# Water: An Introduction

> At the eastern extremity the Lake narrows, and finally is lost in the vast marshes which cover the site of ancient London. Through these, no doubt, in the days of the old world there flowed the river Thames…the river had become partially choked from the cloacae of the ancient city which poured into it through enormous subterranean aqueducts and drains.
>
> —*After London* (1885) (Jefferies 26)

Water persists in the human imagination as a place of paradox: fear, foreboding, possibility and imagination. As an element so entirely vital for life, it provides a space for literal and metaphorical exploration, while oceanic depths act as a reminder of the unknowability of its vastness. As Una Chaudhuri aptly suggests, "A space beyond the normal realm of the human senses, the ocean has also long been a space beyond human thought, almost beyond human imagining" (149). Yet in this elemental power beyond human science, technology and civilisation, water becomes a near all-powerful force that responds and reacts to ill treatment, provoked by decay and corruption to obliterate human hands through tidal waves, floods and deluges. Recent anthropocenic oceanic studies have fixated on the devolution of the natural world through the lens of the ocean, an environment in which "diverse, beautiful ecological systems still dominated by coral reefs and fish will be replaced by 'slime-rock' systems dominated by algal and microbial mats and jellyfish" (Zalasiewicz 191). Similarly, Stacy Alaimo has asserted that the "Anthropocene seas will be paradoxical, anachronistic zones of terribly compressed temporality" in which "the future will move backwards, into a time when the oceans were devoid of whales, dolphins, fish, coral reefs, and a multitude of other species, but jellyfish (and algae) proliferated" (Alaimo 158). From another perspective, there are other scientists who continue to consider the ocean in mechanistic, industrial terms, maintaining an imperialist approach: "The ocean itself is our single greatest tool when properly harnessed and leveraged. That tool sits ready, and we have a good idea how to use it" (Palumbi 178).

The essays and poems in this issue engage with the long history of water as a site of life, hope, and imagination, but also of danger, death, and manifest destruction. There is a distinct preoccupation with the vastness and power of the ocean, rather than engagement with water on smaller scales, suggesting both the global environmental concerns of our contemporary world, as well as a visceral response to global trauma. Tracing the long nineteenth century through to the present, with engagement with neo-Victorianism as well as contemporary responses to nineteenth-century concerns, they show the almost immutable awe-inspiring power of water in the human imagination, as well as position water and its bodies as loci for critiquing human corruption. Richard Jefferies's 1885 post-apocalyptic novella *After London* explicates the silencing power of water, with the "site of ancient London" entirely obliterated by waters; yet these waters remain marked by the impact of humanity in their dark marshes. There is a suggestion that the lake needed to overflow and overtake the Thames because of the river had become so "choked" with the sewage and refuse of humanity that kept rising and rising through "subterranean aqueducts and drains." The fraught relationship of humans to the natural world that sustains life is persistently addressed and grappled with through the constantly moving, often overpowering, undeniable mass of both the flowing of rivers and tides of the sea.

Deborah Denenholz Morse's essay on slavery, impressment and whaling in Elizabeth Gaskell's Napoleonic War setting of *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) exposes the tragedy of technological and elemental imperialism, manifested through the role of the Atlantic in the violent displacement from family, community, and the natural environment. Morse

provocatively draws attention to the use of whale oil in fuelling the machines of the Industrial Revolution, evoking the human violation of the waters alongside the violation of humans. The ocean is the most critical element to the whaling town of Monkshaven, where the "people breathed more water than air," suggesting the slow drowning of humanity in this novel of social protest. Silvia Granata's essay on Archibald John Little's navigation of the Yangtze River, enabled by the development of the steamboat, is seemingly less fraught in its engagement with the travel-writing genre; however, within the concept of commercial potential and economic power being enabled through steam navigation, there is a disturbing suggestion of Western models of progress being imposed upon the world. Indeed, a part of Granata's interest is in the interaction between two nineteenth-century empires—Britain and China—and the tensions between them. There is a desire to dominate the elements (the waters) that lies at the heart of imperialism, yet at the same time there is the "stunning silence" created by the vast watery space. Between the two experiences there is a flowing of cultural ideas between the empires, with Little's appreciation of the harmony of feng shui. The metaphor of water flowing and making boundaries within its body indistinct—after all, where does the river end and ocean begin?—crosses into the potentiality of infusing national cultures with other influences.

The commonality between each of the essays is the humbling nature of oceanic vastness. In Janette Leaf's essay on Netflix's neo-Victorian series *1899*, the ways in which humans attempt to interact directly with the elemental force of water is brought to the fore. Again, the technology of the steam-ship is prevalent, as well as the way in which water facilitates human migration—something that often occurs as a response to unhappy circumstances at home. Leaf engages closely with water as a metaphor for sunken memories and human displacement, something most evocatively expressed through the paradoxical agoraphobia of endless waves entwined with the claustrophobia created by the close quarters on board the ship. Leaf uses an interdisciplinary lens incorporating spatial studies, the nautical gothic and the blue humanities to interrogate humanity's hubris, with echoes weaving through nineteenth-century texts and tropes, such as the incarcerated woman in gothic and detective fiction to the complexities of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). The gothic undertones emphasise that the sea is never static, but always shifting and moving. This constant instability is simultaneously liberating and terrifying.

