



CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO *THE EVERGREEN: A NORTHERN SEASONAL*, VOLUME 1: SPRING 1895



Figure 1. Decorative detail from the title page for *The Evergreen* Vol 1: Spring 1895

The first volume of *The Evergreen: A Northern Seasonal*, subtitled “Spring,” came out in May 1895 from the firm of [Patrick Geddes](#) & Colleagues, housed in the Outlook Tower on Castle Hill in Old Town Edinburgh. In the wake of Aubrey Beardsley’s eviction as art editor of *The Yellow Book* and the homophobia following Oscar Wilde’s arrest in London for loving other men, the “[Proem](#)” to *The Evergreen* claimed to see, “against the background of Decadence, the vaguely growing lines of a picture of New-Birth” (Macdonald and Thomson 10-11). Inevitably, volume one of *The Evergreen* and [volume five of *The Yellow Book*](#)—the first issue published after Beardsley’s firing—were reviewed together as a study in contrasts. Echoing a widely shared sentiment, the *Bookman* critic claimed: “It is impossible to keep from grouping these two “seasonals” together, and yet green is not nearly so yellow as these northern and southern cousins are unlike each other.” Just as *The Yellow Book* was “of the hour,” *The Evergreen*, as its title suggested, looked to the future, “and by to-morrow it thinks decadence, whatever that may be, will have died” (“[The Yellow Book](#)” 91).

Functioning as a manifesto, the “[Proem](#)” explicated the meaning of spring for the “Northern Seasonal.” Spring, its authors declared, is “a time of Renaissance” and vision: “the epochal dawn of a new age” (Macdonald and Thomson 9). The political implications of this keynote are taken up explicitly in [Patrick Geddes](#)’s essay on “[The Scots Renaissance](#),” the concluding statement of the volume. As part of its “return at once to local tradition and living nature,” *The Evergreen* aimed to stimulate contemporary writers and artists through “its revival of Celtic design” (Geddes 139). Geddes’s essay was punctuated with a [tailpiece](#) by W. Smith showing the Old Edinburgh skyline in silhouette ([database 139](#)). As Julian Hanna remarks, Smith’s ornamental device reinforced the volume’s “theme of transition between past and future, endings and beginnings” (4). For Geddes and his followers, the city was not opposed to nature, but transformed by nature, just as the future was not opposed to the past, but connected through it to a renewed sense of self, place, and purpose.

The revival of Celtic design is so central to this project that the artists who created the numerous textual decorations were given authorial credit on the [Table of Contents](#). The Spring volume, displays a variety of ornamental style and skill, coupled with an enthusiasm for decoration for its own sake; ornament became more aesthetically restrained and purposeful in subsequent numbers. The desire to decorate every item seems to have been so great that a number of initial letters and decorative tailpieces may have been supplied by Constable from his printing stock, as they are unattributed and generic (Kooistra, [Database](#)). The stylistic approach of the artist-designed devices varies. Some show mastery of Celtic design, as is in the elaborate initials featuring birds and interlacing knotwork created by John Duncan and Helen Hay (Hay [9](#), [56](#); Duncan [19](#), [109](#)). Others evoke the crafts of illumination and heraldry, with initials set within decorative boxes ([Cadenhead 92](#)). While some head- and tailpieces display Celtic design features, others evoke local or topical motifs, as in [Smith’s silhouette of the Old Town Edinburgh skyline](#). Duncan created the magazine’s most elaborately [decorated page](#) for [William Sharp](#)’s poem “[The Norland Wind](#)” (109). Integrating headpiece, title, and inhabited initial letter, Duncan’s design shows his fusion of Japanese woodblock prints and Symbolist art with Celtic lines and motifs. In addition to other ornaments, Alice Gray produced a Celtic-inspired [headpiece](#) for [Fiona Macleod](#)’s “[The Bandruidh](#),” which

features the Celtic Green Lady as the personification of Spring in a medallion set within spiraling lines (98).

James Cadenhead, who oversaw the artistic contents of the magazine with Duncan, produced a number of head- and tailpieces based on the seasonal theme, rather than on Celtic motifs. His [tailpiece](#) for Alexander Carmichael's "[The Land of Lorne](#)," for example, shows a lovely little frieze of snowdrops against a bank of snow (115). Smith contributed a number of ornaments celebrating renewal. His most delightful device shows the metamorphoses from [polliwog](#) to tadpole to frog, set inside undulating lines reminiscent of Katsushika Hokusai's *The Wave* (25). The design beautifully embodies the volume's keynotes of variation, sexual reproduction, and evolution. While individually attractive and collectively linked to the volume's themes, however, the ornaments in the *Evergreen's* first issue were not visually cohesive, and thus did not contribute to an integrated architecture. The *Aberdeen Free Press* described the magazine's mixture of styles as "a wild array of erratic initials, head-pieces, tail-pieces, and weird pictures in black and white" (Ferguson "Patrick Geddes" 124). Today the *Evergreen's* images are viewed differently. In *Scottish Art*, Duncan Macmillan describes the designs as "often quite startlingly bold and modern looking," despite their "distinct Celtic overtones" (298).

