

RETHINKING "THE EPISODE OF MR. WELLS:" A STUDY IN THE SOCIALISM, POLITICS, AND PERSONALITIES OF THE FABIANS AND H.G. WELLS

Robyn E. Carswell

*The right timing and the right degree, governed alike by vigilance and patience,
so that nothing regrettable is done though haste, and nothing left undone through sloth.*

-Erasmus

*You may say that the world has been changed by a smaller handful than those who meet here to-night,
but they met under Pentecostal tongues of fire,
-H.G. Wells*

In 1903, the Fabian Society celebrated almost two decades of existence, and looked to the future with something less than unanimity. A socialist organization founded by well-educated men and women possessed of strong and independent personalities, it was united in its desire to bring about socialism, but scattered in its approach to that goal. The Fabian leaders, especially Beatrice and Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw, and Hubert Bland, agreed that new blood was necessary to renew the society's vitality, and they soon settled on one man above others to help them meet that goal: H.G. Wells. Wells, who had been a proponent of socialism nearly as long as the Fabians had been meeting, had written *Anticipations* (1902), a book in which he called for the end of capitalism and the emergence of a new World-State. Fabian leaders read the book and agreed that Wells's ideas could help make Fabianism interesting again. At the urging of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Wells joined the

Robyn Carswell, of Shelbyville, Illinois, who earned her BA in history with departmental honors at Eastern Illinois University, is currently a graduate student in History. A member of Phi Alpha Theta, she wrote this paper as her senior honors thesis, in Spring 2006, under the direction of Dr. Michael Shirley.

Fabians in 1903. All seemed primed for a Fabian revival. Yet only five years later, Wells quit the Fabians in disgust.

Those five years have been labeled as everything from a "petty, dusty conflict"¹ to a "Storm in a Fabian Teacup."² During first three years, Wells offered minimal participation in the society, usually through minor essays and a few lectures. In 1906, however, after being asked for a "stock-taking" report by Shaw,³ Wells shifted from a passive player to a radical reformer. Wells began in February of 1906 with a lecture entitled "Faults of the Fabian." In his address, he heavily criticized the Fabians for being small-minded and collectively inactive. Initially, the Fabians took the censure well and began to make changes. The Fabians formed a special committee to address the problems within the society, but the Fabian Executive eventually stonewalled the report. The ensuing debate between Wells, chair of the Special Committee and Bernard Shaw, chair for the Executive, was carried on over three months at members-only meetings during the closing weeks of 1906 and the early months of 1907. Even after winning a seat on the Executive, Wells's reform attempts remained unrealized. After two years of blocked action, Wells finally gave up in a fit of despair, resigned his position on the Executive, and ended his Fabian membership.

The historiography of H.G. Wells and his membership in the Fabian society is limited, and most scholarly work focuses too heavily on the personality differences and petty squabbles that existed between the factions that developed during his tenure with the society. Many historians rely on early accounts from members such as Edward Pease, S. G. Hobson, Beatrice Webb and Bernard Shaw for their assertions; yet all of these accounts are anti-Wells in nature. Margaret Cole, a Fabian herself, wrote

¹H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866)* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1934), 564.

²Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *H.G. Wells: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 201.

³George Bernard Shaw (GBS) to Edward R. Pease (ERP), 4 July, 1905 in Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters, 1898-1910* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972), 536.

The Story of Fabian Socialism in 1961 after a gap of almost half a century, since the days of Edward Pease. Cole, who relied heavily on Pease for her conclusions, maintained that, "The immediate issue was one of personality not of principle – Wells *versus* the Old Guard, with Shaw as its chief spokesman."⁴ While she is correct in her claim of Shaw as mouthpiece for the Executive and the "Old Gang," she still repeated Pease's assertion that the differences were personal. To her credit, Cole put the affair into the larger picture—that of the parliamentary election of 1906, which previous historians had ignored. She claimed, correctly, that the social historians of the 1950s had largely played down the election, suggesting, "that there was nothing really radical about it."⁵

Other historians, such as George Mariz and Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, have also relied heavily on anti-Wells sources. In his "The Fabians and the 'Episode of Mr. Wells'," Mariz claimed, "that personal animosity played a large role" in the episode.⁶ He also argued that Wells found it impossible to work within a framework that was not completely his own creation.⁷ Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie offer two chapters devoted to the Fabian affray in their 1973 biography of Wells. They considered Wells an abrasive character with whom most people could not get along. They claim that Wells, in "Faults of the Fabian," required the Society give itself over to him.⁸ In fact, Wells asked only for the liberty to develop a massive propaganda campaign and marketing strategy; it was Shaw who claimed Wells demanded the Executive's resignation.⁹

David Smith, perhaps the most prolific writer on Wells's life, regards the Fabian-Wells imbroglio as overplayed when

⁴Margaret Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961), 123.

⁵*Ibid.*, 113.

⁶George Mariz, "The Fabians and the 'Episode of Mr. Wells,'" *Research Studies* 51, no. 2 (June 1983): 83.

⁷*Ibid.*, 95.

⁸Mackenzie, *H.G. Wells: A Biography*, 197.

⁹*Fabian News*, January 1907, 13.

focusing on the personalities involved: "this matter has received a great deal of attention, much of the correspondence surrounding the case has not yet been printed, and no account uses all available correspondence."¹⁰ In his own work, *Desperately Mortal*, he maintained that Wells was a novice in the political field and that his four books on socialism represent an evolution in his socialist philosophy and the members of the "Old Gang" were unwilling to be patient.¹¹ He further argued, that the "Old Gang" did not want to be reformed, especially Shaw, who according to Smith did not take Wells seriously, "except as a threat to his power on the Fabian executive."¹² Wells annoyed many members of the Executive by his overbearing personality, and Smith contended they were "threatened by the prospect of the future, or in Shaw's case, by the prospect of losing power."¹³ Smith also claimed that other members of the society had different aspirations for Wells, in particular the Webbs who Smith argued, "thought they could use Wells to their own ends," although he offers no evidence to support this assertion.¹⁴

As Smith pointed out, few historians have used the personal letters of Fabian members to support their arguments and even fewer have looked at the wealth of information contained in the *Fabian News*. Personal letters between Shaw and Wells particularly deserve further analysis. Privately, Shaw encouraged Wells's ideas about the society and supported his thoughts on possible changes, but at the public forum, he blasted Wells for his impulsive ideas and mocked his delays. In letters to Webb, Shaw supported the use of Wells's ideas, but suggested presenting them as those of the Executive.

Misrepresentation of sources has also created problems in understanding the relationships between Wells and the Fabians.

¹⁰David C. Smith, *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal: a Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 518.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 105.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

One scholar, William J. Hyde, has used words of Beatrice Webb out of context to support his argument that the members of the society found Wells to be incorrigible and frustrating. In his article, "The Socialism of H. G. Wells," Hyde quotes Beatrice Webb in the following: "to Mrs. Webb, Wells was merely a 'speculator,' a 'gambler' in ideas, useful for 'loose generalizations.'"¹⁵ One could argue Hyde's selective use of Beatrice Webb's words, leads the reader to believe that the Fabians thought of Wells as useful for nothing more than an entertaining diversion. Beatrice's full words from her diary are as follows:

We like him much—he is absolutely genuine and full of inventiveness—a "speculator" in ideas—somewhat of a gambler, but perfectly aware that his hypotheses are not verified. In one sense, he is a romancer spoilt by romancing—but, in the present stage of sociology, he is useful to gradgrinds like ourselves in supplying us with loose generalizations which we can use as instruments of research. And we are useful to him in supplying an endless array of carefully sifted facts and broad administrative experience.¹⁶

Because of errors and misrepresentation, the Fabians as well as other socialist societies demand further research. While Socialism continues to be a popular and fruitful subject of study among historians, research into the relationship of those who considered themselves socialists, especially radicals, and the larger political movements can help to further the understanding of the successes as well as the failures of their endeavors. In addition, it is necessary to study the relationship between Wells and the Fabians further, as it has later historic import regarding the rise in popularity of socialistic societies, and why the efforts of upper-middle class radicals to effect political change in Britain

¹⁵William J. Hyde, "The Socialism of H.G. Wells," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 2 (April 1956): 218.

¹⁶Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership*, eds. Barbara Drake and Margaret Cole (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), 289.

did not make as marked a change as one would have expected following the electoral gains of the Labour Party in 1906. Further, it is necessary to address the inaccuracies perpetuated by historians concerning the "episode" between Mr. Wells and the Fabians, inaccuracies that have led to a general labeling of Wells as more of a troublemaker and ill-mannered interloper than an assertive socialist. The arguments over personality clashes and matters of poor taste do not address the deeper issues—that of what exactly it was that the Fabians wanted from Wells, what Wells was trying to accomplish for the Fabians, and to what extent either side was successful. H.G. Wells joined the Fabian Society to help advance the cause of socialism. The Fabian Society recruited H.G. Wells to help advance Fabianism. In that respect, Wells did the job; he did not realize, however, at least initially, that those goals were not the same thing.

Finally, absent from scholarship is discussion of the behind-the-scenes reform party that Wells and several other prominent Fabians constructed. Wells and his reform-minded Fabian supporters had careful planning sessions and corresponded extensively during the tumultuous year after delivery of "Faults of the Fabians," especially in the month prior to election of a new Executive Committee. In short, while personality clashes definitely existed and probably exacerbated the conflict, Wells's ultimate withdrawal from the society after only five years was the culmination of arguments over differences of principle and politics rather than personality.

Early Fabianism

In order to appreciate the dynamics of the episode, one needs an understanding of the social climate during the formation of Fabianism and what the Fabian Society represented. The socialist revival of the 1880s brought forth a myriad of new socialist organizations across the whole of Europe. The Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League along with the Fabian Society survive to this day.

