

The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth Century City. Paris, London, New York

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Extraordinarily, Nick Daly's *The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth Century* is the 97th book published in CUP's 'Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture' series, under the general editorship of Gillian Beer. The series itself has been an outstanding achievement, and since the appearance of Miriam Bailin's *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction* in 1994, it has published much of the best work to come out of new historicism-inflected interdisciplinary Victorian Studies. Although overwhelmingly written by scholars who would primarily identify themselves as literary, much of this work, including Thad Logan on the *Victorian Parlour*, Helena Michie on *Victorian Honeymoons*, and indeed Daly's earlier volume *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s*, will be familiar to 19th-century cultural historians.⁽¹⁾

To this list is now added Daly's *Demographic Imagination*. In the course of five characteristically eclectic chapters on the spectacle of volcanoes, the urban *mise en scène*, city ghost stories, the printed word of papers and posters, and the incipient environmentalism prompted by fashions of fur and feather, Daly offers five facets – apocalyptic, criminal, supernatural, visual and proto-ecological – of 'the ways in which the surging populations of the nineteenth century were imagined' (p. 148). Daly's method is a unique combination of close reading, plot summary, repertory study, and art history. His expressed focus is 'images of mass humanity' (p. 1), and more specifically 'the first phase of the demographic imagination, the response to the unprecedented population explosion of the nineteenth century' (p. 5).

Fuelled by the general population explosion in Western Europe, North America and the European colonies, Daly notes that this demographic imagination is neither confined by national boundaries, nor constrained by cultural genres. The scope of the book – Paris-London-New York – is driven by an awareness of the extent to which 'France remained a major source for the demographic imagination, for narratives, images, *idées reçues*, structures of feeling, and practices of city life, including those of fashion' (p. 11). Attention to the transnational traffic of cultural influences, although uneven, is one of the pleasures of *The Demographic Imagination*, along with the vivid detail (the actress who missed the mattress designed to cushion her 15-foot fall, the uncooperative leaping stage cat, the exploding ship), and the frequent lightning bolts of charged illumination, (the metaleptic infusion of the modern into the ancient in Bulwer Lytton, the 'optical conscious' (p. 128) of the accoutrements of the high art painting background).

Make no mistake, Daly is unquestionably a 'good thing'. *The Demographic Imagination*, just like the rest of his impressive body of work on the 19th century, manifests an assured and extensive interdisciplinarity of the sort that few contemporary scholars can match. Drawing on an encyclopaedic engagement with 19th-century theatre history, visual print cultures and popular fiction, an assiduously archival approach to constituting his object of study married to a sophisticated theoretical engagement, and a fascination with the interplay of ideas and objects across cultural forms/genres, his work has illuminated key moments of cultural tension across the 19th and 20th centuries. These include not just cultures of sensation in the 1860s, but of modernity at *fin de siècle* (in his *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siecle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880–1914*), and also the intersecting communicative technologies of railway and cinema in *Literature, Technology and Modernity, 1860–2000*.[\(2\)](#)

All the more reason to make it clear from the outset that this volume is unlikely to meet with the expectations of its readers, especially, but not exclusively, if their approach is primarily as historians. Fundamentally this is because its engagement with and development of the central concept of the 'demographic imagination' is both too flimsy and too forced to be convincing, not primarily because (despite its characteristic range of citation) it deliberately avoids the canonical genres of 19th-century social description and criticism, but more because it inexplicably fails to engage with vital elements of the existing scholarship on the 19th-century demographic imaginary. Scholars aware of recent work on the 19th-century census (including Matthew G. Hannah, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America*, Kathrin Levitan, *A Cultural History of the British Census: Envisioning the Multitude in the Nineteenth Century*), or social statistics more generally (for example, Alain Desrosieres, *The Politics of Large Numbers. A History of Statistical Reasoning*, Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States*, or L. Schweber, *Disciplining Statistics: Demography and Vital Statistics in France and England, 1830–1885*), will be surprised that none of these merit a place in Daly's historiographical frame of reference. Even conceptual classics like Paul Rabinow's *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*, or Mary Poovey's *Making of a Social Body*, are absent.[\(3\)](#)

