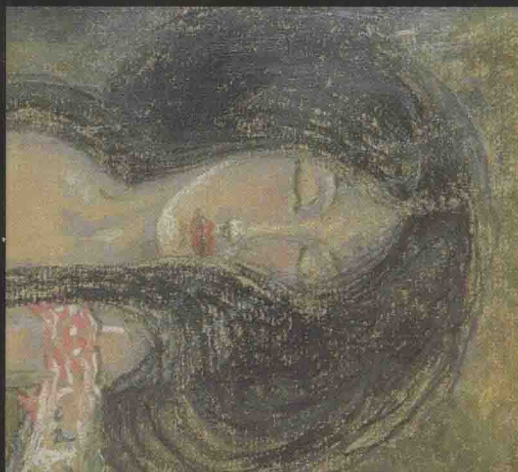


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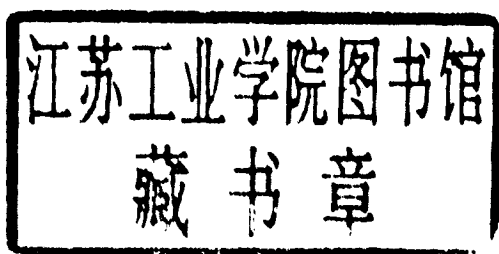


# THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

*Edited by Gail Marshall*

THE CAMBRIDGE  
COMPANION TO  
THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

EDITED BY  
GAIL MARSHALL  
*Oxford Brookes University*



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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1885      General Gordon killed in the Sudan  
              Stead, 'The Tribute of Modern Babylon'  
              Criminal Law Amendment Act passed  
              *Dictionary of National Biography* founded  
              Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*
- 1886      Trafalgar Square riots  
              Haggard, *She* (–1887)  
              Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders*  
              (–1887)  
              Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and  
              *Kidnapped*  
              Watts, *Hope*
- 1887      Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee  
              Bloody Sunday riots
- 1888      Kodak box camera invented  
              Jack the Ripper murders in Whitechapel  
              First woman elected to London County Council  
              Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills*
- 1889      First English performance of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*  
              International Congress of Psychology in Paris  
              Cleveland Street Scandal  
              Prosecution of Zola by National Vigilance Association  
              Booth, *Life and Labour in London* (–1903)  
              S. Webb, *Fabian Essays in Socialism*
- 1890      Cecil Rhodes made Premier of the Cape Colony  
              Morris, *News from Nowhere*  
              Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (and in revised edition in  
              1891)

- 1891 The Clitheroe case  
First English performances of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Lady from the Sea*  
Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*  
Gissing, *New Grub Street*
- 1892 Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*  
Shaw, *Widowers' Houses*  
Death of Tennyson  
Morris founded the Kelmscott Press
- 1893 Independent Labour Party founded  
New edition of Pater's *Renaissance* with 'Conclusion' restored  
Egerton, *Keynotes*  
Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*  
Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*
- 1894 Women permitted to stand for Parish and District Councils  
*Yellow Book* founded  
Beerbohm, 'A Defence of Cosmetics'  
Kipling, *The Jungle Book*  
Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (–1895)  
Sarah Grand coins the term 'New Woman'
- 1895 Oscar Wilde found guilty of committing indecent acts, and imprisoned to two years' hard labour  
*The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* are taken off the stage  
Marconi invents wireless telegraphy  
Lumière brothers invent cinematography  
Sully, *Studies of Childhood*  
Nordau's *Degeneration* translated into English  
Wells, *The Time Machine*  
Allen, *The Woman Who Did*  
Sickert, *Gallery of the Old Bedford*  
F. Macdonald, *The Sleeping Princess* (–1896)
- 1896 Founding of the *Daily Mail*  
London School of Economics opens
- 1897 National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies established  
Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee  
Stoker, *Dracula*  
James, 'Turn of the Screw'

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1898      Hong Kong enlarged when Britain leases Chinese territories  
            Vagrancy Act increases penalties for homosexual soliciting
- 1899      Anglo-Boer War (–1902)  
            Seats for Female Shop Assistants Act  
            Conrad, ‘Heart of Darkness’
- 1900      Conquest of Orange Free State and the Transvaal  
            Ruskin and Wilde die  
            Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*
- 1901      Queen Victoria dies

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GAIL MARSHALL

## Introduction

In seeking a mode in which to speak of the moment of the fin de siècle, one is immediately confronted by a history of conflicting narratives and trajectories. The term itself, of course, carries its own chronological presuppositions boldly before it, allowing barely the whisper of a continuity beyond the 'fin' to be heard. That lack of continuity is particularly emphasised in Oscar Wilde's employment of the term in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891):

'Fin de siècle', murmured Lord Henry.

'Fin du globe', answered his hostess.

'I wish it were fin du globe', said Dorian with a sigh. 'Life is a great disappointment.'<sup>1</sup>

This well-known moment occurs at Lady Narborough's house, in the midst of a particularly tedious evening, brought about by the sudden arrival of the hostess's daughter, who, 'to make matters worse, had actually brought her husband with her' (p. 201). The scene works by typically Wildean paradox and humour to ensnare readers into confronting their own prejudices and limitations, and to confound expectations. In particular, in a scene which immediately follows upon Dorian's murder of the painter Basil Hallward and the disposal of the body by Dorian's one time friend Alan Campbell, the expectation of endings, and the assumption of ennui, are confounded. Dorian's desire for a definitive ending, for sterility, a lack of continuity, his refutation of his life so far, the languor of his expressed desire, belie the extent of his visceral engagement with the sensational life which is the counterpart of his role as decadent icon. The extent of his languor testifies precisely to the extent of Dorian's awareness of his inextricable involvement with life, its continuities and complications.