The Fabian Society debuted in 1883 when a small group of intellectuals met casually in a basement room to hear a lecture by

traveling scholar and philosopher, Thomas Davidson.¹⁷ Those assembled had recently attended another lecture by Davidson, who was visiting London to promote the formation of Utopian societies and spread the gospel of communal living, and asked him to guest lecture at their first meeting. This was the first gathering of what the group called the Fellowship of the New Life and was attended by eleven others including Davidson himself. Originally, the group considered forming a separate community in which they would share their material possessions, but after the second meeting, the focus shifted away from cooperatives to education of society for the future. A rift developed between those in favor of communal living and those who wanted to focus on social education. The latter broke off from the original group and became the Fabians, although all those present continued to be members of both societies until the end of the Fellowship of the New Life in 1898. The fledgling society borrowed its name from the Roman General Quintus Fabius Maximus, who advocated the weakening of the opposition by harassing operations rather than becoming involved in battles. Thus was the birth of the Fabian Society.

Within two years, membership in the society grew and more notable personalities joined the group; Sydney Olivier, Eleanor Marx, Annie Besant, Graham Wallas, Charles Trevelyan, George Bernard Shaw, and Sidney and Beatrice Webb were among the newcomers. Bernard Shaw,¹⁸ Sidney Webb,¹⁹ Graham Wallas²⁰

¹⁷Davidson was a scholar and had lived in America amongst the Utopian societies. He founded Ethical Societies and Schools and published volumes on philosophical subjects. According to Edward Pease, he was extremely charismatic and influenced many people to join in his Utopian thinking. – Pease, *History of the Fabian Society*, 26.

¹⁸George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin Ireland in 1856 and moved to London at the age of nineteen. Desperately poor, he attended lectures and debates on local religious, social and political matters for entertainment. He also spend countless hours in study at the British Museum. He found socialism to be something he could support and became active, joining the Fabians in September of 1884, and advanced to the Executive Committee in January 1885.

¹⁹ Sidney Webb was born in 1859 to an upper-middle class family, was educated abroad, but did not attend a University. He became a member of

and Sydney Olivier²¹ became the foundation for the ‘Old Gang’ and much of the early success of the Fabian Society is due to their efforts in writing essays and lecturing. By 1886, the society boasted sixty-seven members, their own journal, titled *Today*, and a small annual income of £35 19s.

In the early years, the society forged manifestos and documents to frame and explain what they stood for and what their goals were. The Fabians believed that they could influence societal change through slow evolution rather than immediate revolution. The first document, “The Fabian Manifesto” issued in 1884, opened by stating that members of the society were responsible for spreading the opinions contained within the manifesto as well as “discussing their practical consequences.”²² They believed that a “life interest in the Land and Capital of the nation is the birthright of every individual” and wealth in the hands of private individuals resulted in competition leading to “adulteration [and] dishonest dealing[s].”²³ In 1887, the Fabian Society adopted its creed, which they called it the “Basis.”²⁴ Edward Pease,²⁵ long-time secretary for the society, described it

London’s intellectual crowd, argued most often that there was no need for a revolutionary movement within socialism and society was on a course toward that end, and simply needed guidance along the way. He, like the other members of the ‘Old Gang’ was a prolific writer and lecturer. He was also Baron Passfield, a title his wife despised and refused to use.

²⁰Graham Wallas, a political psychologist, was born in Sunderland in 1858. He attended Corpus Christi at Oxford where he earned his degree and lost his religion. In the early twentieth century, when the society drifted from Liberalism, a cause Wallas staunchly supported, he left the Fabians.

²¹Sydney Olivier was born at Colchester in 1859. Like Wallas, Olivier was an alumnus of Corpus Christi, which was where the two met. He served with the Fabians leaving for a time to serve as colonial secretary and later governor of Jamaica. He was present during the later years of the Wells episode.

²²“A Manifesto,” *Fabian Tracts*, No. 2 (London: Geo. Standring, 8 & 9 Finsbury Street, E.C., 1884) in *Fabian Tracts*, Nos. 1-47, 1884-1893, (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1969): 6-7.

²³Edward Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 3d ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963) 41.

²⁴ For the full text of “The Basis,” see the appendix on the last page of this article.

²⁵ Edward Pease, born in Bristol in 1857, served as secretary for the Fabians

as not fully a statement of faith, but rather “a test of admission, a minimum basis of agreement, acceptance of which is required from those who aspire to share in the control of a Society which had set out to reconstruct [their] social system.”²⁶ The Basis later served as a major source of dissension in the Wells-Fabian relationship when Wells failed to gain Executive Committee support for recommended changes. The Basis stressed the importance of wrenching away “Land and Industrial Capital from individual and class ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for the general benefit,”²⁷ but the Fabian’s basic philosophy was one of patient permeation rather than radical reform. According to the history of the society as told by the Fabians in their centennial work, *100 Years of Fabian Socialism, 1884-1984*, the early founders attempted to infiltrate “institutions by social reformist ideas, patiently setting out a rational case for change and improvement which the thinking citizen would, over time, embrace.”²⁸ They proposed in the Basis that the best way to prepare society for its inevitable shift to socialism was through the “general dissemination of knowledge as to the relation between the individual and Society in its economic, ethical and political aspects.”²⁹

As the Fabian Society relied heavily on literary output to disseminate their doctrine, they published *Fabian Essays*, a collection of works by individual members; *Fabian Tracts*, intended for public distribution; and, for its members, the *Fabian News*. The views expressed by each member were considered solely his own and not representative of the society. Even collective publications such as *Fabian Essays* demonstrated the

from the beginning with only brief lapses. He dabbled in psychic research and spiritual séances until he met the reform-minded socialists, who preferred moral reform within the middle-class to radical revolution among the working-class. While his role was mainly administrative, he did write occasionally, and in 1916 he authored the first official *History of the Fabian Society*.

²⁶Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 72.

²⁷Ibid., 284.

²⁸Deidre Terrins and Phillip Whitehead, eds. *100 Years of Fabian Socialism 1884-1984* (London: The Fabian Society, 1984), 3.

²⁹Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 284.

range of beliefs held by individual members. In the collected essays both Annie Besant and Bernard Shaw presented differing theories of class behavior and morality. Shaw argued that while the bourgeoisie exploited the labors of the lower classes to line their pockets, they were also creating an environment in which the oppressed would “breed like rabbits; and their poverty breeds filth, ugliness, dishonesty, disease, obscenity, drunkenness and murder. In the midst of the riches which their labor piles up for you, their misery rises up too and stifles you.”³⁰ Annie Besant, by contrast, maintained that education of the masses led to morality rather than simply recognizing their oppressed condition: “The moral education of the individual is the lesson, not that desire is evil...but that the wider, fuller satisfaction is built upon the simpler, and common morality a condition of its possibility.... [and that] love, the social instinct, and science, which is ordered knowledge, are his only reliable tutors in practical morality.” No member was stifled in his or her personal opinions and editing by colleagues was not done.³¹ When they were not writing, members of the Fabian Society lectured. By the time of publication of *Fabian Essays* in 1889, members had collectively delivered over 700 lectures.³² Most of the lectures were simply reading of the papers and tracts that members had already written, but for members like Shaw and Webb, who were gifted orators, the delivery was as impressive as the material.

Politically, the Fabians did not align with any one particular party, although many individual members attempted to create one. In 1886, open invitations were sent out by the Fabian Society for all socialists to convene and discuss socialist ideas. Members of the Socialist League, a group spawned from a debate within the Social Democratic Foundation, accepted the invitation and a large group of socialists met at Anderton’s Hotel

³⁰Bernard Shaw, et al. *Fabian Essays on Socialism* Jubilee ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1948; reprint, Letchworth Hertfordshire: The Garden City Press Ltd., 1950), 20.

³¹Ibid., xl.

³²Ibid., xxxix.

in September 1886. At the meeting, concerns arose that many Fabian members silently wished for a political movement amongst the socialists. Fabian members Annie Besant³³ and Hubert Bland³⁴ made and seconded a motion that addressed the issue, saying, "That it is advisable that Socialists should organize themselves as a political party for the purpose of transferring into the hands of the whole working community full control over the soil and the means of production, as well as over the production and distribution of wealth."³⁵

To this, William Morris, leader of the Socialist League, added the following:

But whereas the first duty of Socialists is to educate the people to understand what their present position is and what their future might be, and to keep the principle of Socialism steadily before them; and whereas no Parliamentary party can exist without compromise and concession, which would hinder that education and obscure those principles, it would be a false step for Socialists to attempt to take part in the Parliamentary contest.³⁶

A heated debate followed that ended in a vote, which carried Mrs. Besant's motion.³⁷ Out of this deliberation the Fabian Parliamentary League was formed. While it survived for only a few years, the subject of the Fabian Society involving itself in politics became an issue that would resurface repeatedly, especially during the Wells years.

³³Annie Besant, born Annie Wood in London in 1847, was a self-proclaimed feminist and anarchist. She married a minister in 1867, but later separated after she turned from orthodoxy. She championed radical movements, including access to birth control and theosophy.

³⁴Hubert Bland was a charter member of the Fabians, along with his wife, Edith Nesbit. Bland married Nesbit in 1880, just two months prior to the arrival of their first son. Bland believed in imperialism and was an established free-thinker.

³⁵Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 67.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷The debate also resulted in Anderton's Hotel barring any further meetings of the Fabian Society. Ibid., 68.

A little over a decade after the conference at Anderton's Hotel, the Socialist societies attempted the process again, this time meeting with various trade union groups and Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party. In 1900, seventy disillusioned organizations came together to form the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). The various groups joined forces for the purpose of backing candidates who would express the viewpoint of the working-class in Parliament. The LRC was not a political party and indeed had no members, but was rather a loose affiliation of special interest groups coming together for a common cause. Despite its origins as a non-political entity, the LRC later gave birth to the Labour Party, with its first successful candidates (twenty-nine in all) elected to Parliament in 1906. Edward Pease served as the representative for the Fabian Society.

