The Island of Lost Souls:
Review of Jeremy Page, *The Collector of Lost Things*

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Jeremy Page, *The Collector of Lost Things*
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Eco-criticism and neo-Victorian Gothic prove surprisingly amenable bedfellows in Jeremy Page's first novelistic outing into the nineteenth century.[1] As promised by its suitably elegiac title, *The Collector of Lost Things* (2013) mourns an irredeemable loss, namely the rich diversity of the natural world ravaged by mercantile self-interest and the pursuit of vanity and profit in an increasingly globalised world economy. This is a novel that blatantly holds up the neo-Victorian mirror to postmodernity, asking us to see the Victorians not as historical Others but as recognisable versions of ourselves, reflecting both contemporary humanity's callous disregard for other life forms with whom we share this planet and the stubborn idealism that would prevent wholesale and irreversible environmental destruction. Indeed, the novel's focus on the Arctic, "a larder with apparently infinite resources" but clearly "not infinitely replenished" (p. 308), unmistakably resonates with current debates about melting icecaps and contested national sovereignty claims about resources and the rights to their extraction at both of the Earth's poles.

Admittedly, at times Page's novel becomes blatantly didactic: descriptions of the naturalist Eliot Saxby's horrified response to the callous carnage of sea birds for pleasure, merely to try out a sportsman's specialist guns, like the novel's later depictions of the bloody business of whaling, seal and walrus hunts, all function as literary equivalents of protest videos posted on-line by conservation groups and activists. Yet the novel's advantage over the visual medium lies in the reading process's facilitation of a much more intimate and prolonged engagement with these offenses,

enabling us to more fully perceive their complex interconnections and cumulative effects as the narrative unfolds. We are *meant* to be left haunted by an impoverished and depleted world, by the presence of absence, like Saxby's fellow passenger Edward Bletchley, tormented by the seal he shot which, while dying, had "stared right through him into his soul" (p. 174).

In Saxby, Page provides his readers with a problematically compromised, often weak and ineffectual first-person narrator as the point of identification. Well-intentioned idealists in neo-Victorian fiction, genre aficionados know well by now, frequently turn out to harbour dark secrets or come a cropper, and unsurprisingly both apply in Saxby's case. As much is hinted at by the defeatist opening line as he contemplates the likely futility of setting out in 1845 to search for traces of the Great Auk, presumed already extinct: "Perhaps I would be too late to save them" (p. 1). Not least, present-day readers are discomfited to discover that, although "the final breeding pair" is rumoured to have been slaughtered so that "their skins" could be "sold to private collectors" (p. 1), the protagonist's expedition has been financed by just such rich collectors and museums patrons. As Saxby admits: "For the sake of owning a specimen, the museums made these birds extinct" (p. 34). Moreover, he makes use of the *Amethyst* for this purpose, a one-time slaver turned whaling and trading vessel, which supplies whaling and sealing stations in the Arctic Circle. Appropriately, Saxby's sense of the ship is disturbingly chameleon-like and anthropomorphic: "perhaps I never saw it for what it truly was" (p. 2), he reflects, disconcerted by the interminable loading of the vessel's holds prior to departure, "as if the soul of this barque was cavernous and without measure and, above all, hungry" (p. 3).

Later, foreshadowing the narrator's complicity in this voracious consumption, the ship's first mate breaks the neck of a captured greenfinch, so that the protagonist "may sketch it at [his] leisure" (p. 47).

