Yours, H. G.: Some Missing Wells Letters to Arnold Bennett

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In the introductory comments to his collection of the correspondence between H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, Harris Wilson notes that, insofar as he knows, he has compiled all the surviving letters exchanged between these two men, "except a few undated notes which I have excluded on the grounds of brevity and lack of significance or interest." In the archives of the Academic Center Library of the University of Texas at Austin, however, there exist other letters from this correspondence. Of the letters in the archives, those written by Bennett appear in James Hepburn's edition of Bennett's letters or will be printed in the succeeding volume, but in this collection there are certain missing letters from Wells to Bennett which have gone unnoticed.

Most of the items in this Wells-Bennett collection are trivial, largely consisting of brief invitations to lunch, dinner, or a visit; but there are a few letters which prove more substantial. Some provide biographical footnotes - the letters concerning Raphael Roche, for instance; others reveal the critical side of Wells through his comments on G. K. Chesterton, Eden Phillpotts, and, of course, Bennett himself; and one, written in New York on New Year's Eve, represents as touching an attestation of Wells' affection for Bennett as any other letter of its kind. My purpose in making these letters available is to supplement Wilson's edition, to clear up a few matters left uncertain without them, and to provide further testimony that the relationship between the two men endured over the years in spite of very real differences.

The earliest letter of any interest in the collection is slight and requires little commentary:

Spade House
Sandgate
20. II. 01

My Dear Bennett.

I hope you'll get "Anticipations" & the 'F. M. in the Moon' in the natural course of reviewing. But if you don't, I'll send you the former because as a promising young man, you cannot go without reading it.

Yours
H. G.

Bennett had read most of the two books in their serialized versions and had expressed a high regard for Anticipations (Wilson, p. 66). Shortly thereafter Wells wrote the following letter, one which pro-
vides a humorous moment in the correspondence - though the gripe expressed in Wells' short phillippic concerning C. K. Chesterton is indeed irate:

Spade House
Sandgate
20. 12. 01

My dear Bennett.

I've just read this new light Chesterton on ME in the Pall Mall Magazine & Really, you know, he's an ass. "The most polished & futile of centuries," i. e., Either the century of Cromwell or the century of the French Revolution. His judgement does not penetrate, it's sham. On me anyhow he's no better than Lewis Hind. I am confirmed in the opinion I derived from Zangwill's appraisal that Chesterton must be an imposter.

No furth[er] light on 'The Crime' so far, but I hope.

Yours
H. G.

[Added as an afterthought at the top of the letter!]
Why should Chesterton flourish while Whitten is a violet? Tell Whitten to wake up & be a little pushful & tell people things.

Chesterton had not, in fact, referred specifically to Wells' work when he wrote the phrase quoted in the letter; rather, he had said: "'Gulliver's Travels' is, indeed, the great Bible of scepticism, and worthy to be the greatest literary work of the most polished and most futile of centuries." Why Wells understood this comment to refer to his own work is not difficult to ascertain. The answer lies in the fact that in the same essay Chesterton relates Wells to Swift, remarking that "the conception at the back of his [Wells'] mind appears to be essentially the same as that of Swift." Moreover, although Chesterton agrees that Wells is "a profoundly interesting and representative man of this age," he finds fault with the books he is considering in the review. He reports that "for some mysterious reason" Anticipations fails to satisfy him, that there is a weakness in "nearly all of Mr. H. G. Wells's books" which "arises out of his sceptical attitude." Citing The First Men in the Moon as a typical example of this deficiency, Chesterton comments: "As a human story it is lifeless." Chesterton's critique of Anticipations surely must have irked Wells who believed "that a real first class boom and uproar and discussion about this book will do an infinite amount of good in the country" (Wilson, p. 68). It is interesting to note, however, that Wells and Chesterton later became fairly good acquaintances, though their relationship always remained a turbulent one.

Echoing this adverse reaction to the sort of comments he was receiving from critics, the following letter refers to Wells' response to a project which Bennett had agreed to do for J. B. Pinker. Pinker had encouraged John B. Walker to get Bennett to do an article on Wells for Cosmopolitan Magazine; the article was intended to "present"
Wells to American readers. As a letter he wrote to Bennett five months before this one makes clear, Wells was rather displeased by the idea but had given his consent. He refused, however, to see Bennett until the essay was completed and he instructed him to avoid anything personal, especially "the 'dry goods clerk' legend" which Wells thought best kept "in a corner"; "I'd be grateful if you'd remember," Wells explained, that "stupid praise at this juncture would do me vast harm" (Wilson, pp. 73-75). In March Bennett reported to Wells that Pinker "wasn't over-struck by my article on you" (Wilson, p. 79). Probably Pinker was disturbed by Bennett's effort to adhere to Wells' request to avoid a personal portrait - at least we can now surmise this from the missing letter Wells wrote in July:

Spade House
Sandgate
July 4, 1902

Dear Bennett.

