



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

THE YELLOW BOOK: INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 12 (JANUARY 1897)

One senses just how prescient the editorial team behind *The Yellow Book* managed at times to be when, in January 1897, they chose as the opening item of Volume 12 a sketch of Evelyn Sharp. The 27-year-old was on the cusp of becoming well known as a children's writer and, soon after, as a journalist. In a few years, she would become a leading suffragette; her political efforts resulted in imprisonment in 1911 (John). This portrait of an up-and-coming author and activist, moreover, was sketched by A.E. Walton, a member of the Glasgow School recognized as the heart of the Scottish avant garde at this time. Thus the first featured work strongly encouraged the magazine's audience to recognize the expert finger that *The Yellow Book* had on the pulse of British culture.

At the same time, however, the positioning of this portrait can be read as a strategic act of product placement. John Lane (who published *The Yellow Book* at his press The Bodley Head) had recently released Sharp's novel *At the Relton Arms* (1895) in his Keynote Series. And soon after this latest issue of his magazine hit the stands, Lane would bring out Sharp's *Wymps and Other Tales* (1897), followed by her *All the Way to Fairyland* (1898), both illustrated by Mabel Dearmer, a Bodley Head artist likewise featured in Volume 12. Walton had contributed material to previous issues of *The Yellow Book*, including portraits of George Egerton (Volume 5) and Kenneth Grahame (Volume 8), both notable authors in Lane's roster. From this perspective, the twelfth volume of *The Yellow Book* affirms that Lane must be recognized not only as the publisher of the periodical, but also as an influential co-editor whose decisions were based extensively on marketing the books he produced at The Bodley Head.

Critics had by now recognized Lane's strategy. As the *Times* speculates in their review of Volume 12, "the principle upon which the Yellow Book (John Lane) is edited would seem to be that at intervals of every three months a section of the reading public is seized with a craving for fresh work by Mr. Henry Harland, Miss Ella D'Arcy, and others of the little school of writers whom the Bodley Head has brought into notice" (Rev.). The reviewer observes that it is perhaps not surprising that, after a dozen issues, the publication would "tend to run largely in the same groove." *The Graphic* similarly describes the latest issue as striking the death knell of the publication's reputation for innovation: "the twelfth volume fills us with an apprehension, which grows with every page, that we have to look forward neither to playful and disturbing eccentricities nor to anything particularly good or particularly clever" ("The 'Yellow Book'"). Overall, *The Graphic* finds the issue "middle-class" and "rather 'stodgy'." Despite approaching from a different perspective, the *New York Times* reaches much the same conclusion, declaring that the qualities bred by familiarity and habit have resulted in "the egg-colored volume" now being "not as yellow as it was," which it sees as an improvement ("Not").

The image of *The Yellow Book* as less of a rebel than it used to be was also in part due to the fate of its key rival, *The Savoy*. Having recently been fired as art editor of *The Yellow Book*, Aubrey Beardsley's initial design for the cover of *The Savoy's* premier issue included a putto preparing to urinate on a copy of *The Yellow Book*; this version was never used (Nelson 70). The sudden end to publication of *The Savoy* in December 1896 would have encouraged a view of *The Yellow Book* (Volume 12 appearing the next month) as the established avant-garde periodical of the London scene, having outlasted the more licentious upstart.

It is true that most authors and artists represented in Volume 12 had appeared in previous issues. Past authors contributing poetry to this volume included Marie Clothilde Balfour, Kenneth Grahame, Edith Nesbit, Rosamund Marriott Watson, and William Watson. But the two new contributors – A. Bernard Miall and Stephen Phillips – do suggest *The Yellow Book's* interest in discovering and promoting new talent. Phillips had only just begun to receive attention after winning the Academy Prize for poetry in 1896 for his poem *Christ in Hades* (Kershner 194). Miall was only 20 years old when Leonard Smithers published his *Nocturnes and Pastorals* in 1896. Lane would

publish his second collection, *Poems* (1899). Of the poetry in Volume 12, it was Kenneth Grahame's elegy to a puppy, "To Rollo: Untimely Taken," that garnered the most attention. *Literary World*, *National Observer*, and *The New York Times* all singled it out for its brilliance, the latter calling it "true gold" ("Not"). Interestingly, John Lane explicitly demarcates William Watson's "The Lost Eden" as under copyright in the United States because he was also publishing an 8-page, sewn booklet of the poem in Britain and the United States in a limited run intended to deter copyright infringement (Bose 897). Perhaps he need not have worried; for *The Graphic*, Watson's piece was "singularly dull."

