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Discovering the Living Fossil Short Story in the Late Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT
The founders of cryptozoology in the 1950s implied that their objects of investigation, animals elsewhere presumed mythical or extinct, were beyond respectable science. Back in the late eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson had been by no means idiosyncratic in believing that American fossils represented living animals. The subsequent near-consensus regarding extinction was, moreover, complicated in the mid-nineteenth century by evidence that early humans lived alongside mammoths, and by views that myths about monsters were based on human encounters with prehistoric creatures. Such creatures were soon incorporated into a genre of short horror stories. The origin of this familiar genre has rarely been considered in detail. Firstly, I explain, in a transatlantic context, why the ‘living fossil short story’ emerged when it did. Next, I argue that these stories displayed simultaneous urges, firstly, to disturb the natural order by putting the monstrous inhabitants of deep time in contact with contemporary humans, and secondly, to interrogate the directionality of nature by asking whether manly, modern St Georges can return these animals to extinction. I focus on two key examples written by American authors: Charles Jacobs Peterson’s ‘The Last Dragon’ (1871) and Wardon Allan Curtis’s ‘The Monster of Lake LaMetrie’ (1899).

KEYWORDS
Crypto-fiction; prehistoric animals; Peterson’s Magazine; Pearson’s Magazine; Charles Jacobs Peterson; Wardon Allan Curtis; cryptozoology; degeneration; masculinity; extinction

Introduction

An individual or a small group of people find themselves in an isolated location; they encounter a surviving specimen of a dangerous prehistoric animal (a ‘living fossil’); they flee from it, and eventually kill it. Variations on this rudimentary pulp plot structure will be so familiar to consumers of Syfy channel reruns and horror paperbacks that it is hard to imagine the formula needing to be invented at all. Nonetheless, it emerged in American and European short stories of the late nineteenth century, and, despite the formula’s familiarity and the vast quantity of scholarship on palaeontology’s relationship with imaginative literature (Debus 2006; O’Connor 2007), its origins have received little concerted attention. The living fossil short story genre started to solidify around seventy years before cryptozoology, the fringe science concerned with mysterious animals, was...
founded in the wake of Bernard Heuvelmans’s book *Sur la piste des bêtes ignorées* (1955), translated as *On the Track of Unknown Animals* (1958). While the potential survival of large animals found as fossils had been a contested subject in late eighteenth-century science, Heuvelmans’s urge to launch a new field demonstrated how far from mainstream science this belief had drifted. In Peter Dendle’s words (2006, 201), cryptozoologists adopt a ‘spirit of iconoclasm’ in their maverick search for *bêtes ignorées* ‘in a world many perceive as having lost its mystique’.

Justin Mullis (2019, 240) notes that ‘crypto-fiction’ began in the nineteenth century, although his important discussion of the subject focuses on early twentieth-century literary works that, he argues, inspired the claims subsequently propounded by marginalised cryptozoologists. I will go back further, showing how the literary genre itself first materialised as an imaginative exploration of new developments in comparatively mainstream palaeontology. Authors of the earliest stories about living fossils – many of them published in American popular magazines – courted verisimilitude by highlighting salient research on human interactions with prehistoric animals in the geologically recent past, based both on palaeoanthropology and on naturalised interpretations of myths. My use of the term ‘living fossil’ in reference to these texts has the disadvantage of bypassing the useful coinage ‘crypto-fiction’, but the advantage of adopting a designation introduced by Charles Darwin himself (1859, 107). More importantly, my use of an older designation is also an attempt to avoid backdating cryptozoology. The scientific community’s consensus against the recent survival of large prehistoric animals was not quite as robust in the late nineteenth century as it would become in the mid-to-late twentieth, when the fringe science of cryptozoology was formalised.

While the scientific context I discuss explains the topicality of these stories, it does not explain the generic conventions authors adopted. After outlining the genre’s origins, I argue that these stories exhibited two simultaneous urges: firstly, to disturb the natural order by putting the monstrous inhabitants of deep time in contact with contemporary humans; and secondly, to interrogate the progressive directionality of nature by asking whether humans, usually white men, can act as modern St Georges and return these animals to extinction. Various treatments of this theme were aired during the late nineteenth century, but my analysis focuses on two major examples by American writers: Charles Jacobs Peterson’s ‘The Last Dragon’ (1871), published under the name Harry Danforth, and Wardon Allan Curtis’s ‘The Monster of Lake LaMetrie’ (1899). The latter is well-known but rarely given serious scholarly attention; the former, despite its significance, has mostly passed unnoticed. These texts are eminently instances of the way living fossil stories often served as a space for reasserting strenuous ideals of white masculinity elsewhere threatened by the changing conditions of urban modernity. Ridding the rugged frontiers and imperial outposts of their anachronistic monsters, the exemplary male protagonists of tales like ‘The Last Dragon’ act as the vanguards of civilisation, enforcing evolutionary progress in real time. Gloomier stories like ‘The Monster of Lake LaMetrie’, however, shun complacency about the inevitability of this progress, predicting dire consequences for those who fail to live up to this pure and vigorous masculine ideal.
'The Economy of Nature'

