The Mystery of History:
To Say Nothing of the Dog as Neo-Victorian Fiction

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Abstract:
This article analyses Connie Willis's 1998 time-travel novel *To Say Nothing of the Dog* through the lens of neo-Victorian studies. It argues that the novel's humour and its characteristically neo-Victorian concern with the relationship of past and present develop in tandem through its representation of reading and quotation practices. Reading and quoting emphasise the textual nature of the past and draw attention to the problems of interpretation, as characters' (mis)readings and (mis)quotations exaggerate and thus make visible the difficulties of definitively reading the past.

Keywords: Connie Willis, detection, humour, (mis)quotation, (mis)reading, neo-Victorian fiction, time travel, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*.

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Connie Willis's 1998 novel *To Say Nothing of the Dog* mobilises conventions of time-travel science fiction (sf), neo-Victorian fiction, and "screwball comedy" (Killheffer 1998: 43), creating a witty meditation on the past's relationship to the present. The novel is part of a series that Willis has developed over thirty years, including 'Firewatch' (1982), *The Doomsday Book* (1992), *Blackout* (2010) and *All Clear* (2010).[1] Although the texts' protagonists differ, all inhabit the 'present' setting of mid-twenty-first-century Oxford, and all are historians of some sort: amateurs such as the boy Colin in *The Doomsday Book*, students such as Bartholomew in 'Firewatch' or Kivrin in *The Doomsday Book*, or professional academics such as Mr Dunworthy (who appears throughout the series) as well as Verity and Ned in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. As historians living in the future, these characters use time travel to study England's past, whether visiting the fourteenth century in *The Doomsday Book* or World War II in 'Firewatch,' *Blackout*, and *All Clear*. *To Say Nothing of the Dog* includes both of these eras as well, but unlike the other books, its protagonists spend significant time in Oxford

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and its environs in 1888. Thus, although one of the constants of the series is a concern with our relationship to history, *To Say Nothing of the Dog* is the only novel in the series to represent the Victorians as a way to explore that relationship. In particular, it does so by foregrounding the textual nature of the past – that is, how we know and/or construct the past through texts – and the fragmentary nature of those texts and of our understanding thereof. *To Say Nothing of the Dog* uses time travel and humour to reflect on the ways in which the past lives on in personal and collective memory, in institutional or individual histories, in objects, and in texts. As a result, the novel engages with some of the fundamental questions raised by the concept of time travel – namely, the extent to which individuals can preserve, interpret, or recreate the past, or affect the course of history (past or future). By using the Victorian past – an era supposedly well-documented and thus 'known' – *To Say Nothing of the Dog* suggests that the past both endures and disappears: it is resilient and retrievable, but often simultaneously fragile and fragmented, and time itself becomes a series of interlocking mysteries, the solving of which is never complete.

1.   Time Travel, History, and Human Agency

Discussions of time travel recognise the problems of knowledge, history, and individual agency that the concept entails if the traveller visits the past. The time traveller as passive observer, going back in time only to witness events, privileges lived observation over texts or artefacts and assumes that such an observer can achieve a greater objectivity and scope of knowledge than any contemporary person involved in events; by this logic, history is a story to be rewritten from the improved vantage point of the present-day observer. A time traveller able to intervene in the past immediately raises the potential for paradoxes when such actions change the present from which the time traveller originates, possibly eliminating the time traveller whose actions have been shown as necessary to history's unfolding. The ways that time-travel stories explain paradoxes thus address the role of the individual in making (as well as writing) history. David Wittenberg frames the questions raised this way: "is the historical event, in and of itself, a blankly preliminary cause, an overdetermined revisionist effect, or a mere component or signifier of some even larger story or allegory" (Wittenberg 2012: 13). In other words, he asks "[w]hen" exactly the past event is "caused" and what (or who) is responsible

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for it (Wittenberg 2012: 13). Time travel challenges usual sequential notions of cause and effect, of event and the history of the event.

If paradoxes are explained by positing multiple timelines (a popular explanation based in quantum physics), defining history becomes even more difficult and the power of the observer more complex. Although characters in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* discuss the possibility, time travel in these novels does not create alternative history; there is not some "moment of divergence" (Duncan 2003: 209) between our consensus history and fictional events. Indeed, in Willis's series, changes to history are subtle: as becomes clear late in the series, in spite of characters often struggling valiantly (sometimes comically) to *not* change the past, their actions help create the timeline that readers recognise as 'ours', one in which the Allies win World War II. In *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, the complicated chain of events in which the historians participate – including the return of a missing cat in 1888, their search for the bishop's bird stump during the Blitz, and several romantic entanglements – prevent the Nazis from discovering, in 1940, that the British "had their Enigma machine", knowledge that "could change the course of the war. The course of history" (Willis 1998b: 447). In this way, the protagonists uphold "the 'conservative' characteristic of time travel fiction, which, perhaps surprisingly, tends to restore histories rather than to destroy or subvert them" (Wittenberg 2012: 13). Nevertheless, time travellers' repeated musings in Willis's novels upon the dangers of altering the past make visible the question of the extent to which human agency shapes history, both in its events and their subsequent narration. The power of human action and knowledge is repeatedly questioned in Willis's novels, as it is in critical discourse of time travel. For example, Dale J. Pratt argues that "[w]ith time travel, the very concept of history becomes problematic, because unless we assume a narrator's-eyeview of the multiverse, we have no platform upon which to build our historical understanding" (Pratt 2015: 70). Fiction can give the illusion of "a narrator's-eye-view," or what Wittenberg calls "a pragmatic means of super-observation, and therefore of finally deciding how the story is supposed to go or was supposed to have gone" (Wittenberg 2012: 23). However, the question of the extent to which 'history' is inevitable or can be changed by an individual's actions must still be explained in each time-travel story.

