

# Totalitarian Opportunism

## Cataclysm, Nietzschean Thought and Cultural Transformation in J. J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923)

### ABSTRACT

This article considers J. J. Connington's 1923 British disaster novel *Nordenholt's Million* as a response to its British inter-war context by examining the novel's presentation of cataclysm as an opportunity for social change. *Nordenholt's Million* utilises an apocalyptic scenario involving soil denitrification as a means of offering an uncompromising critique of conventional government systems and its wider social context. Drawing upon the appeal of extreme politics and displaying affinities with Nietzschean philosophy throughout, *Nordenholt's Million* emphasises the necessity of dictatorship during periods of social and economic difficulty. It uses such circumstances to champion social transformation from what it presents as a state of contemporary decline towards a highly efficient, eugenically constructed post-apocalyptic utopian society.

### KEYWORDS

Disaster Fiction, Apocalypse, Literature, Nietzsche, Inter-war Britain, Eschatology, Utopia, Science Fiction

### BIOGRAPHY

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J. J. Connington's 1923 apocalyptic novel *Nordenholt's Million* is one of several British catastrophe narratives written prior to the Second World War that use disaster as a means to envision social transfiguration and political wish-fulfilment fantasy. Such narratives form a body of secular-eschatology that use disaster narratives to address contemporary social concerns and model social change. Specifically, *Nordenholt's Million* uses a global cataclysm to champion

proto-fascist dictatorship as a solution to weak government and contemporary social and political crises. Displaying affinities with Nietzschean philosophy throughout, it argues that under certain conditions, dictatorship, brutality and population control may be necessary, even advantageous, for the construction of a highly efficient, eugenically shaped utopia. Thus the text offers an invaluable insight into the ways that eschatological narrative structures – dealing with endings and new beginnings – have been adopted by secular writers to present issues around morality, social transformation and “human nature”.

The novel opens with the significantly named narrator, Flint, visiting Wotherspoon, a scientific “dabbler” and writer for the popular press.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the protagonist the highly competent multi-millionaire businessman Stanley Nordenholt, Wotherspoon is inept, focussed more on his writing than on being a proficient experimenter in his studies of nitrifying and denitrifying bacteria. When an unexplained fireball mutates the denitrifying bacteria, Wotherspoon is too inattentive to notice.<sup>2</sup> In short order, the mutated bacteria cause massive crop failure and widespread starvation. Five million English (rather than “Nordenholt’s Million”, which is Nordenholt’s recruiting slogan) are saved only by Nordenholt’s foresight and dynamic response, as he secures resources from America and embraces the calamity as an opportunity to take control of the situation in Britain.<sup>3</sup> After overthrowing the failing British government, Nordenholt establishes himself as dictator, selecting those who are to survive and relocating them to a “Nitrogen Area” in the Clyde Valley.

Nordenholt’s character is significant. In *The Pattern of Expectation*, I. F. Clarke reads *Nordenholt’s Million* as the source of a particular “variant on the disaster story”, the “salvation myth”, which relates “how a man of genius, usually a scientist, saves a remnant of humanity and lays the foundation for a better order of existence”.<sup>4</sup> Although not a scientist, Nordenholt becomes “the architect” of a future civilisation planned and executed by Flint, his friend, and Elsa, his niece.<sup>5</sup> As the narrative progresses, the blight not only precipitates mass starvation but also exposes the degenerative path on which the pre-cataclysmic society had embarked. Hence, Nordenholt’s actions in the Clyde Valley provide a remedy both for the blight and for what are presented as the regressive tendencies of the English. At the novel’s conclusion, a new civilisation emerges and overcomes what the text has framed as the social, political and economic problems of post-war Britain.

1 Connington 1923, 8.

2 Connington 1923, 27.

3 Connington 1923, 45–66.

4 Clarke 1979, 229.

5 Connington 1923, 146.

The anti-democratic ideology actioned by Nordenholt and implemented throughout *Nordenholt's Million* aligns it with what Dan Stone defines as “extremes of Englishness” thought.<sup>6</sup> Exemplified in works by writers and scholars including Oscar Levy, Anthony Ludovici and Karl Sanderson, the “extremes of Englishness” mindset is seen in their works’ embracing of radicalism and illiberalism in relation to British concerns. Although not individually fascist, they come, Stone notes, “very close to satisfying the criteria regarded by scholars as constituting fascism”.<sup>7</sup> They embrace militarism, the defence of Empire, the call for a “masculine renaissance” and eugenics, and demonstrate an engagement with Nietzschean philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Such thematic concerns indicate channels of reasoning that highlight what Stone identifies as a “provenance of proto-fascist ideas in Britain” before the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> Comparably, the response to the inter-war context evidenced in *Nordenholt's Million* asserts that failing democratic governments and a lack of National Efficiency can only be remedied by fascist politics, a solution it presents without irony or satire as wholly desirable. The political content of the novel, which champions autocracy, appears grounded in Nietzschean thought and promotes National Efficiency and eugenics, clearly aligns it with an “extremes of Englishness” ideology. It addresses contemporary British anxieties regarding political systems, industry and industrial relations, and race and degeneration through a proto-fascist lens that sees dictatorship as the only viable response to catastrophe.

