In this book we have analyzed the work and ideas of the Geddes circle. Many of these people, however, have been marginalized and their ideas forgotten. An important question to ask, therefore, is why they should have been forgotten. Why did a collaborative circle with a clear vision and organizational base come to be such a prime case of professional failure? Of course, Geddes, Branford, and their associates deserve recognition for their crucially important role in the history of the Sociological Society, but it is their intellectual contribution that requires reassessment.

It might, perhaps, seem obvious to say that they were forgotten because their ideas were wrong and so have been rightly rejected and ignored. However, things are not so simple. Many theorists who espouse wrong or incorrect ideas are remembered in disciplinary histories, so it cannot simply be the content of their ideas that explains the failure of the Geddes circle. We have shown, in any case, that their ideas are often of considerable importance and that they are deserving of continuing recognition in sociological practice. Indeed, many of their ideas have been independently rediscovered by more recent sociologists, often in complete ignorance of the earlier discussions. Much time has been lost and much intellectual effort has been wasted by the failure to explore and develop the intellectual content of these ideas as originally formulated. It is, surely, more productive to improve on existing arguments than it is to completely reinvent their key ideas from scratch. How, then, is the failure of the sociological project initiated by Geddes and Branford to be explained?

Some of the most important factors responsible for this intellectual failure must lie within the social organization of the collaborative circle itself. The circle was organized around Patrick Geddes as its inspirational and charismatic leader. This was clearly one of its strengths, as it provided the core set of ideas that went largely unchallenged among his followers. This structure was also, however, a source of weakness. Geddes's charisma
as a teacher attracted those who were seeking an answer to fundamental questions. His synoptic vision and the apparent completion of his theoretical system tended to ensure that his followers were immediately and absolutely committed to furthering his work. They believed they had discovered "the truth" and so felt an almost religious obligation to bring this truth to those who had not yet encountered it. They became disciples with a commitment to proselytize on behalf of the master and to take his words to the ignorant masses. As convinced believers, they felt that it was necessary only to bring these ideas to the attention of others for them to recognize and accept their truth. Argument and persuasion were felt to be unnecessary, given the "obviousness" of the ideas once stated. Hence, they emphasized didactic education rather than persuasive discussion.

For some of the key figures—and most notably for Victor Branford and his brothers—a further factor reinforced the master-disciple relationship. The Branford brothers were the academically brilliant sons of a disreputable, but also brilliant, scientist. All showed some of their father's eccentricities and, more importantly, believed that Geddes was more completely the inspirational father figure than their own father had been. Seeking intellectual comradeship in their father, but finding him seriously flawed, they attached themselves almost unquestioningly to Geddes. Victor Branford, in particular, found it hard to question Geddes's intellectual views. Often exasperated by his practical and financial incompetence, this exasperation rarely extended to any intellectual questioning of the fundamental ideas.

The members of the circle therefore felt no real need to enter into proper dialogue with advocates of other positions. Their absolute certainty—often perceived as arrogance—was viewed with suspicion by their intellectual rivals, who simply ignored what they had to say. Other sociologists felt alienated from the Geddes circle and refused to cooperate in any venture that they thought might be a mere pretense at cooperation designed to impose the Geddes viewpoint. Excluded from expanded professional activities, the Geddes circle became increasingly inward looking. Its members tended to overpromote the work of very minor members of the group, further undermining their credibility in the eyes of others.

This was the reason for their failure to establish the Sociological Society as the primary basis for the professional development of sociology in Britain. This failure was reinforced by their lack of any strong university base from which they could deliver their ideas. Until his move to India, Geddes held only a part-time post in botany, having failed to gain the chair at the LSE that had been designed especially for him. Branford had applied for chairs in commerce at Birmingham and Manchester, where he would have been responsible for the teaching of social studies, but he spent most of his adult life in business and was, for much of this time, unable to
paricipate in mainstream sociological activities. As sociology slowly became established within the London University system and in social work and teacher training in London and the provinces, it was Hobhouse's view of the subject that prevailed and became the principal basis of a textbook tradition in British sociology.

The Geddesian view of sociology was in many ways grander and more ambitious than Hobhouse's view, or even the academic sociology that emerged after World War II, with the establishment of the British Sociological Association. However, at the critical moments in the first three decades of the twentieth century it was not presented with sufficient force, conviction, or widespread diffusion. The times were difficult, punctuated by World War I, the influenza pandemic, and the Great Depression, and publications were often cancelled or reduced to low print runs and cheap, dull formats. Meanwhile, Geddes spent a great deal of his time away from Britain, and Geddes, Branford, and others in the circle faced various health and family crises.