No historian of early American palaeontology omits to mention that Thomas Jefferson, at the end of the eighteenth century, opposed the growing pressure to declare animals like the mammoth extinct. As Jefferson declared in Notes on the State of Virginia (Jefferson 1787, 83), such was ‘the economy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct’. Still nurturing this deistic worldview at the dawn of the next century, Jefferson asked Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to look out for living specimens on their famous westward journey (Barrow 2009, 19). Nonetheless, most naturalists were becoming persuaded by the work of the French anatomist Georges Cuvier, who ruled out the survival of fossil beasts and showed that they had lived in the profoundly distant past. In the young United States, the new principle of extinction soon proved politically convenient. The disappearance of mammoths and mastodons in the struggle for existence provided savants and legislators with a precedent for population changes in North America, thus naturalising the displacement and elimination of Native Americans (Sayre 2001, 77; Qureshi 2013, 268–72). British geologist Charles Lyell, in his epochal The Principles of Geology (1830–33, vol. 2, 175), anticipated ‘the speedy extermination of the Indians of North America . . . in the course of a few centuries’.

By the 1830s, with extinction so integral to the thriving earth sciences, and possessing such expansionist expediency in the treatment of Indigenous peoples, assertions that fossil animals might survive were rarely uttered in the transatlantic scientific community. In his theistic treatise On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God as Manifested in the Creation of Animals (Kirby 1835, vol. 1, 36), distinguished British entomologist William Kirby admitted that his ‘hypothesis of a subterranean metropolis’ where giant reptiles like Megalosaurus lurked would appear ‘improbable and startling’. Few adopted his ‘hypothesis’, but a related case, that of the sea serpent, was a topical subject of mid-century debates over living fossils. Lyell himself, whose own view of the economy of nature was riddled with extinction but free from any linear directionality, investigated sea serpent reports during his trips to North America in the 1840s. His colleague Richard Owen, however, refuted claims that these so-called serpents were Mesozoic reptiles like the long-necked, flippered Plesiosaurus. As Sherrie Lyons (2009, 44) argues, Owen’s rejection of plesiosaurian sea serpents attested, firstly, to his anti-Lyellian conviction that life’s history was progressive, leading to more and more complex animals, and, secondly, to his desire to devalue judicial evidence, like ‘eyewitness accounts’, in favour of the exclusive value of ‘corroborating specimens’ available for analysis by anatomists. While anecdotes of sightings proliferated, no satisfactory specimens were forthcoming.

If the survival of mammoths and megalosaurs seemed improbable to most metropolitan savants, the former proximity of these animals to humans was more debatable. For thinkers like Jefferson, Native American lore, particularly that of the Delaware people, had been employed as evidence to determine the status of the mammoth (Sayre 2001, 74). Even in the mid-nineteenth century, when the dust of extinction had settled, the common notion that all prehistoric animals disappeared before humans arrived clashed with an urge to explain the religious beliefs of colonial subjects by euhemerising or naturalising them. For example, in 1836, tentatively – and, in 1844, more confidently – geologist Hugh Falconer proposed that the giant Indian tortoise Colossochelys had
survived into the human period, inspiring the chelonian kurma avatar described in the Hindu Vishnu Purana (Chakrabarti 2020, 112). The notion of deep human antiquity, and thus contemporaneity with Pleistocene animals like mammoths, was taken more seriously in the late 1850s and accepted by all but the most conservative investigators by the end of the 1860s (Manias 2018, 20–21). This evidence empowered more ambitious claims. Charles Carter Blake, speaking to the London Ethnological Society (Blake 1863, 168–69) about ‘native traditions of the rapports which early man once bore to the extinct animals’, suggested that Indigenous Brazilian stories of a creature called the ‘cayporé’ referred to ‘an extinct ape (Protopithecus antiquus)’ which may ‘have lived down to the human period’.

