

# Spirituality, Feminism, and Pre-Raphaelitism in Modern British Art and Culture



**Alice Edén**

# Spirituality, Feminism, and Pre-Raphaelitism in Modern British Art and Culture

This book proposes new understandings of modern life in Britain by bringing constructs of female spirituality centre stage and examining three ‘forgotten’ artists identified with the Pre-Raphaelites and Victorianism.

Thomas Cooper Gotch, Robert Anning Bell and Frederick Cayley Robinson are resituated squarely within the tumultuous social and cultural changes of the period. Becoming visible again, in more inclusive histories, allows such artists not only to re-inhabit but also to reshape narratives of modernism, reanimating the scholarly discourse and creating a dynamic cultural history of modern Britain expressed through their striking visions of womanhood.

This book will be of interest to scholars in art history, gender studies and British studies.

**Alice Eden** is a cultural historian, writer and curator.

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Alice Eden

Designed cover image: Frederick Cayley Robinson, *Orphans*, left hand painting  
from *The Acts of Mercy*, 1920, Wellcome Collection

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**For Garrie, Emmie and Evie.**

**Beautiful, joyful and lights in the darkness, without you this book  
would not be here.**



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# Introduction

## Spirituality and Feminism

This book presents Thomas Cooper Gotch, Robert Anning Bell, Frederick Cayley Robinson and their peers for the first time as modern British artists.<sup>1</sup> Following the ascent of artistic Modernism in the early twentieth century, these artists came to be generally positioned as antithetical to the modern. They were amongst an inchoate group of British artists reviving the visual forms of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), which had formed in 1848. However, working from 1880 and well into the twentieth century, they engaged with *modern* contexts in varying ways. In their artworks and those many peers, maidens, chivalric knights, guardian angels, ghosts and fairies coexist strikingly with cities, electricity, sewing machines, aeroplanes. Older visual languages and spiritual yearnings are carried over in intriguing ways into the age of film, X-rays and the Titanic. This book contributes to revisionist approaches concerning these late or ‘Modern Pre-Raphaelites’, which have been much neglected. I reassess them via a new lens – female spirituality – which provides new insights into cultural modernity.<sup>2</sup>

This period was experienced by contemporaries as a ‘spiritual epoch’.<sup>3</sup> Historian Alex Owen has described how, by the 1890s, ‘the terms *mysticism* and *mystical revival* were in general use’ in Britain.<sup>4</sup> This ‘mystical revival’ included Pre-Raphaelitism and the visual iconographies of Edward Burne-Jones. Thomas Cooper Gotch was described by one reviewer as ‘Realist as Mystic’.<sup>5</sup> Other peers, like William Shackleton, were described similarly. This book shows how forms of ‘Spiritual Woman’ were depicted over and over again as a solution to the ills of modernity: Through innocence and purity or journeys of death and regeneration ([Chapter 1](#)), through fantastic imaginative and emancipatory potential ([Chapter 2](#)), through new insight, uncanny abilities, transcendence, spiritual planes and perspectives ([Chapters 3 and 4](#)).<sup>6</sup> In all renditions of spiritualised women found in the book, women and girls have the potential to redeem humanity. Notably, older and familiar Pre-Raphaelite forms of womanhood provide hopeful sources of comfort within new, modern contexts.

In Part One of the Introduction, I outline the central theme of female spirituality, which frames all analyses in the book. The artists’ association with unfashionable Pre-Raphaelite art caused their disregard. This was reinforced by an additional scholarly neglect of the cultures pertaining to female spirituality in this period. These cultural responses resulted in reduced visibility of these representations through most of the twentieth century, with them falling from the historical record. Part Two of the Introduction provides the background with regard to Pre-Raphaelitism, its historical positioning and categorisation. The idea of ‘Modern Pre-Raphaelitism’ is not the key or driving question

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of the book, but knowledge of this background is central to enable the re-positioning of the artists' representations of women back within the landscape of modernity. Part Three of the introduction considers the new 'meanings of modernity' presented in the book through its particular lenses and case studies.<sup>7</sup> I finish by thinking about possible ways forward for study of this neglected area of British art. The introductory material sets the scene for the chapters, which can then focus solely on detailed case studies in historic contexts with the background and historiographical issues already laid out.

