Dance and Dancers in the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet

ALEXANDRA CARTER

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For Simon

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Contents

List of Illustrations

General Editor's Series Preface

Music in nineteenth-century Britain has been studied as a topic of musicology for over two hundred years. It was explored widely in the nineteenth century itself, and in the twentieth century grew into research with strong methodological and theoretical import. Today, the topic has burgeoned into a broad, yet incisive, cultural study with critical potential for scholars in a wide range of disciplines. Indeed, it is largely because of its interdisciplinary qualities that music in nineteenth-century Britain has become such a prominent part of the modern musicological landscape.

This series aims to explore the wealth of music and musical culture of Britain in the nineteenth century and surrounding years. It does this by covering an extensive array of music-related topics and situating them within the most up-to-date interpretative frameworks. All books provide relevant contextual background and detailed source investigations, as well as considerable bibliographical material of use for further study. Areas included in the series reflect its widely interdisciplinary aims and, although principally designed for musicologists, the series is also intended to be accessible to scholars working outside of music, in areas such as history; literature; science; philosophy; poetry and performing arts. Topics include criticism and aesthetics; musical genres; music and the church; music education; composers and performers; analysis; concert venues, promoters and organisations; the reception of foreign music in Britain; instrumental repertoire, manufacture and pedagogy; music hall and dance; gender studies; and music in literature, poetry and letters.

Although the nineteenth century has often been viewed as a fallow period in British musical culture, it is clear from the vast extent of current scholarship that this view is entirely erroneous. Far from being a 'land without music', nineteenth-century Britain abounded with musical activity. All society was affected by it, and everyone in that society recognised its importance in some way or other. It remains for us today to trace the significance of music and musical culture in that period, and to bring it alive for scholars to study and interpret. This is the principal aim of the Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain series - to advance scholarship in the area and expand our understanding of its importance in the wider cultural context of the time.

Dr Bennett Zon
University of Durham, UK

Preface

The only other book that exists on this period of dance history is Ivor Guest's *Ballet in Leicester Square* (1992), an amalgam of two previous monographs, *The Alhambra ballet* (1959) and *The Empire ballet* (1962). I am indebted to Guest for inspiring my own interest in the period; those who are similarly attracted will find, in his text, richly descriptive accounts of the ballets, including some detailed scenarios which give a flavour of the works. Guest also provides accounts of the principal dancers and useful appendices on their appearances in the venues.

This text does not attempt to replicate Guest. Here, my concern is to place the ballets within the social context of Victorian and Edwardian London and to explore their relationship to the dominant beliefs and value systems of sexuality and morality. To this end, I am concerned with how the image of the dancer was constructed by the ballets, by primary and secondary sources, and by the dancers themselves. I also wish to place the period within the web of British dance history by claiming its significance not only in its time, but also for its contribution to the development of ballet in the twentieth century.

This text also differs from Guest in its concern with the status, background and working lives of the ballet girls. Missing from history, it is their story I wish to share.

Prologue

When Lottie Collins roared her song 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay' at the audiences of the late Victorian music hall, she punctuated it with back bends, pirouettes and notorious high kicks which hit the 'boom' of the refrain. Like many before her, Collins was aware of the enhanced entertainment value of combining song and dance.[1] Some performers in the halls just danced, offering attractions such as clog, step, skirt or Serpentine dancing. Salome danced, courtesy of Maud Allan, across the European halls and London's Alhambra palace of varieties parodied her performance in *Sal! Oh! My!* (1908). In the music hall and variety bills of Britain and Europe, in the vaudeville of America, wherever there was entertainment outside of the legitimate theatre, dance was a key component. Some forms, like the can-can, remain in public consciousness; some entertainers, such as Josephine Baker, retain their charisma down the ages. The music halls and similar venues also provided a home, for lack of any other, for those who have since acquired a respectable reputation in the history of the art of dance. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Loië Fuller nurtured her experiments with lighting and costume in Parisian variety; Ruth St. Denis worked in music hall in New York, and the Russian dancers who preceded Diaghilev's Ballets Russes presented the art of ballet in the larger halls of London. The halls, the variety stage and vaudeville all presented popular entertainment which, in its diversity, its non-reliance on the spoken word, the brevity of its acts and the opportunities it offered for solo performance, was ideally suited to dance. Yet so much of the history of that dance has gone unrecorded. Dance historians, concerned with sustaining the respectability of the art, have tended to focus on its heritage from Imperial Russia and France; writers on theatre and popular entertainment perhaps have not felt equipped to tackle such a seemingly specialist activity as dance.[2] This falling between the gaps of history is nowhere more apparent than in the case of ballet in Britain's music hall.

