Introduction: 'Knowledge Made for Cutting'

Penny Fielding and Andrew Taylor

Periodicity is a necessary yet problematic rubric, a scaffolding that supports narratives of influence and antagonism and that generates histories of progression and divergence. Michel Foucault noted, pithily, that '[k]nowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting',[1] and the question of where and how to cut literary history continues to preoccupy. David Perkins, writing in *Is Literary History Possible?*, notes that literary periods are 'necessary fictions' simply because it is impossible to 'write history or literary history without periodizing. Moreover, we require the concept of a unified period in order to deny it, and thus make apparent the particularity, local difference, heterogeneity, fluctuation, discontinuity, and strife that are now our preferred categories for understanding any moment of the past.'[2] Perkins's formulation, one that acknowledges our inevitable dependence on (literary) historical units at the same time as we use periodicity as an impetus for measuring complication, resonates as an important, generative paradox at the heart of this book. The named decade is a habit of mind that is difficult to shake. Other kinds of 'period' are heterogeneous, variously shaped, and irregularly designated. In the field of literary history, reigns ('Victorian'), intellectual concepts ('Modernism') and pragmatically extended centuries ('the long eighteenth century') all lay different kinds of claims to our intuitional practices. But the span of the decade continues to appeal with its neatly packaged temporality and its promise of offering a snapshot of its historical character. The historical grammar of the twentieth century has been punctuated by decades: 'the Roaring Twenties', 'the Thirties', 'the Swinging Sixties'. Indeed, this act of historical naming has proved persistent, with 'the Aughts' and 'the Noughties' being variously proposed for the first decade of the twenty-first century.

There are obvious disadvantages to this approach: the decade smooths out the fabric of history as uneven development (not everyone was swinging in the sixties) and instead promotes a concentration of assumed

1

sameness. Decades, for all their geometrical precision, are erratic – why are some distinctively named and not others? Yet the decade, despite its artificiality, may still prove a useful tool for thinking about literary history. Rather than imagining the years between 1880 and 1890 as exhibiting a discrete, definitive narrative of literary 'essence' and 'organic unity', the essays in this book understand periodicity to be relational, such that the chronological unit under investigation here is always and inevitably imbricated with other, prior and subsequent, temporalities. The risk of what Jameson called 'totalizing thought' is mitigated once we recognise that periods – in this case the 1880s – signal to landscapes beyond their own, very porous, borders.[3] The conceptual parameters imposed on any act of literary history – where we choose to make the Foucauldian cut – are themselves determined by relations beyond and outside those boundaries. A properly self-conscious literary history, then, aims for what Marshall Brown usefully describes as a 'dialectical and rough-edged' periodicity in which we are able to map the collisions and collusions of thought across, but not confined to, the decade.[4]

To turn a lens on a decade in fact offers us two distinct perspectives. Firstly, from the position we take in this volume, it is a form of experiment in literary history. To concentrate on an artificially delimited number of years allows us to see not only what might characterise the decade, but also its diversity – what began and what ended, what networks can be traced between its human figures, and between those figures and economic and technological developments that facilitated and shaped their writing. Secondly, we can ask whether the ways in which those writers thought about *themselves* in relation to influence or experimentation can constitute any kind of temporal unit, however relationally understood. We take the term '1880s' as a thought experiment. What happens when we look at a decade that has been neglected in favour of the more seemingly dominant 1890s? What new currents and ideas might come to light? But we also recognise that the very concept of historical self-awareness is itself historically contingent – thinking of oneself as within a historical period is, as James Chandler argues in *England in 1819*, a product of the nineteenth century.[5] The idea of a 'Spirit of the Age' requires some complex thinking about *Geist* and about period. There is no neutral position from which to assess historical change, and the best we can do is to accommodate contemporaneous ideas about historical context, or, more precisely, about the forms of historical context. To this extent, we aim to say something specific about the temporal self-consciousness of the 1880s and its sense of itself as a decade-long period.

As the century narrows towards the millennium, the longue durée of 'Victorianism' becomes understood in terms of shorter chronological units in which the 1880s, the decade before the more famous 1890s, play an interesting role. Focusing on the 1880s in particular makes it more difficult to categorise cultural life into, to use Raymond Williams's terms, its dominant, residual and emergent forms.[6] We look at a decade that characterised itself in terms of absence, trial and error, 'minor' literature, and heterogeneity. A time in which no 'major' author established himself or herself to characterise the decade, and no single movement or school of writing held sway, and where the idea of the network took the place of the author, and debates in journals diversified the sense of what literature was or should be.

