



# The British Society for LITERATURE and SCIENCE

*Dr Jenni Halpin (Savannah State University), Chair; Dr Laura E. Ludtke (Independent Scholar), Secretary;  
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## CONFERENCE NOTES SIXTEENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE BRITISH SOCIETY FOR LITERATURE AND SCIENCE 8-10 APRIL 2021, ONLINE

Beginning on 8 April, we had our second online annual BSLS conference, with papers, virtual pubs and coffee hours, a thoughtful roundtable from past BSLS book prize winners, and a movie night. With panels roaming the field from plants to animals, DNA to technology, discourse to performance, the conference was sheer abundance.

Really the conference began before it began, with a PGR/ECR social on the evening of 7 April. So many newer scholars brought ideas and interesting objects to the social time organised around 'Show and Tell.' To Will Tattersdill and Fran Kohlt go tremendous appreciation for their creation of so many avenues for informal conversation, starting with this social and running through a many-hours-long farewell coffee on Wonder.

Special thanks go as well to Greg Lynall not only for facilitating us on Teams but especially for his good-

natured hosting of a pub quiz on the first evening. He has been assured that he will be among the first to be called upon should the BSLS need a quizmaster in the future.

On the Friday the conference continued apace throughout our weekly #LitSciWrite time (2 – 5 BST, Friday afternoons), with the AGM leading up to the book prize panel. This included previous prize winners Gerard Passannante (2019), John Holmes (2018), Ursula K. Heise (2016), and Claire Preston (2015), and nearly 60 other members in attendance. Despite some technological struggles, we enjoyed a lively hour on the hopes of our shared interdiscipline.

(The watch party for *Rampage* reportedly went swimmingly, with enthusiastic calls for more such events going forward.)

Throughout the official days of the conference, and extending beyond it through our ongoing access up to 30 April, we enjoyed papers shared as video, as narrated PowerPoint, and as text. (All uploaded by Will Tattersdill—thanks, again!) One by one, we spent more than six days watching the videos in the UK, US, Germany, Canada, India, Singapore, and elsewhere. And in Teams we got hundreds of conversations going in the posts and replies and reactions for the panel threads: we are a live and lively bunch, even when the conversation is growing asynchronously.

—Jenni Halpin

The BSLS promotes interdisciplinary research into the relationship between science and literature in all periods.

Spring 2021 Newsletter

# MEMBER ENGAGEMENTS

## DAVY NOTEBOOKS PROJECT

In 2019, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding enabled Professor Sharon Ruston and Dr Andrew Lacey, both of the Department of English Literature and Creative Writing at Lancaster University, to crowdsource transcriptions of five of Sir Humphry Davy's (1778-1829) notebooks, dating from between 1795 and 1805, using the people-powered research platform Zooniverse.

Following on from this successful pilot project, during which more than 500 participants from around the world transcribed 626 notebook pages in under 20 days, the project team has secured further funding from the AHRC (c. £1 million) to crowdsource transcriptions of Davy's entire 75-strong notebook collection. This three-year project will shed more light on Davy's fascinating life, which saw him rise up through society's ranks from relatively modest origins to become, just over 200 years ago, the President of the Royal Society.

Some 70 notebooks are held at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in London and five are held in Kresen Kernow in Redruth, Cornwall. Davy kept

notebooks throughout his life, but most of the pages of these notebooks have never been transcribed before. Transcriptions of the first five notebooks—the result of the pilot—revealed Davy's creative mind at work: lines of poetry were written among descriptions of chemical experiments, philosophical musings, geological drawings, and accounts of his life. Most notebook entries have yet to be dated or considered in the light of what they tell us about Davy, his scientific discoveries, and the relationship between poetry and science.

Crowdsourcing is due to begin in May 2021, and the edited transcriptions will later be published online, alongside images of the notebooks, on a free-to-access website, as part of Lancaster Digital Collections. Online and in-person discussions with participants will enable the project team to find out how transcribing Davy's notebooks changes their view of how poetry and science could co-exist today.

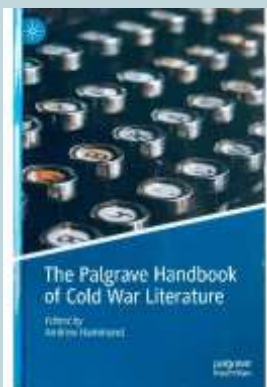
For updates, please follow the Project's Twitter account: @davynotebooks.

