



## the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

### PATRICK GEDDES (1854–1932)



CMS 1/2/3: Detail of Patrick Geddes on a field study outing c1890. Photograph courtesy of University of Dundee Archive Services.

Although Patrick Geddes is best known for his work in town planning, he deserves recognition as a founding and contributing editor to the 1890s periodical *The Evergreen: A Northern Seasonal*. Despite its short publication history, consisting of only four issues produced from 1895 to 1897, *The Evergreen* offered a significant alternative to *The Yellow Book* and other periodicals with aesthetic and modern agendas. Instead of following these trends away from the socially engaged art and literature of the past, *The Evergreen* went back to the future to revive a sense of community involvement that Geddes believed was needed in his day. This mining of a local past for ore to construct what might now be called a “glocal” present reflects the approach and values that Geddes used in town planning.

For him, the built environment was also a cultural environment, and urban renewal required the participation of people from all walks of life. Geddes’s experiment with publishing a periodical exploring the

Celtic heritage of his native Scotland, neighbouring Ireland, and France was part of his effort to draw “intellectuals” and “emotionals” (as he and his collaborator Victor Branford habitually called writers and artists) away from modern alienation and engage them in civic affairs.

*The Evergreen* was itself a cooperative undertaking. Geddes enlisted William Sharp, who had already become an experienced writer, editor, and advocate of Celtic culture

through his publication of *The Pagan Review* (1892), as co-editor. Sharp joined the publishing company that Geddes set up at the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh as part of his efforts to turn that building into a “civic museum” and educational centre (Claes 113-14). The firm of Patrick Geddes and Colleagues published additional works with Celtic associations in a “Celtic Library” series, which was overseen primarily by Sharp (Claes 114-15). *The Evergreen’s* title connected this 1890s periodical with a 1720s analogue, *The Ever Green: A Collection of Scots Poems, Wrote by the Ingenious before 1600*, which represented the poet Allan Ramsay’s effort to save the Scottish literary tradition from assimilation into the English tradition after the 1707 Act of Union (Crawford 246-47, 518).

In addition to these historical and literary allusions, the title evoked the natural world and the natural sciences that were Geddes’s first areas of study. Born in Ballater, West Aberdeenshire, Scotland on October 2, 1854, Geddes was drawn to nature studies but accepted a job at a bank to please his parents. Unhappy in this line of work, he left banking after little more than a year to pursue the sciences that he loved. Geddes fulfilled a dream by studying biology and zoology with Thomas Huxley at the London School of Mines, and his earliest academic employment was in botany, first as a Demonstrator at the University of Edinburgh, and then as a Professor at the University of Dundee. On a trip to France to study marine biology, he discovered the social sciences, especially the approach of Pierre Guilliame Frédéric Le Play (1806-82) and his followers to surveying folk life in multiple contexts. This discovery led him to ponder the social significance of evolution and to dedicate his research to studying how people evolve in social environments (Meller; Mairet 27-28). With no pretense of objectivity, Geddes gave his research an interventionist bent: he wanted to draw up town plans and promote town planning that would help communities evolve into coherent and cooperative forms. In a vocabulary that recurs like a leitmotif in Geddes’s work, communities on their way to cooperative futures were “eutopian” (spelled with an “eu” to imply a “good” place); eutopianism was not dreaming about a perfect society but a practical effort to “make the most” of an existing place.

Social planning sounds alarms for many present-day scholars, who associate it with eugenics. However, Geddes's understanding of evolution departed from his contemporaries' preoccupations with competition: instead, he emphasized a goal of cooperative adaptation that is just beginning to find widespread acceptance in our own time (Craig 761; Studholme 382). Had sociology developed as Geddes wished, Maggie Studholme argues, environmental sociology would have come into being decades before the late-twentieth century (367-68). Geddes had hoped that his research might form the basis for an Edinburgh School of Sociology, and much of his work throughout the 1880s and 1890s set up such an institution in practice, if not in name. This work included the transformation of properties and closes in Edinburgh's "Old Town" from cramped lodgings into airy residences, providing a habitat in which people were more likely to thrive. It involved the opening of Outlook Tower, once an observatory, as an interactive museum where people could survey the geography, history, and culture of the city and identify themselves as participants in its evolution. He also organized summer classes on broadly defined subjects, an effort often compared with the contemporary adult education offered at Chautauqua Lake in New York State. The conceptualization of *The Evergreen* was also part of Geddes's sociological practice. It was a resource for—and perhaps even a manifesto of—cultural evolution.

Writing in *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1896 about a tour of Edinburgh led by Geddes himself, Israel Zangwill described *The Evergreen* as an "antidote" to *The Yellow Book*, albeit "undesigned." Zangwill valued Geddes's commitments to breathing new life and meaning into neglected local cultures over Aubrey Beardsley's eagerness to have modernity overshadow them (327-29). In *The Evergreen*, the Celtic past – with its affective bonds, familial social structure, and openness to the spirit of nature – grows out of the decadence of the nineteenth century, with its instrumental relationships, valorization of individual achievement, and mastery of nature. Geddes explicitly offers this hope of new cultural life by analogy with the cycle of seasons in the conclusion of his essay on "The Sociology of Autumn," published in "Autumn," the second issue of *The Evergreen* (1895). While the magazine can be defined in opposition to the *Yellow Book*, it can also be seen in sympathy with such journals in the Arts and Crafts Movement as the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* and the *Acorn*. Imogen Hart notes how *The Evergreen*

upholds similar values regarding the community of artists and the unity of arts, but takes the concept of unity beyond the Movement's joining of fine and decorative or applied arts by extending it to literature and science (135). Geddes had what would now be called a truly interdisciplinary vision, and exhibits in Outlook Tower were designed to show the interdependence of all branches of learning. The artistic qualities of *The Evergreen*, including its similarities to the Arts and Crafts periodicals and, ironically, to Beardsley's illustrations in *The Yellow Book*, are well analyzed by Hart and by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, the latter also explaining the remediation of images and texts in digital versions for this website.

