

Alex Murray. *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2023. Pp. 288. ISBN: 9780192858207

With a title such as *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past*, one might expect a political project, wherein the aesthetic is secondary; “conservatism” is, after all, the entitled subject, and “Decadent” is the acting descriptor. Alex Murray, however, has written a book that complicates our understanding of the ideologies underpinning the Decadent movement by arguing that Decadence is conservative—not necessarily in terms of politics (or in defence of any particular politics at all), but as a fundamental worldview. As Murray claims, there were two mutually dependent forms of Decadence during the *fin de siècle*: one which embraced sensual experience for its own sake, and one which rebelled “against the dramatic social change of the *fin de siècle* that saw writers turn to the past, and others to forms of nationalism, as a ballast against the disorientation of the modern” (Murray 2). Contextualized in the relative flexibility of the British conservative tradition, wherein conservatism is more an attitude than a set of principles, conservatism can and has aligned itself with many political and social movements. As such, Decadence can be defined as a value of “the accumulated experience of tradition, what [Murray terms] “‘conservative experience,’ as much as ... the radical empiricism of experience as sensation” (24). To Murray’s mind, both *Erlebnis* (experience present) and *Erfahrung* (experience past) are present in Decadent art, inherited from Walter Pater, but it is *Erfahrung* that has been underrepresented in scholarship to this point.

Murray’s project in *Decadent Conservatism* is to draw attention to this latter, less-studied form of Decadence, arguing that Decadence ought to be understood not as the progressive, avant-garde movement recent scholarship has described, but as a response to and a suspicion of rationalism, materialism, progress, and the Puritanical thinking which the Decadents perceived as threatening art and the culture at large. Through the view of inherited sensation as conservative experience, Murray argues that this backward gaze is not nostalgic, but rather the method Decadent conservatism uses to envision a better future. The claim is not that all Decadents were conservative, but that “Decadence can be understood [...] as a response to modernity which is very often about the need to conserve or rekindle the values of the past” (41). It is the values of the past, Murray argues, that the Decadents wished to bring into the future, not the past itself. This broader understanding of experience is what connects the Decadents—but it is their “reverence for tradition [that] structured the Decadent revolt against bourgeois modernity” and thereby makes them rightly called conservative (41).

The first chapter explores this thesis by studying the Decadent little magazines, noting that they are particularly helpful to scholars of the movement in that they represent the way that “art for art’s sake” could be—and was—used to attack Bourgeois morality. Murray points particularly to *The Whirlwind* and *The Senate*, with their varying and sometimes contradictory political goals, to express the role that these publications played in creating a community of letters through which Decadent conservatism could coalesce. Ultimately, these little magazines expressed both the conservatism of the Decadents, the utter heterogeneity of the political manifestations of their conservative bents, and the burgeoning significance of individualism to both Decadent and conservative thought.

Chapters Two and Three bring the Decadents into the actively political realm, first through an exploration of the relationship between Oscar Wilde and Arthur Balfour and later through an exploration of the emergence of a “throne-and-altar” Decadence that melded the religious and the political. Wilde’s and Balfour’s brief friendship and extensive writings expressed how individualism’s paradox—the value of autonomy versus that of the traditional social order—brought Decadents and conservatives into conversation with each other, ultimately connecting them in their shared fear of the tyranny of the majority. What manifested as an individualistic, aesthetic ideology in Wilde and Balfour is transposed into an elitist thread in Chapter Three’s throne-and-altar Decadents, with their “profound distrust of democracy, [...] fetishization of elitism and inequality, and [...] fervent belief that premodern religious faith offered a viable alternative to the secularizing tendency of liberal modernity” (131). Murray focuses primarily on the religious politics of the past, particularly as they appear regarding medievalism, the Neo-Jacobite movements following the reestablishment of the Catholic Church in 1850, and in the wake of Queen Victoria’s passing.

By considering such figures as Frederick Rolfe and Lionel Johnson, Murray concludes that the monarchical and religious social structures of the past were fetishized by the Decadents “as a means of counteracting the demoralizing experience of democracy” (172). This chapter would have benefitted from a more serious treatment of the religious conversion instinct present among Decadents, as well as a broader sampling of the connection between queerness and Roman Catholicism. The political analysis Murray offers is certainly useful; yet by focusing on the political, he misses significant and foundational spheres of influence that coloured the ideological positions of many of the Decadents surveyed. Nonetheless, both chapters express when and how Decadent conservatism could look forward and backward, and highlight the multimodality of conservative thought present in the Decadent movement.

Moving from religious and political rituals, Chapter Four shifts focus to what Murray terms “Folk Decadence,” as embodied in such figures as W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, and Fiona Macleod. Thus, he argues that Decadent engagement with folklore as a tradition to preserve and a way of finding “ecstatic experience that resisted rationalizing epistemologies” was another expression of conservatism (174)—here manifested through the belief that the imaginative or spiritual resources of the past are useful and necessary for the changing modern world. This is the spirit in which Decadents often rejected the structures of science present in anthropology or comparative religion. By pushing against the study of folklore as a universalist and comparativist science, the Decadents aimed to preserve the enchantment and mystery—the irrationality—of the world, allowing the past thereby to work in the present and shape the future.

*Decadent Conservatism* closes by showing, in Chapter Five, how the rise of jingoism and imperialism during the Second Boer War affected Decadence. Murray argues that this ideological development was the end of the movement—not the death of Wilde, nor any other terminal point that scholars have previously offered. Rather, by studying war poems from the Boer War period and the attempted “marriage of aestheticism and imperialism” in *The Anglo-Saxon Review* (209), Murray shows how Decadence shapeshifted to match the fears of the nation—empire—during the wartime period. The connection to conservatism, outside of the patriotic nostalgia of poets such as Katherine Bradley and John Davidson and the politics of the Churchills which shaped *The Review*, becomes somewhat nebulous in this closing section.

Perhaps, though, it is this very dissonance that underlines Murray's point: that "aestheticism and Decadence, in their disdain for modernity, would seek salvation in the strangest of scenarios," and even to their dissolution (253). The Coda to the book, titled "Symons and *The Superwomen*," underscores the incongruity and heterogeneity of Decadent conservatism by treating, briefly, Symons's inaccessible and misogynistic play about—horror of horrors—women's suffrage and its (farcical) implications for British life. Symons, Murray notes, seemed to reject female suffrage because he equated it with the Puritanism that restricted the liberty of others—one of Decadence's enemies. Yet Murray simultaneously points to Michael Field, the shared pen name of two queer women who, though they were activists in many respects, did not embrace gender equality broadly. Their inaction came from a different place, Murray argues, based on "a nuanced conservatism, an anxiety that social changes were altering the nature of femininity" (259). The tradition they drew upon was a means of critiquing the world while simultaneously making sense of it, and yet that tradition was embodied differently from Decadent to Decadent.

Ultimately, *Decadent Conservatism* offers an important counterargument to the discourses of its field: the Decadents were not inherently progressive, nor motivated by a progressive worldview or any homogenous ideological framework. Rather, the Decadents were united by the belief that "Britain at the *fin de siècle* needed art, beauty, and the wisdom of the past if it was to thrive" (260). Decadence was a conservative reaction, though not necessarily reactionary. With his sense that a thorough, well-rounded image of these writers is necessary to understand their work, Murray has succeeded in complicating our understanding of the many Decadent artists he treats. Perhaps, even, he offers us a non-political conservatism that we can use in reading this and other texts—for what else would it mean to "use our examination of their past to reflect on our present" (260)?

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