

ROBERT DOUGLAS-FAIRHURST

## Visionary of Bromley

**The Young H G Wells: Changing the World**

By Claire Tomalin

(Viking 256pp £20)

At the start of H G Wells's 1909 novel *Tono-Bungay*, the narrator explains that most people continue through life in a neat line from beginning to end. However, there is 'another kind of life', something more like 'a miscellaneous tasting' of its possibilities. Wells might have been writing about himself, because few writers have been so full of contradictions: a socialist who clung on to his money until it was prised away by the taxman; a tolerant thinker who admitted to 'a strain of Teuton in my composition' when he found himself on 'a mainly Yiddish boat' during wartime; and an atheist haunted throughout his life by the rhetoric of hellfire and damnation that his mother had spouted. Meanwhile, books and articles poured out of him in an unstoppable flood, including political theory, history, popular science and a series of stories that combined mind-bending ideas with wonderfully matter-of-fact prose. It was an output that would have been impressive coming from a whole team of writers, let alone one man.

For this reason, it makes sense for a biographer to focus on a single part of his career. George Orwell wrote after Wells's death in 1946 that 'We value H G Wells for *Tono-Bungay*, *Mr Polly*, *The Time Machine*, etc. If he had stopped writing in 1920 his reputation would stand quite as high as it does.' Unfortunately, he didn't stop, with the result that he ended up outliving his talent: some of the final stories were little more than strong opinions struggling to organise themselves into a plot. For Claire Tomalin, the essential Wells is the early Wells, and *The Young H G Wells* offers a spirited and sympathetic investigation into how a boy who lived above a smelly shop in Bromley became a writer who was at the heart of Britain's artistic and political life, with an address

book that was like a global *Who's Who*.

For much of this biography, Tomalin's approach is very successful. We follow Wells through a childhood that left him skinny and often hungry, one aborted career as an apprentice draper and another as a junior schoolmaster (his pupils included the headmaster's son A A Milne). We are also presented with



Wells with gorilla skull and skeleton, mid 1880s

some sliding-doors moments that reveal how his life could have ended differently, and indeed much sooner, such as when, shortly before his twenty-first birthday, a crunching rugby tackle ruptured his kidney and led to several months of convalescence at Uppark, the grand country house where his mother had relocated to serve as housekeeper. Here Wells could rummage in the library and he also got used to a world that was split between life in the servants' basement and the more refined existence of those who remained

upstairs – a division he would turn into a terrifying allegory in his first bestseller, *The Time Machine*, published in 1895, which led to him being applauded as a 'genius' and launched his career as a best-selling writer.

If this book had ended with Wells's early success, it would have provided a wonderful snapshot of a life. But instead it goes on to his long flirtation with Fabianism, his sometimes prickly friendships with writers like Arnold Bennett and George Gissing, his two unfulfilling marriages and much more. In fact, Tomalin continues to follow the 'young' Wells into his mid-forties, and also provides a long chapter on his final years and death, so in effect this is a full biography with the three duller decades sliced out of it rather than one that focuses exclusively on his rise to fame.

Tomalin's explanation for this is that Wells continued to behave like a young man long past his actual youth and that she found him 'too interesting to leave: ambitious, generous, hard-working, and astonishingly energetic and original in his thinking'. Her first reason is certainly supported by the facts. As an old man, Wells was still gamely puffing across London to meet his lover (one of many he gleefully pursued after discovering that sex was far more exciting than the 'hot, uncomfortable, shamefaced stuff' he had experienced as a teenager), notwithstanding her opinion that 'at his age, by the time he had walked there, I don't know why he bothered'. Even in his forties he was signing himself 'Peter' to a Cambridge student with whom he had been conducting an affair, as though he saw himself as a horny grown-up version of J M Barrie's popular new character Peter Pan. Tomalin also largely succeeds in justifying her second reason for looking closely at Wells's later life. While she is clear-eyed about his personal failings (as she bluntly puts it, 'He was a bad husband and an unreliable lover'), she also admires his fierce determination to succeed, even if that resulted in him squashing anyone who got in his way, rather like the military tanks he conjured up in his 1903 story 'The Land Ironclads'.