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The natural theology of Victorian industry

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As clergymen in Britain celebrated the Great Exhibition in the summer of 1851 and drew appropriate moral lessons, there was widespread agreement that the triumphs of industry on display represented the fulfilment of God's will. The basic assumption was that overcoming God's curse on Adam had been possible only through sustained hard work – industry in the early Victorian sense – and that this imperative work ethic had always been God's intention for mankind. In elaborating the details, preachers combined the British tradition of natural theology with the Scottish Enlightenment's progressive science of man to paint a picture of the slow recovery of man from the Fall through his own industry. This was the very story of civilization itself, with God the driving force. The celebrants were quite clear that it was divine providence that had ordained the greatness of Great Britain.

In 1847 Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, philosopher, and poet, for some time a Unitarian minister in the family tradition, was invited on a lecture tour by a consortium of Mechanics' Institutes in the north of England and southern Scotland. A few years later he summed up his experiences in the affectionately critical *English traits* of 1856, in which he attempted to account for England's success as a nation.

> The problem of the traveller landing at Liverpool is, Why England is England? What are the elements of that power which the English hold over other nations? If there be one test of national genius universally accepted, it is success; and if there be one successful country in the universe for the last millennium, that country is England.

No one has ever managed a definitive answer to Emerson's question, of course, but his exploration is often fun, and always shrewd. In industrialised England, society is artificial, and so are all its institutions. 'Man is [as] made as a Birmingham button.' These artificial people are by no means modest in their success:

> The habit of brag runs through all classes, from the *Times* newspaper through politicians and poets, through Wordsworth, Carlyle, Mill, and Sydney Smith, down to the boys of Eton. In the gravest treatise on political economy, in a philosophical essay, in books of science, one is surprised by the most innocent exhibition of unflinching nationality.[2]

I think it was the English historian of Victorianism John Harrison who was first to point out that Emerson was describing his English contemporaries in very much the terms that a century later the English would be applying to brash entrepreneurial Americans.[3]

A last point from Emerson, in this case a throwaway line. 'Tis said, that the views of nature held by any people determine all their institutions.'[4] I have no idea whom, or what proverb, he was quoting, but this comes tantalisingly close to some of my arguments later in this article.

My own interest in British pride and unflinching nationality centres on the celebrations surrounding the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations which was held in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace in Hyde Park for 5½ months in the summer of 1851. For several years now I have been struggling to make sense of that many-headed monster (Fig. 1).[5]

The major group of British celebrants I want to draw on comprises ministers in their pulpits in 1851, some of them of the Church of England, but many more non-conformists or dissenters, particularly Congregationalists. Geoffrey Cantor has recently discussed the religious dimensions of the Exhibition in book and article (including the reservations of some divines about such a very earthly show). The present article traces the background to the beliefs that he explores.[6] In addition to the sermons, there were annual series of lectures at the time to the newly formed YMCA, twelve each winter, which yield several plums; and of course God was always a major presence in periodical articles, religious tracts, and devotional books. It is this loose grouping of British Protestants, mostly enthusiasts

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[1] Retired.

[2] R. W. Emerson, *English Traits* (London, 1856), 19, 56, 84–5.

[3] J. F. C. Harrison, *Society and Politics in England, 1780–1960: A Selection of Readings and Comments* (New York, 1965), 217.

[4] Emerson, *English Traits*, 27.

[5] See for example Nick Fisher, 'The Great Exhibition of 1851: The Struggle to Describe the Indescribable,' *Endeavour*, 36 (2012), 6–13.

[6] Geoffrey Cantor, *Religion and the Great Exhibition of 1851* (Oxford, 2011); and 'Science, Providence, and Progress at the Great Exhibition,' *Isis*, 103 (2012), 439–59.

