

*Introduction*  
*The 1890s: Decade of a Thousand Movements*  
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The 1890s were not very far in the rearview mirror when Holbrook Jackson published *The Eighteen-Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (1913), the first of many early twentieth-century attempts to capture the spirit of the nineteenth century's final decade. Jackson's work is somewhat singular, however, in its effort to take in the enormous range of innovations occurring within literature and the arts at the fin de siècle. Later works, such as Bernard Muddiman's *The Men of the Nineties* (1920), Osbert Burdett's *The Beardsley Period* (1925), and Richard Le Gallienne's *The Romantic '90s* (1926), tend to collapse decadence and the fin de siècle, while Jackson endeavors to engage the divergent and contradictory movements that, for him, were all similarly motivated by "the restless spirit of the time," its sense of "experiment and adventure."<sup>1</sup> Jackson's volume might be dedicated to Max Beerbohm and include a frontispiece of Aubrey Beardsley and a lengthy chapter on Oscar Wilde, but it also turns to Rudyard Kipling, George Bernard Shaw, the Celtic Renaissance, H. G. Wells, and the revival of the art of printing to make the case that this was a "distinctive epoch" (12). Beardsley was "but an incident of the Eighteen Nineties," "but one expression of *fin de siècle* daring, of a bizarre and often exotic courage, prevalent at the time and connected but indirectly, and often negatively, with some of the most vital movements of a decade which was singularly rich in ideas, personal genius, and social will" (17). The period was, Jackson acknowledges, a decadent moment, but it was also many other things, a period "electric with new ideas," operating in myriad forms to facilitate change, the "decade of a thousand 'movements'" (25, 34).

The mythmaking surrounding a period so singular, according to Jackson, could begin sooner than its end and flower before it was even a distant memory. In the preface to the 1927 edition of *The Eighteen-Nineties*, Jackson states that in the years since first publishing this volume, "the Eighteen Nineties has become a legend."<sup>2</sup> The fact that this is

possible, he asserts, is because the era was distinct, an “extraordinarily self-contained” period of ten years, making it “possible to interpret . . . in what may be called terms of personality” (12). He has not singled out this period for review. “That decade had,” he insists, “singled itself out.”<sup>3</sup> In characterizing the art and literature of the period, Jackson pays particular attention to the extent to which the artists and authors of the 1890s were self-aware about their positioning within a unique and vital moment, the ending of one century, the transition into another. “We are actually,” he argues, “made more conscious of our standing towards time by the approaching demise of a century” (18). It was not left to historians to establish the defining characteristics of this decade. This process was well underway as the era began. The writers of the 1890s saw themselves in time, of a time, as evidenced by the prevalence of the term “*fin de siècle*,” which according to Jackson indicates “the liveliness of the people of the Nineties to their hour and its characteristics” (21). Side by side with this term marched the moniker “new,” operating as a prefix that could move in every direction during a period “so conscious of its own novelty,” modifying the New Woman, the New Fiction, the New Hedonism, the New Drama (24). This historical and temporal self-consciousness was accompanied by a revolutionary spirit, “demands for culture and social redemption,” “seeking the immediate regeneration of society by the abolition of such social evils as poverty and overwork, and the meanness, ugliness, ill-health and commercial rapacity which characterized so much of modern life” (25–26). This was a decade that experienced itself as a decade, as a distinct moment in time with a distinct ethos, when one way of approaching existence would dissipate so another might begin.

Along with this sensitivity to time, there was something unique also, Jackson and other early writers on the 1890s insist, about the manner in which the authors of the 1890s conceptualized space. A receptivity to national influences outside of Britain is often cited as a marked characteristic of the period. Bernard Muddiman argues that “it is to France if anywhere we can trace the causes of this new attitude” that shaped the 1890s, asserting that it was in particular “a genital restiveness which came over from France” that “started the sex equation” in the literature of the 1890s.<sup>4</sup> Jackson also notes the “profound effect” of French fiction writers on the “imagination” of the period as well as the influence of German wood-engravers on the English artist Walter Crane (271). Even the enthusiasm for Kipling, that most jingoistic of *fin-de-siècle* fiction writers, had to do, according to Jackson, with the manner in which he facilitated contact with other places, enabling British readers to experience “the scent and