As will be demonstrated later in this essay, Willis's choice of a first-person fallible narrator in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* resists endorsing the

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present's knowledge or objectivity as superior to the past's; it also complicates the binary of free will and destiny. Willis's time-travelling protagonists never simply observe; they also participate in the past, often using their knowledge of the way their present has understood past events. However, Willis has said that her "characters are always trying to figure out the world, and they never have enough information" (Willis qtd. in Shindler 2001: 76), and this lack of information is particularly true of the time-travelling historians, who know both more and less than the "contemps" (Willis 1998b: 38) – the people native to the era the historians are visiting. The historians' imperfect knowledge makes their effects on history more accidental than deliberate, so that the novel explores the power of individual choices and actions within some larger design. Robert K. J. Killheffer thus notes of *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, "[t]his is not a story of human competence triumphing over adversity, nor is it a tale of human bungling destroying the world; it's a tale of human insignificance, at least on the cosmic scale" (Killheffer 1998: 44). Nonetheless, Willis's series demonstrates that, though negligible, individual actions are simultaneously necessary to the evolving course of history. While "human competence", to borrow Killheffer's terms, may not triumph "over adversity", human bungling sometimes can. These characteristics of Willis's time-travel fiction are particularly significant in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, as regards the explicit mystery of what happened to "[a] cast-iron footed pedestal firugeal urn" (Willis 1998b: 329) colloquially known as the bishop's bird stump, the artefact having gotten its moniker in 1926, when the Ladies Altar Guild had to make do with the Victorian urn instead of purchasing a new, fashionable vase due to the bishop's decree about reducing expenses (see Willis 1998b: 330). The quest for this object reveals the mysteriousness of, specifically, the Victorian past and the contradictions of the human role in history.

2.   *To Say Nothing of the Dog* as a Neo-Victorian Novel

Questions of the relationship of past and present raised by the concept of time travel have similarities to those explored in other neo-Victorian fiction. *To Say Nothing of the Dog* uses sf conventions of technological access to the past; words such as "net" (the device that allows travel through time), "fixes" (co-ordinates in space-time), and "time-lag" (a physical and mental response to too many consecutive trips to the past) signal this sf context. At the same time, however, time travel in these novels makes literal the "desire to close

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the gap between past and present" that Linda Hutcheon identifies as motivating postmodern intertextuality and by extension, historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988: 118). It also literalises the inter-relationship of past and present that characterises neo-Victorian texts: because the future historians visit the past to understand how their own present situation evolved, the past "exists in dynamic relation to the present, which it both interprets and is interpreted by" (Gilmour 2000: 200). Representing Ned and Verity's search for clues in 1888, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, like other neo-Victorian fiction, shows itself and its characters as "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis), with the result that the novel proves acutely "self-aware about the problems of representing history" (Glendening 2013: 10). Because of this self-consciousness, Willis's text draws attention to the extent to which the present constructs, rather than simply recovers, the past, which raises questions, as Kate Flint says, of "the problematics […] of writing history" (Flint 1997: 302). The present reads the past, assembling evidence to create a coherent narrative, and *To Say Nothing of the Dog* foregrounds such attempts to create order and wholeness out of fragments by having historians search for clues to what happened to one specific Victorian artefact.

The concern with gathering clues to understand the past leads, in many neo-Victorian novels, to the use of conventions of detective fiction. Flint points out that "the rhetoric of detection" applies to "the piecing together of the past", but such rhetoric also affects a text's representation of history through the closure the text provides: the conventions of detective fiction applied to the past convey, "implicitly, the possibility that it is possible to make sense of it, to arrange it into some kind of pattern as neat as the teleology of the solved crime" (Flint 1997: 288). Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn also note an "association between detection and historical fiction" because of "the similarities in the gathering of evidence and the search for the new (and hopefully correct) interpretation of that material", and they link these elements of detective fiction to the "tying up of not-so-loose ends and the sense of finality to the text's conclusion" in many neo-Victorian novels (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 16).[2] Willis makes such detective work explicit in the mystery of the bishop's bird stump as well as in the comparisons her historian-detectives make between themselves and Agatha Christie's Poirot or Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet

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Vane.[3] Although Willis's historians must make deductions from people's actions and testimony, many of the clues they encounter are textual, and their previous reading, whether in the discipline of history or various genres of fiction, often shapes their deductions. *To Say Nothing of the Dog* thus exemplifies Patricia Pulham's claim that in neo-Victorian fiction, "a crime, event, personage, or text from the past functions as the catalyst for the retrieval/revision of that past in order to discover some new clue that will change our perceptions in the present" (Pulham 2009: 159). In Willis's novel, the perceptions to be changed involve the course of history itself: the relationship among events in 1888, 1940, 2018 (the pasts visited by Ned and Verity), 2057 (their present), and the as-yet unknown future events of 2678.