As Pease and the "Old Gang" continued their labors within the Fabian framework, a new century began. With it emerged a rift between the younger crowd and the older generation. Membership was climbing, but new members were younger, typically university students, and increasingly more radical. Older members, specifically the Executive Committee, discouraged change and dawdled when it came to sensitive issues. Major issues such as the society's stance on the Boer War, education, and fiscal reform sharply divided many members.

The first test of this issue came during debates over the society's refusal to comment on the Boer War. They issued no formal leaflets or tracts. As Margaret Cole, author of *The Story of Fabian Socialism* and a Fabian herself, put it, the older generation of Fabians saw the war "as a monstrous irrelevance to Fabian work," which many members, especially the Executive Committee, argued was to promote socialism, not decide rights and wrongs.³⁸ The Executive Committee reached a divided decision on the subject with seven votes to five in favor of maintaining silence on the war. Sydney Olivier, who was leaving Britain to govern Jamaica, urged the Executive

³⁸Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism*, 98.

Committee to reconsider the decision and publish a leaflet on the war, which they refused. Instead, the society asked the publication committee to consider a more general tract on the subject of imperialism. Executive Committee member S.G. Hobson, political activist and journalist, argued that war was a product of the governing classes and thereby evidence that socialism was necessary. "The Society [should] make its attitude on the war plain," Hobson argued, "and to support the expansion of the Empire only in so far as that may be compatible with the expansion of that higher social organisation which this Society was founded to promote."³⁹ The press discovered the inner turmoil and ridiculed the Fabians for their inaction, which prompted the Executive to annul their earlier decision and put the question to a postal referendum, asking, "Are you in favour of an official pronouncement being made by the Fabian Society on Imperialism in relation to the war?"⁴⁰ The votes yielded a decision that reflected the earlier divided position of the Executive. Out of approximately 800 members, only 476 voted, with 217 in favor of a pronouncement and 249 against. The vote also signified the rare occasion of any societal resolutions being put to a referendum; the Executive Committee normally made all decisions.

While the Fabians remained silent on issues of war, they spent much effort and printed numerous tracts on public education. The education system in turn-of-the-century Britain was miserably poor and the Fabians decided to do something about it. The existing education system was divided among church-administered schools (mostly Anglican) or specially elected school boards. In some areas, such as London, the school buildings and staff were models of their day; while other smaller districts barely scraped by, often having board members who were uneducated and preoccupied with quarrels amongst sects.⁴¹ In response to the state of the education system, the

³⁹Ibid., 99.

⁴⁰Ibid., 100.

⁴¹Ibid., 103.

Fabians published the tract *The Education Muddle and the Way Out* in January of 1901. In the tract, the Fabians suggested the larger school boards (Birmingham and Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds) continue to function as independent units, but that the smaller units be enlarged beyond the size of the parish. Also suggested was the creation of County Councils for each remaining district, which in turn held the responsibility for the "provision and maintenance of every kind and grade of education within its area. All School Boards existing within the County should be abolished, and their school transferred to the County Council."⁴² The cost of maintaining the school system, the Fabian plan suggested, would come from taxes levied within the county. The County Council was autonomous, but was required to submit its survey for educational provision to the Board of Education for criticism, which in turn had the power to audit education and make suggestions. Several months later a Government Bill appeared that bore a striking resemblance to the Fabian tract.⁴³ The LRC opposed the Bill and the Fabians opposed the LRC, but regardless of the opposition, the Bill passed.

Fiscal Policy had also left the Fabians bickering amongst themselves. In 1903, the Lord Chamberlain proposed tariff reform, including new taxes on food and preferential duty systems. The argument among the Fabians was not about the taxes or Parliament's right to impose them, but rather, the wording contained in a tract concerning it. The argument led to Graham Wallas, who had been a Fabian since 1886, to resign in January of 1904. In his resignation, he complained that when he had disagreed with form or substance of any tract, his arguments were met with resistance, despite a clear majority of other members agreeing with him against the Executive.⁴⁴ Wells, a close friend of Wallas, was disgusted by the "attitude adopted

⁴²"The Education Muddle and the Way Out," *Fabian Tracts*, No. 106 (London: The Fabian Society, January 1901) in *Fabian Tracts*, Nos. 96-129, 1900-1906 (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1969): 12.

⁴³Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism*, 105.

⁴⁴*Fabian News*, February 1904, 6.

by the society toward various contemporary political issues” and one month after Wallas left, Wells tendered his own resignation, but later retracted it after a scolding letter from Shaw.⁴⁵ This was neither the first, nor the last, letter Shaw wrote to Wells giving him fatherly advice.

As the Fabian Society grew, they sought out new members, especially among the intellectual elite, seeking to add to their numbers men and women of the same caliber as themselves. Bernard Shaw stated that he had chosen the Fabians over the Social Democratic Federation “by an instinctive feeling that the Fabians and not the Federation would attract the men of [his] own bias and intellectual habits.”⁴⁶ The society looked for men and women who were not only socialists, but also well-known personalities. They found writers especially attractive and H.G. Wells was no exception.

Wells - Life Before the Fabians

Herbert George Wells was born September 21, 1866 in Kent. His father, Joseph, was a professional cricketer and shopkeeper, but a poor businessman. His mother, Sarah, was a lady’s maid. Although they considered themselves part of England’s middle-class, the Wells household barely rose above insolvency, a fact that fed Wells’s ideas about welfare and social programs for families. As his parents’ financial security waned, their relationship became more distant and troubled. Wells’s later obsession with governmental support for mothers raising their children came from these early years of equating economic stability with happiness. He attended a private school until the age of thirteen, when his parents could no longer pay for their son’s education. Wells then apprenticed himself as a draper, but forced his mother to buy his freedom after only three years, after

⁴⁵HGW to ERP 17 March 1904 in David C. Smith, ed. *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, vol. 2, 1904-1918 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), 13. GBS to H.G. Wells (HGW), 5 April 1904, in Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters, 1898-1910* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972), 414.

⁴⁶Anthony Wright, “A Century of Fabianism,” *History Today* 34, no. 5 (May 1984): 50.

which he returned as a pupil teacher at the local grammar school. After a year, he left for the Normal School (later Royal College) of Science in South Kensington, London.

His interest in socialism developed during his early days at Normal School. He spent more time reading political theories and works on utopian thought than he did on science. He was a member of the school’s debating society and it was within the confines of this society that he presented, in 1886, his first paper on socialism. He confessed, during those early college years, to being a socialist aspirant; he wore the required red tie and attended various socialist meetings, including some open ones held by the Fabian Society. He researched socialism, studied utopian societies and participated in debates on socialism. However, the casting of his lot with the Fabians waited for several years while he focused on his literary career.

Wells had early successes with scientific literary works such as *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *War of the Worlds*, but it was *Anticipations*, a series of essays published in serial form for the *Fortnightly Review* and *North American Review* in 1901, and as a book in 1902, that caught the attention of the Fabian Society. The book was Wells’s first non-fiction success and earned him popularity as well as a handsome paycheck. It focused on technological progression for the next century, leading up to what Wells called the “New Republic,” in which a new majority of competent men, mostly scientists and engineers, would be responsible for administration of the state. Additionally, Wells saw the uneducated, slovenly masses as dead weight; the new order should use all means necessary to rid itself of the draining, useless horde. Wells also proposed solutions to the problems that he thought the industrial age had created in the chapter “The Higher Synthesis” which outlined the formula to create a World-State. The Fabians, particularly the Executive, shared Wells’s elitist view. They latched onto his ideas and hoped that they might be the chosen lot to administer Wells’s New Republic. A review in the February 1902 edition of the *Fabian News* by Haden Guest concluded, “perhaps it is through some such...media as Mr. Wells provides that Fabians

will find themselves able to get back to their work of promoting the World-State."⁴⁷

Despite Wells's early interest in political theory, he much preferred socialism from a scientific point of view. His writings on socialism were mostly scientific rather political and he enjoyed more success when dealing with the future in scientific terms rather than socio-political ones. His success with the scientific community of the more literary and social types reflect this.⁴⁸ Wells said that the "lion of politics" blocked progression toward a world state and when later asked about socialism in the political realm, he stated that there was "no orthodox socialism, one and indivisible."⁴⁹

Wells's Socialism and Life among the Fabians

By the time the Fabian Society discovered Wells for themselves, he had already published several works and devoted a fair amount of time to writing letters to leading newspapers and journals including the *London Times*, the *Morning Post* and *The Fortnightly Review*. His works of fiction were bestsellers and his volumes on socialism, particularly *Anticipations*, increased his popularity. Wells shone in the literary field, and it was his unmatched success as a writer that led to his recruitment by the Fabians.

The Fabians thought *Anticipations* was exceptional, as well as other early works on socialism by Wells. In Guest's review for the *Fabian News*, he chided socialists, saying that they "have very stupidly not been awake to our own business as social reformers."⁵⁰ Guest would become one of Wells's chief supporters in the coming years. In the same year, Wells read a speech at the Royal Institution entitled *The Discovery of the Future*. The audience regarded the speech so well that his agent, J. B. Pinker, persuaded the publisher to rush a copy of it as a

⁴⁷*Fabian News*, February 1902, 7.

⁴⁸Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 118.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰*Fabian News*, February 1902, 7.

book. Over 6,000 copies sold the first month.⁵¹ Edward Pease, secretary for the Fabian Society, reviewed the book for the *Fabian News* and concluded that, "we hope his advice will be followed."⁵²

Other readers also found Wells's predictions of the future in *Anticipations* compelling. E. Ray Lankester, director of the Museum of Natural History, reviewed the book for *Nature* saying, "it is, truly enough, an unsparing indictment of existing government, society, education, religion, and morality, but it contains also a confession of faith and is full of a spirit of hope and belief in future development."⁵³ Francis W. Hirst, writing for *Nature* in 1904, but commenting on *Anticipations* as well as Wells's more recent political works, remarked that Wells was toying with "great ideas in a time of flux" and supported him to create 'a great synthesis.'⁵⁴ The book sold 2,430 copies in one month and duplicated that number in the five months that followed.

