

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Adam Roberts (July 2022)

Adam Roberts has been nominated three times for the Arthur C. Clarke Award: in 2001 for his debut novel, Salt, in 2007 for Gradisil and in 2010 for Yellow Blue Tibia. He won both the 2012 BSFA Award for Best Novel, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, for Jack Glass. It was further shortlisted for The Kitschies Red Tentacle award. His short story "Tollund" was nominated for the 2014 Sidewise Award.

He has a degree in English from the University of Aberdeen and a PhD from Cambridge University on Robert Browning and the Classics. He teaches English literature and creative writing at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Adam Roberts is the author of "H G Wells: A Literary Life." In 2018 he was elected Vice-President of the H.G. Wells Society.

Andrzej Wieckowski: In any of his letters or writings did he express any views about the development of the science fiction scene in America and the pulp magazines during his lifetime, and the rise in popularity of the genre?

Ed Newsom: How aware was Wells of the American science fiction scene? How did he feel about it?

Wells's first visit to the US was 1906 (he toured New York, Boston, Chicago and Washington, giving lectures and met, among others, Teddy Roosevelt and Booker T Washington) but by then he wasn't really concentrating on science fiction: the great works in that mode all date from the 1890s; in the early 1900s he was writing non-fiction and contemporary-set novels like *Kipps* (1905) and *Ann Veronica* (1909). I don't think he had much of an opinion on the American science fiction scene.

Ed Newsom: During the Depression, Heinlein identified as a Wellsian socialist. Was Wells aware of him? Did they ever correspond?

I don't believe there was any communication between them, no.

Ed Newsom: After his death, Wells was one of the people Colin Wilson identified as an Outsider, largely because of *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. Do you think this was a fair assessment? Did Wells see the last years of his life as a bleak existential dilemma?

[*Mind at the End of its Tether*](#) (1945) is the last book Wells published during his lifetime and it is a strange, brief, hugely pessimistic work. I've read it several times and have tried to make sense of it, without any great success. But what I would say is that for most of his life, before his final illness, Wells was very far from being a Wilsonian 'outsider'. On the contrary he was an energetic, sociable widely-travelled man who numbered presidents and movie-stars among his friends; he was a main player in the early century UK political scene, first with the Fabians and then with the Labour party: his work as a journalist was very highly paid and gave him access to all sorts of opportunities to travel and meet and influence people. He was given permission to tour the trenches during World War 1, and travelled to Moscow to interview Lenin in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. He had a string of famous lovers, and spoke directly to an audience of millions in his journalism and fiction. It's far from Colin Wilson's isolated existentialism, really. Now it's true that Wells was an 'outsider' in terms of the British class

system: born into a lower-middle class family, he spoke with a high-pitched cockney accent and he was short. But that's a different thing to Wilson's self-proclaimed genius-Outsider

Bill Rogers: Was the sterile vision Wells painted of the far future in 'The Time Machine', of the Eloi/Morlock impasse, how he really saw humanity's penultimate fate, or was it only a warning of a probable outcome of continued class-based exploitation?

John Grayshaw: If SF tends to reflect the fears and hopes of a times, such as post-nuclear apocalypse stories in the 50s and 60s, what would be the equivalent for H.G. Wells' time?

To answer John's question first: decadence, 'devolution', the anxiety, widespread in the 1880s and 1890s, that the world was running down, society was falling apart, evolution was going into reverse, the sun would soon use up its fuel and go out. You can see this fear of decadence in some of Wells's 1890s fiction. But then he had a moment of conversion: reading physicist Frederick Soddy's *Interpretation of Radium* (1909)—a really important book in the history of science. Before Soddy it had been believed that the sun 'burnt' its fuel much as a coal-fire burns coal, and that it would soon all be used up. Soddy showed that the sun's fire was actually radioactivity, and that therefore it would continue to burn for billions of years. Wells found the prospect hugely inspiring and began writing a series of future-utopias in which humankind makes the world a practical paradise and then spreads out into the universe.

John Grayshaw: Was it difficult for H.G. Wells to get published? How popular were his stories at the time?

Immensely popular. His route to publication was writing short pieces for magazines and newspapers in the late 1880s and early 1890s, and then moving on to writing short stories for the many journals that published short fiction in the 1890s; after that he enjoyed great success with science fiction in the 1890s, but really broke through in the 1900s with *Anticipations* (1900), a bestselling non-fiction work of what we would nowadays call 'futurology', and novels like *Ann Veronica* (1909) which was a slightly scandalous success. His first world war novel *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916) was the single best-selling novel of 1917 in both the UK and the USA. More, he treated publishing professionally: he was one of the first writers to retain a literary agent and negotiated hard with publishers to get the best deal. He did sometimes have trouble being published, but not for commercial reasons. His regular publishers refused to publish his 1911 novel *The New Machiavelli* because they considered its theme, about a married politician who has an affair, indecent; but Wells found another publisher easily enough.

John Grayshaw: I think H.G. Wells most well-known novels are "The Time Machine," "the Island of Dr. Moreau," "The Invisible Man," and "War of the Worlds." Which of his other works SHOULD be more widely read?