Of the twelve contributors of prose works to this volume, only Hermione Ramsden was new to *The Yellow Book*. The previous year, Lane had published her translations of the German author Laura Marholm Hansson's *Modern Women* (published in the United States by Roberts Brothers). It includes a chapter entitled "Neurotic Keynotes: George Egerton," addressing one of the most prominent authors in Lane's roster at the time. As the most famous contributor to Volume 12, Henry James's essay on George Sand and Alfred de Musset received the most attention from critics, predominantly positive. Lena Milman's "Marcel: An Hotel Child" received strong positive commentary for its sympathetic portrayal of a boy gradually rejected by his mother, while Henry Harland's "Flower o' the Clove" received mixed reviews. *Literary World* offers the somewhat back-handed compliment that the latest volume offers an "unusual number of good articles," although Harland's story and Watson's portrait of Sharp receive particularly harsh criticism as examples of "decadent" art ("The Yellow Book"). Sharp herself offers a fairytale that is refreshing in its practical tone and lack of condescension.

In addition to the five artists who had contributed to previous volumes of *The Yellow Book* – Mabel Dearmer, Charles Pears, Alfred Thornton, A.E. Walton, and Patten Wilson – there are two new contributors, Ethel Reed and Aline Szold. Szold offers three muted water-colour sketches on familiar themes that the *New York Times* sums up as "commonplace" ("Not"). Reed, meanwhile, contributes more works than any other artist to the volume: not only four full-page pictures, but also the decorative illustrations for the cover and the title page. An American who had only settled in London in 1897, Reed quickly developed a reputation as an innovative illustrator and poster artist. The front

cover and title page to Volume 12 evoke the art-nouveau style popular in fin-de-siècle poster art and, while the same decorative approach is apparent in the four full-page pictures, both “Puck” and “Enfant Terrible” effectively imbue their subjects with individuality as well.

In contrast to the *Literary World*'s characterization of Watson's portrait as decadent, *The Academy* singles it out for praise, while it sees virtually all the other materials – visual and verbal – as consistent in their “very low” quality (“From”). The *New York Times* also finds Watson's portrait of Sharp to be a reasonable likeness, if indeed “the model be not comely” (“Not”). The rest of the visual artworks, the critic concludes, are of poor stylistic quality (primarily for not being realistic enough), although their subject matter is in better taste than in past issues. The American periodical *The Dial* similarly finds the art “not particularly striking” (“Literary”), while the *Times*, concluding that “of the drawings, it is impossible to speak with any enthusiasm” (“Rev.”), chooses not to discuss them at all.

When Volume 1 of *The Yellow Book* appeared, the American periodical *Bookbuyer* warned, “the instant the fever of the novelty and audacity is allowed to flag—*explicit The Yellow Book*” (qtd. in Mix). There is a sense from reviewers' responses to Volume 12 that they had indeed become comfortable with the periodical and were no longer recognizing the editors' choices as particularly daring, let alone provocative. It is true that just over 80 per cent of the contributors to the latest issue – 21 of the 26– had appeared in *The Yellow Book* previously. While many of these were Bodley Head authors and illustrators, however, many of them were not, reflecting an ongoing interest in publishing quality work, regardless of affiliation. Moreover, a number of the repeat contributors had appeared rarely, with people such as Balfour, Milman and Frank Athelstane Swettenham having only contributed once before. To get a sense of the editors' sensitivity to both quality and innovations in the arts, therefore, one must recognize that new contributors such as Miall, Phillips, and Reed – relatively unknown in the winter of 1897 – would soon have vibrant, artistic careers, and that Volume 12 of *The Yellow Book* reveals a combination of marketing acumen, work by established authors and artists, and a selection of well-chosen new voices.

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