Like the ornaments, the full-page black-and-white images express variations on the spring theme and celebrate a new Scottish art inspired by both local traditions and international connections. Although not an artist himself, [Patrick Geddes](#) provided a black-and-white rendition of the stained glass window in the Outlook Tower. [Arbor Saeculorum](#), or the "tree of history," symbolizes Geddes's organic understanding of social development and international connection as part of a larger cross-cultural evolution (143). A number of other pictures were black-and-white versions of murals produced for Geddes's Ramsay Garden project, for which he provided the subjects. John Duncan's "[Apollo's School Days](#)" and "[Pipes of Arcady](#)" (Spring in Nature and Life, respectively) were details from *The Evolution of Pipe Music*, which appeared in a procession around four walls of Patrick Geddes's home ([Armour](#) 100). Duncan's "[Anima Celtica](#)" (Spring in the North), which represented the "Celtic spirit" in the form of a

woman writer turning from her desk to see the embodied images of Celtic story, has been called a “visual manifesto of the Celtic Revival” (Ferguson, “Patrick Geddes” 116). Contemporary readers may well have associated this representation of the Celtic spirit with *The Evergreen*’s most popular author, then synonymous with the Celtic revival, [Fiona Macleod](#) (aka William Sharp), especially since the editors situated the image immediately after a poem and story from her hand. Duncan’s image was not well received, and even Sharp himself panned it (Bowe and Cumming 44).

Some of the *Evergreen* artists took a distinctly modern approach, which contemporary critics dismissed as “amateur” (Wells 410). Charles Mackie, who contributed “[Robene and Makyn](#)” (Spring in Nature) and “[When the Girls Come Out to Play](#)” (Spring in Life), was influenced by Paul Gauguin and Paul Sérusier in his use of the flat style and simple forms favoured by the French Nabi group of painters (Ferguson 100). Sérusier’s “[Pastorale Bretonne](#)” also appeared in the Spring in the World section, contributing, in title and theme, to *The Evergreen*’s pan-Celtic vision, and in style to its modern symbolist approach. The originals of Mackie’s and Sérusier’s designs were likely Ramsay Garden murals, which no longer survive (Willsdon 90). The most famous picture from the first issue is Robert Burns’s [Natura Naturans](#) (Spring in Nature), representing the personified figure of Nature as a monumental, naked woman set in the midst of waves flowing out from her hair to include birds and fishes (Macmillan 297). This picture of Nature effectively birthing herself—the title translates roughly as “Nature naturing”—connects to the Spring volume’s themes of sexual reproduction and its celebration of an essentialized maternal femininity.

While women were celebrated in story and image, and as symbolic representations of Nature or the Celtic spirit, few actually contributed to *The Evergreen*’s first volume. Apart from the designers, Helen Hay and Alice Gray, the Spring issue featured no female artists in its full-page illustrations. And apart from Fiona Macleod, Sharp’s avatar, there was only one female author. Dorothy Herbertson contributed an essay on “[Spring in Languedoc](#)” to the Spring in the World section of the magazine; her husband, Andrew Herbertson, who worked as a demonstrator for Geddes’s botany lectures at the

University of Dundee, offered "[Northern Springtime](#)" for the Spring in the North section (Scott and Bromley 79).

Taken as a whole, the contents of the Spring volume were male dominated and almost aggressively heterosexual and essentialist with respect to the role of women. This keynote was set in the [Proem](#)'s "four chords," heard in "the music of the Renaissance": "That faith may be had still in the friendliness of fellows; that love of country is not a lost cause; that the love of women is the way of life; and that in the eternal newness of every child is an undying promise for the Race" (Macdonald and Thomson 15). This perspective is in keeping with the views expressed by Geddes and Thomson in *The Evolution of Sex* (1899), where the authors endorsed equality of the sexes and education for women while, at the same time, asserting their biological destiny: maternity was woman's ultimate role (Claes 123-124). Opposed to the "struggle for existence" model of Darwinian evolution, Geddes and his circle promoted an understanding of evolution, as Victor Branford explained in [his review](#), "primarily through Sex with its consequences of family and wider co-operation" (89).