## ANTI-DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT IN THE NOVEL

What is clear from the European movement towards anti-democratic political ideologies between the wars is that forceful, decisive leadership was considered by many an appealing alternative to what were popularly perceived as ineffective modes of government.<sup>10</sup> Richard Thurlow explains that many people saw democracy as a “fair weather system” not best suited to times of social or economic difficulty.<sup>11</sup> There was an increased sense that democratic government pandered to the physically weakest and least intellectual in society.<sup>12</sup> In

6 Stone 2002, 2–3.

7 Stone 2002, 3.

8 Stone (2002, *passim*) outlines how works by popular authors arose out of fears of decline in Edwardian Britain. They represent trends in thinking prior to the Second World War that resulted in the popularity of extreme views in British society more broadly.

9 Stone 2002, 2–3.

10 Thurlow 1987, 8.

11 Thurlow 1987, 25.

12 Schapiro 1972, 8.

Britain, the appeal of such ideas emerged in the context of post-war political instability and social unrest and the economic crisis that would eventually lead to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Although living conditions improved after the war, largely due to advances in technology, it was a period of industrial discontent and economic decline arising from demobilisation and the return to a peacetime economy.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as Thurlow notes, Britain's "political system had been unable to check the sharp decline in British power in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras".<sup>14</sup> In *Nordenholt's Million* that decline is averted by the rise of a totalitarian demagogue.

The novel is overtly critical of democratic government, representing it as weak, self-serving and corrupt – a criticism of the political turmoil seen in successive post-war British governments. Overt criticism of democracy begins when Flint is called to a meeting with Nordenholt and the government about the impending catastrophe. The Prime Minister, looking "worn and agitated" but endeavouring "to assume a cheerful and confident air", is revealed to be preoccupied with preserving and consolidating his political position.<sup>15</sup> Without irony, the Prime Minister states that "nothing could be more fatal than a general election".<sup>16</sup> The satire is not lost on the reader. Conscious of the electorate's growing unease as the blight spreads, he sees the crisis requiring a public relations exercise to pacify them. At no point does the Prime Minister comprehend the apocalyptic effects of the mass starvation that will arise from denitrifying the soil. His strategy is reactive rather than proactive, with no priority given to addressing the cause of the growing catastrophe. Furthermore, none of his measures can be implemented quickly, since his cabinet is dispersed, with many members abroad and unable to return. Nordenholt's condemnations of the government's reaction are overt. Describing their plans to address the effects of the ensuing cataclysm as "window dressing [...] to pacify the public", he recognises that politics is placed before action in their plans.<sup>17</sup> Midway through the meeting, Flint is also critical of the government response. He admits that "I had become more and more uneasy. Through it all ran the governing thought that something must be done, which was true enough; but the thing which he proposed to do [...] was to persuade the country that all was well, whereas I felt that the essential matter was to prepare against a practical calamity."<sup>18</sup> This practical perspective allies Flint with Nordenholt, a man of decisive action and foresight who has already secured emergency food stocks and surrounded him-

13 Hamilton 1971, xxii; Thurlow 1987, 8; Smith 1995, 169.

14 Thurlow 1987, 8.

15 Connington 1923, 45.

16 Connington 1923, 46.

17 Connington 1923, 52.

18 Connington 1923, 47.

self by those most able to manage the crisis.<sup>19</sup> As such, Nordenholt fulfils – in fiction at least – what Alastair Hamilton describes as the 1920s’ “craving for decisiveness” by overthrowing the parliamentary system in favour of what is presented as necessary (for human survival) and advantageous authoritarian rule.<sup>20</sup>

In its distinction between governmental prevarication and individual action, the novel differentiates sharply between feigned and genuine authority. As Flint observes Nordenholt, he notes that “while the Premier counterfeited power in his appearance, this unknown [Nordenholt] embodied it”.<sup>21</sup> His determination overwhelms the Prime Minister, who “had been brought face to face with reality; and it had broken him”.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, his dynamism and greater intellect mean that he has already secured a plan for how to deal with the crisis and he gains complete control of the country by leaving the politicians little choice but to conform to his plans. Flint remarks:

I realised what he had done. By sheer force of personality and a clear mind, he had carried us along with him and secured our assent to a scheme which, wildcat though it might appear, seemed the only possible way out of the crisis. He had constituted himself a kind of dictator, though without any of the trappings of the office; and no one dared oppose him. The cold brutality with which he had treated the politicians was apparently justified; for I now saw whither their procrastination would have led us.<sup>23</sup>