Humour proves key to the novel's answers (or lack thereof) for the problems of understanding the past.[4] The Otherness of the Victorians, their contrast to our present selves, is one of the sources of this humour. As Michael Ross comments, "[a]ny re-creation of bygone times – the imaginative feat attempted by neo-Victorian fiction – can lend itself to comic treatment", often through the representation of "'quaint' locutions and 'dated' customs" (Ross 2017: 125), and Willis's novel repeatedly remarks on Victorian expressions or social niceties, such as an elderly woman's exclamation of "Poppycock" (Willis 1998b: 60) or the lack of sex education for Victorian girls (see Willis 1998b: 232). As observed by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, "[t]o some extent, humour […] operates by way of the simultaneous recognition of incongruities and congruities between ourselves and our historical forebears" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017b: 17), and in Willis's novel the twenty-first-century historians recognise these in/congruities, deliberately drawing readers' attention to them. Such humour risks becoming a humour of superiority, which can "stereotype, denigrate or vilify those perceived as Other and inferior to the dominant group, including the Victorian 'Others' vis-à-vis postmodern subjects" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017b: 13).[5] While Willis's comedy does depend to a certain extent on stereotypes, they apply equally to characters regardless of their 'native' time period. The domineering woman type appears throughout the novel, in the twenty-first century with Lady Schrapnell and in the nineteenth century with Mrs Mering; the perfect butler type, established through reference to P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves (see Willis 1998b: 226), is embodied in 1888 by the Victorian Baine, but also by Finch, the twenty-first-century secretary of Mr Dunworthy. Stereotyped figures, both female and male, thus act as continuities between past and

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present, which is one of the ways (as previously noted) the novel resists endorsing the present over the past, but which also undermines humour of superiority. As in the texts that Kohlke and Gutleben discuss, "[s]uperior humour mocks the Victorians […] but also repeatedly exposes incongruities in postmodern subject positions, value judgments, and ethics", leading to what they call "comic implosion" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017b: 17). In Willis's novel, a main source of humour is the fallible narrator Ned, whose superior knowledge as a future historian is undermined by travelling to an era that is not his period of study, and whose ability to understand his mission and untangle the mystery of the bishop's bird stump is compromised by the effects of time-lag and lack of sleep. Readers who find Ned's fallibility humorous laugh from a position of superior knowledge at someone whose supposedly superior knowledge (compared to the Victorians) proves to be anything but. All such judgments (by characters or by readers) thus become a target of the novel's comedy.

3.   The Presence of the Past
To Say Nothing of the Dog's humour and its concern with the relationship of past and present therefore develop in tandem, and the novel's reading and quotation practices are crucial to this development. In part, the quotation practices are those of the novel itself, as it, like other neo-Victorian fiction, "rewrites Victorian materials" (Glendening 2013: 12), in this case by alluding to various Victorian novels and poems and using Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men and a Boat* (1889) as an intertext, the formal features of which are mimicked in Willis's chapter headings (to say nothing of her title). However, the novel also represents its characters reading and quoting, which emphasises the textual nature of the past. As Hutcheon argues, history and fiction "actually refer at the first level to other texts: we know the past […] only through its textualized remains" (Hutcheon 1988: 119). Such emphasis on textuality draws attention to the problems of interpretation. Willis's characters' use of quotation and allusion creates humour, but the implications of their (mis)readings and (mis)quotations exaggerate and thus make visible the difficulties of reading the past and the impossibility of discovering Flint's earlier cited "pattern as neat as the teleology of the solved crime" (Flint 1997: 288). The past is only ever partially accessible, and what is accessible is never neat.

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    To Say Nothing of the Dog highlights the past's influence on the present because the texts of previous generations inspire later generations. Given the comic nature of the novel, that influence is exaggerated and the inspired actions are as much ridiculous as heroic. The plot is driven by Tossie Mering's nineteenth-century diary, in which she recorded her life-changing trip to Coventry cathedral and her encounter with the bishop's bird stump (see Willis 1998b: 103). Because of reading these diaries, Lady Schrapnell, Tossie's descendent, "had *her* life changed forever" (Willis 1998b: 103, original emphasis) and has commissioned the rebuilding of the cathedral in 2057 (see Willis 1998b: 455), driving historians, including Ned and Verity, into every time period to confirm that the building and its contents are being accurately replicated. The emphasis on accuracy – most notably in Lady Schrapnell's mantra "God is in the details" (Willis 1998b: 89) – represents one approach to recovering the past: a focus on minutiae in order to recreate physically the past in the present. The validity of such an approach seems to be confirmed by the project's success, at the same time that it is undermined by the fact that the rebuilt cathedral is located not in Coventry, but in Oxford. This inaccurate location, which Lady Schrapnell blissfully ignores, comments on the susceptibility of academic institutions to accept funding regardless of the strings attached (see Willis 1998b: 79), but it also draws attention to the way that insistence on accuracy ignores context, creating a simulacra rather than reproducing the 'real': the replication of a past artefact is never the same as the original because the context differs.

