

OXFORD

The Fin de Siècle

A READER IN CULTURAL
HISTORY C.1880–1900

SALLY LEDGER AND ROGER LUCKHURST



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*c.*1880–1900

EDITED BY

Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst

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Introduction

READING THE 'FIN DE SIÈCLE'

Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst

The Victorian fin de siècle was an epoch of endings and beginnings. The collision between the old and the new that characterized the turn of the century marks it as an excitingly volatile and transitional period; a time when British cultural politics were caught between two ages, the Victorian and the Modern; a time fraught with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility. At the very moment that Max Nordau famously lamented the encroaching 'Dusk of nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is persisting in the midst of a dying world',¹ Britain's cultural and political landscape was being lit up by a constellation of new formations: the new woman, the new imperialism, the new realism, the new drama, and the new journalism, all arriving alongside 'new' human sciences like psychology, psychical research, sexology, and eugenics. This was an era of extraordinary technological advance (duplex telegraphy, the gramophone, the telephone, wireless telegraphy, X-rays, cinematography), of educational and democratic reform, of transformations in political representation, and yet it was also an age of very real decline, in which Britain's primacy as global economic power was rivalled by Germany and America.² This contradiction, the way in which assertions of the limitless generative power of the British nation were haunted by fantasies of decay and degeneration, is a highly specific moment, we might say, of experiencing the *ambivalence of modernity*.³

Perhaps this is why we remain fascinated by the fin de siècle. The allure of the 1890s might have less to do with its alleged 'naughtiness', or with seeking parallels to our own late twentieth-century millennial fantasies, than with the sense that the period has provided both enduring cultural icons of ambivalence, as well

¹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* [1892] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 1.

² 'Britain, we may say, was becoming a parasitic rather than competitive world economy, living off the remains of world monopoly, the undeveloped world, her past accumulations of wealth, and the advance of her rivals': Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 192.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

as a difficult historical legacy to which we are still, in many ways, indebted, and are still working through. Certainly, this might explain the intense interest that has come to be focused on the era by a number of disciplines and disciplinary approaches over the last fifteen years or so. This is one very timely reason for a reader in the *fin de siècle*: cultural and social historians, urban theorists, historians of science, psychologists, literary critics, post-colonial critics, feminist writers, and gay and lesbian theorists have, in diverse ways, come to regard the late nineteenth century as a crucial moment in the formation or transformation of their object of study. We can provide a portrait of how the Victorian *fin de siècle* has been reconstructed by traversing some of these disciplinary engagements.

One of the most important developments in the humanities has been a shift to a more broadly conceived 'cultural studies'. One important aim of this disciplinary reframing has been to extend and redefine 'culture' in its broadest sense, and question assertions of immanent value in high art against the more immediate 'gratifications' of popular culture. The *fin de siècle* has become historically important to both of these aims. A number of critics have observed that conceptions of 'culture'—in both its narrow, Arnoldian meaning and its more general sense—owe much to ethnological and anthropological writings of the late nineteenth century.⁴ Equally, the *fin de siècle* has come to be identified as the moment of emergence, in their modern configuration, of the forms and definitions of 'high' and 'low' culture.⁵ The *Daily Mail* begins, but so does the *Times Literary Supplement*; Henry James defines the art of the novel and begins to find uses for obscurity,⁶ but this is also the moment at which mass generic forms—detective fiction, the spy novel, science fiction—take on the shapes that remain recognizable today. The hegemonic vehicle of Realism, the three-volume novel, died in 1894; the romance is propagandistically revived and the newly named 'short story' fills the vast acreage of columns in the new magazines. Terms like the 'best-seller' are coined. It is these cheap, mass forms which produce, in a period of amazing intensity, the *Time Traveller* and the *Invisible Man*, Sherlock Holmes and Watson, Svengali and his damsel Trilby, Dracula and his many damsels, Jekyll and Hyde. W. T. Stead begins the New Journalism at the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the 1880s; Northcliffe and others finance the rise of the tabloid in the 1890s. New printing techniques and photographic technologies transform print culture; the 'celebrity interview' takes off; the resituation of the royal family from

⁴ See especially Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity, in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁵ See Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) and *In Crusoe's Footsteps: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁶ A reference to Allon White, *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1981).

bourgeois seclusion to public figureheads of empire renews popular expressions of patriotic fervour.⁷

The audience for such popular literatures was perhaps the first generation to benefit from the 1870 Education Act. Ambivalence marks 'informed' opinion. What good was literacy if it was only to foster such literatures?⁸ Massification became a crucial problem in a number of aspects, perhaps most visibly reflected in the intensification of concern over the problem of the large population of the London poor in the late nineteenth century. This has left a complex legacy. There is a discourse of degenerative urban blight and a set of representations of the poor, in which the 'residuum' are more feared than pitied.⁹ James Cantlie wrote in 1885: 'the close confines and foul air of our cities are shortening the life of the individual, and raising up a puny and ill-developed race . . . It is beyond prophecy to guess even what the rising generation will grow into, what this Empire will become after they have got charge of it.'¹⁰ Much of the political language concerning 'immigrant' populations and the aims of 'urban regeneration' derives from this moment. There is the remorseless statistical regulation of the city, mapped by Charles Booth in twenty-four volumes between 1889 and 1903, which replaces the anecdotalism of Henry Mayhew or Dickens, London's East End moving from a mythical 'Darkest England' to object of positive knowledge. Booth's transformative project, in which a conservative businessman setting out to challenge socialist statistics on poverty ends up advocating limited forms of state support for the 'deserving' poor, marks a shift from somewhat *ad hoc* philanthropy to the beginnings of the systematic interventions of a Welfare State. And there is, entangled in the origins of welfarist ideals, in the model housing, in the public parks and baths, an element of wishing for eugenic control over the breeding habits of a new mass population, an artificial intervention into a natural evolution 'gone wrong' in its proliferation of the 'weakest'. It is difficult not to want to read the discourse of this sort of social Darwinism teleologically—as if its trajectory towards Nazism was inevitable. There is a certain cosy hindsight, however, in the recent 'outing' of H. G. Wells as holding eugenic views.¹¹ The pervasiveness of such racialized thought across the political and cultural spectrum reflects the authority of science and the power of the evolutionary analogy in the late Victorian era.

⁷ For the best surveys of these changes in high and low cultural forms, see David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895–1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), and Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (London: Fontana, 1991).

⁸ This is discussed in Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper-Collins, 1991).

⁹ See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

¹⁰ James Cantlie, *Degeneration Amongst Londoners* (London: Field & Tuer, 1885), 35 and 52.

¹¹ See the recent biography by Michael Coren, *The Invisible Man: The Life and Liberties of H. G. Wells* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993). Such teleological views are eloquently warned against in Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: Anatomy of a European Disorder c.1848–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

The New Science, too, was the impetus for the development of literary naturalism at the fin de siècle. Simultaneously influenced by the literature of urban exploration and by theories of heredity, literary naturalism—represented in Britain by George Gissing, Arthur Morrison, and George Moore—mimicked the developing technology of photography in its ‘objective’ scrutiny of city life. The often unsympathetic accounts of working-class city dwellers fuelled existing fears of degeneration.