### 'A Spiritual Epoch'

Modernity was 'a spiritual epoch'.<sup>8</sup> Central to this book is the artists' shared interest in this theme and their cultural environment, which displayed acute yearnings to retain the spirit. Faced with immense modernising changes, continuing desires for the spiritual are now seen as a central experience of the modern, previously dismissed as only relevant for an aberrant and atypical few.<sup>9</sup> I interpret 'spirituality' in a broad sense as an overarching modern context. Many spiritual metaphors and languages pervaded culture. Central are feminist constructs of spirituality and spiritual representations of women, within the context of the general rise in the popularity of the occult, the Golden Dawn, theosophy, mysticism, Edwardian enchantments and art of the Symbolist movement, which interacted with and was part of the spiritual revival. The selected artists privileged spiritual and occult perspectives. Works by all three of the case study artists show a significant, overarching interest in the spiritual and the immaterial, common to 'Modern Pre-Raphaelites' as well as to the Symbolist movement. How these various forms of spirituality informed and inflected specific artworks is detailed in the chapters.

The *fin de siècle* saw a turn to the occult evident across Europe. Efforts to understand the profound secrets of humanity and the Universe through Spiritualism or mysticism, far from being a lunatic fringe, were widespread and reflective of key intellectual and cultural concerns of this period.<sup>10</sup> Key works of theosophy, such as Alfred Percy Sinnett's *The Occult World* (1881) and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) were widely read.<sup>11</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck wrote in 1899:

a spiritual epoch is perhaps upon us...A spiritual influence is abroad that soothes and comforts...I will say nothing of the occult powers, of which there are signs everywhere – of magnetism, telepathy, levitation...phenomena that are battering down the door of orthodox science.<sup>12</sup>

Ruth Livesey in *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880–1914* (2007) described the constructive blending of spiritual and philosophical approaches:

The last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable disregard... of boundaries...an eclectic collation of belief systems: spiritualism, theosophy, Emersonian transcendentalism, Nietzschean notions of the will, Ruskinian medievalism, alongside the more material influences of Marx and Engels<sup>13</sup>

Further, as Edward Carpenter recalled in 1916:

It was a fascinating and enthusiastic period...The Socialist and Anarchist propaganda, the Feminist and Suffragette upheaval, the huge Trade-union growth, the

Theosophic movement, the new currents in the Theatrical, Musical and Artistic world, the torrent even of change in the Religious world – all constituted so many streams and headwaters converging, as it were, to a great river.<sup>14</sup>

Mysticism of various kinds, including Spiritualism, theosophy and Indian philosophy provided many alternatives to mainstream empirical science, alongside popular psychology. ‘The spiritual’ was constructed as an irrational counter to the unchecked progress of the modern world as expressed most notably in theosophical and contemporary occult literature, Edwardian enchantments and fantasies.

Scholarship has sought to establish the changing experience and functioning of spirituality as a central part of society and cultural history. The idea of a pervasive ‘spooky sense’ of the supernatural or spiritual in the modern period was developed by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell in *The Victorian Supernatural* (2004).<sup>15</sup> Bown’s work on the continuation of ‘small enchantments’ in the form of fairies into the twentieth century has also aided my theorisation.<sup>16</sup> Further, Alex Owen explored the idea of re-spiritualisation or re-enchantment of culture, and allied changes in consciousness, which have been important to my analysis of the action of spirit in modernity, spiritual thinking and viewing.<sup>17</sup> How modern lives may retain senses of the spiritual has been considered in Lynda Nead in *The Haunted Gallery* (2007). Spiritual or magical thinking in modernity was re-evaluated in works such as Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking 1880–1920* (2001) and Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic* (2013).<sup>18</sup> These works consider the way modern technologies could foster spiritual experiences and the types of metaphysical transfigurations art could effect. The parallel influences of new technology alongside persistent desire for magic have been highlighted by Lynda Nead and others.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the art world presented a particularly important locus for the circulation of spiritual ideas.<sup>20</sup> Ideas of spirituality in aesthetics had been expressed prominently in European art from the mid-nineteenth century. The Pre-Raphaelites’ ‘truth to nature’, the efforts of the Arts and Crafts movement including Lethaby’s spiritual ideas of architecture in *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (1892), art nouveau in its social and cultural contexts are prominent examples.<sup>21</sup> However, the spiritual in art was recast pertinently in the period of modernity, inflected by a heightened interest in the unconscious, introspection and the domestic, the occult and spiritual womanhood. These interests featured more prominently in art reviews of the period. Examinations of spiritual subjects, including the relationship between the material and the immaterial in art, were undertaken by the Symbolists, including the Nabis, the Modernists, Mondrian, Kandinsky and other practitioners, such as three chosen artists, whose works were not so easily categorised. The connections between spirituality and visuality, art and culture are evident in journals such as *The Studio*. These ideas permeated fields of artistic practice, discussion, criticism. Concepts of regeneration and re-enchantment were explored, which countered those of degeneration. The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, an independent London-based organisation, had links with Rosicrucianism and, since its establishment in 1888, disseminated ideas in *The Studio* as well as *The Evergreen* and *The Yellow Book*. By the mid-1890s, the Golden Dawn was well established in Great Britain, with over 100 members from every class of Victorian society. *The Evergreen* printed pictures by Celtic revivalist artists alongside occult and mystical writings and intellectual discussion. This format was similar in the journal *Orpheus*, published by the London Art Theosophical Circle and *Theosophy in Scotland*.<sup>22</sup> Anning Bell published