    Although the textual past in the form of Tossie's diary has undoubted power in the novel, since it inspires a project that is expensive and time-consuming (in all senses of the word), the text itself is not readily accessible. The diary is not always legible, in part because of a "badly water-damaged" volume (Willis 1998b: 103);[6] other pages are marred by inkblots in crucial places (see Willis 1998b: 110). Moreover, the form of the text works against interpretation: the private diary, for example, never gives Tossie's eventual husband's name, because that is a fact which its writer knows and takes for granted. The historian/reader without such insider knowledge must search for external, that is extradiegetic, clues to his identity. The novel thus emphasises the fragmented and illegible nature of the past as text, both because of the physical effects of time on objects and because of the nature of what is recorded in the first place, which in turn reinforces the importance of context: different context changes the information deemed necessary to include.

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To Say Nothing of the Dog also highlights the textual traces of the past through the use of allusions to and quotations from past literary texts. The principle that structures Jerome's *Three Men and a Boat* – the journey from Kingston to Oxford by boat – shapes chapters 5 through 10 of Willis's novel, as Ned journeys along the Thames from Oxford to just below Streatley with Terence (an 1888 Oxford undergraduate), Professor Peddick – a Victorian "genuine eccentric Oxford don" (Willis 1998b: 87) – and Cyril (a bulldog). Although Jerome's narrator J. and Ned move along the Thames in opposite directions, many of the same places inspire description or meditation upon human actions and history in both texts, and Ned's references to the wordy prose style of Victorian writers might be justified by passages from Jerome, such as this description that opens Chapter 6 of *Three Men in a Boat*:

> It was a glorious morning, late spring or early summer, as you care to take it, when the dainty sheen of grass and leaf is blushing to a deeper green; and the year seems like a fair young maid, trembling with strange, wakening pulses on the brink of womanhood. (Jerome 1957: 46)

Ned at times mimics this style, for example in describing his own first morning on the Thames:

> The birds began to sing, and the sun came up, streaking the water and sky with ribbons of rosy-pink. The river flowed serene and golden within its leafy banks, denying incongruities – the placid mirror of a safe, untroubled world, of a grand and infinite design. (Willis 1998b: 149)

Ned's description, like Jerome's, paints an idyllic picture through multiple comparisons (metaphors or similes). Willis signals the extravagance of such ramblings by referring to Cyril's response to Ned's speech as "an expression that clearly said, 'Exactly how time-lagged *are* you?'" (Willis 1998b: 149, original emphasis). Willis thus parodies not just Jerome but stereotypes of Victorian literary styles more generally.

Such parody itself could be read as a potential homage to Jerome's text, since the latter's genre is a matter of some debate. William J. Scheick summarises the different critical interpretations of the genre of *Three Men in*

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a Boat (e.g. as humorous writing or travelogue), which have affected its reception, and calls Jerome's text a satire, arguing that

> the resolve of the three men […] bears a satirical relationship to Livingstone's search for the much-disputed source of the White Nile and also to Stanley's heroic effort to aid Livingstone in this quest. Jerome's narrator […] in fact describes his experiences along the Thames as if they were life-threatening perils of the sort encountered by Livingstone and Stanley in central Africa. (Scheick 2007: 406)

Allusions to Livingstone's quest appear in Willis's novel as well, in Terence's comments on "the sources of the Thames" (Willis 1998b: 68), and the boat's owner's reference to how much luggage they take on their journey (see Willis 1998b: 77). Like J. and Livingstone, Ned encounters a series of "perils", but most of them are caused by his own misunderstanding of customs, cats, and his own mission,[7] since for the first part of Willis's novel, Ned – unlike Livingstone and Stanley or even J. – has no idea what his quest entails. Willis thus exaggerates a text which is itself exaggerating a specific literary style/genre and content for satirical effect.

Other allusions appear in the conversations and thoughts of the characters in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. The historians refer to the mystery novels of Christie and Sayers as templates for their activities and their love lives: Terence compares himself to doomed lovers from literature; Professor Peddick quotes Herodotus. Many of the major characters repeat quotations from Shakespeare's plays, much beloved by the Victorians, as well as nineteenth-century literary classics like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' (1842) among others. For example, Terence resorts to Tennyson to describe his experience of love at first sight: "And it was just like 'The Lady of Shalott,' only without the curse, and the mirrors breaking and flying about" (Willis 1998b: 81). The way Terence and Ned refer to literature in their conversations does not simply serve the characterisation of these Oxford-educated scholars. The art of the apt quotation, as practiced by these characters – and through them Willis – is to isolate specific lines and make them carry individual meanings that are in some ways congruent with their function in their source, but that are also incongruent, often because of a

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disjunction of style and subject matter. In the example just given, referring to the Lady in talking about love at first sight is congruent with her experience of seeing Lancelot; unlike the Lady's, however, Terence's experience of love at first sight is neither fatal nor singular. The act of quotation is thus often ridiculous in the novel – humour as incongruity; it is also an act of interpretation, even of rewriting. The act of quotation foregrounds the act of interpretation, and because Ned as time-travelling historian is reading not just poetry but the past, characters' use of apt quotation becomes one of the ways the novel draws attention to the textual nature of the past and the fragmentary human understanding of history. As a result, one of the many objects of parody in the novel becomes the act of reading itself, or more specifically, the reader who (mis)reads and (mis)applies that reading. The novel is full of examples of apt quotation and inept interpretation.

