

The Shelley Society, Literary Lectures, and the Global Circulation of English Literature and Scholarly Practice

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THE NEWEST CULTE.
THE Æsthete arose;
Gave a yawn —blew his nose;
With a handkerchief silken he blew it;
Then he said, “How I pine
From some new fad to shine!
Won’t a ‘Shelley Society’ do it?”
—*Punch*, January 16, 1886

In 1887 the first attempt to establish a school of English at Oxford University was defeated following a compelling speech in the convocation by the Regius Professor of History, Edward Freeman. “What is meant by distinguishing literature from language,” asked Freeman, “if by literature is meant the study of great books, and not mere chatter about Shelley?” (Freeman 1887: 549). Freeman’s now-famous speech championing philology over unteachable literary appreciation soon became emblematic of the entire debate about the new discipline. Yet why did he choose to represent this body of unruly vernacular literature—the antithesis of “the study of great books”—as “chatter about Shelley?”¹

¹ In his speech Freeman was certainly referencing Edward Dowden’s 1886 biography of Shelley, the first study to reveal scandalously what Matthew Arnold (1888: 36) called Shelley’s “irregular relations.” “After reading Dowden it was no longer possible to read Shelley on love and liberty with the same pleasure as before and no longer possible to study him without dragging unpalatable biographical facts into the critical assessments. The poetry was tarnished by the biography” (Kearney 1998: 61). As this article demonstrates, however, Freeman’s famous phrase in fact referenced a complex cultural phenomenon now largely forgotten.

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In tracing a history of the rise of English studies, we need to reconstruct the public feeling for what “studying English literature” meant outside the university in the late nineteenth century. I believe that Freeman referred to studies in English literature—as distinct from English language—as “chatter about Shelley” because Shelley had become emblematic, largely through the unprecedented prominence of the Shelley Society, of what it actually meant to study vernacular literature. Literary societies at the time were a potent force. Most obviously, they provided a forum for the exchange of ideas between some of the first university academics in the discipline and writers, critics, and the public. However, they also developed the idea of contemporary English literature as a legitimate subject for scholarly pursuit, and they helped answer for the general community the question of how the study of English literature could be elevated to more than a matter of “taste.” In recent studies Suzy Anger and Miriam Bailin consider the broad cultural significance of Victorian literary societies.² My article extends this work, analyzing the evolution of the Shelley Society to evaluate the influence of literary societies on the rise of English studies. Through this case study I build and test the theory that literary societies were agents for the dissemination of literature and scholarly practice and for discussion across the English-speaking world of curricula and the relevance and public benefit of literature.

In the 1880s the Shelley Society became representative of the unprecedented flourishing of literary societies. Its inexhaustible schedule of literary lectures and activities, prolific publications, high-profile members, and astonishing presence in the periodical press led to its exemplifying what a literary society was, as the opening *Punch* parody illustrates. The periodical press, which reported on the society’s activities in minute and scholarly detail, helped demystify the study of English literature, suggesting for the first time that scholarship in the field was possible at a “scientific” level. Freeman’s phrase “chatter about Shelley” referenced a social phenomenon whereby the general notion of literary societies was conflated with one society in particular,

² Anger 2004 and Bailin 2009 build on scholarship that helped establish the role of literary societies in Victorian culture, including Peterson 1969 and the debate over the origins of the Shelley Society between Walter Edwin Peck (1923, 1924) and Newman I. White (1924).

one that substantially shaped the perception of English studies outside the university. The Shelley Society had sufficiently saturated the public consciousness to become exemplary of an entire movement.

The Rise of Literary Societies and the Supremacy of the Shelley Society

Reflecting on the 1880s, during which the major societies dedicated to vernacular literature were formed, the Scots poet and critic Andrew Lang (1892: 3) complained that “they all demonstrate that people have not the courage to study verse in solitude and for their proper pleasure; men and women need confederates in this adventure.” Lang was only one voice in a lively debate as to the purpose and usefulness of literary societies. The debate raged in the periodical press both in Britain and internationally, with key areas of contention captured by an eloquent letter to an Australian newspaper, the *Argus*:

A writer in a recent review pleads the cause of literary societies. He will have it that they greatly encourage intelligent reading of literature of the better sort, and produce withal much mutual improvement. Whether he writes after adequate observation, or whether he is arguing a priori, is not stated, but from his untempered enthusiasm we incline to believe the latter. It is true that amid the present plethora of matter called literature, seriousness and depth of reading are becoming difficult and rare. “Bad literature,” says GEORGE ELIOT, “is spiritual gin”; and in these days of cheapness the distilleries of literary schnapps are over-thick. We go sipping of this book and that till taste is corrupted and mental indigestion becomes chronic. Thoughtful persons are prepared, therefore, to welcome any course which will promote a more discriminating and effective use of our literary stores. . . . And they will belong to literary societies, if such societies do all the good things which the abovementioned reviewer claims that they do. If, however, their society proves rather a bad influence than a good, the said thoughtful persons will only be meeting with too common a disappointment. (Benjamin 1890)

The letter writer’s anxiety about the reviewer’s “untempered enthusiasm” revealed a fear that the proliferation of societies would propagate indiscriminating readings of “bad literature” even among “thoughtful persons.” The founding of such large literary societies as the Early English Text Society (1864), the Ballad Society (1868), and the Chau-

cer Society (1868) was followed shortly by a flourishing of single-author societies, including the New Shakspeare Society (1873), the Browning Society (1881), the Wyclif Society (1882), the Charles Lamb Society (1885), and the Shelley Society (1885). Excepting the Charles Lamb Society, these owed their existence to F. J. Furnivall, a lawyer whose life-long devotion to the Philological Society led to his establishing literary societies to publish editions of key texts in English literature.³

On December 6, 1885, at the suggestion of the philologist Henry Sweet, Furnivall founded the Shelley Society.⁴ Membership was open to all who paid the annual guinea subscription rate (*Shelley Society's Papers* [SSP] 1888: app. 7).⁵ Within three months the society had accumulated 144 members, a beginning it considered "most promising," as "the Browning Society, which now numbers about 220, had only 72 when it had been established nine months" (*Notebook of the Shelley Society* [NSS] 1888: 8). Membership rose steadily: by January 1887 it stood at 400, and additional members of the general public attended its meetings (SSP 1888: 5).

³ Furnivall also undertook textual criticism and the preliminary editing of what became, under the editorship of James Murray, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The biographical information on Furnivall is taken from Peterson 2004.

⁴ Sweet is an interesting example of a scholar who spent most of his life without an institution. Sweet, whose renown as a philologist rested almost entirely on books and publications made for the Philological Society, was unable to secure an academic position until he was fifty-six, when he was appointed to the new Oxford Readership in Phonetics in 1901. He had applied for the Merton Professorship of English at Oxford in 1885, even though it was a "language and literature" position, once he learned that other "language" applicants were being considered. When he was discounted because, it was rumored, of his difficult personality, and the philologist Arthur Napier appointed, Sweet launched a tirade against the university's academics; a long-standing dispute ensued. For a full account, see Wainger 1930.

⁵ When it came to open membership, however, even the Shelley Society's liberalism had its limits. In March 1887, for example, Edward Bibbins Aveling, professor of comparative anatomy at London Hospital, was denied membership for living with Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl. The irony was not lost on William M. Rossetti, who threatened to tender his resignation: "I didn't see how we could think of resisting [Aveling's] claim to subscribe, and that on the same grounds the Shelley Society would have turned out Shelley himself. . . . I do not consider that a Literary Society has anything to do with the sexual morals of actual or proposing members—most especially not a Shelley Society" (Rossetti to Furnivall, March 8, 1887, in Rossetti 1990: 503). Aveling took up membership in the end, and in December 1887 he and "Mrs Aveling," Eleanor Marx, presented a joint lecture for the society on Shelley's socialism.

While the majority of names in Shelley Society membership records are obscure, the society acquired authority through the prominent academics, critics, and authors in its ranks. They included the critic, editor, and biographer William M. Rossetti; the preacher and writer Stopford Brooke; the poet and biographer Mathilde Blind; the bookseller and author F. S. Ellis, whose Bond Street premises were a favorite haunt of literary circles; the poet and playwright John Todhunter; the British Museum librarian and author Richard Garnett; the bookseller and literary scholar Bertram Dobell; the author William Bell Scott; the playwright and essayist George Bernard Shaw; the translator Alfred Forman; the classical scholar Henry Salt; and the bibliographers (and, later, forgers) H. Buxton Forman and Thomas J. Wise. One highly symbolic member was the philologist Arthur Napier, who, after great public debate, had been appointed Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford.⁶ Sweet was also on the Shelley Society executive committee despite being Napier's great detractor after he himself had failed to obtain the position. Napier's presence as a committee member further strengthened the society's legitimacy as a site for serious scholarly study of vernacular literature.