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illustrations in *The Yellow Book* while *The Studio* printed works of all three artists featuring in the book.<sup>23</sup>

European Symbolism was a key context for all three artists in this book. Much Symbolist art was concerned with the spiritual and artists sought to connect with the idea beyond the visual and, at the same time, considered the nature of the visual with a 'subversive attitude toward the image and its very structure.'<sup>24</sup> Symbolists were concerned with time and timelessness, frozen, iconographic moments, desiring transcendence and spiritual experience. Symbolist art affirmed its function as medium for humanity to access the ineffable and there was a revival in the belief in the 'cosmic character' of art and the making and viewing of art as a spiritual quest. Symbolism, in its denial of certain meaning, deliberate ambiguity and association with the unconscious, especially evident in Cayley Robinson's work, could be emancipatory to artists wishing to experiment with the immaterial and spiritual in art.

Glasgow was a crucial centre for spiritual and mystical art in this period, including artists associated with the Celtic revival.<sup>25</sup> There were connections with the theosophical movement in Scotland. John Duncan became a member of the Theosophical Society from 1909, during the time of Cayley Robinson's position at the Glasgow School of Art (GSA). Jean Delville, the Belgian Symbolist, was Head of Painting at the GSA from 1900 and was also connected with the Art Theosophical Circle (ATC), London, dedicating the introduction of his work, *The New Mission of Art* (1910) to its members.<sup>26</sup> Delville's artworks examined esoteric and hermetic ideas and were influenced by Edouard Schuré, who wrote the key occult text *The Great Initiates* (1889). Another influence was Joséphin Péladan, the founder of the famous occult organisation the Salon de la Rose + Croix in 1890s Paris, as well as the theosophist leaders Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant. Glasgow was an important centre advancing the spiritual in art in this period and Cayley Robinson, as well as Anning Bell, were able to benefit from these rich cultural contexts.

Artists employed at the GSA in this period included the Symbolist Jean Delville, appointed as Head of painting in 1900. Delville was a leading Rosicrucian artist, friends with Maurice Maeterlinck.<sup>27</sup> Anning Bell and Cayley Robinson also held positions at the same time that Frances MacNair (née Frances MacDonald) lectured there. Maurice Greiffenhagen was employed as the Head of the Life School, from 1906–1929. Greiffenhagen's works showed Pre-Raphaelite and academic elements and also Rosicrucian-type symbols, as does the work of many students who passed through the GSA in this period. Newbery encouraged links between Anning Bell, Cayley Robinson, Greiffenhagen and Symbolist artists. For instance, when Newbery wrote to Mackintosh suggesting he come and contribute to a lecture, he tried to persuade him by emphasising that the artist would be in the company of Anning Bell and Cayley Robinson.<sup>28</sup> Anning Bell corresponded with, met and exhibited with Mackintosh, notably in 1902, at the crucial Turin Exhibition of Decorative Art, in which the work of the Glasgow Four was most highly and famously acclaimed.<sup>29</sup> The 'Glasgow Girls' as well as Margaret Macdonald made important forms of spiritual art. The context of Glasgow and my research at the GSA have revealed pertinent overlaps in artistic concerns and groupings.<sup>30</sup>

The connections between the artists, Symbolism and forms of spirituality are important to the narrative of the book. Works on Symbolism in English language works are still comparatively limited, particularly those connecting such sources to visual culture. Scholarship has highlighted the mode of visual ambiguity within Symbolism and the close relationships between such aesthetics and new psychological understandings of the unconscious.<sup>31</sup> Similar work is needed to continue to make connections between the

spiritual and esoteric Symbolist approaches and the contexts of modern life.<sup>32</sup> I contribute to a growing body of scholarship seeking to contextualise the movement as modern, engaged and subversive. Sharon Hirsh's *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (2004) examined Symbolist painters and their relationship with modern life and the city, a relationship previously abjured. Katherine Kuenzli's *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism* (2010) applied serious academic attention to the Nabis artists and their use of the modern domestic environment.

