

Dawn of the New Age: Edwardian and Neo-Edwardian Summer

Sarah Edwards

Introduction: neo-Edwardian deconstructions of Edwardian summer

One of the most persistent and alluring images of Edwardian Britain is the ‘long hot summer’.¹ In both literary and popular cultures, summer has been a metonym for an ahistorical moment of unreflective ease that is soon to be engulfed by political turmoil. This vision of the period is epitomised in George Orwell’s novel *Coming Up For Air* (1938): anticipating the onset of World War Two, the protagonist fondly remembers his rural Edwardian childhood, musing that ‘before the war [...] it was always summer’ (p. 37).² This narrative, then, contrasts the apparently timeless qualities of summer with the forthcoming carnage of World War One. The poignant, foreboding nature of late summer is perhaps most famously depicted in Philip Larkin’s poem, ‘MCMXIV’ (1964), set during the August Bank Holiday weekend of 1914 and ending with an image of incipient decline: ‘never such innocence before or since/ Never such innocence again’ (pp. 25-26).³ Larkin’s theme of innocence, and its defilement by season’s end, recurs in narratives of Edwardian childhood and country houses, of holiday camps and beautiful young poets destined for the trenches; as well as in diverse re-imaginings of summer as a brief and exotic space of social experimentation, anarchy and sexual fall.⁴ Many narratives link the season to Golden Age and Eden but also to Janus’s double face, and suggest that the British race are peculiarly unsuited to the season. This essay, then, examines the persistent identification of the Edwardian era with a ‘long hot summer’ in both Edwardian and neo-Edwardian texts. What meanings has this narrative accrued at particular historical moments, and why?

I also consider the discursive role of summer in the development and preoccupations of neo-Edwardian writers and, in particular, their periodizations of the era. In this essay, the ‘neo-Edwardian text’ refers to a post-1910 work that is located in any period from the mid-1890s until the end of World War One. This may seem a vague and controversial timeframe, but the uncertain periodization of the Edwardian era has been a consistent feature of academic debate and public perception. The signifier ‘Edwardian’ has been frequently invoked to serve diverse political and cultural agendas. Hence, it has been included in accounts of the *fin-de-siecle* 1890s, identified with the new century, terminated at 1910 and the Post-Impressionist Exhibition, extended until the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, and until the end of the First World War in 1918.⁵ In my usage of the

¹ See, for example, Juliet Nicolson, *A Perfect Summer: Dancing into Shadow in 1911*, London: John Murray (2007); ‘Forever Summer’ in Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson, *Fantasy Island: waking up to the incredible economic, political and social illusions of the Blair legacy*, London: Constable (2007).

² George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, London: Penguin (2001), Kindle edition.

³ Philip Larkin, ‘MCMXIV’, in *The Whitsun Weddings*, London: Faber and Faber (1964).

⁴ See, for example, Robert Baden-Powell’s *Scouting for Boys* (1908) and the satirical descriptions of scouting camps in Piers Brendon, *Eminent Edwardians* (1979); and the account of poet Rupert Brooke in George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935).

⁵ For debates on the parameters of the Edwardian period, see Ann Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922*, Cambridge University Press (2002); John Batchelor, *The Edwardian Novelists*, London: Duckworth and Co (1982);

term ‘neo-Edwardian’, I draw on the theorisations of neo-Victorian critics who assert that the neo-Victorian text ‘re-interprets, re-discovers and revises’ the dominant discourses about the period rather than merely using it as a historical backdrop (p. 4).⁶ However, neo-Edwardian works also demonstrate an acute consciousness of a ‘new age’ and probe its boundaries (as, indeed, do many Edwardian texts). In addition, neo-Edwardian texts incorporate a sense of the era’s ending: they usually include framing narratives and attempt to re-construct a relationship between the imagined Edwardian past and the present.⁷ Hence, these works draw on depictions of summer in order to question, or deconstruct, familiar associations with timelessness, decline or peace. Both Edwardian and neo-Edwardian summers feature an exotic, self-contained space which is beyond the realm of the protagonist’s ordinary experience: geographically remote, stilled in time, promising heightened adventures and sensory delights. It may be an island, wood, river and/or a country house. Yet, neo-Edwardian works are also preoccupied with minute dating, with the nature of change and development in the lives of individuals and nations, during a relatively short era.⁸ They often feature children or adolescents undergoing rapid growth, set against a detailed landscape of political and social events. Summer, then, may become a yearly marker of change. In Vita Sackville-West’s *The Edwardians* (1930), characters’ impressions of interchangeable summers – ‘all their days were the same; had been the same for an eternity of years’ (p. 16) – are juxtaposed with the exact dates of country-house parties.⁹ This precise data disrupts the overarching narrative of timeless summer which, it is implied, can obscure historical understanding of the decline of the country house and the attendant consequences for its young heirs. The motif of summer is thus a particularly useful interpretive lens for neo-Edwardian writers who wish to historicize the era.