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heat, the colour and passion of the East in all its splendours and seductiveness” (280). Osbert Burdett narrowly framed the scene of the 1890s as “set in London,” but admitted “its tone was . . . cosmopolitan.”<sup>5</sup> And there was something self-contained, too, about this transnational openness and curiosity, brought to a close by the jingoism of the Boer War (1899–1902). W. G. Blaikie-Murdoch noted in his *The Renaissance of the Nineties* (1911) that the war submerged the nation in “patriotic anxiety and ardour,” eliminating the prior enthusiasm for aesthetic cultures both domestic and international that marked the period, for “in the main imperialism is the enemy of art.”<sup>6</sup> Muddiman notes similarly that French art continued to stimulate the English imagination “until the Boer War, when the imperialism of writers like Kipling became the chief interest” (4). As the century drew to a close, Jackson argues, “pride of race” reached an “unseemly” pitch, and “the nation forgot arts and letters” in favor of “an unseeing pride” and “a strangely inorganic patriotism” (63–64). The fluid national boundaries that marked the 1890s, these writers insist, became again consolidated and guarded as the century came to a close.

There is much we would like to bring forward into this collection from Jackson’s *The Eighteen Nineties* and these other early volumes. *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s* could be understood as the continuation of the work that Jackson initiated. Working within a series meant to revise conventional visions of the individual decades of the nineteenth century, we hope, like Jackson, to enrich and complement received insights about “the Naughty Nineties,” “the Yellow Nineties,” or “the Beardsley Period,” recognizing the divergent strains of cultural production that operated alongside Wilde and Beardsley. We are interested, of course, in the French-inflected “genital restiveness” that inaugurated this period of sexual anarchy, but we have endeavored to gather together a set of approaches that see beyond that horizon. This collection strives to fulfill the mission of the broader Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition series and to establish what was particular about one decade in comparison with the others to which this broader series is devoted. In this light, we find compelling Jackson’s assertions about historical self-consciousness and temporal awareness on the part of the denizens of the 1890s. If the authors and artists of the 1890s were already characterizing themselves as “fin-de-siècle” during the fin de siècle, then they have already begun to do some of our work for us, to tease out the threads that truly make this a discrete historical period, worthy of consideration as a moment unto itself. And if, as Jackson and his fellow critics of the period insist, this was a period of

heightened transnational receptivity, that makes it a particularly fertile ground for doing the kind of “undisciplining” work that seems so necessary at this moment, work that might facilitate a renewed vision of the nineteenth century, one that moves away from nationally siloed treatments of Victorian literature and attends to the cross-currents that made this period so cosmopolitan in tone.

### Rethinking the 1890s

Throughout the twentieth century, interest in the 1890s as a decade persisted. The tradition inaugurated by Jackson, Muddiman, and Burdett, which insisted upon the peculiarity and significance of the 1890s, continued into midcentury, facilitated by the publication of anthologies devoted to the decade, such as *The Eighteen-Nineties* (1948) edited by Martin Secker; *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s* (1966) edited by Karl Beckson; *Short Stories of the Nineties* (1968) edited by Derek Stanford; and *Poetry of the Nineties* (1970) edited by R. K. R. Thornton. The period has traditionally been thought of as an era of significant cultural and artistic transition between the confident moralism of the high Victorians and the disillusioned pessimism of twentieth-century modernism and thus deserving of critical attention.<sup>7</sup> The establishment of the Eighteen Nineties Society in 1972 along with works such as John Stokes’s *In the Nineties* (1989), Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner’s *England in the 1890s: Literary Publishing at the Bodley Head* (1990), and *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (2005) edited by Joseph Bristow sustained scholarly interest in the era as a period apart, an era of rapid aesthetic change during the final decades of the twentieth century into the present moment.

We hope the work in this collection will extend this tradition by pointing toward new possibilities for conceptualizing the 1890s as a distinct historical period. There are, of course, several excellent overviews of fin-de-siècle literature and culture, such as *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (1992) edited by John Stokes, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (1995) edited by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, and *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (2007) edited by Gail Marshall. These works can help orient students and scholars new to the field, introducing them to major figures, movements, and historical events. However, the aims of this collection, inflected by the particular objectives of the Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition series, are different. Rather than stressing coverage or genealogies, we have