Looking back from the early twentieth century, the categorisation of literature was a characteristically mixed field. In a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson on Christmas Day 1933, Dylan Thomas gave a list of his books, 'nearly all modern', in his 'Librarian's Corner'. In the anthologies section, he includes: 'most of the ghastly Best Poems of the Year; two of the Georgian Anthologies, one of the Imagist Anthologies, "Whips & Scorns" (modern satiric verse), the London Mercury Anthology, the Nineties Anthology (what Dowsonery!)'.[7] Thomas's bookshelf points to the variety in the way modern poetry (apparently of the last fifty years) was portioned up for sale in the early twentieth-century – movements (Imagism), reigns (Georgian), years and, in a relatively recent development in literary history, a named decade (while the term 'decade' had long been used to mean any span of ten years, its modern meaning of the years between –0 and –9 is much more recent). From this mixed field of terms, the 'nineties' decade was rapidly gaining in popularity as a cultural signpost.

We might say that the 1890s become the first literary decade. By the time Dylan Thomas was scanning his shelves, *Poetry of the Nineties* (edited by C. E. Andrews and M. O. Percival) had appeared in 1926 and – the collection to which Thomas probably refers – *An Anthology of 'Nineties' Verse* (edited by A. J. A. Symons) in 1928. Most influentially, Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties*, first published in 1913, established the decade as, in his words, 'a symbol for the period' of the late nineteenth century.[8] The 1880s, by contrast, did not have their own character in the early twentieth century. The Royal Society of Literature commissioned a collection of essays by its fellows on the topic of *The Eighteen-Eighties*. The immediate reason for this volume seems to be that the Society the previous year produced one on the 1870s, and the reason for *that* volume

was that 'it [was] just about to become historical' in relation to the ages of
the contributors, rather than having a particular historical significance.[9]
The editor of the 1880s collection, Walter de la Mare, was not confident
that the new decade would be particularly different: 'So with the 'seventies,
so with the 'eighties. The one decade glided as inexorably as usual into the
other – the vast blunt stream of events pressing onward into the vast O of
temporal space.' De la Mare is hopeful that the eighties will prove more
worthy of 'the compliment of being called a *period*, and is the first breath of
a coming Spring', but he nevertheless sees the decade as an intimation of
the next one: 'the most conspicuous flowers that presently bloomed in that
Spring were the rarities of the 'nineties.'[10]

   A later literary history, Jerome Buckley's *The Victorian Temper* (1952), its
title revealing much about the book's totalising ambitions, regarded the
1880s as an insipid moment in the nation's cultural life, when compared
with the 'bold speculation, spirited controversy, and earnest pursuit of
conflicting ideals' that marked the previous decade: 'the eighties as a whole
made no considerable effort to achieve the synthesis of "mind and soul,"
the complete cultural integration, towards which the major mid-Victorians
had aspired.'[11] Buckley's critique was focused on the apparent failure of the
period to marry aesthetic and social concerns, encapsulated for him not in
a literary figure but in the work of the painter James McNeill Whistler,
whose canvasses seemed to embody, for Buckley, the empty posturing of an
insubstantial decade: 'Independent of virtue, indifferent to society, aloof
like pure science from human emotion, Art must, he felt, remain forever
"selfishly preoccupied with her own perfection only."'[12] Buckley's premises
are polemically articulated, and his work remains a useful example of the
kind of influential literary history that sought to sum up periods of culture
according to criteria of universal or self-evident value. Yet as the various
chapters in our book demonstrate, a more ragged, fractal and dialogic
geometry of analysis presents a very different set of preoccupations, none of
which can lay claim to definitive status, but all of which find themselves as
part of a complex cultural scene during the decade. Indeed, Whistler is an
instructive instance of how art can be asked to signify the period in a very
different way. Arthur Symons, his ear always attuned to anything that
could be categorised as 'modern', regarded the 1880s as a liberation not only
of style but also of subject – art can be about anything. In a review of
W. E. Henley's 1888 *Book of Verses* (discussed in detail in Penny Fielding's
chapter in this volume), Symons draws a comparison with Whistler: 'It is
one of the modern discoveries that "the dignity of the subject" is a mere
figure of speech, and a misleading one. See what Mr. Whistler can make

out of "Brock's Benefit:" in place of fireworks and vulgarity you have a harmony in black and gold, and a work of art.'[13] The case of this work is instructive. Whistler's painting *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket* had famously invoked the ire of Ruskin when it had been exhibited in 1877 and Whistler had taken Ruskin to court for libel, as the ailing Ruskin's opinion was still able to depress the value of an artist's work. The painting was exhibited in New York in 1889, and in 1892, the year of Symons's review essay on Henley, *The Falling Rocket* was purchased by the American attorney and collector Samuel Untermyer for four times the price Whistler had asked ten years earlier.[14] Between the late 1870s and the early 1890s, Whistler's modernism had found its public.

