

Institution: University of Kent		
Unit of Assessment: 27: English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Improving Health and Wellbeing through a Sustained Literary History of the Body		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2006–2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Vybarr Cregan-Reid	Professor of English and Environmental Humanities	2006 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016–present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Professor Vybarr Cregan-Reid's research in the field of environmental humanities has demonstrated how the human-made environment has been slowly changing our bodies over millennia. This work has reached international audiences across the world through extensive media engagement, including book sales, appearances on 23 talk-shows, feature-interviews in some bestselling books, journalism for globally recognised media outlets, and through two BBC radio series that were broadcast to audiences totalling more than half a billion. Cregan-Reid's work has: 1) raised awareness of the consequences of sedentary behaviours; 2) improved the health and wellbeing of a global audience of readers, listeners, and viewers; and 3) enhanced the pedagogy and knowledge exchange of medical practitioners.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Since 2006 Cregan-Reid has pioneered new, interdisciplinary approaches to the humanities focused on the deep history of the body. <i>Discovering Gilgamesh</i> (2013) [R1] looks at the significance of the rediscovery, by Victorian archaeologists, of the Sumerian poem <i>The Epic of Gilgamesh</i>, written over three millennia ago. <i>Gilgamesh</i> is key in the story of the human body because it narrates early representations of politics, society, inequality, leisure, and literature. Cregan-Reid's research revealed that the poem articulates many concerns that we believe are unique to modern humans, issues such as stewardship of the natural world, and stewardship of the body. Being a poem about the search for the secret to a longer life, <i>Gilgamesh</i> has also informed much of Cregan-Reid's subsequent work. Through examination of <i>Gilgamesh</i> and its rediscovery, Cregan-Reid's research revealed that the switch to agriculture and metropolitan life spawned changes in human behaviour that led to today's sedentary health crisis (the WHO have identified the top 10 causes of death globally, and sedentary behaviours contribute to seven of these causes) [b].</p> <p>Cregan-Reid's next book, <i>Footnotes: How Running Makes Us Human</i> (2016) [R2], developed on the themes of physical activity, and the search for longer life, examined in <i>Discovering Gilgamesh</i>. Through a combination of nature-writing, history, memoir, scientific study, and literary criticism, <i>Footnotes</i> argues for movement as a fully-embodied experience, and challenges modern ideas about exercise and physical activity. <i>Footnotes</i> educated its audience in the deep pre-history of the human body, how it functions, what it wants. It also revealed many of the roots to our failing exercise culture (showing that exercise was unnecessary for 99.85% of our history). Because so many of these issues and debates come into focus with the Industrial Revolution, much of the book's focus is Romantic and Victorian: from Wordsworth and particularly Coleridge's discovery of the knowledges of the body, to how Oscar Wilde's experiences on the prison treadmill inform</p>		

our understanding of current gym use, the book dismantled many of our beliefs about the global spread of inactivity. In doing so, Cregan-Reid's research revealed that both exercise and leisure culture collude in getting us away from the natural world, and the book articulated numerous biological and psychological reasons for our need for green spaces. The book was also published in the US, Ukraine, and Taiwan.

Cregan-Reid's next project was the culmination of his previous works, bringing together the sense of our changed world from *Gilgamesh* and the focus on exercise and physical activity in *Footnotes*. Similarly grounded in the environmental humanities, this research asked how the human-made environment has made and remade our bodies. Its intention was captured beautifully by a reader in the US as 'an urgent wake-up call to sedentary folk' [a]. The major outputs of this project were a book, *Primate Change: How the World We Made is Remaking Us* (2018) [R3] – a Book of the Year in the *Financial Times* and *Daily Mail*, which the *Guardian* called 'a work of remarkable scope' – and two major series on the BBC World Service: *Changing World, Changing Bodies* (2019; 2020) [R4; R5]. This was the first time a compendious assessment of the human-changed body was compiled. Ranging from the palaeolithic to the present, much of the book [R3] focused on the nineteenth century, a revolutionary turning-point in our relationship with the natural world and with our bodies. Literature was key to the project: from Gilgamesh and his quest for more 'good' life, to Dickens on sedentary culture and the perils of gene-editing, or Disraeli and Forster on the beginning of allergies, and Eliot and Gaskell on the health implications of indoor working and living. *Primate Change's* reach was greatly enhanced by its simultaneous publication in the UK, US, Canada and Australia, and its subsequent translation and publication in China, France, Japan, Italy, Korea, Slovenia, Portugal, and Finland.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Vybarr Cregan-Reid (2013). *Discovering Gilgamesh: Geology, Narrative and the Historical Sublime in Victorian Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/36258/>

