

The Boots of H.G. Wells



A Pair of Boots by Vincent Van Gogh, 1887

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (March 2022)

H. G. Wells was a brilliant if flawed man: but all men are flawed, without necessarily being brilliant. Of humble birth, he rose to be one of the greatest literary figures of his time. He wrote many classic books, and I do not think that he will ever go out of print while there is still print to go out of.

Although he became rich early in life – deservedly so, as no one would disagree – he was a convinced socialist, indeed he was one of the prime movers in the British socialist movement in the first years of the twentieth century. In 1905, he published for the Fabian Society a brilliant little tract titled *This Misery of Boots*. As propaganda for socialism, it

was highly effective; for depth of thought somewhat less impressive.

Wells starts from the deficiencies of the footwear of his day. He tells us that he grew up in as basement flat, and therefore saw footwear out of the window unattached, as it were, to the people who wore it. Much of this footwear was very bad; and Wells goes on to enumerate all the things that were wrong with the boots and shoes that people wore. The majority of people, he said, had always to wear uncomfortable, even painful, footwear; the reason for this was poverty, and the reason for poverty was private property. In reality, there was more than enough leather and human skill to go round to make good boots and shoes for everyone, if society were organised along socialist lines (in those days, no one was much concerned with animal rights and the ethics of using leather).

In effect, what Wells wanted was a society in which no one owned capital, but lived solely by wages from his labour, the latter to be determined by the fair rate for the job as determined by objectively reasonable, fair-minded and philanthropic agents of the all-powerful state, presumably with no private interests of their own to pursue. I leave it to readers to decide how realistic this scheme was (or is, since there are still some people who dream of it). In extenuation of Wells, I would point out that, at the time he wrote, no one had tried, except in little utopian communities in places like the United States, Paraguay and Australia, to put this scheme into practice, and therefore mere empirical experience could not have told him what boots and shoes made by employees would actually be like.

Wells begins his pamphlet by classifying all the various discomforts of footwear in his time. He says that they are not inevitable because there are some people – in essence, the parasitic rich – who never feel them. *Their* footwear is made-to-measure, supple and soft. Not for them the various chafings, leaks, pressure points and so forth of the poor

man's footwear. And if it is true that some people never experience what Wells calls *the misery of boots*, then it is clear that this misery is not an inevitable accompaniment of human existence, but could be avoided. Not many would dissent from the view that avoidable misery ought to be avoided.

Naturally, Wells uses footwear as a stalking-horse for his argument for socialism, for what applies to footwear applies to almost everything else: food, housing, education, medical care and so forth. Again, in extenuation of Wells, it must be admitted that life in 1905 in England was for most people extremely hard and often very uncomfortable and lived in dismal surroundings. It is not surprising that reflective people should have thought 'There must be something better than this,' nor was it dishonourable for them to have done so.

Wells disposes of the argument that footwear is not a proper subject for thought because it is not noble, as thoughts about bravery or salvation would be. He takes footwear as emblematic of something much larger, indeed almost of the whole of human existence. His pamphlet, however shaky his economics, is a brilliant *tour de force*.

His classification of the miseries of footwear is amusing but accurate and brilliantly observed, as I know from personal experience that I am about to recount. His classification was as follows:

- The various sorts of chafe (or rubbing).
- The miseries that come from the wearing out of the sole.
- The miseries that come from leaks and splitting.

At this point, I began to remember my own experience of footwear when I was young. I was not born to poverty, though not to great wealth either, and certainly my problems with shoes did not arise from any economic difficulties my parents may have had. (If they ever had any, I never knew of them.)

My recollection of footwear in my childhood are various. For example, when my mother took me to the shoe-shop to buy new shoes (which I found, and still find, tedious to do), my feet were first put into a kind of x-ray machine emanating a pale green light, and no doubt radiation responsible for many cases of leukaemia, to see precisely how the bones in my feet were aligned. Of course, it was a gimmick, and possibly a dangerous one, but this was the only thing I liked about shoe-shops.

My feet were then measured in some kind of callipers, to measure the appropriate size and fitting, for example narrow, medium or wide. I was wide, but not flat-footed, thank goodness. But despite all this measurement, my new shoes always hurt and produced blisters on various parts of my feet. Wells rightly says of these chafes, the worst were those at the heel: they were bad enough in my case to give me a limp for a few days. But the sides of the shoes and the upper where it met my big toe were also problematic. I hated and feared new shoes, and viewed the prospect of a visit to the shoe-shop with dread.

