INTRODUCTION

British sociology has often been seen by commentators on the history of the discipline as the poor cousin of the intellectual developments that took place in other parts of the world. Long and thriving traditions of sociological analysis have been identified and much discussed in the United States, Germany, and France, and numerous social theorists and researchers in these countries have been seen as the architects of the “classical” sociologies that flowered from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. A particularly influential commentator on intellectual culture has decried the absence in Britain of any classical sociology (Anderson 1968). While Herbert Spencer has been recognized as a pioneering British sociologist and has had a substantial international impact, he has tended to be seen as having no lasting influence in his own country.

We show the inadequacy of this claim in the following chapters. We show that Spencer’s British successors as sociologists were numerous and that they developed his insights in diverse directions. Leonard Hobhouse, in particular, was the focal point for a number of writers who built a mainstream of sociological work along the evolutionary basis laid down by Spencer. We argue that another group of theorists, centered on Patrick Geddes, rivaled this evolutionary mainstream and were especially important in the emerging organizational structure of British sociology. The Geddes group, however, has been forgotten and ignored to an even greater extent than Hobhouse and his school. The task that we undertake in this book is to rediscover the leading ideas of these thinkers and to set them in the wider context of the development of British and American social thought, the building of a professional and disciplinary base for sociology, and the formulation of a political project of social reconstruction. In the final chapter we assess their contemporary significance and discuss why it is that they have largely been forgotten.

In discussing Geddes, his colleagues, and followers, we are dealing with a collaborative circle of writers and activists who, together with their larger network of associates, were active during the first three decades of the twentieth century and aimed to build a broad-based sociological movement that could underpin the establishment of a professional organization and academic community of sociologists within which their own intellectual
approach would play a leading part. A collaborative circle has been defined as a set of friends who work together in relation to a shared intellectual vision that guides their work (Farrell 2001). This shared vision defines how the members of the circle feel they should work and how they should relate to others, establishing the possibilities and limits that constrain their larger projects.

The leading figure in the collaborative circle with which we are concerned is Patrick Geddes himself. Geddes worked on the margins of academic society in Edinburgh to set out the core intellectual elements of a sociological and wider intellectual vision that he conveyed to students who then became devoted disciples in the further development of the vision and its wider dissemination from his base in the Outlook Tower. He and his disciples took their sociological view to London and sought to establish it at the center of the academic system. Principal among these disciples was Victor Branford, the key architect of the first professional association for British sociologists (the Sociological Society), its first professional journal (the Sociological Review), and the means through which the first Chair in sociology came to be established (at the London School of Economics). Branford’s business career generated the financial resources that he put to use in the service of sociology and that enabled him to make a number of intellectual contributions of his own to the Geddesian vision. The third figure in the core of the collaborative circle was Branford’s second wife, Sybella (néé Gurney), who contributed a great deal to the practical application of the vision and its spiritual underpinning. Her personal fortune supplemented Branford’s and allowed her to contribute to the task of institutionalizing Geddes’s conception of sociology and civic action.

Geddes, Victor Branford, and Sybella Branford cooperated in a number of ventures and practical projects. The other members of the collaborative circle included, for various periods and at various times, Branford’s younger brother the educationalist Benchara Branford, the New Age Romantic George Sandeman, and the educationalist Gilbert Slater. They influenced a wider network of associates including the communitarian Ernest Westlake, the psychologist Lionel Tayler (see Tayler 1931), the philosopher Mark Herbertson, the architect-planners Raymond Unwin, Barry Parker, and Patrick Abercrombie, the designers Charles Ashbee and Philip Mairet, Branford’s poet nephew Freddie (Frederick Victor Branford), and Branford’s clergymen brothers Jack and Lionel. In the sphere of business they had strong financial and intellectual associations with City merchants John Heslop and Vernon Malcolmson, the latter also writing on rural housing (Malcolmson 1920), the financier Charles Mendl, and a raft of railway financiers with Latin American interests. In the United States they maintained close contact with Albion Small and Jane Addams at Chicago,
with Small’s student Charles Ellwood at Missouri, and with Stanley Hall at Clark University. The latter two developed ideas that both paralleled and influenced the work of those in the circle. Geddes and Victor Branford were on close personal terms with both William James and Thorstein Veblen and they maintained fruitful intellectual contacts with Marcel Mauss. Toward the ends of their lives they attracted the young New York urbanist and architectural writer Lewis Mumford, whose own work developed and articulated their intellectual and practical concerns. Through Mumford, the influential New York–based circle of visionaries known as the Regional Planning Association of America adopted many of Geddes’s ideas.

These were the collaborators, associates, and supporters of the intellectual vision promoted by the Geddes circle as the basis for professional sociology in Britain. In the chapters of this book we explore the sociological content of this vision and its influence within both sociology and geography. We also examine the practical application of the vision in civics, planning, and strategies of social reconstruction, uncovering its foundations in ideas of spiritual renewal. In the first chapters we place their work in its international context and we document the little-known biographies of Victor Branford and Sybella Gurney, key collaborators, promoters, and publicists for Patrick Geddes. Crucial to their mission was Branford’s view of sociology as an omnibus discipline: the greatest of the social sciences and embracing much of what others considered to be geography, urban planning, economics, and political science.

Branford and Geddes lived and worked in a period when there were very few established chairs in the social sciences, and when sociology was an incipient field, rather than an established academic discipline. Most of the members of the Sociological Society were gentleman-scholars, rather than professional academics, and only a few women were present and involved. The gentleman-scholars were also involved in business, politics and religion, and they often had ties to several formative academic disciplines. They divided their time among a range of different activities, they often funded scholarly activities from their own businesses, and some of the businessmen generously funded impecunious colleagues so that they could continue their intellectual and civic pursuits. Geddes’s own career was based largely on his ability to attract followers, donors, and colleagues willing to bail him out financially and to support the publication of his work. Branford’s career was largely based on his rather humble origins, his ambition to make money, and his dedication to write, organize, and spend money to promote Geddes’s vision.

The early-twentieth-century businessmen associated with the emergence of British sociology tended to work closely together, both in the pursuit of profits and in the pursuit of their intellectual interests. They had
strong links with merchant banking, the armed forces, and colonial service, and they relied heavily on social networks, social standing, and personal relationships. In such circumstances, an understanding of the development of sociology as an academic discipline requires a substantial amount of research on business networks. Our discussion of the emergence of British sociology and its links to the schools of sociology emerging in other parts of the world is based on our exploration of business, social, and intellectual networks, and on global patterns of trade, migration, and investment.