An even more spectacular hypothesis was posited from the 1850s onward by British scientific artist Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins. The transcultural ubiquity of dragon legends, he contended, stemmed from encounters between humans and surviving Mesozoic reptiles, especially pterodactyls (Bramwell and Peck 2008, 29) (Figure 1). The similarity between dragons and fossil reptiles found during the first half of the century, chiefly in Britain, had often been remarked upon (O’Connor 2007, 97, 157–58), with few taking the connection to the literal-minded extreme promulgated by Hawkins, who saw the similarities between pterodactyl anatomy and archaic representations of dragons as too close to be a coincidence. When he moved to the East Coast of the United States in 1868, he took his lucrative lectures on “The Age of Dragons” with him. Auditors at Yale College (“The Scientific Course of Lectures” 1870, 96), for instance, heard his startling explanation for the strange coincidence that ‘the idea of Dragons’ as ‘flying reptiles was the same among all people’, from Britain to China.

Thus, in the 1860s, the notion of humans interacting with prehistoric animals was newly credible. Of course, humans had imaginatively interacted with these animals for decades in cartoons, caricatures, and popular science writing. Crucially, however, these encounters were either comical or facilitated by plot devices like dreams, necromancy, and reincarnation, as Ralph O’Connor’s survey of this material demonstrates (2007, e.g. 91–92, 253–54, 429). O’Connor (407) also argues that these devices were a major factor in the emergence of books like Jules Verne’s pioneering Voyage au centre de la Terre (1864), in which more plausibly realistic scenarios framed meetings between modern humans and long-extinct reptiles like the Plesiosaurus, surviving as living fossils. Interest in human contemporaneity with prehistoric animals likely sped up this process, as evidenced by Verne’s addition of several chapters on palaeoanthropology in 1867 (Debus 2006, 30–31). His scientific romance was undoubtedly a key influence on the emergence of palaeontological romance fiction in general, although Verne’s ‘fantastic voyage’ narrative of wonder, discovery, and didactic exposition differs structurally and tonally from the formula that would come to characterise the living fossil short story.

‘Misshapen, Undeveloped, Terrible, Gigantic’

Vivid palaeontological ideas circulated with increasing frequency in the American press in the years following the Civil War. In November 1868, for instance, Hawkins completed his spectacular reconstruction of the bipedal New Jersey dinosaur Hadrosaurus, which was displayed at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and lauded in newspapers across the country (Bramwell and Peck 2008, 37). Prehistory was making for ideal
content in the popular magazines: readers of the August 1869 issue of the Cincinnati-based *Ladies' Repository* were treated to articles both on ‘Extinct Animals’ (1869a) and on ‘Fabulous Monsters’: the latter, asserting the ‘received opinion that man lived on the earth at the same time with the mammoth’ (1869b, 146), recalled that ‘Mr. Waterhouse Hawkins, in his lecture on the Age of Dragons, argues that the wing-fingered, dragon-like pterodactyle [sic]’ was ‘fought with by man’, noting also Falconer’s theories on the Indian fossil tortoise and Blake’s on the Brazilian ape (147). In May 1870, the *Marysville Tribune* even reported the capture of a creature resembling the ‘mythical dragon’, a ‘savage monster – the last remnant of the first age’ (Lemay 2019, 55).

Figure 1. Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins. Photograph by Maull & Polyblank, 1862, Wellcome Collection. Hawkins argued that dragon legends were inspired by humans encounters with pterodactyls.
Harry Danforth’s short story about a clash with a prehistoric reptile taking place somewhere on the West African coast emerged in this climate. Danforth was a pseudonym of Charles Jacobs Peterson (Hayne 1969, 516): prolific literary businessman, centre-right political commentator, former colleague of Edgar Allan Poe, and author of military histories (Figure 2). ‘The Last Dragon’ was published in the October 1871 issue of his Philadelphia-based Peterson’s Magazine, a competitor of the Ladies’ Repository (Figure 3). The periodical, boasting an impressive circulation of 140,000 in 1869, was chiefly a middle-class women’s lifestyle magazine, although its fictional content sometimes included stories of adventurous masculine gallantry, especially following the Civil War (Cronin 1995, 272). As such, although an outlier in Peterson’s content, bookended by a Frances Hodgson Burnett serial, romantic short stories, and various fashion plates, ‘The Last Dragon’ was not entirely anomalous. The journal reviewed works on science: the next issue even contained a review of Lyell’s Student’s Elements of Geology (“Review of New Books” 1871). Notably, the cheap London

Figure 2. Daguerreotype of Charles Jacobs Peterson, c. 1852. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.2013.106. ‘The Last Dragon’ appeared under Peterson’s pseudonym, Harry Danforth.
Figure 3. The wrappers of the October 1871 issue of Peterson’s Magazine containing ‘The Last Dragon’ as well as a serial instalment of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s The Tragedy of a Quiet Life.
Every Week published an anonymous, anglicised version of ‘The Last Dragon’ on 1 November 1871, the American version’s ‘Club’ setting (Peterson 1871, 278) becoming a ‘tavern’ (“The Last Dragon” 1871, 285) and a maritime reference to ‘Boston’ (278) replaced by ‘Bristol’ (286). Despite the ubiquity of piracy in American print at the time, it is probable – given the slightly earlier publication date, Danforth’s byline, several unconvincing localisations, and the thrifty nature of Every Week – that the Peterson version is the original.