—Andrew Lacey  
Lancaster University

## RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Daniel I. Abdalla. "Heredity, Heredity!": Recovering Henry James's *The Reprobate* in its Scientific and Theatrical Contexts." *Modern Drama*, vol. 64, no. 1 (Spring 2021): pp. 67-87. <<https://doi.org/10.3138/md.64.1.1122>>

Daniel Cordle. 'The Politics of Vulnerability: Nuclear Peril and the Global Imagination,' in Andrew Hammond (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Cold War Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 143-61. <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38973-4>>



Drawing inspiration from the world-systems approach of the social scientist, Immanuel Wallenstein, this chapter conceives of the Cold War as a global socio-economic system and reads nuclear literature for its engagement with this system. Drawing on texts from Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America, and Australia, it argues that nuclear texts engage a Cold War cultural system that is global in its reach. Using the 'hibakusha' (a Japanese term for survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, loosely translating as 'explosion-affected person') as a representative figure, the chapter argues that, while the texts manifest local peculiarities, they are linked by their participation in a broader politics of vulnerability that speaks to changed relations between humans, their technologies and the planet in the nuclear age.

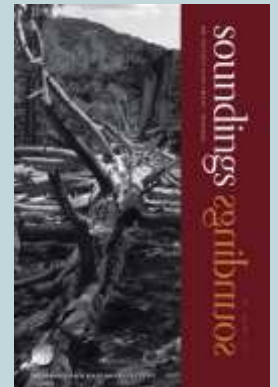


Sean Fitzgerald. 'Presenting a Constructive Image of the Processes of Undertaking Science and Medical Research through Fiction in the Wake of the 2019-20 COVID-19 Pandemic'. *Journal of Science & Popular Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2 (October 2020): pp. 217-222. <[https://doi.org/10.1386/jspc\\_00021\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1386/jspc_00021_7)>

With this paper I consider how interest and trust in science and medicine may be reflected in future fictional treatments. The paper examines if our current understanding of science and medicine has been re-evaluated through the experiences of dealing with COVID-19. Reflecting on a reconstructed image of science from a socio-philosophical perspective—through the treatment of science-as-fiction—could open up questions on what the notion of contemporary science is and what it represents, in a society where the 'new' normal prevails.

Michael Wainwright. "Strains of Attachment: John Bowlby's *Theory* and William Faulkner's *Pylon*," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* vol. 104., no. 1 (2021): pp. 53–88.

"Commentary: Where Science and Humanism Meet" (1988), one of John Bowlby's final papers, at once expresses his despair that the sciences and the humanities remain "plagued by inbred schools of thought which fail to communicate with each other" (82) and promulgates his lifelong belief in consilience. My article responds to his "Commentary" in promoting what can be called a "Bowlbian hermeneutic." Employing Bowlby's attachment theory, this article traces the prescience of William Faulkner's *Pylon* beyond the premonitory orbit of his youngest brother's demise. The year is 1935. On 25 March, Faulkner's novel—a tale of the barnstorming pilot Roger Shumann that seemingly climaxes in his fatal accident—appears in print. On 10 November, Dean crashes the plane William had gifted him, dying on impact. That same year, Bowlby reads the newly published *The Origins of Love and Hate* by Ian Suttie, whose approach to psychological maturation offers a Darwinian alternative to Sigmund Freud's doctrine of drives. Bowlby develops this alternative perspective into attachment theory. Like Bowlby, Faulkner at once distances himself from Freudianism and appreciates Darwinism, with Bowlbian concepts aiding the exploration of Faulkner's psychosocial insights in *Pylon*, and the novel reciprocating in illuminating those concepts.



## BSLS BOOK PRIZE

### ***BIOFICTIONS: RACE, GENETICS AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL***

The 2020 British Society for Literature and Science book prize was awarded to Josie Gill for *Biofictions: Race, Genetics and the Contemporary Novel* (Bloomsbury Academic).

Josie Gill's study of race and genetics in late twentieth and early twenty-first century fiction is critically engaged with science and its contexts, lucidly written, and politically urgent. Covering novels by, among others, Zadie Smith, Kazuo Ishiguro, Octavia Butler, and Colson Whitehead, it argues that the idea of race in genetic science is a biofiction, 'an idea constituted through the complex entanglement of scientific and fictive forms.' It takes in the sciences relevant to ancestry, human genomic diversity, and epigenetics, and examines their relations to the changing social contexts for concepts of 'race' and anti-racist politics. In doing so, it illuminates how concepts of 'race' remain latent even when contemporary genetic science seems to have undermined the concept. Wearing its scholarship lightly, this outstanding study welcomes both the specialist in contemporary literature, the general reader, and, we hope, readers from the sciences.

