

Paper

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IN *The French Revolution* (1837), Thomas Carlyle hits upon a way to characterize the *ancien régime* that unites two disparate factors in the run-up to revolution—France’s government debt and the writing of its public intellectuals:

[S]hall we call it . . . the new Age of Gold? Call it at least, of Paper; which in many ways is the succedaneum of Gold. Bank-paper, wherewith you can still buy when there is no gold left; Book-paper, splendent with Theories, Philosophies, Sensibilities,—beautiful art, not only of revealing Thought, but also of so beautifully hiding from us the want of Thought! Paper is made from the *rags* of things that did once exist; there are endless excellences in Paper.¹

Paper debt offers a flimsy substitute for the gold that isn’t there, while fine books paper over the emptiness of their words. Moreover, this paper world anticipates the revolution’s worthless paper *assignats* as well as its flurries of proclamations, laws, and policies on paper.

Paper is real, of course; it is matter, a thin mat of dried cellulose fibers that can be inscribed, folded, crumpled, and cut. But its existence is both the relic of other “things that did once exist” and, Carlyle suggests, the confirmation that those things will never be restored. We might also detect a wry self-reflection on *The French Revolution* itself, a kaleidoscopic history composed from scraps of things that were, from the anecdotes and factoids that the author gathers to weave the text at hand. As part of the clothes philosophy of *Sartor Resartus* (1831), Carlyle had pointed out that only the harvesting of rags (to make the raw material that papermakers called “stuff”) allowed the creation of paper in the first place. The recording of ideas on paper as well as their dissemination in print depends on the old castoffs whose unrecoverability they document. Philosophies and histories are *made from* clothes.

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There are endless excellences in paper, and endless uses for it, far beyond the printed books, pamphlets, serials, manuscripts, and letters that constitute our most familiar encounters with Victorian paper today: printed forms, registers, and ledgers; envelopes and stamps; financial instruments and money; engravings and other forms of paper art; posters; maps and calendars; contracts and legal records; playing cards and games; ephemera such as notices, handbills, broadsides, or tickets; wall-coverings; protective wrappings for food and merchandise; cartons and boxes; sewing patterns; ornaments such as artificial flowers; reused paper for decoration, scrapbooking, and decoupage; discarded paper for bodily hygiene. Paper lined baking pans, and paper could be used to start fires, as Carlyle was reminded when his only copy of the manuscript for volume 1 of *The French Revolution* went up in smoke thanks to one of John Stuart Mill's servants, who apparently mistook it for wastepaper.

Indeed, it was really the nineteenth century that deserved the title of the Paper Age. The Fourdrinier machine (patented in England in 1801) produced paper in continuous rolls rather than handmade sheets, dramatically increasing the speed and volume of papermaking; it would be joined by fast steam-powered cylinder printing presses and by machinery that could cut and fold paper just as quickly. The Victorians made more paper than ever before, but they also made paper *do* more: paper became telegrams as well as the dust jackets for books (1830s); postage stamps and photographs (1840s); cigarette cards (1870s), which might accompany a purchase of machine-rolled paper cigarettes (1880s). A reprinted paper about paper, from a late Victorian paper dedicated to the art of printing paper, imagines a man of the near future who dresses in paper, lives in a paper house, eats food cooked in paper from paper plates, wipes his mouth with a paper napkin, and at last dies "in paper peace" and is placed in a "paper coffin" and buried under a "paper monument" as "his paper spirit" passes "the paper gates of a paper paradise, where all is paper" (but rendered "fireproof").² Victorian authors contributed to this proliferation and documented it: consider the bags of Chancery Court papers in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53), the Circumlocution Office's useless bureaucratic forms in his *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), or the paper clues of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–62), carefully filed away to be carefully ignored.³

Many factors converged to increase the Victorian demand for paper: the reduction and elimination of the taxes on knowledge (including

duties on newspapers, advertisements, and paper itself), population growth and urbanization, the expansion of literacy and leisure, the rise of a consumer society, and the use of new media that incorporated paper or required a paper record. Yet the supply of rags, the essential raw material for European-style papermaking, could not keep pace with the demand. After decades of experiments, Victorian paper mills turned to alternative resources. By the 1860s, Mediterranean esparto grass was being used to make soft, high-quality paper for books. The next decade brought the great breakthrough: the development of the sulfite process, which allowed the processing of wood into a pulp for manufacturing cheap paper on a truly industrial scale.

Requiring access to sources of clean water that it ended up polluting, papermaking had never been a very green or clean industry, yet rag paper at least depended on recycling worn-out textiles, sometimes even upcycling them into enduring texts. But now harvests of esparto from scrublands in Spain and North Africa and especially of trees felled in the boreal forests of Scandinavia and Canada became the inputs that allowed the paper industry to produce far more material at lower prices than ever before, even as the heat and harsh chemicals used to produce pulp paper further degraded air, land, and water. The story of modern paper epitomizes the invention of “Cheap Nature” through “the interlocking agencies of capital, science, and empire”⁴—especially if we understand empire as not only a place or a system of social domination but also a planet-level logic of rendering all space, life, and matter available for potential extraction. The immense, sustained removal of living biomass allowed the consumption of more paper, with the special irony that the acidity of wood-pulp paper made it liable to rapid deterioration. Much of the paper made from ancient forests had a short life span and was intended to be quickly used and discarded.

This shift in the production, composition, and cost of paper is inseparable from the late Victorian boom in newspapers and magazines (in their number and diversity as well as their circulation) and from the end of the three-volume “library” novel and the rise of the bestseller—phenomena well known to Victorianists.⁵ Such connections exemplify the material importance of the fortunes of paper for literary history as well as paper’s capacity to link textuality and material culture to science, economics, and ecologies. Even in an age of digitization, paper remains the great techno-material a priori of our access to Victorian culture, the main source of the stuff we reprocess in our scholarship. Reading Victorian paper might also offer a model for examining our own media

—legacy media, streaming media, algorithmic media—in relation to contemporary cultural and natural ecologies, and to the economies, affordances, neoimperial practices, and technics of extraction that they presuppose, reinforce, and embody today.

NOTES

1. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, edited by K. J. Fielding and David Sorensen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 31.
2. “The Age of Paper,” *British Printer* 5 (May–June 1892): 9.
3. See Priyanka Jacob, “The Pocket-book and the Pigeon-hole: The Files of Victorian Fiction,” *Victorian Studies* 61, no. 3 (2019): 371–94.
4. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), 53.
5. On the relationships of paper’s history and ecology to late Victorian literature, see Richard Menke, “*New Grub Street’s* Ecologies of Paper,” *Victorian Studies* 61, no. 1 (2018): 60–82.