Flint’s perspective, as he contrasts Nordenholt with the politicians, echoes the call for a “masculine renaissance” associated with “extremes of Englishness” ideas and connotes fascist ideas of authoritarian leadership. Nordenholt is depicted as an unopposable and necessary force. He is a fictional antidote to the real British politicians who, as Thurlow notes, had failed “to create a society that had adequately compensated for the horror and trauma of the war [and who] produced a mood of frustrated anger which tainted the utopian cravings of many attracted to Fascism”.<sup>24</sup> In positioning Nordenholt as a saviour-figure, the novel acknowledges an increasingly popular contemporary conviction that strong leadership was necessary if the nation was to survive its post-war crises. Once Nordenholt has established his survivors in the Clyde Valley, the novel’s rejection of democracy is explicit: he sends the politicians back to their constituencies to starve.<sup>25</sup>

19 Connington 1923, 52–65.

20 Hamilton 1971, 259.

21 Connington 1923, 50.

22 Connington 1923, 59.

23 Connington 1923, 65.

24 Thurlow 1987, 25.

25 Connington 1923, 72; 106–107.

When he declares himself dictator, Nordenholt clearly has a long-term vision that goes far beyond the immediate crisis. In contrast to the novel's self-serving politicians, Nordenholt works for the survival and control of a minority of the population: a eugenic selection of Britain's most talented and hard-working people. The remainder are sacrificed to the blight. Without Nordenholt's dictatorship, the novel suggests, there can be no effective action, survival or progress; the country, and the population, requires a guiding, driving force, an architect and overseer, embodied by Nordenholt himself.

## THE NIETZSCHEAN IDEA OF THE ÜBERMENSCH AND NORDENHOLT'S MILLION

The “extremes of Englishness” ideology found within *Nordenholt's Million* is embodied to a significant degree by Nordenholt himself. His characterisation draws upon a number of Nietzsche-derived ideas that were in the popular cultural consciousness in the first part of the twentieth century. Anti-democratic political ideologies gained increasing popularity in the inter-war years, a fact reflected in the rise of fascism across Europe following the First World War. What is clear from this movement towards autocracy is that forceful, decisive leadership was considered an appealing alternative to what were increasingly perceived as ineffective modes of government. Both in Europe and in Britain fascism came to be regarded as a positive force that would allow for the creation of a new society following the experience of the First World War.<sup>26</sup> In Britain, a growing number of thinkers were echoing the anti-democratic sentiments emerging across Europe.<sup>27</sup> By adopting a “history of ideas” approach, Stone demonstrates that such disillusionment with democracy was evident in fascist impulses in Britain. These fascist impulses are readily observable in *Nordenholt's Million*. Indeed, an intellectual recourse to extreme responses as means of resolving problems was not uncommon, making *Nordenholt's Million's* depiction of extreme measures to achieve wish fulfilment perhaps appealing to contemporary readers.

Presented as an ideal leader, Nordenholt has much in common with the idea of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, whose popularity had grown through this period of post-war instability. Within the text, society is presented as something to be driven and shaped, to be managed and, at times of crisis, manipulated for its long-term benefit by such a leader. Richard Overy explains that the idea of a “New Order” based on authoritarian rule and active, decisive government in which a dictatorship is better suited to representing a nation was influenced by

26 Thurlow 1987, 25.

27 Thurlow 1987, 8.

“fashionable ideas of personality and charisma, derived from a misreading of Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘superman’ as a political phenomenon”.<sup>28</sup> Fundamental to this is the fact that in *Nordenholt’s Million* clear distinctions are made between “types” of people: the sacrificed majority, workers for the Nitrogen Area, Nordenholt’s “gang” and Nordenholt himself. Such distinctions can be read in Nietzschean terms. As Richard Schacht explains, Nietzsche “takes human beings to fall into one or other of two radically different and widely disparate groups, one very numerous and occupying ‘the human lowlands,’ and the other, ‘very small in number,’ constituting ‘a higher, brighter humanity’ standing far ‘above’ the rest”.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, although Nietzsche states in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that “mankind is a rope, tied between animal and Overman”,<sup>30</sup> indicating a spectrum of human development, he broadly distinguishes between “higher” and “lower” types of individuals in terms of their power and ability.<sup>31</sup>