Famously, it was the difficulty in raising sufficiently healthy recruits amongst the population of London for the Boer War of 1899–1902 that intensified the fantasies of racial decline and degeneration. The advancing front of the empire was threatened from the very centre. The fin de siècle again provides remarkably enduring icons and residues—whether from ‘heroes’ like General Gordon, Cecil Rhodes, and Lord Kitchener, resonating events like the battle of Rorke’s Drift or the Relief of Mafeking, institutions like the Boy Scouts, or popular characters like Gunga Din, immortal Ayesha, or the diamonds of King Solomon’s mines. Popular culture of the time was fascinated by exotic, imperial terrors—fantasies of reverse invasion by the French or Germans, the stirring of mummies in the British Museum as Egypt and the Sudan were annexed, the evil genius of Fu Manchu and the ‘yellow peril’ as trade routes in the Far East were contested.¹² This welter of images undoubtedly reflects the paradox of empire in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: a massive expansion, particularly into Africa following the Berlin Conference of imperial powers in 1885, but an expansion which was motored by anxieties over decay and decline.¹³ The model of Gibbon’s ‘rise and fall’ of the Roman empire haunted many articulations in the period. If the ‘sun never set’ on the British empire, puzzled readers of a fractured two-part story, *Heart of Darkness*, could probably have discerned that the opening description of magnificent sunset over the Thames was a jaundiced rebuke to such pretensions. Nevertheless, the death of Gordon, or defeat at the hands of disciplined Zulus or handfuls of Boers, almost propelled the hardening ideology of empire. Newly ‘jingoistic’ defences of empire were also responding to the loosening of the consensus over the validity of imperialism, whether from socialist or anarchist voices, or within the ranks of the liberal intelligentsia, which fractured over the prosecution of the Boer War. Apologists for empire could seek justification in the scientific dis-

¹² For invasion fantasies, see I. F. Clarke, *The Tale of the Next Great War: 1871–1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995). For Gothic exoticisms, see Stephen Arata, ‘The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation’, *Victorian Studies*, 33/4 (1990), 621–45; David Glover, *Vampires, Mummies and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹³ For histories, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), and, for Africa, Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher, and Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1981).

courses of racialized Darwinism, which placed the spatial diffusion of different peoples along a single temporal axis, moving from the 'primitive' to the 'civilized'. By the 1890s, however, such 'armchair anthropology' was beginning to be undermined by the complex findings of workers 'in the field'. When Haddon, Rivers, and others set out on the Torres Straits expedition in 1898, a more relativistic, modern anthropology was in the process of developing.¹⁴

In many ways, Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, and its important contribution to the subsequent academic founding of 'post-colonial studies' has had a major impact on recovering much of this material.¹⁵ In a largely decolonized world, liberal guilt or simple bad faith did much to suppress aspects of British and European imperial history. Said's emphasis on *Orientalism* as a 'textual attitude,' however, has meant that populist imperial texts, whether speeches, travel narratives, *Boy's Own* papers or fictions, have been resituated as significant textual constructions of colonial discourse. Said's trenchant insistence that such racial paradigms still operated in the geopolitics of the late twentieth century is an injunction to confront the persistent residues of the past.

The same is true for questions of contemporary identity, whether concerning gender politics, sexual identity, or conceptions of subjectivity itself. The feminist project of 'recovering' gendered occlusions has had notable successes in reconceiving social and literary histories, and as part of the process of tracking the origins of modern feminism the cultural representations of the New Woman in the 1890s have emerged as a vital adjunct to concurrent suffrage campaigns.¹⁶ The icon of the New Woman was double-coded: it could mark an image of sexual freedom and assertions of female independence, promising a bright democratic future; it could also mark an apocalyptic warning of the dangers of sexual degeneracy, the abandonment of motherhood, and consequent risk to the racial future of England. Such political codings are not always easy to distribute, and indeed self-nominated New Women could themselves be advocates of conservative causes. One of the most famous New Woman novelists, Sarah Grand, was an enthusiastic exponent of social purity. Her novels *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1897) were outspoken attacks on male sexuality in a way which

¹⁴ For standard history, see George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (London: Free Press, 1987). For shifting conceptions and modes of anthropological professionalism see also George Stocking (ed.), *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

¹⁶ See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991); Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and New Women Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992); Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); and Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

abutted onto social purity campaigns to suppress all forms of sexual expression. Such problematic complicities and ambivalences at the beginnings of modern feminist thought have proved productive sites for thinking through the articulation of gender with other significant markers of identity.

The historicization of 'sexuality' as a thoroughly social rather than natural category has resulted in further excavations of the fin de siècle. Feminist social purity campaigns of the time and William Stead's formative attempt at sensationalist investigative journalism in 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' in 1885 led to a raising of the age of consent to the current age of 16 in the Criminal Law Amendment Act, and, as a late addition, the criminalizing of 'acts of gross indecency' between men. The martyrdom of Oscar Wilde to the full punishment provided by the Act, two years of hard labour, has always provided the main focus for the Decadent 1890s. The image of Wilde, dressed in a T-shirt emblazoned with the legend 'Queer as Fuck' hints at shifting conceptions of the 'Wilde icon', however.¹⁷ The ambivalent legacy of Wilde to gay men in the present day has been brilliantly investigated in books like Neil Bartlett's *Who Was That Man?*, a biography of Wilde and an autobiography of Bartlett, in which the link between the reversible dates 1891 and 1981 is seen as essential to the possible construction of something like a continuous gay history, a history which Wilde at once severely jeopardizes and yet also makes possible.¹⁸ The industry around Oscar Wilde¹⁹ has not obscured other valuable work on the 'invention' of homosexuality, as Michel Foucault polemically phrased it in *An Introduction to the History of Sexuality*, or analyses of the excited tabulation of perversions by the new science of sexology.²⁰ We owe terms like 'nymphomania' to the period, but also the sexual meanings of concepts such as 'fetishism' or 'perversion'. Many literary histories have (somewhat contentiously) begun to seek hidden lines between contemporary 'queer' identities, and those of the late Victorian period, learning to read the silences and ambivalences of a Henry James or Robert Louis Stevenson text as markers of emerging modern sexualities.²¹

¹⁷ See illustrations in Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994).

¹⁸ Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988).

¹⁹ See also Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: From Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side* (London: Routledge, 1993); John Stokes, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1996); and Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁰ See, most influentially, Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

²¹ For a fairly queer Henry James, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Brighton: Harvester, 1991). For a discussion of Jamesian ambivalence, see Kelly Cannon, *Henry James and Masculinity: The Man at the Margins* (London: Macmillan, 1997). For Robert Louis Stevenson, see Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (London: Routledge, 1989) and Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*.