In this essay, I focus on several ‘case studies’. First, I consider how scholarly accounts of Edwardian literature and culture have shaped, and been shaped by, the motif of summer, before going on to examine the inter-textual relationships between Edwardian and neo-Edwardian country-house novels set at the turn of the century, and the shifting resonances of Edwardian summer in later wartime fiction.

The critical history of Edwardian summer

Many of the major studies of Edwardian culture invoke familiar tropes of endless summer to characterise the period, even while claiming to dispel such myths. The first chapter of Samuel

Virginia Woolf, ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ [1923], in *Collected Essays*, Vol. One (ed. Leonard Woolf). London: Hogarth Press, pp. 319-37.

⁶ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

⁷ H. G. Wells’ *The Passionate Friends* (1913) is a neo-Edwardian novel: it is framed by the narrator’s present-day reflections, while significant moments of personal development are set against the outbreak of the Boer War (1899) and the coronation of George V in 1911, which occurs in the penultimate chapter, ‘The Last Meeting’.

⁸ See, for example, E. M. Forster, *Howards’ End* (1910), which conflates the country house, June and social change; the wood and the ‘Sacred Lake’ in Forster’s *A Room With a View* (1908); and the neo-Edwardian texts, A. S. Byatt, *The Children’s Book* (2008), Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger’s Child* (2011).

⁹ Vita Sackville-West, *The Edwardians*, London: Virago (2008).

Hynes's early and influential historical study, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (1968), is entitled 'The Edwardian Garden Party'.¹⁰ It begins with a description of a photograph of King Edward (1841-1910) and his queen, Alexandra (1844-1925), at such a party. Hynes's analysis emphasises both the class-bound element of Edwardian summer, whose rituals are enacted in country houses on pieces of cultivated nature – 'why are the drawing-room chairs on the lawn? – The scene is a highly artificial one' – and the trope of oasis: 'somewhere just out of range are elements of disorder that will soon make this scene anachronistic. Still, for the moment how opulent, how stable, how peaceful it all seems' (p. 3). Like *The Edwardians*, then, Hynes's work immediately deconstructs these popular images; in this case, to characterise the Edwardian era as a decade of transition which witnessed increasing agitation over empire, suffrage reform and workers' strikes. This double vision – a nostalgic luxuriance in timeless images of the period which is immediately disavowed in favour of a 'grittier', historicised narrative – is a common feature of neo-Edwardian texts. Paradoxically, Hynes's famous critique is couched within an appealingly visual image of an innocent, yet encircled, oasis – 'it must have seemed like a long garden party on a golden afternoon – to those who were inside the garden. But a great deal that was important was going on outside the garden: it was out there that the twentieth-century world was being made. Nostalgia is a pleasing emotion, but it is also a simplifying one' (pp. 4-5). As this example demonstrates, the Edwardian garden party has framed scholarly, as well as popular, debates; the persistent use of this vocabulary in both types of account has ensured the persistence of the overarching narrative.

Hynes also uses the image of the garden party to introduce the theme of the summer afternoon, which he conflates with partying: 'writers on Edwardian England are inclined to call the time "golden" – "a golden afternoon" – or to describe it, as a BBC program of Edwardiana did, as a "long garden party"' (p. 4). This ideal of the afternoon, as a time for siesta, indulgence and lack of routine – a daily summer holiday – is both reiterated and rejected by J. B. Priestley (1894-1984), who claims that 'England at the beginning of Edward's reign did not resemble at all the long golden Edwardian afternoon described in so many memoirs' (p. 43).¹¹ Jefferson Hunter's account of Edwardian fiction (1982) employs similar imagery when he argues that 'nostalgic Edwardianism' is invested in this idea of the 'single long country-house weekend from Edward's coronation to his passing and, beyond that, to the guns of August' (p. 6).¹² In this rebuttal of nostalgia, afternoon, weekend, summer and era are conflated, so that all sense of historical time between 1901 and 1914 is erased. Hunter attempts to theorise what I have called this 'double vision' of the Edwardians, when he suggests that far from being a 'simplifying emotion', the narrative of 'nostalgic Edwardianism' is built on duality and ambivalence (p. 6). He claims that this narrative is appealing to later readers because it enables us both to feel superior to Edwardian snobbery and excess, while remaining comfortably distanced from the political realities of the era. By invoking familiar visual tropes, then, these major critics of the period are themselves writing nostalgic narratives, and thereby transmitting a latent and ambivalent nostalgia which – as I will go on to demonstrate – can also be found in neo-Edwardian fictions.

¹⁰ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, London: Oxford University Press (1968).

¹¹ J. B. Priestley, *The Edwardians*, London: Heinemann (1970).

¹² Jefferson Hunter, *Edwardian Fiction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1982)

The Golden Age in Edwardian Literature

In the history of Western literature and culture, summer has often been associated with idealised, pastoral and enclosed landscapes that contain within them the seeds of their own destruction. In British history and literature, the classical mythology of the golden age has often been deployed to idealise a period of national prosperity, such as the reign of Elizabeth I, the ‘Virgin Queen’, or the Edwardian era.¹³ In Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue*, the ‘age of gold’ is a time when fruits and grain blossom and ploughman and animal live in a state of communal harmony. It marked the return of the goddess Virgo Astraea, whose constellation presides over harvesting in late August. The concept of the ‘Golden Age’ is an integral element of Edwardian summer and its various social, sexual and intellectual possibilities were explored by many Edwardian writers.