In the year of its inauguration the Shelley Society received and produced a wealth of publicity, so much that it was quickly typecast in the public consciousness and a caricature of "a Shelley Society member" emerged in the press. As the *Punch* poem in my epigraph demonstrates, this parodic representation began as early as January 1886, a mere month after the society's formation. Members were scorned as "snobbish swellish supercilious in early summer suits, enthusiastic votaries of the poet, shabby dramatic parasites, a few angular blue stockings with the indespicable [*sic*] *pince nez*, and one or two real artists" (*Bell's Life in London*, May 8, 1886); and in a few years' time, as far afield as Tasmania, "long-haired, pasty-faced men and lackadaisical women" were held to be "the sort of crackbrains who nowadays form the Shelley Society" (*Hobart Mercury*, October 27, 1892).

The publications that pilloried the society tended to be those with-

⁶ Napier had completed his doctorate in English philology at the University of Göttingen. His supervisor, Julius Zupitza, encouraged him to apply for the Merton Professorship. Despite his youth, the thirty-two-year-old Napier was unanimously appointed by the electors in 1885. See MacMahon 2004. See also n. 4.

out cultural or artistic inclinations.⁷ Their damning descriptions of “Shelleyites” reflected the view that single-author literary societies were populated by “satellites,” or sycophants who encircled famous figures. “Even where the votaries are single-hearted in their adoration,” wrote Benjamin (1890),

the effect of a congregational enthusiasm is apt to be, not a true, but an utterly false, estimation of the special divinity, as a man, as a thinker, and as a writer. . . . Accredited with all the tastes and sentiments which his cult can read into him . . . the author . . . swells to many times greater than his legitimate bulk, and is wholly distorted out of his proper place in the evolution of thought and literature.

Such criticism posed a conundrum to the members of single-author societies: how to approach their subject with scholarly devotion and enthusiasm without being accused of discipleship. “The author as organizing principle,” Bailin (2009: par. 2) observes, “shifts the emphasis from text to person in a manner that was felt . . . to smack of the cult and [that], of course, more emphatically in today’s academic discourse can be seen as utterly retrograde.” The Shelley Society’s masterful publicizing of its scholarly activities became the model solution—a potent antidote to its detractors’ ridicule—and its scholarly practices powerfully shaped ideas about studying vernacular literature in the late nineteenth century.

Literary Societies, Literary Lectures, and Modeling Scientific Practices for the General Public

Literary societies contributed substantially to the rise of university English by rendering transparent scholarly practices that bolstered the legitimacy of English literature as a field of study. Particularly in the debate surrounding the Merton Professorship, English literature was increasingly claimed as a field with the capacity to be studied scientifically or—as we would say today—critically. Challenging the age-old denigration of literature as merely a matter of “taste,” the press applied

⁷ Representative publications include, besides those cited already, *Funny Folks*, the *Country Gentleman: A Sporting Gazette and Agricultural Journal*, and the *Sporting Times*.

scientific vocabularies to indicate that literature had become an area of serious scholarship like its sibling rival, philology. The debates were not limited to the opposition between literature and language; as one representative article explained, “The scientific study of literature should not be left entirely to foreign Universities” (*Saturday Review of Politics*, November 5, 1887).

Assembling a scientific framework around vernacular literature, the Shelley Society sponsored monthly literary lectures by both academic and amateur scholars, annotated primary materials, issued critical publications, and staged theatrical performances. The public was invited to attend the lectures, and even the controversial May 1886 private performance of Shelley’s *Cenci* was attended by many considered “friends” of society members.

Five scholarly lectures were held in the first year at what became the society’s permanent meeting place, University College London.⁸ These lectures were carefully constructed to model scholarly practices, particularly by engaging with contemporary criticism. For example, the inaugural lecture, delivered by Stopford Brooke, was devoted to Arnold’s criticism of Dowden’s Shelley biography, along with sustained critical comparisons to Byron, Keats, and Wordsworth.⁹ The society’s lectures soon gained a reputation for being “critical rather than biographical” (*Athenaeum*, April 17, 1886) —praise indeed, in light of Arnold’s criticism that biography had contaminated literature. After each lecture questions were fielded and lively scholarly debate took place between identifiable members as well as anonymous “Speakers” from the audience.¹⁰ Nonmembers had not only taken up the society’s invitation to attend but also were actively participating.