Wells sent a copy of the book to Bernard Shaw, who received it with less than congratulatory praise. He criticized many of the Wells's ideas and found fault with his conclusions. He even apologized for sharing it with the Webbs and considered his effort as payment for Wells's review of his play: "I see by the Academy that Webb has placed *Anticipations* among his books of the year. As it was I who shoved it on him, I consider that I have rolled your log in return for your noble recognitions of the profundity of *Plays for Puritans*."⁵⁵ Shaw even showed signs of jealousy over the book's widespread notoriety, but still aware of the need for reform within the society. He

⁵¹Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 95.

⁵²*Fabian News*, June 1902, 24.

⁵³E.R. Lankester, "The Present Judged by the Future," *Nature*, 13 March 1902, iii-v; quoted in Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 94.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁵Most accounts seem to suggest that the Webbs had read the book before Shaw, which would make it impossible for him to have "shoved" the work onto Sidney Webb. GBS to HGW, 12 December 1901 in Laurence, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters*, 245.

complained that, “the young men are reading Wells’s “Anticipations” instead of attending to us and unless we succeed in drawing fresh blood...we shall go on the shelf like the Cobden Club.”⁵⁶ Interestingly, Shaw was later Wells’s sponsor for induction into the Fabians and counseled him often on proper decorum within the group. He apparently believed in keeping one’s enemies close.

Wells received much public attention because of his ideas in *Anticipations*; as a result, Fabian leaders, particularly Beatrice and Sidney Webb, sought him out and began wooing him for the Fabians. Beatrice Webb, unlike Shaw, argued that instead of attacking Wells, the Society should consider using him to their benefit. After discovering *Anticipations* for herself, she insisted that Sidney, her husband, read it. She remarked in her diary that the book was “the most remarkable book of the year: a powerful imagination furnished with the data and methods of physical science working on social problems.”⁵⁷ Sidney Webb said that it was “his favourite book of the year.”⁵⁸ The Webbs did think that Wells lacked sufficient understanding of social organization, but despite this, adding Wells’s name to the membership roll of the Fabians could have significant advantages. Membership was flagging and those that were joining were of the same age as those who were already members. The Fabian Society was looking for some young blood to invigorate growth.⁵⁹

The Webbs began their recruit of Wells by cycling out to his home at Sandgate, Kent, under the pretenses of meeting him and conveying their admiration of the book. Wells appeared to be the young blood that Shaw had wanted and he made a good impression on the Webbs. Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary, “in the present stage of sociology, he is useful to gradgrinds like ourselves in supplying us with loose generalisations which we

⁵⁶GBS to T.H.S. Escot, undated, in Laurence, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters*, 254.

⁵⁷Sidney Webb, *Academy* 7 December 1901; quoted in Smith, *Desperately Mortal*, 94.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., 106.

can use as instruments of research.”⁶⁰ Over the next several months, the Webbs and the Wells conferred often, meeting for dinners and exchanging casual correspondence, especially between H.G. and Beatrice. The Webbs convinced Wells to accept their invitation to join the Fabians, and in February of 1903, after an endorsement by Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas, the Executive Committee confirmed him as a member.

Shaw was interested in Wells and anticipated what his ideas could provide for the society. In preparation for Wells’s upcoming address to the society concerning municipalities, Shaw encouraged his ideas. He wrote to Wells saying,

I think it a most desirable thing that you should let the Fabian Society have the benefit of your ideas on the subject, seeing that the F.S. is responsible to such a very large extent for the present great development of municipalities. Seeing also that the society is always open to new ideas, & especially energetic about the propaganda of any ‘better dreamer’ that comes along.⁶¹

In March of 1903, Wells gave his first lecture to the society. He was not a powerful speaker, and despite his earlier success in reading at the Royal Institution, his appearance before the Fabians was less than impressive. The subject, “The Question of Scientific Administrative Areas in Relation to Municipal Undertakings” was technical and when Wells read it in a monotone voice and spoke in the vague direction of a corner, many in attendance lost interest.⁶² Pease would later state that Wells’s public speaking was so awful that had it been anywhere close to his proficiency as a writer, things might have turned out differently in the controversy that was yet to come.⁶³ Wells too realized his shortcomings in the realm of oration and later commented on the event saying he spoke “haltingly on the verge

⁶⁰Ibid., 289.

⁶¹George Bernard Shaw (GBS) to H.G. Wells (HGW), 15 March 1903, Wells Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois.

⁶²Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 164.

⁶³Ibid.

of the inaudible, addressing my tie through a cascade moustache that was no sort of help at all, correcting myself as though I were a manuscript under treatment."⁶⁴ In the reading, Wells claimed that a fundamental belief for all socialists was that property was purely provisional and law-made, but he further defined his own views as part of those socialists "who regard the abolition of inheritance and the intelligent taxation of property for services to the community, as remedies for existing evils."⁶⁵

Early on, the Fabians wrestled with their opinions of Wells; however, those opinions were not as critical as other historians have implied. Beatrice had struggled at length whether Wells's brand of socialism was either brilliance or madness. In 1902 she wrote,

Wells is an interesting though somewhat unattractive personality except for his agreeable disposition and intellectual vivacity.... But he is totally ignorant of the manual worker, on the one hand, and of the big administrator and aristocrat on the other. ...he ignores the necessity for maintaining the standard of life of the manual working population; he does not appreciate the need for a wide experience of men and affairs in administration.... But he is extraordinary quick in his apprehensions, and took in all the points we gave him in our 48 hours' talk with him....⁶⁶

By 1904, however, Wells had managed to charm Beatrice and she had come to regard his peculiarities as tolerable.

While it was true that Wells lacked administrative experience, he did have firm beliefs about socialism, many of which he published as political manifestos, such as *Anticipations* and *A Modern Utopia*, as well as numerous papers and tracts that he wrote during his tenure with the Fabians. In one of the many biographies of Wells, author Vincent Brome attempted to describe Wells's style of socialism. He contended that Wells

⁶⁴Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 565.

⁶⁵*Fabian News*, April 1903, 13.

⁶⁶Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership*, 231.

"never quite reconciled his Socialism with a formal policy.... For him Socialism was much more a 'realization of a common and universal loyalty in mankind, the awakening of a collective consciousness of duty in humanity.'"⁶⁷

Wells argued mostly for the social wellness of the family, although he had little use for those at the lowest levels of humanity and used Malthusian philosophies to support his ideas. *Anticipations* supported suicide and euthanasia over prisons and mounting disease. In *Mankind in the Making*, he supported sterilization for the lowest orders until such a time that science could predict which births would result in drunkenness, criminality or insanity and deal with them accordingly. In regards to the family, Wells proposed that under socialism, the government and society must cease to consider women and children as property. In his 1907 book, *Socialism and the Family*, he argued, "not only must land and the means of production be liberated...but women and children, just as much as men and things, must cease to be owned."⁶⁸ In his perfect New Republic, "people [would] rear children for the State and the future; if they do that well... [they] deserve payment just as much as if they built a bridge."⁶⁹ If they failed, the State assumed the parental role, while the biological parents assumed the cost. Paying a mother to care for her children, Wells thought, liberated her from economic dependence upon a man. *Socialism and the Family* also defined the relationship between socialism, the socialist movement and the middle-classes. Socialism he defined as a large, "slowly elaborating conception of a sane and organized state and moral culture to replace our present chaotic way of living."⁷⁰ Wells argued that socialism was not a political or economic strategy, but rather a plan for a reconstruction of society. However, he said that, for the moment at least, socialist organizations, including the Fabians, were ill prepared for such a

⁶⁷Vincent Brome, *H.G. Wells, A Biography* (London, Longmans, Green and Company, 1951; reprint, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970), 82.

⁶⁸H.G. Wells, *Socialism and the Family* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1907), 56.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 5.

colossal task and thus preparation of the masses, via dissemination of information was the most important job. He firmly believed that “the time [was] ripe for a fresh and more vigorous insistence upon the materially creative aspect of the vision of socialism.”⁷¹ In other words, the Fabians should permeate via propaganda. Make socialists, he thought, and socialism would inevitably follow. Following an impressive showing by the Labour Party in the 1906, he was optimistic about such a program’s chance of success.

The general elections of 1906 had a profound impact on British society and socialist groups specifically. Late in 1905, Prime Minister A. J. Balfour resigned, and the general elections held in January swept the Liberal Party into power for the first time in over a decade. More important was the makeup of the new members. In the words of historian Walter Arnstein, the new members represented “in some ways the first truly middle-class Parliament in English History, made up to a large extent of lawyers, journalists, and teachers, all of whom worked for a living.”⁷² The Labour Party as well made a decent showing, with twenty-nine members elected. The general public, however, was unaware of the secret compact in 1903 between Henry Gladstone, chief Liberal whip, and Ramsay MacDonald, secretary of the Labour Representation Committee, who had agreed in a certain number of constituencies not to compete with each another and thereby risk a Conservative victory.⁷³ As far as most British people knew, the Labour Party had made an effective showing all on their own.

The result was resurgence in membership in socialist societies. From 1906 to 1910, membership in the Independent Labour Party more than doubled and total membership in the Social Democratic Federation, Social Democratic Party and the British Socialist Party increased by almost seventy-five percent

⁷¹Ibid., 21.

⁷²Walter L. Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today: 1830 to the Present* 8th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), 223.