In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that readers looking to the book to provide a sustained discussion of the ways in which these exploding populations were imagined, described or conceptualised are likely to be disappointed. Daly's case studies, while not without promise, ultimately fail to deliver. Partly this is because the readings work the wrong way round: they don't use different cases to build up a picture of the 'demographic imagination'; instead they use the fundamental insight (perhaps assumption?) of the

emergence of such a sensibility to offer sharp readings of aspects of 19th-century culture. Partly it is because, as Daly concedes, many of the cultural forms he examines deliberately eschew strategies of direct representation, and choose instead to rely on ‘synecdochic’ figuration of ‘mass humanity’. Sometimes demographic change ‘is confronted directly’, but the response ‘is just as often a fantasy of escape into emptier realms’ (p. 190). The consequential obliqueness of reference means that Daly is forced to rely too often on ‘obvious’ homologies (p. 128); types which are condensations of the broader urban masses (p. 133), the indexical character of newsboys, the metaphoric force of the volcano, the suggestiveness of streetscapes. Characteristic of his mode of argument is the proposition that the overlapping posters in John Parry’s *The Poster Man* (1835) are ‘the two-dimensional equivalent of the jostling crowd beneath’ (p. 128), and its foreground characters a ‘stylised disaggregation of the urban mass [which] anticipates’ mid-Victorian crowd paintings like Frith’s *The Railway Station*. Too often these figurative relationships are forced to bear an unsustainable explanatory load: so the demonstration that Lytton’s *Last Days of Pompeii* is a parable for the modern city and its mass populations teeters alarmingly on a half a paragraph of foundation – a metaphor of the crowds fleeing the amphitheatre as a mob which “vomits itself forth”, blindly destructive.

It must be conceded that Daly throws up some rough earthwork defences against this sort of critique, in noting that he does not intend a study of the representation of the crowd, nor of the relations of people to the body of the city; and by suggesting at other times that his intent is less to explore the ‘demographic imagination’ itself than it is to trace the way in which it ‘molded a whole range of cultural forms’ (p. 189), and that his interests are in more oblique and indirect influences, ‘the ways in which the demographic imagination operates through cultural forms which do not always foreground the crowd’, the ways in which the population explosion while ‘not always directly invoked, nevertheless underpins a whole array of cultural forms’ (p. 6).

But even here, address to the material premise is sketchy, and not without a whiff of special pleading. Hence while acknowledging the penchant of Le Fanu’s ghost stories for castles and country houses, Daly argues that nevertheless ‘in a significant number of stories his apparitions walk the city streets, and penetrate comfortable urban interiors’ (p. 85); in similar fashion, ‘while’ Daly concedes, ‘many of his stories project the supernatural events safely into the distant past, in others the past seems to but thinly disguise the present; and, in a few, we are very much in the urban now’ (p. 85). The discussion of Le Fanu perhaps best epitomises the long strands of filigree logic by which Daly is frequently forced to articulate his argument, in which, for example, developing streets of the 1790s conjure railway demolitions in the next century, which can be associated with the railway development of Dublin in the 1840s, which link to Le Fanu because he lived close to more than one station, and to ‘The Watcher’ because it was commenced in same year as one suburban line began construction, leading to the conclusion that ‘le Fanu was ... turning the advent of mass transport into the stuff of horror’ (p. 88). But ‘The Watcher’, set ‘some time around 1794’ and with its only incidental urban *mise en scene*, is a most unlikely and indeed unconvincing vehicle for an argument about urban gothic or railway horror, and the effort of demographic imagination required to make it so was too much for this reader.

Perhaps it is unfair to focus on the chapter on the haunted city, which is certainly the least successful of the five studies, and on the Le Fanu sections, given that the chapter finishes more convincingly with discussion of Henry James’s tales as reflections of his ‘species of panic in the face of mass immigration’, as revealed especially in his accounts of his visit to New York (and in particular Ellis Island) in 1904, which offer some of the most effective readings in the volume precisely because they are attentive to the content of the stories. Elsewhere there is much to enjoy. Chapter two on the international intertextualities of 19th-century melodrama, in which (as Brooks noted), the city is less a backdrop and more a character, presents Daly at his best, deploying his exceptional knowledge of the cross-country and cross-genre traffic in distinctive tropes, such as the way in which Paris was not so much the origin of theatrical urban melodramas as the most successful location for creating them ‘as a mode in which such anxious materials could be transformed into pleasurable affect and entertainment’ (p. 49), and the ways in which a performance like Eugene Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* cast a long cultural shadow, offering a ‘vision of the populous city as a breeding-ground for crime [which] shapes urban drama for the rest of the century’ (p. 52). Anyone interested in the