*Biofictions* is [available \(open access\)](#) through the Bloomsbury Open Access programme, funded by Knowledge Unlatched.

Also shortlisted this year:

Will Abberley, *Mimicry and Display in Victorian Literary Culture: Nature, Science and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (CUP)

Andrea Charise, *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (SUNY Press)

Tom Nurmi, *Magnificent Decay: Melville and Ecology* (University of Virginia P)

Sara Wasson, *Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film, and Medicine* (Manchester UP)



# DEGREES CONFERRED

Daniel Ibrahim Abdalla

## Science and Decadence: Evolutionary Biology in Works by Henry James, Elizabeth Robins and Edith Wharton

This thesis, supervised by Kirsten E Shepherd-Barr, examines the significance of evolutionary biology to works by three prominent American expatriate writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Henry James, Edith Wharton and Elizabeth Robins. Drawing on scholarship from the fields of Literature and Science, Theatre and Science, and New Modernist studies, the thesis argues for the importance of new definitions of heredity in the literature of the period 1880-1920 with consequences for our understanding of the move away from realism, engagement with discourses like eugenics, and notions of essentialism with regards to identity categories of race and gender. Focusing on critically overlooked works, the thesis revises our understanding of the influence of the work of figures like Charles Darwin and August Weismann on postbellum American literature and addresses a long-acknowledged gap in the legacy of *fin de siècle* drama for the development of literary modernism. (Examination 27 April 2021, University of Oxford)

Rachel Fountain Eames

## The New Physics in Modernist Literature and Culture

My PhD thesis examines the relationship between early twentieth-century physics, Modernist literature, and visual art in the work of William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and Wallace Stevens. Stepping away from the critical focus on applied physics and technology more often associated with this cohort of writers, this thesis turns instead to the theoretical physics of Einsteinian relativity, atomic theory, and quantum mechanics. Examining these writers' work uncovers the breadth and variety of responses to these theories and their role in modernist culture and reveals a significant tri-directional relationship between physics, literature, and visual art in the first half of the twentieth century. (University of Birmingham)

Philip Jenkins

## “The Satirical Reception of the New Learning in English Literature, 1592-1743”

My PhD thesis is concerned with the satirical reception of the New Learning between 1592 and 1743. By the New Learning is meant antiquarianism, natural philosophy, and textual criticism. In each field something new began to happen in the period in question. The antiquaries, or, later, antiquarians, took an interest in the physical remnants of the past in order to understand better what had gone before. The natural philosophers, encouraged by Bacon's scientific writings, embraced the empirical model of investigation. The textual critics brought their corrections to literary texts before a general readership. All three undertakings were contrary to the prevailing understanding of knowledge during the period, which was that knowledge came from texts and, in particular, from ancient classical literature. As a result of this, the activities of the antiquarians, natural philosophers, and textual critics attracted the attention of the satirists of the day. (Awarded by the University of Salamanca, in Spain, October 2019.)



# BSLS SMALL GRANTS AND PGR CONFERENCE FUND

## BSLS SMALL GRANTS SCHEME

Applications are invited for BSLS small grants of up to **£400** to facilitate and promote the study of literature and science. The scheme is open to applicants at any career stage, including postgraduates. Funds are available to support events, activities, and individual research.

Examples of activities for which the awards might be used are expenses for arranging a visiting speaker, a seminar series, or a symposium. Requests for support towards the associated costs for online events are also welcome. Applications for support to stage special BSLS panels at appropriate conferences (other than the BSLS 2022 conference) will be considered. Applications should take into account potential disruption as a result of COVID-19 and provide a brief outline of contingency plans and costing implications should an event need to be postponed or moved online.

**NEW FOR 2021:** The BSLS is now also accepting small grant applications to support individual research. Expenses may include but are not limited to: the cost of travel and accommodation related to archival or research-focused trips; associated childcare costs; and funds to support remote research such as scanning or photocopying, or digitising projects intended to increase accessibility.

Applicants may apply for any amount up to £400. In some instances, only a proportion of the amount applied for may be awarded. Applicants should be current members of BSLS and should apply by making a case for how the award will contribute to the development of literature and science or to individual research goals in the field. Where funding is sought for BSLS panels a clear indication of the scope of the panel—and of its contribution to the understanding of literature and science—should be included.