⁷³Ibid., 224.

during the same years.⁷⁴ The Fabians, too, enjoyed an increase in membership. Edward Pease attributed much of the growth to the controversy created by Wells and the personalities involved. Beatrice Webb saw a larger picture, considering the society itself was the drawing card. Writing to her diary in 1907 she says, “The little boom in the Fabian Society continues, and Sidney and I, G.B.S., and H.G.W. sometimes ask ourselves, and each other, whether there is a bare possibility that it represents a larger wave than we think—are we, by our constructive thought, likely to attract considerable numbers of followers in the near future?”⁷⁵ When examining the membership increase across the whole of socialist groups, however, the numbers for the Fabians do not look quite as impressive as Pease and Webb had implied. While membership numbers were indeed up for the Fabians (from 700 in 1906 to 2462 in 1909), other societies were enjoying a membership swell as well. While the political infighting obviously increased exposure of the Fabians, the more obvious reason was the renewed interest in socialist societies in general.

Historian and Fabian Margaret Cole argued three factors concerning the results of the 1906 election and the impact it had on the Fabian Society. First, the renewed interest in socialism did indeed lead to an upsurge in membership for the Fabians, mostly because the Fabians had the fortunate circumstance of being the longest in existence as well as having a number of notable personalities to its claim. However, those who joined the Fabian society were not necessarily joining to become Fabians, but rather saw in the society “a means of bringing into being a Socialist society in Britain.”⁷⁶ As Cole observed, the newcomers were unlike the older generation. These second-blooming Fabians were much more concerned with the running of the society and, “not content to leave such matters entirely to the wisdom of the Executive.”⁷⁷ This group later became Wells’s

⁷⁴Mariz, “The Fabians and the ‘Episode of Mr. Wells,’” 97.

⁷⁵Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership*, 380.

⁷⁶Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism*, 116.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

chief support system. Secondly, the younger generation had much wider intellectual interests and experience than the older generation and was more inclined to argue about Socialistic philosophy and Fabian policy.⁷⁸ Third, Cole argued that the newest Fabians, like others, “felt the spiritual distress and discomfort which preceded the mass slaughter [World War I].”⁷⁹ Strikes, political infighting and occasionally physical disputes accompanied an overall feeling of disappointment with the lack of achievements of the new Liberal Government.⁸⁰ Into this environment, H.G. Wells delivered his critique of the Fabian Society.

Finding Fault

The manifesto that Wells read in February 1906, “Faults of the Fabian,” began what Edward Pease and many historians following him referred to as “The Episode of Mr. Wells.”⁸¹ The Fabians themselves, or perhaps more accurately Bernard Shaw, prompted Wells’s criticism of the Fabians. Shaw had requested Wells submit a report concerning the dealings of the Fabian Society. Shaw noted that the society was ripe for change and he was looking for something (or someone) to give the Fabians a much-needed shot in the arm. In 1905, he wrote to Pease, urging a serious stocktaking of where the Fabians stood.

The proper thing would be two reports, pro & con. If you and Webb were to make out the best case you could for the old policy & the old gang, and Wells, Guest and Chesterton were to do all they could to explode us, we should get something that would really give us an overhauling. Our methods are substantially what they were 15 years ago; and they and we must be getting rather stale...All I want is a stir up and stock-taking to make Fabianism interesting again.⁸²

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 163.

⁸² Laurence, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters*, 536.

Shaw received his stocktaking and more, as Wells took the commission as a personal directive to plan for the reconstruct of the society from the inside out. While Wells prepared his lecture, Pease encouraged progress, “the prospect is lively and I hope you will make us all sit up.”⁸³ However, he cautioned Wells about making public accusations saying, “it is not decent for a member to attack his Executive Coram Publico and no action can be taken, no vote or opposed decision, save at a members meeting.”⁸⁴ Concerned that Wells’s accusations might be misunderstood by the general public, the Executive closed the meeting to all but members and while he did not attack personalities—except perhaps Pease—he certainly was thorough when it came to finding fault with the society and its leadership. Faultfinding within the society had never been condemned, but the situation with Wells was different. He believed the fault lied with the administrative body of the Fabians, not the society as a whole. Given that the Executive held nearly absolute power both de facto and de jure, and that the real power in the Executive was held by only a few—especially, Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb—attacks on individuals were inevitable. The “personal attacks,” however, were based on policy disagreements, rather than on personality clashes, although the outsize personalities involved (even self-admitted gradgrinds) tended to overshadow any matters of principle. Additionally, in the past, those who spoke out were typically on the Executive Committee, but Wells was not. Because of the uncharted waters, Wells feared censorship and went to great measures prior to his lecture to make sure his freedom of speech within the Fabian Society was not restricted. Prior to the delivery of his paper on Fabian faults, he offered to pay for printing it in its entirety in the *Fabian News* so all members would have access to it. Pease wrote back stating that he was sure the Executive would agree to the offer and added, “I have no doubt the Exec. will agree to print your paper

⁸³Edward R. Pease (ERP) to HGW on Fabian Letterhead, Nov 1905. Wells Collection.

⁸⁴Ibid. “Coram Publico” or “in the presence of the Public.”

in full in *F. News*, especially as you offer to pay for it. My principle is never to refuse offers of money.”⁸⁵ The society printed the report as Wells had requested but not in the newsletter. Instead, they distributed it privately with a preface urging confidentiality. The note read:

The criticisms made by Mr. Wells while perfectly legitimate in the intimacy of our society and its friends, are not of the sort that it is desirable to publish indiscriminately...his comments are, it is considered, part of a private discussion of our policy and plans, conceived in a vein of frankness that the outsider might easily misunderstand.⁸⁶

On February 9, 1906, Wells delivered his lecture to a crowd of almost 250 Fabian members. He began his assessment by stating that the values and methodologies of socialism that existed at the inception of the society had changed from twenty years ago, but the society had not. He described the present society as “an extraordinarily inadequate and feeble organization.”⁸⁷ He then launched a satirical but accurate assessment of the functions he thought the Society should embody and to what extent, in his opinion, they had completely failed to fulfill those functions. Wells first confronted the large amount of intellectual work needed to redeem society, primarily in the dissemination of propaganda. While Wells grudgingly conceded that the society had devoted much effort in this area, he also chided that too many of their plums of wisdom had been given away to the London School of Economics (an institution created by Sidney Webb several years prior), which in Wells’s opinion should have been saved for propaganda. Secondly, he argued that the society should function as “a sort of official or

⁸⁵Ibid. Apparently even socialists must earn a living.

⁸⁶Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism*, 119.

⁸⁷H.G. Wells, “Faults of the Fabian” (paper delivered at a Fabian members-only meeting, Essex Hall, Essex St., Strand, 9 February 1906), Wells Collection, 2. The original typed copy as well as the holograph and revisions are located at the archive. A copy was mailed to members only and not printed in the *Fabian News*.

representative mouthpiece for socialistic theory in England.”⁸⁸ He charged them, however, with abusing the privilege, especially concerning their reluctance to speak out on the Boer War and educational reform, the very thing he and Graham Wallas had complained about two years prior. Wells argued that in a moment of weakness, or perhaps boredom, the society had moved from Fabian socialism to Fabian politics.

His third point addressed the society’s misdirected propaganda. Wells urged dissemination of information to the middle-class and the “more educated and intelligent sections of [the] population.”⁸⁹ He pointed out that other organizations, such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party, were already in place to meet the needs of the working-class, and that centering the propaganda effort on the educated middle-class would not only increase the Fabians’ membership but also increase the spent coffers. After covering these points, he moved on to the main thrust of the piece, the faults, which he labeled and sharply discussed. “Our society is small; and in relation to its great mission small minded; it is poor; it is collectively, as a society, inactive; it is suspicious of help, and exclusive.”⁹⁰ He charged them with “playing at politico-sociological research,” rather than actually getting things done.⁹¹ Wells also pointed out that the society was too exclusive in its membership. In order to gain admission to the Fabians, a recruit “must be proposed and seconded by two personal acquaintances, who can answer for his or her deportment.”⁹² Wells likened admittance to the Fabians as equal to the “fuss and trouble one takes to be made a member of a London social club.”⁹³ He boiled everything down to the number one job—“make socialists and you will achieve socialism; there

⁸⁸Wells, “Faults of the Fabian,” 3.

⁸⁹Ibid., 5.

⁹⁰Ibid., 16.

⁹¹Ibid., 10.

⁹²Ibid., 12.

⁹³Ibid.

is no other way.”⁹⁴ Additionally, Wells begged for an indulgence of control—specifically for the propaganda machine, not the society as a whole, which at the time he was not aiming for. He believed he was the right man for the job, and with good reason—it was the reason the Fabians had recruited Wells in the first place.

While Wells’s analysis of the Fabians was severe, the Fabians were initially receptive to the changes he suggested. Wells’s lecture ended with a discussion as to how to address his proposals. At the close of the deliberation, the society set to work forming a committee “to increase the scope, influence, income, and activity of the Society.”⁹⁵ The original plan was to appoint a large committee, which would include the entire Executive as well as an equal amount of unofficial members. Wells disapproved of this composition and the Executive, heeding his wishes, instead proposed creation of a committee that included only members that Wells himself nominated.⁹⁶ Bernard Shaw, in a letter to Wells, suggested that the new group should consist of only those outside of the Executive, since part of the committee’s goal was to assess the extent to which the Executive had fulfilled its mission and having members indict themselves would prove fruitless.⁹⁷ Shaw also suggested that the committee interview himself, Webb, and Bland separately to obtain their views, goals and sentiments individually. Wells ignored Shaw’s suggestions and the final composition of the special committee totaled ten with only three from the Executive—Charlotte Shaw (wife of Bernard), Reverend S.D. Headlam and G.R.S. Taylor. The balance of the committee included reform-minded individuals, with Haden Guest, Mrs. Pember Reeves and Sydney Olivier being major supporters of Wells.

Even as the Special Committee met on matters of change, the Fabian Executive did not delay in implementing some of the

⁹⁴Ibid., 18.