The ‘club story’ (Clute 2023) framing of ‘The Last Dragon’, an anecdote recounted to acquaintances, made for precisely the kind of immaterial testimony Richard Owen was attempting to delegitimise. The speaker, Charley Stone, nonetheless establishes the tale’s feasibility with impeccable theoretical support. He begins (Peterson 1871, 278) by explaining that the ‘Saurian’ fossils found in any ‘geological museum’ confirm the existence of dragons, adding that ‘we know that … the Siberian mammoth, once supposed to have been Pre-Adamite, survived until the human species appeared’. To argue that dragons, too, lived into the human era, Charley employs Hawkinsian evidence about the similarity of the ‘Saurian’ to ‘Chinese and Japanese’ dragon art (Peterson was unlikely to have missed Hawkins’s Hadrosaurus, erected in the city three years prior). Finally, he suggests that, if dragons survive, they will surely live in ‘primeval regions’ like ‘Africa’, ‘vast morasses, which, geologically speaking, are like the earlier formations’. This was an extrapolation based on the slippage between deep past and colonial present sometimes used in contemporary geological thought (Guha 1998).

The African continent would regularly be depicted in the early twentieth century as an atavistic space in which prehistoric animals like the dinosaur Mokélé-Mbêmbe might survive (Guimont 2019, n.p.), but in Peterson’s day it was only recently acquiring these derogatory connotations. In the 1850s and 1860s, Africa had been the stage for a flood of what Patrick Brantlinger (1988) calls ‘nonfictional quest romances’ in which ‘Victorian St. Georges’ like missionary David Livingstone battled ‘the armies of the night’ (180–81), the continent becoming a guilty projection of colonists’ own ‘savage and shadowy impulses’ (195). Published when the enduring myth of the ‘Dark Continent’ was being constructed but before the imperial Scramble for Africa formally began, Danforth’s (or, rather, Peterson’s) story relied on readers’ expectations that Africa was a continent of stunted growth. ‘The Last Dragon’ takes place ‘a good way south of the Bight of Benin’, when storyteller Charley was ‘supercargo’ on the ship of one ‘Bob Cushman’. Blown miles off course, they drop anchor on the coast and Charley and Bob go ashore for water. When they return, they see ‘a vast monster’ (279), the description of which suggests a Plesiosaurus or the then-recently unearthed American Elasmosaurus, heading for the ship upon which ‘Bob’s pretty wife’ has remained (280). They fire at the predatory beast before it can reach the ship, finally hitting it in a ‘vital entrance’ to the heart, killing it, but they fail to retrieve any ‘trophy’ of the reptile as proof. Bob’s sleeping wife is saved before she even learns of the danger.

Calling this the urtext of the living fossil short story would be misguided, but it is the oldest unambiguous use of the generic formula I have found in English so far. Clearly, its influences were not just palaeontological, going back to Greek legends of Perseus’s slaying of the monster Cetus to save the beautiful Andromeda (here Bob’s wife, asleep at the rock), and the Christian story of St George and the Dragon – fitting Peterson’s penchant for the ‘chivalric ideal’ (Hayne 1969, 516). More contemporaneously, “The Last
Dragon’ was indebted to stories about encounters with fierce animals in frontier or colonial settings. For instance, compare it with ‘The Crocodile Battery’, a purportedly true story published in Charles Dickens’s immensely successful journal *Household Words*. Attributed to ‘Peppé’ (1851, 540), this story about a man-eating crocodile in north-west India compares these modern reptiles to ‘old stories of dragons’ as well as ‘mososaurians [sic], hyleosaurians, and plesiosaurians’. Peppé’s pleasure in demolishing the crocodile using gunpower is the same as Charley’s joy in being the one who, as he triumphantly declares, ‘shot THE LAST DRAGON’ (280).