⁸ These lectures were reprinted for the members’ benefit in the *Shelley Society’s Papers*. See *SSP* 1888: apps. 8–9.

⁹ Arnold, who became emblematic of Shelley’s detractors, haunts the society’s proceedings; in the inaugural lecture Brooke imagines him “even distressed in mind, or perhaps contemptuous, when he hears of this Society. . . . He will tell us we are about to study the unsubstantial, and that no good can come of it.” Brooke emphasizes that neither he nor the society “wish[es] to exalt Shelley above his proper rank. He does not sit apart from the solemn choir of poets” (*NSS* 1888: 6).

¹⁰ See, e.g., the “Speaker” who took part in the debate of A. G. Ross’s controversial lecture “On *The Revolt of Islam*” on April 13, 1887 (*NSS* 1888: 194). While the *Shelley Society’s Papers* published lectures in their entirety, the *Notebook of the Shelley Society* enables one to reconstruct the debates that followed the lectures, providing an

To supplement its impressive curriculum of literary lectures, the society maintained a prodigious—indeed, ultimately untenable—output of publications, which were widely reviewed in the press. In 1886 alone members received eight edited publications, including annotated editions, a scholarly memoir, and a meticulous bibliographical essay. Members also received five issues a year of the *Notebook of the Shelley Society*.¹¹ Though many in the society were eminent literary scholars or critics, the *Notebook* made a concerted effort to legitimate the opinions and close readings of rank-and-file members, demonstrating that vernacular literature might be seriously studied by amateur enthusiasts, too.¹²

The Shelley Society's publicity peaked with the scandalous premiere of *The Cenci*. To stage Shelley's notorious play about incestuous rape and patricide had been an express aim of the society's formation, but the production had to be nominally private because the Lord Chamberlain refused to license it. Conceptualized in scholarly terms as a way "to test the question whether the greatest lyric poet is not also a great dramatic one" (*NSS* 1888: 8), the production was afterward declared "distinctly an experiment; it had . . . proved that only judicious cutting was needed to make [*The Cenci*] a valuable stage drama" (*ibid.*: 81). That audience members received copies of the play to fur-

"abstract of address" and a minute-style description of the give-and-take (*NSS* 1888: 25). From the accuracy of the abstracts of address compared to the lectures themselves as they appear in the *Shelley Society's Papers*, it would seem that these descriptive accounts of the debates are relatively reliable.

¹¹ The regular "Queries and Answers" section, for example, displayed meticulous research and carefully reasoned close readings of Shelley texts in light of scholarly criticism. See, e.g., *NSS* 1888: 22–23. One "query" regarding the Shelley Society's edition of *Alastor*—"How are the secret caves 'inaccessible to avarice and pride?'" (Shelley 1886: 7)—is "answered" by Rossetti: "It is not entirely clear to me whether Shelley means that the secret caves are inaccessible to avarice and pride, or that 'the springs of fire and poison' are thus inaccessible: I think the former. The general conception seems to be that these caves contain boundless riches, not yet traced out by avarice and pride. The whole description seems to be more imaginative than naturalistic; e.g., the 'clear shrines of pearl.'" Many queries are interpretative, others bibliographical, but generally they are of a scholarly standard.

¹² The 1888 *Notebook of the Shelley Society*, for example, announced in its "Queries and Answers" section that "the Editor wishes it to be understood that the opinion of all Shelleyites, whether members or no, will be welcomed, and, if found at all suitable, printed." The editor (invariably Rossetti) had the final say in what went to press, however (*NSS* 1888: 110).

ther their private study of it scandalized the press almost as much as the performance did. The *Country Gentleman* summarized the widely held view that

there was crime enough represented before the eyes of the audience, but, lest some of the suggestions of the play were not realized, a copy of the drama, with an appendix giving in very plain English the tale of Count Cenci, was circulated among the audience. Were such a publication offered for sale in Holywell-street an indignant police would arrest all the inhabitants, while an indignant public burnt down the place. (May 15, 1886)