The representation of a pastoral yet cultivated Arcadia meshes with images of both the Christian Garden of Eden and the Edwardian garden party. Edward Thomas’s *The South Country* (1909), an observational and lyrical account of his wanderings in Hampshire, alludes to this ideal when he states that the ‘unblemished summer land’ of June ‘invariably calls up thoughts of the Golden Age’ (p. 97).¹⁴ However, the less benign aspects of this myth are often ignored, despite their emergence in many Edwardian and neo-Edwardian representations. Other versions of Arcadia were wild landscapes of caves and woods, characterised by brutality and sensuality. These were presided over by the man-beast god Pan, who copulated with goats and whose music created ‘pan-ic’. The neo-pagan cult of Pan was revived by many Edwardian writers and intellectuals, including popular children’s writers such as Kenneth Grahame, and is invoked in their works to signify these darker imaginings of the Golden Age.¹⁵ In his collection of essays, *Pagan Papers* (1893), Grahame claimed that the heroic spirit of Orion the hunter – what ‘parents and pulpiteers’ term “Original Sin” – was only retained in children. Thus, the ‘original Waft from the Garden asserts itself most vigorously in the Child’ (location 1124). His famous Edwardian novel, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) uses the present setting of ‘golden summer’ to present anarchic scenes of animal life which include an encounter with Pan. The animals have a mystical, synaesthetic experience as they row up the river in a ‘spellbound’ state, listening to a mysterious ‘song-dream’ with no decipherable meaning (pp. 94, 92). Here, Grahame invokes a pagan Golden Age which belongs to undefined fairytale time, or to a mythic past.

Grahame’s earlier work, *The Golden Age* (1895), is a source for many neo-Edwardian texts, as I go on to discuss.¹⁶ This account locates summer in the recent past, by deploying the image as a

¹³ Virgil and Guy Lee (transl), *The Eclogues*, London: Penguin Classics (1984); Edmund Spenser, Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, London: Longman (2003).

¹⁴ Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, London: Everyman (1993).

¹⁵ ‘Orion’, in Kenneth Grahame, *Pagan Papers and Other Stories*, Jane Books (2012), Kindle edition. See also William Greenslade, ‘Pan and the Open Road: Critical Paganism in R. L. Stevenson, K. Grahame, E. Thomas and E. M. Forster’, in Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton (eds.), *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-30*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2000).

¹⁶ Kenneth Grahame, *The Golden Age*, Aegypan Press (2007); *The Wind in the Willows*, London: Methuen Modern Classics (1937). A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2008) refers to Grahame’s work frequently and in her novel the ‘Golden Age’ commences in 1895 and ends in 1901.

metaphor for childhood. The narrator muses wistfully that ‘somehow the sun does not shine so brightly as it used [...] the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and dwindled away [...] *Et in Arcadia ego* – I certainly did once inhabit Arcady’ (p. 12). Here, then, Grahame depicts a recent Golden Age at a moment of incipient decline. Other Edwardian writers drew on anarchic images of summer to condemn contemporary political and social decline. C.F.G. Masterman’s *The Condition of England* (1909), a survey of contemporary society, evokes summer to depict civilisation being overtaken by natural forces.¹⁷ In his chapter on ‘The Countryside’, Masterman narrates the story of a Surrey labourer who is the ‘last relic of a vanishing race’ of villagers whose way of life has been destroyed by rural poverty and dispossession of their land in the wake of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. ‘The untimely summer rain which ruins the harvest’ symbolises the breakdown of centuries of feudal life and peasant culture (pp. 153-54). He dies in a ‘squalid cottage’ in ‘hot July weather with the year at the summit of riotous life and every element in nature taunting the impotence of humanity before the triumphant forces of destruction’ (pp. 153-54). For Masterman, then, the medieval period is a Golden Age, while ‘the present is already in Autumn and its noises and tumults but the jarrings of a machine running down’, or the decline of the capitalist system (p. 180). In the same year, the novelist H. G. Wells used similar autumnal imagery to illustrate the decline of the country house and its rigid class hierarchies in *Tono-Bungay* (1909).¹⁸ For Wells, the Edwardian period is ‘like an early day in fine October’ and the ‘hand of change’ is ‘unfelt, unseen’ (p. 15), while the chatelaine of the ‘dominating’ country house, Lady Drew, and her cousin are ‘dried-up kernels in the great shell of Bladesover’ (p. 17). As in many neo-Edwardian texts, the Edwardian present is depicted as complacent and unheeding of social change.¹⁹