⁹⁵*Fabian News*, March 1906, 9.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷GBS to HGW 14 February 1906, Wells Collection.

more agreeable suggestions. By March, the Executive decided in favor of the immediate adoption of Wells’s proposal of a new class of Associates. The associates were required to pay an annual subscription of at least 10 shillings and enjoyed all the rights and privileges of full membership, with the exception of voting or taking part in matters of societal affairs.⁹⁸

The committee met over six times in the six weeks following its inauguration and once in a joint session with the Executive Committee. Together they began to work out suggestions concerning membership procedure, propaganda and changes to the society’s Basis. Unfortunately, the minutes of the meetings and records of the Wells committee have been lost, but as Pease observed, “The composition of the Committee indicates the probable truth of the rumours that the meetings were anything but dull.”⁹⁹

The Special Committee did not present the final report to the Executive until October of 1906, but even as early as March they shared proposed changes with the Executive. The committee suggested new books, short readable tracts, and the format of the Fabian publications updated and printed with more frequency. Strategies to raise revenue included a fixed minimum subscription and a list of subscriptions, published annually. Plans to increase the size of the staff and the offices also appeared.

In regards to the administration of the Fabians, the special committee suggested that a council of twenty-five replace the existing Executive Committee with a core governance body or triumvirate to lead them.¹⁰⁰ In turn, the committee would appoint three sub-committees for the purpose of publishing, propaganda and general purposes. The committee also recommended that the society work collectively with other socialist organizations to raise funds for the support and running of candidates for Parliament.

⁹⁸*Fabian News*, April 1906, 14.

⁹⁹Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 167.

¹⁰⁰*Fabian News*, January 1906, 9.

The final item introduced by the committee served later as a true point of debate, the changing of the society's Basis. Wells thought the original Basis was overly technical and did not include provisions for women or children. The proposed Basis, to which society members would be required to make an oath, declared that the Society's goal was to aid in the reconstructing of the social organization by promoting transfer of land and capital to the State, enforcing equal citizenship of men and women, and substituting public for private authority in the education and support of the young.¹⁰¹ Bernard Shaw thought the new version was "obviously much better than the existing [one]."¹⁰² However, he explained to Wells that the rest of the Executive would be harder to convince and must have their egos stroked rather than battered in order to make any progress. In March 1906 he wrote,

Your one chance is to shew a perfect appreciation of and sympathy with the exigencies which imposed on us the obvious blemishes in the basis, and to appeal for an attempt to get a more attractive one through by a concentration of our prestige & authority sufficient to silence the guerilla leaders in the society...instead of which, you amuse yourself by treating us to several pages of cheek to the effect that the imperfections of the basis are the result of our own folly and literary clumsiness...you must study people's corns when you go clog dancing.¹⁰³

In other words, Wells needed to use personal persuasion to achieve change via the Executive instead of bullying or shaming them into it. In addition, Shaw wrote Webb, urging the Executive to accept the new basis, if for nothing else than to satiate the members' desire for "want of novelty."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 176.

¹⁰² GBS to HGW, 24 March 1906. Wells Collection.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ GBS to Sidney Webb (SW), 29 September 1906. Laurence, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters*, 656.

After a sufficient dressing down by Shaw, Wells set off for America in late March of 1906. The tour fell at an inopportune time, considering the hornet's nest he had just stirred. During his absence, much of the excitement and drama surrounding his criticisms subsided and upon his return in mid summer, many of those who had pledged their unfailing support to him had lost their zeal. Despite their loss of enthusiasm, Wells continued to push for reform.

In late fall of 1906, Wells, Shaw, and Webb corresponded with one another concerning the special committee proposals. The letters show that Shaw pledged support for Wells's ideas, going so far as to say that he intended to step down and let Wells assume the role of leader. However, when Shaw wrote to Webb, he suggested that the Executive continue to appear eager for change and reconstruction, waiting until the Special Committee had delivered its report. Afterward, the Executive could deliver its own "better report on the Society, its history, position, prospects & policy,"¹⁰⁵ effectively keeping the Executive in control.

Sidney Webb, on the other hand, was far less concerned with mocking Wells than simply rebuffing his proposals directly. Writing to Wells on September 3, 1906, Sidney Webb implied that many of his proposals were ill conceived and premature, informing him that new offices and staff required new money and brilliant tracts required brilliant authors. Further, he noted that the current political parties were already well established and most, especially the Independent Labour Party, would not be willing to be a part of yet another joint committee. In regards to the triumvirate, Webb argued that most members of the society could ill afford to come forward and give up their time and talent to manage the business of the society. Even more doubtful, according to Webb, was that the society would trust someone who could. He expressed to Wells that in their present form, the society was unlikely to accept the proposals of the Special Committee, but he offered his services to Wells for

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

rewriting the proposals “in a form in which we could get them through, [rather] than one in which we should inevitably find ourselves on opposite sides.”¹⁰⁶

Shaw, however, preferred to placate Wells, and the two corresponded often during the months between his delivery of the “Faults of the Fabian” and the final proposal of the Special Committee. On September 11, he urged Wells that if he first became a member of the Executive, it would provide him with a better understanding of the inner workings of the administration. Eventually he could take command as leader while Shaw and Webb faded into the background. Wells had not yet been elected to the Executive, but apparently, that was a mere technicality. Shaw continued that while some claimed that the society “has done its work. It hasn’t; but *I* have done *my* turn...Webb has done his turn. The old gang has done its turn.”¹⁰⁷ He was tired of the Fabians as well as the Executive Committee. On the other hand, Shaw said that Pease had put himself in such a position financially that he could not afford to leave the society, but most of the rest of the Executive was ready to abdicate and “let [Wells] walk over.”¹⁰⁸

Shaw explained to Wells that steering that “crazy little craft” of the Fabians was harder than it appeared.¹⁰⁹ He recommended Wells sit on the Executive for a year or two before committing himself to take control. He also cautioned Wells on the perils of command, warning him that, the energy that wastes itself on senseless quarreling would reform the world three times over if it could be concentrated and brought to bear on Socialism... [and]...if you let your mind turn from your political object to criticism of the conduct and personality of the men round you, you are lost. Instantly you find them insufferable; they find you

¹⁰⁶SW to HGW, 3 September 1906, Wells collection.

¹⁰⁷GBS to HGW, 14 September 1906, Wells collection (italics in the original).

¹⁰⁸Pease had been secretary for the Fabians in 1886 and again from 1890-1913, he remained the honorary secretary until his death in 1955.

¹⁰⁹GBS to HGW, 14 September 1906, Wells Collection.

the same; and the problem of how to get rid of one another supersedes Socialism.¹¹⁰

He then turned his attention to Wells’s fault-finding paper, and suggested he concentrate more on socialism and reform and less on his “irresistible impulse to expose the futility of the lot of us.”¹¹¹ Shaw did not think Wells would fare any better than he and the others had, but he was more than willing to let him try.

Circumventing Wells, Shaw and Webb discussed the proposed changes and how the Executive could present a new report that was superior to that of the Special Committee. They correctly anticipated the split that resulted between the older generation of Fabians and the newer reform-minded socialists. On September 29th, Shaw wrote to Webb, “I feel very strongly that when Wells’s report is given to the Society, it must be followed, not by a vindication or a defence [sic] or an explanation or apology or counter-attack, but simply by a better report on the Society, its history, position, prospects & policy, than Wells’.”¹¹² Shaw felt confident that the members would side with the Executive because the “rank & file do not want to have to desert their old government & accept a Boulanger¹¹³: what will please them is to feel what a splendid lot of fellows their leaders are & what a score it is to have such a swell as Wells taking the juvenile lead.”¹¹⁴

Following delivery of “Faults of the Fabian,” Wells had requested a delay in the election of the Executive until the report of the Special Committee was complete. Wells had hoped that

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Laurence, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters*, 657.

¹¹³Shaw was fond of using names from books, plays and other notable personalities to make a point. In this case, he was referring to George Earnest Jean Marie Boulanger, a French General in the 1880s whose attempts at military reform made him popular with the soldiers, but his outspoken personality and insubordination made him a challenge to the government. Interestingly he was also known to be a poor public speaker.

¹¹⁴Laurence, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters*, 656. The P.S. to the Letter tells Webb not to destroy the letter as it may be useful to circulate to other members of the Executive, Shaw may have held back in his opinion of Wells because of this.

when members read the report of the Special Committee, they would see the value of Fabian reform and a new, younger, more committed society could take shape. He fully realized that any changes he proposed could only occur at the Annual Meeting and that only occurred at the time of Executive election. However, after months of delay, the Executive decided to postpone a vote until the next scheduled election in March. Concerned that the present Executive would reject the proposals of the Special Committee, Wells began to look for more reform-minded candidates to replace the existing Executive. If his suggestion of an enlarged Executive of twenty-five passed, the odds were in Wells's favor that he could have a majority and possibly move past the oligarchy of the "old gang."

In October, Wells wrote to fellow Fabian, Ralph Mudie-Smith, asking if he would object to a nomination for the Executive as "there will be an unique opportunity of bringing in fresh blood amidst the disturbances of the forthcoming Special Committees report...I want new men, younger men,—then we'll get things done."¹¹⁵ In several letters between Wells and Guest, they considered candidates that supported reform as well as had the possibility of succeeding in an election. In a letter to Victor Fisher,¹¹⁶ Wells asked if he was in such a position to "work in the future for the Fabians if a revolution [could] be brought off."¹¹⁷ The events of December 7, 1906, explain the revolution Wells had intended. The *Fabian News* reported on the entire debate; however, one must take into account that George Standring, long-time Fabian and member of the Executive Committee, compiled the report. The wording consistently defends Shaw, Webb and others of the Executive, while depicting Wells as a spoiled child bent on having his own way. Despite the obvious prejudice, much can be learned from the article.

¹¹⁵Smith, *Correspondence*, 115.

¹¹⁶Fisher was a politician and newspaper editor. Like Wells, he joined the Fabians as part of the second generation.

¹¹⁷Smith, *Correspondence*, 124.

