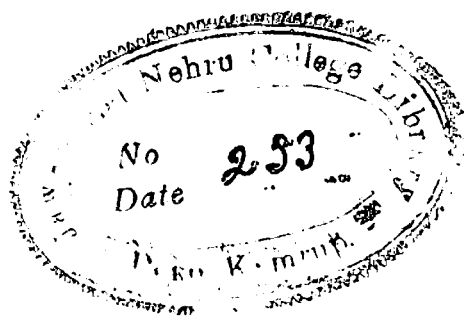


# THE OUTLINE OF HISTORY



# THE OUTLINE OF HISTORY

Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind  
from Primordial Life to Nineteen-sixty

BY  
H. G. WELLS

*Revised by*  
RAYMOND POSTGATE

*With Maps and Plans by*  
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# THE STORY AND AIM OF THE OUTLINE OF HISTORY

§ 1. *How it Came to be Written.*  
§ 2. *The Method of Writing the  
Outline.*

§ 3. *Of Certain Omissions and  
Additions.*  
§ 4. *Of Two Other Outlines*

## § 1

**T**HE *Outline of History* was first written in 1918–1919. It was published in illustrated parts, and it was carefully revised and printed again as a book in 1920. It was again revised very severely and rearranged for a reprint in 1923 (January); it was reissued in a revised and much more amply illustrated edition in 1925, and again in 1930 came a quite fresh edition, recast, rewritten in many places, and with much added new matter. This has now been further revised.

There were many reasons to move a writer to attempt a World History in 1918. It was the last, the weariest, most disillusioned year of the First World War. Everywhere there were unwonted privations; everywhere there was mourning. The tale of the dead and mutilated had mounted to many millions. Men felt they had come to a crisis in the world's affairs. They were too weary and heart-sick to consider complicated possibilities. They were not sure whether they were facing a disaster to civilization or the inauguration of a new phase of human association; they saw things with the simplicity of such flat alternatives, and they clung to hope. There was a copious discussion of possible new arrangements of world politics; of world treaties for the abolition of war, of leagues of nations, leagues of peoples. Everyone was "thinking internationally," or at least trying to do so. But there was a widespread realization that everywhere the essentials of the huge problems that had been thrust so suddenly and tragically upon the democracies of the world were insufficiently understood. "How had these things come about?" they asked, trying to probe behind the disputes about Sarajevo and the Belgian "scrap of paper" to the broader, remoter causes of things. What were the beginnings of this tragic feud across the Rhine? Why had it come to affect the whole world? Why was Japan, which half a century ago had been a romantic, picturesque country, a legend of flimsy art, a comic-opera land as remote almost as another planet, now patrolling the Mediterranean with great battleships? Why had the Tsardom vanished like a dream? What in truth was Turkey? Why was Constantinople so

important in the world? What was an Empire? How had Empires begun? What had converted Germany from a diversity of little states into one aggressive will and power, and put the fear of German energy into half mankind?

Men and women tried to recall the narrow history teaching of their brief schooldays and found an uninspiring and partially forgotten list of national kings or presidents. They tried to read about these matters, and found an endless wilderness of books. They had been taught history, they found, in nationalist blinkers, ignoring every country but their own, and now they were turned out into a blaze. It was extraordinarily difficult for them to determine the relative values of the matters under discussion. Multitudes of people, all the intelligent people in the world, indeed—who were not already specially instructed—were seeking more or less consciously to “get the hang” of world affairs as a whole. They were, in fact, improvising “Outlines of History” in their minds for their own use.

