

H. G. Wells: Utopia and Doomsday

Novelist, short-story writer, historian, twice-defeated Socialist candidate for England's Parliament, H. G. Wells (1866–1946) said he would "rather be called a journalist than an artist." All of his work, fiction as well as nonfiction, has a sense of journalistic immediacy about it. Best known for his science fiction (*The War of the Worlds*, *The Time Machine*), Wells was a prophet who saw both war and technological progress in advance. Here Frank D. McConnell argues for Wells's admission to Anglo-American literature's Hall of Fame. The one-time doyen of that establishment—novelist Henry James—found the eclectic Wells a bit disconcerting but "a very remarkable performer indeed [who] makes even dear old Dickens turn . . . in his grave."

by Frank D. McConnell

"I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide."

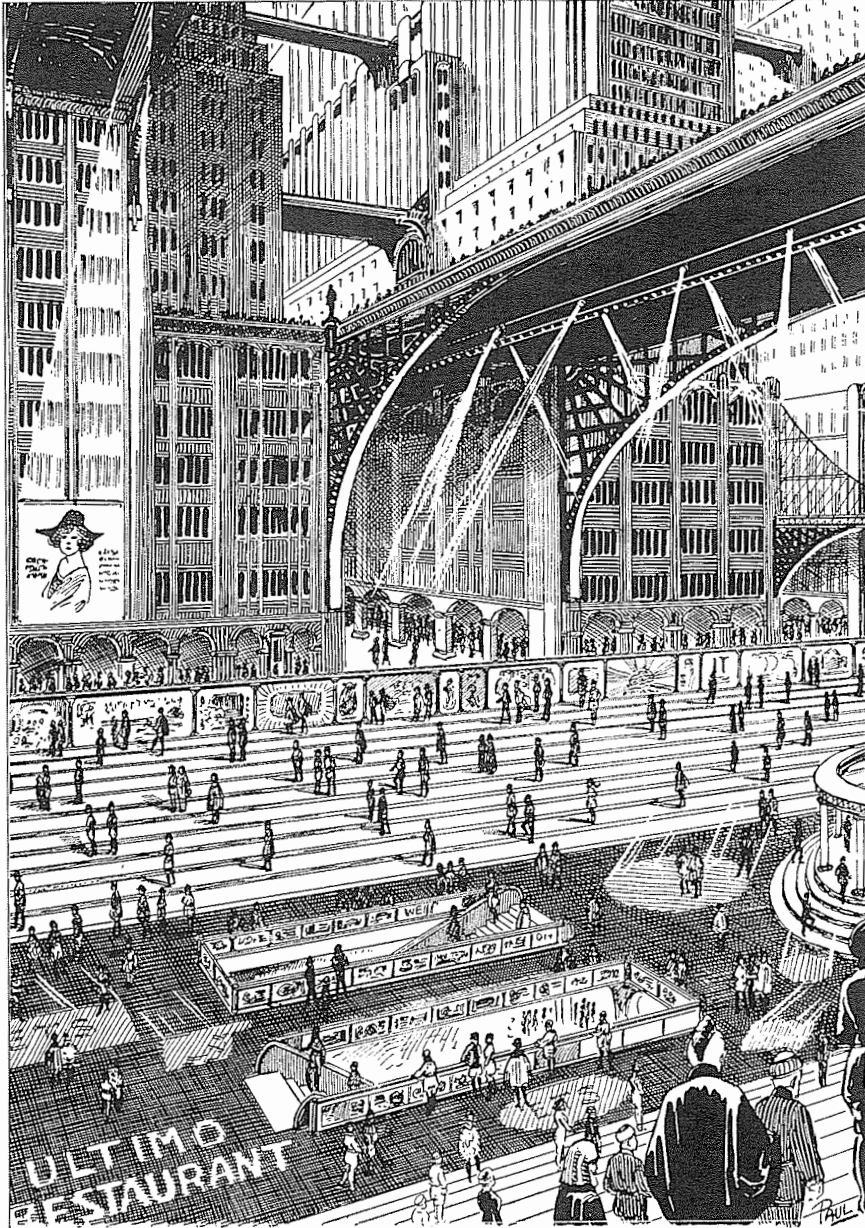
Herbert George Wells made that melancholy observation in his first novel, *The Time Machine* (1895). He spent the rest of his life—and 200 books—trying to erase it.