Relationships between Modernism and spiritualities have been documented. Linda Dalrymple Henderson described how artists heralded 'new theories about the nature of reality and the nature of the self [which] created a new openness towards mystical and occult ideas...a major characteristic of modernism itself.'<sup>33</sup> Instead of focussing on Modernist artists, this book provides *new* evidence demonstrating how many more efforts were made, cutting across boundaries and groupings of category or network. Many artists and viewers of art sought escape and transcendence through aesthetic strategies and in ritualised art practises and viewing processes. Art of varying subjects and forms could animate magical or timeless properties allowing viewers, whilst living through modernity, to experience alternate states within and forms of refuge from modern life.<sup>34</sup> These themes are explored in the chapters, including how viewers attained spiritual states. Artists considered how their art could engage with and represent forms of spirituality, how spiritual thinking informed modernity and the making and viewing of art.

Modernist art like Kandinsky's presented a new visual programme for ideas that also structured the works of artists such as Gotch, Anning Bell and Cayley Robinson. The stylistic break which determined the 'Victorian'/'Modern' divide in art history may be true of the appearance of paintings, evident when comparing those in this book with Modernist artists. However, the superficial differences in appearance fail to acknowledge the continuity in ideas of both the spiritual and womanhood. These ideas, privileged in this book, speak to broader cultural trends. Francis Colmer perceived this in his article in 1910:

It is as impossible for art to give literal expression to human ideas as to much of the phenomena of the natural world. The lisp [*sic*] and flutter of leaves, the ripple of the brook...can have no actual representation. Sound and motion cannot be literally portrayed by the painter, though indeed in France at the present time the so-called Futurists are endeavouring to give actual effect to the latter of these things.<sup>35</sup>

Colmer considered the shared interests of a variety of English artists, as well as the Futurists, in interrogating the relationship between the material and immaterial in art.

Art in this period, transcending networks and genres, offered captivating chances to find re-enchantment. Methods for enchantment can be found in a variety of art forms including Pre-Raphaelite, Symbolist and Modernist. Those creating theosophical art suggested that spiritual images, rituals and languages could re-enchant urban life bringing amelioration, improved psychological well-being, peace, better relationships between people and connection with the positive energies of the Universe. In the context of popular spiritual revivals, enchantment was an attractive method of bringing wonder into an increasingly rationalised and mechanised everyday.<sup>36</sup> Varieties of Edwardian enchantment included fairy tales and fantasies for adults providing joy, opportunities to share and release emotions and escapism.

The contexts of Edwardian Enchantment and theosophy are particularly pertinent to the art of Frederick Cayley Robinson.<sup>37</sup> As discussed in detail in [Chapter 3](#), Cayley

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Robinson's success with illustrations for Maurice Maeterlinck's Symbolist play *The Blue Bird* should be considered within this context. Jane Munro noted in her exhibition catalogue *Chasing Happiness*, featuring Cayley Robinson's illustrations to the play, that it 'reduced well-heeled stockbrokers to tears, echoing contemporary responses to *Peter Pan*.<sup>38</sup> Forms of enchantment may be further contextualised by a number of other allied areas in Edwardian culture. These included revivals in mysticism, Spiritualism, fairy tales, fantasies, Celtic myths and 'alternative' thinking, providing a rich, creative cultural context. The visual efforts of the three focus artists to explore the material and immaterial and to present ambiguous, spiritual modes of womanhood collude with the radical potential of both theosophy and feminism. The overall positioning of the artists alongside feminine spirituality and against narratives of rational masculine progress enveloped them within the sphere of theosophy and its abilities to undermine the established order in this period.<sup>39</sup>

Frederick Cayley Robinson had notable links with the theosophical movement in England. The Theosophical Society had been founded in 1875 in New York by Helena Blavatsky and her American partner Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Theosophical ideas permeated culture at many levels from the late nineteenth century. As scholars such as Janet Oppenheim have determined, the Theosophical Society was a product of its late nineteenth-century English context, including the popularity of Spiritualism, a wide-reaching 'lure of the occult', 'the East emerging', anti-materialism and at the same time, was 'the beneficiary of centuries of occult thought.'<sup>40</sup> Theosophy means 'divine wisdom' or 'wisdom of the Gods' and was already a familiar occult term, co-opted into the new movements. Precepts such as a number of 'initiated adepts, or of secret documents that held, in coded signs and symbols, the key to understanding nature's deepest enigmas,' can also be found in the centuries of occult lore.<sup>41</sup> Theosophy's link with the older hermetic tradition empowered members' searches for eternal truths through conscientious scholarship, re-examining a diverse range of texts of ancient religions and occult traditions as well as evolution theory. Theosophy made grand claims to synthesise occult knowledge. Types and systems of knowledge included hermetic, Jewish kabbalah, alchemy, neo-Platonic, Dominican. All these doctrines and scriptures were linked together in theosophy's divine wisdom, in the neo-Platonist tradition.

