

Augustus De Morgan's anonymous reviews for *The Athenæum*: A mirror of a Victorian mathematician

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Available online 23 October 2015

Abstract

The weekly London-based literary magazine, *The Athenæum*, supplied Victorian Britain with news of the latest developments in the arts, science, and politics. Book reviews represented a regular department of the periodical. While these reviews were usually anonymous, *The Athenæum*'s editors identified the reviewers in their private marked copies of the journal, now held by City University, London. These marked copies reveal that Augustus De Morgan produced around 1000 reviews for the journal from 1840 to 1869. As a reviewer, De Morgan covered books on a wide variety of topics both within and outside mathematics. A consideration of a selection of the mathematical works De Morgan chose to review gives an insight into how he believed issues surrounding mathematics and its study should be presented to the wide and non-specialist audience of *The Athenæum*, and thus to the lay reader of mid-Victorian Britain.

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Résumé

The Athenæum, un magazine littéraire hebdomadaire basé à Londres, alimentait la Grande-Bretagne victorienne en informations sur les derniers développements des arts, des sciences et de la politique. Les critiques de livres formaient une rubrique spécifique de la revue. Ces recensions étaient généralement anonymes. Cependant, les rédacteurs de *The Athenæum* ont indiqué le nom des auteurs dans leurs exemplaires personnels corrigés du journal, actuellement déposés à la City University de Londres. Ces exemplaires annotés révèlent que Augustus De Morgan a écrit environ un millier de recensions pour la revue, de 1840 à 1869. En tant que critique, De Morgan s'est occupé de livres portant sur des thèmes très variés, concernant ou non les mathématiques. Notre analyse d'une sélection des ouvrages de mathématiques que De Morgan a choisi d'examiner donne un aperçu de la manière dont il pensait que les questions relatives aux mathématiques et à leur étude devaient être présentées au large public non spécialisé de *The Athenæum*, c'est-à-dire au lecteur profane de la Grande-Bretagne victorienne.

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MSC: 01A55

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Keywords: De Morgan; Victorian; Britain; 19th century; Book reviews; Public understanding of mathematics

1. Introduction

For a period of three decades between 1840 and 1869, the mathematician and logician Augustus De Morgan wrote a staggering number of reviews on a wide variety of topics for the London-based magazine, *The Athenæum*, a “journal of literature, science, and the fine arts” (Figure 1). A small number of these reviews have been the subject of earlier research in the history of mathematics. For example, in 1976, John Wilson rediscovered an early printed reference to the Four Color Theorem in De Morgan’s 1860 review of William Whewell’s *The Philosophy of Discovery* [Wilson, 1976].¹ More recently, V. Sánchez Valencia has discussed De Morgan’s reviews of the first books on logic by George Boole and W.S. Jevons [Valencia, 2001].

As a regular reviewer of works on mathematics for *The Athenæum*, De Morgan’s vision of mathematics for “public consumption” became the version that the thousands of mid-nineteenth-century *Athenæum* readers encountered. Thus, an investigation into the kinds of mathematical topics De Morgan chose to review and how he chose to review them gives an insight into how he believed contemporaneous issues in mathematics should be presented to the lay reader of mid-Victorian Britain. Indeed, motivated in part by Leslie Marchand’s description of *The Athenæum* in his pioneering study on the journal, as a mirror of Victorian culture [Marchand, 1971], this paper examines four key topics present in several of De Morgan’s reviews as case studies and, via a subsequent categorization by subject, considers to what extent his reviews served as a mirror for De Morgan’s own particular interests and beliefs.

2. The cultural phenomena of reviewing and review periodicals in nineteenth-century Britain

Around 125,000 different newspaper and periodical titles were published in nineteenth-century Britain [Shuttleworth and Cantor, 2004, 1]. Among the wide array of genres among the periodicals, the review journal was especially popular. In fact, this popularity caused alarm among some who saw the review as superseding monographs. The English writer William Hazlitt proclaimed in 1823 that the review “never flourished more than at present. It never struck its roots so deep, nor spread its branches so widely and luxuriantly.” He responded to the complaint “that this is a Critical age; and that no great works of Genius appear, because so much is said and written about them” [Hazlitt, 1823, 350, quoted in Dawson et al., 2004, 8].

Notable examples of the review genre in Britain include the *Edinburgh Review*, established in 1802, the *Quarterly Review*, begun in 1809, and the *Westminster Review*, founded in 1823. These publications in particular established the tradition of presenting views and opinions using the framework of a review of one or more books. Often, the book (or books) under review served only as a springboard for the anonymous reviewer [Yeo, 1993, 78]. Anonymity of these reviews had begun during the eighteenth century and was to remain the standard for much of the nineteenth century, in contrast to contemporary practice in France, for example, where virtually all articles were signed. In his monograph on William Whewell, *Defining Science*, Richard Yeo estimates that 97% of reviews in British journals were anonymous until about 1870. He maintains that this anonymity stirred up intrigue among readers: “The possibility of a famous person speaking on a controversial issue without the restraint imposed by their position was part of the attraction of this tradition.” [Yeo, 1993, 78]

¹ This was believed to have been the first printed mention of the Four Color Theorem until 2012, when an older reference was found dating from 1854 [McKay, 2012]. This also appeared in *The Athenæum* and carried the signature “F.G.”—presumably either Frederick or Francis Guthrie, the theorem’s originator.

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