Nevertheless the society continued to review its theatrical experiment as a serious scholarly enterprise.¹³

The Cenci occasioned widespread concern for and censure of the Shelley Society's female members. Literary lectures and societies had long served as informal means of educating those excluded from the universities by their class or sex. Notices of women's involvement in the Shelley Society were regularly printed in "ladies' columns" in the press and reprinted in the *Notebook*, and female members certainly contributed to the society's debates (see, e.g., *NSS* 1888: 38; *SSP* 1888: app. 6). Now reviews of *The Cenci* brought the presence of female members to the fore. The *Daily Telegraph* condemned not only the Shelley Society but "the ladies, many of them young, who went to Islington yesterday, [who] presumably knew, or ought to have known, the kind of subject that Shelley had selected for his tragedy, and it was their fault, or that of their husbands, fathers, and brothers, if they were shocked at the atrocious and bloodthirsty utterances" (*Daily Telegraph*, May 8, 1886). The sheer number of press responses to the performance, whether notices, reviews, or impassioned treatises against *The Cenci* or its audience, publicized the society and its activities, increasing its profile and ultimately boosting its membership.

Yet what awareness did the general public have of the Shelley Soci-

¹³ On behalf of the society, Rossetti began to research Shelley's references in prose and poetry to his own productions (*NSS* 1888: 82). B. L. Mosley, a barrister, was engaged to deliver a lecture on Beatrice Cenci in March 1887, after which it was heatedly debated how best to cut the play so as to restore what many perceived as a loss of dramatic interest after the third act. For the complete minutes of this debate, see *NSS* 1888: 183–88.

ety's scholarly activities? The inaugural lecture on March 10, 1886, attracted an audience of 500. Of these, only 160 were members (*NSS* 1888: 1). The influence of the society's activities therefore extended significantly beyond the society itself. Publications such as the *Shelley Society's Papers* and the *Notebook* had meaningful afterlives, disseminating the scholarly practices shown in the society's lectures, essays, notes, and queries beyond the members through their popular sale in secondhand bookshops (*NSS* 1888: 111). Even the "private" production of *The Cenci* was highly accessible to nonmembers; at least two thousand of the twenty-four hundred in the audience were "friends" of members and the press (*NSS* 1888: 50–51).¹⁴ Beyond providing activities for members, therefore, the Shelley Society played an important part in making transparent the scholarly practices associated with studying English literature. The most potent means of disseminating the society's activities was the press, whose influence extended the society's reach from local to provincial to global.

The Shelley Society Takes the British Provinces

News of the society's literary lectures and activities soon aroused interest in starting provincial branches. A regular "Provincial and Other News" section soon appeared in the *Notebook* (*NSS* 1888: 23), providing updates on their establishment.¹⁵ In most cases the successful founding of a new branch was largely the work of a single local enthusiast,¹⁶ though Furnivall actively encouraged the provincial branches, often sending his personal support, as well as that of the London society and university professors, via public statements in the local newspapers.¹⁷ On March 3, 1886, Furnivall wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* to encourage

¹⁴ With no monthly records of new members available, we can only estimate membership somewhere between the two closest reported figures we have according to *NSS* 1888: 8; app. 5, namely, 144 by March 1886 and 400 in January 1887.

¹⁵ These branches proliferated with astonishing rapidity: Manchester's was established in March 1886 (*Manchester Guardian*, March 3, 1886), followed by Birmingham's and Liverpool's by year's end (*NSS* 1888: 23, 24).

¹⁶ In Manchester, for example, it was a Mr. T. C. Abbott; in Birmingham, a Mr. D. B. Brightwell; and in Liverpool, William B. Lewis (*NSS* 1888: 16).

¹⁷ When Lewis attempted to establish the Liverpool branch, for example, he was sent notice of the "support of Dr. Furnivall, Professor Rendall, Principal of University College, and the committee of the London Society" (*NSS* 1888: 23).

inhabitants of Manchester and its neighbourhood who have literary tastes . . . to join the Branch Shelley Society which Mr. Abbott and his fellow workers desire to start at Manchester. There can be no question that the people of England do owe a debt to Shelley's memory, and that they ought to pay it. . . . Now the tide of opinion is turning, and Manchester, which justifiably prides itself on having led the rest of England in many matters political and social, ought to add its force to the onward flow of the stream, that is setting towards reverence for Shelley's genius.