Like Leaf, Aidan Wakeley-Mulroney explores the freedom of the seas belonging to rootless mariners in his essay on Wordsworth. The rootlessness of these figures is double-edged, with an intensified imagination and heightened emotion, but simultaneously a disconnectedness from and disinterest in community. Wakeley-Mulroney identifies a correspondence between this rootlessness and an inability to ground their words, "never settling upon solid meaning" as much as they are unable to settle on solid land. The dark undertw of the sea entrances the sailor with a seemingly supernatural, elemental power.

Wakeley-Mulroney's engagement with the instability of words is particularly provocative given that in our 'Water' Special Issue, we are also including creative writing: a first for the *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*! The entwining of scholarly and creative work, like the point where the river meets the ocean, is a moment of critical, yet indefinable importance. It is a delight to present here eight pieces, the work of five poets, each of which is inspired by the nineteenth century, either through history or literature. Where scholarly work stops, these creative works take the exploration of water in nineteenth-century cultural history to a new space of imagining and encounter that blurs the boundaries of recognition in a similar manner to the tides of the ocean flooding the mouth of a river.

Alexandra Lewis's variations on the erasure poetry style are interpretive creative responses to drowning and forms of obliteration in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). "Our Mutual Corpse" reimagines the murky opening chapter of Dickens's novel by floating above, into, and through the perspective of what Gaffer and Lizzie Hexam believe to be a dead body being dragged behind their vessel on the River Thames. What is the consciousness of these moments – what is seen and heard, and what is thought, as water replaces air? Coursing across Eliot's full novel, "Belonging to Water" juxtaposes patriarchal knowledge and the onrush of senses – overload and stillness – to immerse the listener / reader in watershed moments of Maggie Tulliver's erasure, moving fluidly from childhood to desire to death. Alexandra's poems exploring erasure, voice, and nineteenth-century culture form part of a larger collection in progress.

Shale Preston's "The Late Rain" is inspired by a memorable scene in another Charles Dickens novel, *Bleak House* (1852-1853). In the scene Lady Dedlock's maid, Mademoiselle Hortense, walks through wet grass in bare feet at Chesney Wold, the Dedlocks' country estate, after Lady Dedlock dismisses her from her service. Mr Jarndyce, Esther Summerson's guardian, suggests that she does this to make herself ill and die which will thereby serve to punish Lady Dedlock. This does not happen and instead Mademoiselle Hortense goes on to commit murder and seeks to frame Lady Dedlock for it: a powerful "course of revenge".

Carolyn W. de la L Oulton's three poems, "Seaside Sestina: A Folkestone Romance," "Found in the Library," and "FFL Villanelle," are based on her research into the history of the Folkestone Free Library in Kent (https://www.kent-maps.online/19c/19c-folkestone-free-library/) and the seaside romances readers might have accessed in the newspaper reading room. The library regularly featured in the local press and had a close relationship with the nearby *Holbein Visitors' List and Folkestone Journal.* In this sense the poems are intended to complement Oulton's book *Down From London: Seaside Reading in the Railway Age* (Liverpool UP, 2022). However they also respond to the threatened closure of the library, following flood damage in December 2022. A local campaign to save the library is currently underway.

In "Heavenly Bodies of the Sea," Schuyler Becker picks up on the timeless tradition of the drowning woman in literature, deriving inspiration from nineteenth-century authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Leo Tolstoy as well as the stylistic writings of Romanticism. Here "light and dark collide / […] over and over"; this is the "riverbed / casket'"of the Victorian "marriage bed". V. J. René stays "Above the Waterline," a poem in response to Swinburne's lyric "A Wasted Vigil," which was originally published in 1867 in *The Fortnightly Review*. In both poems, the 'sea' denotes the fraught proximity of what we may not (or may not wish to) 'see' about those we love.

Across the essays and poems of this issue, water becomes a site of (sometimes life-threatening) labour. Humans are labouring on the seas and rivers, but also labouring with them, struggling for meaning, for connection, or for a better way of being. In some texts, this struggle is denied fulfilment. Yet the labouring human body, trying to work both with and against the indefatigable waters, becomes focalised in the attempt to reconcile the place of humanity in relation to the force of water. From drowned bodies to wet feet, to the transportation of slaves and whaling, as much as these images can operate as symbols of, for example, empire and patriarchy, they also reveal the limitations of human power structures. The small, individual, working body is found impotent in contrast the vast and illimitable waters, currents, waves and flows of rivers and oceans, the infinite waters.

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