The writer is not in any professional sense an historian, but he has been making out his own private Outline from the beginnings of his career. He has always been preoccupied with history as one whole and with the general forces that make history. It is the twist of his mind. Even when he was a science student he kept a notebook for historical reading. His first published story, *The Time Machine* (1894), was a fantastic speculation about the trend of human destiny; *When the Sleeper Awakes* was a picturesque exaggeration of the development of our civilization; *Anticipations* (1900) was an attempt to argue out some possible consequences of current processes. In quite a number of his books, in *The Research Magnificent* and *The Undying Fire* for example, little “outlines of history” are vignettted. And so this mental stir of the war time found him if not specially equipped, at least specially disposed, to take a comprehensive view of past and present things. For some time before he began this *Outline* he had been working upon the problems of after-war settlement and the project of a League of Nations; in the days, that is, before the late President Wilson took possession of that proposal. Such work necessarily involved participation in the disputes and organization of various propagandist unions and societies. The discussions in these associations brought out very vividly the vital importance in all political activities of a man's conception of the past. For, indeed, what are a man's political activities but the expression in action of his idea of the past? All the people who were interested in these league of nations projects were at sixes and sevens among themselves because they had the most vague, heterogeneous and untidy assumptions about what the world of men was, what it had been, and therefore of what it could be. In very many cases, there was extraordinarily exact special knowledge combined with the most crude and naïve assumptions about history in general.

It seemed more and more advisable to the writer to get together maps and notes, read rather more systematically than he had hitherto

done, and clear up for himself a number of historical issues upon which he was still extremely vague. As soon as he had embarked upon this, it became evident to him that he might do much more useful work by developing his private memoranda upon the main shapes of history into a sort of general report and handbook for the use of men and women busier than himself or preoccupied with other things, than by wrangling more and more hopelessly over impossible constitutions for improbable world confederations. The more he entertained this project of writing a review of existing knowledge of man's place in space and time, the more difficult, attractive and unavoidable an undertaking it appeared to him.

To begin with he had contemplated a general review of European unity, a sort of summary of the rise and break-up of the Roman system, of the obstinate survival of the idea of the Empire in Europe, and of the various projects for the unification of Christendom that had been put forward at different times. But it was speedily evident that there was no real beginning of things in Rome or in Judea, and no possibility of confining the story to the western world. That much was only the latter act of a much greater drama. He found the story carrying him back on the one hand to the Aryan beginnings in the forests and plains of Europe and western Asia, and on the other to the earlier stages of civilization in Egypt, in Mesopotamia and the now submerged lands that seem once to have sustained a human population in the Mediterranean basin. He began to realize how severely European historians have minimized the share of the central uplands of Asia and of the Persian, the Indian and the Chinese cultures, in the drama of mankind. He began to see more and more plainly how living the remote past still is in our lives and institutions, and how little we can understand either the broad political or religious or social issues of to-day without some understanding of the earlier stages of human association. And that involved some understanding of human origins.

So the *Outline* spread and enlarged itself as he contemplated it. For a time he hesitated before the epic immensity of this broadening task. He asked himself whether this was not rather a work for an historian than for one whose chief writings hitherto had been either speculative essays or works of fiction. But there did not seem to be any historian available who was sufficiently superficial, shall we say—sufficiently wide and sufficiently shallow to cover the vast field of the project.

Historians are for the most part very scholarly men nowadays; they go in fear rather of small errors than of disconnectedness; they dread the certain ridicule of a wrong date more than the disputable attribution of a wrong value. It is right and proper that this should be so, and that in a hasty and headlong age a whole class of devoted men should maintain an exacting standard of fine precisions. But these high standards of detailed accuracy make it hopeless for us to go to the historians for what is required here. For them this would not

be an attractive task but a distressing task. To them one must look for accumulated material, rather than for assembled and massed effects. They are, indeed, giving us now, in numerous volumes, by many hands, from many points of view and in a pleasing diversity of spirit and intention, great and noble compilations, of extreme value to students. But these magnificent performances are, for the everyday purposes of the ordinary citizen travelling about in life, as impressive and as useful for handy guidance as a many-volumed encyclopædia.