4.   (Mis)Readings
Terence and Ned are two of the most important readers portrayed in the novel. The evident utility that they find in certain lines to convey emotions or a situation suggests the power of poetry, and Terence's exaggerated epiphany near the end of the novel – "I didn't properly understand poetry […] I thought it was all just a way of speaking" (Willis 1998b: 422) – reaffirms poetry's ability to recognise and articulate the truth. For most of the novel, however, Terence remains a comic (mis)reader of texts. His reflections on 'The Lady of Shalott' critique the ability of poetry to portray 'life' accurately, but it also establishes Terence as a naive reader, locked into his present historical moment and its assumptions. He complains of Tennyson's poem that the Lady "lies down in the boat and goes floating down to Camelot", finding this scenario unlikely, because "[s]he'd have ended up stuck in the reeds a quarter of a mile out" or encountered "the problem of the locks" (Willis 1998b: 79-80). Terence misreads the signals of genre, demanding realism of romance and thereby turning magical elements of the poem into farce; moreover, he ignores the poem's medievalism in his assumption that the Lady's river is the same as his, geographically and temporally.[8] His (mis)reading of Tennyson's poem occurs in the first sixth of the novel, helping to establish the problems of reading as one of the novel's comic targets and thematic concerns.

        Terence's and Ned's recourse to 'The Lady of Shalott' mocks their activities as interpreters of poetic texts, which turn the poem into storehouse of apt quotations to be applied at will. The most common source of these

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quotations from Tennyson is the last lines of the stanza of the curse: "Out flew the web and floated wide; / The mirror crack'd from side to side; / 'The curse has come upon me,' cried / The Lady of Shalott" (Tennyson 2007: 24, lines 114-117). Carl Plasa observes that canonical interpretations of Tennyson's poem as a meditation on "the relation between 'art' and 'life'" too easily overlook the gender of the artistic figure, turning "the 'she' of the text into the 'he' of its readers" (Plasa 1992: 247), and Willis's novel likewise turns "she" into "he" as Terence and Ned appropriate these lines. Terence first quotes them when explaining his reaction to meeting Tossie, then quotes the same lines to communicate despair after he meets Maud and realises that she, not Tossie, is his true love (see Willis 1998b: 81, 421-423). Ned cites "Out flew the web" as part of his deductions regarding the problems affecting the net; interpreting these problems as indicating potential damage to the space-time continuum, Ned realises, "We had broken all the threads at once, and the fabric in the space-time loom had come apart" (Willis 1998b: 345). The utility of the same quotation to describe infatuation, true love, and the disintegration of the universe suggests the incongruity of its multiple applications, which creates humour but also draws attention to the superficiality of this quotation practice.

If Terence and Ned select apt quotations out of context, Willis's novel suggests that their way of reading/quoting is comparable to the way the present constructs the past: reading pieces (sometimes the only pieces available) for its own purposes. Ned's hasty preparation for his Victorian assignment (his period of study is the twentieth century) exaggerates this tendency. Mr Dunworthy, on being told that Ned cannot time travel to 1888 without a course on Victoriana, recites to Ned the following list:

> Darwin, Disraeli, the Indian question, *Alice in Wonderland*, Little Nell, Turner, Tennyson, *Three Men in a Boat*, crinolines, croquet […]. Penwipers, crocheted antimacassars, hair wreaths, Prince Albert, Flush, frock coats, sexual repression, Ruskin, Fagin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, George Bernard Shaw, Gladstone, Galsworthy, Gothic Revival, Gilbert and Sullivan, lawn tennis, and parasols. (Willis 1998b: 38-39)

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The list is oddly comprehensive, with each term gesturing toward larger issues: scientific revolutions of thought, crises of faith or imperialism, debates on the nature of art and literature, and the arrangement of domestic and public spaces. Nevertheless, its presentation is comically reductive because of the equality it implies among its terms: Prince Albert is no more important than Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog Flush; famous prime ministers such as Gladstone and Disraeli receive the same emphasis as penwipers. Its structure owes as much to alliteration ("Gladstone, Galsworthy, Gothic […] Gilbert") as to a logical association of ideas. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Willis is writing parody – but what is its object?

        The inclusion of elements of home décor now usually considered old-fashioned if not odd – antimacassars and hair wreaths – might make the era itself, particularly its sense of good taste, the object of the parody, a reading supported by characters' reactions to the bishop's bird stump later in the novel. Tossie thinks the urn is "the most beautiful piece of art", and Coventry's curate agrees that it represents "all that is best in […] art […]. Excellent representations and a high moral tone" (Willis 1998b: 333, 334). Although the novel never provides one definitive description, the urn's "representations" include a unicorn, camels, Joseph's enslavement in Egypt, Mary Queen of Scots' death, Neptune, Moses parting the Red Sea, Leda's encounter with Zeus as swan, cupids, Abraham with Isaac, Salome with the head of John the Baptist, the Babes abandoned in the woods, a sparrow carrying a strawberry leaf, and Androcles and the lion (see Willis 1998b: 331-334), among other details. The twenty-first-century characters declare it "hideous" (Willis 1998b: 331). The butler Baine, however, delivers the most extensive condemnation of this piece of 'art' and by extension 'Victorian' taste: he refers to it as "a hideous atrocity, vulgarly conceived, badly designed, and shoddily executed", elaborating that it is "cluttered, artificial, and […] mawkishly sentimental" (Willis 1998b: 333, 334). As frequent comparisons between the bishop's bird stump and the Albert Memorial or St Pancras Station (see, e.g., Willis 1998: 332) make clear, this critique applies to Victorian aesthetics generally and not simply this one particular art object.