The meeting opened with a motion by Shaw that the Executive Committee reject the proposal of the alteration of the Basis, "because of the prolonged discussion and waste of time that would be caused."¹¹⁸ Wells followed with another motion for an amendment to the Resolution regarding an increase in members of the Executive Committee. He moved that the "Executive Committee [approved] the spirit and purport of the Report of the Committee of Enquire and [desired] the outgoing Executive Committee to make the earliest possible arrangements for the election of a new Executive to give effect to that report."¹¹⁹ In essence, Wells called for the immediate resignation of the Executive and new elections to fill the vacancies. In a seventy-five minute follow up to his motion for the amendment, Wells explained the basics of the Special Committee Report.

According to *Fabian News*, Wells's speech described the proposals of the Special Committee, which included an internal reconstruction of the Society with a view on increasing the energy and efficiency of the organization with "a fuller and better statement of Socialism in the Basis" and a "defining of the Society to the political world."¹²⁰ He held that an Executive with only fifteen members was incapable of the task at hand and should be increased by ten along with the sub-committees recommended. He then condemned the submitted response from the Executive as "an irritating, irresponsible and mischievous document, not devoid of misrepresentation...a stupendous piece of bluff."¹²¹

Following Wells's address, many members, both for the Special Committee's proposals and against, made their cases. Sidney Webb argued the Special Committee was not a representative body considering the fact that Wells himself had selected its members and its proposals therefore not representative of the society as a whole.¹²² He then argued that it

¹¹⁸*Fabian News*, January 1907, 9.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

¹²⁰*Ibid.*

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 10.

¹²²*Ibid.*

was the duty of the Executive to advise the members as to the value and necessity of the changes suggested by the Special Committee and that in the past, the Society had valued and accepted the leadership of the Executive. His closing words threatened his resignation if the society passed the report of the Special Committee. Wells, too, threatened resignation if the report of the Special Committee failed, which threatened a split within the society that none present were prepared to allow.¹²³

Due to the length of the debate, the members moved to continue the debate at a later date and adjourned for the evening. The debates ensued and continued until mid March, but the correspondence during those weeks show the level of panic that escalated within the Executive as well as Shaw's attempts at damage control. Shaw sent a post to members on December 11 urging their presence at the next meeting, "I find that many members have not noticed that the amendment by Mr. H.G. Wells, on which a division will be taken, is drawn in such a manner that, if carried, it will act as an instruction to me and my colleagues on the Executive Committee...to resign AND NOT OFFER OURSELVES FOR RE-ELECTION."¹²⁴ In a letter to Hubert Bland, written the same day, Shaw claimed that Wells came to him with his hat and an apology in hand, which Shaw refused, telling him he had put himself into the corner he now occupied. Shaw instructed Bland to keep silent at the next meeting so he could address the matter, giving Wells the chance to "unconditionally surrender" and withdraw his amendment. He felt confident he could "smash" Wells on every point of detail and believed he would emerge with a "smashing victory." His only concern was that due to his overwhelming fatigue from events of late, he might appear to be "in bad form."¹²⁵

Pease, Fabian secretary and a member of the Executive, claimed that behind closed doors many of the "Old Gang" questioned whether to let the "society...be controlled by those

¹²³*Fabian News*, January 1907, 10-13.

¹²⁴Laurence, *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters*, 665. Emphasis in the original.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 666.

who had made it or...[let it] be handed over to Mr. Wells."¹²⁶ Mrs. Pease, however, did not agree with her husband that these were the only two options. In a letter from to Jane Wells, she wrote, "The more I think of Mr. Wells Fabian reforms the more do I welcome them and if only everyone will be sensible and broad minded I foresee a new era for Fabianism."¹²⁷

In the next week's debate, Wells withdrew his resignation, which opened a window for Shaw who then replied, "That is a great relief to my mind. I can now pitch in to Mr. Wells without fear of consequences."¹²⁸ Wells was at a disadvantage; he was a gifted essayist but no match when going head to head with the likes of Bernard Shaw. Shaw defeated Wells easily in the open debate and by the end of the evening Wells not only withdrew his threat of resignation, but the proposed amendment as well.

Before the resumption of debate in January, Wells sent an angry letter to Pease, intending him to publish it in the *Fabian News*. Shaw urged him to recall the letter, but Wells refused.¹²⁹ If he was going to be publicly humiliated, he wanted fire back in a way comfortable to him, in print. He accused the *Fabian News* of slanting their report and leaving out statements he had made concerning the withdrawal of his resignation and the proposal. According to Wells, "the wording of the concluding paragraph seems contrived to present me as overwhelmed and penitent in 'unconditional surrender' to Mr. Shaw. It is an entire misrepresentation of the spirit of the situation. It is grossly unfair not to report what I had to say in withdrawing the amendment. I withdrew it solely in order to save the Society from the split threatened by the unreasonable interpretation thrust upon my amendment by Mr. Shaw [that the Executive should resign and not run for re-election]."¹³⁰ Wells concluded by stating that he was going to take up a "secondary position for a time in the

¹²⁶Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 173.

¹²⁷Mrs. Edward Pease to Catherine Wells, Spring 1906. Wells Collection

¹²⁸*Fabian News*, January 1907.

¹²⁹GBS to HGW 16 January 1907, Wells Collection.

¹³⁰*Fabian News*, February, 1907.

campaign for an effectual reform of the Society's constitution."¹³¹ The letter was followed by a rebuttal from Pease, editor for the *Fabian News*. The wording clearly demonstrates Pease's loyalties:

the above letter will help to give the Society some idea of the extreme difficulty the Executive Committee finds in making the most of Mr. Wells's powers as a popular writer on the side of Socialism, and at the same time defending itself against his apparently incurable delusion that the ordinary procedure at public meetings is chicanery, and that the Executive Committee is a conspiracy of rogues to thwart and annoy him.

Shaw, too, responded to Wells's letter, stating that he stood by the report of his speech in the *Fabian News*. While personalities certainly had a hand in the language used, it was still political rather than personal. However, not all those involved agreed. Internal gossip led many astray by convincing them that Wells was part of a coup, causing them to abandon their support. Shaw later accused Wells of a quest to become the "sole Fabian emperor."¹³² Many of the derogatory remarks made by both sides were during periods of inflammation, and most of the personalities involved were best described as megalomaniacal. Shaw had a rather high self-opinion: "with the exception of myself, none of us can be described as perfect; and even with me Wells could not work."¹³³

On January 18, 1907, the debates ended with the adoption of the Executive's Resolution. They agreed to increase the number of Executive Committee members, but reduced it from Wells's suggested twenty-five to twenty-one. They opposed the idea of a triumvirate, but approved the appointing of sub-committees for propaganda, publishing and general purposes. Membership requirements were reduced to a signing of the Society's basis and a contribution to the general fund required.

¹³¹Ibid., 1907.

¹³²Hyde, "The Socialism of H.G. Wells," 218.

¹³³Ibid.

Finally, the only change in the Basis would be to add a clause addressing the equal citizenship of women.

The Executive had spoken, but the revisions, especially concerning the Basis, were not a dead letter. At the February meeting, members had persuaded the Executive to appoint a committee to revise the basis. The newly formed committee consisted of Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, H. G. Wells, and Sidney Ball. The debate over revisions lasted for over a year and ultimately nothing was accomplished.

Wells was annoyed. He knew the Executive would not accept all his ideas completely, but they had asked for his input and then rejected all but a few of his suggestions. With the exception of an increase in the Executive (four less than he had hoped for) and some alteration in membership requirements, most of his ideas were abandoned. Turning from problems of conflict, he decided to move forward with a campaign for election of candidates for reform.

Wells and Guest began actively promoting candidates to run for the Executive. Wells, Guest and others attempted to create a reform ticket, which they hoped would bring the reformers into power on the Executive. When the ballots went out to members in March of 1907, they included a manifesto from the reform party. They called for a "reorganization and revitalization of the Fabian Society," promising, if elected, "a revival in which the Society and its members should take a leading part." They also stressed that changes in the Society's constitution would result, leading to a more democratized society, "organized on a federal basis with an annual general conference of delegates representing them."¹³⁴ Despite their best effort, members voted only a portion of the reformers into office, nine in all. Members gave Wells the fourth highest number of votes after Shaw, Webb and Pease. It was the highest turnout for voting in the history of the society, with nearly eighty percent of the 1220 members voting. With 954 members casting 16, 926 votes, Sidney Webb

¹³⁴Manifesto of the Fabian Reform Association, Undated but can be assumed as late 1907-early 1908. Wells Collection.

earned the top slot with 819 votes, Edward Pease followed with 809, Shaw with 781 and then Wells with 717.¹³⁵

Much to Wells's chagrin, after the elections the society turned itself toward more to political agendas, offering public support to the Labour Party. In May, Wells circulated an open letter among several members, asking for signatures of those willing to resign if the society could not agree that it should not force collective political action upon its members.¹³⁶

We the undersigned, consider that the chief value of the Fabian Society lies in its development of socialist theory and social method, and in its work of propaganda and education in the country...[and that the society] should abandon rather than increase its present limited intervention in the direction of the Labour Party, and that it should abstain from any share whatever in the development of any fresh political socialist organization.¹³⁷

Sidney Webb took issue with Wells on this point: "Now it [the Fabian Society] has been since 1888 at any rate, a very definitely political society, with essentially *political* aims. Pressing *political* proposals, and exercising a good deal of *political* influence. Personally I am not in it for anything else."¹³⁸

Shaw chastised Wells for sending out the petition, "forgetting his committee manners" as well as his lack of public etiquette.¹³⁹ Shaw again assumed the role of father and instructor, pointing out that Wells did not observe proper form for a public meeting, interjecting comments out of turn and using inappropriate language, which in Shaw's opinion were thankfully unheard due to Wells's poor oratory skill. However, Shaw offered to Wells that he would "make a decent public man of [him] yet, and an effective public speaker, if I have to break

¹³⁵*Fabian News*, April 1907, 33.

