In *The Last Utopians*, literary scholar Michael Robertson conducts a sympathetic but not uncritical tour of the lives and writings of four late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century utopian authors: Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edward Carpenter. He intends to illuminate the idealistic longings of the period from 1880 to World War I, and also to find a usable past for today’s “progressives.” These objectives guide his choice of authors and produce clear prose and a friendly tone aimed at a general audience. They also have the perhaps unintended effect of accentuating the idiosyncratic and timebound features of his authors’ visions, since his exposition finds as many disjunctures as persisting ideals in the Anglo-American utopian tradition.

Robertson’s authors are linked by shared influences that radiated from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman and by familiarity with each other’s writings. He cites their democratic socialism, criticism of patriarchy, religious underpinnings, and reverence for nature as key commonalities, although exceptions such as Morris’s atheism and Bellamy’s urbanism stand out. A penchant for theories of human evolution was avidly shared by all four, but this features less prominently in Robertson’s telling, perhaps because it roots them so firmly in their era.

The heart of the book consists of four chapters that artfully blend biography and literary analysis to excavate the roots of these authors’ utopian visions. Bellamy, a sickly and introverted New Englander who failed the West Point physical, transformed Boston in *Looking Backward* (1888) into an orderly middle-class utopia constructed by workers conscripted into the “industrial army.” An ego-denying “religion of solidarity” provides the spiritual foundation of the future, but life in 2000 is privatized, regimented, and awash in consumer goods. Despite its ideological and literary shortcomings, Bellamy’s blueprint for abundance spurred a “Nationalist” political movement that Robertson follows to its demise in the election of 1896.

William Morris, who wrote *News from Nowhere* (1890) as a riposte to *Looking Backward*, has fared much better in recent scholarly opinion because of his frankly-avowed socialism, his attempt to imbue daily living with beauty, and the relaxed...
fellowship of the quirky villagers his narrator encounters as he boats along the Thames in twenty-first century England. The inhabitants of Nowhere are free of schools, prisons, police, and clergy, and they pursue only work they love. Robertson sets aside Morris’s nostalgic medievalism and the general unreality of his “romance” by invoking Morris’s overriding aim to retrain capitalist readers through (quoting E. P. Thompson) the “education of desire” (130).

Robertson’s chapter on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who began as a Bellamyite lecturer but then pursued a fiercely independent path as an author, lecturer, and lover, is the most complete portrait in his gallery. Gilman’s ideas and experiences crystallized in original writings that stressed women’s need for meaningful work outside the family to advance the species by infusing society with a generalized principle of Motherhood. Her utopian romp Herland (1915) is alternately playful in its dissection of Victorian masculinity and completely serious in its evocation of a cooperative paradise made possible by collective devotion to maternalist ideals. Robertson hits his stride by drawing expertly on the sizable scholarly literature on Gilman and by exploring her work through multiple prisms, including gender relations, late nineteenth-century psychology and sociology, and—without making excuses—Anglo-Saxon racism, anti-Semitism, and eugenics.

Edward Carpenter, a British bohemian socialist, is by far the least familiar of Robertson’s authors to scholars and the public, and also less clearly a utopian in the sense that he never published a fleshed-out futuristic novel. His Whitmanesque poem, “Towards Democracy,” written in 1885 and reissued periodically, as was “Leaves of Grass,” in ever-expanding editions, condemned Victorian respectability and prophesied a millennial future “when men and women all over the earth shall ascend and enter into relation with their bodies—shall attain freedom and joy” (145). Before the word “homosexual” became standard in English usage, Carpenter described the “homogenic” sentiment and touted man-loving men and women-loving women as members of an “intermediate sex” who would lead humans toward the unselfish love of utopia. Carpenter’s nonsectarian socialism spawned admirers and his guilt-free homosexual partnership attracted the curious to his farm in rural Derbyshire; but his work was practically forgotten by the time he died in 1929.

Carpenter’s inclusion in The Last Utopians seems to stem from Robertson’s interest in the present. “Legacy” in the book’s subtitle refers not to these writers’ historical influence but to their potential inspiration for our time. Robertson’s group biography is nested in a broader timeline of utopian literature and practice that features big gaps between outbreaks of utopianism before and after his four writers’ era. Nothing is said, for example, about antebellum Brook Farmers who later became Georgists or Bellamites; little is included about Bellamy’s influence after the 1890s on U.S. socialists, progressives, and New Dealers, or echoes of Gilman in the architecture of “kitchenless houses” or Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonia. Paul Goodman is mentioned once, but his immersion in previous utopian writings and his influence on the 1960s counterculture are not discussed. Robertson comes close to asserting that utopian dreaming has gone missing in recent decades, even though his title is contradicted by his own evidence that utopian fiction revived in the 1970s—and continues to the present—with a wave of feminist and ecological narratives.

The Last Utopians concludes with brief tours of “everyday” or “partial” utopias embodied at present in small-scale intentional communities such as Findhorn and Twin Oaks, educational programs like Waldorf schools, and food activism like the farm-to-table and Slow Food movements. What emerges from the book’s core, however,
is less a vision of a utopia that can be resurrected today than a review of century-old futurism whose contemporary relevance is diminished by sexist, ethnocentric, evolutionist—and, in Bellamy’s case, consumerist–historical baggage that cannot be easily shed at the time-travel gate. Doubts about Robertson’s presentist mission, however, do not detract from his book’s fundamental soundness. Carefully researched and balanced in its approach, *The Last Utopians* contains the most readable and reliable brief introduction to these late nineteenth-century utopian authors.

### Writing Women into Progressive Education


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We know that most teachers during the Progressive Era were women. We also know that progressive educators sought to transform the schools from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach during this period. Yet we know relatively little about women’s role in this effort. Previous biographies of female progressive educators mostly focus on those women who worked directly with leading male progressive figures such as John Dewey. Celeste Parrish, the subject of Rebecca Montgomery’s fascinating *Celeste Parrish and the Educational Reform in the Progressive South*, also studied with Dewey at the University of Chicago. But her similarities with these women end there. Unlike these other better-known female educators such as Jane Addams, Ella Flagg Young, and Elsie Ripley Clapp, Parrish did not come from a privileged background. In fact, she was a Civil War orphan who was plagued by financial challenges her entire career. Although she studied with some of the leading scholars of the era such as Dewey and James Angell at the University of Chicago and Edward B. Titchener at Cornell, her career did not directly benefit from her affiliation with these figures. Parrish’s professional appointments at Randolph-Macon Women’s College, Georgia State Normal School, and Georgia Department of Education came solely through her own efforts, accomplishments, and, as Montgomery convincingly argues, “female networks of support” (16). Finally, and most significantly, Parrish conducted her impressive career in the public schools of the American South, which was riddled with reluctant constituents hesitant to raise taxes to fund education, residual and rising racism, entrenched and retaliatory gender discrimination, and a general aversion to reform. The fact that Parrish managed such an impressive career, while supporting several family members on a small salary, speaks to her perseverance, character, and intellect.