

MY MOTHER - MARJORIE CRAIG WELLS

by Catherine Stoye

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John Hammond said that you would be interested to hear about the administration of the H.G. Wells Estate, so I thought I would explain my position before I speak about my mother, Marjorie Well who, because she was H.G.'s secretary, administered his Estate when he died. When she died in 1962 my father, Gip Wells took over, and at his death in 1985, I thought I should take over. I am not a lawyer, but I find myself in this position although I am not equipped to debate such issues as the law about the extension of copyright, for instance. I and my cousin Martin Wells, Frank's son, are Trustees of the Estate, and could be blamed by the beneficiaries if we did not carry out our legal duties to them. I do not have a role in the administration, therefore, so much as a duty as a trustee.

My father had various peculiar problems to deal with when he was trustee for the Estate. One was when a woman who claimed to have spoken to H.G. in a scéance produced all sorts of stories about him, so Gip had to check whether any of them could have been true. Another problem was caused by Rebecca West. She took all H.G.'s letters to her biographer, Gordon Ray, and told him that if he wanted to know how she had felt about the end of their relationship, he should read a certain short story. That story has a heroine lying on a sofa with bullet-wounds caused by her attempt to kill herself after her lover has left her. The bullet-holes were included in the first draft of Gordon Ray's introduction to his book, which meant that Gip had to try to disprove the bullet-holes. On another occasion, someone was collecting letters from H.G. to Arnold Bennett and from Bennett to H.G. There were far fewer letters during the last years of Bennett's life, and the editor concluded: "On documentary evidence, the two became much less friendly". What he did not know was that at that period both men had flats in Chiltern Court, so they saw one another frequently.

Marjorie Craig was born on 9th July 1901. She was the daughter of the schoolmaster in the village of Morebattle in the Scottish Borders and she won a scholarship to St Leonard's School in St Andrews. One of her teachers told me that there was a saying in the classroom: "First Marjorie Craig, second, the person who sits next to Marjorie Craig". She went on to the London School of Economics and

there met all sorts of people, including some who later became distinguished in the setting up of the State of Israel. She became a communist, as did many other young intellectuals in London. Then she went to work for the Labour Research Bureau. When H.G. stood as a Labour candidate for Parliament, hoping to represent the University of London, my mother was asked to help with the work involved, and after the election H.G. offered her a permanent job helping his wife Jane with the typing and office work.

Marjorie was often asked to Easton Glebe, where a wide variety of people were invited to house-parties. Sometimes H.G. would invite people and then forget that he had done so, and at times he was not even there when they arrived, so Jane would have to entertain them. She was an excellent hostess, and she looked after my mother very well – even giving her a lovely Chinese shawl for wear in the evenings. Marjorie met Gip Wells at Easton, and they were married in July 1927. It was while they were on honeymoon that Jane Wells went into a nursing home for investigations and was found to have the cancer from which she died later that year. My mother then became H.G.'s principal secretary, dealing with everything - typing, administration, correspondence, publishers, publicity....

In those days, typing involved taking a piece of paper, a carbon paper, a thinner sheet of paper, another carbon, another piece of paper – and so on – fixing them together. If a mistake was made there was no way of changing it, so the typist had to start the page again. Once, my mother told me, she had to type something about "My dear wife" and found that she kept typing "My *dead* wife". Later, she told me that typing was slavery, and that her daughter should not have to learn. I never have, though I know that it is quite different nowadays. I remember, for instance, in Buckland Crescent, seeing her file a carbon copy of the work she had done that day in Hanover Terrace. When H.G. was at Lou Pidou he sent off a batch of writing every day and I remember the packets arriving, with two on Mondays (or perhaps Tuesdays) because there was no delivery on Sundays.

I have photocopies of various letters which HG. wrote to my mother which show the kind of thing she had to do – the letters are not in the Library at Illinois, and they are not all in David Smith's four volumes of letters. Unfortunately, many of them are not dated. It is clear that she was absolutely straightforward, and H.G. trusted her completely. Amongst the letters there are, for instance, instructions for dealing with publishers, and for finding H.G. a maid when he was moving to Chiltern

Court. She was to be "a superior intelligent cook-general of the experienced parlour-maid type. She must be fit to look at and she must not sing, sniff, or otherwise make her presence felt. She is to have a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen of her own in another flat" – and this is followed by a long list of duties. I am sorry that I cannot remember anything about the person she found for him!

There is a letter from Moura Budberg asking for confirmation of the fifty pounds which he had sent to Estonia and which had not arrived. H.G. wrote on the top "Send her such a letter. She is a bother". There is a long letter about Odette Keun, who was very changeable and erratic. He says "I wish people would be just BAD or GOOD, then one would know how to deal with them". Odette was to visit London and he agreed to pay for her to stay at the Berkeley, but he says "I do not want her to figure in London under my auspices. I want you and the Franks to be friendly to her, and help her in any way, but I do not want her to sail into Chiltern Court, play the mistress to the servants and Lucienne [the other secretary] and so forth...I'm writing you this letter to show to Gip and (if you think that wise) to Frank and Peggy, or you can tell them of its effect". He tells her where he will be but she is forbidden to tell Odette.

During the war, H.G. refused to move from London. Gip was evacuated to Bangor with University College, London, and my brother and I were at boarding school. My mother was by herself in the house near Swiss Cottage. Each day she went to Hanover Terrace at 10 o'clock. The maids had left, but Mrs Johnstone who had come in to clean the house before the war, came to live in the Mews house at the end of the garden together with her husband and sons. She acted as housekeeper. My mother dealt with the typing and correspondence, ran the house, and looked after H.G. The windows and the front door were blown in by bomb blast, and she organised the repairs. At 4 o'clock she would leave and go to see S.S. Kotelianski (Kot), who was a great friend of the family. He was a Russian Jew who had come to England in 1912, a friend of Katherine Mansfield and of D.H. Lawrence and many other literary figures, and he translated various works from the Russian in collaboration with Leonard Woolf or with Lawrence. Kot lived in the little house in which Katherine Mansfield had lived during the First World War. He was sometimes depressed, and my mother cheered and looked after him too. Then she would go home to the empty house in Buckland Crescent and read Proust – she had wide intellectual interests. She wrote us

cheerful letters at school, and it was only later that I realised what a difficult time it was for her and how marvellous she was.

H.G. died in August 1946. Marjorie Wells continued to visit Kot daily, and had a great deal of work to do for the H.G. Wells Estate. She was very pleased when I went to Somerville in 1947 to read mathematics. I married John Stoye, a historian, fellow of Magdalen, in 1950, and my mother enjoyed our boys, particularly the eldest, Jonathan. She died in 1962.