In *Nordenholt’s Million* the creation of the Nitrogen Area facilitates the separation of the “higher” and “lower” types. While the workers have been subject to eugenically intended selection – they are those deemed “most fitted to survive” out of the “human lowlands” – those who work directly for Nordenholt are distinguished by their exceptional abilities.<sup>32</sup> They represent, in Nietzschean terms, “higher” types “in relation to the general run of mankind”.<sup>33</sup> Schacht notes that in Nietzsche’s writings the *Übermensch* is the apotheosis of these “higher” types.<sup>34</sup> While the *Übermensch* is only prophesied in Nietzsche’s work, he is realised in Nordenholt himself. He is described as “Jagannatha” and a “Titan” worshipped by his “gang”.<sup>35</sup> He is established as “above” the rest of the population. Furthermore, while “Nordenholt’s gang” represent “higher” men who have the potential to develop into the *Übermensch*, Nordenholt is a fully realised “higher man”: an exceptional individual guided by his own will and mastery over himself.<sup>36</sup> His characterisation as the apotheosis of the “higher type” of man ensures that he is a formidable dictator. As Flint remarks, while work progresses in the Nitrogen Area:

behind us, seated at the nucleus of that complex web of activities, there was Nordenholt ... the presence of that cool intelligence behind us had a moral effect upon our minds. He never lessened our initiative, never showed any sign of vexation when

28 Overy 2007, 68.

29 Nietzsche 1968, 4:1053–4:1067.

30 Nietzsche 2006, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1:4.

31 Schacht 2002, 381.

32 Connington 1923, 61

33 See Schacht 2002, 340.

34 Schacht 2002, 349.

35 Connington 1923, 259; 199; 237.

36 See Nietzsche 2002, 1:19 and Diethe 2007, 128.

things began to go wrong. He treated us as colleagues though we knew that he was our master. And under his examination, difficulties seemed to fade away in our hands.<sup>37</sup>

At the centre of his web of plans, Nordenholt's detached "cool intelligence behind" them is a driving force. He is both architect and overseer of the new society he is shaping. Without his dictatorship, the text suggests, there will be no effective action, survival or progress. Thus, his role is to achieve a transfigurative vision in society, which culminates in his founding of a Nietzschean-type aristocracy at the wish-fulfilment conclusion of the novel. As a result of his legacy, the book concludes with the prospect of humanity progressing toward something analogous to the *Übermensch*, and the alternate possibility of human decline if Nordenholt's legacy is not preserved.

In his assumption and articulation of power, Nordenholt displays what Nietzsche identifies as a "master morality" that is above the "herd instinct" that characterises conventional morality. Accordingly, in his reshaping of economic, political and financial landscapes, his execution of this "master morality" associates him with the "higher" type of man who, like "the noble type of man, regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of".<sup>38</sup> His intolerance of those he recognises as lazy or inadequate is essential to his capacity to drive the population according to his will – to achieve a wish-fulfilment society – after the cataclysm. In his ruthless manipulation of others and his outright rejection of democracy, Nordenholt stands in opposition to Judeo-Christian morality. This Judeo-Christian morality is attributed by Nietzsche to the general population and sustains what he calls "slave morality" and its "[q]ualities that serve to alleviate existence for suffering people [...]; pity, the obliging, helpful hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, and friendliness [...]. Here we have the point of origin for that famous opposition between 'good' and 'evil'."<sup>39</sup> According to Nietzsche, those living under "slave morality" view the powerful with dread and assume them to be evil. Conversely, according to "master morality", it is the "good" man who arouses fear and seeks to do what may conventionally be perceived as evil.<sup>40</sup> As Abir Taha confirms, Nietzschean philosophy was a "revolt against the entire humanist tradition of the West: Judeo-Christianity".<sup>41</sup> For Nietzsche, the "slave morality" creates a "herd animal" whose position is perpetuated not only by religion but also by the democratic movement, which he sees as "the inheritance of the Christian movement."<sup>42</sup>

37 Connington 1923, 95–96.

38 Nietzsche 2002, 9:260.

39 Nietzsche 2002, 9:260.

40 Nietzsche 2002, 9:260.

41 Taha 2005, 68.

42 Nietzsche 2002, 5:202.

Aligning himself with a comparably Nietzschean view of democracy “not only as a degenerating form of political organisation, but as equivalent to a degenerating, a waning, type of man, as involving his mediocritizing and deprecation”, Nordenholt champions the rebellion against a morality that promotes the “herding instinct”. He does so by elevating himself and those who work directly under him above the societal “herd”.<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche contends that equality stifles the most capable – those who are potentially “higher types”. Schacht summarises this perspective in Nietzsche’s work, stating that Nietzsche “discerns an order of rank amongst human beings” and “acknowledges their different capabilities”.<sup>44</sup> Hence, Nietzsche contends that for humankind to develop it is essential to “maintain the order of rank in the world”, and to even widen the differences between the strata.<sup>45</sup> Thus “higher types” can only be fostered when their “separation from the herd is sufficiently great to establish a ‘pathos of distance’, a ‘disdain for the concerns of the herd’.”<sup>46</sup>

Whereas for Nietzsche “higher types” are usually overcome by the mediocrity of the herd, Nordenholt facilitates their elevation. Both prior to the blight (by sponsoring those he included in his “gang”) and during the catastrophe, his primary role involves cultivating “the greatest possibilities among the few who have it in them to be exceptions to the rule”.<sup>47</sup> In the future that Nordenholt is creating, there is no place for the “mediocre” man. The union leaders Nordenholt identifies as unwelcome in the Clyde Valley, the religious zealot that distracts the population from work by offering them false hopes and whom Nordenholt has killed and the government officials who offer platitudes to gain popularity with the masses are all identified with the “slave morality” associated with the “herding animal”.<sup>48</sup> Their removal from the Nitrogen Area reflects the end of what the novel presents as the perpetuation of the “mediocre man”, and is essential to the way the book achieves its wish-fulfilment transfiguration.

