

# Mr Wells and Mr Buchan

Early in the twentieth century, H. G. Wells was constantly at work, driven by the need for money. It was not unusual for him to be writing a novel while simultaneously negotiating the sale of the previous book and the reprint rights for earlier work with a number of publishers. While he did use the services of literary agents, he was capable of handling the complex contract side himself, as well as using his forceful personality and celebrity value to clinch a deal.

In the spring and summer of 1908, Wells was writing a very personal novel, *Ann Veronica*. The plot drew from his affair with Amber Reeves, a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate and a great friend of his second wife, Catherine. According to most of Wells's biographers, Reeves was determined to have Wells's child, and he promised to dedicate *Ann Veronica* to their as yet unconceived daughter, whom they were already calling Anna-Jane.

An affair that was already building such castles in the air would require financial planning. Wells knew that Catherine and their two sons would still need to be supported, and Amber and a baby would need a separate establishment, should Amber's family refuse to pay for one. In June 1908, Wells approached the Scottish publishing house Thomas Nelson's, offering them the reprint rights for *Kipps* (1905) at the high price of £950.

Nelson's was an odd choice for Wells. The firm was best known for educational and Christian publications, and for its monopoly on editions of the Bible. Wells, for his part, was a difficult author to publish due to the notoriety of some of his works: there were already circulating libraries that refused to stock his books, in turn affecting publishers' profits.

In 1907, Nelson's employed a new man to run their London office, John Buchan. Then in his early thirties, Buchan had published seventeen books – a mixture of novels, collections of short stories and non-fiction – while *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and the other novels that would make him famous had yet to appear. He had been a reader for the avant-garde publisher John Lane in his first year at Oxford in 1896, in which role, with celebrated acuity, he had urged the

merits of Arnold Bennett's first novel, *A Man from the North* (1898).

After Oxford, Buchan read for the Bar and did a stint in South Africa as an imperial civil servant in land reallocation. By the time he landed the job at Nelson's – through his friendship with one of the partners, Tommy Nelson – Buchan was go-getting, full of ideas and a great collector of friends in high places. He plunged into networking among authors, politicians and the aristocracy. He knew exactly who to approach, for example, about a proposed edition of Queen Victoria's letters. While on honeymoon, eight months after starting at Nelson's, he wrote to the office with an assurance that he could return if he was needed for a business trip to the US – the Edwardian equivalent of the tech bro who never turns off his phone for anything. Buchan was a supremely competent multitasker, but also, perhaps, a little naive.

We know all this because the Nelson's archives in the University of Edinburgh Library's Heritage Collections constitute a remarkable record of Edwardian publishing from the inside. I spent years working on these letters, unpacking what Buchan actually did. He was Nelson's marketing manager, rights manager, legal adviser, editor and copywriter, translation adviser and picture researcher; he had strong views on its series designs. He negotiated with authors and their agents. He dreamt up new schemes and spotted good business opportunities. He developed one of the first cheap reprint series, the Nelson's Sevenpennies. I wrote in the *TLS* almost twenty years ago (August 10, 2007) about discovering Buchan's part in Nelson's completely forgotten First World War magazine, *The War*: he devised it and, for the best part of two years, edited it and largely wrote it.

Late last year, Paul Barnaby, curator of the University of Edinburgh Library's Modern Literary Collections, got in touch with me to say that he had found an uncatalogued box of Buchan's Nelson's letters. These 508 letters date from late 1906 to the end of 1908, and are earlier than any I had seen before from Buchan's publishing career. At first sight, they seemed to be more of the same: typed carbon copies and originals in his appalling handwriting, evidence of his multitasking enthusiasm and spontaneous suggestions for different projects.

The letters between Buchan and George Brown, his Edinburgh counterpart, are as frequent as emails, since the two men wrote to each other several times every day about what they were working on together, Buchan dealing with authors, agents and newspapers, while Brown acted as the publisher's production manager and printing supervisor.

The rediscovered letters also provide new evidence of Buchan's ingenuity in expanding Nelson's business. He was keen on modern advertising and considered moving away from traditional display ads. "Masses of red and yellow on the bookstalls are a far better inducement to the public than a page twice a week in the *Daily Mail*" (May 24, 1907). He devised spine layouts, designed leaflets and inserts, and boosted a photograph of a Birmingham bookshop display in advertising for the Sevenpennies. He mingled with the great and the good: "Last night at dinner I sat next to Mrs Barrie, and she told me that her husband had come home the other night with the whole six of our [Sevenpennies] and was greatly delighted with them" (May 30, 1907). Mrs Barrie was then deep in her affair with Gilbert Cannan and separated from J. M. Barrie, so perhaps this was a performative demonstration of wifehood. In 1908, Buchan urged Brown to consider collaborating with Lord Montagu of Beaulieu ("He is my wife's cousin"), to print his pioneering motoring guidebooks and have Nelson's titles sold from the Piccadilly shop of Montagu's magazine, *The Car*.

Buchan was keen to fill gaps in the market, urging Brown to consider publishing a new edition of George Douglas Brown's radical novel *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901), as it was out of print, but still in demand. When Brown objected to taking "unpleasant" stories like this for the Sevenpennies, Buchan rejoined: "It would be an immense mistake I think to attempt to make the Library cater only for people who can read no fiction save stories for school-girls. [But] I should rigidly exclude any really unpleasant book and also, I think, books which play at being unpleasant in a silly way" (November 5, 1907).