The relationships between summer, Golden Age and nostalgia in Edwardian texts are, then, shifting and diverse. The Golden Age may be anarchic and frightening, summer can also symbolise decline, and these multiple visions create both ambivalent nostalgias and apocalyptic predictions. After all, the Golden Age will return, as the seasons recur cyclically. Furthermore, the Edwardian era’s positioning at the beginning of the twentieth century has inspired neo-Edwardian Golden Age myths that are both backward and forward looking, memorialising the era both as the distant past and as the beginning of modernity. This double glance variously characterises the structures of memory and nostalgia in Edwardian and neo-Edwardian texts. For example, in *The South Country*, Edward Thomas recalled ‘a girl of seven or eight years walking alone down a long grassy path in an old garden’. She ‘looked forward as one day she would look back over a broad sea of years’ and in the shadow ‘hovered the phantoms of the big girl, the woman, the lover’ (pp. 107-8).²⁰ Thomas imagines that the young girl is already aware of the fleeting nature of the golden present and is experiencing nostalgia for a moment which has not yet passed. Similarly, in L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between* (1953), Leo experiences ‘a pang of premature nostalgia’ for the forthcoming birthday when he will be separated from his mother (p. 26).²¹ This form of nostalgia – which is acutely

¹⁷ C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, London: Methuen (1960).

¹⁸ H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, London: Penguin Classics (2005).

¹⁹ See, for example, *The Children’s Book* and *Fantasy Island*.

²⁰ Thomas, *The South Country*.

²¹ L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, London: Penguin Classics (2000).

aware of historical time in its feelings of loss and regret for the timeless golden present, symbolised by childhood innocence – is also explored in neo-Edwardian texts. I now turn to three texts which draw explicitly on the turn of the century or the dawn of the age – 1900 and 1901 – to explore its changing cultural significance.

The country-house summer

The start of the new century and/or the new Edwardian era provoked musings from contemporary writers on the reconciliation of tradition and modernity. Many narratives which dwell on this theme are to be found in the ‘country-house’ novel, one of the best-known – and best-loved -- genres of Edwardian fiction. One reason for these novels’ continuing popularity is their lavish descriptions of the garden parties of Edwardian summer, with their descriptions of tea on the lawn, games of croquet and intricate social rituals. However, these Edwardian works often utilise such settings to explore the clash of ‘timeless’ ritual with details of contemporary change, and many neo-Edwardian texts probe this theme further.²²

In H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay*, for example, the plebeian entrepreneur Edward Pondevero recalls the ‘midsummer holidays’ of his childhood. The son of the housekeeper, he visits Bladesover estate and falls in love with the Honourable Beatrice, a beautiful, unattainable daughter of the house. When they pretend to be husband and wife in the ‘West Woods’, he is rebuked for his social impertinence by Beatrice’s half-brother and is subsequently banished from Bladesover (Book One, Chapter One). Here, then, an older narrator places his younger, socially disadvantaged self as the outsider, and the observer, of the country-house summer whose embeddedness in ancient landscapes seems to mirror its antiquated, class-bound structures. But Pondevero also emphasises the transformative nature of this summer holiday. He had ‘newly passed his fourteenth birthday’ and experiences the ‘tragic disgrace’ of social humiliation at the hands of his first love (p. 32). This summertime narrative of innocence and defilement – overlaid with questions of sex, class, the importance of place and memory -- suggests that *Tono-Bungay* is a hitherto overlooked source for L. P. Hartley’s 1953 novel *The Go-Between*. Grahame’s *The Golden Age* is an acknowledged source and, in all three works, the boy-heroes regard the adults as awe-inspiring ‘Olympians’ whose fall from grace marks the end of summer and the beginning of their own adult lives in a rapidly changing Edwardian society.²³

Hartley’s partly autobiographical work similarly traces an ageing man’s recollections of the summer of 1900, when as a thirteen-year-old middle-class boy he visits Brandham Hall and falls in love with his schoolfriend’s sister, Marion. Hartley’s protagonist, Leo, is born in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, and the novel’s focus on female Olympians also echoes the recent coronation of Elizabeth II. Many commentators in 1952 had predicted a second Elizabethan Golden Age, following the Festival of Britain in the summer of 1951, which had aimed to celebrate British

²² See, for example, the Edwardian novels *Howards’ End* (1910) and John Galsworthy’s *The Country House* (1907) and Sackville-West’s neo-Edwardian work, *The Edwardians* (1930).

²³ See Roger Craik, ‘The Ache of Victorianism: L. P. Hartley and Kenneth Grahame’, *Atenea*, 25.2 (2005), pp. 125-41. The famous opening sentences of *The Go-Between* - ‘the past is a foreign country. They do things differently there’ (p. 5) – also explore Edward Thomas’s poem, ‘Parting’, written in the trenches of Flanders during the Great War – ‘the past is a strange land, most strange/Wind blows not there, nor does rain fall’. Edward Thomas and Edna Longley, *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems*, London: Collins (1973), p. 50.