Nietzsche argued that a morality that endorsed the herding instinct encouraged a false sense of universalism, tending to promote pity for the weak rather than respect for the strong. That is, it endorses the morality that praises mediocre men and says, “be like them! Become mediocre!”<sup>49</sup> For Nietzsche, the only hope for future progress comes instead from a will to power:

To teach man the future of humanity as his WILL, as depending on human will, and to make preparation for vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempt to put an

43 Nietzsche 2002, 5:203.

44 Schacht 2002, 327.

45 Nietzsche 2002, 7:219. Also see Schacht 2002, 327.

46 Schacht 2002, 338.

47 Schacht 2002, 386.

48 Connington 1923, 92; 258; 51.

49 Nietzsche 2002, 9:262.

end to the rightful rule of folly and chance which has hitherto gone by the name of “history”.<sup>50</sup>

Nordenholt’s characterisation echoes such a will to power. Reflecting on his drive, he echoes Nietzsche when he remarks, “There’s that element of risk at the back of all real enjoyment, to my mind.”<sup>51</sup> Establishing himself “above” the “mediocre man”, Nordenholt stands ready for the “vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempt” that will ensure civilisation endures and evolves post-catastrophe according to his “WILL”.

Strength of will is fundamental to Nordenholt’s leadership and echoes Nietzsche’s conception of the “freedom of will” in which “a person who wills [...] commands something inside himself that obeys” and as such is an exceptional individual.<sup>52</sup> The Nietzschean will to power is characterised by an individual’s mastery over oneself, which also “gives him mastery over circumstances, over nature” and elevates him above “all more short-willed and unreliable creatures”.<sup>53</sup> While Nietzsche’s writings are largely existentialist, in *Nordenholt’s Million* such will to power is used, in crisis at least, for mastery over others. Consciously overcoming his own self-doubts by pushing himself as far as possible to establish mastery over himself, Nordenholt’s self-mastery extends to a fascination with an individual’s “breaking strain”, a philosophy which enables him to gauge the commitment, tendencies and abilities of others.<sup>54</sup> Through Nordenholt’s psychological understanding and manipulation, the novel links the wish-fulfilment achieved at its conclusion with the ability to mould and develop other people. Accordingly, Nordenholt’s ability to recognise the “breaking strain” of those around him enables him to designate some “human beings as ‘higher’ in relation to the general run of mankind”.<sup>55</sup> As a result, through Nordenholt, the cataclysm will not only be survived; it will also be employed as a means of eradicating contemporary socio-cultural and political systems, of facilitating eugenic selection and establishing social restructuring. The distinctions of rank between “higher” and “lower” peoples, established by Nordenholt and maintained by Flint after Nordenholt’s death, while based on Nietzschean classifications are, however, un-Nietzschean in terms of their delivery (via Nordenholt’s decision to let 45 million die). Indeed, Nordenholt’s position as manipulator and decision maker has more in common with the interpretation of Nietzsche’s work that would famously be associated with Nazism.

50 Nietzsche 2002, 5:203.

51 Connington 1923, 70.

52 Nietzsche 2002, 1:19.

53 Nietzsche 2006, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II:2.

54 Connington 1923, 72–75.

55 Schacht 2002, 340.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche argues that the main lesson of history is that at exceptional times a man of destiny would use his will to rise above the herd of ordinary men.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, Nordenholt is drawn as such a man, emerging at an exceptional time of crisis to found a dictatorship driven by a “master morality”, which is presented as essential to progress. As Clarke points out, in post-First World War Britain, the “old faith in humanity had given way to a belief in the powers of an exceptional individual, a saviour far above the rest of the community in determination and intelligence, who is the only conciliatory means of achieving the ‘ideal state’”.<sup>57</sup> In its advocacy of dictatorship as a means of efficient government, *Nordenholt’s Million* indicates that survival and cultural transformation can only be achieved through a drive towards National Efficiency untrammelled by conventional morality. The appeal for the reader comes from identification not with the starving millions or even with the Clyde workers suffering to fulfil Nordenholt’s plans, but with the survivors enjoying new, post-catastrophe luxuries. Thus, the text offers an exaggeration of the wish-fulfilment fantasies found in many “cosy catastrophe” science-fiction disaster novels which focus on survival and rebuilding over the tragedy of cataclysm, by presenting the case for selection and efficiency to enable social change.<sup>58</sup>

