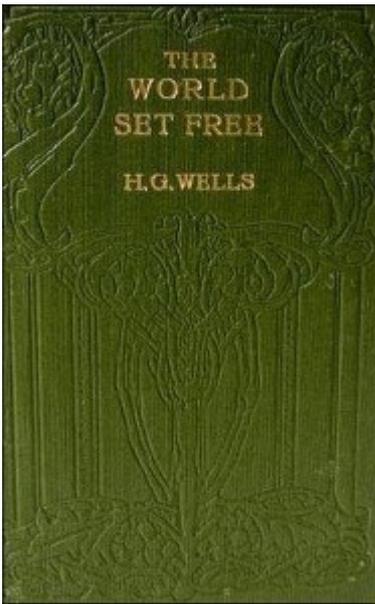


H.G. Wells (1914) *The World Set Free*



Preface: H. G. WELLS. EASTON GLEBE, DUNMOW, 1921.

THE WORLD SET FREE was written in 1913 and published early in 1914, and it is the latest of a series of three fantasias of possibility, stories which all turn on the possible developments in the future of some contemporary force or group of forces. *The World Set Free* was written under the immediate shadow of the Great War. Every intelligent person in the world felt that disaster was impending and knew no way of averting it, but few of us realised in the earlier half of 1914 how near the crash was to us. The reader will be amused to find that here it is put off until the year 1956. He may naturally want to know the reason for what will seem now a quite extraordinary delay. As a prophet, the author must confess he has always been inclined to be rather a slow prophet. The war aeroplane in the world of reality, for example, beat the forecast in *Anticipations* by about twenty years or so. I suppose a desire not to shock the sceptical reader's sense of use and wont and perhaps a less creditable disposition to hedge, have something to do with this dating forward of one's main events, but in the particular case of *The World Set Free* there was, I think, another motive in holding the Great War back, and that was to allow the chemist to get well forward with his discovery of the release of atomic energy. 1956—or for that matter 2056—may be none too late for that crowning revolution in human potentialities. And apart from this procrastination of over forty years, the guess at the opening phase of the war was fairly lucky; the forecast of an alliance of the Central Empires, the opening campaign through the Netherlands, and the despatch of the British Expeditionary Force were all justified before the book had been published six months. And the opening section of Chapter the Second remains now, after the reality has happened, a fairly adequate diagnosis of the essentials of the matter. One happy hit (in Chapter the Second, Section 2), on which the writer may congratulate himself, is the forecast that under modern conditions it would be quite impossible for any great general to emerge to supremacy and concentrate the enthusiasm of the armies of either side. There could be no Alexanders or Napoleons. And we soon heard the scientific corps muttering, 'These old fools,' exactly as it is here foretold.

These, however, are small details, and the misses in the story far outnumber the hits. It is the main thesis which is still of interest now; the thesis that because of the development of scientific knowledge, separate sovereign states and separate sovereign empires are no longer possible in the world, that to attempt to keep on with the old system is to heap disaster upon disaster for mankind and perhaps to destroy our race altogether. The remaining interest of this book now is the sustained validity of this thesis and the discussion of the possible ending of war on the earth. I have supposed a sort of epidemic of sanity to break out among the rulers of states and the leaders of mankind. I have represented the native common sense of the French mind and of the English mind—for manifestly King Egbert is meant to be 'God's Englishman'—leading mankind towards a bold and resolute effort of salvage and reconstruction. Instead of which, as the school book footnotes say, compare to-day's newspaper. Instead of a frank and honourable gathering of leading men, Englishman meeting German and Frenchman Russian, brothers in their offences and in their disaster, upon the hills of Brissago,

beheld in Geneva at the other end of Switzerland a poor little League of (Allied) Nations (excluding the United States, Russia, and most of the 'subject peoples' of the world), meeting obscurely amidst a world-wide disregard to make impotent gestures at the leading problems of the debacle. Either the disaster has not been vast enough yet or it has not been swift enough to inflict the necessary moral shock and achieve the necessary moral revulsion. Just as the world of 1913 was used to an increasing prosperity and thought that increase would go on for ever, so now it would seem the world is growing accustomed to a steady glide towards social disintegration, and thinks that that too can go on continually and never come to a final bump. So soon do we and wont establish themselves, and the most flaming and thunderous of lessons pale into disregard.