Apart from its celebration of sexual reproduction, the Spring volume's strongest note of awakening, renewal, and resurgence is sounded in poems, stories, and essays related to the Scottish Renaissance and the Celtic revival. Fiona Macleod contributed two poems—the lyrical "[Day and Night](#)" for Spring in Nature, and the dialogic "[The Bandruidh](#)" for Spring in the North, an echoing call-and-response between the Green Lady and the Highland Airs. Her short story for the latter section, "[The Anointed Man](#)," tells the mystic tale of the seventh son of an Irish family: touched by fairies, he can only see beauty in the world. Also in this section is Alexander Carmichael's "[The Land of Lorne and the Satirists of Taynuilt](#)." A notable Gaelic folklorist and collector of oral tradition, Carmichael stands in contrast to Macleod/Sharp's approach to the Celtic revival, which was not language-based. According to Murdo Macdonald, Carmichael's essay "makes a direct contribution to the synthesis of Scots and Celtic revivals, by speculating on the Celtic, indeed Bardic, aspects of Robert Burns's ancestry" (76).

Expressing the magazine's pan-Celtic scope and desire to reestablish the ancient Scottish-Franco alliance, *The Evergreen* published Charles Saroléa's assessment, in French, of "[La Littérature Nouvelle en France](#)" in the Spring in the World section. A Belgian who had recently become head of French literature at Edinburgh University (Reynolds 98), Saroléa identifies the three predominant characteristics of contemporary literature as the bankruptcy of pseudo-science, the bankruptcy of naturalism, and the renaissance of idealism. Notably, these literary characteristics map directly onto the *Evergreen's* opening vision "of New Birth" emerging "against the background of Decadence" and in opposition to the Darwinian notion of the "struggle for existence," and its closing call for renewal of "[t]he social and moral cycle" (Macdonald and Thomson 10-11; Geddes 136). Saroléa's essay was singled out by the *Bookman's* critic as sounding the *Evergreen's* "most definite note" in its hailing of "the new era of a purer, more spiritual literature" ([The Yellow Book](#) 91).

In keeping with the *Evergreen's* visual and poetic bias, the Spring number had more full-page illustrations (14) and poems (10) than any other kind of contribution. Unlike later volumes, it was also significantly weighted toward non-fiction (10) than fiction (4). Seeking to weave together science and art, social and civic regeneration, and local and international modernity, the interdisciplinary essays have high aspirations and a serious tone, and tend—as the *Bookman* critic admitted—"to be a little dull." Generously recognizing the magazine's experimentation and innovation, however, the reviewer acknowledged that perhaps *The Evergreen* "should not be judged by its crude spring number; like the season of the year and the movement it celebrates it is all uncertain and immature" ("[The Yellow Book and The Evergreen](#)," 91). In fact, the subsequent volumes showed sophisticated editorial judgement in the selection of contents that balanced fictional and non-fictional contents more adeptly, adding to the work's entertainment value while also raising its literary level of achievement.

[Patrick Geddes](#) and Co sent numerous copies of the Spring volume out for review, with mixed results. *The Athenaeum* praised its material format, particularly the "luxurious type and paper," and the "excellent arrangement" of presenting "full-page

illustrations...faced by spaces of blank paper, which rests the eye” (“[Our Library Table](#)”). The *Bookman* provided a negative summation: “The stories are not first-rate; the essays are vague; the poetry is but indifferent good; and the pictures are just as bad as they could possibly be” (“[The Yellow Book](#)” 91). H. G. Wells was even more brutal with his dismissal: “it is bad from cover to cover; and even the covers are bad” (410). *The Evergreen: A Northern Seasonal* may be the only fin-de-siècle aesthetic magazine to be reviewed by an organ of the scientific community: Wells’s critical essay, “[Bio-Optimism](#),” appeared in *Nature*. While Wells took the opportunity to critique the artistic contents, his main focus was on the magazine’s promotion of “symbiosis” as a cooperative ideal in nature opposed to Darwinian natural selection and struggle (412).

Evergreen editorial board member Victor Branford, who contributed “[Awakenings in History](#)” to the Spring in the World section of the volume, responded as positively as he could to Wells’s damning review in *The Bookman*. A botanist himself, Branford claimed the publication of Wells’s review in *Nature* confirmed that “*The Evergreen* is also to be deemed a scientific publication,” with one purpose being “to present a biological reading of the drama of the Seasons.” Indeed, he claimed that the Scottish magazine “is not primarily an organ of art and literature at all. It is primarily the beginning of an effort to give periodic expression in print to a movement that is mainly architectural, educational, scientific. Thus it is a bye-product [*sic*] of social life rather than a literary and artistic main-product” (89). As the first in a series of four volumes aimed at expressing the integration of art and science, nature and society, and Scotland and the world, *The Evergreen’s* Spring issue seems, so far as we know, unique among the period’s magazines, but also uniquely of its period.

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