## THE NATIONAL EFFICIENCY MOVEMENT

Stone argues that the National Efficiency movement influenced many “extremes of Englishness” texts, which sought to respond to fears of degeneration.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, National Efficiency and eugenics were both offered as popular solutions to contemporary political and social crises.<sup>60</sup> In accordance with the movement, *Nordenholt’s Million* emphasises the importance of reinvigorating industrial production, creating new housing and rejecting the capitalist system existing before the blight. Freed from capitalist ideology, survivors are no longer compelled to consider loss of profits over mass starvation and thus work collectively towards social responsibility.

Once the crisis has passed, industrial production is maintained in a rebuilding programme that ensures full employment. The emphasis on National Efficiency contrasts directly with the situation in the Britain of the early 1920s, which was defined by industrial decline, economic downturn and increased unemploy-

56 Eatwell 1995, 8.

57 Clarke 1979, 230.

58 Aldiss/Wingrove 2001, 279.

59 Stone 2002, 10; 116.

60 Stone 2002, 6–7.

ment.<sup>61</sup> Labour strikes led to the loss of 85 million working days in 1921 alone.<sup>62</sup> These strikes had started in 1919 on the Clyde, where mass demonstrations were held in favour of a 40-hour week. In response, the government mobilised the military and civilian volunteers to break up demonstrations.<sup>63</sup> This oppressive response to strikers is significant to *Nordenholt's Million*, which utilises such contemporary events to make its case for political and cultural transformation. Alluding positively to actions taken against Clyde Valley strikers under the Defence of the Realm Act and overtly critical of the strike's context, in which post-war rebuilding was occurring only slowly, the novel justifies action against anyone refusing to work hard. Nordenholt allows no unionisation in his Nitrogen Area and to achieve a suitable level of efficiency continues his manipulation of the population.<sup>64</sup>

Using a rhetoric of fear and fairness Nordenholt manoeuvres the population towards policing itself for maximum efficiency. He asks the workers, "Is it right that a man who will not strain himself in the common service should reap what he has not sown? [...] Or do you believe this community should rid itself of parasites? I leave myself entirely in your hands in the matter."<sup>65</sup> Behind the rhetoric, Nordenholt's motives are clear: "I shall deal with them – and I shall do it by the hand of their own fellows", he admits. By this strategy, Nordenholt quashes disputes over pay and ruthlessly enforced long working hours, and terror becomes a means of securing National Efficiency. As Flint observes, "For the first time, fear in more than one form had entered the Nitrogen Area."<sup>66</sup> Nordenholt's strategy ensures that the Clyde Valley population has no sympathy for the condemned while at the same time it exonerates him from blame. At no point in its description of Nordenholt's tyrannical behaviour does the novel hint at irony: his actions are presented as entirely pragmatic, a "higher morality" that emphasises the necessity of terror as a strategy in the control of population and the securing of National Efficiency.

Any objections the reader may have regarding the means by which Nordenholt secures his achievements are mitigated by the novel's framing his actions as necessary and rational, and by its treatment of his niece Elsa's opposition to his selection of 5 million survivors. In a key argument between Elsa and Flint, the emotional and logical implications of Nordenholt's actions are evaluated.<sup>67</sup> Drawing on conventional gender binaries of the emotional, empathetic female

61 Taylor 2001, 145.

62 Taylor 2001, 163.

63 Rubinstein 2003, 110.

64 Connington 1923, 92.

65 Connington 1923, 111.

66 Connington 1923, 112.

67 Connington 1923, 220–230.

versus the logical, pragmatic male, the text dramatizes their oppositional interpretations of events. While Elsa can only see starving millions and think of dying children, Flint explains that allowing most of the population to die ensures some can be saved.<sup>68</sup> During their debate, Elsa is shown as illogical and emotional, unsuited to making what are presented as rational choices in a time of crisis. In this way, the text associates opposition to Nordenholt's actions with a naïve, illogical and emotional response rather than reasoned thought. Elsa's standpoint, whilst ostensibly appealing, actually serves to strengthen the pragmatic position taken by Nordenholt and Flint.