migration of plots, characters and motifs will emerge from this chapter with a rich insight into processes of localization and transformation, ‘an [enhanced] awareness of reception, repurposing, and “remediation”, and a sense of cultural forms being in constant motion’ (p. 12). Likewise chapter four, which examines the saturation of 19th-century city streets by texts, while also spending perhaps too much time on a gallop through contextual histories (in this case of the popular press, promotions, and street advertising) heavily reliant on existing general scholarship, draws some of the more familiar images of the textual saturation of the streetscape into illuminating dialogue with a mass of ephemeral posters, playbills, sheet music illustrations, as well as an effective study of Augustus Edwin Mulready; both his paintings of the urban poor which often have poster backgrounds, and his newsboy and flowergirl pictures, with their cross referencing of newspapers and fragments of posters and placards: an art which ‘clearly focuses most intensely on “the “fleeting”, the short lives of street people who make a precarious living by selling ephemera, and who are surrounded by torn posters and scraps of newspaper, fragmented and rapidly fading texts that attest to an age of crowds and paper...’ (p. 146).

Ultimately, as Daly indicates, *The Demographic Imagination* offers a series of case studies rather than ‘an attempt to map in any comprehensive way the paths of demographically-shaped stories, performances and pictures’ (p. 15). It is especially illuminating on cultural traffic; on the irrepressibility of responses to urbanism, both nationally and generically, on their range and variety, on what Kate Newey has described as the ‘transposability of the city’, but also importantly the ways in which it was remediated and localised. The range of citation is impressive, but with this referential range comes at times a loss of historical specificity, and insight into the dynamics of local differentiation. Chapter one on volcanoes as a medium of cataclysmic anxieties, effectively places Lytton’s *Last Days of Pompeii* in its rich context of geological, visual and spectacular cultures, albeit in a way which somewhat undermines particular links to demographic developments of the 1820s and 1830s.

The book is excellently produced, though I hope I can be forgiven for bridling at the reference to the *Journal of Victorian Studies* (p. 195), and wondering at the American Society for the Prevention to Animals (p. 178). Above all, though, for this reviewer three overriding frustrations remained. First, the tendency for the shape of the wood to be overwhelmed by the number of trees, an echo of Noel Annan’s classic essay on the 19th-century intellectual aristocracy, which quickly becomes a blur of connection heaped on connection. Secondly an apparent unwillingness to address the question of how far the urban settings and demographic references are constitutive and how far merely accidental; if the ghost story is the surfacing of anxieties about the urban, we need to hear what this reveals about the nature of those anxieties, why the ghost story was an effective vehicle for them, and how it helped shape them. I confess at times I felt like a REF ‘impact’ reviewer, intoning, yes, but where is the impact, what has changed and how is this traced back to the demographic revolution? Thirdly, and above all, the absence of any attempt to connect the arguments developed with parallel arguments about the concurrent workings of these concerns in more ‘documentary’ texts, the demographic imaginaries of the sanitary movement, the realist urban novel, or the census.

This is a book to enjoy; it is rich and rewarding, and it does offer important insights into conceptions of the city in the age of rapid urbanisation; however, it does not significantly advance our understandings of the ‘demographic imaginary’ prompted by the population revolution of the 19th century.

Notes

1. Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge, 1994); Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge, 2001); Helena Michie, *Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal* (Cambridge, 2006); Nicholas Daly, *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (Cambridge, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nicholas Daly, *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siecle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 2000); *Literature, Technology and Modernity, 1860–2000* (Cambridge, 2004). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Matthew G. Hannah, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America*

(Cambridge, 2000); Kathrin Levitan, *A Cultural History of the British Census: Envisioning the Multitude in the Nineteenth Century* (Farnham, 2011); Alain Desrosieres, *The Politics of Large Numbers. A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore, MD, 2006); L. Schweber, *Disciplining Statistics: Demography and Vital Statistics in France and England, 1830–1885* (Durham, NC, 2006); Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago, IL, 1989); Mary Poovey, *Making of a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago, IL, 1995).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/140817>