Geddes's international absences, with extended periods in India and France, were further complicated by his "disciplinary absences." He was never clearly and solely committed to sociology. Instead, he floated in and out of the emerging discipline, appearing at meetings and in publications as a sage and celebrity, but then disappearing for long periods and often presenting himself as a biologist, a city planner, an educationalist, a specialist in civics, or a general promoter of culture and learning. Geddes, like his younger contact Lewis Mumford, was one of the few twentieth-century Renaissance men and public intellectuals, unwilling to renounce fields of study to others, and unwilling to commit to one academic discipline or to define limits to his expertise. He was a professor of sociology in Bombay, but he spent a lot of his time in India serving as a city planning consultant. Victor Branford and other members of the Geddes circle started and stalled projects in the hope of having Geddes's full participation, but that full participation was little more than a dream. Geddes was pulling in many different directions, and was increasingly unwilling to commit to a single objective for any significant period. His co-authors had to do more and more of the work, trying to imagine what the great man himself would have written. After Branford's death, Geddes had the opportunity to focus on sociology and to finally bring the grand sociological project to fruition in Branford's memory, but instead he focused on his biology textbook with J. Arthur Thomson and on his new educational project at the Collège des Écossais in Montpellier. Quite soon, of course, his own death further complicated the sociological project, leaving it in the hands of Alexander Farquharson, a second-tier figure who lacked the intellect, networks, and funding to bring the grand Geddesian vision to fruition. Under Farquharson, the Sociological Society emphasized regional surveys that were more akin to
geographical fieldwork of the pre-computer era than to anything practiced in the emerging academic discipline of sociology. Any last opportunity to vindicate a Geddesian vision of sociology, or to give sociology leadership among the social sciences, was frittered away in the interwar period.

It has to be recognized that the writings of those within the Geddes circle were not written in such a way that they could have a maximum intellectual impact. Influenced by Ruskin, Morris, and the Arts and Crafts movement, they sought a literary style of presentation that would evoke these influences. However, the key figures simply did not have the literary skills to deliver this. Their texts come across as obscure, dense, and often pretentious. The impenetrable character of the texts did not encourage a wide readership. Texts were also produced as partial drafts and fragments that were ineptly bolted together to meet publication schedules, and many of Geddes's works appeared only because Victor Branford or Arthur Thomson took control and made efforts to complete the works. While Thomson had some success with Geddes's biology texts, Victor Branford's efforts with the sociology texts were less successful. Many of their works achieved few sales and had correspondingly little influence.

The work of the circle cannot be regarded as having been a complete failure. Geddes had a major influence in urban planning, both in Britain and overseas, and his ideas were also central to the development of urban studies as a distinct discipline. The emphasis of the circle on the social survey method had a more diffuse influence with the establishment of statistical surveys in university sociology and social science departments and in the development of fieldwork survey methods in school and university geography teaching. These were, however, less political and more technical forms of survey than the members of the circle had advocated. In sociology, however, they were almost completely superseded and, eventually, forgotten. In sociology it was the speculative evolutionism of Hobhouse (1924) and the structural-functional approach of MacIver (1917, 1921) that came to form the disciplinary core. The insights and innovations of the Geddes circle disappeared along with their errors and eccentricities.

We should not imply that because the members of the Geddes circle have been forgotten within sociology they deserve to be forgotten. It should be apparent from the whole of our book that we believe that they had a great deal to offer and that much of what they said has a continuing relevance today. They were unsuccessful in competition with Hobhouse and his supporters at the London School of Economics, but they could, in fact, have made a substantial difference to the shape of British sociology if there had been a proper engagement with their ideas.

The dominant Hobhouse school established a wide-ranging evolutionism, cast at a very general level, with empirical research taking the form of
comparative cross-cultural investigations. Detailed studies of contemporary society were largely seen as the province of social policy and administration specialists who approached this in the spirit of the centralized administrative socialism of the Webbs and the Fabians. The work of Branford and Geddes suggested a very different, and more fruitful focus.

Their work was, first of all, strongly interdisciplinary. They articulated a view of the social as comprising economic and political processes as well as the cultural framework of social institutions. These could not be studied in isolation, and while disciplinary specialisms were important, they should not preclude an exploration of the interdependence of factors in a social whole. They also recognized the importance of psychological processes in understanding the social, seeing a developmental social psychology as an integral feature of the sociological approach. While they mapped out the disciplinary relations of sociology, geography, anthropology, economics, etc., these were analytical distinctions that highlighted ways of thinking and were not intended to establish rigid subject and departmental boundaries. Their vision of sociology was that it had to be the central social science that brought to a focus these special disciplinary concerns. In this respect, they speak directly to current debates about disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and postdisciplinarity.