A detailed budget should be included as part of the application and applicants should state whether they have applied to any other funding sources (and the outcomes of those applications) as well as information about any institutional funding support. The small grant scheme is open to applicants at any career stage, but preference will be given to those with limited or no access to other funds. International members of the BSLS are welcome to apply for the awards, but they should note that they will be distributed via PayPal or in the form of bank cheques made out in pounds sterling. Serving members of the BSLS Executive Committee are not eligible to apply for the awards.

A specific 'PGR/ECR Resources' page is now available in the Members' Section of the BSLS website. Please e-mail [resourcesbsls@gmail.com](mailto:resourcesbsls@gmail.com) to request types of resources or to offer to contribute.

Please submit your application by one of the four deadlines: **1 March, 1 June, 1 September, or 1 December**. Application for the awards is competitive and must be made before the proposed event or activity is due to take place. Applications will then be considered by the BSLS Executive Committee and grant outcomes will be communicated within one month of the respective deadlines. Recipients of small grants are asked to acknowledge BSLS sponsorship appropriately in publicity for events and to provide a brief report on events for the BSLS newsletter and website.

The complete application should be no longer than 500 words. It should be emailed, as a Word attachment, to Rosalind Powell ([Rosalind.Powell@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Rosalind.Powell@bristol.ac.uk)). Please put 'BSLS small grant' in the subject heading of your email. Queries about the scheme and/or the eligibility of your proposal should be directed to Rosalind Powell.

## BSLS POSTGRADUATE AND EARLY CAREER FUND

Applications are invited for bursaries of up to **£300** for BSLS postgraduate student members and early career researchers who are not in permanent posts and do not have access to institutional funding. Bursaries may be used towards the cost of presenting research papers at conferences (this excludes the BSLS annual conference, which has its own postgraduate bursary scheme); for archival and research trips; for the attendance of summer school, workshop, or training events in the field of literature and science (in person or online); and for childcare costs associated with these activities.

In addition to funding attendance at literature and science conferences, workshops, and events, we would like to fund members who intend to give papers on literature and science at conferences, workshops, and

events which are not specifically focused on this topic, in order to promote the study of our field more widely.

To be eligible, applicants must:

- Be a member of the BSLS
- Be a current research student or an early career researcher (independent or attached to an HE institution) who is not in a permanent post
- Be presenting a paper at a conference held **after the funding deadline** (applicants awaiting decisions on their conference abstracts are eligible to apply, but any award would be conditional upon their paper being accepted for presentation)

Eligible expenses include conference fees, travel and accommodation costs, archival fees (e.g., the reproduction of material, scans, and photocopies), childcare costs, and virtual registration fees. Applicants must provide an outline of their proposed activities, justify why the funds are required (i.e., give a breakdown of the budget) and state whether they have applied to any other funding sources (and the outcomes of those applications). Applicants should also state why the particular activity would be valuable, both for their own career and with regard to the wider objectives of the BSLS.

Finally, applications should take into account potential future disruption as a result of COVID-19 and weigh up the likelihood of events being able to go ahead (either face-to-face or remotely). Applications should be no longer than 500 words. Successful applicants will be expected to provide a brief report on their paper and

experience of the conference, for the BSLS newsletter and website.

Both funded and non-funded PGRs are eligible to apply, but the demonstrating a particular need for the funding will add weight to the application. The BSLS particularly wishes to use the PGR and ECR fund, where possible, to assist applicants to attend and participate in events that might otherwise be beyond their reach financially.

International members of BSLS are welcome to apply for the awards, but should note that they will be distributed in the form of bank cheques made out in pounds sterling or via PayPal. Serving members of the BSLS Executive Committee are not eligible to apply for the awards. We cannot enter into correspondence about the decisions of the Committee.

The application should be e-mailed, as a Word attachment, to the BSLS Early Career Executive Committee Member, Rachel Murray ([Rachel.E.Murray@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:Rachel.E.Murray@sheffield.ac.uk)) by one of the four annual deadlines: **1st March, 1st June, 1st September, 1st December**. Please put 'BSLS PG and ECR fund' in the subject heading of your email. Applications will then be considered by the BSLS Executive Committee, with bursaries awarded shortly after each deadline. Queries about the fund should be directed to Rachel Murray.

—Rachel Murray and Rosalind Powell

## FUTURE BSLS CONFERENCES

The Society welcomes early conversations with members interested in hosting upcoming annual conferences. Please contact the chair, Jenni Halpin.

BSLS 17, MANCHESTER, 7-9 APRIL 2022

BSLS 18, EDINBURGH NAPIER, 6-8 APRIL 2023

The BSLS Newsletter is published quarterly in February, May, August, and November, with submissions deadlines typically the last Friday of the preceding month.

Editor: Jenni Halpin