The question whether a Leblanc is still possible, the question whether it is still possible to bring about an outbreak of creative sanity in mankind, to avert this steady glide to destruction, is now one of the most urgent in the world. It is clear that the writer is temperamentally disposed to hope that there is such a possibility. But he has to confess that he sees few signs of any such breadth of understanding and steadfastness of will as an effectual effort to turn the rush of human affairs demands. The inertia of dead ideas and old institutions carries us on towards the rapids. Only in one direction is there any plain recognition of the idea of a human commonweal as something overriding any national and patriotic consideration, and that is in the working class movement throughout the world. And labour internationalism is closely bound up with conceptions of a profound social revolution. If world peace is to be attained through labour internationalism, it will have to be attained at the price of the completest social and economic reconstruction and by passing through a phase of revolution that will certainly be violent, that may be very bloody, which may be prolonged through a long period, and may in the end fail to achieve anything but social destruction. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is in the labour class, and the labour class alone, that any conception of a world rule and a world peace has so far appeared. The dream of *The World Set Free*, a dream of highly educated and highly favoured leading and ruling men, voluntarily setting themselves to the task of reshaping the world, has thus far remained a dream.

Full Text available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1059/1059-h/1059-h.htm>

In 1914 H. G. Wells predicted that peaceful nuclear energy might profoundly affect the relations between nations. In his remarkable *The World Set Free: A Story of Mankind* Wells foretold the invention of the nuclear bomb and its use in war. After this, said Wells, would come a new age of plenty, based on the availability of cheap and unlimited energy. In this energy-abundant world, adventitious maldistributions of natural resources would no longer be a cause of international strife. The world would become a much more stable place if energy, ubiquitous and cheap, could replace other raw materials: if, say, natural hydrocarbons were replaced by hydrocarbons derived from limestone, water and energy; or if unfertile deserts were rendered fertile by huge desalting complexes driven with the new energy source. Nuclear energy was, to use the current phrase, the ultimate "technological fix": by its exploitation, man could satisfy all of his material wants. And if man's material wants were satisfied, then it seemed to Wells that the world would become a more stable place, especially if the big bomb were there to enforce the peace. [Nuclear Energy, Council on Foreign Relations -

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/24239/alvin-m-weinberg/nuclear-energy>]

[Overview \[Wikipedia\]](#)

The World Set Free is a novel written in 1913 and published in 1914 by H. G. Wells. The book is based on a prediction of nuclear weapons of a more destructive and uncontrollable sort than the world has yet seen. It had appeared first in serialised form with a different ending as *A Prophetic Trilogy*, consisting of three books: *A Trap to Catch the Sun*, *The Last War in the World* and *The World Set Free*.

A frequent theme of Wells's work, as in his 1901 nonfiction book *Anticipations*, was the history of humans' mastery of power and energy through technological advance, seen as a determinant of human progress. The novel begins: "The history of mankind is the history of the attainment of external power. Man is the tool-using, fire-making animal. . . . Always down a lengthening record, save for a set-back ever and again, he is doing more." (Many of the ideas Wells develops here found a fuller development when he wrote *The Outline of History* in 1918-1919.) The novel is dedicated "To Frederick Soddy's *Interpretation of Radium*," a volume published in 1909.