I think J. B. P. is rather unwise in not checking Walker in his design for something 'personal'. You might do a pseudo-"impression" of the man's argumentative side.

Yours
H. G.

Bennett, through some special alchemy of his own, managed finally to please both men, and in September Wells expressed his satisfaction with the essay (Wilson, p. 83).

The next letter answers Bennett's request (September 27, 1904) for information about various clubs, a letter bearing a postscript urging Wells to ignore Bennett's Teresa of Watling Street (Wilson, pp. 111-112). Wells replied:

Spade House
Sandgate
30-IX-04

Dear E. A. B.

The Savile club has no bedrooms - The Arts has got 10. Otherwise the Arts is very much like the Savile, & these two visit when cleaning & so on. The Royal Societies is a very good little club indeed with about 25 or 30 bedrooms. These two are most in your lines. I belong only to the Savile & N. L. C., but when I've got some money I want to belong to the Garrick & Reform.

I won't comment on your next book if you don't want me to, but I'd like to see it. You're no judge of your own work & often what you think poor is good. Odd! seeing you're a very good judge of other people.

Yours
H. G.
Bennett, as might be expected, reacted to Wells' concluding comment, asserting: "I am an excellent judge of my own work" (Wilson, p.113).

Still more specific comment on Bennett's writing occurs in the following letter in which Wells discusses Tales of the Five Towns and Eden Phillpott's The Secret Woman:

Spade House
Sandgate
5-11-05

Dear Bennett.

Next after 'A Great Man', which lies & ripens in my mind like sacred wine in a cellar, I like these short things of yours. They are well & carefully done (which after all isn't anything) & are & above [all] they're authentic (which is everything) - at least most of them are. 'The Dog', the 'Feud', 'Phantom', the Hotel thing (except that you don't quite get the vulgarity of these places) (you seem, I mean, to feel their magnificence is magnificence) & Clarice I like best, & in about that order; but there is nothing I haven't read with interest & some approval. 'A Letter Home' is, as one might expect, least differentiated; it might have been [written] by half a dozen hands I could name; & Tiddy fol-lol is the weakest. I think you go on getting better, wider in your range, and freer and surer in your movements.

But I'm damned if I can stand your friend Phillpotts, his Secret Woman - the trite dawns, the laboriously done sunsets, the vast dyspeptic "tragedy" of these people, the perpetual petty, mediocre "freshnets" [freshets?, freshness?] of the phrasing, the whole signifying nothing! In a measure I've told him as much.

Yours ever
H. G.

On February 7, Bennett responded to this letter and complained: "Surely the irony of my descriptions of leading hotels is not too fine for you!" (Wilson, p. 116). Although he concurred with Wells' assessment of "Tiddy-Fol-Lol," Bennett candidly took exception with the comments on The Secret Woman: "I think you are constitutionally incapable (artistically too irritable and too much preoccupied with mere ideas) to appreciate what is really fine, classical, and indeed great in The Secret Woman." Bennett and Phillpotts were good friends, having collaborated on a number of occasions.

But if this letter reveals one of the rough edges in their relationship, the following one, written in New York about sixteen years later, explicitly demonstrates that there was no decline in their friendship:
My dear Arnold.

I've just got here from a jaunt into the country & I find letters here which tell me you're undergoing the bothers & distresses of some sort of domestic rearrangement. I don't know what sort of rearrangement it is, but I do want to tell you that whatever it is I am most warmly, steadily, & anxiously your friend and that if I can be of any service & any use to you, I'm at your disposal. From those early days when we first met, I've had nothing but kindness, fellowship & sincerity from you. When I've had my own bothers you stood by me without criticism & now I'm unhesitatingly for you. I'm through with the American job & sail for Gibraltar by the Adriatic on Jan. 7th. I get to Gibraltar on the 17th, pick up Rebecca West there, & I shall ask for mail at the Post[e] Restante, Algeciras, Spain up to Jan. 20th. I expect to be back in London by the month of March.

You can count on all my families as your very best friends. We all, from our various angles, know you for the good thing you are.