Blavatsky and her associates, abhorring any systems of clerical authority and scientific arrogance regarding the natural world, revitalised the modern occult, creating a new body of work and teachings in various key texts for the modern Theosophical Society from the 1870s. Oppenheim states that theosophical tenets included:

the three essentials: - "Maya," or illusion; "Karma", or fate; and "Nirvana," the condition of rest. Coincident...is that of "Reincarnation", by which each new life is but the entrance upon existence of a spiritual entity which has passed through many other lives, and whose conduct in each of these...is, in fact, its "Karma", self-created<sup>42</sup>

Within theosophical writings, theories concerned the spiritual planes of existence, the interconnected, spiritual composition of the Universe, as well as guidance to living a higher spiritual life, through the development of the inner life and serving others. The Theosophical Society in England attempted to interrogate and re-frame the boundaries of the material and immaterial, seen and unseen, life and death. This occult focus on the unseen accompanied a widespread contemporary artistic move towards representing the invisible.<sup>43</sup> As various scholars have highlighted, scientific advancements such as the ability to see microscopic organisms, invisible to the naked eye, occurred alongside these trends.<sup>44</sup>

The tenets and culture of theosophy aided the divorce from authoritative cultural meanings, the deconstruction of accepted norms and encouraged alternate experiences of ‘reality’. Such perspectives interpret invisible forces in spiritual ways, challenging the cultural authority of science. I consider Cayley Robinson’s works in relation to a number of interrelated theosophical precepts. The artist was connected to the London-based ATC, as well as the Symbolist movement through the Nabis and Maeterlinck. Theosophy was connected with the Symbolist movement, which also influenced all three artists.

While Cayley Robinson had more direct connections with theosophy explored in [Chapters 3 and 4](#), Anning Bell’s writings about art, from the 1890s right through to the 1930s continually cite spirituality as a key theme. Anning Bell in 1913 described the continuance of mystery ‘*in spite of* the constant communication of modern cosmopolitan life [and] speediness.’<sup>45</sup> [my emphases] He displayed an ongoing interest in the unknown and ineffable, forever permeating his artistic output. He described the ‘mystery of shadow’ in churches and mosaic works and the inspiration for artworks coming from spiritual origin: ‘I know not whence’.<sup>46</sup> He noted the ability of the artist to ‘[draw] forth the hidden charm in some material – pottery, metal or stone.’<sup>47</sup> Anning Bell could enjoy spiritual inspirations during his time at the GSA. With its connection with a number of pertinent Symbolist artists and under Francis Newbery, the GSA supported the making of spiritualised art. In many of Anning Bell’s works, sound was viewed as a magical mode to interact with the past or higher states. Alongside the mystical icon, there was an interest in silence, pre-modern music and sounds, meditative states.<sup>48</sup> Gotch created hieratic, iconic, otherworldly compositions to illustrate his belief, described in lectures, in the primacy of ‘spiritual law’ over ‘physical law’.<sup>49</sup> In this lecture, he explained at length ideas of art, history and time, which are forged through spiritual languages.

Many peers of the selected artists engaged openly with mysticism and enchantments. These included Maxwell Armfield (paganism), Olive Hockin (theosophy), Evelyn Pickering De Morgan (spiritualism), Ricketts and Shannon, (esotericism), William Shackleton (theosophy and palmistry), to name but a few. Gotch, Anning Bell and Cayley Robinson variously expressed their sympathy with a number of Modernist artists in terms of ideas or symbolism; spirituality was also a shared interest with the Modernists as well as the Symbolists. While there was discord concerning method and form, there were shared desires across Europe for emotional resonance and connection with the spirit through art. The languages of spirituality were also inextricably interconnected with languages of feminism. The book highlights how artwork by ‘Modern Pre-Raphaelites’ coincided with many spiritualised iconographies found within feminist cultures. Feminist historical contexts are explored in relation to the spiritual as a central theme of the book, outlined next.

