



## the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

### ***THE YELLOW BOOK:* INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 9 (APRIL 1896)**

Volume 9 of *The Yellow Book* is the first to have its distinctive yellow-and-black bindings designed by a woman artist, Mabel Dearmer. This break-through initiated a trend, as the covers of 3 of the magazine's 4 remaining issues (volumes 11, 12, and 13) were likewise designed by women. Also groundbreaking was the aesthetic periodical's unapologetic presentation of children's book illustration as part of the contemporary art scene. In addition to Dearmer, other contributors to the volume who were involved in children's writing or illustration include Isabel Adams, Georgie Gaskin, Arthur Gaskin, Celia A. Levetus, Florence M. Rudland, and Ernest George Treglown. Dearmer's whimsical cover design of a child riding a butterfly at night (a motif echoed in the butterfly image on the issue's spine) introduces a collection of visual contents by the Birmingham School that include both black-and-white book illustrations and tonal reproductions of easel paintings by members of the group. An art-nouveau illustrator whose modern, poster style of black and white composition was associated with Aubrey Beardsley (Maltz), Dearmer's designs for both cover and title page exemplify the best in fin-de-siècle book arts. For this reason, Dearmer's *Yellow Book* cover also functioned as an advertisement for The Bodley Head brand, as she designed covers and illustrated the work of a number of John Lane's authors, including Henry Harland, Laurence Housman, and Evelyn Sharp.

Announcing that "The Pictures in this Volume are by Members of the Birmingham School," the Table of Contents indicated that Volume 9 would continue the innovative practice introduced in volumes 7 and 8 of featuring a regional arts community. This editorial decision challenged readers' perception of London as the single notable source of artistic innovation by shifting attention to some of the leading movements of the day outside the city. As Simon Houfe suggests, the Birmingham School's contributions to

Volume 9 “would have left no *Yellow Book* reader in any doubt as to where the strength in illustration really lay” (169). At the same time, publishing their work in the transatlantic *Yellow Book* gave the members of the Birmingham School a wider audience than that offered by their own arts-and-crafts magazine, *The Quest* (1894-96).

Arising in the 1890s, the Birmingham Group was an informal collection of artists, most of whom were students or teachers at Birmingham institutions such as the city’s Municipal School of Art. The dominant influences on their work were the Pre-Raphaelites, and Edward Burne-Jones (a Birmingham native) in particular. Some of the group’s members worked for William Morris’s Kelmscott Press and – inspired by Morris and John Ruskin – developed as artisans as well as artists. Many had artistic careers that extended well into the twentieth century, often developing Symbolist and Surrealist elements. Edward S. Harper and Joseph Southall would follow Burne-Jones, Frederick Leighton, John Everett Millais, and others in the role of President of the Birmingham Royal Society of Artists.

The Birmingham School represented in Volume 9 of *The Yellow Book* combined work by teachers and students. Harper’s sentimental painting, *The Missing Boat in Sight*, opened the volume. Sydney Meteyard’s allegorical *Cupid* and Charles March Gere’s visualization of characters from Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Hermia and Helena*, are the only other tonal reproductions of paintings. The remaining visual contents—including Gere’s *Port Eynon, Gower*, a sparse drawing of a village street—represent the strong black-and-white work for which the Birmingham School is best known. Southall, recognized as the leader of the Birmingham group, contributed *Night*, a decorative drawing of the goddess of night surrounded by symbols of the zodiac. E. H. New, whom Lane had previously commissioned to illustrate The Bodley Head premises on Vigo Street for the iconic cover of his *Belles-Lettres* catalogue, is represented by two examples of pen-and-ink work. Ernest George Treglown’s *Three Blind Mice* is a highly decorative, modern design for the familiar nursery rhyme, while Bernard Sleight’s *Tristram and Iseult* (dated 1893) shows the influence of Beardsley’s Pre-Raphaelite style in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (1892-94).

Six of the 14 artists selected to represent the Birmingham School are women, making the artistic contents of Volume 9 the most balanced in gender representation to date. Mary J. Newill, celebrated for her imaginative representations of natural scenes, contributed the highly detailed *Study of Trees*. Evelyn Holden's "Binorie, O Binnorie" takes a traditional ballad as its subject, Isabel Adams's "Come Unto These Yellow Sands" pictures a song from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and Florence M. Rudland's *The Lady of Shalott* gives a striking interpretation of the climactic scene in Alfred Tennyson's well-known poem. Rather than illustrating a literary text, fairy-tale illustrator Celia A. Levetus presents an aesthetic scene of literary consumption in *A Reading from Herrick* (the table of contents gives the incorrect page number for both her contribution and that of Sydney Meteyard). Georgina "Georgie" Evelyn Cave Gaskin (listed as Mrs. A. J. Gaskin) echoes this favourite *Yellow Book* theme in the final piece in the volume—a book plate depicting Isobel Verney Cave seated with a book. Her husband and former teacher Arthur Gaskin contributed two drawings: one of his 71-year-old mother holding a book and a book plate featuring a portrait of Georgie herself.

