



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

The Yellow Book (1894-1897): An Overview

In early 1894 Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley successfully pitched a new kind of illustrated magazine to publisher John Lane. Like the belles lettres published by Lane and his partner, Elkin Mathews, at The Bodley Head, the periodical was to be distinctive and distinguished in format, to combine the avant-garde with the traditional in its visual and verbal contents, and to appeal to a popular, transatlantic readership interested in books as beautiful objects. By April of that year, after unprecedented pre-release promotion in the press, the first volume of *The Yellow Book* was published in London and Boston. Twelve quarterly issues later, in April 1897, *The Yellow Book* ceased publication.

Between these two events the partnership of Elkin Mathews and John Lane dissolved (September 1894), prompted at least in part by issues related to the periodical, and Beardsley was fired as art editor (April 1895), condemned by association in the homophobia occasioned by Oscar Wilde's arrest and trials. Despite the fact that the editors published nothing by this writer in *The Yellow Book*, its reputation as a decadent magazine inspired the American periodical, *The Critic*, to dub it "the Oscar Wilde of periodicals" in a review of the first volume entitled "A Yellow Impertinence." This association, and the fact that Wilde was reportedly carrying a copy of *The Yellow Book* at the time of his arrest (actually, another book with a yellow cover), linked the two in the public mind. The imputed connection was intensified by an actual bibliographic link through The Bodley Head, which had recently published the English edition of Wilde's play *Salome*, translated by his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, and illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley. Giving way to considerable pressure, Lane fired Beardsley and

took over the art editorship himself, with the assistance of Patten Wilson, for the remainder of the magazine's run.

Although art editor for only a year, Beardsley and his distinctive art-nouveau style have continued to be associated with *The Yellow Book*, just as the periodical itself has become virtually synonymous with decadence. In fact, the significance of *The Yellow Book* extends beyond decadence and the Beardsley style: the magazine is central to the study of fin-de-siècle literature and visual culture. “[M]odern and distinguished in its letterpress and its pictures” (Prospectus), *The Yellow Book* bridges the illustrated periodicals of the nineteenth century and the “little magazines” that flourished in the modernist period. As Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner remark, “*The Yellow Book* was not a ‘little’ magazine in any sense. It was big in its size, its scope, its circulation, its public profile, and in its embrace of diverse contributors. One hundred years later, it still looms large” (*Centenary* 46).

Like the avant-garde Pre-Raphaelite journal of art and literature, *The Germ* (1850), to which it owes some of its inspiration, *The Yellow Book's* cultural significance and range of influence belie the brevity of its print run. A squarish yellow-and-black quarto, printed in a single column in elegant Caslon type, with asymmetrical titles and bylines, dropped initial letters and catchwords at the bottom of each page, *The Yellow Book* aspired to more than the ephemeral life of a periodical. As Beardsley and Harland insisted in their first Prospectus, *The Yellow Book* was to be “beautiful as a piece of bookmaking”:

It will be a *book*—a book to be read, and placed upon one's shelves, and read again; a book in form, a book in substance; a book beautiful to see and convenient to handle; a book with style, a book with finish; a book that every book-lover will love at first sight; a book that will make book-lovers of many who are now indifferent to books.

In appealing to the collector as well as the common reader, *The Yellow Book* followed Lane's successful marketing strategy for The Bodley Head of enticing a broad middle-class spectrum into believing they were an elite group of cultivated

purchasers. For Lane and his *Yellow Book* editors, this is what it meant to be, as the Prospectus claimed, “popular in the better sense of the word.” Priced at 5s, *The Yellow Book* was well within the means of middle-class buyers—costing more than a monthly review, to be sure, but less than a one-volume novel.

The editors secured *The Yellow Book*’s visual impact by being as up-to-date and modern as possible in the mechanical reproduction of the magazine’s images. Almost all the engraving was done in London’s most advanced, electrically lit houses of mass production: the Swan Electric Engraving Company (for process-engraving of half-tones) and one of the three Carl Hentschel and Company factories (for line-engraving of pen-and-ink drawings). The editors hoped that by these means the results would “surpass even the best obtained in France and America” (Prospectus).

