

Utopias and Dystopias in the Fiction of
H. G. Wells and William Morris

Emelyne Godfrey
Editor

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FOREWORD

When H.G. Wells's *Time Traveller* arrives in the far future his expectations, it seems, are shaped by the utopianism of William Morris: "Communism," said I to myself ... [T]he whole earth had become a garden.¹ The reality of the year 802,701 proves to be far different, but the link to *News from Nowhere* has been made. And Wells, like Morris, was an imaginative writer who would soon turn to politics. Both men were public intellectuals and radical socialists, though of very different denominations. Some 18 months after the publication of *The Time Machine*, Wells would respond to Morris's death with an affectionate, if barbed, tribute.²

Both Morris and Wells belong in the utopian tradition that stretches from Thomas More and Jonathan Swift through to contemporaries such as Margaret Atwood and Kim Stanley Robinson. Moreover, they were authors of formal and informal utopias. Morris during his lifetime was known not so much for *News from Nowhere* as for poems such as *The Earthly Paradise*, as well as for his unique achievements in the decorative arts and interior design. He wrote numerous prose romances, all of which (like Wells's scientific romances) have a utopian element; in some of them, too—though much less markedly than in the early Wells—utopia shades over into dystopia. But it is Wells, and not Morris, who stands behind the twentieth-century dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell as well as virtually the whole of modern science fiction. Not only was he 30 years younger than the author of *News from Nowhere*, but he liked to portray himself as being incomparably more 'modern'. Whether or not this was a true representation is one of this book's subjects.

As Michael Sherborne reminds us, Wells as an impecunious London student attended the meetings of the Socialist League at Morris's house in Hammersmith. For him, these Sunday evening debates were at once fascinating and deeply disappointing. Instead of a revolutionary movement capable of changing the world, what he found among the socialists of the 1880s was 'a comedy of picturesque personalities' (Wells, 'The Well', p. 111). Bernard Shaw was one of these, but even Shaw was overshadowed by the 'grand head, the rough voice, sedulously plain speech, and lovable bearing of William Morris' (Wells, 'The Well', p. 112). Yet Morris for all his revolutionary 'wild moments' did not seem to look towards the future at all: 'His dreamland was no futurity, but an illuminated past.'³

In sizing up Wells's presence at these Hammersmith meetings, it is helpful to compare him with another potential but quickly disappointed Morris disciple, the young W.B. Yeats. Yeats was born in 1865, Wells in 1866, and there is no record of their ever meeting even though it is hard to believe that they were never in the same room together—be it at Hammersmith in the 1880s or in some Bloomsbury salon 50 years later. (They might have caught sight of one another at Hammersmith soon after Yeats returned from Ireland in early 1887, but Wells seems to have gone to Kelmescott House in 1885–1886, while Yeats's years of attendance were 1887–1889.) By their own accounts, Yeats was a frequent speaker at the Hammersmith meetings while Wells was tongue-tied, and Yeats, already a poet and the son of a well-known painter, was clearly a coming man who was eligible to be introduced to Morris's daughters. At any rate, he begins his account of the Sunday evening debates in his *Autobiographies* by telling us that 'I was soon of the little group that had supper with Morris afterwards'.⁴ It was never likely that Wells, an anonymous science student on a meagre government scholarship, would get to know Morris personally.

For Yeats, as for Wells, Morris cut a striking, almost heroic figure. Yeats speaks of Morris's 'spontaneity and joy', and of how he became for a time 'my chief of men' (Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 141). But distance and a veiled disillusionment were to follow. This can be seen in Yeats's famous comment that: 'The dream world of Morris was as much the antithesis of daily life as with other men of genius, but he was never conscious of the antithesis and so knew nothing of intellectual suffering' (Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 142). Soon after the deaths of both Yeats and Wells, the literary critic Graham Hough sought to make up for the absence of any recorded contact by imagining a 'Conversation in Limbo' between their respective spirits. In Hough's profoundly witty serio-comic dialogue, the two men find little (if any) common ground, but one thing that is clear is that their spirits are unappeased and that both know intellectual

suffering. There is no longed-for paradise in store for either man.⁵ Hough had in mind the disconsolate last Wells of *Mind at the End of its Tether* (1945), but the same conclusion is inescapable—as will be clear to readers of the chapters that follow—when we consider the young author of *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