We might, finally, identify one last contemporary question which owes much to the fin de siècle. The current dispute over the psychiatric technique of retrieving lost memories—'recovered memory' if you believe it is possible, 'false memory syndrome' if you consider it isn't—has been discussed from the academic conference and technical monograph to the popular book and sensational chat show. The forgetting and recovery of traumatic memories, 'locked up' or 'encrypted' in the psyche, is held to explain a host of contemporary psychological disorders. Whether these memories, centrally concerning familial sexual abuse, are actual or phantasmal has often reverted to the minute examination of the letters and texts of Sigmund Freud in the 1890s. It was Jeffrey Masson's explosive book, *The Assault on Truth: Freud and Child Sexual Abuse*, which alleged that Freud had uncovered massive, systematic abuse in his early female patients, but then turned away from the facts, to found the phantasmal science of psychoanalysis.²² Freud has become a token in what have been termed, by another critic, *The Memory Wars*.²³ Other work since Masson, however, has begun to excavate the way in which current psychiatric illnesses, like Multiple Personality Disorder, owe much to long-forgotten late Victorian conceptions of 'double consciousness'. The sudden flowering and then equally sudden disappearance of Multiple Personality Disorder as an illness in the 1980s could learn much from the diagnostic 'fashions' of the late nineteenth century—neurasthenia, hysteria, and the 'alternating personalities' that so fascinated people of the time. This is what historians of psychology like Janet Oppenheim and Adam Crabtree have done.²⁴ Indeed, Ian Hacking has shown that the model of traumatic forgetting on which advocates of recovered memory depend relies more on Freud's contemporaries and rivals—Pierre Janet's work, most obviously—than on Freud's own work.²⁵ This has necessitated a return to recovering those psychologies competing with the psychoanalysis that arrived in

²² Jeffrey Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud and Child Sexual Abuse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

²³ Frederick Crews et al., *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute* (London: Granta, 1997). Crews is crusadingly anti-Freudian. For other views on the same material, see Ann Scott, *Revisiting Real Events: Fantasy, Memory and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1996) and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'Neurotica: Freud and the Seduction Theory', *October*, 76 (Spring 1996), 15–43. For a summary of disputes, see Roger Luckhurst, 'Memory Recovered/Recovered Memory', in Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (eds.), *Literature and the Contemporary* (London: Longman, 1999), 80–93.

²⁴ Janet Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients and Depression in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). All historians of psychiatry rely, of course, on Henri Ellenberger's monumental *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* [1970] (London: Fontana, 1994), despite its rather overwhelming teleology towards Freud.

1896, and a clearer sense of how our models of subjective self, the ‘unconscious’, or memory, are products of a specific conjuncture.²⁶

On all of these issues, then—on formations of ‘culture’, on mass urban populations and the future of the English ‘race’, on the legacies of imperialism, on the constructions of gender, sexuality, and self—the fin de siècle has come to be regarded as a critical historical matrix. This brief account reflects only a fraction of the available material on the period. Amidst this multidisciplinary convergence, certain sources, texts, and concepts have come to be regarded as vital to an understanding of the period. Until now, though, many of these documents have been relatively inaccessible to students and teachers, except as ceaselessly cited references or scattered across single-discipline anthologies.

This reader tries to respond to the current climate of interdisciplinary work, and to provide a wide range of primary sources from the period, offering complete texts where possible and sensitively edited extracts where not. Our thirteen sections move from the cultural politics of metropolitan life, the New Woman and the literary manifestos of the Decadents and the Romancers, through the new politics of socialism and anarchism, to the newly emerging ‘human’ sciences, trying to provide original sources and documents for the issues that have made the fin de siècle so important.

This is an avowedly interdisciplinary reader, although, given that both editors work and were trained in literary studies, one with an inevitably culturalist bias. Political historians may well wonder at the exclusion of the split of the Liberal Party over Irish Home Rule; historians of science might lament the absence of any documents from the revolution in physics in the 1890s or the rescue of Mendel’s genetic researches that rapidly transformed understandings of animal and human heredity right at the turn of the century. If there are inevitable limits on interdisciplinarity, we nevertheless want to assert that this reader can offer some of the primary material that might begin to recover the echoes, interconnections, and different orders of knowledge that operated in the fin de siècle. To cite Michel Foucault:

Different *œuvres*, dispersed books, that whole mass of texts that belong to a single discursive formation—and so many authors who know or do not know one another, criticise one another, invalidate one another, pillage one another, meet without knowing it, and obstinately intersect their unique discourses in a web of which they are not the masters, of which they cannot see the whole, and of whose breadth they have a very inadequate idea—all communicate by . . . a

²⁶ See Sally Shuttleworth and Jenny Bourne Taylor (eds.), *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830–90* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For further indications of seeking other psychologies, see the reprint of Théodore Flournoy’s 1899 bestselling book on the ‘subliminal consciousness’ and ‘multiple personality’ of an alleged spirit medium, *From India To Planet Mars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), with an excellent introduction by Sonu Shamdasani.

field in which formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts, and polemical interchanges may be deployed.²⁷

Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* sketches out a method which necessitates situating each discourse 'in relation to those that are contemporary with it or related to it. One must therefore study the *economy of the discursive constellation* to which it belongs.'²⁸ This process ends by outlining a 'territory' which 'may extend to "literary" or "philosophical" texts, as well as scientific ones. Knowledge is to be found not only in demonstrations, it can also be found in fiction, reflexion, narrative accounts, institutional regulations, and political decisions.'²⁹ In a scaled-down but hopefully productive way, we want the reader to act as a means of negotiating the *constellated* discourses of the fin de siècle. So, for instance, to examine a question of 'race' might mean moving between the pseudo-scientific assertions of 'racial science', discourses of degeneration, imperial history, and the representations of popular culture. Similarly, to situate a question of sex might mean tracing a passage between Mrs Ormiston's purity campaign against *The Empire*, Krafft-Ebing's sexological taxonomy of perversions, concerns over moral decline, and the portrait of artists as moral degenerates provided by Max Nordau or Hugh Stutfield. Different routes and patternings of information should therefore be activated by this reader.

This is not proposed in the service of any particular species of historicism, however (neither editor would wish to be considered *homo calvus* Foucauldians). We have selected this range of discourses in order to reflect the extra-ordinary sense of cross-fertilization between forms of knowledge that marks one of the identifying features of the fin de siècle. Such frantic interconnections might be signalled by tracking, for instance, W. T. Stead's appearance across the anthology. A journalist moving to London in 1880, his editorship of the *Pall Mall Gazette* from 1883 inaugurates, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, 'the new journalism'. So influential were Stead's campaigns that his 'The Truth About the Navy' resulted in a supplementary £3 million of government spending, and his 'Maiden Tribute', as we have seen, altered the age of consent. 'Government by Journalism' looked like a real prospect for a few years—startling to a London Establishment dictated to by a northern radical dissenter. Stead's career gets stranger. He reappeared as apologist for the arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes, yet was one of the most outspoken critics of the Boer War, diminishing his influence on public opinion. This had mostly already dispersed on his discovery of a talent for 'automatic writing' messages from the dead, and his turn to spiritualism and psychical research in his journal *Borderland* between 1893 and 1897. In an almost impossible

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Press, 1972), 126–7.

²⁸ Ibid. 66.