He never succeeded; nor did the world succeed in entirely escaping the truth of what he said—Wells died in 1946, a year almost to the day after Hiroshima.

Historian Ernest Barker recalls meeting a sick, aging Wells in 1939. Wells had lost the audience that, dur-

ing the 1920s and early '30s, made him the most celebrated and influential English intellectual of his time. Europe was plummeting, again, into war—a war he had warned against for two decades. Barker asked Wells how he was: "Poorly, Barker, poorly," said Wells. "I am composing my epitaph." And what would that be? asked Barker. "Quite short, just this—God damn you all: I told you so."

It ought to be his epitaph, catching as it does so much of Wells's arrogance, bitter humor, passion for man's survival—and sadness.



By Frank Paul for Amazing Stories, 1928.

Artist's 1928 conception of Wells's city of the future. The middle space is stationary; on either side, conveyor belts speed pedestrians up to 50 miles per hour.

From *The Time Machine* to his bleak last book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945), Wells journeyed from despair to despair. His books served as his public struggles against that despondency. Science fiction and realistic fiction, history, economic and political analysis—all offered Wells potential ways out of the trap, as he saw it, that evolutionary history had laid for man. His fellow novelist George Orwell doubted that any intelligent Englishman or American educated between the wars could have escaped Wells's influence.

Conspiracy of Silence

There is little doubt that Orwell was right, but it takes an effort to remember *how* right. For one of the most remarkable things about Wells's notable career is its eclipse.

Wells's great early science-fiction novels—*The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The First Men in the Moon*, (1901)—remain in print. They are taught, with growing frequency, in colleges, although usually banished to that academic ghetto—the science-fiction class.

The rest of Wells seems to have vanished without a trace. Who today is aware that Wells's imprint on his time was equal to or greater than that of D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, C. S. Lewis, or W. H. Auden? And yet it was—despite the recent conspiracy of silence.

Conspiracy, of course, is a harsh word. Yet, it is not unjustified. One of

the reasons for Wells's continuing relevance also partially explains why he has not been—and probably cannot be—canonized by the literary establishment. His work represents a serious challenge to the principles of specialization and scholarly disinterest upon which academic culture is founded and thrives.

"I hammer at my ideas," Wells insisted in *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* (1939)—with little respect for those to whom the "intellectual life" means the contemplation of compartmentalized intricacies. Ideas mattered, and mattered passionately, to him because he believed they were the only things that might save the human race from extinction. But the comfortable niches in which we store our ideas—"science," "aesthetics," "economics," "sociology"—had to go.

Forging a New World

If the world did not make sense *altogether*, it could not long continue to make sense at all.

Science and socialism, argued Wells, would unite the world. But Wells's socialism was highly idiosyncratic. He enthusiastically joined the famed Fabian Society (dominated during the early 1900s by George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice and Sidney Webb) and later noisily broke away when he could not take command of the group.

Socialism for Wells, write his biographers Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, "was essentially a state of mind rather than a set of practical

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*In 1901, the 35-year-old Wells was already a successful author, having published *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *The Invisible Man*.*



Courtesy of New English Library.

policies." He came to see the Fabians as a "bureaucratic regime of small-minded experts," as critic Van Wyck Brooks put it. All forms of socialism were, for Wells, only partial steps toward the formation of a new World State.

Wells's semimystical utopia incorporated socialist programs (public ownership of energy sources and land; financial aid for the unemployed, the ill, and the aged) but was a benevolent dictatorship where "voluntary noblemen" would exercise a firm hand (controlling human procreation, for example). These scientifically trained new samurai—mechanics, engineers, doctors, teachers, writers—would rule mankind through a loose and informal worldwide cooperative organization unlike any previously existing government.

Wells was a "global thinker," who, for better or worse, took all contemporary knowledge for his province. It

was for this that he was most often attacked, even during the days of his greatest fame. He does indeed display much of the eccentricity and intolerance associated with the self-educated genius. But he also displays all the humanizing passion of that breed.