The particular view of modern society was also far more in line with contemporary concerns than was that of Hobhouse. Where Hobhouse constructed a grand scheme of evolution from simpler to more complex societies and saw this as a movement of “progress,” Geddes and Branford focused on the specific transition from medieval to modern societies and explored this transition and its consequences through a clear awareness of the fundamental importance of scientific knowledge and industrial technology.

Their model of modernity was one in which the political economy (“temporal power”) was in a state of constant tension and imbalance with cultural concerns (“spiritual power”) and in which competing classes and elites drove societies forward and determined whether this movement was toward wardom, collapse, and oblivion or toward a “larger modernity” in which the forces of technology could be harnessed to meet autonomously determined human needs. Their emphasis on social reconstruction was precisely related to this diagnosis; there was no inexorable movement of progress, and the future is what is chosen and made by people themselves. A scientific understanding of society was seen as the essential requirement for this choice to be a realistic one, to be “eutopian” rather than “utopian.”

A key feature of their sociology was its emphasis on the “region,” which was the means through which they were able to theorize the effects of the natural environment on human activities. This very contemporary focus on environmental issues was largely absent from Hobhouse’s view of
sociology. While it was fundamental to the work of MacIver and, through him, became a central element in the textbook tradition through which students were trained in sociology (see Scott 2013), it barely figured in the professional practice and research of those who entered academic sociology. Despite the production of a number of “community studies,” a consideration of the environment was largely left to the geographers. Geddes and Bradford saw this differently and in ways that are far more in accord with the contemporary concern for environmental issues in sociology. Their argument was that the material environment had to be understood in all its complexity as setting limits within which certain forms of action and ways of life are possible, but not inevitable, and thereby shape the social structure of the naturally constituted region. They recognized, however, that more complex forms of social life, such as those that arise first in cities, are the bases for an autonomous flow of cultural concerns that exert a reciprocal influence on the region and so transform the material environment. Social development is the outcome of this interplay between nature and culture.

Their conception of the region did not, however, lead them to an extreme localism. They were among the first social theorists to recognize the inherently global character of human activity. Social life cannot be understood as purely localized in its region but must be seen as embedded in natural and transnational interchanges that fundamentally affect it. There is a real interdependence of the local and the global, and they saw social reconstruction itself as requiring a global reach if it was to bring about the unity of humanity that Comte advocated and anticipated. This underpinned their conception of the world city and the world university, and it was the basis of a view of the “cosmopolitan” character of truly modern orientations.

Methodologically, too, Geddes and Bradford were ahead of their time. The social surveys with which they were associated tended to be small-scale and largely limited to school field trips, but their aspiration was to establish comprehensive surveys that integrated physical mapping, economic and political charts and tables, and cultural ethnographies into an all-encompassing model that they sought to give physical expression in the Outlook Tower, as an “index museum” serving as an archive, museum, observatory, and university. Their mapping and charting ideas anticipated possibilities that would become realities only with post-code mapping and small-area statistics, and their view of the index museum as the repository and source of sociological understanding could be realized only with the archival and search facilities offered by the development of the Internet. All this they combined with a view that the division between social scientist and human subject must be abandoned in favor of a view of the human subjects of research as active participants in that research.
They proposed a view of politically directed social reform that was fundamentally different from that of the Webbs. Where the Webbs and other Fabians proposed the centralized administrative socialism that became a key element in the Labour Party's establishment of a bureaucratic welfare state, Branford and Geddes were pioneering advocates of decentralized and cooperative organizations that could associate autonomously in democratic federal and functional bodies. This “third way” was rediscovered only in the 1980s—without any recognition of the pioneers—and it is only in the second decade of the twenty-first century that politicians are again emphasizing cooperation, voluntarism, and localism. Where politicians of the political Right see this “Big Society” as a means of fragmenting the central state and, in particular, of reducing levels of public expenditure, Geddes and Branford saw it as a central element in truly democratic participation and as a means through which centralized democratic agencies could utilize ever greater amounts of capital in projects of planned social reconstruction and human betterment.

Whenever concepts such as participatory action research, bio-regionalism, sustainability, engaged universities, historic preservation, neighborhood upgrading, lifelong education, alternative schools, and experiential learning are used, the pioneering works of the Geddes circle are pertinent. The members of the circle often used different terms to illustrate the same ideas, but it is their ideas that matter, and they were often ahead of their time. The reinvention of many of the key ideas pioneered by Geddes, Branford, and their associates makes imperative a rediscovery and reconsideration of their thought. This book is a contribution to that reconsideration. Perhaps Alfred North Whitehead's famous dictum that “a science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost” must be recast as the statement that a science that hesitates to remember its founders is lost.