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H.G. Wells and Columbia University

In Wells' novel *The War in the Air*, German airships descend upon early 20th-century New York, raining death and destruction upon the city and securing its surrender. Imagine this passage broadcast on a radio as you take shelter in an Upper West Side building:

“The trouble became acute at last in the streets above Columbia University. The captain of the airship watching this quarter seems to have stooped to lasso and drag from its staff a flag hoisted upon Morgan Hall. As he did so a volley of rifle and revolver shots was fired from the upper windows of the huge apartment building that stands between the University and Riverside Drive. Most of these were ineffectual, but two or three perforated gas-chambers, and one smashed the hand and arm of a man upon the forward platform. The sentinel on the lower gallery immediately replied, and the machine gun on the shield of the eagle let fly and promptly stopped any further shots” (199).

When reading this exhilarating passage, one may wonder why Wells would mention Columbia at all. It turns out that, in 1906, Wells visited New York City on a trip to America. He detailed this trip in his travel essay “The Future in America.” This book is a treasure trove of information on Wells' relationship with New York City, and will be a main source for the purposes of this tour. The book has an entire section dedicated to Columbia University, titled,

you guessed it, “Columbia University.” I will present most of this section, and as you gaze upon the closed iron gates at Broadway and 116th, consider what Wells might think of this sight.

“[T]here was an effect of remoteness about Columbia. It may have been the quality of a blue, still morning of sunshine that invaded my impression. I came up out of the crowded tumult of New York to it, with a sense of the hooting, hurrying traffics of the wide harbor, the teeming East Side, the glitter of spending, the rush of finance, the whole headlong process of America, behind me. I came out of the subway station into wide, still streets. It was very spacious, very dignified, very quiet. Well, I want the universities of the modern state to be more aggressive. I want to think of a Columbia University of a less detached appearance, even if she is less splendidly clad. I want to think of her as sitting up there, cheek on hand, with knitted brows, brooding upon the millions below. I want to think of all the best minds conceivable going to and fro—[Pg 213]thoughts and purposes in her organized mind. And when she speaks that busy world should listen....”

Clearly, Wells had a strong opinion about Columbia University, but his views extended to higher education as a whole. If you would like to learn more about his views on higher education, you can read about his visits to other prominent United States universities in the full chapter. Of course, Columbia has also had strong opinions about Wells over the years. Columbia University Libraries provides a very effective online search tool for the archives of Columbia’s *The Spectator*, the prominent student news publication.

In October of 1913, Wells’ *Tono Bungay* was listed as a new book at the University Library. November 1920 saw a half-page “Bookstore Announcement” describing Wells’ *The*

Outline of History as “The literary event of 1920, as voiced in opinions of the critics...” and offering a deal of \$7.95 per set (\$129.11 today). The next month, a review of the book by a member of the Columbia community described the book, “As a handy summary of history and as a fervent expression of a radical’s faith, the ‘Outline’ is worth owning, worth reading” (Moon 4).

Throughout Wells' writing, progressive as he was for his time, there are smatterings of racism, antisemitism, and sexism that are pervasive among writers of the early 20th century. In August 1923, Wells took the front page of *The Spectator*. “Teachers Say H.G. Wells is Wrong In Condemning American Coeducation” details how Wells called American men “sissies” as a result of being educated alongside women, contradicting statements he had made in his work that were quite forward-thinking on the topic of coeducation. Teachers seemed wholly disappointed in Wells, making a statement on the importance of educating with themes of gender equality.

Another ill-perspective on Wells appears in a satirical section of the March 1924 issue: “Believe it or not , we have found someone who never heard of H.G. Wells! This lost soul is preparing to teach English in the High Schools and to our ‘You-never-knew Wells-was-an-English-writer’ he returned that ‘He was teaching literature—not Wells’ (2)!

In December of 1947, Columbia University’s President Butler died at the age of 85. The *Columbia Spectator* mourned his passing, “Friend and counselor to emperors, popes, presidents and scholars of all lands, Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler was acknowledged to be the most distinguished American of his day. Up to the very threshold of death Dr. Butler toiled to save the world from the horrors of ‘cruel, relentless war.’” But one connection of Butler’s was specifically mentioned. “Truly a ‘citizen of the world,’ Dr. Butler was affectionately termed ‘the

champion international visitor and retriever of foreign orders and decorations’ by his friend and admirer, H.G. Wells” (1). Friend and admirer? The relationship between Wells and Dr. Butler seems to have been more of two like-minded intellectuals than friends.

In her book, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire*, University of Oxford associate professor Jeanne Morefield writes, “Idealistically inclined liberal scholars in Britain recognized Murray Butler, who would later become the president of Columbia University, as a kindred spirit, so much so that H. G. Wells once referred to him as the ‘Gilbert Murray of the United States’” (112). Gilbert Murray was a prominent Oxford scholar who, like Wells, fervently supported a “League of Nations” to bring an end to war. They collaborated on multiple works, including *The Outline of History*. It is clear from the way Wells spoke of Dr. Butler that he viewed him with great respect as a fellow scholar and proponent of world peace.

In 1931, Wells visited Columbia once more to give a talk at Teachers College, but this will be focused on at the next location.

Over time, Wells’ works have been touched on in various classes, but certain Wellsian scholars have gone to great lengths to study his work and introduce it to new generations of students. Sarah Cole, Parr Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia University, and of course a fervent Wellsian, authored the critically acclaimed book *Inventing Tomorrow: H.G. Wells and the Twentieth Century*. This book, published by Columbia University Press, suggests that Wells “...offers a timely model for literature’s moral responsibility to imagine a better global future.” Beyond writing this book, Cole taught a class in the Fall 2025 semester titled “H.G. Wells,” for which this project is being created. According to the course description, “This is the first time in Columbia’s history that a

course has been dedicated to Wells...” The course had students take a deep dive into the world of Wells, acquainting them closely with him, and keeping the spirit of one of the great intellectuals of the 20th century alive within the gates of Columbia University.

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