²⁹ Ibid. 183.

synchronicity with his times, Stead even met his death on the *Titanic*, with all the loaded symbolism that event possesses for the passing of a certain era. Are Stead's interests idiosyncratic or in some way representative of the period? Similar cross-disciplinary figures like Andrew Lang suggest the latter. Lang was a prolific reviewer (championing the unknown Rudyard Kipling in 1889), classicist, historian of Scotland, popular novelist (co-writing *The World's Desire* with Rider Haggard in 1890), advocate of the vigorous romance against the sapping miseries of the naturalist novel, psychical researcher, and also armchair anthropologist, writing books on magic and totemism and the origins of religion. This might seem a frankly bizarre collocation of interests in isolation; in the late Victorian period, however, different pathways and networks existed, and showing some of the key elements of this discursive constellation can open up the interconnection of these structures again.

This is the logic behind our principles of selection; it remains to say a few brief words on the principles of organization. One of the advantages of hypertext for anthologies is the liberation from linearity, the way in which a reader can construct different priorities and routes through a mass of material. Inevitably, our ordering of selections will be taken to imply hierarchies or manipulative interpretations of the historical record. However, one function of this introduction has been to provide mini-narratives for how to move about the material—whether following disciplinary, analogic parallel, or biographical routes, or whether seeking for continuities or discontinuities with the contemporary moment. This is a way of saying there is no prescription as to how or in what order to read the material.

On the other hand, the period can risk dissolving without some organizing framework, and we announce ours in the opening section of the book, 'Degeneration'. This, we feel, is one defining structure which can be tracked across many disciplines; indeed, since degeneration was rarely invoked without its twin concept of 'regeneration', these are the terms in which the period articulated to itself that experience of ambivalence with which we started. There is a burgeoning secondary literature explaining the ways in which the theory of degeneration moves from biology through to sociology, criminology, psychology and ethics, aesthetics, and eschatology.³⁰ The degenerate was the thief, the undeserving pauper, the madman, the Decadent artist, the sexually active woman, the gambler, the Jew, the sub-human residuum that threatened the race—anything deviating from a middle-class-defined 'normalcy'. Nordau's diatribe caused a major sensation when published in translation in 1895, popularizing a notion that had been in scientific circles since the 1850s. Part of that sensation, however, was a host of

³⁰ See J. Edward Chamberlain and Sander Gilman (eds.), *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*.

responses that rubbished or mocked Nordau's overheated rhetoric of decline and fall—William James considered it a 'pathological book on a pathological subject', Egmont Hake released an impressively weighty tome, *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau*, within months, and Bernard Shaw's riposte became equally famous.³¹ The current focus on the fin de siècle has risked becoming too fascinated with the 'gothic' science of degeneration, forgetting a host of other voices that contested visions of collapse with dreams of regeneration. These might be socialists looking forward to the promise of the new century, anarchists plotting a future of 'mutual aid', feminists figuring the New Woman as promising a new dawn, psychical researchers hinting that evidences of the spirit signalled a new phase of mental evolution, or eugenicists planning to reverse decline and regenerate the race. This dialectic between de- and re-generation was played out on a broad scale between different political stances and different philosophies, and often in factions within disciplines.

We have tried to suggest the energy of this debate both in the overall organization of the reader and in individual sections, in which competing voices, whether psychologists, literary commentators, metropolitan *flâneurs*, or factional politicians, uttered starkly different assessments of the age. There are of course other possible trajectories through the dense networks of the fin de siècle, and we offer this reader as one guide, but also, we hope, as a means for re-forming the period along other routes.

³¹ See Ch. 1 below.

Editors' Note

Omissions from material as originally published are marked by ellipses within square brackets, thus: [. . .]. A number of footnotes in original texts have been silently excised. All footnotes, unless otherwise indicated, are by the editors; each section ends with biographical and contextual notes on entries. Original spelling and punctuation have been retained where possible.

1

DEGENERATION

From the beginning of the 1880s, the end-of-century experience generated an enormous amount of scientific and cultural debate concerning the future of civilization and of the human race itself. Would the turn of the century herald a new evolutionary dawn, allowing the upward curve of humanity's progress to continue unabated? Or would the fin-de-siècle years usher in what Max Nordau characterized as a 'Dusk of nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is persisting in the midst of a dying world'? Positing itself as a universally applicable scientific discourse, 'degeneration theory' was very much a product of the social and cultural climate of the late nineteenth century. Discourses on degeneration had been current from the mid-century in the work of Benedict Morel in France (who coined the term *dégénérescence* in 1857) and Cesare Lombroso in Italy; but they reached a highly developed stage in the 1880s and 1890s. The historians Edward Chamberlain and Sander Gilman have tracked the ways in which the precise biological meanings of degeneration were extended figuratively into many other fields, and make a strong case that it was one of the most influential concepts in late Victorian culture.

Darwinian theories of evolution provided the basis for notions of racial and cultural degeneration. The idea of progress, which went hand in hand with mid-Victorian social and economic confidence, was bolstered by Darwin's theory of evolution, the Victorians regarding themselves and their society as the acme of human development. But the economic recession of the 1880s, combined with a fear that the great 'Age of Empire' might be short-lived, meant that ideas of progress were increasingly countered by fears of cultural—nearly always expressed as racial—decline. Max Nordau, a German polymath, synthesized the work of scientists in his attack on late nineteenth-century culture. The extract we have included here, from what is a weighty tome, illustrates the

'scientific' drift of his argument; but the bulk of his book constitutes a diatribe against a long list of writers, poets, dramatists, artists, and composers of the second half of the nineteenth century—Ibsen, Wagner, Tolstoy, Ruskin, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Zola, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, to name just a few. First translated into English in 1895, in the year that one of his 'degenerates' (Oscar Wilde) was sentenced to two years' hard labour for committing acts of 'gross indecency', Nordau's treatise received a lot of attention from cultural critics in the late twentieth century. Its contemporary significance should not, though, be overstated. It was often laughingly dismissed, and we have included the views of William James and Bernard Shaw. Shaw humorously identifies Nordau's tirade as 'nothing but the familiar delusion of the used-up man that the world is going to the dogs'; James sees it as the work of 'a victim of insane delusions about a conspiracy of hysterics and degenerates'.

Hysterical as Nordau's book undoubtedly is, the 'scientific' texts which inspired it wielded considerable cultural influence. This is represented here by essays by Edwin Lankester and H. G. Wells. Lankester's biological vocabulary signals degeneration theory's debt to Darwin. His essay none the less retains—as does all such work—a cultural dimension: in expressing the fear that modern European civilizations may be on the brink of a radical decline he makes an analogy with the fall of the Greek and Roman empires. H. G. Wells's 'zoological' exploration of the same issues equally slides between 'scientific' (zoological and physiological) discourse and social and cultural analysis. Wells's ostensibly tongue-in-cheek account of the 'life history' of the 'professional classes' who as young men pass through an energetic period of 'Sturm und Drang' but finally end up 'settling down' into social and cultural passivity, is part of a serious rhetorical strategy whereby the lives of the moribund members of British society's highest social groups are compared by analogy with the species-history of the 'Sea Squirts, or Ascidians, of our coasts', whose downward evolutionary spiral finally reduces them to 'a merely vegetative excrescence on a rock'—eloquently presaging the passivity and degenerative qualities of Wells's 'Eloi', in *The Time Machine* (1895), and displaying the political and cultural basis of much degeneration theory.