As this claim from the initial Prospectus suggests, *The Yellow Book* was cosmopolitan and outward-looking, as well as sensitive to readers, makers, and the international market—all traits that marked its modernity. Although very much a London-based, urban magazine, it was published, marketed, and reviewed in the United States as well as the British Isles. Its contributors and readers hailed from various parts of the English-speaking world as well as France, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Serbia. The literary editor, Henry Harland, was himself a transplanted American, and the idea for the magazine was first seeded in an artists’ community in Dieppe.

Together with his sub-editors, Ella D’Arcy and Ethel Colburn Mayne, Harland ensured that *The Yellow Book* would be distinct from contemporary periodicals in its literary contents. In keeping with The Bodley Head list, a significant percentage of the contributions was dedicated to poetry, often by poets associated with The Rhymers’ Club, including John Davidson, Ernest Dowson, Richard Le Gallienne, and W.B. Yeats. Bodley Head women poets were also featured; these included Graham R. Tomson, Dollie Radford, and Edith Nesbit. Some short drama was occasionally included, as well as non-fiction memoirs, essays, and review-essays. Unlike most periodicals, however, *The Yellow Book* had no editorial apparatus or statement, no “letters to the editor” section from general readers (Max Beerbohm’s “A Letter to the Editor” in Volume

2 was a paid contribution), and no advertisements except the publishers' lists printed at the back of each volume.

Notably, *The Yellow Book* refused to publish serialized fiction, a staple of contemporary periodicals. An important result of this editorial decision was that the magazine sponsored significant developments in the style and content of the modern short story. Long works of short fiction by Henry James were not reduced to standardized word counts; "New Women" authors, including George Egerton and Ella D'Arcy, were free to experiment; realist writers appeared without censor. Although the initial volumes of the magazine seem principally directed to the male reader, this focus had shifted by the second year of its publication. Overall, *The Yellow Book* had significant representation from women in both its editorial management and its literary and artistic contents.

In addition to its innovative approach to literature, *The Yellow Book* also set itself apart from "the bad old traditions of periodical literature" (Prospectus) by keeping its visual and verbal contributions distinct. Rather than illustrating verbal text, the pictures were stand-alone works of art, printed full-page and separated from the letterpress by fly-title pages and tissue-paper guards. Featured equally with the authors in promotional materials, press reviews, tables of contents, and back covers, the artists also received appropriate fees for their work. And, though the first four covers stamped *The Yellow Book* with the unique Beardsley style, inside the covers, and in subsequent binding designs, the magazine displayed a diverse range of artistic styles, mediums, genres, and artists.

While many new artists—for example, caricaturist Max Beerbohm or children's book illustrator Mabel Dearmer—were represented in its pages, the magazine also featured more established artists, notably the President of the Royal Academy, Sir Frederic Leighton. Etchings, drawings in pen-and-ink, pencil, and crayon, paintings in water colour and oil—all reproduced photomechanically—offered readers a veritable gallery of contemporary art. The range was rich and varied, including portraits, impressionist studies, genre paintings, life drawings, landscapes, and the poster-style art of decorative art nouveau. Moreover, in keeping with the editors' determination to associate *The*

Yellow Book with the book arts in the minds of aesthetic collectors, the first Prospectus promised to include “a series of new and artistic book-plates” as a regular feature of each volume. While this promise was not fully kept, the book arts remained a prominent feature of the magazine. Illustrations by a range of artists regularly appeared as stand-alone works. Beardsley’s own pieces established this characteristic feature of *The Yellow Book*; other key illustrators whose work was published in the early volumes of the magazine included Laurence Housman, Patten Wilson, and E. J Sullivan. The American poster artist, Ethel Reed, children’s book illustrators Nellie and Mabel Syrett, and Glasgow School designers Frances and Margaret Macdonald, contributed to later volumes.

Traditional analysis of *The Yellow Book*’s contents has divided the print run into an avant-garde and daring period before the arrest and trial of Oscar Wilde in the spring of 1895 and a more conservative, less adventurous phase thereafter. More recent scholarship, however, has shown that the magazine was innovative in both literary and artistic contents throughout its thirteen volumes, challenging accepted hierarchies in art, literature, and life, and introducing a new form for the illustrated magazine.

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Lorraine Janzen Kooistra is Professor of English at Ryerson University and Co-editor of *The Yellow Nineties Online*. She has published books and articles on nineteenth-century visual/verbal relations, illustrated books and periodicals, and publishing history.

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