Most historiography which traces the history of ballet in Britain in the nineteenth century delights in recording the period of the 1830s and 1840s, to which the term the Romantic era is ascribed. Reflecting, albeit a little belatedly, the Romantic dichotomies between flesh and spirit; human and supernatural; love and death; culture and nature, works such as *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841) are still in repertoire today, in narrative and general choreographic design if not in 'original' choreographic form. The presence of ballet was sustained on the stages of respectable theatres such as the King's Theatre (later Her Majesty's) in London until the late 1850s, when the fashion for opera overtook ballet. Its history from the 1850s to 1880s is still shadowy but it is safe to say that, whilst retaining a place in opera productions, ballet as a discrete form lost favour. It did not disappear, however, but was sustained within the context of popular entertainment. Here, it reached an apogee of privileged programming and popularity on the stages of two of the large music halls in London's Leicester Square. Between 1884 and 1915 at

least one, usually two and sometimes three ballets were presented nightly at the Alhambra and Empire.[3] A total of one hundred and forty one new works were produced. Although sandwiched between other acts, they were the main attraction on the programmes.

During this period, the ballet employed thousands of people. Although some works comprised small casts (even solo and duet work), the emphasis was on spectacle, largely achieved by the deployment of a *corps de ballet* of between one and two hundred performers. It played to packed houses nightly and was a vital part of London's entertainment scene. Its management was entirely male, but its executants were largely women. As such, not only has the period disappeared from dance history but so too have the working lives and achievements of thousands of women.

This book aims to redress this gap in dance and social history by identifying the importance of dance in general, and ballet in particular, as a cultural activity in which the body of the dancer and the symbolic constructs of the dance both produce and reflect the concerns - and the spirit - of the age. As Shires (1992: xi) claims,

> we need to examine Victorian culture through analysis of institutions and through close attention to symbolic forms and representations ... the public reception and manipulation of symbols, most of us would agree, is as important to social relations as the formulation of public policy.

Furthermore, whilst exploring the specificity of the work in relation to its age, the ballet of the late Victorian and Edwardian period is returned to the history of performance, and the contribution of the marginalised performers of that history, the 'unsung many' (Hutcheon 1989: 66), is privileged, for it is they who captured the artistic imagination of the period.

The book is structured as follows. The context of the British music hall is set briefly by outlining its history and comparing the nature of its entertainment with that of its European and American counterparts. Although the cultural context of the Victorian and Edwardian age will be woven throughout the book, the general relationship of the music hall to its age will be specifically identified. The focus will then turn to the ballets at the Alhambra and the Empire, not simply as case studies but because these venues were famed, first and foremost, for their ballet productions and for the moral controversies which arose from activity in their auditoria and on stage. The management of the venues, the artistic creators of the works and the audiences are characterised. So, too, are the performers, with an emphasis on their working lives off stage (an under-researched field) as well as their appearance on stage. The ballets themselves are explored, both through a description of their constituent parts and, significantly, for their relevance to the historical period. It is in the production and reception of these works that the thrust of this book resides. Produced under the auspices of a male management, playing to not solely but largely male audiences and, most significantly, recorded through the perceptions of male writers, poets and artists, it is argued that the ballets and their executants dance out the sexual psyche of the age. The moral image of the

dancer, ascribed to her by others, is set against her own self image, and dancers' voices are used where possible to resist the notion that the body is passive, that sexuality is not just ascribed, but experienced. Penultimately, resisting the weight of traditional historiography, a dancer - not a star, but one of the *corps de ballet* - talks back.

Although claiming the importance of the ballet in its specific time and place, and justifying this history mainly on those grounds rather than for its overt contribution to a heritage, I cannot resist challenging the historical lineage of British ballet as traditionally recorded. I conclude, therefore, with an Epilogue which traces that lineage and, by doing so, disrupts conventional notions that 'British' ballet was 'born' with the efforts of Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert in the 1930s. This book concludes with the claim that the recorded history of British ballet is flawed; that it is one based on value, on artistic standards, rather than on the prevalence and popularity of the activity itself.

