

## The emperors who had no clothes

Having just written a piece about Charles Lyell myself, I read with interest the review of Milt Marcy's book, *The Emperors who had no Clothes* (*J. Creation* 28(2):26–28). This states that, according to Marcy, Lyell “was always sympathetic to some form of naturalistic progression of living things”. Marcy is wrong: Lyell was, for much of his life, emphatically against such a view, arguing uncompromisingly that, in the history of the earth, floras and faunas were directionless. As Gould made clear in his book, *Times' Arrow, Time's Cycle*:

“Lyell was ... committed to defending time's cycle against a literal record that spoke strongly against a directionless world, particularly in its evidence of organic progress from fish to reptile, to mammal, to man.”<sup>1</sup>

It is true that Lyell had, in his very early years, supported the view that the fossil record was directional and progressive; for example, in an essay for *Transactions of the Geological Society*, written in 1826.<sup>2</sup> However, by 1830, when he published the first volume of his *Principles of Geology*, his view had totally changed. He summarized his position in chapter 9: “Theory of the progressive development of organic life considered—Evidence in its support wholly inconclusive”.<sup>3</sup> Rudwick observed:

“Lyell . . . was now claiming instead that the organic world, like the inorganic on which it depended, was subject to perpetual flux without any directional change in its overall character.”<sup>4</sup>

It is also true that, late in life, Lyell capitulated, finally accepting the evidence for progression in the fossil

record. However, as Gould pointed out, “Lyell held firm for more than twenty years, from the first edition of the *Principles* in 1830 to his last defense of nonprogression ... in 1851.”<sup>5</sup>

According to the review, as evidence for Lyell's alleged sympathy for evolution, Marcy refers to a letter written by Lyell to his friend Scrope, dated 14 June 1830:

“It is not the beginning I look for but proofs of a *progressive* state of existence in the globe, the probability of which is *proved* by the analogy of changes in organic life [emphasis in original].”<sup>6</sup>

However, Lyell here is not stating that he *believes* that such proofs exist; indeed, by 1830 he clearly did not.

Given this, Marcy's other statements in support of his main thesis are also highly misleading; for example, “Lyell also wrote a letter of praise to Darwin, but fell short of giving him an unqualified endorsement.” I suspect, however, this was after the publication of the *Origin* in 1859. But if so, that was thirty years on, when Lyell was changing his mind.

Also quoted in the review was this statement by Marcy: “In his *Principles of Geology*, Lyell praised the French for ‘sapping the foundation of the Christian faith’. Lyell expressed open admiration for the efforts and tactics of Voltaire.” This is a reference to p. 65 of Lyell's first volume, which reads:

“The party feeling excited against the Huttonian doctrines, and the open disregard of candour and temper in the controversy, will hardly be credited by our readers, unless we recall to their recollection that the mind of the English public was at that time in a state of feverish excitement. A class of writers in France had been labouring industriously for many years, to diminish the influence of the clergy, by sapping the foundation of the Christian faith, and their success, and the consequences of the Revolution, had alarmed the most resolute minds, while the imagina-

tion of the more timid was continually haunted by dread of innovation, as by the phantom of some fearful dream. Voltaire had used the modern discoveries in physics as one of the numerous weapons of attack and ridicule directed by him against the Scriptures.”

Having read this passage in context, I struggle to concur with Marcy's interpretation. It seems to me that Lyell was, here, simply stating the facts, rather than *praising* the French. Also I note that Lyell was *criticizing* people for their “party feeling” and “open disregard of candour and temper”. Was he then, at the same time, behaving in the same way? Though Lyell was not a Christian, and indeed was strongly opposed to ‘fundamentalist Christians’ and the belief in a global Flood, as has been well documented in CMI literature, he was not at war with the church *per se*. As Rudwick made clear, Lyell's “battle was not with the religious, but with the ‘modern offenders’ who had revived a literalism that had long been abandoned on the Continent”.<sup>7</sup> Accuracy and fairness is crucial, including when it comes to enemies of the faith.

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### References

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2. Rudwick, M.J.S., *Worlds Before Adam*, University of Chicago Press, IL, p. 205, 2008.
3. Lyell, C., *Principles of Geology*, vol. 1, John Murray, London, p. 144, 1830.
4. Rudwick, ref. 2, p. 354.
5. Gould, ref. 1, p. 168.
6. Letter from Lyell to Scrope, 14 June 1830; in: Lyell, K.M., *Life, Letters and Journals of Sir Charles Lyell, Bart*, vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 269–270, 2010.
7. Rudwick, ref. 2, p. 301.