¹³⁶HGW to Fabian Society, May 1907. Petition attached. Wells Collection.

¹³⁷Petition from members of the Fabian Society. May 1907. The copy in the Wells Collection is an attachment sent to G. M. Trevelyan.

¹³⁸SW to HGW, June 1907, Wells Collection.

¹³⁹GBS to HGW, 22 March 1908, Wells Collection.

your heart in the process. [T]hank Heaven [I] am an ORATOR, and not a mulish draper's assistant."¹⁴⁰

In spite of winning his seat on the Executive, Wells lost his enthusiasm. He attended less than half of the Executive Committee meetings over the next year and although he was appointed to two sub-committees, he rarely attended their meetings and resigned from both in October. He tendered his formal resignation from the society in September of 1908, claiming he still was in disagreement with the Basis as well as a continued discontent of the general form of the society's activities. He also explained that he had considered mounting another campaign for revising the Basis, but when calculating "the forces against such a campaign, the inevitable opposition and irritation that must ensue and the probable net results of what would certainly be an irksome and distressful conflict, I am forced to conclude that the effort is, for me at least, not worth making."¹⁴¹ He added, "the period of opportunity for propaganda to the British middle classes on Fabian lines is at an end. That opportunity came and found us divided in theory and undecided in action. The petty growth that is a mere mockery of the things we might have done."¹⁴² The Executive agreed to publish the letter in the *Fabian News*, but according to Pease, they worried it would "mislead the non-Fabian public in a way they do not suppose you to intend."¹⁴³ Despite Pease's request, Wells's letter of resignation appeared in full in the September 1906 edition of the *Fabian News*. With that the 'Episode of Mr. Wells' was finished.

Reminiscing: Wells and the Fabians

In the decades that followed, Wells and the other Fabians looked back on their years together. Pease wrote *The History of the Fabian Society* in 1918, Shaw wrote his version in *Pen Portraits*

¹⁴⁰Ibid. The last words were especially cruel, as Wells had been a drapers assistant before his literary success.

¹⁴¹HGW to ERP, 16 September 1908, Wells Collection

¹⁴²Ibid.

¹⁴³ERP to HGW, 26 September 1908, Wells Collection.

and *Reviews*, in 1932 and Wells responded in 1934 with *Experiment in Autobiography*. Beatrice Webb too had a story to tell in 1948 with *Our Partnership*. Bernard Shaw went so far as to commission a stained glass window depicting Webb, Pease and himself re-molding the world with Wells thumbing his nose at the Fabian elders kneeling in supplication to an altar of Fabian works and governmental theory.

Pease's *History of the Fabian Society* depicted Shaw as the hero and Wells as the goat. His obvious allegiance to Shaw is evident. He accused Wells of being "a masterful person, very fond of his own way, very uncertain what that way was, and quite unaware whither it necessarily led. In any position except that of leader Mr. Wells was invaluable, as long as he kept it!"¹⁴⁴ Not to let Pease or Shaw have the satisfaction of the last word, but careful to avoid an invitation to debate, Wells wrote almost casually of the imbroglio in his autobiography; he saved his vitriol for his novels. Sidney and Beatrice Webb found themselves thinly veiled as characters, Oscar and Altiora Bailey in *The New Machiavelli* and Amber Reeves (Wells's sometimes lover) disguised only by a name change. The novel dealt with social questions, particularly that of sex, with the character of Remington (Wells) destroyed by a scandal involving his lover, a scandal manufactured by the Bailey's (Webbs.) Beatrice Webb read the novel, considering Wells's caricatures, "really very clever in a malicious way."¹⁴⁵ She also thought the book laid "bare the tragedy of H.G.'s life—his aptitude for 'fine thinking' and even 'good feeling' and yet his total incapacity for decent conduct."¹⁴⁶ Despite the venomous prose, the Webbs still considered Wells a friend.

After Wells left the Fabians, he continued to have warm personal relationships with those he had formerly regarded as enemies. For many years, the Shaws and the Webbs were regular dinner guests of the Wells and often stayed for the weekend at

¹⁴⁴Pease, 173.

¹⁴⁵Beatrice Webb's Diary 5 November 1910; quoted in MacKenzie, 270.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

the Wells's home at Sandgate. He frequently corresponded with the Webbs, offering advice on political issues as well as societal concerns.¹⁴⁷ In addition, Wells's wife Catherine¹⁴⁸ continued to be a member of the Fabians, and sat on the Executive Committee for an additional two years. The influence he had on the society after his resignation, through his wife as well as his correspondence with Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb could benefit from further research.

Wells's published memoirs of his time with the Fabians are remarkably brief, less than three pages in fact. He admitted that his behavior was a case of "bad judgment, gusty impulse and real inexcusable vanity," but essentially that his "motives were misunderstood" and he lacked in his effort to make them understandable.¹⁴⁹ He confessed antagonizing both Bernard Shaw and Beatrice Webb, but contended that fundamentally he was right. Wells, upon reflection, realized his hope for the Fabians was public action and their hope for themselves was public awareness. He puts the affair into perspective, "A vast revolution was going on swiftly and irresistibly all about us, but with perfect sincerity this Fabian group posed as a valiant little minority projecting a revolution reduced to its minimum terms. It was to permeate the existing order rather than change it. There was no real hope in their revolutionary project. It was a protest rather than a plan."¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

The Fabians had looked for someone to "make Fabianism interesting again"¹⁵¹ and H.G. Wells served them well in this

¹⁴⁷In a letter dated 22 February 1909, he told Beatrice Webb that a recent reprinting of a old essay would be "as aimless & silly a proceeding as it is possible to imagine. HGW to Beatrice Webb (BW) 22 February 1909. Other letters to Beatrice Webb are similar in style. Wells Collection.

¹⁴⁸Wells referred to her as Jane, although most everyone else called her Catherine.

¹⁴⁹Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 564.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 198.

¹⁵¹GBS to HGW, Wells Collection.

regard. In the two years following his delivery of “Faults of the Fabian,” the society had an upsurge in membership. Between March of 1906 and March of 1907, 455 persons sought membership, an increase of 288 over the previous year. The next year the number was 817 and the next, 665. In 1904, the society had only 730 members. By 1909, the total was 2462. The financial state of the society benefited as well, during the years of Wells’s membership. Income from subscriptions rose from £473 in 1904 to £1608 in 1908—according to Pease a high-water mark for contributions to ordinary funds.¹⁵²

Wells had hoped to move socialism from a drawing-room catch phrase to a well-realized social movement—“make socialists and you will achieve socialism; there is no other way.”¹⁵³ He had hoped the Fabians would provide a forum for his ideas and experiments. The society needed stronger organization and a fully engaged program of propaganda if Wells was to fulfill his vision and while membership bloomed during his association with the Fabians, Wells felt the increase paled in comparison to the thousands he believed they could recruit.

Considering that both Wells and the Fabians sought several of the same things—increased membership, financial stability and public education—what kept them from working in harmony? It is clear that Shaw, mouthpiece for the “Old Gang,” had set Wells up. He learned from previous dealings with Wells that he was easily manipulated, and could readily be drawn into a conflict. Shaw orchestrated much of the debate. He asked Wells to contribute a report to make Fabianism interesting again, he encouraged his drafts of the special committee proposals and even enticed Wells with the promise of his (and the rest of the Executive) stepping down from controls and Wells taking over. Previous scholarship has agreed that Wells was the odd cog that did not fit the Fabian wheel and most argue that Wells was a spoiled child, bent on having his own way, even if he unsure of

¹⁵²Pease, 186.

¹⁵³Wells, “Faults of the Fabian,” 18.

what that was. While it is true that Wells did feel better when steering the ship, he was willing to take advice, as he had from Graham Wallace, and indeed even Bernard Shaw. Given that all of the main actors had outside personalities it is not surprising that scholars have focused on personality conflicts in the episode of Mr. Wells, but the underlying conflict was one of mismatched objectives.

Wells was firmly established in the literary arena and as a widely published author already had not only the medium but also an audience for his ideas. Therefore, as some have suggested, Wells was not ego-driven to join the Fabian movement, although with some prodding he was enticed to join with the idea of having a society that was not only willing but eager to put his ideas into practice. The Fabians, particularly the Executive Committee, however, were not so much interested in making socialists as they were in making Fabians. Encouraged by the swell of numbers, they wanted to hold on to the society as they knew it. The triumph of socialism would mean Fabian obsolescence. Wells had hoped for a symbiotic relationship where he could promote socialism, but instead, found himself in a group wishing primarily to promote itself.

Appendix

The Basis of the Fabian Society until 1919

The Fabian Society consists of Socialists.

It therefore aims at the reorganization of Society by the emancipation of Land and Industrial Capital from individual and class ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for the general benefit. In this way only can the natural and acquired advantages of the country be equitably shared by the whole people.

The Society accordingly works for the extinction of private property in Land and of the consequent individual appropriation, in the form of Rent, of the price paid for

permission to use the earth, as well as for the advantages of superior soils and sites.

The Society, further, works for the transfer to the community of the administration of such industrial Capital as can conveniently be managed socially. For, owing to the monopoly of the means of production in the past, industrial inventions and the transformation of surplus income into Capital have mainly enriched the proprietary class, the worker being now dependent on that class for leave to earn a living.

If these measures be carried out, without compensation (though not without such relief to expropriated individuals as may seem fit to the community), Rent and Interest will be added to the reward of labour, the idle class now living on the labour of others will necessarily disappear, and practical equality of opportunity will be maintained by the spontaneous action of economic forces with much less interference with personal liberty than the present system entails.

For the attainment of these ends the Fabian Society looks to the spread of Socialist opinions, and the social and political changes consequent thereon, *including the establishment of equal citizenship for men and women*.¹⁵⁴ It seeks to achieve these ends by the general dissemination of knowledge as to the relation between the individual and Society in its economic, ethical, and political aspects.

¹⁵⁴Words in italics were added in 1907. Pease, 284.