

Historian examines how 3 19th-century authors recoiled from technology

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In a new book, MIT historian Rosalind Williams examines the deep tension authors Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and William Morris felt about technology

CAMBRIDGE, Mass-- In 1890, living in Samoa, Robert Louis Stevenson sent a letter to his fellow writer Henry James, explaining a momentous decision on his part: Disillusioned with a rapidly changing, technologically driven world, Stevenson intended to remain in "exile" on the island, never to return to his native Britain.

"I was never fond of towns, houses, society or (it seems) civilisation," Stevenson wrote, explaining his choice. Indeed, he died in Samoa four years later.

But how exactly did Stevenson, who grew up in a well-off family of Scottish civil engineers, wind up lamenting technological progress and its social effects from a remote island in the South Pacific? And how should we understand this kind of uneasy response to technological advancement more generally?

Those are among the questions MIT historian Rosalind Williams addresses in her new book, "The Triumph of Human Empire," just published by the University of Chicago Press. It is a study of three famous authors — Stevenson, Jules Verne, and William Morris — and their complicated responses to technological and social change: embracing some innovations while lamenting that many changes were diminishing our sense of connection with the natural world and the past, and even creating new social inequities.

Much as the current day is awash in technology-based innovation, so too was the Victorian era: As Verne (1828-1905) noted in an 1891 interview, he had lived through the introduction or popularization of trains, trams, the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, steamship, and commercial electricity.

In the book, Williams analyzes how the works of Verne, Morris (1834-1896), and Stevenson (1850-1894) — while often remembered for their flights of enjoyable fantasy — are actually deeply grounded in this "decisive turning point in the human story," as she writes, when they could see that "human needs, desires, works and actions would more and more dominate the planet" in the future. That also speaks to our world, she believes, as we are confronted with resource scarcity, climate change, dangerous military conflicts, and changes in behavior oriented around technology.

"There is a deep belief in progress of science and technologies that you can see in the 19th century, and is extremely powerful today, but there is also the anxiety that

comes from that belief," says Williams, the Bern Dibner Professor of the History of Science and Technology in MIT's Program in Science, Technology, and Society (STS). "This book is intended to explore that paradox."

'They could see over the horizon'

Significantly, none of these writers had a lifelong, reactionary distaste for technology. Stevenson took pride in his family's engineering feats, for instance, while Verne gained renown for his stories about futuristic submarines, moon landings, and even penned a (posthumously discovered) novel about life in Europe under a radically changed climate. They all shared, Williams asserts, a geographic link around the North Sea that made them especially interested in human exploration though water, but they thought about the impact of many technologies.

"What they're writing about science and technology is astoundingly prescient and true," Williams says. "They could see over the horizon." Taking an approach Williams has used throughout her career, "The Triumph of Human Empire" employs fictional works as a window into the human response to rapid social transformation.

"Science and technologies have [created] astonishing accomplishments, and real material changes," Williams says, "but I'm most interested in how they have an effect on people's lived experiences."

Those rapid changes form a recurring tension in Verne's works, in which technology enables previously unimaginable journeys and feats of exploration, yet traps people in its grip. After all, Pierre Arronax, the scientist narrator of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," (1870), is imprisoned by Captain Nemo aboard the Nautilus — privy to remarkable views of life undersea, but unable to escape.

Morris' response to technology was more explicitly political: Famous for his poetry, in the 1880s he threw himself into left-wing politics, and founded a noted decorative arts company. As a writer, he suddenly started translating Icelandic sagas — as a way, Williams thinks, of aligning himself with a more pristine society than heavily technologized Britain.

"Our civilisation is passing like a blight, daily growing heavier and more poisonous, over the whole face of the country," Morris wrote.

Stevenson's grasp of the global effects of technological change seems to have emerged as he journeyed first to America by steamship and then across the United States by train, in pursuit of his future wife, Fanny, who was then living in California. The trip appears to have been an epiphany for Stevenson, as he realized how many of the world's travelers were not journeying by choice, but as migrants displaced by a rapidly globalizing economy. After a few years in California, he set forth on a sailboat cruise of the South Pacific in search of a healthier climate, new adventures, and new income based on travel writing.

"All of them had to do some sort of pivot," Williams says. "They grew up in one world and had to realize they were living in another one."

"The Triumph of Human Empire" has been praised by colleagues; John Tresch, a historian of science at the University of Pennsylvania, has called the book "engaging, highly informative, and entertaining."

The 'rolling apocalypse'

Williams concludes "The Triumph of Human Empire" by observing that Verne, Morris, and Stevenson all seemed to experience technological change not as a clean break from the past, but as a long-term "rolling apocalypse" in which their cherished worlds were erased over time.

"I think this shows two coexisting visions of history," Williams says. "One is history as progress, but there is also this other vision of history as rolling apocalypse. A lot of us are living with that ambiguity today, which is a very ambivalent moment in history. You can't just say [changes] are good or bad — but we need to understand their complexity."

This means, Williams says, that we should not regard the tales of Verne, Morris, and Stevenson as sheer escapism; that escapism is telling us something about their times.

"In each of their cases, their personal reinventions were as writers, too," Williams observes. "It just shows how important writing is. Part of the subtext of the book is to take art seriously. That's the first place to go to figure out what's going on in the world."

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