[R2] Vybarr Cregan-Reid (2016). *Footnotes: How Running Makes Us Human*. London: Ebury Press. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/71308/>

[R3] Vybarr Cregan-Reid (2018). *Primate Change: How the World We Made is Remaking Us*. London: Cassell. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/71306/>

[R4] *Changing World, Changing Bodies*, series 1 (three episodes of 30 minutes each), BBC World Service, *The Compass*, first broadcast 14, 21, and 28 May 2019 (+ many repeats).

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w27vq4k2/episodes/player>

[R5] *Changing World, Changing Bodies*, series 2 (three episodes of 30 minutes each), BBC World Service, *The Compass*, broadcast 26 February, 4 and 11 March 2020 (+ many repeats).

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w27vq4k2/episodes/player>

4. Details of the impact

Cregan-Reid's research reached international audiences of more than half a billion through features in diverse media outlets and other venues, both nationally and internationally. These include interviews, national appearances, and panel discussions on BBC Radio 3, 4, and 5, ITV, and readings of his work on BBC Radio 4 and Sky News [c]. International interviews include: two on national services in Canada (peak time reach: 2.3 million), five on Ireland's *Newstalk*, two on US National Public Radio (NPR) stations, one on peak-time Sunday evening Brazilian TV, as well as seven podcast interviews [c]. He engaged directly with audiences as a speaker at 20 literary festivals (including Hay) [c], through an invited TEDx talk delivered to a live audience of 1,000 and viewed over 5,000 times on YouTube [d], and through multiple wellbeing talks delivered (nationally and internationally) to a wide variety of audiences. These included, for example, talks on employee health to the car manufacturer Tesla and the business leaders of Cyprus, and talks on

sustainability and health to young start-up entrepreneurs at Goldsmiths, University of London. The Academic Lead, Enterprise Goldsmiths, has described these latter talks as ‘conceivably life-changing’, noting also that they have helped ‘[i]n particular participants from the MENA and East Africa regions ... [to] move their creative thinking forward’ [e].

Cregan-Reid has written extensively for national and international newspapers, and this journalism has been syndicated all over the world and translated into several languages. Outlets included the *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, *Sun*, *Sunday Times*, and *Telegraph* [c]. Highlights include a full-page article in the *Observer* and a Long Read in the *Guardian* (which after one day was ‘closing on 500,000’ reads and was shared on social media over 20,000 times [c], spawning discussion and debate across Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook). In 2019 and 2020, Cregan-Reid presented his work to a global audience in the form of two radio series (each 3 x 30 minutes) on the BBC World Service [R4; R5]. He was sole writer and presenter of *Changing World*, *Changing Bodies*, aired in the World Service’s flagship slot, *The Compass*, with each episode ‘broadcast ten times throughout each week to reach audience saturation across the world’s different time zones’, making it available in almost every country across the globe to an audience of 97 million a week and per episode, an aggregate listenership of 395 million [c]. After the first radio series aired, Cregan-Reid was invited onto the BBC World Service’s audience-nominated *Over to You* (with an audience of about ‘27 million’ [c]), where the makers of popular programmes are interviewed and answer audience questions.

Raising awareness of the consequences of sedentary behaviours

Specifically, Cregan-Reid’s research has: changed how global audiences understand the sedentary nature of modern life, in comparison to that of our distant ancestors; helped them to understand how this development occurred; motivated them to change behaviours; and inspired them to reflect on their lifestyles and make positive changes.

Feedback shows that during and after the extensive airing of his work there was both an improvement in public understanding and changes in behaviour. For example, a UK reader of *Footnotes* [R2] commented that ‘[t]he paradox of this brilliant book ... is that each page ... has something in it that tempts us to put it down ... and join the writer out in the streets and on the trails’ [a]. A reader in Berlin noted: ‘The book really helped to try to understand something which I didn’t understand – why do I get so much out of [running]? ... I already want to read it again’ [a]; and one in the US stated: ‘already it has changed my running, allowing me to own what I’ve always loved about [it] and let go of everything I never really cared about deep down’ [a].