Nordenholt's banishment of the unskilled and the unwilling from his Clyde area is a social Darwinist strategy that accelerates the natural winnowing of the population begun by the disaster and extended by the virulent influenza that follows the blight. Early in the novel Nordenholt remarks that it was nature that passed sentence on humanity and in this context his own extreme responses are necessary in an extreme situation and are no worse than the ruthlessness of nature itself.<sup>69</sup> With such justifications Nordenholt does not shy away from utilising violence and manipulation to achieve his aims. His propaganda campaign, for example, is designed to raise and then shatter the hopes of the population in order to crush dissent and render the population fractured and frightened. The novel presents the use of propaganda for the purposes of terror as necessary – a manifestation of his “master morality” – rather than cruel. Once the immediate danger has passed, the anti-democratic ideology of the novel is maintained and naturalised: democracy is not restored. Nordenholt tells Flint that in the Nitrogen Area there is “no gabble about democracy, no laws a man can't understand”.<sup>70</sup> Thus, *Nordenholt's Million* promotes autocratic leadership as essential for, and central to, its own form of social progress. As is common amongst pre-war secular disaster novels, catastrophe facilitates what is presented as positive social change.<sup>71</sup> Following the cataclysm, Nordenholt's direction of the “collective attempts in rearing and educating” results in “children who throng [the streets of the newly built cities] happier and more intelligent than their fathers in their day”. These children “are also part of our work”, Flint explains, “taught and trained in the ideals that inspired us”.<sup>72</sup> Their education signals the ongoing social aims of Nordenholt's legacy.

68 Connington 1923, 220–223.

69 Connington 1923, 62.

70 Connington 1923, 138.

71 Woodward 2017, 43–47, provides an overview of how pre-war science fiction disaster novels used imagined cataclysms to realise wish-fulfilment fantasies.

72 Connington 1923, 198.

## DEGENERATION AND EUGENICS AS THEMES WITHIN *NORDENHOLT'S MILLION*

Contemporaneous fears of degeneration are central to the novel's advocacy of population selection and the necessity for control of that population by "higher men".<sup>73</sup> Importantly, the threat to human survival and development is not only external, in the form of the blight, but also internal, arising from what the text presents as the nature of humanity. Nordenholt sends Flint to London to understand human nature deprived of the veneer of civilisation. This insight is invaluable for developing Flint's recognition of the need for controlling the surviving population until it can be shaped into a less-base people. Nordenholt tells him, "I want you to see what it [human nature] amounts to when you take off the leash. Of course the brute is the basis."<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, an entire chapter of *Nordenholt's Million* is dedicated to educating Flint by emphasising the fragility of civilisation. As Nicholas Ruddick notes, this chapter – "Nuit Blanche", with its sense of a night that is never fully dark – is a "phantasmagoria of embodied anxieties", chief among which is the vision of humanity consumed in crisis by its baser instincts.<sup>75</sup> "Nuit Blanche" charts Flint's journey amongst a starving population turning to cannibalism, ritualism and barbarism and, as such, comments critically on human nature and the tenuous façade of civilisation. Flint's passage into the Thanatotic burning landscape of London highlights the horrors "at the roots of humanity" and draws attention to humanity's links to its animal ancestry. Flint laments that the "trail of the brute's over everything" and on his return, Nordenholt emphasises that this must be taken into account as plans are made for the future development of civilisation.<sup>76</sup>

Cumulatively the encounters during "Nuit Blanche" emphasise that the catastrophe has exposed people's hidden natures. The collapse of law and the onset of mass starvation outside the Nitrogen Area create unrepressed, animalistic individuals. As a result of his experiences of barbarity during his long night in London, Flint understands that "the old civilisation went its way, healthy on the surface, full of life and vigour [...] yet all the while, at the back of it there lurked in the odd corners the brutal instincts, darting into view at times for a moment and then returning into the darkness which was their home".<sup>77</sup> While these traits are associated with the entire population (just as they had been in H. G. Wells's 1898 disaster novel *The War of the Worlds* in its subtler treatment of the same ideas), here they are linked directly with foreigners (a Jew stere-

73 See Stone 2002, *passim* and MacKenzie 1990, 150.

74 Connington 1923, 149.

75 Ruddick 1994, 117.

76 Connington 1923, 182.

77 Connington 1923, 181.

otypically obsessed with gold, a German “colony” that has crucified a victim, and a “gigantic Negro” practising Voodoo) and a decadent aristocracy (Lady Angela, a degenerate aristocrat described as “rotten to the core”).<sup>78</sup> As Ruddick notes, London is populated by those who “have been masquerading as civilised human beings”, suggesting that “For Connington [...] the new urgency for survival in the moral ruins of the post-war necessitates a hunt for scapegoats, rather than a period of introspection that might locate and confront the source of the catastrophe within.”<sup>79</sup> However, it is in its introspection, its attempt to “locate and confront the source of the catastrophe within”, that *Nordenholt’s Million* provides scapegoats in order to justify its eugenic agenda and achieve its wish-fulfilment conclusion.

The implicit eugenic objective of Nordenholt’s strategy is the elimination of those judged to be degenerate: the lazy, the weak, foreigners and the upper class. However, as “Nuit Blanche” makes clear, another form of selection is crucial to Nordenholt’s plans: selection based upon efficiency is also fundamental. Eugenics is not associated solely with selecting the best people as progenitors of future generations; it also informs how different vocations are classified as worthy or unworthy.

