# Mr Science, warts and all

Roy Porter

**The Invisible Man: The Life and Liberties of H. G. Wells.** By Michael Coren. *Bloomsbury: 1993. Pp. 240. £20. (To be published in the United States by Atheneum later this year.)*

ONE of this century's great teachers and novelists, H. G. Wells was blessed with superabundant energies — was, indeed, a driven person. As the classic self-made man who worshipped his maker, he possessed omnivorous appetites and pursued astonishingly broad interests. In women and affairs of the mind alike, he spread himself widely if not always wisely. Incorrigibly ambitious, he made himself the consummate self-publicist in an age of mass communication.

Born in 1866 into a shabby shopkeeping family from Bromley and backed by a powerful mother, the young Wells developed a passionate love of writing and debating that lasted all his life. Trapped early on as a draper's apprentice and schoolteacher — episodes chronicled in autobiographical fictions such as *The History of Mr Polly* (1910) which were destined to be his lasting testament — he fled suburban tedium to enjoy what proved to be his most formative experience. By studying science at Imperial College, London, sitting at the feet of the divine T. H. Huxley, he acquired the obsession with science that fuelled his whole career. His goal was to emulate Darwin's Bulldog, to be the sage and seer for the modern world. Surpassing his mentor, Wells displayed extraordinary talents for journalism and fiction. Above all, in works such as *The Time Machine* (1895), he virtually invented a new genre of popular novel, grafting scientific and technological futurism onto political utopianism in tales that voiced the hopes and fears of common men.

Flirting with Fabianism, Wells-the-thinker put his finger on the pulse of the Edwardian age. Victorian values were *passé*. The new century wanted populism and radicalism; it fostered the cult of everyman, it craved the sexual experimentation that Wells personally indulged in and discussed in his essays. Not least, the Edwardian mind looked to science to create a new social order — rational, productive, efficient, hygienic and healthy — while enjoying the frisson of fear sparked by boldly going (at least in the mind) where no man had gone before.

Wells met these needs with a blizzard of novels and tracts. Even more than Shaw, he became the mouthpiece of progressive thinking, prophesying better futures. And then, as uncertainties and forebodings grew after the Great War, Wells's own message and mood darkened. Early faith in a new samurai expert class had evaporated by the 1930s, when the shape of things to come seemed the dynasties of the dictators. Wells sank into dejection. His last work, published in 1945 just months before his death, was aptly called *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. Wells, remarked his arch-critic, Malcolm Muggeridge, had been a naïve crusader for shallow scientific rationalism; Hitler and the Holocaust were his chickens coming home to roost.

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

**Armchair visionary — Max Beerbohm's caricature of Wells.**

Mary Evans

Wells's personal life also involved a fall from pleasure to pain. Love affairs, notably with Rebecca West, went sour and created conflict. A man ever craving sexual adventure and female admiration, he found ageing hard to endure, growing testy, impatient and moody. But for all his faults, he never entirely lost the more amiable side of his character — a gusto for life, a puckish charm, an openness to experience, a certain honesty.

In this breezy yet informative biography, Michael Coren gets the blend about right. As his choice of title indicates, he believes the true Wells has been neglected. Until now, we have had hagiography not biography. He aims to put the record straight and to give us for the first time the whole Wells, warts and all. Coren's hero is thus deeply self-centred, and perhaps a frankly selfish user of women. Yet Coren is not as original in this as he likes to think: readers of Ruth Brandon's witty *The New Women and the Old Men* (Secker and Warburg, 1990) will already be familiar with the blindspots of Wells's special style of one-way permissiveness.

The real shortcoming of this biography is that in stressing Wells-the-man Coren neglects Wells-the-mind. Alongside his hero's love of sex we could have done with more of Wells's love of science. Coren never analyses Wells's scientific beliefs in any depth: just what combination of social evolutionism and eugenism was Wells advocating? How far, indeed, was Wells actually advocating a particular scientific future or merely forecasting its imminence? Coren is inclined to paint Wells as a bit of a scientific buffoon, repeatedly outsmarted in evolutionary controversies, even by Hilaire Belloc. But this is to miss Wells's remarkable magnetism as a scientific preacher and teacher. No one as scientifically inept as Coren's Wells would have succeeded in persuading Julian Huxley to collaborate with him in 1933 on *The Science of Life* (1930), a massive textbook of popular biology that complements Wells's earlier best-selling *A Short History of the World*.

Coren fails to convey Wells's importance as a public figure. Anti-Christian and ferociously anti-Catholic, Wells viewed science as the new religion. Identification with scientific salvation made him the great prophet of the age, the thrilling, favoured author for millions of clerks and commuters. Wells's role as Mr Science deserves closer study. Ironically, his own extraordinary life, *An Experiment in Autobiography*, remains the most penetrating and poignant introduction to the man and his mind. □

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