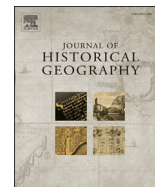




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Debating Darwin at the Cape



David N. Livingstone

School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses attention on the fortunes of Darwin's theory among the English-speaking community in Cape Colony during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The paper begins with a review of early encounters with Darwin dwelling particularly on the response of figures like Roderick Noble - professor and editor of the *Cape Monthly Magazine*, the geologist John Shaw, and Sir Henry Barkly, governor of the colony. Besides these more theoretical responses, Darwin's ideas were also mobilised in a range of scientific inquiries on such subjects as birds and butterflies. But most conspicuous was the use of evolutionary thought-forms in the work of the eminent philologist Wilhelm Bleek, cousin of Darwin's leading German apologist, Ernst Haeckel. The prevailing sense is of a liberal intelligentsia calmly interacting with a novel theory with all due deference. During the 1870s, an address by Langham Dale at the South African Public Library injected new energy into the Darwin discussion. Dale expressed disquiet over some of the anthropological implications of evolution as well as its apparent reductionism, and this stimulated a range of reactions. Several anonymous commentators responded but the most sustained evaluation of Dale's position emanated from the Queenstown physician and later politician, Sir William Bisset Berry. Then, in 1874, copious extracts from John Tyndall's infamous 'Belfast Address' were printed in the *Cape Monthly* and this added yet further impetus to the debate. Tyndall's seeming materialism bothered a number of readers, not least Hon William Porter, former attorney-general of Cape Colony. To figures like these the materialist extrapolations of radical Darwinians such as Haeckel were deeply disturbing, not just for religious reasons, but because they seemed to destabilise the moral and pedagogic progressivism that lay at the heart of their civilising credo. While reservations about Darwin's proposals were certainly audible, taken in the round Darwinian conversations among the English-speaking literati at the Cape were conducted with liberal sentiments, not least when evolutionary science approached questions of race. For Darwin's writings were seen to confirm a monogenetic account of the origin and unity of the human race, and could readily be called upon to justify the paternalistic ideology that governed colonial affairs.

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On 31st May 1836, the Royal Navy's surveying barque, HMS *Beagle*, dropped anchor at Simon's Bay near Cape Town. On deck was the young Charles Darwin who, nearly four and a half years earlier, had stepped aboard the vessel as a budding geologist and table companion to Captain Robert Fitzroy who had been assigned the task of charting the coastline of South America and determining meridian distances in the southern hemisphere. The Royal Observatory outside Cape Town was a crucial port of call, and with Sir John Herschel, Britain's highly distinguished astronomer, currently residing in Cape Colony on a four-year project to catalogue the stars, clusters and nebulae of the southern skies, the *Beagle's* crew found themselves in the Cape for eighteen days – a longer stay than

anywhere else on the whole voyage save for the Galápagos Islands. For all that, Darwin was remarkably silent about the Cape.¹ For the fact of the matter is that Darwin did not take to the colony much at all. In his diary entry for 4th June he confessed 'I saw so very little worth seeing, that I have scarcely anything to say'. The landscape he found 'bleak and desolate', its aspect 'cheerless' and the Ruggensveld region devoid of interest.² His private notes on Paarl Rock never saw the public light of day and his reflections on the Sea Point granite-slate contacts were reduced to the briefest of remarks in his

¹ W.S. Barnard, Darwin at the Cape, *South African Journal of Science* 100 (2004) 243–248.

² See entries for June 1836 in R.D. Keynes (Ed.), *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary*, Cambridge, 1988. See also Barnard, Darwin at the Cape, 245.

E-mail address: d.livingstone@qub.ac.uk.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2015.12.002>

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1844 *Geological Observations on Volcanic Islands*.³ But if Darwin more or less entirely ignored the Cape in his writings – though he did remain in touch with a number of correspondents there – the same cannot be said of the Cape's reaction to his theories. For during the late 1860s and 1870s, when controversy surrounding the theory of evolution by natural selection was bursting into full flame, the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in particular carried a spate of articles subjecting Darwinism to sustained scrutiny.

The *Cape Monthly* had come into being in 1857 under the editorship of Roderick Noble who taught at the South African College, and was designed to advance the virtues of intellectual enlightenment, social progress and the spread of civilization in the Cape.⁴ As Saul Dubow remarks, the '*Monthly* combined the seriousness of purpose characteristic of the highbrow British quarterlies ... and lay at the center of an interlocking network of associated colonial institutions and societies such as the South African Library, Museum, the Art Gallery and the University of the Cape of Good Hope'.⁵ Aspiring to involve itself in the global scientific conversation, its editors kept their eyes 'firmly fixed on developments in the imperial centres of London and Edinburgh'.⁶ Thus while much original work on the local geography and anthropology of the Cape itself graced the *Monthly's* pages, its tone was, by and large, that of a liberal intelligentsia seeking a place at the international scientific table during a time when the colony was absorbed with railway construction, diamond mining and the establishment of 'responsible government' with the appointment of its own Prime Minister in 1872.

