Towards the end of the nineteenth century many affluent and educated people, influenced by developments in medical, biological and psychiatric sciences, became convinced that destitution, insanity and criminality – even homosexuality and hysteria – were symptoms of the degeneration of the human race, through the determinism of heredity. Such theories seemed to provide plausible explanations for disturbing social changes, and new insights into human character and morality. For a time they achieved extraordinary dominance. William Greenslade’s book is the first to investigate the impact of degeneration theories on British culture and on fiction. He traces the difficulties experienced by writers, including Hardy, Gissing, Conan Doyle, Conrad, Wells, Forster and Woolf, in negotiating their own freedom of interpretation in the light of such theories; he pursues the survival of degenerationism in the work of popular writers Warwick Deeping and John Buchan; and he charts the resilience of its tropes through the 1930s, to the holocaust.
DEGENERATION, CULTURE AND THE NOVEL
1880–1940
DEGENERATION, CULTURE
AND THE NOVEL 1880–1940

WILLIAM GREENSLADE

University of the West of England, Bristol
To Stella, Basil, Karen, and Isabel
and in memory of John Goode 1939–1994
Contents

List of illustrations ........................................ page x
Acknowledgements ........................................... xii

Introduction .................................................. 1
1 De-generation ............................................. 15
2 Biological poetics ........................................ 32
3 Degenerate spaces: the urban crisis of the 1880s and The Mayor of Casterbridge ..................... 47
4 Reversionary tactics ...................................... 65
5 Criminal degeneracy: adventures with Lombroso .................................................. 88
6 Max Nordau and the Degeneration effect ............... 120
7 Women and the disease of civilisation: George Gissing’s The Whirlpool ............................. 134
8 The lure of pedigree and the menaces of heredity in Tess of the D’Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure .................................................. 151
9 Race-regeneration .......................................... 182
10 Masculinity, morbidity and medicine: Howards End and Mrs Dalloway .................................................. 211
11 The way out is the way back: the anti-modernists .................................................. 234
12 Postscripts .................................................. 253

Notes .......................................................... 264
Bibliography ................................................... 315
Index .......................................................... 346

ix
Illustrations

1 ‘Little Collingwood Street, Bethnal Green, London’ (PH92/249/142, Museum of London).
2 ‘Prehistoric Iguanodon’, an engraving by Alice B. Woodward.
4 ‘Dignity’ from Gustav Cohen, Modern Self-Instructor in Phrenology, Physiology and Physiognomy; or the People’s Handbook of Human Nature (London 1884).
5 ‘“Here They Come!” – The Mob in St. James’s Street’, The Graphic (13 February 1886), p. 177 (British Library, Colindale).
7 ‘Six Criminal Types’ from Cesare Lombroso, L’homme criminel (2nd edn Paris, 1895) (Reg. no. Li0110, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London).
8 ‘Quite Unnecessary Question’, Punch (22 February 1896).
List of illustrations

13 ‘Hitler at the “Degenerate Art” [Entartete Kunst] Exhibition, Munich 1937’ (B PL-HIT-114, Barnaby’s Picture Library).
Acknowledgements

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the late John Goode, my one-time Ph.D supervisor, for his expert advice, critical insight and his unflagging belief that my subject was worth pursuing. His generous and unequivocal response to my first, half worked-out, research proposal was of inestimable value. Numerous other postgraduate students and colleagues at Warwick, and at Reading and Keele, owe similar debts to a man of rare critical gifts and radical courage.

In John Stokes I have been most fortunate to find an exemplary guide, critic and friend whose comments on my manuscript at the various stages of its composition never failed to hit the mark. My thanks also to Kate Fullbrook, Rosemarie Bailey, and my friend of longstanding, Keith McClelland – each of whom gave generously of their time and wisdom.

I also gladly acknowledge the help given to me, in different ways, by Steve Attridge, Michael Bell, Oliver Bennett, Jeremy Bennett, Bernard Bergonzi, Marion Doyen, U. A. Fanthorpe, Nicole Foster, Giles Foster, Brian Gibbons, John Goodman, Basil Greenslade, Lynne Hapgood, Loveday Herridge, Robin Jarvis, Tom Jeffery, the late Michael Katanka, Anthony Kearney, Mary Langan, John Lucas, Ludmilla Jordanova, Keith Maiden, Michael Mason, Karl Miller, Evelyne Muller, Michael Neve, Kathleen Knapp, Geoffrey Pearson, Kate Petty, Deborah Philips, John Reid, David Shewell, Jenny Bourne Taylor, Kevin Taylor, David Trotter, Tom Wakefield, Eddie Wainwright, Frank Warren, Paul Weindling, Richard Wilson, Michael Wheeler, Kevin White, and Polly Wright.

I would like to thank the library staff at the following libraries and institutions for their assistance: the British Library, the London Library, the libraries of the Universities of London, Warwick, Manchester, Bristol, Bath, and the UWE, Bristol, S. Martin’s
Acknowledgements

College of Higher Education, Lancaster, the Wellcome Institute, London, and the Royal College of Physicians.

I should like to thank the Trustees of the British Library, the Trustees of the Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection in the Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, and the Sheffield City Library, for permission to quote manuscript material in their possession.

An earlier version of Chapter Seven first appeared in Victorian Studies 32 (4) (Summer 1989): 502–523 and a version of the first three sections of Chapter Eight first appeared as ‘The Lure of Pedigree in Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles’, Thomas Hardy Journal 7 (October 1991): 103–115; my thanks to both editors. I am grateful to Macmillan for allowing me to draw on some of the material contained in my essay ‘Fitness and the Fin de Siècle’ in John Stokes (ed.) Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe (Macmillan, 1992), 37–51, for Chapters Two, Three and Nine.

I am grateful to the following for permission to reproduce illustrations in their possession: The Museum of London for ‘Little Collingwood, Bethnal Green’; Hulton Deutsch for ‘Prehistoric Iguanodon’; Punch Publications Ltd for ‘The Nemesis of Neglect’ and ‘Quite Unnecessary Question’; Bridgeman Art Library for ‘Motherhood’ and Barnaby’s Picture Library for ‘Hitler at the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition’.