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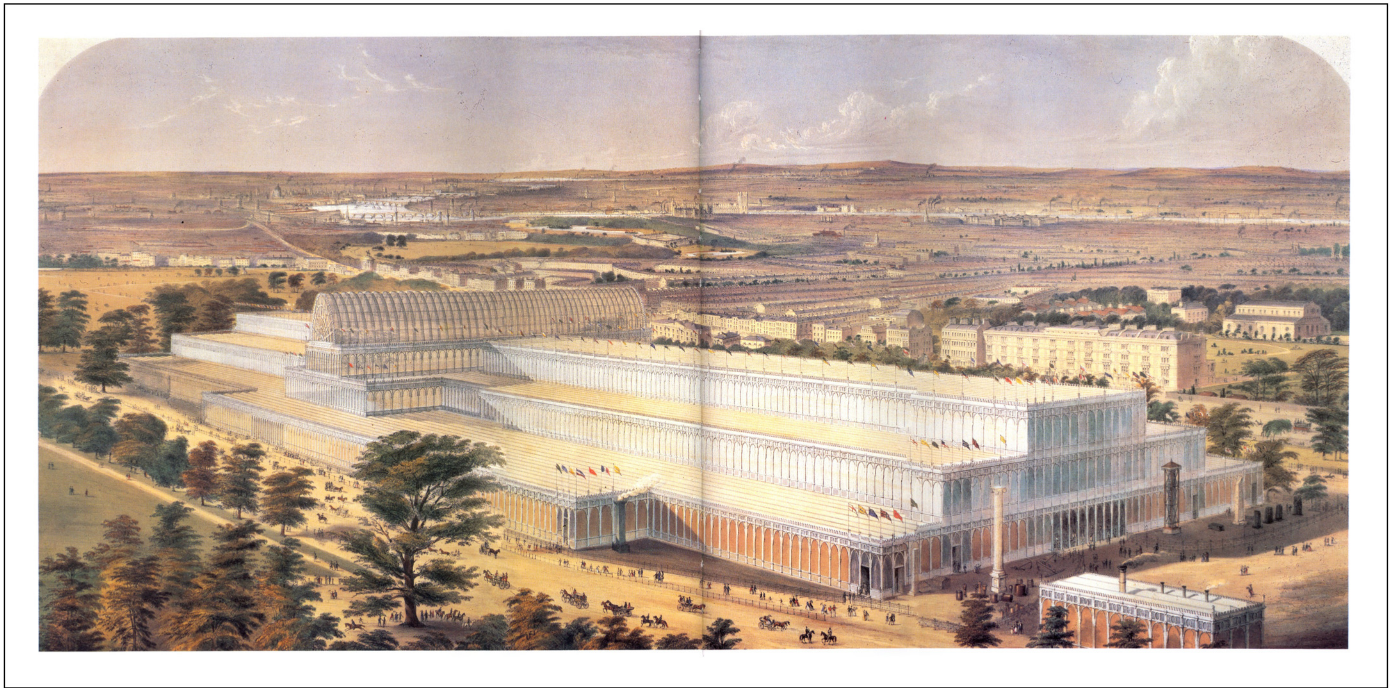

Fig. 1. The Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, looking south towards the Thames.

for evangelical religion, whose frame of mind and whose sources I want to unpick: they were heirs to a long British tradition of natural theology.

One preliminary point I should make is that these Christian writers were precisely those people whose God-given benevolent world was to be so disrupted by Darwin's *Origin of species* of 1859. We might at the risk of anachronism call them 'creationists,' because certainly they believed in God's initial creation of the world, but for most people (unlike today's creationists) that world was not necessarily young and unchanging. When an author casually says of the machinery in the 1851 Exhibition: 'We believe that the inventions of men have a tendency to remove a great part of the curse which has tormented the world for nearly six thousand years,' let us note that for many writers (in this case anonymous) the earth might or might not be really very old, but the age of man, the age of Adam and Eve, was pretty much in line with that worked out by Archbishop Ussher in the seventeenth century, 4004 BC.[7] I will come back to Adam's Fall and man's later inventions, because they are at the heart of what I want to say about the early Victorian world view (Fig. 2).

During the first third of the nineteenth century there had certainly been worries among some of the devout about the greatly expanded timescale required by the new science of geology, and the implications of this for religious belief, although by mid-century these worries had been somewhat stilled. The problem perhaps first acutely arose in 1795 with the publication in Edinburgh of James Hutton's *Theory of the earth*, in which he famously, or notoriously, remarked that in examining the earth and its history the evidence is very limited: 'we find no vestige of a beginning – no prospect of an end.'[8] Hutton himself was no atheist, although equally he was no orthodox churchman, but his remark was thought to be an encouragement to atheism, and even, at a time of national paranoia during the French wars, an encouragement to sedition or worse. He was attacked by the chemist Andrew Ure, for example, in his *A New system of geology, in which the great revolutions of the earth and animated nature, are reconciled at once to modern science and sacred history*, 1829. (I single out this undistinguished book because I want to return to Ure later.) The arguments one way and the other have been considered by such scholars as Martin Rudwick, and more recently in article and book by Ralph O'Connor, who pleads for a more sympathetic understanding of those he calls 'biblical literalists,' those 'who assume (rather than argue) that the Bible is the primary authority on earth history.'[9]

Soon enough, as I have said, these literalists found themselves marginalised intellectually, and for several reasons. First, there was the enormous popularity of geology, with thousands flocking to public lectures; second, the geologists who were also Anglican divines such as William Daniel Conybeare, Adam Sedgwick, and William Buckland (not to mention Congregationalists such as John Pye Smith) had shown how their faith could be reconciled with their science; and lastly there was the superlative job Charles Lyell had done in his *Principles of geology* of 1830–33 in incontrovertibly establishing actualism and gradualism – the principles that the only forces that have brought about geological change in the past are those that we see acting

[7] Text accompanying the illustration 'Machinery in Motion,' *Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition* (2 vols., London, 1854).John Harris, *The Pre-Adamite Earth: Contributions to Theological Science* (London, 1846). David N. Livingstone has discussed ideas of the world before Adam in several publications, such as his 'The Preadamite Theory and the Marriage of Science and Religion.' *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 82(3) (1992).

[8] James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth, with Proofs and Illustrations* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1795), final words of i, chapter I.

[9] Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolutions* (Chicago, 2005); and *Worlds before Adam: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Reform* (Chicago, 2008). Ralph O'Connor, 'Young-Earth Creationists in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain? Towards a Reassessment of "Scriptural Geology".' *History of Science*, 45 (2007), 357–403 at 378; and *Earth on Show: Fossils and the Poetics of Popular Science, 1802–1856* (Chicago, 2008).

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