Secondary reading: Chamberlain and Gilman; Greenslade; Jones; Ledger, 'In Darkest England'; Mosse; Pick; Williams.

1

from Edwin Ray Lankester, *Degeneration:
A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880)

It is clearly enough possible for a set of forces such as we sum up under the heading 'natural selection' to so act on the structure of an organism as to produce one of three results, namely these; to keep it *in statu quo*; to increase the complexity of its structure; or lastly, to diminish the complexity of its structure. We have as possibilities either BALANCE, or ELABORATION, or DEGENERATION.

Owing, as it seems, to the predisposing influence of the systems of classification in ascending series proceeding steadily upwards from the 'lower' or simplest forms to the 'higher' or more complex forms,—systems which were prevalent before the doctrine of transformism had taken firm root in the minds of naturalists, there has been up to the present day an endeavour to explain every existing form of life on the hypothesis that it has been maintained for long ages in a state of Balance; or else on the hypothesis that it has been Elaborated, and is an advance, an improvement, upon its ancestors. Only one naturalist—Dr. Dohrn, of Naples¹—has put forward the hypothesis of Degeneration as capable of wide application to the explanation of existing forms of life; and his arguments in favour of a general application of this hypothesis have not, I think, met with the consideration they merit. [. . .]

Degeneration may be defined as a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to *less* varied and *less* complex conditions of life; whilst Elaboration is a gradual change of structure in which the organism becomes adapted to more and more varied and complex conditions of existence. In Elaboration there is a new *expression* of form, corresponding to new perfection of work in the animal machine. In Degeneration there is *suppression* of form, corresponding to the cessation of work. Elaboration of some one organ *may* be a necessary accompaniment of Degeneration in all the others; in fact, this is very generally the case; and it is only when the total result of the Elaboration of some organs, and the Degeneration of others, is such as to leave the whole animal in a *lower* condition, that is fitted to less complex action and reaction in regard to its surroundings, than was the ancestral form with which we are comparing it (either actually or in imagination) that we speak of that animal as an instance of Degeneration.

Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he suddenly becomes possessed of a fortune; or as Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient

¹ Anton Dohrn, zoologist and entomologist, writing in the 1860s and 1870s.

world. The habit of parasitism clearly acts upon animal organisation in this way. Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, eyes, and ears; the active, highly-gifted crab, insect or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs. [. . .]

All that has been, thus far, here said on the subject of Degeneration is so much zoological specialism, and may appear but a narrow restriction of the discussion to those who are not zoologists. Though we may establish the hypothesis most satisfactorily by the study of animal organisation and development, it is abundantly clear that degenerative evolution is by no means limited in its application to the field of zoology. [. . .]

The traditional history of mankind furnishes us with notable examples of degeneration. High states of civilisation have decayed and given place to low and degenerate states. At one time it was a favourite doctrine that the savage races of mankind were degenerate descendants of the higher and civilised races. This general and sweeping application of the doctrine of degeneration has been proved to be erroneous by careful study of the habits, arts, and beliefs of savages; at the same time there is no doubt that many savage races as we at present see them are actually degenerate and are descended from ancestors possessed of a relatively elaborate civilisation. As such we may cite some of the Indians of Central America, the modern Egyptians, and even the heirs of the great oriental monarchies of pre-Christian times. Whilst the hypothesis of universal degeneration has a very large share in the explanation of the condition of the most barbarous races, such as the Fuegians, the Bushmen, and even the Australians. They exhibit evidence of being descended from ancestors more cultivated than themselves.

With regard to ourselves, the white races of Europe, the possibility of degeneration seems to be worth some consideration. In accordance with the tacit assumption of universal progress—an unreasoning optimism—we are accustomed to regard ourselves as necessarily progressing, as necessarily having arrived at a higher and more elaborated condition than that which our ancestors reached, and as destined to progress still further. On the other hand, it is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as progress. As compared with the immediate forefathers of our civilisation—the ancient Greeks—we do not appear to have improved so far as our bodily structure is concerned, nor assuredly so far as some of our mental capacities are concerned. Our powers of perceiving and expressing beauty of form have certainly *not* increased since the days of the Parthenon and Aphrodite of Melos. In matters of reason, in the development of the intellect, we may seriously inquire how the case stands. Does the reason of the average man of civilised Europe stand out clearly as an evidence of progress when compared with that of the men of bygone ages? Are all the inventions and figments of human superstition and folly,

the self-inflicted torturing of mind, the reiterated substitution of wrong for right, and of falsehood for truth, which disfigure our modern civilisation—are these evidences of progress? In such respects we have at least reason to fear that we may be degenerate. Possibly we are all drifting, tending to the condition of intellectual Barnacles or Ascidians.² It is possible for us—just as the Ascidian throws away its tail and its eye and sinks into a quiescent state of inferiority—to reject the good gift of reason with which every child is born, and to degenerate into a contented life of material enjoyment accompanied by ignorance and superstition. The unprejudiced, all-questioning spirit of childhood may not inaptly be compared to the tadpole tail and eye of the young Ascidian: we have to fear lest the prejudices, pre-occupations, and dogmatism of modern civilisation should in any way lead to the atrophy and loss of the valuable mental qualities inherited by our young forms from primaeval man.

There is only one means of estimating our position, only one means of so shaping our conduct that we may with certainty avoid degeneration and keep an onward course. We are as a race more fortunate than our ruined cousins—the degenerate Ascidians. For us it is possible to ascertain what will conduce to our higher development, what will favour our degeneration. To us has been given the power to *know the causes of things*, and by the use of this power it is possible for us to control our destinies. It is for us by ceaseless and ever hopeful labour to try to gain a knowledge of man's place in nature. When we have gained this fully and minutely, we shall be able by the light of the past to guide ourselves in the future. In proportion as the whole of the past evolution of civilised man, of which we at present perceive the outlines, is assigned to its causes, we and our successors on the globe may expect to be able duly to estimate that which makes for, and that which makes against, the progress of the race. The full and earnest cultivation of Science—the Knowledge of Causes—is that to which we have to look for the protection of our race—even of this English branch of it—from relapse and degeneration.

2

H. G. Wells, 'Zoological Retrogression' (1891)

Perhaps no scientific theories are more widely discussed or more generally misunderstood among cultivated people than the views held by biologists regarding the past history and future prospects of their province—life. Using their technical

² Sub-class of marine organisms—the most common being the sea squirt. This was the favourite zoological example of degeneration, as they begin their life cycle as free-swimming larvae before attaching to rocks and regressing in form. Discussed at length by H. G. Wells in the article below.

phrases and misquoting their authorities in an invincibly optimistic spirit, the educated public has arrived in its own way at a rendering of their results which it finds extremely satisfactory. It has decided that in the past the great scroll of nature has been steadily unfolding to reveal a constantly richer harmony of forms and successively higher grades of being, and it assumes that this 'evolution' will continue with increasing velocity under the supervision of its extreme expression—man. This belief, as effective, progressive, and pleasing as transformation scenes at a pantomime, receives neither in the geological record nor in the studies of the phylogenetic embryologist any entirely satisfactory confirmation.³

On the contrary, there is almost always associated with the suggestion of advance in biological phenomena an opposite idea, which is its essential complement. The technicality expressing this would, if it obtained sufficient currency in the world of culture, do much to reconcile the naturalist and his traducers. The toneless glare of optimistic evolution would then be softened by a shadow; the monotonous reiteration of 'Excelsior' by people who did not climb would cease;⁴ the too sweet harmony of the spheres would be enhanced by a discord, this evolutionary antithesis—degradation.