### *Feminist Historical Contexts*

The case studies are considered alongside contemporary feminist historical contexts. The two histories, of these paintings and of feminism, run alongside each other and have connections. Feminist historical contexts are considered in the book via the lens of the spiritual, which itself interacts with modes of artistic representation of women, particularly Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist images. In this period, feminists across Europe and in America undertook reassessments of society and culture and took part in violent acts of unmaking or ‘breaking’ with the past. From the late nineteenth century, there were changes in women’s thinking and aspirations, a flourishing of feminist texts and theorisations of male hegemony. During these decades, feminism exerted consistent, direct and

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insidious pressures, both pushing for tangible changes and re-framing the languages of expectation. Key themes in the history of women are pertinent to the chapters and outlined below. I examine the artworks side by side with contemporary feminist cultures and activities. I also consider interactions with these cultures, women's presence and agency in society as key frames for understanding the modernity of these artworks. However, the book maintains a central focus on visual and imaginative cultures. Each chapter considers modes of imagery which arose in relation to the feminist movement and various spiritual cultures.

At times within the book, art forms coincide closely with feminist ones, such as Gotch's pure child and the 'social purity' campaigns, Anning Bell's physically robust women, the women of feminist utopias and works by female artists. Cayley Robinson's incarcerated women correspond with images of women in domestic hardship or captivity, suffrage imagery and the writing of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. There are many feminist tropes, forms of imagery and symbols that are found across culture and in these artworks. However, my aim has not been to use the paintings to *illustrate* feminist ideas but to examine the artworks alongside cultures of feminism and spirituality as central to modernity. While images were not consciously advancing a feminist agenda, they destabilised and eroded the certainty of dominant gender norms, displaying the unease of the artists within those strictures.

The time span of the book begins in 1880, a few years prior to the repeal of the Criminal Diseases Act in 1886, which ushered in the 'social purity' campaign. These years saw the advent of the 'New Woman' in the 1890s, changes in physical culture and unprecedented female agency, including an increasingly militant battle for the vote up to the First World War. The period ended in 1930, just after the vote had eventually been won in 1928. The 'gender crisis' from the late nineteenth century is central to the analysis in the three chapters. The 'Woman Question' became a significant issue in the British press and periodicals from the 1880s and 1890s and is an essential context for the book.<sup>50</sup> Debates concerning women were pervasive in culture, as described by Angeliqe Richardson and Chris Willis in their introduction to *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact* (2001), citing A. G. P. Sykes in the *Westminster Review* (1895):

it is not possible to ride by road or rail, to read a review, a magazine or a newspaper, without being continually reminded of the subject which lady-writers love to call the Woman Question. 'The Eternal Feminine', the 'Revolt of the Daughters', the Woman's Volunteer Movement, Women's Clubs are significant expressions and effective landmarks.<sup>51</sup>

In a period with many cultural anxieties, contemporary concerns often focussed on women and girls. Indeed, changing experiences of girlhood was an important contemporary theme, with growing scholarly attention.<sup>52</sup> The unmarried woman became of increased focus when connected with discourses of fitness, the nation and decline around the time of the Boer War. The 'New Woman' became an important cultural icon of the period, created by writer Sarah Grand in 1894 and came to represent departures from the strictures of Victorian culture. Lucy Bland has completed valuable, detailed work on the 'social purity' campaigns, which culminated in the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1886. This Act ended legalised prostitution and raised the age of consent from 12 to 16 years old.<sup>53</sup> The 1890s saw matters of sex being more and more openly discussed while the advent of sexology in that decade brought new theoretical types of sexuality.

Increased frankness in the languages of sex, culminating later in the 1910s, was a momentous change.<sup>54</sup> The commotion surrounding such changes and the feminist movement in the late nineteenth century were enough to threaten a contemporary ‘gender crisis’ or ‘sexual anarchy’ a crucial context for the artists examined.<sup>55</sup>

Chapter 1 on Thomas Cooper Gotch is informed by the related crisis in masculinity, which eroded certainties about male identity. This context inflects the artworks and arose ‘partly [as] the result of ...change in perceptions of female identity.’<sup>56</sup> Phillip Mallett in surveying the area wrote: ‘masculinity in the later nineteenth century seemed to many writers to be facing threats from every angle.’<sup>57</sup> The threats included female white-collar workers and the increased presence of women in the public sphere, legal changes such as the Married Women’s Property Act, feminist campaigns, including around the Contagious Diseases Act, as well as the New Woman. The *fin de siècle* context brought various cultural anxieties and fears. Pertinent were fears of declining birth rate, rival imperial nations, ‘degeneration’, the ‘depletion of nervous strength’ for professional men as explored in scholarship by Daniel Pick, Michael Neve and others.<sup>58</sup> These anxieties resulted in vigilant policing of masculine identities and boundaries of behaviour through, for example, discourses of law, medicine, politics as well as literature regarding manly adventure.<sup>59</sup> ‘Normal’ masculinity was defined and deviant versions were increasingly stigmatised including new categories. Literature such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) reflected these concerns over homosexuality and manliness, featuring the mingling of blood, homosocial interactions and male vulnerabilities.<sup>60</sup>

