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Human history and deep time in nineteenth-century British sciences: An introduction

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ABSTRACT

The historicisation of humans was a major endeavour in nineteenth-century Britain, and one that led to wide-ranging debates involving a variety of disciplinary approaches, new and old. Within the context of science and medicine these discussions centred on the issues of human origins and evolution. Did the various races living throughout the world develop from a single location, or were their physical and social differences evidence for their separate genesis? Which disciplinary tradition offered the best method for tracing human development? Was it even possible to trace that development, or had too much time passed since the dawn of humans? Furthermore, who had the authority to speak about these matters? This special issue will examine these core questions and introduce some of the ways that researchers attempted to historicise humans within the context of nineteenth-century British sciences.

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In the following pages I shall endeavour to state as clearly as possible the principle facts whether physiological or historical... whether it is probably that all mankind are the offspring of one family, and shall afterwards proceed to trace the affinities of different nations, as far as an inquiry of this nature may tend to throw any light on the physical history of man. I shall in the course of this investigation endeavour to obtain some idea of the efficacy of those causes, which have been supposed capable of producing the divestitures of the human kind.¹

So began *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (1813), by the physician and ethnologist James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848); and so began the intertwining in nineteenth-century British science of the historicisation of humans and debates about racial diversity.² Under the rubric of what came to be known as ‘monogenism’ Prichard attempted to trace the history of humans and link the various tribes and nations of the world to a single

ancestral origin. For Prichard, the physical and cultural differences perceived among the various races of the world were that of variety within the same species, and not of distinct species. Using his training in natural history, medicine, and linguistics, he attempted to show the unity of humans and follow their developmental histories.³ It was not a unilinear model, without any deviation, that moved predictably through sequential stages towards a teleological endpoint. Rather, as George Stocking has argued, it was an integrative system that ‘...was more a generalisation about the overall course of the past development of mankind as a whole rather than a description or a prediction of the course of development in particular human groups’.⁴ All people regardless of their race were subject to the same developmental processes within Prichard’s scheme, and differences perceived in the physical and cultural attributes of humans were caused by local environmental and social influences over successive generations.

Prichard’s book serves as a good example of how nineteenth-century British science was engrossed in studies of deep time and

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¹ Prichard (1813), p. 3.

² Over the course of the next thirty years, Prichard reworked and broadened his study of human races and published two more editions of his *Researches*. See: Prichard (1826); and Prichard (1836–1847).

³ For more on the history of early British ethnology and Prichard see: Burrow (1963, pp. 137–154); Stocking (1987, pp. 47–51); Augstein (1999); Kuklick (2012, pp. 83–88); Sera-Shriar (2013, pp. 21–52).

⁴ Stocking (1968, p. 119).

human history. As Peter Bowler has argued, the nineteenth-century was ‘an age dominated by a fascination with the past. History offered the preferred way of understanding how both human society and the material world operated.’⁵ Human developmental theories were at the crux of many scientific and medical discussions throughout the century, and Prichard’s version of monogenism was an important precursor to evolution, albeit with some distinct differences. According to J.W. Burrow, Prichard’s ethnological inquiries were primarily ‘classificatory and historical’ and there was ‘no attempt to detect laws of social or psychological differentiation.’⁶ This characterisation of Prichard’s research can be extended further to his examination of physical variation among races. For instance, his analytical framework did not include mechanisms comparable to either the transmutation of species or natural selection. Instead, Prichard compared the anatomical and physiological features of different races, studied and contrasted the etymological roots of various languages, examined and brought together numerous historical accounts, and classified humans according to the principles of natural history taxonomies. Because Prichard lacked first-hand experience engaging directly with extra-Europeans *in situ*, he substantiated the credibility of his work by using the eye-witnessed reports of European explorers and travellers.⁷

Though Prichard was certainly not the only researcher interested in the history of human diversity, he was one of the earliest nineteenth-century British figures to publish on the topic, and the significance of Prichard’s writings in Britain and its empire cannot be underestimated. His work influenced many future core texts on topics relating to scientific race studies and human evolution. As Janet Browne, Adrian Desmond and James Moore have shown, the naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) was profoundly indebted to Prichard’s ethnological investigations. Darwin heavily annotated his personal copy of Prichard’s *Researches* so that he could incorporate its ideas into his evolutionary framework, and he referred to Prichard’s writings in his notebook on the transmutation of species from 1838. There were even passing references to Prichard’s work sprinkled throughout the *Descent of Man* (1871).⁸

The evolutionary anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) was also strongly influenced by Prichardian ethnology. According to George Stocking, Tylor named his second book, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilisation* (1865), after Prichard’s seminal study.⁹ More than anything Prichard inspired other researchers to think critically about human history and consider the causes that had shaped the races of the world since the dawn of time. Whether scholars supported Prichard’s theories about human history or challenged them, in the wake of his early ethnological writings there were subsequent generations of scientific and medical practitioners attempting to historicise humans and trace their origins.