The 1890s stuck as a decade, partly, no doubt, as a response to the millenarian pull of a new century. The rapid adoption of 'the Nineties' as a period of decadence and degeneration is fuelled by the sense of ending captured in the most famous summary of the time, the exchange between Henry Wotton and Lady Narborough in the *Picture of Dorian Gray*: '*fin de siècle*', '*fin du globe*'.[15] But *fin de siècle* is a term we have generally avoided in this collection. Rather than extending, as is perfectly possible, a much-discussed term backwards in time so as to collapse the 1880s into this more conceptually generic (and highly powerful) category, we want to explore the decade as a more open space in literary history – a time of waiting and experimenting rather than of ending, without the teleological drive that the 'end of' narrative imposes. Instead of coherence, we deliberately promote proliferation, as an expanding publishing industry and readership generated new genres and modes of consumption, and as an increasingly connected world encouraged authors to think of themselves in much wider, professionalised marketplaces. Moreover, the temptation to identify literary periods with dominant and influential authors is thwarted by the 1880s, where the direction of travel is centrifugal, in the absence of dominant figures or forms that might provide a centre of gravity. What David Morse identified as 'High Victorian Culture', located broadly between Queen Victoria's accession to the throne in 1837 and her proclamation as Empress of India in 1877, coincides with the writing careers of many of those authors now, retrospectively, understood as definitive of the period.[16] The 1880s saw the decline and death of a series of prominent mid-century authors: George Eliot in 1880, Anthony Trollope and D. G. Rossetti in 1882, Matthew Arnold in 1888. As the umbra of these giant figures began to fade, new possibilities emerged and with them new readerships that were enthusiastically addressed. The curators of an exhibition of 1880s art and literature at the University of Virginia Library in 1985

found that the very diversity of material they assembled indicated a 'confidence in deserving, finding, and reaching an audience'.[17]

The author who most obviously fills the decade, measured by his popularity and the duration of his career, is Robert Louis Stevenson. But it is hard to say exactly what Stevenson's influence was. Henry James wrote of him that 'Each of his books is an independent effort – a window opened to a different view.'[18] Stevenson wrote poetry, stories, essays, plays and novels of various kinds – all of them comparatively short works that reached in many directions. There are economic reasons behind the conditions of publishing that cleared a path for him. As Alexis Weedon has exhaustively demonstrated through publishers' records, the 1880s saw the start of decline of the three-volume novel and the rise of 'innovative publishing strategies' to meet new markets.[19] Stevenson is a good example of this – his successes are discussed elsewhere in this volume, but equally indicative of publishing at the time is one of his rarer failures. Stevenson struggled long and hard to produce a novel that was 'not like these purposeless fables of today, but [. . .] intended to stand firm upon a base of philosophy – or morals – as you please'.[20] That novel, *Prince Otto*, was received with notably faint praise. W. E. Henley's unsigned review in the *Athenaeum* has difficulty with the concept of 'classic' literature, as if *Prince Otto* could be classed as a classic only in the sense that its author has set out to write one: 'it has been produced as a "classic" [. . .] and as a "classic," if in no other capacity, it is tolerably certain to endure.'[21] Henley's inverted commas hollow out the term, as if it is now difficult to say what a 'classic' might be. 'Classics' were no longer free-standing monuments of self-evident worth, but, with the gradual consolidation of genres as distinct publishing categories, a classic now had to be a classic *of* something.[22]