Scientists of the time were well aware that the slow natural radioactive decay of elements like radium continues for thousands of years, and that while the rate of energy release is negligible, the total amount released is huge. Wells used this as the basis for his story. In his fiction,

The problem which was already being mooted by such scientific men as Ramsay, Rutherford, and Soddy, in the very beginning of the twentieth century, the problem of inducing radio-activity in the heavier elements and so tapping the internal energy of

atoms, was solved by a wonderful combination of induction, intuition, and luck by Holsten so soon as the year 1933.

Wells's knowledge of atomic physics came from reading William Ramsay, Ernest Rutherford, and Frederick Soddy; the latter discovered the disintegration of uranium. Soddy's book *Wealth, Virtual Wealth and Debt* praises *The World Set Free*. Wells's novel may even have influenced the development of nuclear weapons, as the physicist Leó Szilárd read the book in 1932, the same year the neutron was discovered. In 1933 Szilárd conceived the idea of neutron chain reaction, and filed for patents on it in 1934. Wells's "atomic bombs" have no more force than ordinary high explosive and are rather primitive devices detonated by a "bomb-thrower" biting off "a little celluloid stud." They consist of "lumps of pure Carolinum" that induce "a blazing continual explosion" whose half-life is seventeen days, so that it is "never entirely exhausted," so that "to this day the battle-fields and bomb fields of that frantic time in human history are sprinkled with radiant matter, and so centres of inconvenient rays."

Never before in the history of warfare had there been a continuing explosive; indeed, up to the middle of the twentieth century the only explosives known were combustibles whose explosiveness was due entirely to their instantaneousness; and these atomic bombs which science burst upon the world that night were strange even to the men who used them.

Wells observes:

Certainly it seems now that nothing could have been more obvious to the people of the earlier twentieth century than the rapidity with which war was becoming impossible. And as certainly they did not see it. They did not see it until the atomic bombs burst in their fumbling hands [...] All through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the amount of energy that men were able to command was continually increasing. Applied to warfare that meant that the power to inflict a blow, the power to destroy, was continually increasing [...] There was no increase whatever in the ability to escape [...] Destruction was becoming so facile that any little body of malcontents could use it [...] Before the last war began it was a matter of common knowledge that a man could carry about in a handbag an amount of latent energy sufficient to wreck half a city.

Wells viewed war as the inevitable result of the Modern State; the introduction of atomic energy in a world divided resulted in the collapse of society. The only possibilities remaining were "either the relapse of mankind to agricultural barbarism from which it had emerged so painfully or the acceptance of achieved science as the basis of a new social order." Wells's theme of world government is presented as a solution to the threat of nuclear weapons.

From the first they had to see the round globe as one problem; it was impossible any longer to deal with it piece by piece. They had to secure it universally from any fresh outbreak of atomic destruction, and they had to ensure a permanent and universal pacification.

The devastation of the war leads the French ambassador at Washington, Leblanc, to summon world leaders to a conference at Brissago, where Britain's "King Egbert" sets an example by abdicating in favor of a world state. Such is the state of the world's exhaustion that the effective coup of this "council" ("Never, of course, had there been so provisional a government. It was of an extravagant illegality.") is resisted only in a few places. The defeat of Serbia's "King Ferdinand Charles" and his attempt to destroy the council and seize control of the world is narrated in some detail.

Brought to its senses, humanity creates a utopian order along Wellsian lines in short order. Atomic energy has solved the problem of work. In the new order "the majority of our population consists of artists."

The World Set Free concludes with a chapter recounting the reflections of one of the new order's sages, Marcus Karenin, during his last days. Karenin argues that knowledge and power, not love, are the essential vocation of humanity, and that "There is no absolute limit to either knowledge or power."

Other posts of possible interest:

[Wodehouse, P. G. \(1909\), *The Swoop! or How Clarence Saved England*](#)

[Cole, R. W. \(1907\) *The Death Trap*](#)

[Tracy, L. \(1901\) *The Invasion / The Invaders*](#)

[Gleig, C. \(1897\) *When All Men Starve*](#)

[Grip \(1882\) *How John Bull Lost London*](#)