In addition to the art works, Volume 9 includes 8 works of fiction, 4 of nonfiction, and 8 poems. Some of these contributions arguably consist of more than one item, such as Richard Le Gallienne's "Four Prose Fancies" and Baron Corvo's two installments in his series *Stories Toto Told Me*. The longest prose work is Stanley V. Makower's thoughtful essay on the French singer Yvette Guilbert. Max Beerbohm's "Poor Romeo!" is a light-spirited study of Robert Coates, a wealthy amateur actor from the early nineteenth century whose favourite role was Shakespeare's Romeo. Alice Mary Brandreth Butcher (published here as Mrs. J. E. H. Gordon) offers a recuperative study of the feminist Mary Astell's writings and her fight for women's right to education. Butcher describes Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest. By A Lover of Her Sex* (1694) as a "bomb-shell" that "deserves to be rescued from oblivion" (106).

Among the poems, the Belgian Symbolist Emile Verhaeren's "The Fishermen," translated by Alma Strettell, stands out for its decadent imagery: "The river stagnates, pestilent / With carrion by the current sent / [...] / The moon, just like a woman dead, / That they have smothered overhead" (135). Poems by Francis Prevost and Laurence

Alma Tadema both deal with love lost, but it is Nora Hopper's "Wolf-Edith" that offers the most innovative take on the subject, as the heroine maintains a haunting romance with a lover killed in battle.

Editor Henry Harland initiated the literary contents of Volume 9 with a self-reflexive critical essay "A Birthday Letter," written under his "Yellow Dwarf" pseudonym, first introduced in his long review essay for Volume 7. In the piece in Volume 9, the Dwarf's closing suggestion that *The Yellow Book* reduce its price and length may have been spurred by a recent review in *The Academy*, which had praised the premier issue of the less expensive *Savoy* for not being too "thick" ("Magazines"). Or Harland may have been trying to justify reducing his editorial workload. At 406 pages, Volume 8 would prove to be the longest issue of *The Yellow Book*'s 13-volume run, while Volume 9, which included the Yellow Dwarf's recommendation of brevity, was to be the shortest, at 256. This reduced bulk also may have been the result of a greater parity in artistic and literary contents. While most issues of *The Yellow Book* contained more works of literature than art, Volume 9—with the title page, front cover, and back cover—matches its 20 literary works with 20 visual designs.

The Yellow Dwarf's commentary in Volume 9 also contributes to an on-going kerfuffle between Harland and H. G. Wells. In October 1894, Harland had written *Yellow Book* publisher John Lane boasting about having received such high quality submissions that he had even rejected two stories by Wells (Henry Harland to John Lane). When, in March 1895, Wells became the principal fiction reviewer for the *Saturday Review* (usually publishing anonymously) (Philmus), he was critical of Harland's prose. In an 1895 review of novels by Ella D'Arcy, Henry James, and Harland, for example, Wells ridiculed the "Yellow Book School." However, he then praised James as a writer of a higher calibre and described D'Arcy as "remarkably promising," leaving Harland the sole target of his critique. Wells took another passing swipe at Harland later that same year, in the *Saturday Review*. In January 1896, Harland did finally publish Wells in *The Yellow Book* (Volume 8), only to have the *Saturday Review* declare, in February, that Harland's own short story in that issue, "P'tit Bleu," was derivative of George Du Maurier's popular 1895 novel *Trilby* ("Notes" 213). And so in this issue of *The Yellow Book*, we find Harland, under the pseudonym of The Yellow Dwarf, criticizing Du

Maurier's novel and attacking the *Saturday Review* because of its "perennial state of peevish animosity" toward Harland (12). "Is it possible," The Yellow Dwarf asks Harland in a blatant dig at Wells, "that in the course of your editorial duties you have ever had occasion to reject a manuscript offered by a member of its staff?" (12). Thus, in addition to the innovative art and literature that continued to be stimulating and often well-received, Volume 9, with its "Birthday Letter," also presents a tantalizing peak into the manoeuvring among the authors, editors, and artists who made up the 1890s British avant garde.

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