

On 3 September 1940, writing the fourth of his surviving war letters to his long-time companion and eventual wife Grace Isabel Wilson (letters now part of the University of Liverpool’s John Wyndham Archive as file 10/6/10), John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (henceforth JBH) mentions visiting their friends “Howell & Becky” Davies (Becky’s full maiden name being Enid Margaret Beckett).



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*Howell and ‘Becky’ Davies on their wedding day
23 September 1922 at Shiplake, Oxfordshire*

They lived at 2 Pond Square, Highgate (see my photograph below and the 1946-47 one above it), at the top of Swain’s Lane just north of Highgate Cemetery. During the Blitz, JBH would sometimes stay with the Davies couple and so escape the more-likely-to-be-bombed Bloomsbury Penn Club where he lived for so many years. He kept some spare clothes at 2 Pond Square. Fellow Penn Club resident, the schoolteacher Grace was evacuated (along with her school) to Wales.



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*2 Pond Square, Highgate, 1946-47
(second house on the right)*



Photograph by David Ketterer

2 Pond Square, Highgate in 2015

The very Welsh Welshman Howell Davies (1896-1985) was a gregarious author and editor (who often wrote scripts for the BBC) and one of JBH’s best and most influential friends. Under the pseudonym “Andrew Marvell” (that metaphysical poet’s cottage was once just south of 2 Pond Square), he published three very interesting Gollancz sf novels: *Minimum Man, or Time to be Gone* (1938; originally set in 1950, it is set in 1970 in the 1953 subtitle-less Science Fiction Book Club edition; there is also an English spelling US text in *Famous*

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Fantastic Mysteries for August 1947;¹ there may also exist an as-yet- unidentified 1938 (or later?) London evening newspaper serial version); *Three Men Make a World* (1939); and *Congratulate the Devil* (1939). The first of the 1939 novels deals with the consequences, largely in London but implicitly everywhere, of a world catastrophe caused by a bacteria which destroys petroleum and thereby has the happy consequence of preventing WWII. The second, set in England (mainly Hampstead) with a side trip to a Welsh village, focuses on the discovery of a drug in pill form that enables a controlling form of telepathic hypnotism (compare the varied implications of the longevity drug in JBH's *Trouble with Lichen* and telepathic hypnotism in *The Chrysalids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*). The pills are used addictively for ill (a bank robbery, taking advantage of a woman, and murder) and good (kindness and happiness for all) but, either way, the authorities will ensure the deaths of the users. Like Howells, JBH would also unpack "telepathy" as a controlling "telepathic hypnotism", a weapon used for "good" in *The Chrysalids* and for "evil" in *The Midwich Cuckoos*.² All three "Marvell" novels have that persuasive context of everyday realism that characterises "Wyndham"'s novels. *Three Men Make a World* is more interesting than *Congratulate the Devil* because it suggests that the influence between Davies and Wyndham went both ways. Davies' focus on the impact of machines may have been inspired by similar discussions in JBH's *Planet Plane* (1936) while Davies' penultimate prophetic-of-the-Blitz catastrophe scenes in London (especially in the vicinity of the nearby-Penn-Club British Museum) combined with the world-wide spread of the anti-petroleum spores anticipates aspects of *The Day of the Triffids*. *Three Men's* concluding seven-years-later, semi-utopian, southern England includes the following anticipations of *Triffids* (and JBH's feminism): University of "Canterbury physicists have discovered a vegetable lubricating oil which is immune to attack"; there are "no more bewildering -isms" (282); and "There are girls at Eton" (285). JBH would have read all three of Howell's novels as they were published and they all anticipate aspects of his "Wyndham" novels to come.

JBH may have first met Davies around 1938 via the sf world in London with its regular pub meetings. But it is more likely that their meeting happened in 1936 via the 1921-23 Bedales School geography teacher Annie Leslie Sargent (known as "Leslie"), who, in 1930, became the wife of JBH's life-long Bedales friend Arthur Thomas Sykes (known as "Bill" Sykes). I am indebted to David Sykes for information about his mother. It is clear in several of JBH's war letters to Grace that Howell and Becky knew Bill and Leslie. Thanks to a 19 December

¹ *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* also pirated JBH's *The Secret People* in its April 1950 issue. Eventually, the agent Margaret Christie secured compensation for both JBH and Davies. JBH settled for \$300, Davies for \$250

² The concept of telepathic hypnotism is implied in this passage which exists only in the US Ballantine 1958 hardback and 1959 paperback editions of *The Midwich Cuckoos*. Dr. Willers speculates about three young women who have no idea as to how they became pregnant: "I've wondered, could hypnotism be involved, do you think? Someone who hypnotically induces amnesia in his victims and wipes the whole matter out of their memories? Would such a thing, perhaps, be possible?" (p. 73 and p. 60).

2014 phone conversation with Joan, Howell and Becky's daughter born in 1925, I learnt that Becky knew Leslie because they had met at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Joan also informed me that, from the age of eight, until she went to Bedales in Steep, she (Joan) had attended its preparatory school Dunhurst. The Sykeses lived in Froxfield (just outside Steep) and probably introduced JBH (a regular multiple days guest at their home) to Howell and Becky during Joan's time at Bedales. Joan's son (and the Davies' grandson) Adrian Dannatt, kindly provided me with his mother's (the artist Joan Dannatt's) phone number. Adrian (the child star of the 1977 British TV series *Just William* based on Richmal Crompton's novels) supplies an invaluable colourful account of his maternal grandfather (which includes the Highgate address and mentions an evening newspaper serial of *Minimum Man*) in his Foreword to a Welsh first reprint of *Congratulate the Devil* (Parthian Books, 2008). Joan would have left Dunhurst and gone up to Bedales at about 11 years of age (1936). This may have prompted her parents to make a special visit to the school. Perhaps they were staying with the Sykeses while JBH was staying (as was also his regular habit) with his also Bedales friends, the Barkers, at Row Cottage in Steep--hence the timeliness of the introduction by Leslie, and the meeting.