By mid-1908, Buchan was suggesting titles by the actress and activist Elizabeth Robins ("There are many hundreds of thousands of suffragists in the country,

most of them poor, who cannot afford to buy a 6s. book, but *The Convert* might easily become the bible of their cause"; July 29, 1908); the queen of the historical romp, Baroness Orczy; the imperious Victorian bestseller Mary Elizabeth Braddon; the sentimental realist Frances Hodgson Burnett; and the quirky Elizabeth von Arnim. Many of the writers he was pitching for the Sevenpennies had had their big hits in the nineteenth century: even as Buchan was developing a New Novels list, Victorian culture continued to dominate in British publishing.

It was in this context that Wells and Buchan first came into contact. Buchan was looking for suitable titles for reprinting in the Sevenpennies, and hoping to launch Nelson's New Novels in 1910. He rejected Wells's £950 offer for the reprint rights for *Kipps* (which its first publisher, Macmillan, had declined to reissue). The negotiations continued, and at the end of June Wells and Buchan had settled on a price of £750, including, too, the reprint rights for *Love and Mr Lewisham* (1900) and *In the Days of the Comet* (1906). Perhaps encouraged by this evident enthusiasm for his fiction, in late November 1908, Wells sent Buchan his new novel.

This makes Buchan one of *Ann Veronica*'s first readers. On December 1, 1908, he wrote to Brown: "I sat up till the small hours this morning reading Wells' new novel, *Ann Veronica*. I think it very good, and as it is about a girl who runs away from a suburban home and becomes a Suffragist and a Fabian its interest is exceedingly topical. I am inclined to think we might make a great success of it. The ending was absurd at first, but he has altered that now".

Given what we already know about Wells's attempts to sell *Ann Veronica*, this letter throws new light on his negotiating tactics, as well as on Buchan's gullibility. In October, Frederick Macmillan had written to Wells to say that he liked the novel, but would not publish it because it would offend Macmillan's public. Michael Sherborne, Wells's biographer, writes that, "Fortunately for Wells, another publisher, T Fisher Unwin, had recently contacted him as part of a recruiting drive for well-known authors. Two days before Macmillan's final rejection he was already negotiating with this rival". In November 1908, Wells

wrote to T Fisher Unwin to resume a discussion about an unnamed novel that he hoped the publisher would take for £1,470 in three payments: this was almost certainly *Ann Veronica*. On November 10, he mentioned Hutchinson as a possible publisher as well.

Following Macmillan's unexpected rejection of *Ann Veronica*, Wells was casting his nets wide; after reading the book for the first time, Buchan was more excited than was sensible. His letter of December 1 to his Edinburgh counterparts asked permission to secure the novel without them seeing the manuscript first. Brown agreed. The next day, Buchan wrote again: "I was not satisfied with the end of Wells' *Ann Veronica*. There was one passage which I thought quite unnecessary and stupidly improper, so I have sent it back to him to amend".

He does not specify which "passage" he found objectionable, but it is likely to have been the same one that scandalized the novel's reviewers: a frank depiction of a young woman asking for a sexual relationship with a married man.

"... Are you sure what it is you want of me?"

"I want you. I want you to be my lover. I want to give myself to you. I want to be whatever I can to you." She paused for a moment. "Is that plain?" she asked.

Despite his lack of discomfort about "unpleasant" subjects, Buchan was quite aware of what Nelson's could and could not publish, and what might wreck their sales and reputation. He had airily claimed that Wells would make the changes to the text that he had requested; Wells did not agree to anything of the sort. A fortnight after Buchan's enthusiastic letter to Brown, Wells wrote to Philip Cazenove, an agent he used for serializations, to say that T Fisher Unwin had "crumpled up", and had bought *Ann Veronica* "without seeing it & I've had none of the publishers & editors [sic] criticisms or anything of that sort". The criticisms from publishers and editors that he resented had been from those who had actually read the novel: Frederick Macmillan and John Buchan.

Ten months later, in October 1909, T Fisher Unwin published *Ann Veronica* in the form that Wells had wanted. One of its most vicious reviews was from the *Spectator*, by its editor, St Loe Strachey. Buchan was also a *Spectator* writer, publishing sixty reviews in the magazine in 1909 alone. Had he had a word?

*Ann Veronica* was dedicated to “A J”. Two months after its publication, Amber Reeves – by now Mrs Blanco White – gave birth to Wells’s daughter, Anna-Jane. Nelson’s did publish a new Wells novel before long: it brought out *The History of Mr Polly* in 1910. Although the majority of reviews were positive, *the Field* condemned it as “the most repulsive story of unredeemed vulgarity and sordid discomfort”. Furious, Wells wanted to launch a legal action against the magazine for defamation, and asked Nelson’s to support him. Worrying that this projected action would sully the Nelson’s brand, Buchan reckoned that *Ann Veronica* was “sure to be brought up” (May 25, 1910). It had, by then, become for him “that indefensible book”.

In the event, Brown ruled that Nelson’s would not support Wells in the libel case, to protect its business information. In November 1910, Wells complained to Buchan that the short stories he had sold to Nelson’s had still not been published. Buchan advised Brown that Wells had no legal case to insist on publication, and that, in addition, it would be better for Nelson’s to keep Wells’s stories as a Sevenpenny title, so that edition would be as separate as possible from the furore – *another* furore – surrounding *The New Machiavelli* (first serialized in the *English Review* in 1910), which Macmillan and Heinemann had refused to publish. (The Bodley Head did so in 1911.) Both Buchan and Brown were, by then, thoroughly aware of the difficulties of negotiating with and about Wells. Ten years later, the bad blood between Buchan and Wells had clotted. As Buchan told Brown in a letter of February 20, 1920, Wells was “quite the most disgusting person we have had to do with I have ever met, and, though I know him pretty well, I do not at all like him”.

*Kate Macdonald is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Oxford International Centre for Publishing Studies at Oxford Brookes University and was the publisher at Handheld Press.*