The book [R2] has also enabled readers/listeners/runners to take control over their activity by giving them agency. For example, on hearing an interview with Cregan-Reid on NPR New York a US reader wrote: ‘your book keeps saving my life again and again ... you’ve made my life better but more importantly, I know exactly how to make it better’ [e]. Another reader called the book ‘groundbreaking’ and added that it ‘literally changed [their] outlook, initiated momentum and reinvigorated fundamental interests’ [e].

Readers of *Primate Change* [R3] were equally engaged and commented in particular on the book’s motivational impact. For example, a reader from the US noted: ‘I am ... motivated to be less sedentary’ [a]; and a US couple stated that it ‘definitely helped inspire my wife and myself to make changes in our lives’ [a]. These responses also indicate the global reach of the book. A reader from India noted: ‘[*Primate Change*] motivated me to eat healthier and exercise more’ [a]; one from Germany: ‘it made me consider my lifestyle choices and think about what I could improve to live a life my body was better suited to’ [a]; and another from Australia: ‘its key messages have the potential ... to make impactful changes in your daily life’ [a]. An influential UK blogger also wrote it was a ‘potentially life-changing book’ [e].

Improving public health and wellbeing

By generating an international debate to improve understanding of our custody of the body, Cregan-Reid’s work added value and justification to continuing fitness regimes (exercise being an

addition to one's working day), and encouraged increased levels of physical activity (the movement necessary to get through one's day).

In many responses to *Footnotes* [R2], readers noted personal health benefits and improvements to their lives. For example, one reader said: 'I have started to enjoy running, even looking forward to a run' [e]. Another noted: '[I] never previously got much out of [running]. Reading this book has inspired me to keep working at it, but also opened me up to new ways of enjoying it' [a]. And another stated: '[Footnotes] got me out the door on days when it would have been too easy to have stayed glued to the sofa. As a geography teacher it also helped me to appreciate something I had previously missed; the way running allowed me to explore a landscape and the layers that make it up' [e]. The impact of *Footnotes* on readers' mental health was substantial, too: 'your book changed my life. For the better. I'm great. The depression is at an all time low and [for] no other reason but your book' [e]. And: '[Cregan-Reid's] writing has rewired my brain and running will remain a permanent feature in my life!' [e].

By email and on social media, readers of *Primate Change* [R3] also shared how Cregan-Reid's writing and media work has inspired changes in their own and others' lives: '*Primate Change* rocked. Your chapter on air pollution freaked me out. I'm now campaigning for better air quality in our area' [e]. And: '[*Primate Change* helped] me appreciate the way the modern world was acting against our evolution. It has changed the way I behave in terms of limiting screen time, what I'll eat and how long I'll sit for' [e].

As a key contributor to ITV's peak-time *Tonight Show* (formerly *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*) for a programme on movement and spine health on **28 February 2019** (audience of 3 million and garnering over 3,000 comments on Facebook), and as an interviewee on Radio 4's *You and Yours* on **22 April 2016**, Cregan-Reid was able to encourage listeners and viewers to reflect more knowledgeably on their health and wellbeing behaviours [c]. 'I was interested and informed with what you said on the radio so job done' [e], one listener wrote after Cregan-Reid had edited and hosted a live hour on **28 October 2018** of BBC Radio 5 Live's *Afternoon Edition* (weekly audience of 5.4 million) on his research [c].

At a grassroots level, Cregan-Reid's research inspired two initiatives that, according to the CEO of one of the UK's leading outdoor festivals, have contributed to 'an international movement to encourage more people to be running in nature and wild places' [e]. His research informed the content of a ten-part course, 'A Good Runner', which aimed 'to improve the attendees' engagement with and enjoyment of running' [f], and was also key to the success of Global Trail Running Day (GTRD). He wrote the prose for the website (his writing later became a free ebook for users to download [g]), and on **19 September 2020** 75 GTRD ambassadors ran and/or organised runs totalling more than 1,000 miles [f]. The CEO anticipates that 'in 5 years' time Global Trail Running Day will be counting its ambassador numbers in the thousands' [f], with the day now set to become part of the annual running calendar [g].