The cultural context of Decadence also brought some ‘dangerous’ forms of masculinity as outlined by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken.<sup>61</sup> Male fears of vampiric woman accompanied changes such as the ‘New Woman’ and feature in Chapter 1. Related discourses also surface in Chapters 3 and 4 when Cayley Robinson’s art, connected with the example of Edward Burne-Jones, comes close enough to Decadent forms to cause concern in art reviews. Contemporary languages of degeneration overlapped with Decadence, encompassing theories of crowds and atavism by Gustave Le Bon, anarchy and sexual degeneration, focussing on the figures of the dandy, the hermaphrodite and the ‘New Woman’.<sup>62</sup> Christopher Prior has brought attention to a number of male anxieties relating to imperial authority, economic strength, racial decline and degeneration.<sup>63</sup> Alexandra Warwick has explored how fears of vampires shifted from connections with otherness threatening domestic femininity to fears about women themselves.<sup>64</sup> Artworks dealing with ‘sexual anarchy’, decadence and androgyny include Symbolist paintings by Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon, Fernand Khnopff, Gustav Klimt and Jean Delville, which provide contexts for artworks in this book.<sup>65</sup> Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1882) cited the spectres of degenerative disease and sexual profligacy as tainting and poisoning male legacies. The perceived threats to masculinity meant that artists’ works were policed in reviews and at times deemed verging on the Decadent (see Chapter 3). Gotch embraced a dandified image particularly evident in a portrait as a young artist, when he was more closely associated with the artist Henry Scott Tuke.<sup>66</sup>

Chapter 2 focuses largely on the Edwardian period, which saw the peak of militancy in the Suffragette campaigns for the vote. The three major Suffrage organisations were Millicent Fawcett’s suffragist National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS, 1897), the Pankhursts’ militant Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU, 1903) and Charlotte Despard’s Women’s Freedom League (WFL, 1907).<sup>67</sup> The period from January 1906 to 1914 saw an escalation in the militancy of the campaign until it stopped at the

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onset of war.<sup>68</sup> The new physical activities required for the political campaign – marching, acts of destruction, presence on the streets – added to other sweeping changes in physical cultures for women.<sup>69</sup> Significant changes discussed in the chapter included the arrival of the bicycle, women’s involvement in self-defence and sport, including archery, and increased visible mobility.

The peak in feminist militancy featuring in [Chapter 2](#) was halted by the First World War, during which there was a cessation of all Suffrage campaigns. These campaigns were not reprised after the war. While the book does not deal with the war period directly, I consider important cultural continuities across the period 1880–1930. Female writers and artists during wartime created constructs of femininity which recast forms of pacifism and female spirituality developed from the late nineteenth century. Elise Lawton Smith, Lucy Ella Rose and Richenda Roberts amongst others have explored some of these with reference to the artist Evelyn Pickering De Morgan.<sup>70</sup> Vera Brittain’s writings engage in constructs of womanhood which combine assertions of women’s autonomy, strength and spirituality while also drawing on older forms of femininity. [Chapter 4](#) covers a period from the 1890s to the 1920s and looks at Cayley Robinson’s paintings of interiors with recurring ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ or Symbolist-type women as well as spiritual languages pertaining to theosophy and Edwardian enchantment.<sup>71</sup>

### *Female Spirituality*

All three chapters feature a litany of spiritualised images of womanhood which are found within contemporary contexts including feminist cultures. This section outlines types of female and feminist spiritualities, forming a conception of the feminist spiritual as a pertinent cultural presence. Just a few examples of these spiritual iconographies are: Symbolism of captivity, innocence, motherhood, images of women archers, Amazons, mermaids, *femme fatales*, Symbolist Seers, the ‘Pre-Raphaelite Woman’ or ‘Burne-Jones Lady’ and there are many more. As well as being a significant presence within the art world, these visual forms and related ideas interacted with the progressive cultures of feminism.<sup>72</sup> The close inter-relationships between feminisms and spiritual ideas, such as within the suffrage movement, form a central thread running throughout the book. While the scholarly landscape has begun to include the spiritual more centrally in its understandings of modernity, what about these forms of specifically *female* spirituality, which were widespread at the time? Such forms, emerging within feminist cultures, have been relatively ignored.<sup>73</sup>

