

The Victoria Institute—the forerunner of modern creation science organizations

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The Victoria Institute was the earliest creationist organization, founded in 1865. It later accepted old-earth creationism and theistic evolution. Early supporters favoured the Baconian scientific methodology, which involved experimentation and observations, and were sceptical of the hypothetico-deductive methodology that Darwin and Lyell used; they thought it too speculative. Their approach to science closely mirrors that of modern creation science organizations, which draw a distinction between testable operational science, and historical sciences that are untestable in real-time. Despite recent critics of creationism arguing that inspiration for creation science only arose with the Seventh Day Adventists in the 20th century, the early years of the Victoria Institute reveal that to be false.

The Victoria Institute, or Philosophical Society of Great Britain, was arguably the first creationist organization formed in order to oppose Darwinian evolution and support Christian belief (figure 1). It was founded in 1865, several years after the initial publication of Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species*. The main human drivers in the movement were the Scottish naval civil servant James Reddie, who became the first honorary secretary, and the Irish naval captain Edmund Fishbourne. Many leading gentlemen scientists joined the organisation, including the Earl of Shaftesbury, the first president, and the leading marine biologist Philip Henry Gosse (figure 2), who was one of the first of several vice-presidents.

The Victoria Institute was, from the beginning, only opposed to science that it considered to be false or highly speculative, and it defended the Scriptures against criticism. Officials and members were leading figures in British and Irish society (many from Trinity College, Dublin), including Sir George Stokes, who was president from 1886 until his death in 1903. Stokes also held the Lucasian professorship of mathematics at Cambridge from 1849 to 1903 (a post once held by Sir Isaac Newton) and was president of the Royal Society from 1885 to 1890 (figure 3).

Although the Institute's first papers defended a recent creation and Flood geology,¹ it later moved to accept old-earth creationism, and even theistic evolution, forgetting the reason for its foundation. As a result of acceptance of theistic evolution, a new movement, the *Evolution Protest Movement*, was formed in 1932 to challenge evolution, although remaining non-committal at that time regarding the age of the earth (but later accepting young-earth creationism; now known as the *Creation Science Movement*, which is based in Portsmouth, England).² Today, the Victoria Institute (under the name *Faith and Thought*) jointly publishes, with the organization Christians in Science, the journal *Science and Christian Belief*; this journal is dedicated to supporting

theistic evolution.³ The Victoria Institute has moved a long way from its founding principles.

Opposition to Lyell's geology and biblical criticism

Despite opposition to Darwinism, the Victoria Institute's first paper, by Reddie *Scientia Scientiarum*, did not mention Darwin's work.¹ Instead, it challenged Lyell's geological claims relating to the age of the earth, and the biblical criticism of Bishop John William Colenso⁴ (the 1860 work, *Essays and Reviews*, edited by John W. Parker, was also mentioned as a cause for concern). It was a lecture by Bishop Colenso in 1865 that had criticized the biblical text which sparked Reddie and Fishbourne to respond through the formation of a new organization. Anglican Bishop Colenso had been in London to defend himself against the charge of heresy, but he used the opportunity to engage in further controversy.

Colenso presented a paper at the Anthropological Society of London that raised questions relating to the integrity of the biblical text and the latest claims of geology. In the paper he commented that “the elementary truths of geological science” and “the simple facts revealed by modern science” were contradictory to “the accounts of the Creation and the Deluge”, so were “utterly irreconcilable with Scripture statements, if these are taken as announcing literal historical truth.”^{5,6} Reddie, and the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, Rev. W. J. Irons, were present. They strongly objected to these charges in a lengthy defence of the Bible, which even left Captain Fishbourne unable to speak.

The Victoria Institute supported Baconian science

The Victoria Institute certainly questioned aspects of Darwinism, but they did not spend a lot of time arguing against it in their first publications. Instead, members

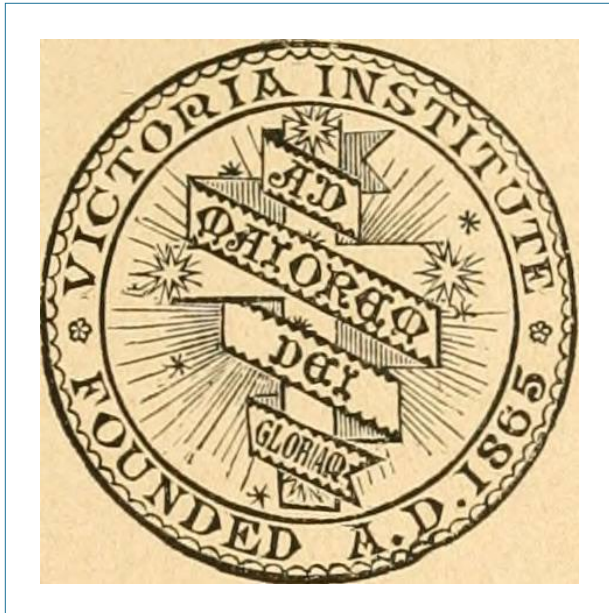


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Figure 1. Seal of the Victoria Institute