There is a moment in *Kipps* (1905) that catches Wells's special tone. Near the end of that wonderfully comic novel, the working-class hero, Artie Kipps, and his wife, Ann, have earned a comfortable degree of wealth and a house in a neighborhood far above their station. They quarrel over their inability to behave properly among their upper-class neighbors. It is terribly funny, until the narrator suddenly interrupts himself:

The stupid little tragedies of these clipped and limited lives! . . . See what I can see! Above them, brooding over them, I tell you there is a monster, a lumpish

ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL

In Wells's last great fictional prophecy—The Shape of Things To Come (1933)—a League of Nations official has been able to read a history textbook written 150 years in the future. He learns that a devastating world conflict will break out in 1939—over a dispute between Germany and Poland. After the war, the airmen responsible for the destruction become the elite that saves mankind and restores order to the world. All men come to share a unifying purpose:

The body of mankind is now one single organism of nearly two thousand five hundred million persons, and the individual differences of every one of these persons is like an exploring tentacle thrust out to test and learn, to savour life in its fullness and bring in new experiences for the common stock. We are all members of one body. Only in the dimmest analogy has anything of this sort happened in the universe as we knew it before. Our sense of our individual difference makes our realisation of our common being more acute. We work, we think, we explore, we dispute, we take risks and suffer—for there seems no end to the difficult and dangerous adventures individual men and women may attempt; and more and more plain does it become . . . that it is not our little selves, but Man the Undying who achieves these things through us.

monster, like some great, clumsy griffin thing, like the Crystal Palace labyrinthodon . . . like pride, like indolence, like all that is darkening and heavy and obstructive in life. It is matter and darkness, it is the anti-soul, it is the ruling power of this land, Stupidity. My Kippses live in its shadow.

This interruption is an aesthetic flaw, if you conceive of the novel as a disinterested, wholly pure narrative. The narrator is preaching here, and preaching at the top of his lungs—"See what I can see!" It is also a moment, however, in which we hear Wells's characteristic voice demanding that we understand the middle-class comedy of *Kipps* in its widest significance, and insisting that that significance be taken seriously.

Kipps, by the way, was one of

Wells's last books to appear before the onset of his quarrel with novelist Henry James. That feud, in its way, determined much of the 20th-century debate over the function and purpose of art. James (who admired *Kipps* for its "rawness") insisted that a novel should be an utterance like a lyric poem. Wells increasingly insisted that fiction should serve the purpose of mass education and social transformation. The only hope for mankind's survival, believed Wells, was knowledge; education was the road to that knowledge.

It was once assumed, by the mandarins of the London literary establishment, that James had won the quarrel. Recent experiments in fiction by Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and Robert Coover call that

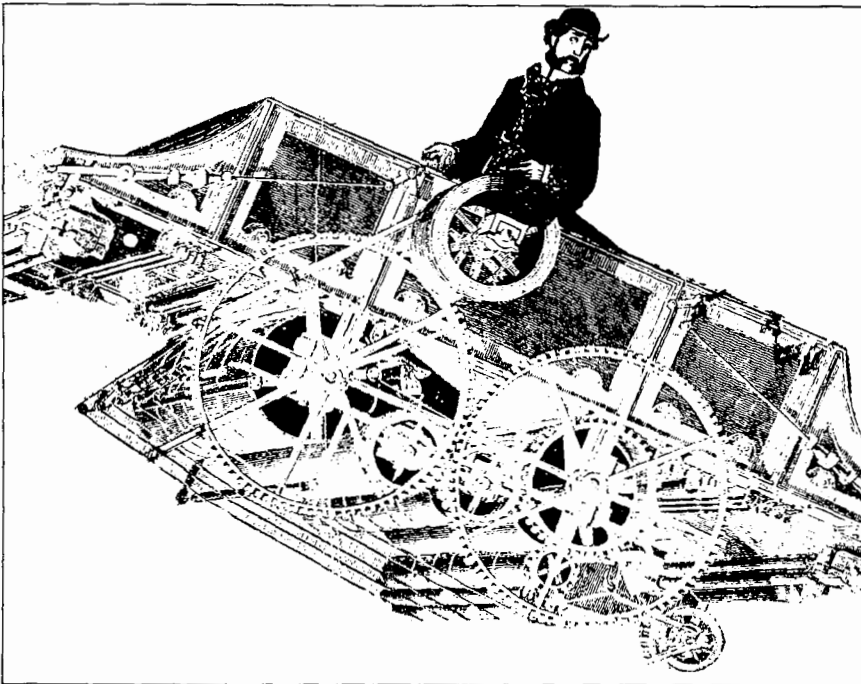
decision into question.