Critical strategies

Any attempt to revisit history is necessarily coloured by the consciousness of the present day. That consciousness is formed by questions, debates and points of view which contribute to and feed upon the dominant theoretical perspectives of the time when research is undertaken, and written. This investigation is informed not by one critical perspective or disciplinary stance, but several intersecting fields of knowledge and a range of critical strategies. Debates about historiography and the role of the historian are implicit, but central. As claims are made about the cultural impact of ballet in a specific time and place, the reader may need to be persuaded about the links between dance and society. Furthermore, as a study of the artistic and cultural representations of women in the ballets, critical thinking about how dance embodies gender and sexuality is also key to the task of interpreting this history.

It is now axiomatic that the role of the historian is not one of retrieving facts, but is an interpretative act which requires imagination, inference and speculation. As Husbands (1996: 59) claims, if 'the argument is that the understanding of the past is itself a creative act which can be rendered differently by historians, novelists and poets', then 'the place of the imagination in the construction of historical accounts becomes central.' Nevertheless, historiography is not an arbitrary act, but one based on thorough research of the evidence of the past. As none of the ballets of the period are extant, the evidence is dependent on primary sources which record the productions of the ballets as written by their creators (and occasionally, executants) and those who received the ballet such as journalists, critics, poets, biographers and social commentators. This evidence is not, of course, a way of gaining 'second hand' access to the works themselves, for the meanings of these works, like all cultural activity, are ascribed to them and do not pre-exist either the interpretation of the time, or the interpretation of the historian. The historian, by giving form and shape to selected evidence, imposes a narrative structure on that evidence - a beginning, middle and end. When the evidence is not available, such as that which describes the subjective experience of the actor on the

historical stage or, in our case, the dancer on the ballet stage, then the historian's imagination becomes even more active. In Chapter 7 the imagined voice of the dancer offers an alternative interpretation of the evidence in all the preceding chapters which comprise the conventional source material of history. Cara Tranders' testimony is rooted in this source material, and her recorded experience hovers on the cusp of history and fiction; of history as a creative act, of imagined phenomenology.[4] Such a strategy allows for the minor characters of history to be acknowledged as makers of their own meaning of their own experience. It also recognises that the interplay between institutions and individuals, between the structures of society and the agency of the subject, embraces not just the famous, not just the named, but everyone.[5]

In discourse on cultural representation the focus has tended to be on arts such as literature, theatre, music, film and the visual arts. Dance, in its social and theatre forms, tends to be absent and its contribution to the cultural life of society is neglected. Furthermore, as suggested, even in the histories of British theatre dance the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth is also almost ignored. Dance writers have preferred to overlook what was described as a 'lamentable fall' (Haskell 1938: 30) in the artistic standards of the period. And yet, whatever the retrospective judgment of these standards (for it was certainly not the judgment of the time), and whether deemed popular entertainment or 'art', this historically specific dance practice was a vital part of London's popular culture. By exploring the institution of the music hall and the works presented there, the music hall ballet can be seen as embodying dominant ideological concerns of the age. In undertaking such an exposure, however, I am wary of offering a reductive account, for the ideologies of any period are diverse and contested both in their time and after. Shires (1992: 185) warns of the dangers of accepting the fixity of Victorian ideologies, arguing that 'the instability of any ideology in the period and even more radical instability of Victorian representations must count as a defining characteristics of the age'. Notwithstanding, whilst wary of 'Victorian' and 'Edwardian' archetypes, there are trends in the beliefs and customs of a particular age which become reified in the public domain. Generalisations they may be, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to proceed without them. What is offered here, therefore, is an example of the symbiotic relationship between dance and culture, revealed in the on-stage embodiment of ideologies of gender and sexuality.