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asked our authors to craft innovative scholarly arguments that also exemplify recent critical trends in the field and have encouraged them to reflect on how we might practice literary history moving forward. Accordingly, the chapters brought together here both build upon the insights of previous scholars and introduce into these longstanding conversations new texts, contexts, methodologies, and media. We have encouraged contributors to think critically about the stories we have tended to tell about the period and to incorporate literary forms and movements, such as weird fiction, the nocturne, colonial realism, and socialist novels, that have received less notice in the past. Consequently, some of the more familiar names traditionally associated with the 1890s, such as Thomas Hardy, Bram Stoker, George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Henry James, and Rudyard Kipling, appear less frequently in these chapters than one might expect. Indeed, some of the figures who do play a central role in these pages – Emma Frances Brooke, O. Chandumenon, and Moncure Conway, to name a few – are likely obscure even to specialists. This has not been done solely to introduce readers to lesser-known and lesser-studied authors of the era, but because new methodologies necessarily summon our attention to new texts and issues. For example, while one might expect to find separate chapters on decadence and theater in a collection on the 1890s, Adam Alston, in Chapter 13, combines the two, arguing that to understand the 1890s properly we must also understand certain understudied theatrical works as central to the decadent project and vice versa, an insight that becomes readily apparent once we move beyond certain antitheatrical prejudices that still dominate literary studies.

The results of this and the other investigations undertaken in this collection have, we believe, been twofold. They enhance our understanding of the nineteenth century's closing years in their full complexity, dynamism, and intellectual ferment; they also make a case, implicitly or explicitly, for the relevance of perspectives from the 1890s regarding issues that still preoccupy us today. What can the alluring artificiality of hothouses and hothouse flowers famously associated with fin-de-siècle decadence tell us about the greenhouse gas effect and humanity's role in climate change, as Elizabeth Carolyn Miller asks in Chapter 8? How, Zarena Aslami queries in Chapter 1, do recent interrogations of the Enlightenment category of "the human" within Black studies force us to confront the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in 1890s culture and the centrality of racialization within multiple turn-of-the-century discourses? What happens to the era-of-transition narrative when recent advances in

digital technology prompt us to see the decade's "little magazines" as a pivotal moment in media history in and of itself rather than an anticipation of modernist innovation, as Lorraine Janzen Kooistra argues in Chapter 15? These are just a few examples of how our authors bring rigorous historical research to bear on pressing presentist concerns with the goal of enhancing both our comprehension of the 1890s and our current moment.

Ultimately, we believe these chapters offer both helpful distillations of current critical trends in fin-de-siècle studies and innovative critical arguments. Rather than providing a synoptic overview of or handbook to the period, they collectively offer a snapshot of issues currently igniting scholarly debate, as well as individually modeling new paths of inquiry that can be followed by others. Our hope is that this volume will be just as useful and informative to those who are already familiar with the field as it is to relative newcomers, insofar as it makes a case for why the 1890s continue to be an area of perennial interest and relevance, even while our comprehension of the decade is changing in response to our own era's shifting cultural and political concerns. The attraction this period holds has much to do with the way authors and artists of the period perceived their historical moment as vexed and apocalyptic – an end as well as a beginning leading into a more keenly modern new world. We believe that the sense of urgency, rapidity, transition, and crisis we associate with the fin de siècle speaks directly to how many of us perceive our dizzying and disorienting present.

### **The "Naughty Nineties"?: New Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality**

The final decade of the nineteenth century has long had a reputation for being the "Naughty Nineties" (a phrase in use since the early twentieth century), a time when bourgeois gender norms and sexual mores came under attack by what decadent writer Vernon Lee called a "queer comradeship of outlawed thought."<sup>8</sup> No two figures have been more emblematic of this "sexual anarchy," to borrow a phrase from Elaine Showalter's landmark study of the era, than the cigarette-smoking, bicycle-riding, sexually liberated New Woman and the effete, aesthetic, and erotically perverse male decadent, epitomized by Oscar Wilde.<sup>9</sup> The New Woman and the decadent formed something of a matched set in the decade's popular imagination, serving as harbingers of either an emancipated or degenerate future, depending on one's perspective.<sup>10</sup> These figures have continued to dominate critical accounts of the Victorian fin de siècle,

