



## the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

### **THE YELLOW BOOK: INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 5 (APRIL 1895)**

In spring of 1895, assured that Volume 5 was ready for publication, John Lane sailed for New York with Richard Le Gallienne to see about opening a North American branch of his publishing house, The Bodley Head. He was met on arrival with the screaming headlines of the Sunday papers: “Arrest of Oscar Wilde, *Yellow Book* under his arm” (May 80). This was followed by a cable from six of his most prominent authors, demanding not only that Wilde’s name be expunged from the publisher’s catalogues, but that Beardsley – due to his past work with Wilde – also be utterly disassociated with the magazine; anything less than this would result in the withdrawal of their books from The Bodley Head. Wilde had been arrested for “gross indecency” under the Labouchere Amendment (Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885), a law used primarily to prosecute males for committing homosexual acts (Cohen 92). Despite the facts that Wilde was carrying only *a* yellow book, and not *The Yellow Book* at the time of his arrest, and that none of his work had ever been published in the avant-garde quarterly, Lane caved to the irrational and unjust public pressure, firing Beardsley as art editor and requesting his presence be hastily erased from Volume 5 prior to its publication.

When the issue appeared later in April, it did not have the Beardsley cover design advertised by the Prospectus, which had shown a kneeling faun reading to a woman seated on a flowery field by a stream. Instead, the black ink design on the yellow cover was of a woman reclining on a settee reading, with a dog stretched out on the floor in front of her. This hastily prepared cover design, likely the work

of Patten Wilson (Lasner fn55), was coupled with a title page similarly unembarrassed by any decadent drawing from Beardsley's hand. Working feverishly on her own in London while Lane was in New York and Henry Harland was in France, sub-editor Ella D'Arcy used an innocuous pen-and-ink sketch of ships in a harbour by Walter Sickert for the title page. Accepting D'Arcy's decisions, Harland wrote to manager Frederic Chapman at The Bodley Head: "It is a pity about the title-page, but perhaps the public won't dislike it. Anyhow, with Davidson at the helm and Watson at the prow, it will be a rare number" (Letter from Henry Harland to Frederic Chapman [April 1895]).

The literary contents of Volume 5 were precisely as announced by the Prospectus, opening and closing with fin-de-siècle versions of two different classical forms. A four-part ode in unrhymed hexameters, "Hymn to the Sea," by William Watson (one of the instigators of Beardsley's dismissal) headed the list and the pastoral/urban verse dialogue "Fleet Street Eclogues," by John Davidson, closed the volume. Over the space of its 318 pages, the spring number had a total of two literary essays, thirteen poems, and twelve short stories. Volume 5 displays a more European, cosmopolitan flair: both Dauphin Meunier's three poems and Anatole France's story "L'Eveché de Tourcoing" were published in French without translation. A literary essay by Maurice Baring introduced France to his new readership. Volume 5 also had a notable number of women contributors. In addition to D'Arcy, these included Rosamund Marriott-Watson (aka Graham R. Thomson), Mrs. Murray Hickson (identified by Lasner as Mabel Greenhow Kitcat), Leila Macdonald (wife of Hubert Crackanthorpe), Nora Hopper, Evelyn Sharp, and Ada Levenson. The latter was a friend of Oscar Wilde who stood by him publically throughout his arrest, trial, and imprisonment. The presence in Volume 5 of both Levenson's story "Suggestion" and Sickert's portrait of her did not seem to have provoked any concern from The Bodley Head's anti-Wilde and anti-Beardsley contingent. Indeed, Levenson published another story in Volume 8 of *The Yellow Book*.

Aubrey Beardsley is customarily identified as the art editor of only the first year's four volumes, but he was also responsible for almost all the visual contents of Volume 5. Although the cover design, title page, and four Beardsley pieces announced in the Prospectus—"Frontispiece to the Nocturnes of Chopin," "Atalanta," "Black Coffee," and "Portrait of Miss Letty Lind in 'An Artist's Model'"—were cut before the magazine went to press, the other art works selected and arranged by the art editor were published precisely as planned. In addition to regular *Yellow Book* artists Alfred Thornton, P. Wilson Steer, A.S. Hartrick, Robert Anning Bell, and Walter Sickert, Beardsley introduced some new contributors. These included E.A. Walton, who provided a portrait of George Egerton as the magazine's third "Bodley Head," and F. G. Cotman and Constantin Guys, who contributed a landscape and figure designs respectively. To replace the four Beardsley works, D'Arcy inserted Sydney Adamson's "Study of a Head" and an illustration by Patten Wilson, both artists whom Beardsley had included in previous volumes of the quarterly. Thus, Volume 5 appeared with a total of fourteen artworks, rather than the sixteen announced in the Prospectus, but otherwise reflected Beardsley's editorial direction.

Nor were the editors able to erase Beardsley completely from the contents of this volume. With only ten days to make the changes before the magazine's usual mid-month release date, the skeleton staff left to deal with the crisis neglected to replace Beardsley's pre-formatted designs for the spine and back cover, so the issue went to press branded with the art editor's signature style after all. Inside the covers, trace evidence of association remained as well. One of Dauphin Meunier's poems, "Chapelle Dissident," was dedicated "Pour Mr. Aubrey Beardsley" (102), and his name appeared frequently in the advertising supplement at the back of the volume, in both John Lane's *Belles Lettres* list, and, of course, in the advertised contents of the four previous *Yellow Book* volumes.

The reviewers of Volume 5 noted Beardsley's absence and assumed it meant he had had little influence on the selection process of its contents. The piece in *The Bookman* alluded to "certain occurrences in London of recent date, which it is not necessary to mention more specifically," and claimed that these events had removed "any suspicion of moral slime" from Volume 5 of *The Yellow Book*, as well as all "eccentricity" from the "more wholesome" literary works. The visual art, however, was critiqued for an over-arching air of despondency and general inferiority, with the cover image being singled out for particular mockery, although not for any decadent quality. In "The Fifth Issue of the 'Yellow Book'," the writer for the *Dial* similarly declared that the Literature demonstrated worthy work by both established and lesser-known authors, but that there was nothing worth saying about the Art. For this critic, the periodical had survived the somewhat justified accusations of decadence and, with the latest issue, "c[ame] up smiling." Although speculating that the cover image – albeit "decent" – might have been by Beardsley, the writer of the *New York Times*'s "The Fifth Yellow Book" reassured readers that there was "little of Mr. Aubrey Beardsley" in the volume. The critic found a "decided improvement" in the Art, while the Literature was "less colored, say, with a jaundice yellow, than are former issues of this nondescript series." In the end, the ghost of Beardsley haunted the reviews at least as much as it had the actual fifth volume.

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