science, engineering and arts in the aftermath of World War Two.²⁴ Similarly, Leo predicts that the beginning of the twentieth century marks the ‘dawn of the Golden Age’ and imagines Marion as the incarnation of Virgo Astraea (p. 8). Hartley’s novel undercuts the cultural notions of female purity which underlie this mythical narrative and exposes the constraints of place and ‘natural’ instincts that the Edwardian country-house lifestyle impose to preserve it. In arranging her marriage to Viscount Trimmingham, Marion’s ‘new money’ parents seek to repress her sexuality and cast her as Virgin, so seeking to ensure that the aristocracy may inherit the country house. Marion proves to be a false idol when Leo witnesses her sexual encounter with a local farmer, leading to a nervous breakdown and a permanent repression of his own sexuality. Hartley’s use of mythological structures to interrogate the nature of memory, repression, trauma and the dangers of nostalgia, have been well-studied.²⁵ Instead, I consider Hartley’s depiction of summer’s elemental, sensual qualities, the ways in which they are experienced and mystified by Leo and function as a critique of the insularity of the country house.

1900 proves to be a ‘phenomenally hot summer’, and for Leo, ‘the heat was my enemy, the sun something to be kept out’ (p. 25). He quickly conflates the ‘heat’ with Marion, whose ungovernable desire ultimately destroys both Leo and her lover, who kills himself (p. 228). Other Edwardian and neo-Edwardian texts reiterate the idea that the English are uncomfortable in the heat, imagined as a dynamic but destructive force, and associated with the sexual, racial or classed Other. In E. M. Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), Caroline and Philip take their summer holiday in Italy and this foreign environment is personified as an exotic female: ‘Italy is only her true self in the height of summer [...] her soul awakes under the beams of a vertical sun’ (p. 89).²⁶ The Italian heat is likened to a sudden attack by a sentient force: ‘on the second day, the heat struck them’ (p. 89), as Leo feels the heat is an ‘assault’ (p. 48). However, the heat transforms its victims by subjecting them to the primitive desires of the Other: Forster’s Caroline discovers her sexuality with a young Italian man. *The Go-Between* develops a symbolic vocabulary for this sexual awakening. Leo’s yearning for ‘complete, corporeal union with the summer’ conflates femininity, the slowing of time and the overwhelming of the senses. The heat ‘rise[s] shimmering [...] hang[s] heavy on the tops of the darkening July trees [...] I liked the sense of suspended movement that it gave [...] reducing everything in Nature to the stillness of contemplation [...] I liked to touch it with my hand and feel it on my throat’ (pp. 45-46). However, this sensual disorientation also enables the emergence of a new self with transformed perceptions of the country house: the heat is a ‘liberating power with its own laws’, ‘a medium which made this change of outlook possible’, in which ‘the commonest objects changed their nature’ (p. 70). This change of outlook facilitates Leo’s growing awareness of the diverse and shifting meanings of the geography of the country house.

²⁴ See Becky Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation: the 1951 Festival of Britain*, Manchester University Press (2003).

²⁵ See, for example, Richard Gill, *Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House in the Literary Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972; E. T. Jones, ‘Summer of 1900: A La Recherche of *The Go-Between*’, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1 (1973), pp. 154-60; Alan Radley, ‘Psychological Realism in L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*’, *Literature and Psychology* 33 (1987), pp. 1-10.

²⁶ E. M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, London: Penguin Classics (2007).

In both *The Go-Between*, (and, as I will demonstrate, in other neo-Edwardian and Edwardian texts), the summer wood is an important boundary space with constantly shifting meanings. Drawing on classical myths of Pan, the wild god of hunting who haunted the woods, and the outlaw Robin Hood (to whom Leo is likened), the wood is, as Simon Schama describes it, ‘the place where one found oneself [...] there it is forever green, forever summer’.²⁷ In ‘The Dark Forest’, Edward Thomas observes the wood’s liminal status: ‘dark is the forest and deep, and overhead/Hang stars like seeds of light’ (p. 125).²⁸ Thus, even when the walker is in the deepest part of the forest, s/he can always see the light that represents the forest’s end. The visual and spatial configuration of the wood, then, can be evoked to illustrate the continual oscillation between summer’s anarchic and sensual appeal and the rituals of the country-house summer. In *The Go-Between*, a ‘belt of trees’ is located on the boundary of the garden, which Leo must pass through to reach the cottage where the lovers’ trysts take place. It is here that Leo abandons middle-class social mores, opens the letter which the lovers have entrusted to him and discovers their affair. Later, he imagines that this secret, rebellious self resides in the wood: ‘I had a curious experience, almost an illusion, as though part of me was stationed far away, behind me, perhaps in the belt of trees, beyond the river; and there I could see myself, a bent figure [...] perhaps it was the part of me that would not take the letter’ (p. 57).

The summer wood is often a symbolic landscape of primal femininity: in *The Wind in the Willows*, for example, the summer wood is a teasing woman, who would ‘trick’ and ‘entice’ the animals with her ‘billowy drapery’ (pp. 31-32). In *The Go-Between*, the ‘belt of trees’ represents Marion’s enticing yet unavailable sexuality. When Leo enters the belt with Marion *en route* to a bathing party, his description of the moment mirrors his account of the heat’s overwhelming of time and the senses, except that the wood is cool and shady: ‘the trees were very thick, they wrapped us round; the stillness was infectious, no one spoke’ (p. 47). The moment is soon over, as they enter the road and ‘never again did I get quite the same impression of cold succeeding heat’ as the heat ‘assault(s) him again (p. 47). Marion’s teasing behaviour, alternately kind and cruel to Leo, is here projected onto the country-house landscape.