> I placed my sketchbook next to the dead greenfinch. My half-completed drawing confronted me: the sketch of a bird that was still living. Its similarity to the etching of the great auk in my Arctic book, an image created in all likelihood after the extinction of the species, felt eerie. They were the drawings of ghosts. (p. 48)[2]

Fittingly for Page's investment in the neo-Victorian project, so often linked to spectrality, Saxby becomes both the seeker of ghosts and a ghost-maker. Fantasising himself discovering Great Auk survivors against all odds and heroically positioning himself as the final "barrier" between the birds and "extinction" (p. 1), the would-be saviour Saxby will ironically become the instrument of their destruction, even as he fulfils his dream. Unwittingly, his idealism feeds the ship's hunger, which ultimately stands for the unappeasable avarice, incessant commodification of all things, living or otherwise, and the insatiable lust for possessions and profit inspired by the capitalist system itself. Not least, the protagonist himself intends to make his fortune from the re-discovered Great Auk: "The absolute rarity of these birds made my observations unique. I was sure my notes would become a celebrated document. This would be a defining moment in my career and my life" (p. 156). Saxby's retrospective narrative thus becomes a form of penance and atonement for his inadvertent interpellation and co-option into that same system, in which "[o]nly the dead have value" (p. 171).

Page's novel, it must be said, is not highly original in this regard, with earlier neo-Victorian fictions pursuing a similar eco-critical agenda in excoriating environmental plunder and predation through the perspectives of those complicit. Among the most notable precursors are Roger MacDonald's *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (1998), Jem Poster's *Rifling Paradise* (2006), Anca Vlasopolos's *The New Bedford Samurai* (2007), and, more recently, Carol Birch's *Jamrach's Menagerie* (2011). Not coincidentally, the first two focus particularly on the acquisition of bird specimens, while the latter two incorporate horrendous scenes of the indiscriminate slaughter of marine wildlife. Page's novel also recalls some of its predecessors in its tone of elegiac lament juxtaposed with passages of lyrical celebration of the miraculous preciousness of the natural world poised at the brink of man-made destruction, so too in its representation of intimate encounters between the human and the animal Other's gaze (see p. 117). The equivocal ending of *Jamrach's Menagerie*, which resorts to the trope of cannibalism to encapsulate capitalism's logical endpoint of excess consumption, might usefully be read alongside the conclusion of *The Collector of Lost Things*, which likewise leaves its protagonist an elective outsider to the system, even as Saxby relies on the system to persevere with his conservation efforts. There is, finally, no uncompromised position from which we can judge the Victorians' work of ecological destruction as well as acknowledge their role

in the birth of modern environmentalism, all the time invited to recognise our own implication in the legacies of both these precedents.

Saxby's attempted restitution is twofold, for the reader quickly suspects a further, earlier source of unspecified guilt within the protagonist, linked to the mysterious female passenger, Clara, whom he believes victimised through drug dependency encouraged by her cousin Edward Bletchley. Clara occasions a sense of déjà vu in the narrator, although she does not appear to recognise him in turn. As their relationship develops over the course of the journey, more details are revealed of Saxby's transgressive love for his former employer's daughter, Celeste, whom he believes Clara to have been. This introduces the doubling trope typical of much neo-Victorian fiction, but also underlines the obsessive, possibly delusional nature of the narrator, who once before cast himself as the prince rescuing a Sleeping Beauty with disastrous consequences. As he recalls, during the "tedious" work of "assembling the fragments of rare eggshell into complete specimens" for the rich industrialist collector, "[i]t was easy for my mind to create its fantasies" about the daughter of the house (pp. 83-84), kept permanently locked in an upstairs chamber apart from brief supervised walks in the grounds of her family home. Saxby's sense of Celeste's prized uniqueness transposed onto Clara, whom he deems to be "as rare and as beautiful as anything I'd ever known" (p. 211) and later describes as "a bird of paradise" (p. 238), "precious" and, again, "rare" (p. 240), does not bode well for the female passenger, implicitly aligning her with the hapless Great Auk and its fate.

Clara, whom he will finally also fail to save, further functions as Saxby's own double. The two characters both experience Gothic "night terrors" (p. 95), and Clara shares the narrator's convictions and his disgust that thousands of years of natural evolution should be destroyed in the space of a few hundred years (see p. 91). Accordingly, it is left to Saxby to try and realise Clara's childhood fantasy "that God had created a special place beyond the edges of the world, where all the lost souls could go in order to live their lives in peace" (p. 91), by way of further reparation for his blindness to the consequences of his actions. She imagines this sanctuary as an island that can only be seen by other lost souls, made by God "as an afterthought, knowing man would be cruel enough to drive all that was precious away from him" (p. 91).