        Willis uses the moment of Baine's outburst for great comic effect. The novel exaggerates the features of the urn and the reactions of its viewers (a number of whom, like readers, are encountering the object for the first time). It also reverses expectations, not least of which is the fact that Tossie's life-changing experience is learning to reject the very object that Ned has been

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sent through time to recover for the future. In this moment, the novel depends on humour as superiority: as Kohlke and Gutleben say of other examples of neo-Victorian humour, readers are positioned "as contrasting postmodern 'ideal' subjects, renouncing outmoded attitudes" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017b: 8) about what constitutes 'art' that are set up as quintessentially Victorian. In this moment, the novel casts people of the past as Other to enlightened modern taste. That divide between Victorian and modern is complicated, admittedly, by the fact that the nineteenth-century butler voices the condemnation of Victorian aesthetics, but Baine has been depicted as progressive throughout the novel, chafing at class restrictions and reading Thomas Carlyle's 1837 *The French Revolution: A History* (see Willis 1998b: 99), so that the novel aligns him with the twenty-first-century historians rather than with other Victorian characters. Thus, characters who have the same tastes as the twenty-first-century protagonists, and presumably as the late-twentieth-century target audience, become harbingers of our own 'enlightened' taste rather than representatives of their own era.[9]

However, Willis does not simply validate the present over the past, for time travel allows the novel to play with cause and effect, and Willis foregrounds similarities between practices and stereotypes in different time periods. Time travel allows the future to motivate the past. For example, Ned's actions on the river, when he sees Jerome and his friends, inspire at least one of the episodes of *Three Men in a Boat*: distracted by thoughts of the comic episodes that Jerome will relate of the river excursion, Ned unintentionally enacts one of those episodes, running his boat into the bank (see Willis 1998b: 161). Since Jerome is just starting his journey, the twenty-first-century character is implied to be the model of comic ineptitude for the nineteenth-century novelist. Readers may not take seriously Ned as the inspiration for Jerome's text, but the possibility troubles simple binaries of past vs. present, outmoded vs. progressive. Such binaries are also troubled by the similarities the novel reveals (or creates) between present and past. The list Mr Dunworthy recites to Ned, quoted earlier, reads not just as a summary of the nineteenth century, but as a parody of *post*-Victorian judgements of the era, since the list is arguably what we (as academics or as collectors) have studied or deemed important from the period. Moreover, Mr Dunworthy's technique of listing fragments to represent the past has similarities with the artistic practice that created the bishop's bird stump: both juxtapose diverse people and objects to evoke meaning and represent a larger past or tradition.

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Victorian aesthetics may be a target of the novel's humour, but so is the later
historian's practice, which in itself resembles the novel's own practice of
quotation. Binaries are also troubled by the way stereotypes of the period are
undermined when Willis repeatedly juxtaposes 'facts' of the past's customs
and beliefs with comic examples of their inaccuracy and thus exposes the
problems of characterising the 'past' in any simple way. For example, Verity,
who has had more training in nineteenth-century customs than Ned, informs
him of one of the most important social rules: "'Unmarried men and women
are never allowed to be alone together,' she said, in spite of the fact that we
seemed to be" (Willis 1998b: 216).[10] Ned spends much of the novel confused,
as much from such contradictions as from time-lag caused by too many
consecutive trips to the past. These contradictions reveal a problem in writing
history, regardless of the period and the records available: the generalised
narrative can never capture the variations of individual situations in all details.

     In undermining stereotypes of the Victorian, the novel does not simply
turn them into their opposites. Many of the assumptions made about the era
turn out to be true, just not in the way the characters expect. When the idea of
the Victorian past as a place to rest and hide from Lady Schrapnell and her
incessant demands is first raised, Ned rhapsodises:

> Long dreamy afternoons boating on the Thames and playing
> croquet on emerald lawns with girls in white frocks and
> fluttering hair ribbons. And later, tea under the willow tree,
> served in delicate Sèvres cups by bowing butlers, anxious to
> minister to one's every whim, and those same girls, reading
> aloud from a slim volume of poetry, their voices floating like
> flower petals on the scented air. (Willis 1998b: 34)

He finishes this idyllic picture with a quotation: "All in the golden afternoon,
where Childhood's dreams are twined, In Memory's mystic band" (Willis
1998b: 34).[11] Everything Ned imagines comes true: he boats on the Thames,
and nearly drowns in the process; he plays croquet on emerald lawns with a
Victorian girl, festooned with ribbons, who approaches the game as a blood
sport and wins; the bowing butler dreams of equality in America; the girls –
many of them named after flowers – read aloud from long, boring letters or
diaries that describe every ruffle of their dresses in excruciating detail. The
quotation, which closes Ned's vision of the past, foreshadows his chaotic

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Victorian vacation: taken from Charles Dodgson's dedicatory poem to Alice
Liddell, the lines are undoubtedly sentimental, but the book which they
introduce, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), is a violent, nonsensical,
chaotic fantasy.

     Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, then, is another Victorian intertext
for *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, and the parallels between Alice and Ned are
instructive.[12] Perhaps most striking is the lack of mastery that both Alice and
Ned display. Margery Hourihan uses Alice as an example of a female
protagonist "who negotiate[s] fantastic wildernesses in quite different ways
from those employed by conventional heroes with sword and gun in hand and
mastery in mind" (Hourihan 1997: 206-207), and that challenge to
conventional heroism can be seen in Ned as well. He may eventually solve
the mystery, but for most of the novel, like Alice, he is at the mercy of the
whims of other characters. Both Alice and Ned are disoriented by their
entrance into the other world, Alice by her fall and Ned by time-lag. That
disorientation affects both characters' ability to adapt to their surroundings,
which in turn draws attention to the *need* to adapt because of the social
constructedness of manners and customs. Alice demonstrates a concern with
etiquette, particularly in the chapter 'A Mad Tea-Party', yet she herself breaks
those rules by sitting down uninvited (see Carroll 2000: 104); furthermore,
she makes a number of social *faux pas* by failing to recognise the nature of
the creatures that she meets – talking fondly of her cat to mice and birds, for
example (see Carroll 2000: 72). As in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, part
of the humour of *To Say Nothing of the Dog* derives from Ned trying (and
often failing) to follow the social rules of the Victorian world, most
memorably when he starts to comment on Mrs Marmalade's pregnancy (see
Willis 1998b: 231), not realising that even feline reproduction is a forbidden
topic in Victorian company. Like Alice, Ned brings to his Victorian
Wonderland a set of assumptions about society and manners that never quite
work. Although Ned, unlike Alice, is not dreaming, his assumptions, like
hers, are shaped by his present moment, a moment that has constructed a
specific narrative of history and a particular understanding of the 'Victorian'.

     Determining which fictional Victorian society – that of Ned's
assumptions or the one he encounters through time travel – is closer to our
"real" Victorian past is less important than the questions the contrast raises.
Representations of the Victorian age in this novel are still reconstructions of
the past by the present, with the twentieth-century novelist imagining future

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historians in a nineteenth-century world. The significance of these multiple
representations is not whether one or any of them is 'the real Victorian age',
but rather their demonstration of the difficulty, even with time travel, of ever
truly knowing the past.

5.   Conclusion: Design and Destiny

The past in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* is a mystery that the time-travelling
characters are trying to solve, in addition to the real crime of the
disappearance of the bishop's bird stump. The discovery of what has
happened to the bishop's bird stump acts as the resolution of the novel as it
completes the Coventry cathedral project; the recovery of the object also
prevents a "parachronistic incongruity" in the space-time continuum at the
crisis point of World War II (Willis 1998b: 31). The novel thus explicitly
parallels the puzzle of the fictional crime that must be solved to restore order
and the puzzle of the past that we solve to create an ordered, closed narrative
of our place within history.

      The closure Willis's novel provides is contingent, however, and not
just because other books follow in the series. Ned's solution to the mysteries
of the bishop's bird stump and the problems of the space-time continuum at
1888 and 1940 reveals another mystery. The "incongruity" in the timeline,
which is supposedly caused by the bird stump's disappearance in 1940 and
which Ned, Verity, and their colleagues have been trying to resolve, is likely
"part of the self-correction" of the same timeline, necessary because of
"[s]omething that hasn't happened yet. Something that's going to happen in
[…] 2678" (Willis 1998b: 489). Even in its moment of resolution, the novel
refers to the incomplete knowledge of its fallible narrator and his colleagues,
whose ordered narrative of their place within history will be subject to future
modifications. Those modifications remain unknown to characters and
readers, for the mystery that Ned reveals is not solved by *Blackout* and *All
Clear*. It thus emphasises again the inevitably incomplete, partial perspective
of events possessed by any one individual or individual era trying to (re)create
a narrative of the past.

      If a coherent, ordered narrative is impossible for humans to perceive
or articulate with any accuracy, Willis's series does not discount its possibility
altogether. As mentioned earlier, changes the historians make to the timeline
allow our past to unfold the way it has (from our perspective); they conserve
history, however inadvertently. This outcome deliberately invokes the

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"Grand Design" that Professors Peddick and Overforce debate in the novel
(see Willis 1998b: 87-90). However, the design remains unattached to any
consciousness, as the novel attributes it to the space-time continuum itself, as
per Ned's reflections (see Willis 1998b: 479). As Victoria Carpenter and Paul
Halpern observe, in Willis's series "time seems to have a consciousness of its
own, and is able to make decisions that unravel the mess created by time
travellers" (Carpenter and Halpern 2015: 111). In this context, it is worth
noting one of the hymns played in the restored cathedral, 'God Works in a
Mysterious Way His Wonders to Perform' (Willis 1998b: 482), a 1774 poem
by William Cowper set to music. The last verse of Cowper's poem reads,
"Blind unbelief is sure to err,/ And scan his work in vain;/ God is his own
interpreter,/ And he will make it plain" (Cowper 1998: n.p., l. 21-24).
Although the novel does not quote these words, the naming of this hymn, to
a reader familiar with it, alludes to a larger design beyond human perception
and to a perfected interpretation, divine and pan-temporal.