Yours

H. G.

The letter is undated, but we know that late in 1921 Wells, as a correspondent for the New York World, went to Washington, D. C. in order to attend the Disarmament Conference held there. We also know that it was about this time that Bennett had decided to separate from his wife, Marguerite - doubtless the "domestic rearrangement" Wells refers to in the letter.

Another letter, written nearly three years later and at times illegible, similarly reveals another human aspect of Wells:

Easton Glebe
Dunmow
16. XI. 25

My dear Arnold.

Like the others I'm delighted by your news. I didn't write at once because I was caught in a stream of more personal trouble at the time. I had your letter in France, but before I could write came telegrams that put it out of my head for a little while. I've been with an ace of losing Frank. He was left at home - Jane was in Switzerland & I was in Britanny - and got appendicitis & perforated [?]. If it hadn't been for the decision of the (once despised) Dunmow doctor, he'd have gone out. But he was rush[ed] up
to London, operated upon (last Thursday), hung between life & death all [day] Friday, & then came through. It's disconcerting, the sort of reminder of the instability of things.

And now coming to your news. Having one's first child is a very amazing & wonderful experience. I don't know why it excites the man so much, but it does. I think there is nothing quite like one's first encounter with the wet little, exquisite [?] thing . . . produce out of these mysteries. You ought to have done this years ago. I'm glad you've done it now. It will be a difficult situation but with nothing in it that money cannot master. It will be delightful to see you steering it through. Please give my respects & Jane's respects to the lady. Jane also is . . . elated.

Life is chiefly a business of going to see Frank just at present, but we must see you soon.

Yours
H. G.

Wells had decided to take a sorely needed vacation with Jane, his wife. They first went to Geneva, Switzerland; then Wells went on to France for a while. Apparently it was shortly thereafter that his son, Frank Richard Wells, became ill.

The second part of the letter refers to the future birth of Virginia Mary, the daughter of Bennett and Dorothy Cheston. Wells must have been, as Bennett put it in a letter to his sister, one of "the 2 or 3 of my friends whom I have told." Bennett was not divorced from Marguerite at the time, but, as he explained further to his sister, he was confident: "I see all the drawbacks of the matter, but am getting rather excited and pleased too. Socially there will be little difficulty as my friends have greatly taken to her and generally ask us together." Reginald Pound has reported, however, that in reaction to Bennett's affair, "Wells was not impressed by the spectacle of a profoundly inhibited man pretending to defy the inhibitions of society" - an observation refuted by the missing letter cited above as well as by the next two letters.

The following letter mentions both Bennett's new novel (Lord Raingo) and his new family situation:

4 Whitehall Court
[London]
26. X. 26

My dear Arnold.

I've been reading Raingo. As 1 & all say, it's not your best, but how good it is! The good decisive writing, the clear vision, the surprise [?] of fine feeling. I congratulate you. In many things you make me feel as though all my finest [?] work [?] thunks. I congratulate you on Raingo, but may I also congratulate you on your renewed home. I confess I have always loathed your Mar-
guérite & have been . . . & distressed by a sort of atmosphere she threw over you. Now I finally have to express the sort of happiness I have in seeing you at last nestled in affection, in a home that is really a home & sane & sweet. In all virtue I adore your wife. And lastly, instead of looking the sort of man who ought to consult a doctor, you have suddenly relapsed into vitality & activity.

God love you Arnold & God bless you
H. G.

The next six letters concern Jane's fatal illness resulting from cancer of the uterus. She had been diagnosed, in 1927, to live but six months more, and that Wells felt deep anguish during this time can somewhat surmised from this often terse and blunt series of letters regarding his investigation of Raphael Roche, who claimed to be able to cure or at least alleviate cancer. Bennett was impressed with Roche's claims (Wilson, pp. 238-239); but Wells' letters tell their own sad story:

4 Whitehall Court
[London]
4. VI. 27

Dear Arnold.

Thanks for your letter. Jane has had an X ray treatment which may have knocked her malignant cell about but which has certainly knocked her about very roughly. She is here, very exhausted, & we are trying to restore her strength before going down to Easton. She can't see many people, & it's best not to have her see more than one at a time. She'd like a glimpse of you. 'Old family friends,' she said. The best time is Monday or Tuesday afternoon about 4.30 to 6.

Our love to you both. All about you & Dorothy has been a great joy to us.

Yours
H. G.

Easton Glebe
Dunmow
1. VIII. 27

Dear Arnold.

I mistrust this writing. Before I go further I would like to know of any case of established & properly diagnosed cancer that this chap has either relieved or cured.