A less embittered, though equally cryptic, view of female sexuality is found in Joan Lindsay’s 1967 novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. This Australian novel shares many structural and thematic similarities with *The Go-Between*: it is also set in the summer of 1900, features a country house and recounts a tale of sexual innocence and fall.²⁹ However, the novel’s title – a wilder variation on the garden party – provides a clue to its colonial context. The Victorian house functions as an English girls’ school in the Australian outback and the date of the picnic is Valentine’s Day, immediately foregrounding the connections between summer, sexuality, and mysterious, self-contained landscapes.

This ‘college mystery’ of the disappearance of several girls and their strait-laced teacher on the rock during ‘a shimmering summer morning’ creates an apparent dichotomy between British civilisation

²⁷ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, London: Harper Perennial (2004), pp. 141-42.

²⁸ Edward Thomas and Edna Longley, *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems*.

²⁹ Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Vintage Digital (2011), Kindle edition. The casting of Dominic Guard as Leo and Michael respectively in the film adaptations of the novels (Joseph Losey, *The Go-Between*, 1971; Peter Weir, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975) multiplies the inter-textual relationships and creates new configurations of Edwardian childhood and masculinity.

and the primitive outback. The college, where a flag is hoisted on the queen's birthday, is an 'architectural anachronism in the Australian bush – a hopeless misfit in time and place' (p. 8). However, the 'lush luxuriant gardens', are formed out of 'rich volcanic soil' where roses glow in 'almost tropical brilliance' (p. 73) and the Hanging Rock encroaches menacingly, as 'shadows were tracing their million-year-old pattern of summer evenings across its secret face' (p. 68). At the picnic, when pupils and teachers lie in the boundary space of the picnic site, at the base of the rock, 'the drowsy well-fed girls lounging in the shade were no more part of their environment than figures in a photograph album' (p. 21). This inadequacy of English representational strategies for evoking bodily experiences of this space is reinforced by the scene's place in the text, as it immediately precedes their unexplained (and unrepresented) experience on the rock.

Following the disappearance, the young Englishman Michael Fitzhubert, who watched the girls on their final journey and was bewitched by Miranda, becomes a go-between and seeks the lost girls. In this novel, too, the wood assumes symbolic importance, as Michael recalls that he 'used to play hide and seek with his sisters in a little civilised wood' (p. 76) as he stands on the rock and listens to 'the murmuring life of the forest welling up out of the warm green depth' (p. 77). Here, the precise topography of the English wood, cultivated to allow for a moment of secrecy within a carefully bounded estate, is contrasted with the disorienting 'depth' of the forest. This sense of boundless place is matched with 'timeless days melted imperceptibly into timeless nights' (p. 96)

As the girls ascend the rock, Western time is suspended as the clocks stop (p. 23). The novel, like other neo-Edwardian texts, is precisely dated and mimics the conventions of detective fiction and reportage with its inclusion of police and newspaper reports as representatives of these professions seek to solve the mystery. For these men, and for Michael, the mystery of female sexuality is at the heart of the investigation and this, too, cannot be represented by Western modes. Although the novel is related through a third-person narrator who assumes the impersonal voice of the investigator, Michael's ongoing quest for resolution is portrayed as acutely as Hartley's Leo. Similarly, the nature of time and memory, and its modification by the self-contained world of summer, is a key concern for Lindsay: 'there is no single instant on this spinning globe that is not, for millions of individuals, immeasurable by ordinary standards of time: a fragment of eternity forever unrelated to the calendar or the striking clock [...] the brief conversation by the lake would inevitably be expanded, in memory, during his fairly long life, to fill the entire content of a summer afternoon' (p. 120). The timeless quality of the summer afternoon, then, is produced by a memory theme, a 'fragment' which is 'expanded' into a cultural narrative of sexual initiation.

Unlike Hartley's novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* probes the meanings of female sexual innocence and is much more ambiguous about the effects of the girls' 'fall'. Their purity is signalled through conventional Western tropes of virginity. Miranda, who never returns from the rock, is described as a 'Botticelli angel' (p. 24) and all of the girls are dressed in white, as is Marion in *The Go-Between*. Many neo-Edwardian authors pursue the latent erotic connotations of female clothing to explore experiences, and perceptions of, sexuality. The 'lingerie dress' was common summer apparel in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, but, as its ambiguous nickname suggests, it was often seen to indicate a teasing, deceptively innocent sexuality.³⁰ On the one hand, it covered the whole frame

³⁰ See Sarah Edwards, 'Clad in Robes of Virgin White': The Sexual Politics of the 'Lingerie' Dress in Novel and Film Versions of *The Go-Between*, *Adaptation: A Journal of Literature on Screen Studies*, 5.1 (March 2012), pp. 18-34.