In America, indeed, there were to be found several useful small books on universal history, notably the *Ancient and Modern History* of Robinson and Breasted, and Hutton Webster's and W. M. West's similar volumes, but these writers aim at the school and the college rather than at the general reader. *The Living Past* of F. S. Marvin again is an admirable essay on intellectual progress, but it gives little substantial fact. It would indeed have meant disaster to the academic reputation of any established historical authority to have admitted an intention of writing a complete Outline of History, and, even were that promise given, the general reader would still have had to wait many years for its performance. The standing of the present writer, however, who is by nature and choice as remote from academic respect as he is from a dukedom, enabled him to interest the public in history without any such sacrifice of dignity and distinction, such risks from hostile criticism, as a recognized authority would have had to incur. It was his happy privilege to offend inaccessibly; he is a literary Bedouin, whose home is the great outside, who knows no prouder title than his name, whose only conceivable honour is his own. This or that specialist might rage at his scandalous neglect of this or that precious item of that specialist's monopoly; it would not matter very much. He could go unblushingly to standard works and ordinarily accessible material; he was not even obliged to pretend to original discoveries or original points of view; his simpler undertaking was to collect, arrange, determine the proportion of the parts and phases of the great adventure of mankind, and write. He has added nothing to history. At least he hopes he has added nothing to history. He has merely made a digest of a great mass of material, some of it very new material, and he has done so in the character of a popular writer considering the needs of other ordinary citizens like himself.

Yet the subject is so splendid a one that no possible treatment, however unpretending, can rob it altogether of its sweeping greatness and dignity. If sometimes this *Outline* is laboured and pitifully insufficient, at others it seems almost to have planned and written itself. Its background is unfathomable mystery, the riddle of the stars, the measurelessness of space and time. There appears life struggling towards consciousness, gathering power, accumulating will, through millions of years and through countless billions of individual lives, until it reaches the tragic confusions and perplexities of the world of to-day, so full of fear and yet so full of promise and opportunity. We see man rising from lonely beginnings to this present dawn of

world fellowship. We see all human institutions grow and change; they are changing now more rapidly than they have ever done before. The display ends in a tremendous note of interrogation. The writer is just a guide who brings his reader at last to the present edge, the advancing edge of things, and stops and whispers beside him: "This is our inheritance."

It would be absurd to claim that this *Outline* is anything more than a current rendering of the opening vision of reality that the multitudinous activities of geologists, palæontologists, embryologists and every kind of naturalist, psychologists, ethnologists, archæologists, philologists and historical investigators, have unveiled during the last hundred years. History a century ago was mere bookishness. The bookish historian now accepts, reluctantly and ungraciously enough, his place as a mere contributor of doubtful documents to the broad ensemble.

On this huge prospect our *Outline* makes its report. To the best of the writer's ability this is how that vision looks to-day. But he writes within his own limitations and the limitations of his time. The *Outline* is a book of to-day—with no pretensions to immortality. It is the current account. This *Outline of History* will in due course follow its earlier editions to the second-hand book-box and the dust-destroyer. More gifted hands with fuller information and ampler means will presently write fresh Outlines in happier phrases. The *Outline of History* the writer would far prefer to his own would be the *Outline* of a hundred years hence; to read it and, perhaps with even more curiosity, to pore over its illustrations.

All of us, if by some miracle we could get that future copy of the *Outline of History*, would, I suppose, turn first to the amazing illustrations of the last chapters and then to the accompanying text. What astonishing events! What unbelievable achievements! But, afterwards, this writer at least would go back to the early chapters to see how much of the story that is told here survived.

Probably the general shape of the early part would still be very much the same, but there would be hundreds of illuminating details now unknown and fascinating additional discoveries, of skulls, implements, buried cities and vestiges of lost and submerged peoples, as yet unsuspected. The stories of China and India would be much more exact and perhaps different in quality, and much more would be known of Central Asia, and perhaps of America before Columbus. Charlemagne and Cæsar would still be great figures in history, and some of our nearer giants, Napoleon for example, might be found shrunk to comparative unimportance.

## § 2

### *The Method of Writing the Outline.*

The chief purpose of the revision of 1930 was to make the *Outline* simpler and easier to read.