were committed to defending philosophical and scientific commitments that supported the biblical text.⁶ Essentially, they were committed to the Baconian methodology of science. This approach valued empirical science, sensory experience, and inductive reasoning. In other words, they believed that science should progress through experimentation and the collection of data from observations. Through inductive inferences, general scientific laws and principles may be established.

The Institute's opposition to belief in deep time, Darwinism, and biblical criticism arose because they perceived the inherent hypothetico-deductive approach of proponents to be excessively speculative. So it was not worthy of acceptance as established scientific methodology (hypothetico-deductive reasoning involves stating a general hypothesis and then setting a test which is validated against data). The first 'Object' of the organization reads as follows:

"To investigate fully and impartially the most important questions of Philosophy and Science, but more especially those that bear upon the great truths revealed in Holy Scripture, with the view of defending these truths against the oppositions of Science, falsely so called."⁷

The phrase "oppositions of science, falsely so called", references 1 Timothy 6:20 (King James Version): "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science [gnōseōs γνώσεως] falsely so called [pseudōnymou ψευδωνύμου]."⁷

The first paper, *Scientia Scientiarum*, written by Reddie, mentions a Declaration of Students of the Natural and Physical Sciences that had been signed by 700 learned gentlemen students of science (see figure 4). Reddie

also commented that "science has become, in our day, materialistic and wildly speculative, entirely through a disregard of Lord Bacon's principles."¹ This demonstrates that, within the movement, there was a strong commitment to Baconian methodology as the only way to do science with integrity. Modern biblical creationists equally draw a distinction between operational science, which is based upon experiment and the historical sciences, which are untestable in real time.¹

Reddie also quoted Dean William Cockburn's 1844 defence of the literal reading of the Bible against the nebular theory; a theory that made claims about deep time relating to astronomy and geology (Dean Cockburn is one of the Scriptural geologists discussed in Terry Mortenson's research).⁸ It held that the earth had formed by the action of heat over long periods of time, thus rendering the Mosaic account in Genesis false. This theory was later abandoned, even by Lyell in 1864, because it was recognized that granite had been subject to cooling by water, thus (inadvertently for Lyell) supporting the biblical statements regarding a universal deluge. Reddie quoted the Dean's notes, that the Geological Society was "Most valuable, as having furnished us with unexpected and unanswerable proofs of the waters having once covered the existing earth."¹ Cockburn is quoted further by Reddie as follows:

"You say that there are geological facts which prove the long existence of the world through many ages. I say there are *no such facts*. Here we are completely and plainly at issue. Produce, then, some one or more of these facts; and if I cannot fairly account for them without supposing the very long duration of the earth, I am beaten! I am silenced! But if you do not produce such facts, and retreat, like Professor Sedgwick, from the challenge, confess, or let your silence confess, that the whole doctrine of a pre-Adamite world has been a mistake, too hastily adopted by men of talent and learning, and too apt, like all other persons, to draw general conclusions from a few particular facts [emphasis in original]."¹

However, Colenso had still used the nebular theory in his attack on the Bible in 1865—as Reddie observed:

"So that it would appear, that at that time, the 'orthodox' geologists taught that the facts of geology proved the universality of the deluge, which Bishop Colenso, on May 16th, 1865,—drawing his inspiration, no doubt, from what he now regards as geological science—declared to be 'an impossibility' in such absolute terms, as even to draw forth a disclaimer from the president of the Anthropological Society of London."¹

The Victoria Institute moves away from its founding principles

James Reddie died in 1871, and the movement began to compromise, with questioning over biblical interpretation.