and was made in white and pastel colours; on the other, parts of the material were semi-transparent and the dress was often worn without a corset. When Irma returns from the rock, her bodily state is equally ambiguous; she is uncorseted, suggesting a loss of feminine control, but is declared to be 'virginal' following a medical examination (p. 94). There is no narrative closure, as there is in Hartley's novel, no conventional revelation of seduction or violence. Have the girls accessed a primitive Golden Age of female-centred sexuality to evade the linear journey of marriage and motherhood? The only closure we are granted is to learn that one of the staging-posts on this journey, the girls' college, is destroyed by fire during the following summer of 1901 (p. 188). 1901, then, signals yet another new beginning, pointing to the multiplicity of Golden Age dawns and indicating how they are rooted in apparently destructive events. The girls' summer adventure in a foreign land, and the destruction of Western time and space, also enables the destruction of the conventional female life-stages, and the institutions which groom girls for them.

War, memory and the country house

Another neo-Edwardian novel which deploys the symbolic figure of the woman in white is Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918).³¹ This work is a very early reflection on the Edwardian era, within the context of World War One. West explores issues of masculine identity, trauma and the relevance of the country house, drawing on emerging psychoanalytic frameworks. Her novel features another privileged country-house owner, Chris, who returns home from the Front in 1916. His story is narrated by his cousin Jenny, who lives at Baldry Court and harbours an unrequited passion for him. Chris's shell-shock has obliterated his memory of events since 1901: he has no recollection of his subsequent marriage, the death of his young son or the renovation of his country pile. Instead, he longs for his first love, Margaret, with whom he spent the summer of 1901, when they were twenty years old. This novel has received relatively little scholarly attention and most of the work which does exist focuses on its depiction of amnesia and Freud's 'talking cure' to restore Chris's memory.³² However, it is worth considering the symbolic significance of 1901 in this precisely-dated novel.

The youthful romance takes place in another self-contained paradise, Monkey Island, 'not a place, but a magic state' whose 'utter difference was a healing' (pp. 102-03). Margaret, a 'girl in white', is the daughter of an innkeeper and initially Jenny provides a snobbish and patronising account of her unsophisticated speech and demeanour: 'the gift of animals and those of peasant stock' (pp. 33-34). However, Margaret's mental powers are both astute and empathetic: 'when she picks up facts she kind of gives them a motherly hug. She's charity and love itself' (p. 74). In her person, she unites the archetypes of mother and virgin: on the island, she stands in a 'small Greek temple' and 'her white dress shone like silver' (pp. 85, 80). In the summer wood, 'the wild part of the island, where poplars and alders and willow grew round a clearing' (p. 82), there is no emergence of a destructive alter ego that must be repressed. In this 'gentle jungle', West employs the same images of timeless summer bliss that characterise their river trips and walks on the green lawns, as the lovers 'stand in

³¹ Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier*, London: Virago (2009).

³² See Wyatt Bonikowski, 'The Return of the Soldier Brings Death Home', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 51.3 (2005), pp. 513-35; Misha Kavka, 'Men in (Shell-)Shock: Masculinity, Trauma and Psychoanalysis in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*', *Twentieth-Century Literature* 22.1 (1998), pp. 151-71.

a communing silence' (p. 77). This depiction of 'changeless love' (p. 78) suggests a pre-Oedipal attachment and it is Margaret who finally accesses Chris's repressed memories and enables him to live in the present once more. The pivotal importance of 1901, on the 'most glorious day the year had yet brought. The whole world seemed melting into light' (p. 79)', is rendered in images of both spiritual and sexual transformation. Here, the Edwardian era is the dawn of adult life and sexuality, and, furthermore, enables the expression of female sexual responsiveness and moral integrity in a working-class character. However, as in *The Go-Between*, this cross-class relationship cannot be sustained beyond the utopian Edwardian island. Chris must return to history and to the Front and Margaret to her marital home in the 'red suburban stain which fouls the fields three miles nearer London' (p. 22).

Chris's amnesia signals a flight from his pre-war life, and not merely from the battlefield. West's novel avoids a nostalgic opposition between Edwardian pastoral and wartime loss, instead tracking a decline from the idyllic summer of 1901 throughout the Edwardian era. This decline encompasses personal disillusionment, including death and the loss of true love, which is mirrored in the decay of the country house. As children, Chris and Jenny had pretended to be 'Red Indians' in the estate wood, yet another space for uninhibited freedom represented by an exotic, imaginary Other; but as Chris leaves childhood behind and is forced to occupy the house as heir, 'he had exchanged his expectation of becoming a Red Indian for the equally wistful aspiration of becoming completely reconciled to life' (p. 20). Jenny conflates Chris's wartime duty and sense of displacement at Baldry Court: in her dreams, she imagines Chris running across No Man's Land as he frantically paces over the lawns of the estate. His wife Kitty has created an insular 'globe of ease' (pp. 15-16). She is dutifully philanthropic and makes clothes for the villagers to maintain the conventional social hierarchy, but the house does not perform a socially useful role in the local community. Chris has wasted money buying vast amounts of land whose occupants, it is implied, live in poverty (p. 62). Kitty is materialistic, wedded to social ritual and, it is implied, sexually and emotionally dead. Like Margaret, she is associated with the colours of white and silver, but, she is 'cold as moonlight', looks 'cruelly bright' and her hands are 'stiff with rings' (p. 56). West's novel, then, locates 1901 as a golden dawn followed by a period of decline. The Edwardian era is notable for its failure to transcend luxurious ease and to achieve social reform; and is ultimately compared to – rather than contrasted with – the Great War.