Furnivall's rhetoric of social progress not only appealed to those Manchester workers but inspired imitators in other industrial regions. "Birmingham," wrote that city's aspiring honorary secretary, "ought not to be so far behind Manchester in this matter. We are not altogether hard and mechanical: we have soft places in our hearts for literature, for music, and for fine art" (*Birmingham Weekly Post*, March 13, 1886). The Shelley Society was becoming a marker of culture in the provinces. In reprinting these notices from local newspapers in the *Notebook*, the society propagated the idea of its civilizing impulse spreading throughout the country. With astonishing speed, this influence became international.

The Shelley Society Goes Global

From its inception the Shelley Society's activities had been minutely reported in the Australian press, from the major papers in the metropolises to regional papers such as the *Queanbeyan Age* and even the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*.¹⁸ On March 30, 1886, the *Argus* printed a call for Australian members. Like that of the British provincial branches, the establishment of the Melbourne branch was largely due to a single enthusiast, Frank Scrivenor. In April 1886 Scrivenor wrote to Rossetti to offer his services and summarize the cultural climate in Melbourne, which he considered too conservative to support a Shelley Society:

¹⁸ My focus on the Australian society evidences the Shelley Society's geographic reach. However, there were branches throughout the world, including a New Zealand branch in Auckland; American branches in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in New York; and British branches in Cambridge, Hackney, Oxford, Reading, and Uxbridge as well as those in Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester (*NSS* 1888).

At different meetings of our (Shakspere) Society I took occasion to sound the most likely men on the subject of Shelley, but soon had to drop it. Several of our best members . . . are on the *Argus* literary staff—an ultra-Conservative journal—and of course *they* would not touch the unclean thing. You would be astonished, sir, to find how successfully we have imported our fine old British prejudices to this new land. A Shelley Society, then, for the present at any rate, is impracticable here. . . . I have often longed to be in England, but never so much as now. (NSS 1888: 103)

Nonetheless Scrivenor soon mustered sufficient support for a Melbourne branch. Intending members were invited to view the London society's prospectus "at Mr. Mullen's Library, Collins-street"; monthly lectures were held in "the Assembly-hall, Collins-street east" (*Argus*, May 21, 1886); and annual subscriptions were "merely nominal" at five shillings per year (*Argus*, April 21, 1886). Scrivenor's anxiety about Shelley's radical beliefs persisted in his notices in the *Argus*, in which he reassured intending members that "the society is to be purely literary, members in nowise identifying themselves with Shelley's religious opinions" (*Argus*, April 21, 1886).¹⁹ Scrivenor could not have anticipated how pivotal the *Argus* would be to the intense albeit short-lived success of the Melbourne branch; in May 1886 alone it published eleven notices or letters relating to the society's activities.

The London Shelley Society appointed Scrivenor honorary secretary for the Melbourne branch, which first met on May 25, 1886.²⁰ It was attended by "eight gentlemen and two ladies," who elected their executive and determined that "the Melbourne Society should follow the lines of the English society as far as possible" (*Argus*, May 26, 1886; *Australasian*, May 29, 1886). Office bearers included several figures from Melbourne's cultural life, including George Walters, a Unitarian minister and playwright involved with the Melbourne Shakespeare Society, the Womanhood Suffrage League, and the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts (Langmore 2012); a Mr. A. Lynch, a polymath affiliated

¹⁹ The unflagging support of the "ultra-Conservative" *Argus* demonstrates the extent to which the Shelley Society had deradicalized its hero.

²⁰ On receiving his letter of appointment, Scrivenor printed it in the *Argus* (December 23, 1886) and at the same time inserted a notice to invite inspection of letters from Rossetti and James Stanley Little, honorary secretary of the London Shelley Society.

with Melbourne University (Serle 2012); and James Smith, a revered journalist and editor (Jordens 2012). Like the London society, the Melbourne branch insisted, despite the overrepresentation of literati in the executive, that membership was open to “all real lovers of literature” (*Argus*, May 29, 1886) and that “the public are cordially invited to come and listen to our debates” (*Argus*, June 30, 1886).²¹ By June the society’s membership had reached twenty-six (*Argus*, May 29, 1886; June 11, 1886).²² The society’s monthly program of literary lectures and debates commenced with a notable leaning toward the scientific and scholarly over the biographical.²³