Figure 2. Drawing of “British Sea-Anemone and Corals” by marine biologist Philip Henry Gosse, Plate V, Van Voorst, Paternoster Row, London, 1860

The later president, Sir George Stokes (figure 3), was a traditionalist Christian, but he suggested Christians may err in their interpretation of Scripture, particularly in relation to the Genesis creation account. However, Stokes equally questioned the reliability of scientific knowledge because it was at best probabilistic. He wrote:

“We all admit that the book of Nature and the book of Revelation come alike from God, and that consequently there can be no real discrepancy between the two if rightly interpreted. The provisions of Science and Revelation are, for the most part, so distinct that there is little chance of collision. But if an apparent discrepancy should arise, we have no right on principle, to exclude either in favour of the other. For however firmly convinced we may be of the truth of revelation, we must admit our liability to err as to the extent or interpretation of what is revealed; and however strong the scientific evidence in favour of a theory may be, we must remember that we are dealing with



Figure 3. Sir George Gabriel Stokes (13 August 1819–1 February 1903)

evidence which, in its nature, is probable only, and it is conceivable that wider scientific knowledge might lead us to alter our opinion.”⁹

By the turn of the 20th century the Victoria Institute had abandoned a literal reading of Genesis 1. Roger Forster and Paul Marston write that “In 1914 E.W. Maunder summarised the then current views of Genesis 1 for the Victoria Institute—noting that recent creation was believed ‘at one time’ but no one now accepts it.”¹⁰

False claims about biblical creationism

It is often claimed by evangelical Christians, such as Forster and Marston, that scientific defences of the Bible do not have a long tradition within Christianity. Sometimes, modern creationists are accused of being inspired only by the Seventh Day Adventist George McCready Price in the early 20th century.¹⁰ However, Forster and Marston, for example (as many others), follow geologist Michael Roberts,¹¹ and Ron Numbers (a professor of the history of science, but anti-creationist)¹² in arguing that young-earth creationism has its origins with the Seventh Day Adventists, and the eccentric founder and prophetess Ellen Gould White. They write:

“Many people today who adopt ... young-earthism ... do not realise what are its roots. They presume that they are acting in the general tradition of Evangelicals or of Fundamentalism. This is simply not so.”¹⁰

It is true that Price became a member of the Victoria Institute in the 1920s and that he called the movement back towards a more literal interpretation of the Bible (which may have partly influenced the rise of the *Evolution Protest Movement* in 1932). However, as evidenced by the foundation of the Victoria Institute and the 19th century Scriptural geologists, the philosophical and theological foundations of modern creationism were already in place during the 19th century, and even centuries earlier.⁸

"We, the undersigned Students of the Natural Sciences, desire to express our sincere regret, that researches into scientific truth are perverted by some in our own times into occasion for casting doubt upon the Truth and Authenticity of the Holy Scriptures. We conceive that it is impossible for the Word of God, as written in the book of nature, and God's Word written in Holy Scripture, to contradict one another, however much they may appear to differ. We are not forgetful that Physical Science is not complete, but is only in a condition of progress, and that at present our finite reason enables us only to see as through a glass darkly; and we confidently believe that a time will come when the two records will be seen to agree in every particular. We cannot but deplore that Natural Science should be looked upon with suspicion by many who do not make a study of it, merely on account of the unadvised manner in which some are placing it in opposition to Holy Writ. We believe that it is the duty of every Scientific Student to investigate nature simply for the purpose of elucidating truth, and that if he finds that some of his results appear to be in contradiction to the Written Word, or rather to his own interpretations of it, which may be erroneous, he should not presumptuously affirm that his own conclusions must be right, and the statements of Scripture wrong; rather, leave the two side by side till it shall please God to allow us to see the manner in which they may be reconciled; and, instead of insisting upon the seeming differences between Science and the Scriptures, it would be as well to rest in faith upon the points in which they agree."

Figure 4. "Declaration of Students of the Natural and Physical Sciences", as quoted by Reddie in *Scientia Scientiarum*.¹

While Forster and Marston are clearly well acquainted with the Victoria Institute, they fail to draw out the significance of evidence that the early members generally held to a recent creation. They even note that the early foundation of the Victoria Institute involved belief in a recent creation, as the quote above, referring to E.W. Maunder, demonstrates. This evidence renders their categorical statement "This is simply not so", regarding the origin of young earth creationism, to be indefensible.

Conclusions

This article has only outlined the foundation of the Victoria Institute and its early position. However, it is evident that the scientific methodology of the early Victoria Institute is upheld within modern biblical creationism. The Victoria Institute's approach to science is clearly identifiable in the modern creation science position. This divides science; between the Baconian methodology, which involves experimentation, experience, and observation, and the speculative hypothetico-deductive approach of natural science, with its belief in deep time and evolution. Likewise, modern biblical creationists divide scientific methodology into operational science, which is widely accepted, and historical science, which is

considered speculative and unreliable when it contradicts the Bible.

It is true that the Seventh Day Adventist Price attempted to call the Victoria Institute back to its original position in the 1920s, but today's biblical creationists are really following an approach that already existed in the 19th century among leading evangelical Christians. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that modern biblical creationism has its roots only in the early 20th century, as Forster and Marston and others such as Roberts and Numbers try to maintain.

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