The dragon’s alterity is established by its chimeric body: it is a ‘nameless shape’, ‘[h]alf crocodile, half-elephant’ with a ‘neck like a giraffe’s’ and ‘legs ... more like fins’ – ‘[m] isshapen, undeveloped, terrible, gigantic’ (279). Even its movements are incongruous, rolling through mud then ‘awkwardly’ swimming (279) while bobbing its neck in ‘undulatory movements’ (280). Evidently the survival of this composite creature upsets any natural order based on concrete categories. As Harriet Ritvo (1997) has memorably shown, nineteenth-century classifiers strained to make sense of a cacophony of fossils and modern mutations as well as bizarre animals shipped from colonial territories to imperial metropoles. In the first half of the century, the discordant characteristics combined in extinct reptiles like plesiosaurs and elasmosaurs (British and North American, rather than West African, genera) had drawn palaeontologists uncomfortably close to hoaxers, while the notion that prehistoric animals were ‘monsters’ was commonplace (O’Connor 2007, 328–29). Charley’s unfalsifiable story of a monstrous plesiosaur is, itself a potential tall tale, but the symbolism is clear: his bullets restore temporal and categorial balance to nature by eliminating a threatening aberration.

As Chris Manias (2018, 18) notes, once the antiquity of humanity was established, it became necessary to understand how humans had survived amongst sabre-toothed cats and giant bears. Many authors straightforwardly explored this question in fiction set during the Stone Age (Ruddick 2009), but the potential to use modern humans as characters offered different attractions, namely the chance to pit primeval brawn against nineteenth-century brain. ‘The Last Dragon’ functioned as an experiment on this question, replacing the Pleistocene predators known to have lived alongside humans with a Mesozoic reptile loosely tied to Hawkins’s dragon theory. Marianne Sommer (2007) discusses the development of a related dynamic in Edgar Rice Burroughs’s twentieth-century romances, which she sees as placing resourceful white men in prehistoric lost worlds to test how they stand up to the challenge. Many decades prior, in a few short pages, ‘The Last Dragon’ presented several models of masculine response to the threat of a nightmarish past encroaching on the manly rationality of the present. Bob’s crew react poorly (Peterson 1871, 280), ‘cowering’ or having ‘leaped overboard’. Charley sympathetically reflects that ‘reason and courage, in what were otherwise brave and intelligent fellows’, had ‘given way in the face of this appalling and unheard-of danger’. Indeed, the notion of failure challenges his own nerve: ‘The vision of what would happen there almost unmanned me’. Luckily, the monster’s approach ‘stimulated me afresh’; Bob pressures Charley to make a hasty shot, but he keeps calm until he discovers a weak spot – coolly passing the test of masculinity nestled within the feminine pages of Peterson’s.

This simple but effective generic template, with its in-built interest in the prowess of white manliness under extreme conditions, only caught on slowly. Prehistoric animals
were appearing more regularly in fiction, but usually in uncanny utopias like Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871), or in more farcical situations, as in Robert Duncan Milne’s two-part ‘The Iguanodon’s Egg’, published in the San Francisco *Argonaut* in April 1882. Authors’ reliance on readers’ willingness to accept extravagant scenarios was buttressed during the 1880s, when fantastic adventures began to form a more accepted part of the reading material of adult men (Vaninskaya 2008). Palaeontological a tales like Phil Robinson’s ‘The Last of the Vampires’ (1893) in the *Contemporary Review*, H. G. Wells’s ‘Æpyornis Island’ (1894) in the *Pall Mall Budget*, and Jack London’s ‘A Relic of the Pliocene’ in *Collier’s Weekly* (1901) became, therefore, increasingly commonplace. The rise of affordable illustrated magazines like the British *Strand* and American *McClure’s* in the 1890s was the genre’s main catalyst: formulaic, irony-tinged living fossil short stories were ideal content for this middlebrow, high-circulation format. The transatlantic living fossil genre also developed in tandem with a rise in claims, some of them high-profile, that prehistoric animals still lurked in the colonial frontiers of the American West, Alaska, South America, and Africa. Indeed, news items of this kind in the American popular press regularly read like verisimilar short stories themselves (Lemay 2019, e.g. 119–25, 271, 312). This was no coincidence, given the ongoing adoption of techniques from fiction to draw mass readerships to the modern ‘New Journalism’ (Roggenkamp 2005). In this new context, highly favourable to authors of popular adventure fiction, darker and stranger permutations of the living fossil story took shape.