This special issue seeks to understand how humans were historicised in nineteenth-century British sciences, and examines why it was an important issue for British society. The historicisation of humans within the context of this collection means: the process of constructing human histories for various scientific, religious and socio-political purposes. When it came to historicising humans, nineteenth-century scientific and medical practitioners were

varied in their methodological and theoretical approaches. While there was no consensus on humanity’s past, competing theories such as monogenism and polygenism intersected in fascinating ways, opening up new opportunities for researchers to pursue historical studies.

Chronological periods also differed in length depending on the nature of an investigation. Not every study in the nineteenth-century looked at the deep histories of human groups, and there were many instances where researchers only historicised people over short periods of time – such as a few centuries. By contrast, there were also some researchers who challenged human developmental and evolutionary theories. Figures such as the ethnologist and anatomist Robert Knox (1791–1862) believed too much time had passed since the dawn of humans, and he argued that only examinations of the current state of races could be substantiated empirically.¹⁰ Regardless of their perspectives, the implication of all of these investigations fed into larger discussions on human ancestry.

Because of this collection’s focus on the historicisation of humans in nineteenth-century British sciences, there are complementary works in several historiographical areas. The following essays build on major themes in the history of evolutionary studies by scholars such as Peter Bowler, James Elwick, Robert Kenny and Gregory Radick. There are also strong thematic links to the works of Ralph O’Connor and Martin Rudwick who have discussed in detail changing understandings of geological time in nineteenth-century scientific texts. During the nineteenth-century, topics such as race and empire were intricately tied to discussions of human history, and illuminative examples can be drawn from the historiography on Victorian anthropology by Stocking and Henrika Kuklick, as well as the secondary literature on nineteenth-century British imperialism by Daniel Headrick, Catherine Hall and Sujit Sivasundaram. Where this special issue diverges from previous historiographical material is in its interdisciplinary and transnational approach, and in its critical evaluation of how scientific and medical practitioners historicised humans in nineteenth-century Britain and its empire; placing great emphasis on the various theoretical and methodological approaches competing for scientific priority during this era.¹¹

Large-scale changes to print culture from the early nineteenth-century onward connected new forms of knowledge to wider audiences and further transformed scientific understandings of humanity’s past.¹² After the publication of Prichard’s *Researches* in the 1810s, there was a profusion of books that followed, many of them tracing the deep history of human development. As A.B. Van Riper, James Secord, Peter Kjaergaard and numerous others have discussed elsewhere, texts such as Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Lyell’s *Antiquity of Man* (1863), Thomas Huxley’s *Man’s Place in Nature* (1863), John Lubbock’s *Pre-Historic Times* (1865), and Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) expanded human history beyond the traditional biblical timeframe of 6,000 years and opened up new questions about human origins.¹³

There were also other significant transformations occurring during the nineteenth-century that affected the historicisation of

¹⁰ Sera-Shriar (2013, pp. 90–94).

¹¹ Bowler (1983); Stocking (1987); Bowler (1988); Hall (2002); Rudwick (2005); Elwick (2007); Kenny (2007, pp. 363–388); O’Connor (2007); Radick (2010, pp. 181–187); Headrick (2010); Sivasundaram (2005); Kuklick (2012, pp. 83–102); and Bowler (2013).

¹² For more on science and the nineteenth-century periodical press see: Topham (2000, pp. 559–612).

¹³ Van Riper (1993, pp. 2–6, 247); Secord (2000); and Kjaergaard (2011, pp. 83–98). See also: Chambers (1844); Darwin (1859); Lyell (1863); Huxley (1863); Lubbock (1865); Tylor (1871).

⁵ Bowler (1989, p. 1).

⁶ Burrow (1963, p. 144).

⁷ Prichard (1813, pp. 56–58; 213–216; 243–247).

⁸ Browne (1995, pp. 421–422); Desmond & Moore (2009, pp. 157–158); and Sera-Shriar (2013, pp. 148–149). See also Darwin (1871).

⁹ Tylor (1865); Stocking (2001, 108). See also Leopold (1980); and Sera-Shriar (2013, p. 157).

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