George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* glances backwards and forwards at both world wars, while the remembered Edwardian era and its physical traces are, once more, the site of present-focused nostalgia. The novel begins in a contemporary suburban house where the (anti-) hero, George Bowling, mulls over the ongoing Spanish civil war and the looming threat of Hitler. Bowling's memories of his Edwardian childhood evoke an ideal rural community, which is contrasted both with suburban uniformity and with the cataclysmic effects of the First World War on landscape and people. Bowling's dull life enables Orwell to engage in topical criticism on the inter-war growth of suburban estates, which began in the wake of the 1919 Housing Act and the Homes Fit for Heroes movement and aimed to provide housing for soldiers.³³ The novel's imagery creates associations between the impending threat of war and the manufactured products of suburban civilisation:

³³ See Kristin Bluemel, "'Suburbs are not so bad I think': Stevie Smith's Problem of Place in 1930s and '40s London', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 3 (2003), pp. 96-114; and Lynne Hapgood, *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction and Culture, 1880-1925*, Manchester University Press (2004).

‘everything slick and streamlined [...] Rotten fish in a rubber skin. Bombs of filth bursting inside your mouth’ (p. 24). As Rebecca West’s novel indicates, though, suburban development began in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. H. G. Wells, who is one of Bowling’s favoured authors, also employed images of uniformity and decay in *Tono-Bungay*. Pondevero bemoans the ‘endless streets of undistinguished houses’ and ‘the unorganized, abundant substance of some tumorous growth process’ (p. 102), as he observes the proliferation of badly-designed suburbs on the green belts surrounding London. Bowling’s evocation of his Edwardian past in the village of Lower Binfield employs many of the tropes of Edwardian summer similarly to emphasise continuities with the present, rather than a simple dichotomy between past and present. Hence, ‘before the war it was always summer – a delusion, as I’ve remarked before, but that’s how I remember it’ (p. 37). He recalls fishing in the woods as a child, again imagined as an exotic, self-contained place – ‘you felt as much alone as if you’d been on the banks of the Amazon’ (p. 78) – but quickly deflates conventional notions of a Golden Age, acknowledging: ‘it isn’t that life was softer then than now. Actually it was harsher. People on the whole worked harder, lived less comfortably, and died more painfully’ (p. 109). The novel recapitulates West’s themes of trauma and amnesia: Bowling realises that ‘the war had jerked me out of the old life I’d known, but in the queer period that came afterwards I forgot it almost completely’ (p. 128). As Bowling struggles to recall his past, he longs for a time of certainty: ‘and yet what was it that people had in those days? A feeling of security, even when they weren’t secure. More exactly, it was a feeling of continuity’ (p. 110).³⁴ This type of nostalgia, which favours security over an idealised past and denies the possibility of change, is a response to trauma. The fish in the woods symbolise this longed-for continuity: as he constructs the narrative of his time on the Front in 1916, the motif of fishing dominates his evocation of past summers.

The Edwardian past is always a self-contained narrative within a narrative, a re-constructed past that raises questions about the possibility of reconstruction. In *The Return of the Soldier*, the narrative structure even foregrounds the Golden Age mythologizing of the lovers’ summer on Monkey Island, through its re-telling by cousin Jenny: ‘I have lived so long with the story which he told me that I cannot now remember his shy phrases. But this is how I have visualised his meeting with love on the secret island. I think it is the truth’ (p. 70). West emphasises, then, that this ‘truthful’ account is being told second-hand by a woman who is in love with the hero, and that Jenny’s use of language draws on ‘visualised’ and mythologizing conventions of Edwardian summer rather than Chris’s ‘shy phrases’ (which have themselves re-shaped his memories). Both Edwardian and neo-Edwardian writers thus continually absorb historical data into mythicized versions of summer; furthermore, neo-Edwardian representations increasingly draw on several inter-textual layers of earlier neo-Edwardian texts while also shaping, and responding to, the resonance of the period for a particular cultural and historical moment. The recurring motif of Golden Age and decline signifies both awareness of the nostalgic fantasy of the long hot summer and, I would suggest, its function as a symbol of hope and renewal. The Edwardian summer evokes a Janus-faced nostalgia, which looks backwards to imagine a usable past for the present and an anticipated ‘new age’.

³⁴ This can be likened to the concept of *ostalgie*, or nostalgia for the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe. See Daphne Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*, Indiana University Press (2009).