As elsewhere, the Darwinian debates in the Cape really only surfaced during the late 1860s and 1870s, and progressively intensified as the new decade wore on owing, in large measure, to the appearance of the *Descent of Man* in 1871 which directly applied the theory of evolution by natural and sexual selection to the human race, and to the furore surrounding John Tyndall's infamous presidential address to the 1874 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Belfast. Taken in the round, exchanges over Darwin's proposals were conducted with notable civility in the Cape, certainly compared with other venues, though worries over materialism were increasingly voiced in the aftermath of Tyndall's incursion. There were, too, novel mobilisations of Darwinism for purposes of immediate cultural relevance to the colony – especially in the fields of legislation and linguistics – which had significant racial resonances. Charting something of these engagements in the cultural space marked out by the English-speaking network that congregated around the *Cape Monthly Magazine*, the South African Library and the like, is my ambition in what follows.⁷

This inquiry is intended to further contribute to the growing literature on the geographies of scientific knowledge in general, and the historical geography of Darwinism more particularly, by tracing in some detail the ways in which Darwin's theory was talked about and acted upon in the Cape during the decades around 1900. By examining the practices of science and the responses of the Cape's intellectual elite to the latest theoretical proposals, it aims to make a contribution to understanding something of the

nature of scientific culture in a colonial setting. At the same time, by inspecting the diverse range of spheres into which evolutionary thinking was drawn – philology, natural history, anthropology, religion, philosophy, geology, law – it demonstrates just how wide-ranging the Darwinian debates were in the colony's public square. What also emerges from this analysis is the complex geography of exchange between Europe and the Cape with the circulation of people, print and opinion across the imperial domain rendering local scientific cultures a compound product of both 'here' and 'there'.⁸

1. Early encounters

Initial reactions to Darwin at the Cape were articulated in a setting already favourably disposed to scientific inquiry. The Scottish-born physical scientist, Roderick Noble (1829–1875), professor at the South African College, public lecturer and editor of the *Cape Monthly*, for example, had expressed his views on the science of geology in a lecture delivered to the Mechanics Institute in 1854.⁹ Noble was deeply religious – he had studied for the ministry in Edinburgh – and was well acquainted with the tradition of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, lecturing on such figures as Dugald Stewart and Thomas Reid. These predilections favourably disposed him to the scientific enterprise and his lecture *Geology: Its Relation to Scripture* was sculpted in dialogue with his theological heritage. Here no trace of literalist scriptural geology surfaced.¹⁰ Instead, calling on the authority of such figures as Thomas Chalmers, John Pye Smith, Hugh Miller and Edward Hitchcock, not to mention Cardinal Wiseman and Archbishop Whately, he argued that they had developed a variety of hermeneutic schemes – basically harmonising strategies – showing how a lengthy earth-history was entirely compatible with enlightened readings of the Genesis narrative. Geology's compatibility with popular religious sentiment was a different matter; but Noble assured his audience that 'no such antagonism or irreconcilableness does in reality hold'.¹¹ Later, in 1868, in another public lecture, this time to the South African Public Library, an institution renowned for its rich manuscript resources, he insisted that there was no inevitable conflict between Darwinian evolution and Divine revelation. Certainly he entertained doubts about the universal efficacy of natural selection, but was convinced that it operated as a *vera causa* in the natural world. 'So far as it goes, it is unquestionably true' he declared; 'There is no doubt that great variations in type are produced in the manner described by Mr. Darwin'.¹² But its operations were constrained within definite limits. Noble was sure that it could not effect species transmutation

⁸ On global lives and imperial careerism more generally see M. Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World 1550–1800*, Cambridge, 2008; D. Lambert, A. Lester (Eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careerism in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 2006.

⁹ See W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment 1770–1950*, Oxford, 2003; W.J. De Kock (Ed.), *Dictionary of South African Biography*, Vol. II, Cape Town, 1968–1981, 518–519.

¹⁰ For analyses of scriptural geology see R. O'Connor, 'Young-earth creationists in early nineteenth-century Britain? Towards a reassessment of 'scriptural geology'', *History of Science* 45 (2007) 357–403; R.L. Stiling, 'Scriptural geology in America', in: D.N. Livingstone, D.G. Hart, M.A. Noll (Eds), *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective*, New York, 1999, 177–192; J.R. Moore, 'Geologists and interpreters of Genesis in the nineteenth century', in: D.C. Lindberg, R.L. Numbers (Eds), *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science*, Berkeley, 1986, 322–350.

¹¹ R. Noble, *Geology: Its Relations to Sacred Scripture. A Lecture Delivered to the Cape Town Mechanics' Institute in the Town Hall, on the 11th August, 1854*, Cape Town, 1854, 11.

¹² R. Noble, Address, *Proceedings at the Thirty-Ninth Anniversary Meeting of the Subscribers to the Public Library, Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope, Held on Saturday, the 23rd May, 1868*, Cape Town, 1868, 8–35, quotation on 29–30.

³ On Darwin's account of the Sea Point contacts see Sharad Master, 'Darwin as a geologist in Africa – dispelling the myths and unravelling a confused knot', *South African Journal of Science* 108 (2012) 1–5.

⁴ See the discussion in S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa 1820–2000*, Oxford, 2006, chapter 2.

⁵ S. Dubow, 'Earth history, natural history, and prehistory at the Cape, 1860–1875', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (2004) 109.

⁶ Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge*, 71.

⁷ How Afrikaner culture engaged with Darwin's proposals in this period, so far as I am aware, remains to be explored.

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