Our volume recognises the lure of the period, its dangers and its practicalities. Periods are embedded within each other, they overlap, and have indeterminate beginnings and endings and heterogeneous reasons for existing in the first place, most prominently the syllabi of universities.[23] Yet they persist as apparently indispensable markers by which to map historical change. To a certain extent, we are still seduced by, in the title of Walter J. Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (first published in 1957 and still in print) the possibility of a Victorian social sensibility, or by the idea that there was a *fin-de-siècle* 'mentality' characterised by the spirit of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*. As Amanda Anderson notes, the term 'Victorian' still has its uses for forms of Marxist or Foucauldian historicism because it 'manages to indicate the primacy of history, as well as the notion of a unified era, which allows for an assumable social totality and unified

culture.'[24] Such is the lure of the iconic Victorian period, that there has been a long competition to define it through drawing its boundaries. For Woolf, human nature changed in 1910. Holbrook Jackson, in 1913, identified in the last decade of the century 'the Victorian revolt against Victorianism'.[25] More recent commentaries draw 'Modernism' ever further back into the nineteenth century, or to replace the notion of a distinct '*fin-de-siècle*' way marker with something more complex. As Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken point out, 'the *fin de siècle* was only an epoch of beginnings and endings if we look for them.'[26] A recent collection of essays identifies a 'period' with a duration from 1880 to 1920, but, although the title (*Late Victorian into Modern*) is sufficiently integrated into the needs of academic publishing and the curriculums of university English departments, its editors move away from received periodisation. Their collection 'emphasizes the in-between: not one period or the other, but the "into", the gradual changeover from one to the next', like our own volume, it resists the centripetal or anchoring pull of the term '*fin de siècle*'.[27]

It goes almost without saying that we should accept the arbitrary nature of any slice of time. But that very arbitrariness, in an almost paradoxical way, serves two purposes. To focus our historical view onto an artificially delimited temporal stretch forms a kind of scientific sample, exposing the variety and heterogeneity of literary activity and the unevenness of its development. Our volume ranges across form and history in ways that imbricate each in the other. Caroline Levine has argued for an expanded notion of 'form' that can encompass not only literary forms like the sonnet or the epic but social structures and the way they are shaped into institutions, something that she names 'infrastructuralism'. Levine's infrastructuralism is a way of thinking about the relations of historical materialism and formalism that is not bound by the artificial syntheses of the traditional period. In this sense, form is not imposed by history but is seen in the recurrent, transhistorical patterns of social life.[28] Levine's approach allows us to thing about material, specific manifestations of social experience and about fluid, formal patterns that overlap and flow into each other. Clare Pettitt's essay in our volume also looks at formal homologies that include both literary, material and wider social structures – patterns of global electronic communications that were made possible at a particular point in history, but that also allows us to think more generally in terms of a formal understanding that we recognise beyond historical specificity and is true both for the late nineteenth-century telegraph and contemporary systems of programming. For Pettitt, this is not causal history, but a way of

thinking about transhistorical forms that may materialise in heterogeneous ways. Pettitt shows how the 1880s can be thought of as 'the metamorphic decade for the acceleration of global electrical communications technology'. But she simultaneously looks at the way in which undersea cables abolish geo-specific notions of place and time and replace them with virtual structures. Her essay explores the ways in which material developments in communications technology afford models for visual art, literature and politics. In art these are ways of imagining scenes or objects that we will never be able to touch, typified by mermaids and undersea creatures that inhabit the non-realm of global communication lines. In poetry, the revival of interest in the roundel turns poetic energy into a system, and Pettitt offers an intricately close reading of Swinburne that fuses the formal with the historical.

Linda Hughes's chapter addresses and completely revises the question of the 'fixed-form revival' in the 1880s, and shows how those forms turn out not to be very fixed at all. Like Pettitt, Hughes identifies new forms of literary temporality and spatiality in the decade. So far from bringing outworn poetic forms back to a half-life, the return to fixed verse inaugurated new networks and points of connectivity. As Hughes shows, the very attempt to revive English-language poetry through the return to late medieval and early modern poetry opens up literature to forms that precede the modern nation state. Even as imperial 'Englishness' was reinforced as a category, so the sense of a global empire and a new ease of travel was coterminous with the viewing of literature 'across time periods and national boundaries to understand its inherently global circulation'. The 'return' to fixed forms also has implications for gender, that show how what seems at first to be a rediscovery of older convention is in fact a form of repetition with difference. Hughes's chapter shows how closely discussions about form were bound up in the writing lives of women, and how poets like May Kendall, Amy Levy and May Probyn were able subtly to subvert older forms, invoking ideas of pastness or patriarchal tradition only to ironise or undercut them.