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which became more central to the field of Victorian studies with the advent of feminist and, later, queer criticism in the twentieth century's closing decades. The sexual radicalism commonly associated with the New Woman and the decadent played a prominent role in the establishment and development of these schools of thought, often serving as historical inspirations for their own political goals and commitments. One need only look at groundbreaking work done by scholars such as Joseph Bristow, Richard Dellamora, Ellis Hanson, and Richard Kaye on aestheticist and decadent challenges to normative sexualities; Kathy Alexis Psomiades, Talia Schaffer, and Jill Ehnenn on women's decadent writing; and the revolutionary work on New Woman fiction by Ann Ardis, Ann Heilmann, Sally Ledger, Lyn Pykett, and Margaret Stetz to see how the pressing concerns of the present day led to new, fuller understandings of the cultural significance of the 1890s.<sup>11</sup>

Although it is incontrovertible that the New Woman and the decadent were cultural lightning rods throughout the 1890s, several of our authors suggest that the preeminent role they have occupied in cultural memory has distorted our perception of an era that was only ever partially "naughty" at best. In Chapter 12, Alex Murray highlights the political complexities of the *fin de siècle*, the subtleties of which are lost if one applies an overly simplistic binary opposition between sexual radicals and their enemies. He shows that, despite its reputation, the 1890s were just as conservative and patriotic as they were subversive and cosmopolitan, and that many of the authors who have been celebrated for their aesthetic experimentalism and unconventional personal lives were also reactionaries, nationalists, and imperialists. Murray reminds us that gender and sexual dissidence need not necessarily align with other progressive political commitments – a useful lesson for our own era, when the most famous transgender celebrity in the United States is a conservative Republican, and a small but vocal faction of so-called gender critical lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists in the UK are currently campaigning against transgender rights.

In Chapter 10, Simon Joyce advises us to look beyond our present-day version of queer politics as a tenuous coalition between two groups that are separate yet somehow related: those who define their identity primarily by their non-normative sexual orientation (i.e., lesbians, gays, bisexuals) and those who primarily define themselves by their non-normative gendered embodiment (i.e., transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer people). For Joyce, thinking outside this spurious binary can enhance our comprehension of sexual and gender identity in the 1890s. While in our current

moment, it is an indication of one's sophistication to insist on the separability of sexual orientation and gender identity, a perspective encapsulated by the well-worn explanatory phrase, "sexuality is who you go to bed with, gender identity is who you go to bed as," Joyce proposes that this separation might have actually been a historical misstep. He looks back to the writings of Edward Carpenter, a socialist, feminist, and early gay rights activist who was influenced by both New Woman authors and German sexologists to conceive of the complex interrelations of gender transitivity and sexual identity. For Joyce, this model of sexual selfhood might be more politically efficacious and personally empowering than the one we have now.

Perhaps Joyce's boldest claim, at least in terms of dominant assumptions of literary and cultural history, is that we cannot learn terribly much about the new models of gender and sexual identity arising in the 1890s by looking to Oscar Wilde: his classical, pederastic model of same-sex relations was already considered by many to be regressively hierarchical. The notion that Wilde might not be central to the decade, especially when it comes to sexuality and gender, goes against the scholarly trend to view him as the very embodiment of the spirit of the age.<sup>12</sup> His outsized personality, the wit and audacity of his writings, as well as the media spectacle of the trials and his subsequent vindication as an early martyr for gay rights, have altogether made him not only a synecdoche for the decade when he rose to fame and fell into infamy, but one of the most famous and widely read authors in the English language. His presence as one of the biggest celebrities of the 1890s undoubtedly helped make the era a hotbed for scholarly investigations into alternative sexualities and genders. Yet the dominance of the Wilde *mythos* – a cultural role the author himself helped to create in his own writings – has tended to crowd out of our cultural memory the period's numerous other writers on sexuality and gender. Consequently, although discussions of Wilde appear frequently in this collection, our authors tend to treat him as part of a larger constellation of thinkers, rather than as somehow exemplary or *sui generis*.

