

## Surprising Insights into H. G. Wells

by Brian J Ford

*Brian J Ford CBIol, FIBiol, FLS is a Fellow of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) and a Member of Council.*

Sitting on my bookshelf are several titles by H. G. Wells; authoritative, well-written, sturdily bound and impressively produced. That's how books are, when written by eminent authors. But tucked in a corner is a less well-known *oeuvre*: wire binders containing brightly coloured magazines, a series of part-works headed *The Outline of History, by H. G. Wells*. Wells as a magazine writer seems much less prestigious and authoritative. Yet for all its inauspicious beginnings, the writing published in these magazines became so popular that they were published in book form, which became a best-seller. Two other titles were to follow, though neither would prove to be as successful as the first.

Now, through a purchase by the Friends, there sit in the University Library two books that cast further light on this period of Wells' creative life. They tell a remarkably personal tale of intrigue, strife and bitterness.

These slight volumes were produced by Gresham Press and were never intended for publication, for they deal with a legal dispute between Wells and the Society of Authors. They were his way of soliciting support, and they were expensively printed and bound not because they particularly merited it, but simply because Wells was rich. As I've observed elsewhere, the act of printing can dignify the most trivial matter; H. G. Wells was very much aware of that fact.

The first little book, entitled *The Problem of the Troublesome Collaborator*, runs to 74 pages. It starts portentously enough, asking whether the state of affairs at the Society of Authors 'can be considered satisfactory'. He cites 'Mr Stanley Unwin's *The Truth About Publishing*', which described the Society as having a 'narrow and litigious view', and he knew that he wasn't the first person to feel the weight of the Society's wrath. It was Mr G. Herbert Thring, the just-retired Secretary of the Society, for whom Wells had greatest animosity. Thring's knowledge of literary work, states Wells, is 'practically nil'. It is true that Thring was no writer, but he was what the Society needed most – a lawyer. He had joined the Society in 1892 as a solicitor, and found it in poor shape, with a modest membership and few strengths. By the time he retired, in February 1930, the Society of Authors was in fine shape. Victor Bonham-Carter wrote that Thring succeeded in making the Society 'strong and respected'. None of this impressed H. G. Wells. To him, the Society had become 'very largely a sham'.

The matter had its origin when Wells resolved to write a sequence of three titles, which together he felt would serve as 'a popular statement of the current state of knowledge'. It's tritely put, but seemed a grandiose project even for an established writer. Wells had written his *Outline of History* in 1918-19, paying advisers as necessary. Then followed the *Science of Life*, for which he said he'd used the collaboration of 'two able biologists'. These were in fact Sir Julian Huxley and Wells' own son George Philip Wells.

The third volume was envisaged as 'The Science of Work and Wealth', and that's where the trouble started. Wells took on collaborators to help write the text. He refers to them as X and Y; Y being an established author, X having no qualifications and being new to the game. Wells thought him 'quite useful in canvassing', but did not respect him as a writer. At the time, Wells offered both collaborators a deal which would net them £6,000 each, an unusually large sum. Kate Pool at the Society of Authors was kind enough to direct me to the second volume of Victor Bonham-Carter's book *Authors by Profession* (Society of Authors, 1978). Bonham-Carter then mentioned that the two men were Hugh P Vowles (identified by Wells in the books only as X) and Edward Cressy (Y).

It may be instructive to look further into both men. Vowles was an aspiring author who had written a little on management matters. 'Edward Cressy' was a pseudonym for a writer and engineer named C. H. Creasey who had much more of a track record as a successful author and collaborator. Routledge & Sons had published his *Discoveries and inventions of the twentieth century* in 1923. By the time Wells enrolled him, this book was already in its third edition (it was still being up-dated and edited by J. G. Crowther three decades later). Other books under Cressy's name included *A brief sketch of social & industrial history* (Macmillan, 1927) and *Stories of engineering adventure: railways—ships—canals* (Warne, 1928). Cressy was an established author, and a man Wells respected.

Vowles was less to Wells' taste, and Wells found him increasingly self-important and touchy. Vowles began quarrelling with Cressy. By this time, wrote Wells, he was sure that he should have dismissed the man, but nothing happened until Edward Cressy, who protested that the matter was making him tired and ill, announced his determination to retire from the project. H. G. Wells stopped work on the compilation and proposed that Hugh Vowles should accept payment for the work he'd already done. Vowles could publish it as a separate book under the title *The Conquest of Power*. Wells had advanced him a total of £800 for his labours. With that, Wells considered the matter closed. He travelled to France for a holiday, feeling jaded and unwell.

Back in London, Hugh Vowles was convinced that Wells was wrong summarily to dismiss him. He turned for advice to Mr Thring at the Society of Authors who agreed to fight his case through their lawyers. The Committee of Management, whom Wells believed thought him to be a 'cheat', agreed to meet the costs from the Society's funds. Matters went from bad to worse as the Society concluded that there had been a contractual agreement for a total payment of £6,000. Wells became increasingly indignant. Thring wrote proposing arbitration; Wells reiterated his insistence on being supplied with the exact details of the supposed contract Vowles and he shared. He also demanded a list of the Society's members, so that he could send them all a letter. It took the threat of legal action for a list to be provided.