The genesis of the Melbourne branch occasioned a range of reactions in Australia, largely thanks to persistent and widespread press coverage. Early calls for members drew a skeptical response, a questioning of the usefulness of such a society. One representative letter to the *Argus* signed “Want to Know” in April 1886 asked Scrivenor for

some statement of the reason that they are “begun for.” Shelley did not, like Shakespeare, “exhaust worlds and then imagine new,” and I fear it is a mistake to inaugurate a society for the study of his works. We shall soon have a Lamb club I suppose, or a Swinburne society, and other such bodies, which, though they may occasion some notes, result . . . in very little solid work being done.

Similar responses cast doubt on the suitability of contemporary vernacular literature as a subject for study. Whereas Shakespeare would stand the test of time, vernacular literature was presumed ephemeral.

Thereafter the debates grew more nuanced. Exchanges published at length in the *Argus* considered the movement toward single-author societies. Benjamin (1890), for one, argued that the increasing specialization of knowledge in the new discipline would only lead to “mutual befogging”:

²¹ This public invitation was periodically reiterated (e.g., *Argus*, September 4, 1886).

²² Despite the society’s claims to open membership, its cap of fifty members and its unusual sign-up procedure in the library of a private residence would have dissuaded some of the tentative.

²³ Lectures delivered in 1886 included “Shelley’s *Juvenilia*,” “Shelley’s Religion,” “Masque of Anarchy,” “Ode to Skylark,” “Ode to West Wind,” “Was Shelley an Atheist?,” “Epipsychidion,” “Tower of Famine,” “Sonnet on Napoleon,” and “Shelley and Nature” (*NSS* 1888: 138).

The one class, not satisfied with studying the best and studying it well . . . exhume and uncoffin various decomposed remains or withered mummies of the literary kind, and lumber up the already over-stocked museum with them and with cheap literary bric-à-brac and specimens of rubbish. . . . The other class . . . are a peculiar outcome of this age. A “literary society” is becoming almost synonymous with the cult of some particular writer, great or small. . . . And there need apparently be no end to this literary monotheism, with all its clouds of biographical and aesthetic-critical incense offered on special days by special hierophants to special literary idols, and with its hymns of unquestioning praise.

The movement toward single-author societies had certainly coincided with the rise of the cult of celebrity, a charge against which the Shelley Society sought to guard itself, first in London and then in the provincial and colonial branches. The society’s devotion to its namesake, however, inevitably led to lapses in scholarly disinterest.

Discourses of empire and nation building soon infiltrated the debate. Some critics conceived of the society as a vehicle for intellectually invigorating Australia’s youth; the “energetic committee of young men” on the Melbourne society executive, wrote Scrivenor, demonstrated that “young Australia is to the front, intellectually as well as physically” (*Argus*, May 29, 1886). “We have a grand future, we are often told, as a nation,” wrote another supporter of the proposed Melbourne branch. “Why should not supremacy in philosophy, science, and literature be component parts of our greatness? This can only be achieved by the united and earnest effort of men who are alive to our necessities, and who are able to meet and supply them, and in the formation of the projected society I seem to see promise of such achievement” (Warland 1886).

Another national controversy, the “undue worship of muscle which prevails in this community,” also animated the literary set, who considered the proposal to launch a Shelley Society

a healthy sign that we are beginning to chafe under the autocracy of sport which rules the lives of the vast majority of Australians, who have yet to learn that cricket bats are not the noblest weapons to wield for the welfare and advancement of the nation, that there are higher pursuits than those of following bladders full of wind, that . . . ovals are not schools best calculated to supply solutions to life-problems which every man should seek to understand. (*ibid.*)

But there were those who did not regard these interests as mutually exclusive, finding “no reason why a devoted Shelleyan should not be a crack ‘mid-off,’ or why an unexceptionable Lambite should not at the same time be known as an expert ‘half-back’” (Benjamin 1886).

Arguments for federation soon entered the arena. Some suggested that a national society should be established rather than merely a Melbourne branch. “Let the proposed society be called ‘The Australian Association,’ ‘The Australian Institute,’ or some such broad federal name,” one *Argus* letter encouraged. “Let its annual meetings be held in the various provincial towns, extending as years go on, and the influence of the organization becomes stronger, to the various capitals of (then) federated Australia” (Warland 1886).