Isolated cases of degeneration have long been known, and popular attention has been drawn to them in order to point well-meant moral lessons, the fallacious analogy of species to individual being employed. It is only recently, however, that the enormous importance of degeneration as a plastic process in nature has been suspected and its entire parity with evolution recognised.

It is no libel to say that three-quarters of the people who use the phrase 'organic evolution,' interpret it very much in this way:—Life began with the amoeba, and then came jelly-fish, shell-fish, and all those miscellaneous invertebrate things, and then *real* fishes and amphibia, reptiles, birds, mammals, and man, the last and first of creation. It has been pointed out that this is very like regarding a man as the offspring of his first cousins; these, of his second; these, of his relations at the next remove, and so forth—making the remotest living human being his primary ancestor. Or, to select another image, it is like elevating the modest poor relation at the family gathering to the unexpected altitude of fountain-head—a proceeding which would involve some cruel reflections on her age and character. The sounder view is, as scientific writers have frequently insisted, that living species

³ Degeneration theory owes much to the notion that the individual's development rehearses the evolution of the species—that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny'. The human embryo, for example, was held to progress through 'primitive' cellular stages then through lower animal forms, before arriving at the most complex mammalian form. Wells's argument relies extensively on the possibilities of reversing this development. Principally associated with the German physiologist Ernst von Baer (1792–1836) and Wells's contemporary Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), the German Darwinian theorist.

⁴ Excelsior means 'ever higher'.

have varied along divergent lines from intermediate forms, and, as it is the object of this paper to point out, not necessarily in an upward direction.

In fact, the path of life, so frequently compared to some steadily-rising mountain-slope, is far more like a footway worn by leisurely wanderers in an undulating country. Excelsior biology is a popular and poetic creation—the *real* form of a phylum, or line of descent, is far more like the course of a busy man moving about a great city. Sometimes it is underground, sometimes it doubles and twists in tortuous streets, now it rises far overhead along some viaduct, and, again, the river is taken advantage of in these varied journeyings to and fro. Upward and downward these threads of pedigree interweave, slowly working out a pattern of accomplished things with which the word 'evolution' is popularly associated.

The best known, and, perhaps, the most graphic and typical, illustration of the downward course is to be found in the division of the *Tunicata*. These creatures constitute a group which is, in several recent schemes of classification, raised to the high rank of a sub-phylum, and which includes, among a great variety of forms, the fairly common Sea Squirts, or *Ascidians*, of our coasts. By an untrained observer a specimen of these would at first very probably be placed in the mineral or vegetable kingdoms. Externally they are simply shapeless lumps of a stiff, semi-transparent, cartilaginous substance, in which pebbles, twigs, and dirt are imbedded, and only the most careful examination of this unpromising exterior would discover any evidence of the living thing within. A penknife, however, serves to lay bare the animal inside this house, or 'test,' and the fleshy texture of the semi-transparent body must then convince the unscientific investigator of his error.

He would forthwith almost certainly make a fresh mistake in his classification of this new animal. Like most zoologists until a comparatively recent date, he would think of such impassive and, from the human point of view, lowly beings as the oyster and mussel as its brethren, and a superficial study of its anatomy might even strengthen this opinion. As a matter of fact, however, these singular creatures are far more closely related to the vertebrata—they lay claim to the quarters, not of molluscs, but of imperial man! and, like novelette heroes with a birth-mark, they carry their proofs about with them.

This startling and very significant fact is exhibited in the details of their development. It is a matter of common knowledge that living things repeat in a more or less blurred and abbreviated series their generalized pedigree in their embryological changes. For instance, as we shall presently remind the reader, the developing chick or rabbit passes through a fish-like stage, and the human foetus wears an undeniable tail. In the case of these ascidians, the fertilized egg-cell, destined to become a fresh individual, takes almost from the first an entirely different course from that pursued by the molluscs. Instead, the dividing and growing

ovum exhibits phases resembling in the most remarkable way those of the lowliest among fishes, the Lancelet, or *Amphioxus*. The method of division, the formation of the primitive stomach and body-cavity, and the origin of the nervous system are identical, and a stage is attained in which the young organism displays—or else simulates in an altogether inexplicable way—vertebrate characteristics. It has a *notochord*, or primary skeletal axis, the representative or forerunner in all vertebrata of the backbone; it displays gill-slits behind its mouth, as do all vertebrated animals in the earlier stages only or throughout life; and, finally, the origin and position of its nervous axis are essentially and characteristically vertebrate. In these three independent series of structures the young ascidian stands apart from all invertebrated animals and manifests its high descent. In fact, at this stage it differs far more widely from its own adult form than it does from *Amphioxus* or a simplified tadpole.

Like a tadpole, the animal has a well-developed tail which propels its owner vigorously through the water. There is a conspicuous single eye, reminding the zoologist at once of the Polyphemus eye that almost certainly existed in the central group of the vertebrata. There are also serviceable organs of taste and hearing, and the lively movements of the little creature justify the supposition that its being is fairly full of endurable sensations. But this flush of golden youth is sadly transient: it is barely attained before a remarkable and depressing change appears in the drift of development.

The ascidian begins to take things seriously—a deliberate sobriety gradually succeeds its tremulous vivacity. *L' Allegro* dies away; the tones of *Il Penseroso* become dominant.

On the head appear certain sucker-like structures, paralleled, one may note, in the embryos of certain ganoid fishes. The animal becomes dull, moves about more and more slowly, and finally fixes itself by these suckers to a rock. It has settled down in life. The tail that wagged so merrily undergoes a rapid process of absorption; eye and ear, no longer needed, atrophy completely, and the skin secretes the coarse, inorganic-looking 'test.' It is very remarkable that this 'test' should consist of a kind of cellulose—a compound otherwise almost exclusively confined to the vegetable kingdom. The transient glimpse of vivid animal life is forgotten, and the rest of this existence is a passive receptivity to what chance and the water bring along. The ascidian lives henceforth an idyll of contentment, glued, head downwards, to a stone,

The world forgetting, by the world forgot.⁵

Now here, to all who refer nature to one rigid state of precedence, is an altogether inexplicable thing. A creature on a level, at lowest, immediately next to verte-

⁵ The opening line of R. L. Stevenson's poem, 'My wife and I, in our romantic cot'.

brated life, turns back from the upward path and becomes at last a merely vegetative excrescence on a rock.

