so notable as in his acceptance of the machine. Gears and coherers, radioactivities and the powers are as much a factor of Mr. Wells' world as pounds, shillings and pence. They are part of the communicating medium. That is, perhaps, why he is able to make them pass current in his tales as no other, not excepting Mr. Kipling, has done. Mr. Kipling's feeling for machinery is the feeling of a poet, it comes alive for him, presents itself as personality; but Mr. Wells' feeling is of a man stretching himself and realizing to the full his extended capacities and powers.

His motors and aeroplanes are the swift feet and the wings of a man, and somehow Mr. Wells convinces you that it is not in the least surprising for a man to be possessed of such conveniences, or even of others much more remarkable.

The quality of Mr. Wells' work is uneven, which is perhaps natural to the earlier stages of an artist's development, but it is of increasing humanness. In "Tono Bungay," his most successful novel, the story of the rise and decline of a patent-medicine millionaire, it is possible to forget for whole chapters that the author is writing in England of Englishmen.

The locale of the story is never actively a protagonist except in the presence of the ladies. Barring the accent and a difference in taste in neckties, it is possible to find most of Mr. Wells' men in Indiana, but his women are all Englishwomen. There is sometimes a touch of the method of Balzac in the sense Mr. Wells gives of having got to the bottom of his male characters; there is nothing left in the crucible. But it is conceivable that of his women the best of them might have known the novelist better than he knew them. But Mr. Wells is an avowed feminist, and has been active in the dramatic struggle now going on in England for the enfranchisement of women, and this failure of the world-touch in the delineation of femininity might very well be due to the fact that women themselves are not yet molded to the world type, but retain longer than men the stamp of their particular

An Appreciation of H. G. Wells, Novelist

environment. It is the possibility that Mr. Wells may be able to pass even this limitation that gives the fillip of interest to his forthcoming novel, "Marriage," which is to begin in the November AMERICAN MAGAZINE. If he can lift the subject out of little London, into the universality achieved in "Tono Bungay," he will at the same time raise himself to a citizenship in the world of human understanding not attained by any Englishman since Mr. Dickens, and by few before him.

It is because Mr. Wells exhibits possibilities of doing just this thing that he is so well worth watching. There is no writer to-day who gives his readers such a satisfying sense, by the mere delight of attending to him, of having participated in a social solution.