　　　Positing such a design invokes the "predestinational paradox" of time
travel – "the time traveller creates the situation she has travelled to the past to
change; or someone with information from the future is compelled to fulfil
it" (Pratt 2015: 69). That in turn raises questions about the degree to which
Willis's characters (to say nothing of the dog and the cat) exercise free will.
Carpenter and Halpern argue that "Willis allows for the possibility that free
will is an illusion, and that all of the supposed choices made by the characters
are inevitable links in a complex, but self-consistent web" (Carpenter and
Halpern 2015: 111). The malfunctions of the net that remove Ned and Verity
from the Victorian era for a while support such a reading. However, another
potential reading of *To Say Nothing of the Dog* is that the novel celebrates the
possibility that a design can be made out of anything – any wilful, accidental,
chaotic, bungling, and/or well-intentioned actions – even if humans cannot
perceive that design.

　　　As a result, in *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, the sf conventions of time
travel raise the possibility of design and destiny, and the conventions of neo-
Victorian fiction emphasise the inter-relationship of past and present as
mutually constructing each other, while the novel's comic mode undermines
any resolution to the philosophical problems posed by either sf or neo-
Victorian conventions. Due to its fallible narrator, the novel does not
completely share Cowper's apparent confidence in God's ability to interpret
and make plain reasons for the world's events, for each time the historians

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understand one mystery of the timeline, another emerges. Narration foregrounds the choices made by individuals and their confusion, even if the solution to the mystery of the bishop's bird stump suggests that a design works itself out beyond human awareness. This greater design makes human actions seemingly insignificant; at the same time, in a chaotic system, "[e]verything [is] relevant" (Willis 1998b: 490), and that includes human beings, dogs, and cats, the choices we make and the actions we take. Thus, Willis's *To Say Nothing of the Dog* as neo-Victorian fiction both mocks and reaffirms human attempts to read the past. The impossibility of fully perceiving the design is not a failure in itself, but rather a recognition of the scale of history and the relationship of the individual to historical events and forces. The novel demonstrates the limits of human knowledge, which Killheffer argues reflects a 1990s' "awareness of our own limitations" (Killheffer 1998: 44), but the novel's comic nature in some respects celebrates those same limits, reassuring us that history will get along with, without, and/or in spite of us. History may be a mystery we can never solve, but the quest to understand it is essential to its unfolding.

<u>Notes</u>

1. The novella *Jack* (first publication 1991, reissued 2020) is set during the Blitz in London during World War II, like 'Firewatch,' *Blackout* and *All Clear*. Unlike those other works, *Jack* does not involve time travel and so is not part of the series.
2. Willis's novel cites Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, whose mysteries tend to depict the solving of the crime as a means of restoring social order, as opposed to texts in the hard-boiled tradition that tend to depict a corrupt society whose disorder is systemic rather than the fault of one criminal's actions. Also note that not all scholars link neo-Victorian closure to its borrowings from detective fiction. John Glendening, for example, lists closure among other realist conventions that neo-Victorian texts employ (see Glendening 2013: 10), and Flint attributes it to the tendency in neo-Victorian fiction to be "sceptical about post-modernism, about its refusal of the illusion of character, about its refusal of closure" (Flint 1997: 302). Regardless of its source, closure is often identified as one of the features (even attractions) of neo-Victorian fiction.
3. Admittedly, some of the comparisons to Sayers's detectives involve the romantic relationship of Peter and Harriet rather than detection, but even those

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comparisons help Willis's novel create a sense of closure: the assurance, to the reader, that the relationship of Ned and Verity will follow the pattern of Sayers's protagonists.

4. Although there are witty remarks and humorous incidents in all of Willis's time-travel fictions, *To Say Nothing of the Dog* remains consistently in the comic mode.

5. For a discussion of the overlap between humour of superiority and humour of incongruity, see Kohlke and Gutleben 2017b: 17.

6. The water damage is explained when Ned witnesses a confrontation between Tossie and Baine near the end of the novel. Tossie quotes from her diary during this argument, and although Ned does not see the final outcome, he thinks he "hear[s] a splash" (Willis 1998b: 378). Tossie's later letter to her parents confirms that she and the diary ended up in the river (see Willis 1998b: 428).

7. Cats are extinct in Ned's present, so his interactions with Victorian felines proceed based on his faulty (and usually humorous) assumptions, for example, that cats are "tame" and will do what they are told (Willis 1998b: 146).

8. Although Sir Thomas Malory specifies that the Maid of Astolat's barge arrives at court on the Thames, Tennyson does not name the river that flows between Shalott and Camelot in 'The Lady of Shalott.'

9. Readers who agree with Tossie's taste are unlikely to find the book funny.

10. Sexual repression is one of the most often repeated stereotypes of the Victorian era, frequently appearing in our imaginings – whether theoretical or creative – of the period. Michel Foucault, for example, begins *The History of Sexuality* (1976, English translation 1978) with this stereotype in order to then question "the repressive hypothesis" (Foucault 1990: 11). Analogously, discussing twentieth-century stage representations of the Victorians, Sharon Aronofsky Weltman reports that "Victorian sexuality becomes a foil against which present-day sexual relations and sex roles are represented as unproblematically more advanced" (Weltman 2008: 305).

11. Ned combines lines from the poem that opens *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. That poem begins, "All in the golden afternoon" and in the final stanza offers the story to Alice to "Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined / In Memory's mystic band" (Carroll 2000: 49-50).

12. Parallels between other characters might also be possible. Ned explicitly compares Tossie to the Red Queen (see Willis 1998b: 238), that is, the Queen of Hearts, during the croquet game, but at times Colonel and Mrs Mering could be read as more analogous to the King and Queen of Hearts from Carroll's novel.

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