It is lower even than the patriarchal amoeba of popular science if we take psychic life as the standard: for does not even the amoeba crawl after and choose its food and immediate environment? We have then, as I have read somewhere—I think it was in an ecclesiastical biography—a career not perhaps teeming eventful, but full of the richest suggestion and edification.

And here one may note a curious comparison which can be made between this life-history and that of many a respectable pinnacle and gargyle on the social fabric. Every respectable citizen of the professional classes passes through a period of activity and imagination, of 'liveliness and eccentricity,' of '*Sturm und Drang*.'⁶ He shocks his aunts. Presently, however, he realizes the sober aspect of things. He beomes dull; he enters a profession; suckers appear on his head; and he studies. Finally, by virtue of these he settles down—he marries. All his wild ambitions and subtle aesthetic perceptions atrophy as needless in the presence of calm domesticity. He secretes a house, or 'establishment,' round himself, of inorganic and servile material. His Bohemian tail is discarded. Henceforth his life is a passive receptivity of what chance and the drift of his profession bring along; he lives an almost entirely vegetative excrescence on the side of the street, and in the tranquillity of his calling finds that colourless contentment that replaces happiness.

But this comparison is possibly fallacious, and is certainly a digression.

The ascidian, though a pronounced case of degradation, is only one of an endless multitude. Those shelly warts that cover every fragment of sea-side shingle are degraded crustaceans; at first they are active and sensitive creatures, similar essentially to the earlier phases of the life-history of a prawn. Other Cirripeds and many Copepods sink down still deeper, to almost entire shapelessness and loss of organization. The corals, sea-mats, the immobile oysters and mussels are undoubtedly descended from free-living ancestors with eye-spots and other sense-organs. Various sea-worms and holothurians have also taken to covering themselves over from danger, and so have deliberately foregone their dangerous birthright to a more varied and active career. The most fruitful and efficient cause of degradation, however, is not simply akin to it—an aptness for parasitism. There are whole orders and classes thus pitifully submerged. The *Acarina*, or Mites, include an immense array of genera profoundly sunken in this way, and the great majority of both the flat and round worms are parasitic degeneration forms. The vile tapeworm, at the nadir, seems to have lost even common sensation; it has become an insensible mechanism of evil—a multiplying disease spot, living to that extent, and otherwise utterly dead.

⁶ Literally 'storm and stress', signifying the fervent idealism and emotionalism of youth, deriving from the German Romanticism of figures like Goethe and Schiller.

Such evident and indisputable present instances of degeneration alone would form a very large proportion of the catalogue of living animals. If we were to add to this list the names of all those genera the ancestors of which have at any time sunk to rise again, it is probable that we should have to write down *the entire roll of the animal kindgom!*

In some cases the degradation has been a strategic retrogression—the type has stooped to conquer. This is, perhaps, most manifest in the case of the higher vertebrate types.

It is one of the best-known embryological facts that a bird or mammal starts in its development as if a fish were in the making. The extremely ugly embryo of such types has gill-slits, sense-organs, facial parts, and limbs resembling far more closely those of a dog-fish than its own destined adult form. To use a cricketing expression, it is ‘pulled’ subsequently into its later line of advance.

The comparative anatomy of almost every set of organs in the adult body enforces the suggestion of this ovarian history. We find what are certainly modified placoid fish scales, pressed into the work of skull-covering, while others retain their typical enamel caps as teeth. The skull itself is a piscine cranium, ossified and altered, in the most patchy way, to meet the heavier blows that bodies falling through air, instead of water, deliver. The nasal organ is a fish’s nasal organ, constructed to smell in water, and the roof of the mouth and front of the skull have been profoundly altered to meet a fresh set of needs in aerial life. The ear-drum, in a precisely similar way, is derived from a gill-slit twisted up to supplement the aquatic internal ear, which would otherwise fail to appreciate the weaker sound-waves in air. The bathymetric air-bladder becomes a lung; and so one might go on through all the entire organisation of a higher vertebrate. Everywhere we should find the anatomy of a fish twisted and patched to fit a life out of water; nowhere organs built specially for this very special condition. There is nothing like this in the case of a fish. There the organs are from the first recognizable sketches of their adult forms, and they develop straightforwardly. But the higher types go a considerable distance towards the fish, and then turn round and complete their development in an entirely opposite direction.

This turning is evidently precisely similar in nature, though not in effect, to the retrogression of the ascidian after its pisciform or larval stage.

If the reader can bear the painful spectacle of his ancestor’s degradation, I would ask him to imagine the visit of some bodiless Linnaeus to this world during the upper Silurian period.⁷ Such a spirit would, of course, immediately begin to classify animated nature, neatly and swiftly.

⁷ Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) was the figure who organized a taxonomical system to classify all animals, plants, and minerals—thus, for Wells, the exemplary naturalist–observer.

It would be at once apparent that the most varied and vigorous life was to be found in the ocean. On the land a monotonous vegetation of cryptograms would shelter a sparse fauna of insects, gasteropods, and arachnids; but the highest life would certainly be the placoid fishes of the seas—the ancient representatives of the sharks and rays. On the diverse grounds of size, power, and activity, these would head any classification he planned. If our Linnaeus were a disembodied human spirit, he would immediately appoint these placoids his ancestors, and consent to a further analysis of the matter only very reluctantly, and possibly even with some severe remarks and protests about carrying science too far.

The true forefathers of the reader, however, had even at that early period very probably already left the seas, and were—with a certain absence of dignity—accommodating themselves to the necessities of air-breathing.

It is almost certain that the seasonal differences of that time were very much greater than they are now. Intensely dry weather followed stormy rainy seasons, and the rivers of that forgotten world—like some tropical rivers of to-day—were at one time tumultuous floods and at another baking expanses of mud. In such rivers it would be idle to expect self-respecting gill-breathing fish. Our imaginary zoological investigator would, however, have found that they were not altogether tenantless. Swimming in the pluvial waters, or inert and caked over by the torrid mud, he would have discovered what he would certainly have regarded as lowly, specially modified, and degenerate relations of the active denizens of the ocean—the *Dipnoi*, or mud-fish. He would have found in conjunction with the extremely primitive skull, axial skeleton, and fin possessed by these Silurian mud-fish, a remarkable adaptation of the swimming-bladder to the needs of the waterless season. It would have undergone the minimum amount of alteration to render it a lung, and blood-vessels and other points of the anatomy would show correlated changes.

Unless our zoological investigator were a prophet, he would certainly never have imagined that in these forms vested the inheritance of the earth, nor have awarded them a high place in the category of nature. Why were they living thus in inhospitable rivers and spending half their lives half baked in river-mud? The answer would be the old story of degeneration again; they had failed in the struggle, they were less active and powerful than their rivals of the sea, and they had taken the second great road of preservation—flight. Just as the ascidian has retired from an open sea too crowded and full of danger to make life worth the trouble, so in that older epoch did the mud-fish. They preferred dirt, discomfort, and survival to a gallant fight and death. Very properly, then, they would be classed in our zoologist's scheme as a degenerate group.