Nevertheless, the letter writer continued, it still made sense to establish the society in Melbourne. Doing so would enable its participation in a global community of Shelley Societies, for “one of the most interesting features in the British Association is that its annual meetings are held in different cities of the Empire, one of the first being held in Montreal, Canada; and who knows how soon Melbourne will be honoured with a visit? This would become almost a surety if there were a kindred society here to welcome the British one” (ibid.). In this way the establishment of the society would help promote Australia as a progressive nation and an important player on the global stage.

After such a surge of enthusiasm, the Melbourne branch suffered a strikingly anticlimactic demise in 1887, when the seemingly indefatigable Scrivenor became ill and also discovered “a plentiful lack of enthusiasm of a Shelleyan nature here. ‘Religious’ virulence has lost none of its strength in its transit across the seas, and even, I find, among men of professedly broad and liberal views, Shelley often makes but little way” (NSS 1888: 210).²⁴ Scrivenor reverted to his earlier opinion that London was a better, less conservative place for “Shelleyans.”

The London branch was longer-lived. Although the final literary lecture was delivered in December 1890²⁵ and a series of financial crises curtailed its other activities, the society technically existed into

²⁴ Another reason that the *Notebook of the Shelley Society* provided for the failure of the Melbourne branch was “the extreme heat of the weather” (NSS 1888: 210).

²⁵ Although disputed in the early twentieth century, the date of the final lecture was determined by Peck (1924: 314).

1901. In 1902 committee members were still personally paying down its debts.²⁶ Even though Brooke had pointed out in his inaugural lecture that “the Society is not meant to last for ever” (*NSS* 1888: 8), it had certainly met with a disappointing end.

Conclusions

Representations of the Shelley Society’s activities, particularly in the periodical press, revealed to the reading public the scientific or critical practices of studying vernacular literature. Yet even as the Shelley Society and its ilk purported to democratize the study of literature, the literati running them, the locations of meetings, and the texts they covered distanced the societies from that public, whose participation they ostensibly sought. A critic in the *Queenslander*, a Brisbane weekly, satirically proposed the formation of “a sect which shall concentrate its whole worship on one single Shelley-poem, or, at the most on two. Suppose we say ‘The Skylark’ and ‘The Sensitive Plant.’ An Amalgamated Society of Gentlemen Skylarkers and Female Sensitive Plants would not only turn our Melbourne rivals green with envy, but would be in itself the consummation of aesthetic rapture” (April 10, 1886). Though masquerading in the competitive rhetoric employed when society branches were established in Britain’s industrial towns, this piece revisited key debates about authority, legitimacy, and difficulty that the spread of the Shelley Society had instigated.

The unprecedented presence of the Shelley Society in the contemporary press may be read in several ways. As Freeman’s preoccupation with “chatter about Shelley” intimated, popular representations of the society and its more controversial activities may not have helped the cause of English in the universities. Yet, just as Dowden’s biography had reframed Shelley for nineteenth-century audiences, the Shelley Society

²⁶ A musical performance of *Hellas* had failed to replicate the earlier success of *The Cenci* and left the society owing ninety pounds. Additionally, the ambitious publishing schedule proved impossible, and the dishonesty of Thomas J. Wise, who had used society funds to finance his own set of editions, resulted in crippling debts (see Rossetti to T. J. Wise, May 14, 1901, in Rossetti 1990: 626). Rossetti, with characteristic generosity, arranged to pay the impoverished Furnivall’s share (Rossetti to Wise, November 14, 1902, in Rossetti 1990: 632).

and its high-profile literary lectures and activities reframed the study of contemporary vernacular literature and contributed significantly to a broad understanding of the suitability of English literature for critical or scientific study. After all, the connection between literary societies and “the general public was always an essential aspect of their stated aims” (Bailin 2009: par. 1). Indeed, after its advent the Shelley Society inevitably came to mind in discussions of the study of English literature outside the university. Thomas P. Miller (2011: 6) reminds us that “historic transitions in English studies arise at critical junctures when developments in literacy studies, literacy, and the literate converge.” The nineteenth-century flourishing of literary societies was one such juncture. The neglected history of this remarkable literary society reveals the pervasive cultural meaning embedded in Freeman’s dismissal of the study of English literature as “chatter about Shelley” and provides an instructive lesson from the past.

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