One of the ideological constructs which appears to be so key to the age was the binary opposition ascribed to women's sexuality and, by overt association, their status. They were either the angel in the house or the whore in the street; the lily or the rose; the Madonna or the Magdalene. Close examination of the ballets and the images of their executants reveals how they were imbued with these oppositional images. And yet our post-feminist thinking warns us to be wary of these binaries, for they are categories that are monolithic and exclusive. When ascribed to the gendered constructs such as those above, this is undoubtedly the case, for these categories solidify sexuality and leave out all kinds of diverse personal identities. Furthermore, all research is imbued with a particular critical framework and the results of the research will bear its imprint; if looking for binaries, they will be found. When I commenced this research I had no such gender perspective in mind;

my project was, initially, a historical one centred on the ballets. It became more and more evident, however, that the performers in the ballets were symbols, on and off stage, of public sexual categories that were not new to the Victorian age but high in its consciousness. In identifying these categories: the untouchable and chaste ballerina; the accessible and immoral ballet girl and, in the case of the *en travestie* performer, the not-quite-sure, my intention is not to disguise the diversity of actual sexuality but to expose the contribution of ballet in the music halls to the public construction of women's sexuality and moral image. Central to this exposure is the tension described in Compton Mackenzie's novel (1929) between the public identity of the dancer as she appeared on stage, 'over the footlights' and her private self, in the street outside, 'under the moon' of London's night skies.

NOTES

1. See Koritz (1990) for a dance analysis of Collins' act.
2. The ballet writers of the 1930s-1960s were, in the main, initially responsible for the neglect of this period, though few of them had first hand experience of the actual performances. Haskell (1934: 188) speculates 'I imagine that the Empire ballet was choreographically, musically and artistically negligible' whilst Beaumont (1940: 3) was more fascinated by the promenade than by the stage performance. Lynham (1947) gives some attention to the period but focuses on the composers rather than the choreographers. Lawson (1964) makes a brief reference; Reyna (1964) and Kraus (1969) each give the period one sentence and Kirstein (1971) makes no acknowledgement at all. Clarke and Crisp (1978: 89) make the erroneous statement that it was Diaghilev who gave ballet 'to the people at large'; Sorell (1981) discuss the 'gay' nineties, Loië Fuller and dance at the Moulin Rouge but ignores the vast amount of activity on the London stage.

   The theatre historian Short (1951) has a chapter on the palaces of varieties and acknowledges that the Alhambra and Empire were primarily renowned for ballet, but passes over these in a sentence or two. Leslie (1978) comments on an Alhambra programme cover of the *corps de ballet* that this image 'proves that the chorus line had arrived in Britain'. Such a mistaken nomenclature would have infuriated the ballet dancers. Most texts on the music hall ignore ballet completely, even in the face of evidence in their own books. For example, Kift (1996) acknowledges dance and ballet in her text and there is a skirt dancer on the book cover, but despite her claim that she will look at the hall programmes as a whole, she overlooks dance except for one brief paragraph about ballet in a regional music hall.
3. There is, as identified in Ch. 1, a distinction between the different kinds of music hall, their programmes and their clientele. Whilst the Alhambra and the Empire, like other larger venues, were each known by the more prestigious title of 'palace of varieties' the common perception of the period and later historiography includes them within the generic realm of 'music hall'.
4. Tranders' account is also an intertextual one, for she moved in the world of Compton Mackenzie's *Carnival* and *Figure of Eight*, and George Gissing's *The Odd Women*.
5. See Tomko in Carter (2004) for a discussion of these historiographic tensions in relation to dance history.