Some conservative descendants of these mud-fish live to-day in African and

Australian rivers, archaic forms that have kept right up to the present the structure of Palaeozoic days. Others of their children, however, have risen in the world again. The gill-breathing stage becomes less and less important, and the air-bladder was constantly elaborated under the slow, incessant moulding of circumstances to the fashion of a more and more efficient breathing-organ. Emigrants from the rivers swarmed over the yet uncrowded land. Aldermanic amphibia were the magnates of the great coal measure epoch, to give place presently to the central group of reptiles. From these sprang divergently the birds and mammals, and, finally, the last of the mud-fish family, man, the heir of ages. He it is who goes down to the sea in ships, and, with wide-sweeping nets and hooks cunningly baited, beguiles the children of those who drove his ancestors out of the water. Thus the whirligig of time brings round its revenges; still, in an age of excessive self-admiration, it would be well for man to remember that his family *was* driven from the waters by the fishes, who still—in spite of incidental fish-hooks, seines, and dredges—hold that empire triumphantly against him.

Witness especially the trout; I doubt whether *it* has ever been captured except by sheer misadventure.

These brief instances of degradation may perhaps suffice to show that there is a good deal to be found in the work of biologists quite inharmonious with such phrases as 'the progress of ages,' and the 'march of mind.' The zoologist demonstrates that advance has been fitful and uncertain; rapid progress has often been followed by rapid extinction or degeneration, while, on the other hand, a form lowly and degraded has in its degradation often happened upon some fortunate discovery or valuable discipline and risen again, like a more fortunate Antaeos, to victory. There is, therefore, no guarantee in scientific knowledge of man's permanence or permanent ascendancy. He has a remarkably variable organisation, and his own activities and increase cause the conditions of his existence to fluctuate far more widely than those of any animal have ever done. The presumption is that before him lies a long future of profound modification, but whether that will be, according to present ideals, upward or downward, no one can forecast. Still, so far as any scientist can tell us, it may be that, instead of this, Nature is, in unsuspected obscurity, equipping some now humble creature with wider possibilities of appetite, endurance, or destruction, to rise in the fulness of time and sweep *homo* away into the darkness from which his universe arose. The Coming Beast must certainly be reckoned in any anticipatory calculations regarding the Coming Man.

BOOK ONE: *FIN-DE-SIÈCLE*

THE DUSK OF NATIONS

[. . .] One epoch of history is unmistakably in its decline, and another is announcing its approach. There is a sound of rending in every tradition, and it is as though the morrow would not link itself with to-day. Things as they are totter and plunge, and they are suffered to reel and fall, because man is weary, and there is no faith that it is worth an effort to uphold them. Views that have hitherto governed minds are dead or driven hence like disenthroned kings, and for their inheritance they that hold the titles and they that would usurp are locked in struggle. Meanwhile interregnum in all its terrors prevails; there is confusion among the powers that be; the million, robbed of its leaders, knows not where to turn; the strong work their will; false prophets arise, and dominion is divided amongst those whose rod is the heavier because their time is short. Men look with longing for whatever new things are at hand, without presage whence they will come or what they will be. They have hope that in the chaos of thought, art may yield revelations of the order that is to follow on this tangled web. The poet, the musician, is to announce, or divine, or at least suggest in what forms civilization will further be evolved. What shall be considered good to-morrow—what shall be beautiful? What shall we know to-morrow—what believe in? What shall inspire us? How shall we enjoy? So rings the question from the thousand voices of the people, and where a market-vendor sets up his booth and claims to give an answer, where a fool or a knave suddenly begins to prophesy in verse or prose, in sound or colour, or professes to practise his art otherwise than his predecessors and competitors, there gathers a great concourse, crowding around him to seek in what he has wrought, as in oracles of the Pythia, some meaning to be divined and interpreted. And the more vague and insignificant they are, the more they seem to convey of the future to the poor gaping souls gasping for revelations, and the more greedily and passionately are they expounded.

Such is the spectacle presented by the doings of men in the reddened light of the Dusk of Nations. Massed in the sky the clouds are aflame in the weirdly beautiful glow which was observed for the space of years after the eruption of Krakatoa. Over the earth the shadows creep with deepening gloom, wrapping all objects in a mysterious dimness, in which all certainty is destroyed and any guess seems plausible. Forms lose their outlines, and are dissolved in floating mist. The day is over, the night draws on. The old anxiously watch its approach, fearing they will not live to see the end. A few amongst the young and strong are conscious of the vigour of life in all their veins and nerves, and rejoice in the coming sunrise. Dreams, which fill up the hours of darkness till the breaking of the new

day bring to the former comfortless memories, to the latter high-souled hopes. And in the artistic products of the age we see the form in which these dreams become sensible.

Here is the place to forestall a possible misunderstanding. The great majority of the middle and lower classes is naturally not *fin-de-siècle*. It is true that the spirit of the times is stirring the nation down to their lowest depths, and awaking even in the most inchoate and rudimentary human being a wondrous feeling of stir and upheaval. But this more or less slight touch of moral sea-sickness does not excite in him the cravings of traving women, nor express itself in new aesthetic needs. The Philistine or the Proletarian still finds undiluted satisfaction in the old and oldest forms of art and poetry, if he knows himself unwatched by the scornful eye of the votary of fashion, and is free to yield to his own inclinations. He prefers Ohnet's novels to all the symbolists, and Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* to all Wagnerians and to Wagner himself;⁸ he enjoys himself royally over slap-dash farces and music-hall melodies, and yawns or is angered at Ibsen; he contemplates gladly chromos of paintings depicting Munich beer-houses and rustic taverns, and passes the open-air painters without a glance. It is only a very small minority who honestly find pleasure in the new tendencies, and announce them with genuine conviction as that which alone is sound, a sure guide for the future, a pledge of pleasure and of moral benefit. But this minority has the gift of covering the whole visible surface of society, as a little oil extends over a large area of the surface of the sea. It consists chiefly of rich educated people, or of fanatics. The former give the *ton* to all the snobs, the fools, and the blockheads; the latter make an impression upon the weak and dependent, and intimidate the nervous. All snobs affect to have the same taste as the select and exclusive minority, who pass by everything that once was considered beautiful with an air of the greatest contempt. And thus it appears as if the whole of civilized humanity were converted to the aesthetics of the Dusk of the Nations. [. . .]

DIAGNOSIS

The manifestations [. . .] must be patent enough to everyone, be he never so narrow a Philistine. The Philistine, however, regards them as a passing fashion and nothing more; for him the current terms, caprice, eccentricity, affectation of novelty, imitation, instinct, afford a sufficient explanation. The purely literary mind, whose merely aesthetic culture does not enable him to understand the connections of things, and to seize their real meaning, deceives himself and others as

⁸ Georges Ohnet (1845–1918), was an extremely successful popular novelist, widely translated and dramatized in the 1890s, and widely despised by the literary establishment. Pietro Mascagni (1863–1945) composed the *Cavalleria* in 1889. The one-act opera, using popular melodies, was a Europe-wide success in the early 1890s. The operas of Richard Wagner (1813–83) remained a powerful influence over music and art in the 1890s.