The 1880s saw changes in the institutionalising of literature. A number of the essays in this volume look at the expanding number and influence of magazines and the professionalisation of reviewing, and Angela Dunstan explores the rise of literary societies. Dunstan's essay replaces the nebulous idea of 'late Romanticism' with a study of how Wordsworth and Shelley became contested grounds as literary societies sought to give literary study a scientific role on a par with philology. The retrospective construction of 'Romanticism' in the

period takes place amid debates about authorship and readership, as these are pulled in opposite directions by the Shelley Society's attempts to democratise a reading public's appreciation of Shelley, as Wordsworth became increasingly withdrawn from popular reading by the Wordsworth Society's veneration of him. With the foundation of the Browning Society in 1881, debates about how his life and works should be approached gave a focus to the 'scientific' study of literature and its relation to authorship. As Dunstan notes, 'the establishment of a society to dissect the works of a poet might unwittingly suggest that the poetry requires an intermediary to reveal its meaning.' Although Browning had little direct contact with the Society, its members nevertheless corresponded and conversed with him on points of interpretation, discussion that sometimes surfaced in print to make public debates about intentionality and the status of the author.

The Browning Society is exemplary in this respect as its subject was both living and dead within its duration (Browning died in 1889 and the Society ended in 1892) and towards the end of its existence it struggled to maintain the image of the iconic author figure. At the same time, the publishing world saw the decline of the three-volume novel, new ventures in genre fiction, the flourishing of magazines and the rapid turnover of poetic 'schools'. Penny Fielding's chapter explores the interstices of these rapid changes in literary history to think about the temporality of 1880s poetry. Her chapter takes its starting point from contemporaneous discussions of the state of 1880s poetic art that speculate about literary tradition. Attempts to delineate the historical place of contemporary poetry call on ideas of waiting and the tentative trying out of new models – whether French symbolism or early modern forms – at a point in which no single exemplar seemed to emerge. Fielding argues that this allowed a form of lyric poetry that sought to capture the impossible sense of the present experience. In an essay on the problematic and multiple ways in which we feel ourselves to be within historical time, Katie Trumpener has characterised lyric poetry as a way of 'living simultaneously in the self and in one's period as it juxtaposes quotidian activities and perceptions with moments of intense insight or records moments in external landmark events break in to fix or transfix the habitual as historical'.[29] Fielding's chapter is about the fractures between these two elements of living in time. Focusing on W. E. Henley's 'In Hospital' sequence, with its central image of the anaesthetised subject who fails to capture an event of which he cannot have been empirically aware in the first place, this chapter explores the peculiar temporality of the 1880s.

By contrast, Cannon Schmitt's chapter takes two novels that resist any easy categorisation of the decades that contain their writing and publication. Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (drafted in the 1870s and published in 1883) and Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (written 1873–84, but not published until 1903) are both novels which work against 'the linear conception of historical unfolding that subtends attempts to fix the emergence of a phenomenon to a specific moment in time'. Schmitt returns to the question of form, but in a revisionary way that renders the history of the novel as a genre 'clockless'. His intricate focus on the granular level of point of view in these novels allows us to see how the micro-level of individual chapters, sentences or even pronouns interacts with the wider structures of Spencerian evolutionary theory in which individual experiences merge with the abstract understanding of progressive development. Schreiner's use of a first-person plural point of view, for example, holds in tension the novel's movement towards Spencer's projection of complexity within universality, and the specific response of characters or even readers. Experimental, and refusing to correspond to what we might expect from sequential history, these novels, in Schmitt's reading, throw received notions of literary history into exhilarating disorder. In a single chapter of *The Story of an African Farm*, for example, Schreiner splinters the narrative point of view into the infantile world of sensation, religious intensity and the universality of natural temporality in ways that seem as much like Joyce as the Victorian novel.

Nathan K. Hensley's chapter on the prolific career of Andrew Lang reminds us of the inadequacies of imagining literary history based around a stable central author or a discretely bounded chronological unit. Lang's career as what Hensley calls a 'mediator' between other authors, texts and publishers, is indicative of the expanding structure of a networked literary culture. Hensley argues that Lang's 'minor, subordinate, or entangled status' provokes a reconsideration of 'identitarian thinking', which chooses to invest in, and isolate, singular objects – be they authors, individual works, or decades – 'understood as the explanatory *actants* of history'. Drawing persuasively on the network theory advanced by Bruno Latour, Hensley shows how Lang's methods of composition, for instance in his volume *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), thrive on a proliferating methodology of adaptation, translation and transcription that, cumulatively, revels in its linked, generative status. Lang's work rejects the model of the romantic singular author to reveal instead a collaborative, collective vision of textual production that stretches beyond its historical moment.