The assumption of the desire for an absolute ending, rather than achieving that ending, actually signals the undeniable continuity of vitality, and is acted out in the scene itself, which provides the basis for a number of paradoxes and characters which achieve a further posthumous life in Wilde's

plays: Mrs Erlynne, with her 'Venetian-red hair' would later surface in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Madame de Ferrol's hair, which turned 'quite gold from grief' after the death of her third husband would provide the model for Lady Harbury, the subject of Lady Bracknell's suspicions and speculation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and Lord Henry's aperçus find their way into Wilde's dramatic dandies. The richness of the scene works spectacularly against its obsession with endings, and acts synecdochically to proclaim the energy which emerges from confronting the possibility of ending. But this is not the final assertion of life in one doomed, or an anticipation of Dylan Thomas's raging against the dying of the light. In confronting the end of the century, and arguably the ending of the narratives which had been engendered in the mid-nineteenth-century period, a creative energy is unleashed which, in its vitality and multiplicity, becomes the most effective statement against our understanding of this period as the end of anything.

And yet, that understanding of the period has had a critical persistence, perhaps generated by W. B. Yeats's elegy for what he termed 'The Tragic Generation' of writers of the period. In his *Autobiographies* (published posthumously in 1955), Yeats cites a catalogue of men doomed to early death, disgrace and an aesthetic of exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Holbrook Jackson's equally influential study, *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), seems to concur in its litanies for the lost dead, which anticipate the roll-calls of the dead which would be generated by the war just about to begin. Jackson writes of the poets of the period:

Most of them died young, several were scarcely more than youths . . . It would seem as if these restless and tragic figures thirsted so much for life, and for the life of the hour, that they put the cup to their lips and drained it in one deep draught: perhaps all that was mortal of them felt so essential to the Nineties that life beyond the decade might have been unbearable. Oscar Wilde died in 1900 at the age of forty-four; Aubrey Beardsley died in 1898, aged twenty-six; Ernest Dowson in 1900, aged thirty-three; Charles Conder, in 1909, aged forty-one; Lionel Johnson, in 1902, aged thirty-five; Hubert Crackanthorpe, in 1896, aged thirty-one; Henry Harland, in 1905, aged forty-four; Francis Thompson, in 1907, aged forty-eight, and John Davidson, in 1909, aged fifty-two.<sup>2</sup>

Such a list confirms Jackson's assessment, in the preface to his work's second edition, that the 1890s was a period, 'extraordinarily self-contained, although its origins go back to the eighties and even to the seventies of last century, and its reverberations are still heard in the twenty-seventh year of a new century which is so different as to be, in our necessarily short perspective, a new era' (p. 12).

There is arguably, of course, a tension here as there is in Yeats. This is a period ending in early deaths, but which is still heard, a period which saw the



denigration of the art of Beardsley – an art described by Yeats as having been ‘created out of a spirit of mockery’, ‘a form of beauty where his powerful logical intellect eliminated every outline that suggested meditation or even satisfied passion’ – but which generated in his supporters the animated realisation that ‘we knew we must face an infuriated Press and public, but being all young we delighted in enemies and in everything that had an heroic air’.<sup>3</sup> Yeats creates out of a narrative of despair and rejection, ending in the early death to which he and Jackson both accord a form of iconic status, a response which is heroic and vital, suggestive of positive engagement, a response which is as much a part of the 1890s as the tragedy to which both bear witness.

This tension is essentially of the period itself, and exposes the extent to which it is impossible securely to pronounce on the historical contingency of the fin de siècle. Such end-stopped, tragic readings of the period as Jackson and Yeats present are arguably enabled by their concentration on a particular sub-set of the myriad writers publishing at the time. The poets named by Jackson and of whom Yeats gives brief portraits are, however, just one branch of the industry that writing and publishing were becoming at this period. To concentrate on them is to enable a firm categorisation of the period, but once that group has to share critical attention with the journalists, dramatists, novelists of realism and fantasy, short story writers, women writers of the ‘new’ and ‘old’ varieties, and polemicists of the 1890s, to say nothing of the period’s artists and musicians, the issue of definition is impossibly muddled.

Some categories of culture were almost brand new in the 1890s, as markets expanded to capitalise on the appetite for print culture of a newly literate population, often in the form of popular papers, such as *Tit-Bits*, which was founded in 1881, and which spawned a number of copy-cat successors. The birth of the ‘New Journalism’ of the late-Victorian period saw the emergence of such newspapers as the *Daily Mail* in 1896. That category of journalism was filled with celebrity gossip and sensation: it pioneered the celebrity interview alongside burgeoning correspondence columns which jointly acknowledged the new journalism’s professed basis in a form of democracy which promised in the words of W. T. Stead to ‘interpret the knowledge of the few to the understanding of the many’.<sup>4</sup> Such journalists and editors exploited the newly commercial opportunities for the proliferation of the written word in the period, opportunities enabled by increased literacy and technological developments in printing, marketing and transportation, and created a form of journalism which continues in the mass market dailies in Britain today, with all the attendant anxieties as to the probity and legitimacy of the personalisation of political issues which such techniques as the