Modern constructs of ‘Spiritual Woman’ or the ‘Divine Feminine’ drew on the currency of time-worn iconographies of female spirituality. Belinda Crerar’s recent book and exhibition *Feminine Power* (2022), with its cross-cultural and global approach to the subject of female divinity, has been a timely reminder of the perennial nature of the feminine as an ever-present cultural presence and force.<sup>74</sup> However, exploring this theme raises thorny issues around forms of female spirituality. Belinda Crerar alluded to this in *Feminine Power*. The words ‘hippy dippy’ and other cultural attitudes appeared silhouetted on the walls of the show.<sup>75</sup> Jan Marsh has noted how ‘derided’ the Spiritual movement has become, affecting interpretation of spiritual cultures in their historic moment.<sup>76</sup> Charlene Spretnack, author, eco-feminist activist and co-founder of the US Green Party movement, has described the disdain attending to history examining the spiritual.<sup>77</sup> Spretnack cites art historian James Elkins, who wrote in 2015: ‘For some people in my profession of art history, the very fact that I have written this book may be enough to cast me into a dubious category of fallen and marginal historians.’<sup>78</sup>

The later twentieth century saw the popularisation and simplification of spiritual or magical ideas. Notorious examples like Aleister Crowley's association with the Beatles and imagined satanic cults in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1966) were well-known examples.<sup>79</sup> The strong connection between second wave feminism, female spirituality, the Goddess movement, the search for the Amazons and the growth of New Age alternative cultures accompanied a confusing blurring of mainstream and pop culture ideas with historical, Esoteric and scholarly sources. 'Spiritual' and 'occult' in the late twentieth century became much looser, umbrella terms encompassing a whole range of alternative and New Age concerns; Spiritualism, wicca and paganism were in the same spectrum as vampire-hunters and UFOs. This has all contributed to a broader scorn of spiritual cultures. More cynical and less sentimental times could also explain the neglect of these languages within historical understandings of modernity. A re-positioning of the spiritual further away from academic or scholarly contexts accompanied these developments. A glance at popular television shows, films and books of popular mysticism today reveals an unflagging commercial and popular interest in this subject. Recent books on the occult and its visual history also show a growing academic and intellectual interest.<sup>80</sup> However, the scholarly consideration of forms of female spirituality can pose challenges to the historian.

With a challenging historiographical and cultural context in mind, the case studies in this book are kept very carefully entrenched in their specific historic moment. They are situated conscientiously within the intellectual contexts, texts, histories and concepts of the day, including new feminist ideologies, psychological awareness, progressive movements, socialism. I focus on particular case studies, exploring interrelationships between historic context, constructs and iconographies. The chapters reveal that, rather than being kooky or fringe, these languages were pervasive and significant. Spiritual cultures are given central place within this book befitting their significant influence within a spectrum of spiritual thinking, their effects on the cultural production of Pre-Raphaelite art and continuing legacies today. My exploration of female spirituality draws on a number of contemporary constructs, including those related to feminist cultures.<sup>81</sup> An overview of female spirituality as context for the case studies is given here.

Spiritual ideas permeated the visual cultures of this important historical moment for the feminist movement. Feminists inherited a number of older ideas of female spirituality from the nineteenth century and earlier. Evangelical Christianity of the eighteenth century had, for example, created 'the ideology of women's moral guardianship of society.'<sup>82</sup> Pre-existing ideas of the sanctity and superior morality of women permeated much Victorian literature and culture and helped fuel the development of feminist campaigns to protect women. However, older ideas were re-purposed with many new challenges of the modern city. By the 1890s, a feminist valorisation of spirituality was constructed within the 'social purity' movement. This construct was built on women's protection from the public sphere, through middle-class 'separate spheres' ideology, respectability and ladylike behaviour.<sup>83</sup> Women's moral and spiritual virtue was delineated in contrast to the problem of 'the beast' of male lust and man's lack of, or disconnection from, his spirituality. This strain of female and feminist spirituality features in [Chapter 1](#). Similar constructs are deployed by feminists to prove women's worthwhile contribution in the public sphere in the early twentieth century, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#).

Many feminists elevated the spiritual nature of motherhood to a venerated, sanctified level. These included Annie Besant, Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy (who also wrote under the pseudonym Ellis Ethelmer), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ellen Key, Henrietta Muller and Frances Swiney amongst many others.<sup>84</sup> The cult of motherhood