Wells—in his urgency and prophetic fervor, in his insistence on taking the whole range of knowledge as his domain, and, particularly, in his utopianism—may be not only the characteristic writer of the early 20th century but (as he would have hoped) the characteristic writer of the century's end. Against the monster "Stupidity" that he describes in *Kipps*, he struggled his whole life. Even at his most "realistic," he was a science-fiction writer. His two central beliefs lie at the heart of science fiction: Man is under

universal sentence of death, but he has it within his power to cheat that cosmic doom.

His own life story seemed to portray this drama. Destined to be an intellectual bull, Wells was born in 1866, literally, in a china shop—a business his parents, a housekeeper and a professional cricketer, failed at. His mother's fondest wish for him had been that he might become a draper's assistant. At 14, he did—only to fail rapidly and totally. (He couldn't keep accounts straight.)

After a few years, he was again apprenticed to a draper. (He later said



By Peter Edwards for H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. Everyman Paperback, 1964.

*Uncharacteristically, Wells rewrote *The Time Machine* six times before he published it in 1895. The above antiquated montage was designed by artist Peter Edwards for the 1964 Everyman paperback edition of the book.*

that his mother's belief in God was equalled only by her faith in drapers.) He also served as an apprentice to a druggist and, finally, to a grammar school teacher. His record of failure continued.

Free Love

Wells broke the habit—temporarily—when he won a national competition for a scholarship to the Normal School of Science (now the Royal College of Science) in 1883. It was a turning point. There he met Charles Darwin's staunch defender, biologist T. H. Huxley. Wells never forgot Huxley's lessons, but after three years he left without a degree.

In 1891, he married his cousin Isabell and was soon bored and unhappy. (A man of voracious sexual appetite, Wells openly advocated free love. It is likely that he never found a partner who met his expectations.) He was also very ill, with a lung ailment diagnosed as tubercular and terminal. Yet he insisted on controlling his life. He began to write witty sketches on the implications of modern science for man's self-image for London newspapers. In 1892, he was teaching biology at William Briggs's Tutorial College. Two years later he ran off with one of his students, Amy Catherine Robbins. He married her in 1895. She was probably the woman who understood him best—and forgave him most.

A sickly young man with little means of support and two families is not likely to be either happy or productive. Nevertheless, in 1895, Wells published *The Time Machine* to great acclaim.

During the next decade, he produced enough work to consolidate his position as one of the most popular writers of the age. From World War I until his death in 1946, he pub-

lished at an astonishing rate. Through periods of depression and numerous disruptive and passionate love affairs (including a famous liaison with Rebecca West), he continued to write "for dear life."

It is worth noting that seven years before Wells's birth two books appeared that shaped the course of his intellectual life. The more immediately successful of the two was *Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles. Smiles, a Victorian clergyman and a dedicated "social worker," ardently contended that man's will and self-control could overcome any obstacle.

The other book was *The Origin of Species*. It took away everything Smiles's book seemed to promise. Man, in Charles Darwin's scheme, was not a specially created, specially gifted architect of his own salvation or damnation. He was, rather, the random side-effect of a blind, reasonless, and awesomely long process of evolution.

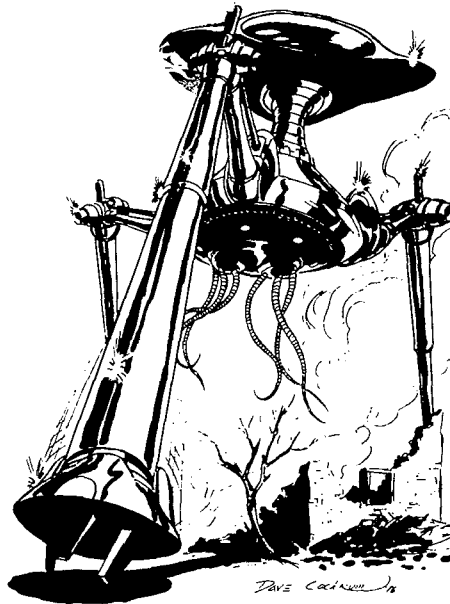
"Heads—Merely Heads"

It is not too much to say that a great deal of 20th-century intellectual debate has centered around the tensions between the visions of Smiles and Darwin. Are we condemned to be the playthings of forces over which we have no real control? Or are we the agents of a consciousness and a *purpose* beyond the mere physical dimensions of our world?