Photograph by Trevor Dannatt OBE
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and her son Adrian Dannatt

*Howell Davies with his grandchildren Adrian
and Clare Dannatt at their home in Canonbury, c1972*



Photograph by Trevor Dannatt OBE
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and her son Adrian Dannatt

'Becky' Davies, c 1972

The subtitle-signalled next stage of evolution theme in *Minimum Man* (a main title which should be understood as combining the ideas of Little People and Barely Human) would have contributed significantly to *The Midwich Cuckoos*, JBH's masterpiece. Mysteriously affected by working in a poison gas station, a Mrs Jones, "the Mother" (295), without being impregnated, gives birth to extremely small twins, one male, one female: "How could there be children without a father?" (1938 edition, 113). JBH largely grew up without a father and might well have wondered about his own paternity. "Marvell"'s vague answer to the question is some kind of "asexual or parthenogenic birth" (114). Approximately one foot tall adults at a speeded up rate, the twins mate and produce more of their preternaturally fast moving and intellectually superior telepathic kind. Like Mrs Jones's twins, their similarly hobgoblin-like offspring are all the same diminutive height and have no need for clothes. (Joan Dannatt recalled that a number of concerned readers created miniature outfits for these beings that they mailed to "Andrew Marvell.") The naked "minimum" people reproduce sexually and incestuously. Mrs Jones's female twin, like that twin's female offspring, is able to give birth three times a year. Their leader explains to a newspaper reporter that, to their rational benefit, "we are, like the animals, seasonally sexed, and not continuously like you" (257). Note should be taken of "their eugenic programme" (246; see also 258) and the reference to "Hitler" (228). By 1950 (or 1970) these variably advanced and accelerated human[?] midgets number around 250 and take over from the dictatorship that, after dissolving the House of Commons, controls Britain; it is assumed that eventually they will totally supplant our taller humankind. The controlling character Zellaby in *Midwich Cuckoos* was clearly so named as an acknowledgement on JBH's part given the Prime Minister character named Jellaby (a fascist dictator and persecutor of Jews) in *Minimum Man*. Jellaby anticipates Orwell's Big Brother by a decade. Howell Davies probably derived the name from that of the character in *Bleak House*: Mrs Jellyby, the unthinking philanthropist.

The Day of the Triffids' illegitimate working class Wilfred Coker who quotes the concluding lines of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is also a kind of acknowledgement. This disputatious character is, to some extent, a hybrid of Davies and the JBH who may have discovered around 1940 that he was born a bastard. A partial name (and free will?) overlap between WILfred Coker and the Wyndham-style narrator WILliam Masen should be noted.

Hwyl and Bronwen Hughes, the married couple who appear in JBH's most Welsh story, *Chinese Puzzle* (the UK *Argosy* February 1953), are based on Howell and Becky Davies.

The minimums take control of Britain by killing the 26 key "party of New Freedom" (6) members, including Jellaby, in support of that party's replacement by the opposition Conservative party led by an individual named "Gregory". The fact that Jellaby is known only by his last name and Gregory only by his apparent first name underlines the minimums' view that because of maximal humankind's contradictory deficiencies, the one

leader is not more desirable than the other. Gregory and the near homonymously named Jellaby (which could be spelled Gellaby) are essentially akin to Tweedledum and Tweedledee; they might as well be one person named Gregory Jellaby, or G. Jellaby. JBH's Zellaby is a G. Zellaby, the "G" standing for "Gordon". The minimums' wise leader, Solomon, arranges with Gregory that once Gregory is Prime Minister, he, Gregory, will be under the control of Solomon and the minimums. Incidentally, the novel's concluding overthrow of the government all approximately revolves around Davies' Highgate home address--2 Pond Square. Adrian informed me by email (18 December 2014) that his grandfather had personally painted the exterior brick work of the house pink! That pink paint has since been removed.

John Clute's and Brian Stableford's entry for "Andrew Marvell" in the online third edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* mentions, in conclusion, that "Marvell's novels were professional and engrossing, and may have influenced John Wyndham . . ." Thanks to Jellaby/Zellaby, we can assert with assurance that the first of "Marvell"'s novels most certainly did influence Wyndham. But that is not the only reason why *Minimum Man* must be recognized as an overlooked seminal sf novel. It should be reprinted as soon as possible, perhaps under its original (non-sexist) title *Time to be Gone*. This is the obviously relevant title that appears at the top of every page of the original 1938 text. Whoever publishes a twenty-first century edition (ideally Orion Books) should also consider including the 1947 text's Virgil Finlay's dramatic cover illustration and the four internal black and white illustrations by a combination of Hannes Bok, Austin, and Lawrence. Unlike the 1938 and 1953 editions, the 1947 text inserts ten chapter divisions.

JBH, in 1939, was soon to become involved in World War II and that experience largely accounts for the fiction of "John Wyndham". But his previous awareness of the novels of "Andrew Marvell" is also an explanatory factor. In 1938 and 1939 (and until the 1951 publication of *The Day of the Triffids*) Howell Davies was a more successful sf author than JBH. Indeed, now it suddenly seems that Davies should be recognised as a significant figure in the history of British sf. We may assume that JBH would have observed that Davies' sf novels were not marketed as sf but as thrillers. That would become "Wyndham"'s strategy. JBH was one of the first authors of sf (alongside Ray Bradbury) to attempt to distinguish his work from sf for commercial and other professional reasons. Margaret Atwood is the most famous current example.