In this context, the era's most characteristic author may not be Wilde but rather Carpenter. Although today he is not especially well known outside of specialist circles and was even something of a niche figure during the 1890s, perhaps no other author better exemplifies our vision of a "decade of a thousand movements." During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries he was an internationally known thinker who combined a Walt Whitman-inspired mysticism with a radical political outlook. In contrast to Wilde's presentation of himself as a solitary genius, Carpenter understood himself to be but a node in a network of progressive



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activists that included utopian socialists, New Woman feminists, vegetarians and anti-vivisectionists, anti-imperialists, and campaigners for the rights of sexual minorities. In her contribution to this volume (Chapter 11), Diana Maltz discusses the Carpenter-inspired socialist New Woman novelists – authors who, unlike better known New Woman novelists like Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Mona Caird, were just as committed to socialism as they were to feminism. While critics have long noted the ideological tensions that existed between New Woman and male decadent authors, Maltz builds upon this insight to demonstrate how socialist feminists were inspired by Carpenter’s utopian pastoralism to embrace ideas of degeneration and eugenics against a male decadence which they thought to be the very embodiment of middle- and upper-class convention, a hindrance to social and evolutionary advancement. Both Maltz’s and Joyce’s chapters support Murray’s claim that it is impossible to reduce the politics of the 1890s to a progressive/reactionary binary, just as it is misleading to let one major figure stand in for the entire ecosystem of dissident gender and sexual thought at the fin de siècle.

**Cosmopolitanism/Patriotic Anxiety: Transnational Contact at the Fin de Siècle**

Decadence has to a certain extent managed to define our vision of transnational contact and cosmopolitanism in the 1890s as well. This is in part because, as Stefano Evangelista notes, “decadence has always been regarded as a foreign import,” a cultural disease contracted from France, making the very existence of the movement within England a testament to the nation’s permeable borders.<sup>13</sup> This has also to do with the essential nature of the decadent sensibility, the fact that as an aesthetic and an approach to living, decadence welcomed contact with alterity. Guided by the Paterian exhortation to be forever courting new impressions, decadent writers and artists opened themselves up to transnational influence in a manner that hovered somewhere between an ethics of curiosity, welcoming contact with strangers, and racial fetishism, subjecting the world outside of England to an appetitive and orientalist gaze. For this reason, some of the strongest scholarship on transcultural contact at the fin de siècle has focused on the decade’s aestheticism and decadence. Stephen Arata’s *Fictions of Loss at the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Identity and Empire* (1996) discusses how much the concepts of decadence and imperialism were intertwined in the late Victorian imagination.<sup>14</sup> Matthew Potolsky has highlighted the manner in which networks of taste facilitated

transnational contact within the “decadent republic of letters,” inspiring decadent writers to generate alternative canons that fostered a cosmopolitan sensibility.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, Leela Gandhi’s *Affective Communities* describes how the aestheticist ethos underwrote bonds between British and colonial subjects at the end of the century, giving close consideration to how the Indian writer Manmohan Ghose drew from his contact with Wilde’s circle “a radical reading of ‘aestheticism’ as a profound and effective rehearsal of anti-imperial ‘autonomy.’”<sup>16</sup>

Work like Gandhi’s, however, also shows us the rich array of fin-de-siècle radical thinking that circulated around the question of cross-cultural contact. Such thinking extended beyond the borders of the Decadent Movement, within coterie circles of vegetarians, spiritualists, and sexologists. And, as Sebastian Lecourt’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 5) on popular publications on world religions highlights, these conversations were not confined to radical circles but also took place on a mass-market level. The broader attentiveness across British culture to the question of international relationality is an instance of what Ross Forman has described as the consolidation of “the model of acquisitive empire” during this period, as Britain came increasingly to conceptualize itself as “able to select, absorb, domesticate, and recycle the commodities, peoples, languages and methods of other cultures.”<sup>17</sup> If this was a heyday for forms of anticolonial theory and activism, it was also, as Tanya Agathocleous and Jason Rudy have recently argued, the moment when “the empire was at its largest, most powerful, and most correspondingly bombastic” and the expansion of Anglophone print culture accelerated communication about the realities of empire, allowing “English language newspapers, books, periodicals, pamphlets, Bibles and other printed matter to circulate within colonies, between colonies, and between colony and metropole.”<sup>18</sup> Global contact was increasingly significant and increasingly rapid, making it crucial for modern critics to address transnational exchanges in the 1890s, as well as rendering the 1890s particularly relevant to the longer history of globalization in our present moment.

With the objectives of the Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition series in mind, particularly the call to examine the nineteenth-century concepts and concerns that shape our contemporary world, we have placed a great deal of emphasis on questions of race, empire, and global circulation. In envisioning futures for the field of nineteenth-century studies, we wish to put the most pressure on the national boundaries that have for so long curtailed work in the field. As Caroline Levine has argued, despite the influence of work in postcolonial, transatlantic, and world literary studies,