## VOCATION, EFFICIENCY AND ELITISM

The vocations *Nordenholt’s Million* presents as most valuable are practical, particularly relating to industry and science. Although Nordenholt is a businessman rather than a scientist, his decisions and actions are predicated on National Efficiency and scientific rationalism and he gathers scientists around him in order to facilitate his actions as saviour, and initiator, of the novel’s overall wish-fulfilment rebirth fantasy. Indeed, the catastrophe is overcome by scientific innovation and the sacrifice of selfless scientists. The “better order” offered by *Nordenholt’s Million* is based on a society governed by a dictator whose policies are implemented by a scientific and industrial elite composed of the most committed and productive in society. In this respect, the text is a departure from Nietzschean thinking. Where for Nietzsche great importance is placed on artistic creativity in relation to “higher men”, here scientific discovery and efficiency are central to the creation of “higher types”. Progress, the novel affirms, is secured by the elevation of the competent in order to shape an efficiency-based society. As Martin Pugh notes, champions of National Efficiency complained of the decay of parliamentary systems and the incompetence of mature party politicians in tackling complex issues. They sought to reduce the role of parliament

78 Connington 1923, 159–178.

79 Ruddick 1994, 117.

by replacing elected authorities with experts and successful entrepreneurs “capable of promoting the national interest”.<sup>80</sup> This strategy is precisely that adopted by Nordenholt. The key quality of those he enlists into his elite “was efficiency”, resulting in an aristocracy formed from the “super-excellence of the human material in which he [Nordenholt] had dealt”.<sup>81</sup>

Unconcerned with egalitarianism, the novel offers a clear distinction between an emergent aristocracy and the general population. The leaders and masses do not mix.<sup>82</sup> As in Nietzsche’s works, both the “herd” and the “higher” types are necessary elements of society, but their separation – a “pathos of distance” – is essential. If the “higher” is sufficiently distanced from the “herd”, they may bring about the enhancement of life.<sup>83</sup> This Nietzschean aristocratic division is akin to the separation at the conclusion of *Nordenholt’s Million*. Nordenholt’s aristocracy resides in the new city of Asgard, named after the realm of the Norse gods, where the elite design the cities of the future. These cities are built with the skill and sweat of the labouring class, whose attention and energy are syphoned into their construction.<sup>84</sup> They are utopian places, combining practicality with beauty. Flint refers to the “faint and perfumed breezes bringing their subtropical warmth as they blow across the valley; and [he says] I hear, faint and afar, the sounds of music mingling with the rustling of trees”.<sup>85</sup> The suggestion of warmth, beauty and sweet-smelling air in these final descriptions creates from an eschatological perspective a perversion of the idea of a New Jerusalem. More secularly, it is a utopian vision that forms a further justification for the novel’s advocacy of totalitarianism.

The new cities of *Nordenholt’s Million* constitute a wish-fulfilment fantasy of urban efficiency and hygiene for the survivors involved in Nordenholt’s remaking of Britain. The city of the inter-war years, as Thomas Linehan reveals, was a place of “squalor, deprivation and disease, poisoned environments which brutalised the inhabitants, destroyed their health and invariably imperilled the survival of the race”.<sup>86</sup> This was hardly the country fit “for heroes to live in” promoted by Lloyd George in 1918, and by 1923, and the publication of *Nordenholt’s Million*, there was no sign that his vision was going to be achieved.<sup>87</sup> Accordingly, informed by post-war zeitgeist, *Nordenholt’s Million* advocates pro-

80 Pugh 2006, 15.

81 Connington 1923, 236–237.

82 Connington 1923, 112.

83 Schacht 2002, 338.

84 Connington 1923, 283.

85 Connington 1923, 286.

86 Linehan 2000, 248.

87 Pugh 2009, 60.

to-fascist ideas while drawing on eugenic perspectives for the improvement of humanity. Although it finds radically different expression, the post-First World War disenchantment evident in *Nordenholt's Million* would also permeate Sydney Fowler Wright's inter-war disaster novels *Deluge* (1927) and *Dawn* (1929), although, unlike *Nordenholt's Million*, they advocate a complete rejection of modernity in favour of a re-assertive middle-class patriarchy controlling the land, working classes and women. *Nordenholt's Million's* non-democratic, highly efficient utopia built on the subjugation of the few and the sacrifice of the many is informed by a desire to overcome and where necessary oppress what it perceives as "human nature". In keeping with its "extremes of Englishness" themes, strong leadership is shown as necessary in the novel's emphasis on the benefits of dictatorial rule. Such a positive representation of dictatorship, even one apparently justified by catastrophe, could only have been written before the Second World War. Nevertheless, it reveals how it is possible for some to accept an isolationist, anti-democratic and anti-liberal environment as a desirable means of overcoming contemporary social and economic anxieties.

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