Yours
H. G.
Dear Arnold.

If Roche's evidence is satisfactory I will, of course, go in with him; but it must be satisfactory. Frankly I don't believe he has either cured or alleviated cases of cancer.

Yours
H. G.
Easton Glebe
Dunmow
6. VIII. 27

Dear Arnold.

My impression of Roche as an impudent, illiterate quack deepens. I will write to the man he cites.

Yours
H. G.
Easton Glebe
Dunmow
13. VIII. 27

Dear Arnold.

I've gone into the one case for which Roche claimed a cure. It was a case of primary cancer of the heart, for which a prompt operation is frequently successful. I have corresponded with Miss Wallis, her brother & the surgeon in the case. Roche's claim is absurd.

Yours
H. G.

Jane, by the bye, is stronger & gayer than when you saw her. She wants to see you both or either [of you] again soon - any fine day. Telephone Dunmow 77.

Easton Glebe
Dunmow
[October 7, 1927]

[Dear Arnold.]

Jane died painlessly last night.
I think the cremation service will be at Golden
Green at 3 on Monday. I will let you know if that is not so.

Yours
H. G.

The final two letters of note in this collection concern Bennett's *The Accident*. They also reveal a forgetfulness on Wells' part, a forgetfulness which may be entirely the result of the late hour in which the first letter was written or which may signify a more pervasive weariness:

Lou Pidou
Saint Mathieu
Grasse
Feb. 17, '29

Dear Arnold.

I've just read *The Accident* with much amusement & admiration. It's not the great EAB, but it's the very entertaining EAB, gay as ever. We've been snowed up here for days & reduced to our last bottle of beer, but communications are now restored. Odette in tears almost at her garden. All the geraniums, all the many [?] trees like to die, Evergreen[s], oaks, & mimosas crushed to earth & uprooted. Likewise, being in the sunny south with all our pipes nude, we froze most horrible.

Our joint love to you both.

H. G.

(Inundations at 3 a. m.)

Lou Pidou
Saint Mathieu
Grasse
[February 20?, 1929]

Dear Arnold.

Life has too much hurry in it. I sent you a letter a day or so ago about the Accident & left out the only thing I had to say about it that matter[ed], which was that you've done the accident most amazingly well.

Love
H. G.

Did you invent all that stuff or were you there?

The answer to Wells' postscript can be found in a letter Bennett wrote nearly eighteen years earlier to Mrs. Wells, in which he described an accident he witnessed at Mantes, France (Wilson, p. 177).
As these letters make clear, both in their explicit remarks as well as in their informal and relaxed tone, the friendship between Wells and Bennett remained strong and vital until Bennett's death on March 27, 1931. For Wells, Bennett was "that friendly rival of my middle years": "We two, he and I, got on in the world abreast - and it was extremely good fun for both of us." Wells further noted that "latter on we diverged," but "we never quarrelled, we never let our very lively resolve to 'get on' betray our mutual generosity; we were continually interested in one another." Wells' exclamation in a letter of October 7, 1930 - "Arnold you are a dear. You are the best friend I've ever had" (Wilson, p. 255) - pinpoints precisely the sentiment pervading the entire correspondence between the two men.

NOTES


2 Permission to publish these letters has been granted by G. P. Wells and by the Academic Center. Silent editorial changes affect only Wells' often careless punctuation, including contractions. Conjectural readings are followed by [?]; words, parts of words, or correct spellings intended by Wells are enclosed in brackets; and illegible words are represented by three spaced periods. A note of appreciation is owed to Mrs. Mary M. Hirth, Librarian of the Academic Center Library; to Miss Kathleen Blow, for help with a number of library reference matters; and to Marion, my wife, who pondered with me over Wells' handwriting.


4 Lewis C. Hind (1862-1927) was an editor and a critic. In June, 1901, Wells told Bennett: "There is a coolness between myself and Hind quite outside literary matters and I am sorry to find it affects criticism" (Wilson, pp. 54-55).

5 "The Crime" was the title of a projected play to be written by Wells and Bennett for the Haymarket Theatre. The idea was later abandoned.

6 Wilfred Whitten was an editor of T. P.'s Weekly.


9 These articles later became Washington and the Hope of Peace (1922).

10 See Bennett's letter (October 23, 1921) to Tertia, his sister, in Reginald Pound, Arnold Bennett (Lond: Heinemann, 1952), pp. 290-91.

11 Pound, p. 313.

12 Pound, p. 314.

13 Odette Keun.
15 Wells, pp. 533, 536.