CHAPTER ONE

In Fit and Seemly Luxury: Ballet at the Alhambra and the Empire

The term 'music hall' is a generic one used to describe both the venues and the type of programme presented therein. This programme can be characterised as that which, in social class terms, grew from 'the bottom up'; that which, over the history of the halls from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, embraced diverse, unrelated acts such as song, dance, comedy sketches, music, acrobatics, animal acts and, in the larger venues, more spectacular treats such as trapeze and *tableaux vivants*. These were all linked by a master of ceremonies who managed the order of the acts as well as inciting, and keeping in check, the audience. The acts embraced almost anything, in fact, that was not legitimate theatre, though performers did cross from one to the other.[1] Evolving from entertainment by and for the people, its main characteristic, argues Leslie (1978: 14) was 'the interaction between artists and audience which was peculiar to them and their time'. This notion of peculiarity to time and place is key. Though the halls in different cultural locations may have had similar precursors, they catered for the indigenous tastes of their location. To take the French halls as an example, they developed from the *boîte*, the *bal musette* and the *guingette* - similar to the British taverns, dancing saloons and pleasure gardens. Although modelled on the British music hall (the Folies Bergère was based on Leicester Square's Alhambra), there was a more political, satiric edge to their acts. From the 1900s, the French (or rather Parisian) halls focussed on spectacle and revue, thus departing from the traditional programmes by separating the lived experience of the audience from the erotic and exotic fantasies on the stage. American vaudeville (possibly a corruption of *voix de ville*: 'voices of the town') was similar in its component acts but there were significant differences in the tastes of the public. Two of these key differences were, first, that vaudeville had a cleaner, more respectable flavour compared with the vulgarity of the British halls (even though, being the Victorian era, that vulgarity was disguised in the central performance strategies of its songs, repartee and body language - innuendo and *double entendre*). Second, the vaudeville acts were more detached from the experiences of the audience; there was not the same sense of complicity, of shared toils and tribulations, of parody of the habits of the middle and upper classes which only the class conscious British could produce. Neither did vaudeville attract the literary and artistic milieu, those who flirted with the sensations of the *fin de siècle* which the larger halls of Britain and north western Europe presented in abundance.

It would be erroneous to trace a linear development of the halls in any given location, for their development is a web of intersecting and culturally specific

influences. If commonalities can be discerned, however, they would cohere around the expansion of entertainment from that offered by the working class to their own class, with a commonality of interest (assumed or otherwise), to an increasingly theatricalised and commercialised profession. Performers were separated from audiences, both in spatial terms and then with stage curtains; attention was paid to costume and lighting and there evolved a professional hierarchy of performers. Most significantly, from free entertainment within a small community, entry charges were introduced and the music hall became big business.

The British music hall

Although the above commonalities can be traced across different national forms of popular entertainment, the concern here is with the distinctly British phenomenon of music hall. Its history is well documented and reveals a diversity of size, programmes, clientele and atmosphere.[2] A key thread in their history can be traced back to the 1830s and 1840s; to the all-male song and supper rooms and amateur entertainment offered in public houses (or taverns). Enterprising publicans or 'caterers' began to formally manage and present this entertainment, thus distinguishing the start of the halls. Charles Moreton is credited with the opening of the most famous of the early halls which he built in 1852 adjacent to his public house, the Canterbury Arms in London. Moreton not only encouraged the attendance of women, but also funded the entertainment on offer by charging for a refreshment ticket, a system adopted by many of the burgeoning halls in London and in provincial cities. The sale of drink was therefore inextricably connected to the provision of entertainment, a connection which was largely responsible for the disreputable status of the music hall throughout the remainder of its history.[3] The halls developed apace, varying in size and atmosphere from the intimate concert rooms in the local tavern to large, purpose built or converted venues. From 1878, however, changes in safety laws for places of public entertainment, such as the statutory requirement for safety curtains and adequate exits, led to a decline in traditional venues and also in the spontaneity and informality nurtured by more basic facilities. A new class of entrepreneur evolved and both producers and performers drew apart from the social class whose experiences they appropriated but no longer shared. As Stuart and Park (1895: 190) observe,

> The opening of the new Pavilion in 1884 may be said to have inaugurated a fresh area in music hall history. It marked the final and complete severance of the variety stage from its old associations of the tavern and the concert salon ... hitherto the halls had borne unmistakable evidence of their origin, but the last vestiges of their old connections were now thrown aside, and they emerged in all the splendour of their new born glory.

This seemingly linear development was particular to London, however, for the regional halls did not suffer the constraints of competition and retained their special characteristics far longer.

By 1890 Anstey (p.190) was able to distinguish four types of London music hall as:

> the aristocratic variety theatres of the West End ... the smaller and less aristocratic West End halls ... the larger bourgeois halls of the less fashionable parts of London ... (and) ... the minor music halls of the poor and squalid districts.

By the outbreak of the First World War music hall in its conventional form had declined and by the Second World War even the variety theatres had lost to the competition of cinema and broadcasting.