The fact is that in those days new shoes had to be run in, like new cars. When my father bought a new car, he was supposed not to drive it at faster than 30 miles an hour for its first 1000 miles or so. If he did, he was warned, it might seize up. I am not sure he was ever patient enough to abide by this warning, but I remember the day when the car was *run in*, as it was called, and the sense of liberation it brought with it. My father could now speed, as was his inclination, with a clear conscience. He would overtake on the brow of a hill, claiming that he had estimated what was coming over the other side. I never understood how he thought he could estimate this, but the fact is that he never had an accident.

Anyway, shoes had to be run in like cars, and liberation came when you realised that the shoes had stretched to the shape of your feet and no longer hurt or pinched anywhere.

Comfort did not always last long, for the soles of some shoes were fixed to the uppers with little nails, that had an inclination to wear through and dig into your feet. How well I remember that sensation! I can still feel it in my mind's feet. I didn't like to complain and would put up with it for ages.

This was particularly so with football and cricket boots. They seemed expressly designed to prevent any athletic achievement. Football boots in those days were made of tough leather which had to be softened regularly with a substance called dubbin. I remember rubbing my boots with dubbin before a game, otherwise I could not possibly have got my feet into them. Even so, they were not comfortable and in the wet had a tendency to absorb water, so that they became like dumbbells attached to your feet. Of course, in those days the ball was also made of absorbent leather, so that to kick it in the rain was like kicking Ayer's Rock. The pitch turned to glue, the mud tried to suck your boots from your feet, even the laces, which seemed about two miles long, soaked up water and became heavy, but it was all supposed to be good for your character. Had it not been for my boots, I am sure I should have been a star player.

I have not fully listed the problems with the football boots of those days, however. They had studs on the soles, but like the soles themselves, they were not glued but nailed. This was another test of character.

When I was about 11 or 12, however, I regarded leaks in my ordinary shoes, and my preparedness to put up with them, as a sign of my concentration on things higher than the squelching sensation when I walked in them in the wet. I would not draw attention to the leaks and the holes in the soles because to do so would have made me appear very ordinary. I was therefore rather proud of my leaks and holes, and I can still feel the sensation of water-saturated woollen socks in my mind's feet.

In those days, of course, footwear was not yet a matter of status among children and adolescents as it has now become. Indeed, many years later, I knew of a murder committed because of a quarrel about someone's footwear deemed to be laughably unfashionable (though indistinguishable from everyone else's, as far as I could tell, a fine example of Freud's concept of the narcissism of small differences).

For many years now, I have had no problems at all with new shoes. They all seem to fit perfectly from the moment I buy them: indeed, sometimes I walk out of the shop with them on, and by old shoes in the shoebox for the new ones. Am I alone in this, or is *this misery of boots* a thing of the past, and if so, why?

I don't hear anyone complaining of tight shoes that chafe, so I presume this is a misery that has been conquered. It is not so much that my feet have become absolutely shoe-makers' standard size and shape, as that the technique or technology of shoe-making has improved out of all recognition. Where football is concerned, the players now wear footwear not very dissimilar from a ballerina's instead of an imitation marching boot of a Victorian army. The ball is lighter, of course, and no longer absorbs water like a malevolent sponge, and the pitches do not turn gloopy at the first fall of rain. But the footwear is now hi-tech and often of luminescent colouration.

Poverty such as Wells described (with real feeling) has virtually disappeared, along with this misery of boots. Is it social reform of the kind advocated by Wells – though he would have gone much further – that is the main cause of these happy results? No doubt it had some part to play, but overwhelmingly, I think, it was the result of technical advancement. If we made shoes and boots as we made them in 1905, we should suffer just as badly as people did then, but probably a lot more complainingly. Oddly enough for a man who was in many respects a great observer and predictor of technological advance, he underestimated its transformative

effect in the matter of footwear. And he believed that nothing could change unless change was wrought by a directing intelligence such as his.

To end, however, on a personal note. I still suffer from a certain kind of misery of footwear, or absence of footwear. I have only one recurring dream, or only one recurring dream that I remember. It is this: that I leave the house for an important meeting, fully dressed except for my feet which are bare. The weather is wet and I can feel my feet are freezing. But instead of turning back, I continue; I appear at the meeting barefoot. I am cold, miserable and humiliated when I wake and realise it is only a dream, and that my feet are actually perfectly warm. I could interpret it, but I won't.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd*](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [*Grief and Other Stories*](#) from New English Review Press.

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