As pressure mounted, work on Wells' grand book resumed, albeit in a half-hearted manner. Wells even wrote a letter to Vowles, instructing him to send in the material on 'Celanese' he had written for the 'Conquest of Power' section. Wells also started reorganising the publication schedule. There followed a stentorian letter from the Society's lawyers, Messrs Field, Roscoe and Co., pointing out that a breach of contract made Wells liable for damages. Wells retorted that the project was now moving ahead again; the lawyers said that this was irrelevant. Damages would still be payable in respect of the contract that had been summarily

cancelled. What about the resumption of work? Ah, said the lawyers that would amount to a new agreement. Wells by now was furious.

Field, Roscoe drew up a Memorandum of Terms, which laid down the division of income for the book. It would give Vowles, in the end, the £6,000 he had originally anticipated. Wells rejected these 'ridiculous proposals' and went off to print an account of the entire dispute including the principle letters. The original correspondence with Vowles does not appear, so we cannot deduce whether a contractual undertaking was truly given (however, their omission might suggest that Wells had conceded more than he claimed).

The book had a print run of 175 copies (the Library's is No 169). It ends with a 'conclusion' of some five pages, which addresses the reader directly. 'See how I have been worried! See how my time has been invaded!' Wells exclaims. The little book was sent out to the Society's membership, once Wells had secured a copy of the list, with an appeal to 'write in at once' to protest to the Committee of Management.

The second volume of this intriguing pair is entitled *Settlement of the Trouble between Mr Thring and Mr Wells*. It reports that on 19 March 1930 a meeting of Council was finally held with Sir James Barrie in the chair. Even though every member of the Society of Authors had been sent the first privately-printed booklet, just 26 members actually turned up.

Wells was, at the time, a member not only of the Society but also of its Council. So was George Bernard Shaw, who wrote at once to Thring. H. G. Wells had clearly implied that Thring was litigious beyond reason, and Wells wrote that Thring had 'jumped at once naturally and joyfully into the blackmailing attitude'. In response, Thring stated that he had been defamed, and would seek legal remedy. Shaw had crossed swords with Wells in previous years, and he seemed to concur that Wells had apparently impugned Thring's probity. When Wells wrote suggesting that he and Thring should meet, he was met with a stiff rebuttal. Thring assured Wells that he was going to seek advice against him for his 'serious libel' and the 'serious damage' it had caused.

Further letters were exchanged, until Thring accepted that a sufficient apology had been offered. He agreed that the second booklet detailing the resolution of the negotiations should be sent to the members who'd received the first one. This time the print run was 225 copies, of which the Library has No 173. Like the first, it was printed on good paper stock and bound, hand-sewn, into boards. Thring also agreed that the matter would be kept out of the Society's house magazine *The Author*. Wells knew that this would mean wide publicity for the matter, and was anxious that it should remain within the Society if at all possible. Thring seems to have concurred with good grace.

And so the matter ends. But not quite! The final letter, dated 29 April 1930, gives Wells a perfect opportunity to close the affair, but instead he threatens to start all over again. While emphasising that he would never again impugn Thring's personal integrity, Wells set out a fresh demand: this time for the Society to pay his bill for 'fighting this preposterous campaign'.

In the event, this supplementary booklet was published only after further pressure from Thring, who was anxious to have matters properly set before the membership, and it ends with a further 'conclusion'. Wells, in a closing paragraph, reminds the reader that he will not

again allow matters to degenerate into ‘a squabble about personalities’. After all, he concludes, ‘The points at issue are far too grave for that’.

Although Wells retained his sense of indignation to the end, his collaborators moved on to produce works that derived, in part, from the project. Hugh P. Vowles wrote his book in collaboration with his wife, Margaret W. Vowles. It was published under the title *The quest for power from prehistoric times to the present day* (Chapman & Hall, 1931). Edward Cressy continued to write in his established vein. His later titles included *A hundred years of civil engineering* (Duckworth, 1937), and *Civil engineering today* (OUP, 1938). The Vowles’ volume soon disappeared from popular view, but Cressy’s writing remained in print and appeared in subsequent, up-dated editions.

Much of the original correspondence has been preserved. The Society of Authors’ archives for the period are at the British Library, while the H. G. Wells papers are in the care of Professor Gene K. Rinkel, Curator of the Special Collections Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

And the great book? It was, in the end, completed. It was never a success like the *Outline of History*. Wells included some eternal observations, like this one: “In England we have come to rely upon a comfortable time-lag of fifty years or a century intervening between the perception that something ought to be done and a serious attempt to do it.” Other comments (which may have been dropped in by his collaborators) included: “Ultimately the mystery may be the only thing that matters, but within the rules and limits of the game of life, when you are catching trains or paying bills or earning a living, the mystery does not matter at all.”

While the book was taking shape, Charlie Chaplin (who was also on holiday in the South of France) went to see Wells. In 1930 he wrote in his diary:

H. G. Wells was staying near Grasse and invited me to spend a few days with him. He was just completing his book, *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* - a colossal undertaking upon which he had been working three years.

“What are you going to do after it’s finished?” I asked.

“Start on another one.”

“Good heavens! I should imagine you’d want to get away from work for a while and do something else.”

H. G. laughed mischievously. “What else is there to do?”

The first edition of the book was published as two volumes in New York by Doubleday (1931) and in London by William Heinemann (1932). It has been reprinted in New York by Greenwood, (1968). The eventual title was *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*. In the light of the bitter disputes recorded in the two booklets, I doubt whether Wells could honestly have counted himself an authority on any of those.