The essays, stories, and poems in each issue of *The Evergreen* were organized under the headings of "Nature," "Life," "World" and "North." The pattern of this apparently inconsistent classification system is explained by Koenraad Claes as suggesting an organic relationship between the biological environment and human and social life and between the many regions, nations, and countries of the world and the northern region of Britain. In Geddes's time, as in our own, the phrase "North Britain" was a politically charged designation, identifying Scotland by its connection with England, although its implications for *The Evergreen* have been interpreted in different ways. In Julian Hanna's radical reading, the phrase implies that the areas of Britain outside of metropolitan London share the bond of Celtic culture and that they need not accept London as a centre of meaning and power (6). Less polemically, it is typical of Geddes's organic or ecological thinking to connect cities with regions and then regions with ever-larger formations until a global scale is reached. His goal in reviving Celtic culture was not to celebrate it in isolation but to use it as an example of the local embedded in the global or cosmopolitan sphere of a comprehensive life world. But for each region to take its place in this scheme, the value of that region must be appreciated. Thus, in the context of metropolitan and modern slighting of what was viewed as a Celtic fringe, championing Celtic culture was a corrective manoeuvre. Geddes's essay on "The Scots Renaissance" in "Spring," the first issue of *The Evergreen*, is widely credited as a catalyst for the later literary movement known as the "Scottish Renaissance," though many of its writers diverge from Geddes. The positive influence of his Celticism may be best

explained by Cairns Craig, who attributes it to Geddes opening “an alternative route to a future modernity,” rather than merely criticizing “current modernity” (763).

Geddes contributed at least one essay to every issue of the magazine. These pieces express the same desires to reduce alienation and replace conflict with cooperation that motivated his urban renewal work and town planning throughout his life and that are developed in his later writings. For instance, in “The Sociology of Autumn” he decries the behaviour of “American squirrel-millionaires,” who scramble to store up more wealth than they can consume. He predicts, however, that the decay of community culture that triggers such behaviour can be succeeded by a season of different values in which resources are more equitably acquired and shared. Geddes’s pointed, yet playful, “squirrel” metaphor shows how creative and exuberant his writing can be. His later prose contains some Carlylean coinages (such as “kakatopia” and “mammonist”) along with allusions to Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and William Morris, who influenced both his thought and his style.

Geddes’s career and reputation continued to climb during the early twentieth century. He mounted traveling exhibits of his city plans and developed and promoted survey methods that included studying the cultural landscape along with the geographical and historical features. He also became involved with the Sociological Society that formed in London in 1903, presenting his ideas about civic sociology in academic papers that the Society later published. That he was passed over for the first Chair in Sociology at the London School of Economics was disappointing but hardly surprising, given his unconventional education and attitudes (Studholme 382). In 1912, he declined to be knighted “for democratic reasons,” but he did accept the honour the year before he died (Scott and Bromley 33). In 1914, he took his city exhibits to India and stayed in that country to draw up plans for renovating towns that he believed would preserve some features of local culture. In 1918, he was awarded a Chair in Civics at the University of Bombay, and the following year he was asked by the Zionist Federation to draw up plans for a Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Among his last projects was a renovation of the Scots College in Montpellier, France, where he served as a sort of scholar in residence. He died there on April 17, 1932. Geddes’s work outside of Britain is controversial, as

postcolonial critics find it complicit with imperialism (Hysler-Rubin), but perhaps, like the status of North Britain in *The Evergreen*, it may have a subversive or ambiguous strain. Geddes's accomplishments are extremely wide ranging, making it difficult to marshal them for a single assessment of his legacy. Perhaps a fuller appreciation of Geddes awaits us in a more interdisciplinary season in the future.

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### **Selected Publications by Patrick Geddes**

#### **Essays in *The Evergreen***

"*Envoy*" [with William Macdonald]. *The Evergreen* 4 (Winter 1896-97): 155-56.

"*Flower of the Grass*." *The Evergreen* 3 (Summer 1896): 43-63.

"*Life and Its Science*." *The Evergreen* 1 (Spring 1895): 29-37.

"*The Megalithic Builders*." *The Evergreen* 4 (Winter 1896-97): 142-51.

"*Prefatory Note*" [with Victor Branford]. *The Evergreen* 2 (Autumn 1895): 8.

"*The Scots Renaissance*." *The Evergreen* 1 (Spring 1895): 131-39.

"*The Sociology of Autumn*." *The Evergreen* 2 (Autumn 1895): 27-38.

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*City Development: A Study of Parks, Gardens, and Culture-Institutes. A Report to the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust*. Edinburgh: Geddes and Company; and Birmingham: Saint George, 1904.

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Studholme, Maggie. “Patrick Geddes and the History of Environmental Sociology in Britain: A Cautionary Tale.” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 8.3 (2008): 367-91.

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