Enhancing the pedagogy and knowledge exchange of medical practitioners

Primate Change [R3] has also impacted directly on the training of medical practitioners, confirming the comment by one reader who noted that the book was a '[f]ascinating, eye-opening read that should be mandatory in med schools and in every household' [a]. The Director of one of the UK's leading medical schools wrote in a personal message that the book 'was so good I bought it twice', adding that 'we are currently redesigning our curriculum. I will be shamelessly using examples from your book to emphasise these points' [e].

A keynote Cregan-Reid delivered at a conference of GPs, trainee GPs, and their teachers at the South East of Scotland Faculty of Clinical Educators' symposium in **2019** has equally led to changes in the pedagogy of medical schools. The Director of the Clinical Educator Programme at the University of Edinburgh confirms that Cregan-Reid's 'talk has contributed to the way that my colleagues are thinking in the process of updating our curriculum ... [S]ince your talk, there is a much greater awareness of the importance of teaching medical students to consider how humans are adapting to our changing world' [e].

Impact on the knowledge and understanding of medical practitioners was also achieved via keynotes at the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum, the latter to around 200 movement and manual therapists, biomechanists, yoga and Pilates teachers. The world-leading specialist in Myofascial Release and Structural Integration who organised the event attested that it was 'an inspiring talk ... well received by the attendees' [e]. Its influence on health and fitness instruction is evidenced in the social media comment by a postural alignment therapist who attended the talk: 'I just did a week on "Feet and Ankles" in a course I am running (entitled Ancient Body, Modern World) and so much of it was lifted from @vybarrcr amazing book!' [e].

Cregan-Reid's research has impacted positively on other medical disciplines and health initiatives. For example, the founder of a public health NGO in Bulgaria, TarnovoRUNS, has confirmed the positive effect on his work of Cregan-Reid's journalism: 'those articles give me so much energy and motivation to continue' [e]. An NHS rehabilitation therapist and Sports Rehabilitator for a football team confirms that reading *Primate Change* [R3] has given 'extra buy-ins to help educate my patients on the importance of movement, activity and exercise ... it has deepened my understanding of issues that I regularly deal with ... I have recommended the book to many of my colleagues and ... I have presented your work at some learning days' [e].

The circulation of Cregan Reid's research among movement specialists is further confirmed by the director of a physiotherapy practice (a former strength and conditioning coach to Tim Henman and Greg Rusedski): '*Primate Change* has been the most important book I've read as a physio ... I recommend this book nearly every day to patients. It has stayed in my top recommendations to coaches and physios ever since. It has improved my lifestyle, my practice, and the lives of so many of my patients ... I'm happier and healthier now than before reading the book ... it has had a huge impact on my own personal thinking and on my professional approach to physiotherapy ... The book has helped me positively change the lives of thousands of patients over the last couple of years' [e].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[a] Portfolio of corroborating reader reviews posted on Goodreads and Amazon.

[b] World Health Organisation 'The top 10 causes of death', corroborating links to attenuation of movement and numbers of deaths globally: <https://tinyurl.com/y7hccj5p>

[c] Portfolio of media engagement: including a testimonial from a BBC Producer for the World Service and BBC Radio 4 (dated 7 January 2021); evidence for media engagement captured from the *Guardian* and email correspondence with editors at the paper; links to appearances on Radio 4 and 5, and on ITV's *Tonight Show*, and links to works in journalism.

[d] Link to TEDx talk delivered at TEDx Royal Tunbridge Wells on 1 February 2020 at Royal Tunbridge Wells Assembly Hall Theatre: <https://tinyurl.com/y4jf7gbs>

[e] Sample of corroborating emails, blogs, social media comments, and responses.

[f] Letter of Support from CEO of UK festival that corroborates the claim that Cregan-Reid's work was the inspiration for Global Trail Running Day, and some numbers of attendees and ambassadors for those ventures.

[g] Website for Global Trail Running Day, corroborating the claims that Cregan-Reid wrote the prose on the site, and that GTRD has become an annual event: <https://www.globaltrailday.com>