

THE H.G. WELLS QUOTE ON STATISTICS:  
A QUESTION OF ACCURACY

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SUMMARIES

*A widely disseminated quotation by H.G. Wells on the importance of statistics is shown to have been misrepresented.*

*Es wird gezeigt, dass ein oft wiederholtes Zitat von H.G. Wells über die Bedeutung der Statistik falsch gegeben ist.*

*Una muy conocida frase de H.G. Wells sobre lo importancia estadísticas ha sido mal interpretada.*

One of the most frequently cited quotations championing statistics is a remark usually attributed to H.G. Wells. The quotation appears in various forms by various authors, and in fact is not even always attributed to Wells. It now appears that the quotation was taken out of context, and later generously paraphrased, and that there is considerable doubt that Wells ever gave much attention to statistics, much less an enthusiastic endorsement.

The earliest occurrence of the quotation in writings about statistics is as an epigraph at the beginning of Helen M. Walker's *Studies in the History of Statistical Method*, where it appears in this form:

*"The time may not be very remote when it will be understood that for complete initiation as an efficient citizen of one of the new great complex world wide states that are now developing, it is as necessary to be able to compute, to think in averages and maxima and minima, as it is now to be able to read and to write."*

H.G. Wells, *Mankind in the Making*  
[Walker 1929, v]

A book chapter on the history of statistics that appeared in 1940 concluded with the following paraphrase of the Wells quotation, but this time without even giving credit to Wells:

*The time is perhaps at hand when it will be recognized that for intelligent living in modern society it is as necessary to be able to think in averages, percentages, and deviations as it is to be able to read and write.*

[Lundberg 1940, 140]

Still a different version of the quotation was used in the presidential address to the American Statistical Association in 1950. Samuel S. Wilks, addressing the 110th annual meeting on December 28, 1950 in Chicago, said the following:

*Perhaps H.G. Wells was right when he said "Statistical thinking will one day be as necessary for efficient citizenship as the ability to read and write."*

[Wilks 1951, 5]

Walker used the quotation again in 1951 when she made it the basis for a plea for statistical as well as verbal literacy [1951, 7].

Essentially the same version used by Wilks also appeared in 1952 in a statistics textbook by Simpson and Kafka [1952, 3] and as the epigraph of an article on statistics in *Scientific American* by Warren Weaver [1952, 60]. Simpson and Kafka attributed it to Wells and gave Wilks' speech as the source. Weaver attributed it to Wells but gave no source. He later said (personal communication, November 19, 1977) that he could not recall the source. It seems likely that it was the Wilks speech, since it appeared the year before and contained exactly the same wording.

An examination of *Mankind in the Making* reveals what Wells actually wrote. The quotation comes from a paragraph dealing with the importance of teaching mathematics, not statistics. The quotation that Walker presented in 1929 is part of a long sentence that reads in its entirety:

*The great body of physical science, a great deal of the essential fact of financial science, and endless social and political problems are only accessible and only thinkable to those who have had a sound training in mathematical analysis, and the time may not be very remote when it will be understood that for complete initiation as an efficient citizen of one of the new great complex world-wide States that are now developing, it is as necessary to be able to compute,*

*to think in averages and maxima and minima, as it is now to be able to read and write.*

[Wells 1911, 204]

It might be argued that statistics and mathematics were closely related in Wells' mind, and that when he wrote this passage he was to some extent thinking of procedures we would now regard as statistics. That is conjecture, however. Earlier sections of the paragraph deal with arithmetic and geometry, and its literal topic is mathematics. It doesn't contain the word "statistics," even though the term was clearly in use at the time of Wells' writing [Yule 1905].

Further evidence of Wells' lack of attention to statistics comes from biographies of the man by Vallentin [1950], Brome [1951], and Dickson [1969], none of which mentions statistics in its index. Dickson indicated recently (personal communication, December 5, 1977) that he could not recall another place in Wells' writings where he dealt specifically with statistics. Dickson pointed out, however, that Wells wrote more than 100 books, as well as a great deal of journalism, and that there could be some reference to statistics in this vast material.

H.G. Wells foresaw the power of science to revolutionize war, the coming emergence of the middle class, and the need for a World State. He was a prophet on many matters, but it now appears the future role of statistics was not one of them.

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