The plethora of recent American best sellers on self-help psychology, along with the equally large number of popular books on biological determinism, shows how persistent the debate remains.

Wells gave full expression to these ideas. His most deeply held convictions were Darwinian in origin. For all its splendid accomplishments, he believed, society was on the verge of

On Halloween 1938, actor Orson Welles broadcast, on radio, news of a Martian invasion after the fashion of The War of the Worlds. Americans believed the hoax and were terrified; Wells was furious. Here, a Marvel Comics rendering.



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overspecializing itself into extinction. This was Wells's point in *The War of the Worlds*. Those soulless Martian invaders are future versions of ourselves who have become "heads—merely heads," and who are pathetically prey to so simple a threat as the common cold.

If Wells was moved to Darwinian despair, it was precisely through expressing it that he exemplified, in his own life, Samuel Smiles's (and, later Horatio Alger's) success fable. Through sheer will and application, he lifted himself from the bleakest of backgrounds to international fame.

Wells's career suggests a triumph of mind that his central ideas denied. Could man, through common sense, avert disaster? Wells had, and he always thought of himself as a "very

ordinary brain." The prognosis for the human race was not good, but it was not altogether fatal. At least, he thought, not if the rest of mankind could be persuaded to act as H. G. Wells had.

Isaac Asimov, who ought to know, has written that science fiction is best understood as "ordinary," novelistic fiction, with one crucial difference: Its hero is no individual but the human race itself.

This is an accurate description of Wells's work—not only his science fiction but also his realistic novels and most of his historical and sociological writing. Wells was a very heroic man, and a very vain one. His permanent and preeminent concern was the fate of mankind, and his reference point for the fate of the

human race was, always, himself.

These two outlooks are present in Wells's writings from the beginning.

In *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveller relates his tale of universal despair to an anonymous narrator. At the end of the book, after the Traveller has embarked again on his journey into time, the narrator reflects upon his curious friend. He "thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind," observes the narrator, "and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end." Here speaks the Darwinist, the calm and dispassionate analyst of the human condition against the absolute background of scientific truth. Yet, this voice does not have the last word. "If that is so," says the narrator, "it remains for us to live as though it were not so."

"Living as though it were not so" is, indeed, the theme of most of Wells's writing after *The Time Machine*. The despairing, time-traveling hero and the willfully optimistic narrator continued their debate in his books for the next 50 years.

Optimism or Despair

To be sure, Wells gave an increasingly ample role to the hopeful narrator. By World War I, Wells's scientific romances had taken a distinctly positive turn. He was now writing utopian fiction. In it, he imagined that following the cataclysmic war to which mankind was surely doomed, a new golden age of rational organization and scientific progress would emerge.

This vision, too, was the projection of his own massive will to survive, his insistence that turmoil and disaster *must* be redeemable. It is the implicit argument of his massive survey

of civilization, *The Outline of History* (1920), and also of his last great exercise in social prophecy, *The Shape of Things To Come* (1933).

Wells, however, was never a "utopian" in the pure sense of the word. He never, even at his most strenuously assertive, fully trusted his own optimism. The voice of the time traveler, with its message of a great darkness at the end of all striving, was never entirely stilled.

It was once fashionable to attack Wells for his optimism—to denigrate his boyish insistence that, if only the world could be handed over to the engineers and the scientists, they would produce a clean, sane, chromium and glass civilization.

This optimistic side of his vision is expressed most unabashedly in his one screenplay, *Things To Come* (1936). The Marxist critic of the 1930s, Christopher Caudwell, accused Wells of being irresponsibly



Courtesy of G. P. Wells, London.

Caricature of Wells drawn in the 1920s by his son G.P.