Throughout the history of the British halls, programmes were diverse but there was an emphasis on song interspersed with dialogue.[4] Many artists adopted songs which become their trademark and these, together with a distinct use of spoken and body language, comprised the artists' stage identities or 'characters'. Some halls ran two shows a night, others a continuous evening of acts; a programme from the Tivoli in London, 1892, lists twenty eight different 'turns' (Disher 1938: 23). Whilst rooted in the lower strata of a highly inequitable class system, working class music hall was far from radical. The upper classes, or 'toffs' were depicted with fondness rather than resentment. In songs, character roles and in the topical ballets (see Ch. 4) the social classes were juxtaposed but the hierarchy was never questioned.

The rapid expansion of music hall gave rise to opportunities for a large number of amateur performers to achieve fame. A circuit of established artists developed and the new ease and speed of transport enabled the more popular ones to perform at several venues on the same night and also to tour the provinces, thus becoming national stars. Whilst actresses in legitimate theatre were fighting for recognition and status with actors (see, for example, Holledge 1981; Davis 1991) women, from the 1880s, had a well established and frequently starring role in music hall. Performers such as Marie Lloyd, Vesta Tilley, Jennie Hill and Lottie Collins became household names; music hall was a rare outlet for women to make public their creative talents and lead independent lives. Part of their acceptability, however, was their distancing from the audience by costume and stage persona. Stage clothes were exotic or ornate, bearing little resemblance to the working class apparel of the time. Women performers were often girlish or ingénue or, the ultimate in distancing, cross-dressed.

The popularity of the halls is indicated by the words of a song which included the lines:

> And I'd bring her to see the music halls
> Every Saturday night
>
> Pearsall 1983: 74

Although these lyrics are undated, they signal not only the frequency of attendance but also the fact that audiences were of mixed sex. In the halls of the industrial north of England, women would attend unaccompanied without detriment to their

reputation, for it was recognised that the large number of female factory workers were entitled to leisure. In the differently constituted demography of London, however, it was more challenging for a woman to attend a place of entertainment alone without being viewed with suspicion. The high population of prostitutes on public display compounded this suspicion. Although it is impossible to ascertain accurate statistical data for the number of people who attended the halls, the rapid expansion in the number of venues; their increased seating capacity; their significance in popular folklore; the attention given to them in the popular press and contemporary testimony such as the above song, all bear witness to their popularity. Even those who would never have contemplated the idea of setting foot in a hall, such as Rose Macaulay's highly respectable, staid and staunchly middle class fictional Grandpapa, were aware of their product: 'Grandpapa was more stirred ... by the alarming increase of female bicyclists and by the prevalent nuisance of that popular song, 'Ta-ra-ra-boomdeay' (Macaulay [1923] 1986: 111).

The halls undoubtedly reached the peak of their popularity in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In order to see how the spirit of the *fin de siècle* (a French term, but one which resonates with the spirit of the 1880s and 1890s in Britain), it is to the cultural context of the age that I now turn.

The vibrations of life: the music hall and the fin de siècle

History does not, of course, separate itself into distinct decades; it is historians who achieve this by ascribing common phenomena to a period, albeit rather loosely. (For example, the Swingin' 'Sixties of the twentieth century actually happened in the 1970s.) Nevertheless, the end of the nineteenth century does appear to be a particular kind of age, the specificity of which lies in contrast to the preceding decades. Houghton, in his key text *The Victorian frame of mind* (1957) frames his investigation within the years 1830 - 1870, stopping when Queen Victoria herself had thirty more years to reign. His rationale for defining Victorianism thus is that

> After 1870, while many of the characteristics persist through the century ... their dominance and their peculiar coherence were breaking down. Victorianism was dying, and a new frame of mind was emerging, a *late* Victorian frame of mind, which pointed forward to the postwar temper of the 1920's.
>
> 1957: xv

It is this late Victorian 'frame of mind' with which we are concerned here. Queen Victoria had reigned since 1837 and although she had become more of a recluse than an active monarch her Golden (1887) and Diamond (1897) Jubilees were celebrated with due recognition for all the 'achievements' of her reign. There was a resurgence of her popularity - a phenomenon also seen with Queen Elizabeth II's Jubilees. Industrial development at home and colonisation abroad had made Britain a tremendously powerful nation, not only in economic and military terms but also through the dissemination of religious tenets and social systems. There was a sense of the old passing and the new beginning or, as Wilson, using the metaphor