I'd pick two in particular: *Tono-Bungay* (1909), a brilliant, capacious 'condition of England' novel centred on a confidence man who grows rich peddling the 'wonder-drug' of the novel's title; and his genuinely affecting World War 1 novel *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916), whose main character is a self-portrait of Wells himself.

John Grayshaw: Do you have personal favorites of Wells' work?

It was reading his science fiction that first made me fall in love with Wells, and I'd still say that's my favourite: *War of the Worlds* and some of his short fiction—'Pollock and the Porroh-man' and 'The Country of the Blind'.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers Wells grew up reading?

He liked to claim that he spent his youth reading Plato—and he did read Plato, and other philosophical and political thinkers—but the author who had the biggest influence upon him, whom he read over and over, was Dickens. In many ways Wells is a neo-Dickensian writer.

John Grayshaw: Who are some writers that were Wells' contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired?

He was friendly with pretty much all the major writers amongst his contemporaries, and was close to Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Dorothy Richardson and Rebecca West (both of whom he slept with). He expressed particular admiration for Tolstoy, and had a famous falling out with James that broke their friendship. Rather cruelly he parodied Henry James in his comic novel *Boon* (1915)

John Grayshaw: What kind of research did Wells do for his books?

He was very thorough: read widely and approached experts. For his *Outline of History* (1920) he drew on the expertise of Sir Ray Lankester (director of the Natural History Museum), Sir Harry Johnston (an Africa and Asia expert), Gilbert Murray (the famous classicist—some of Murray's celebrated translations of Aristophanes first appear here), Ernest Barker (political scientist and historian), Sir Denison Ross (Orientalist and sinophile).

John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of Wells?

Without wishing to sound lubricious, I was surprised to discover just how wide-ranging Wells's love life was, how many women he slept with. He had a string of beautiful, intelligent women dotting upon him, despite the fact that he was small, often ill, that he spoke with a (to his generation) unattractive cockney accent in a high pitched voice, and his success with women did not slow-up as grew balding and pot-bellied in middle age: none of this got in the way of women falling for him in droves. It's true he was clever, funny, generous with money, famous and attentive. Rebecca West (with whom he had an illegitimate son) said that his skin smelled of honey. I consulted with a doctor about this, and was told this is a sign of diabetes—Wells was diagnosed with the disease late, and helped found The Diabetic Association in 1934, but it seems he suffered from it all his life.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writer's the Wells had correspondence with?

It would be easier to list the writers he *didn't* correspond with (Heinlein, for instance, as noted above). He was good friends with many famous contemporary writers, and exchanged letters with many more. There's a begging letter from James Joyce, and a reply from Wells turning him down, in the correspondence; the British Library has in its collection some fine, moving letters Wells wrote to Sigmund Freud in 1938: Wells was active in the movement to get Freud out of Nazi Germany and to safety in the UK, which he did.

John Grayshaw: Are there any examples of Wells corresponding with his readers?

He did correspond with, and sometimes meet, his readers and fans (especially if they were attractive women). But he was so famous he also attracted less agreeable attention. For example: he was sued by a Canadian woman called Florence Deeks in 1928, she claiming that Wells had plagiarized an unpublished manuscript of hers. I [really don't think Wells did so](#), but the court case went on for years and cost Wells a fortune: also Wells won in court, Deeks declared bankruptcy and Wells had to cover all the lawyers' costs.

John Grayshaw: Did Wells have any particular writing habits or routines he stuck with?

He was asked how it was he could be so productive, writing hundreds of books, fiction and non-fiction. He replied: 'well, I'm an indolent man, and I'm generally sitting down anyway—so I might as well write something.' His self-portrait in *Mr Britling* shows him writing all morning, and sometimes waking in the middle of the night with an idea to write, getting up and writing it then and there.

John Grayshaw: What were some of Wells' hobbies other than writing?

He loved playing games, often inventing his own games—both outdoor games with bats and balls and so on, and indoor games. He published the first book outlining the best way to play war games with toy-soldiers, *Little Wars* (1911): anticipating the later development in miniatures war-gaming, table-top dungeons-and-dragons and so on.

John Grayshaw: Why has H.G. Wells stayed so popular?

I'm not sure he *has*, really. His science fiction is still read, because science fiction as such remains really popular and he is recognized as a key figure in the genre's development—and because his SF is really good! But most of his writing wasn't SF, and I'm not sure many people still read novels like *Kipps*, *Ann Veronica* or *Mr Britling*, and in his last decades of writing there are titles that nobody nowadays has even heard of, let alone read—though many of them are really interesting books—like *Christina Alberta's Father* (1925), *The World of William Clissold* (1926) and *The Bulpington of Blup* (1932).

John Grayshaw: What is Wells' legacy? Why was his work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

This is at once a really interesting, and a really large, question! It would take me many hours of writing and many many thousands of words to even start to answer it ... so I'm afraid I'm going to duck out at this point.

John Grayshaw: Be sure to mention me in the dedication if you turn it into a book...Thank you so much for the interview!