**‘The Possession of a Too Active Brain’**

Wardon Allan Curtis’s ‘The Monster of Lake LaMetrie’, published in British and American editions of *Pearson’s Magazine* in September 1899, played around with the ossifying landmarks of the genre, interrogating the same concerns as ‘The Last Dragon’ but adding a bizarre twist that has made it mildly notorious. The narrative is an epistolary diary written by the scientist James McLennegan, who has brought Edward Framingham, an ill young man, with him to the healthy mountain air of Wyoming. They are investigating a remote lake that – based on a theory posited by John Cleves Symmes Jr. back in 1818 (Sinnema 2012) – might lead to an underground world of surviving prehistoric lifeforms. We have already heard Kirby propose a related hypothesis, although it was Verne’s scientific romance that gave subterranean prehistoric worlds their enduring currency. Symmes’s theory turns out to be correct and an aquatic reptile, *Elasmosaurus*, emerges from the lake. Oddly, when McLennegan hastily severs ‘the top of its head’, he sees that the creature’s wound is ‘preparing to heal’ (Curtis 1899, 246). The invalid Framingham dies, but McLennegan, noting that the self-healing *Elasmosaurus* possesses a skull ‘the size and shape of the brain-pan of an ordinary man’ (246), transplants Framingham’s brain into it. The experiment is initially successful, with Framingham’s mind retaining consciousness and controlling the *Elasmosaurus* body. Eventually, however, the reptile takes over the human. McLennegan’s diary is discovered by a US army captain who killed the Framingham-*Elasmosaurus* – after it was seen ‘rending the body’ of McLennegan (251).

While ‘The Last Dragon’ had been a fairly unusual fit in *Pearson’s*, deadly monsters were basic ingredients in the male-oriented *Pearson’s*, the American edition of which had
launched too late to include Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (serialised in the British version in 1897). Reprinted in Sam Moskowitz’s anthology *Science Fiction by Gaslight* (1968), ‘Lake LaMetrie’ has been a curiosity rather than the subject of much analysis. Curtis’s history is fairly obscure: born ‘on an Indian reservation in New Mexico’ (“The Lounger” 1904, 9) although not, apparently, of Indigenous ancestry, and a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1889 (“Personals” 1892–93, 266), he was working as a journalist in this city around the turn of the century (Figure 4). The antagonist of ‘Lake LaMetrie’ is ostensibly the long-necked reptile unearthed in New Jersey in 1868, but the story’s Wyoming setting suggests that Curtis’s journalistic eye was on more newsworthy material. Tendentiously based on the discovery of a *Brontosaurus* bone in Wyoming, a memorable December 1898 issue of the New-Journalistic *New York Journal* depicted a giraffe-necked dinosaur leering at a skyscraper. The story intensified interest in the spectacular fossils that had been excavated in the Western states, themselves only recently carved out of Native American lands, since the 1870s (Schuller 2016). Thus, like the West African setting of ‘The Last Dragon’, Wyoming, on the fossiliferous

![Figure 4](image-url)
quondam frontier, was an anachronistic ‘chronotope’ (time-space), to use the term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin and applied to lost world fiction by Brian Noble (2016, 33).

The notion that a masculine protagonist would be bested by a prehistoric survival had been swiftly discarded in ‘The Last Dragon’, but Curtis, working in the darker traditions viable in the fin de siècle magazines, took it seriously. Framingham – whose name, that of a university city near Boston, connotes East Coast over-civilisation – suffers from ‘an acute form of dyspepsia that at times drove him frantic’ (Curtis 1899, 244), leaving him in such pain that he considers ‘suicide’ (246). When he learns of the Wyoming elasmosaur’s regenerative powers, he longs to possess ‘the vitality of that animal’. McLennegan agrees that ‘[i]n your case, the possession of a too active brain has injured the body’, speculating on the possibility of uniting the reptile’s ‘robust health’ with ‘your intelligence’ (247). After Framingham takes his own life, McLennegan’s Frankensteinian brain transplant promises mens sana in corpore sano. McLennegan’s first thought is that man and reptile can work together to increase ‘geological knowledge’ (248), and Framingham’s intellectual survival is indicated by the elasmosaur’s ability to chant ‘the solemn notes of the Gregorian’ (249). His following mental disintegration is depicted in class terms: initially fluent in the Latin mass, the musical reptile next blends high and low culture, ‘singing a Greek song of Anacreon to the tune of “Where did you get that hat?”’, a music hall number. Soon, his ‘boisterous and commonplace conversation betrays a constantly growing coarseness of mind’, ‘slangy and diffuse’. Finally, the speech of the Framingham-Elasmosaurus resembles ‘the jabbering of an imbecile, or a drunken man’ (251).