A READER'S GUIDE TO H. G. WELLS

The best place to begin reading—or re-reading—H. G. Wells is where he himself began: *The Time Machine* (1895). It is arguably his best book, and certainly one of the great short novels in the English language. It is also a dress rehearsal of the themes of determinism and free will, technology and its negative effects on the human spirit, that remain crucial to his later work. His other major “scientific romances”—*The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901)—develop these themes for later science fiction.

Of Wells's so-called realistic novels much less remains in print than should be the case. *Kipps* (1905) survives, of course, and may well be one of the great English comic novels. In the currently out-of-print *Ann Veronica* (1909) and in *The History of Mister Polly* (1910) and *Tono-Bungay* (1909), Wells extended the hardheaded vision of the social conditions determining—and strangling—his world. The realist and the scientific romancer come together (at least in the early Wells) in *The Food of the Gods* (1904) and *In the Days of the Comet* (1906). Here Wells the visionary and Wells the acute chronicler of his own times and class find a common voice (that of the utopian planner) that remained with him for most of his career.

The Outline of History (1920) is opinionated, flawed, and brilliant. In it, Wells refocused and reinterpreted the world's history to show its rhythmical nature. For Wells, nations rise and fall just as species dominate and decline. A nation rises due to the presence of a creative ruling elite. Bureaucrats then take over and change a “community of will” into one of “faith and obedience” that exploits the masses. As this degeneration sets in, society falls prey to “barbarians.” *The Shape of Things To Come* (1933), his last and most ambitious utopian novel is a companion-piece to the *Outline*, a projection of the latter's arguments into the future.

Experiment in Autobiography (1934) is by no means great. But its voluble, often anecdotal reminiscences shed light on Well's early years, particularly on his sense of the writer's craft. The opening pages of *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* (1939), on the other hand, constitute the most satisfying self-portrait Wells ever drew. Finally, Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie's *H. G. Wells: A Biography* (Simon & Schuster, 1973; cloth; Touchstone, 1974, paper) is indispensable.

“spiritual” in his hopes for the future. C. S. Lewis, at almost the same time, accused Wells of being overly “materialistic.” But Wells's optimism was held, throughout his career, in a creative and humanizing

tension with a deep pessimism and melancholy. The man who whistles loudest in the dark is likely to be the one who feels the darkness most. It is *this* Wells, the Wells of the dark places, who matters—or should

matter—more and more for us.

We may be closer to the self-destruction Wells warned of in 1895 than we have ever been before. Critics have remarked how much recent American fiction—Saul Bellow in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Thomas Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*, John Barth in *Letters*—makes serious use of themes and techniques once thought to be the province of pulp science fiction. Recent "explainers" of the human condition—from Robert Ardrey and Arthur Koestler to Carl Sagan—insist that we cannot fully understand or control our own fate until we begin to see it in the context of evolutionary history.

These writers are not Wells's "disciples." Wells was too idiosyncratic a thinker to have any real disciples. He would not have wanted any, anyway. As a *reactor*, a highly intelligent, extraordinarily sensitive, middle-class man who courageously confronted the central problems of his age, Wells has gained something more important than followers. He has found brothers.

All of Wells's writing is science fiction. It is (as the claim is often made by science-fiction writers) important because it is prophetic. "Prophetic," not in the sense of accurate technological forecasting but as poet William Blake was. Wells understood how men come to feel in a

world in which they are capable of unprecedented self-aggrandizement (we *can*, technologically, do almost anything we want) and total humiliation (we might kill ourselves doing it). In surveying such a world, he managed to be infinite in hope, yet sober in expectation.

Wells is cantankerous enough not to be readily admitted into the polite world of literary history. Scholars, however, have begun to examine his importance for the history of 20th-century thought and writing, and especially his relevance to the way we think and live today. Nevertheless, Wells is still best read and understood by those "ordinary brains" who were always his audience. Rediscovering Wells is not a matter of stumbling upon an interesting literary curio but rather of recognizing a powerful, immensely kind, and good-humored voice.

Perhaps Wells described himself best in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1897). There, his revolutionary hero, Graham, is about to address the nations of the Earth and rid them of their slavery:

He found the thing in his mind too vague for words. He paused momentarily, and broke into vague exhortations, and then a rush of speech came to him. Much that he said was but the humanitarian commonplace of a vanished age, but the conviction of his voice touched it to vitality.