What neither Yeats nor Wells (let alone Morris himself) could have foreseen in the 1880s was that the posthumous reputation of the Morrisian ‘Earthly Paradise’ would become tied up with a virulent ideological orthodoxy. Although most evident in the Cold War period, some traces of this still linger on in academic scholarship in the field of Utopian Studies. We owe it largely to two prominent Morrisians who were also members of the Historians Group of the British Communist Party, the loyalist A.L. Morton and the heretical E.P. Thompson. For Morton (though not, apparently, for Thompson), admiration for the ‘Marxist’ William Morris carried with it the obligation to express a hatred of Wells. Morton’s *The English Utopia* (1952) is in many respects a pioneering and rightly celebrated survey. Yet, if Morris is the hero of this study, Wells (and, still more, George Orwell) are the villains. Wells, the Fabian pseudo-socialist, envisioned ‘a sterilised, hygienic, cellophane world where everything appeared to have been just polished by the most advertised brands’.⁶ This may, however, have been a more honourable fate than that selected for Morris in at least one passage of *The English Utopia*. Morris’s evasion of the question of the production of energy in *News from Nowhere*, Morton tells us, anticipates ‘something comparable to the vast schemes of electrification’ taking place in Stalin’s Russia (Morton, *The English Utopia*, p. 168).

Wells was a recurrent critic of Marxism and of the suppression of freedom of speech under Stalin, but it is, of course, he and not Morris who is on record as championing industrialisation and schemes of electrification. This brings us back to Wells’s pointed contrast in *A Modern Utopia* between his own vision of a ‘kinetic’ and still-developing future society and Morris’s supposedly static dreamland.⁷ The problem is—as Wells himself knew—that what seems modern to one generation soon becomes hopelessly old-fashioned. (Consider, in the previous paragraph, A.L. Morton’s use of the word ‘cellophane’.) The challenge for the utopian writer is to present an estranged world that is both (as Yeats put it) ‘the antithesis of daily life’ and yet indisputably relevant to it. This central paradox of the utopian genre is inherent in the word itself: the no-place that is also a good place. Morris and Wells are at one in attempting to provide political blueprints for the future, blueprints which also (as Helen Kingstone argues) suggest a new account of recent and contemporary history. Yet their utopian societies—Morris’s ‘epoch of

rest' and Wells's parallel world on another planet—are by the same token manifest 'elsewheres'. They succeed, perhaps, to the extent that they draw in their readers to become participants in re-imagining the future and our hopes and fears of what it may offer. As Tony Pinkney shows, this could involve actual rewriting or, at least, sketching a possible sequel. (Pinkney's proposed sequel to *News from Nowhere*—a book I would love to read—would need a chapter 'Concerning Politics' very much longer than the 118-word dismissal that Morris himself provided.) As for Wells's *Modern Utopia*, its very title signifies a self-conscious rewriting of the utopias of the past, going back to More and, above all, to Plato's *Republic*. Not only is the utopian genre an expression of desire, but utopia in the modern world necessarily forms part of a dialogue, a dialogue that (as many contributors to this book emphasise) always includes dystopia.

Finally, it is surely a requirement for successful utopian writing that it should appeal to a wide range of interests and be open to a variety of critical approaches. Thus, in the present book, readers will encounter Morris and Wells through the perspectives of architecture and imaginative topography; statistics and probability theory; views of art and the artist; theology; historiography; irony and satire; the 'underworld'; order and disorder; and much else. The outcome is a greatly enriched sense of both the links and the differences between two of our most visionary modern writers.

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NOTES

1. H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 29–30.
2. H.G. Wells, 'The Well at the World's End' [1896], in *H.G. Wells's Literary Criticism*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder and Robert Philmus (Brighton: Harvester; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1980), pp. 111–114.
3. H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* [1934] (London: Gollancz and Cresset Press, 1966), I, p. 238; Wells, 'The Well', p. 112.
4. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 139–140.
5. Graham Hough, 'Epilogue: Conversation in Limbo', in *The Last Romantics* (London: Duckworth, 1949), pp. 263–274.
6. A.L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952), p. 185.
7. H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, ed. by Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 11–12.

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Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of The War of the Worlds (1978) in 1988, which sparked an interest in Wells. Thank you to her and Jonathan Fry for securing some hard-to-get books, and to my husband Martin for helping me transport stacks of volumes from library, and to the London Library's Carlyle Trust for providing access to all those lovely books. I would also like to mention our son Peter, who was born a month after the Kelmscott House conference and who has been exploring science fiction, time travel and utopianism on CBeebies.

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