‘Lake LaMetrie’ is a darkly comic nightmare of American masculinity, its East-West dynamic following in the wake of historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential pronouncements on ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ (1893). The extreme bounds of US territory had been emblematically associated with potent pre-historic beasts since Jefferson’s day. As Howard I. Kushner (1992, 67–68) observes, Turner’s thesis depicted the frontier, closed by 1890, as having functioned as ‘a harsh, but protecting environment’ and geographical safety valve for effete urban centres where ‘suicide’ epidemics and growing ‘fluidity of gender roles’ threatened the virility of the United States. In a climate of heightened European New Imperialism, Turner’s thesis helped motivate further American expansion. The robust challenges of war and conquest would potentially stave off the fin de siècle spectre of human degeneration and cure the fatigued, neurasthenic conditions purportedly caused by urban life’s frantic pace (Schuster 2011; Spangler 1989). Curtis’s own attention to matters of national virility extended, as so often in degeneration discourse, to racial hygiene. In a prurient 1893 essay, he argued that African Americans were ‘gradually absorbing white blood until in the course of time it will be utterly impossible to distinguish between the person who is Caucasian and the one who had an infinitesimal strain of African blood’ (356). Curtis saw this national whitening as inevitable and ultimately beneficial, however repugnant he professed to find the multiracial breeding that was enacting it, letting slip no suspicion that sexual selection would instead lead to darkening.

In Curtis’s story, however, an alternative trajectory symbolically plays out: one in which the bestialised Other is not subsumed. In ‘Lake LaMetrie’, Framingham embodies the failure of the East Coast male to meet the challenge of the vigorous Wyoming chronotope. Curtis’s addition of a living elasmosaur to the iconography of degeneration current in 1890s fiction pessimistically replayed the clash between Charley and
the *Peterson’s* dragon. Charley’s coolness under pressure allows him to find the plesiosaur’s weak spot; he adds the tale to his stock of club anecdotes, albeit adding little to palaeontological knowledge. In contrast, palaeontological knowledge is precisely what McLennegan pursues, fatally. Framingham cannot steer the ‘powerful vital apparatus’ of the *Elasmosaurus*, depicted as a mindless killing machine, its very lack of human self-consciousness and concomitant low level on the evolutionary scale making it near-indestructible (Curtis 1899, 248). McLennegan’s egg-headed inability to recognise danger leads to his own death, his diaries constituting an even more incredible story than Charley’s unfalsifiable yarn. This was less a valorisation of prehistoric reptiles than a warning to modern men, who, the story suggested, needed to moderate their intellectual pursuits with physical activity. Over the following decades, palaeontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn filled the American Museum of Natural History in New York with paintings of prehistoric ecosystems, attempting to reacquaint white urban populations with survival skills employed by early humans (Cain 2010, 287–90). Curtis’s story took an alternative approach to reversing degeneration: scaring readers straight by entangling civilised present and deep, primitive past without the expected disentangling resolution.

*Pearson’s Magazine* presented more than enough uplifting content to balance the effects of tonally complex scare stories like ‘The Monster of Lake LaMetrie’. The very same issue contained an instalment of C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne’s romance *The Lost Continent* (1899–1900), in which manful hero Deucalion fights dinosaurs and *femmes fatales* to purge Atlantis of its enfeebled cultural decadence before it sinks below the waves. Both British and American readers of *Pearson’s* would thus have been able to read Curtis’s cautionary tale against a more encouraging tradition of muscular heroes attempting to meet the challenges of 1890s imperialism (Deane 2008). Notably, Curtis’s morbid tale languished for decades before it was rediscovered and reprinted, its lost context of expansionist discontent and degeneration scares placing its already eccentric plot at a further remove. In the living fossil genre, a less demoralising plot structure closer to that of ‘The Last Dragon’ remained reliable stock content in the popular magazines. For example, the protagonists of Edwin J. Webster’s ‘The Slaying of the Plesiosaurus’ (1903), published in the *National Magazine*, successfully perform the titular deed with dynamite, exploding the saurian like Peppé’s unfortunate Indian crocodile.

‘No Place in the Order of Life’

Peterson and Curtis presented two disparate ways modern masculinity could meet brute prehistory in the popular magazines: either by affirming the progress of life through time or by undermining it. Before closing, I’ll briefly mention another story engendered, like ‘Lake LaMetrie’, in the transatlantic fallout of the *New York Journal’s* *Brontosaurus* story. ‘The Dragon of St. Paul’s’ was published in the British *Ludgate* in April 1899, jointly penned by George Reginald Bacchus and Cyril Ranger Gull. As the *New York Journal’s* illustrator had brought a prehistoric titan to the American metropolis, Gull and Bacchus shipped one to the British capital. In this case, the ‘Dragon’ is not a plesiosaur but, as in Hawkins’s hypothesis, a giant pterodactyline creature, found on an Arctic expedition organised by an expert on ‘prehistoric animals’ (Bacchus and Gull 1899, 491) and unwisely unfrozen on return to London. The protagonists with whom the story begins,
unscrupulous newspaper men, place the short story in an appropriately New-Journalistic milieu, giving it an initially flippant tone. Rumours of the dragon are met with dismissive allusions to the ‘beasty Snark’ (492), the non-existent animal from Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem The Hunting of the Snark (1876). After the dragon starts its killing spree, the story becomes more melodramatic and the pseudo-journalistic narrative voice provides some of the clearest statements of the logic at work in these early living fossil stories. While the dragon attacks the West End, the narrator pontificates:

A creature which, in those dim ages when the world was young and humanity itself was slowly being evolved in obedience to an inevitable law, had winged its way over the mighty swamps and forests of the primeval world, was alive and preying among them. The order of nature was disturbed. (499)

The dragon’s ‘weird and unnatural appearance excited in the brains of the populace’ a profound ‘uneasiness’ (499–500). If, over a century prior, the extinction of the mammoth had disturbed Jefferson’s ‘economy of nature’ (1787, 83), the situation had now reversed: authors of popular fiction in the age of evolutionary progress felt it obvious that a prehistoric predator’s survival was an unnatural affair in need of rectification. Later, when the dragon is killed by soldiers in the rafters of St Paul’s Cathedral, the strength of its uncanny aura is reiterated:

The mere sight of the malign thing gave a shock to the experience that was indescribable. It fulfilled no place in the order of life, and this fact induced a cold fear far more than its actual appearance. A psychologist who talked to one of the soldiers afterwards, got near to some fundamental truths dealing with the natural limits of sensation, in a brilliant article published in Cosmopolis. (504)

The antagonist of ‘The Last Dragon’ was chiefly disturbing for its mixture of physical characteristics. The London dragon is equally miscellaneous, ‘the most horrid cruel sort of thing you ever dreamt of after lobster salad’ (491), but its mere presence, a contradiction of the progressive teleology widely espoused in late nineteenth-century evolutionism, is its most terrifying quality. Unlike in ‘LaMettrie’, this anomaly is satisfyingly corrected.

Across the twentieth century, especially in the emergent pulp magazines, countless variations would be made on the skeleton plot used in ‘The Last Dragon’. Usually by hybridisation with the lost world romance genre, the plot could be extended to novel-length, as in Frank Savile’s Beyond the Great South Wall (1899), in which a predatory Brontosaurus is the creature that must be destroyed. The formula was so established that Samuel Hopkins Adams could subvert readers’ expectations in his McClure’s Magazine mystery story ‘The Flying Death’ (1903), which hinges on the credibility of a surviving Pteranodon. Comic presentation brought these generic cues furthest from the bloodthirsty models presented here, a crucial example being Robert W. Chambers’s proto-cryptozoological short story collection In Search of the Unknown (1904). The subject animal’s genus typically shaped the tone: stories about mammals like mammoths, for instance, tended to the elegiac mode in a way that those about reptiles did not (Schell 2018). Nonetheless, rare indeed was the living fossil short story in which a prehistoric endling survived its encounter with humans.

I began by noting Justin Mullis’s (2019) argument that cryptozoologists based their discipline on stories like these. In so doing, they asserted, like other practitioners of fringe science, that the world was a more enchanted place than mainstream science would allow. For the later twentieth-century cryptozoologist, the attraction lay, at least theoretically, in proving
these animals alive, attesting to the truthfulness of folklore and thereby stunning scientific pencil-pushers. For most authors of nineteenth-century short stories about living fossils, the pleasure lay less in fictionally unfurling the animal’s pelt before astonished sceptics than in killing the animal to restore the natural order, or chilling readers with the disastrous alternative. Although routine nineteenth-century natural history could, itself, be a strenuous, blood-soaked affair, the stories I have discussed are not vicarious narratives of a maverick’s triumph against the scientific establishment, like Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912). The living fossils genre, emerging in the wake of research on human contact with prehistoric animals, was quickly found to be an efficient venue for expressing a fusion of colonial and racial neuroses and masculine angst. These motivations added new complexities to, but only occasionally reshaped beyond recognition, the ancient core narrative of St George and the dragon. As such, the survival of the ‘last dragons’ in these stories was effectively irreconcilable with the need to satisfy generic demands. When the male protagonists discover that enchanted, monster-haunted realms still exist, the noblest are compelled to put an end to such an untidy state of affairs. After all, real life rarely presents so unequivocal an opportunity personally to tie up the loose ends left by nature’s apparently progressive, if sometimes absent-minded, evolutionary operations.

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