

## LESLIE STEPHEN: THINKING WITH AND AGAINST HIS TIME

International Conference  
Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Paris  
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PRISMES – EA 4398  
Langues, Textes, Arts et Cultures du Monde Anglophone

CORPUS – UR-UPJV 4295  
Conflits, Représentations et Dialogues dans l'Univers Anglo-Saxon

SEW – Société d'Études Woolfiennes

### Confirmed keynote speakers:

Dr. Jane Potter (Oxford Brookes University)

Dr. Trudy Tate (Clare Hall, University of Cambridge)

### Call for papers:

Early advocate of evolutionism, one of the first openly declared agnostics, editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, pioneering mountaineer, moral philosopher, founder and general editor of the DNB: there are so many more facets to Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) than those recorded by his daughter Virginia Woolf, who memorably paid tribute to his “strong,” “healthy out of door, moor striding mind”. By unfolding all the contradictions and paradoxes of the character, this first international conference on Leslie Stephen means to reclaim the full complexity of his thought and legacy.

Thinking with and against his time, Stephen held a key position at the heart of the Victorian literary scene and was an impressively prolific writer, profoundly engaged with the religious, philosophical and social debates of his age. A highly respected journalist and critic, he edited the *Cornhill Magazine* from 1871 to 1882, publishing works by George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, John Addington Symonds, Henry James and R.L. Stevenson, and was the author of hundreds of essays, published over the course of forty years in periodicals, such as the *Fortnightly Review*, *Fraser's Magazine*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Mind*, the *National Review*, the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Saturday Review* or the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a vast oeuvre now finally accessible thanks to online databases.

His devotion to knowledge and integrity were such that he preferred to break with the academic world of Cambridge rather than compromise with the Church. Heir to the Clapham Sect, Stephen engaged with the theological debates of his time to the point of gradually and publicly embracing agnosticism, a form of radicalism that coexisted from then on with forms of traditionalism.

His own prolific output bears witness to his encyclopaedic mind and his boundless curiosity for all the key issues of the day, however polemical: the anti-slavery movement, agnosticism, educational and social reform... Both a man of his time and a pioneer, Stephen explored new epistemological modes in keeping with the expanding frontiers of his age, while remaining profoundly anchored in some of the values and hierarchies of the day.

The DNB, his life's work, and one of his most ambitious projects, is the finest example of his desire to define new modes of classification and new forms of expression for the expanding knowledge of his time. Breaking with the established narratives of the past, he devised a new approach to writing the biography of the nation, doing away with the grandiose tradition of commemoration. In its place, he developed a more archaeological approach, delving into the past and collating the life stories of all those who helped shape the evolution of the country.

The same pioneering spirit stoked his passion for the Alps and mountaineering, in which he proved as much a trailblazer as he did in intellectual life. It is this conquering spirit that his close friend Thomas Hardy immortalized in his poem “The Schreckhorn, With Thoughts of Leslie Stephen” (1897), which extolled his will to “venture life and limb” as well as the “quaint glooms” of his personality, when paying tribute to Stephen as the first man ever to ascend this mountain.

However daring and rigorous in his endeavours, Stephen was no less a direct heir to the Romantic tradition. An ardent poetry lover, he could quote vast swathes of the poetic canon, from Milton to Wordsworth, Tennyson and Arnold, and would rhythm both domestic life and mountaineering exploits with his recitations. Likewise, despite his allegiance to Victorian models of “Muscular Christianity”, and the manly world of clubs and fellowships, he would at times indulge in various forms of sentimentalism and melodramatic displays of emotion.

These are some of the contradictions that the participants to this conference are invited to explore. Similarly, his vast output deserves to be reconsidered through diverse critical paradigms, such as new materialist History, print culture studies, new sensory studies, phenomenology, affect studies and ethics, gender studies, health and disability studies.

We welcome contributions focusing on Leslie Stephen, but also on the following topics, connected with his life and times and shedding light on the larger context of his work:

- , Victorian encyclopaedism
- , Victorian periodicals, print culture, the publishing industry
- , Biography, the DNB, “hero-worship”
- , Stephen’s relations to Victorian sages and prophets
- , Letters, epistolarity, literary networks
- , Cambridge, academia, education and university reform
- , Gentlemen’s clubs, sociability
- , 18th century philosophy and literature, the Enlightenment
- , Utilitarianism, Science, Evolutionism
- , The Clapham Sect, Agnosticism, Scepticism
- , War, the anti-slavery movement
- , Morality, the “science of ethics”
- , Mountaineering, athletics, walking, nature and travel writing
- , Memory, elegy, mourning, the Mausoleum Book, Virginia Woolf & Leslie Stephen

Abstracts of about 300 words, for 25-minute papers in English, together with a short (100-word) author biography, should be sent to the organizers by 31st January 2024 at the following address: [leslie.stephen.conference@gmail.com](mailto:leslie.stephen.conference@gmail.com). In case of difficulties tracing Stephen’s works, please contact the organizers, who will be happy to share links and resources.

A selection of peer-reviewed articles based on papers given at the conference will be collected for publication.