Other characters have distinctly Dickensian overtones in their strange eccentricity. The "small and rotund" pragmatic Captain Kelvin Sykes with his "quizzical – slightly monkeyish – expression" (p. 10) reveals an unexpected passion for meticulous needlework and describes himself as "a keen engineer when it comes to the forces of man against nature" (p. 14), mocking the docile Great Auks as self-destructive lemmings (see pp. 32-33) even as he immortalises them in embroidery. Quirky Dickensian aspects are also discernible in the sinister first mate Quinlan French (with shades of Uriah Heep), who spends his nights scribbling in his cabin and exercises a strange hold over the captain. So too in the foppish, splendidly dressed Bletchley, a ruthless expert marksman who breaks down into hysterics at the first sight of mammalian blood, leaving the captain complaining that "I have a ship to run, not an asylum" (p. 136). One might even discern ironic traces of the naïve, self-deluding Pip from *Great Expectations* (1860-61) in Saxby, with Clara cast in the combined roles of Biddy and Estella.

In another sense, however, Page's novel is not so much a novel of awakening to personal self-delusion and accountability as to humanity's collective madness and guilt, elaborating Oscar Wilde's dictum that "each man kills the thing he loves" (*The Ballad of Reading Goal*, 1898). This maxim is played out on several different levels in *The Collector of Lost Things*, not least in the context of that prevalent motif of neo-Victorian fiction – the survival of the fittest.[3] Yet in proper Darwinian fashion, Page's novel also stresses that evolutionary progress is predicated on fortuitous chance, accident, and deviation from the norm and, in line with present-day understandings of species development, direct and deliberate human intervention. When the ship's crew first arrives on the bleak island off Iceland's coast, where the last of the Great Auks were purportedly destroyed, Saxby has a lingering sense that "the spectre of the violence that had finished them remained" and, in ideologically weighted idiom, he experiences the place as "the site of an atrocity" (p. 145).

Throughout the novel there is a sense of fateful inevitability, as the "unenlightened" Saxby (p. 9) – and the readers with him – move towards simultaneous enlightenment and disillusioned desolation: "probably there was nothing I might have done to alter the course of events. These things move towards us from the horizon, whether we sail for them or not" (p. 9). Evident parallels with our own present-day world as an ecosystem under on-going serious threat merely emphasise the sense of impending calamity.

Nonetheless, Page's novel refuses to resort to pessimism or cynicism, offering Saxby and his readers a surprisingly hopeful, though not unreservedly optimistic ending, since this too remains predicated on irreversible loss. Against Sykes' assertion that the Great Auks "are *birds*, nothing more" and that man's "business is money", not "sentiment" or "love" (p. 159, original emphasis), Page's novel unashamedly advocates that it *should* be the latter, lest we become failed witnesses to species extinction. There is a more valuable currency than the monetary kind, namely "a currency of legacy", Saxby proposes: "What is the purpose of being a man, other than to make sure that we can be guardians of what we have been given and pass it on to future generations?" (p. 160). Implicitly, *The Collector of Lost Things* suggests that there may still be time to avert the disaster that we, like the Victorians, so insistently conjure into being.

Notes

1. The text also has evident generic affinities with neo-Victorian Darwinian exploration novels, such as Roger MacDonald's *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (1998) and Harry Thompson's *This Thing of Darkness* (2005), as well as maritime voyage narratives, such as Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2002) and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008).
2. This scene is 'doubled' in a later one of a wheatear, which dies in Saxby's hand (see p. 131).
3. Page's adaptation of the discourse of evolution could be said to be slightly anachronistic in so far as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* was, of course, only published in 1859 and Saxby's story ends in 1850; however, many of the ideas were already in prior circulation.