Reign of the Beast

The Atheist World of W. D. Saull and his Museum of Evolution

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Cover illustration: A spoof of the "Devil's Chaplain", the Rev. Robert Taylor (left, on the podium). His patron, the atheist Richard Carlile, is seen on the right, landing a punch. The wine merchant W. D. Saull funded both men and grounded his evolutionary talks in their dissident sciences. Such pastiches reinforced the prejudices of pious readers, by depicting the moral rot caused by irreligion. The wall posters on the left advertize contraception manuals and licentious memoirs, and a lecture by "Miss Sharples", Carlile's common-law "wife". Taylor's character is being impugned by portraying the mayhem caused by his infidel oratory. Beyond the brawling and debauchery, thieves are shown in the audience (bottom right) and a dagger-wielding agitator (centre). In reality, Taylor's congregations were respectable and attentive.
Etching, in the author's possession, entitled "The Triumph of Free Discussion" (the motto of Carlile's Fleet Street shop selling subversive prints). The caption reads, "A Sketch taken in the Westminster Cock Pit on Wednesday the 24th. of September 1834. Subject A Lecture by the Revd R. Taylor, A.B.M.R.C.S. 'On the importance of Character'."
Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

10. An Appeal to the Revolutionary Enemy

Saull confessed that he was better appreciated on the Continent. Unlike most of his confreres, he had a French connection, being known to the Parisian savants. This gave him a unique dimension—indeed, at times he deliberately talked over the heads of the English and made a direct appeal to what some still considered the national enemy.[1] His European connection was two-fold: as a wine and brandy importer he was well travelled and often in Paris, and it was because he was so successful in this trade that he could afford to travel to France frequently. Further, he was Robert Owen's right-hand man by the early thirties; and Owen, venerated in French republican circles, but not speaking a word of the language, would be accompanied on political trips by Saull as his interpreter.

Since Owen had long known the Parisian savants, he might actually have introduced Saull, either in France or in London. And, in Paris, Saull—as a new museum proprietor who had his own spectacular coal-age ferns—would undoubtedly have visited the collections in the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle (an institution with an allowance of 425,000 francs, as the *True Sun* reported to shame the niggardly British government for its neglect of institutions at home).[2] It is possible that Saull was in Paris in 1834,[3] when a behind-the-scenes visit could have

1 For Francophobia among the career zoologists at this time, see Desmond 1985a, 174–76.

2 *TS*, 7 Dec. 1835, 1. It also reported that "a most complete collection of fossil plants has been placed in the geology department".

3 Talking to the Trades' Unions in April 1835—and inviting its delates to his museum—"Brother Saull" said that he had been in France "lately" (*TS*, 22 Apr. 1835, 2).

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been arranged by the great fossil botanist, Adolphe Brongniart, the new professor of botany at the Muséum.

Certainly, Saull was elected a member of the Société Géologique de France (founded 1830) on 19 May 1834. He had been put up by the one of the society's founders, Ami Boué.[4] Boué was an Edinburgh-educated geologist, which undoubtedly made him familiar with Owen's New Lanark enterprise (visiting it was *de rigueur*). And having discovered human bones near those of extinct fossil mammals in 1823,[5] Boué was one of the first to accept a deep human antiquity, putting him in sympathy with Saull. Boué was also censored for his anti-Christianity, and was "a transformist of some sort",[6] which must have strengthened their rapport. In common with many geologists and fossil zoologists coming out of Edinburgh at this time,[7] he was a 'gradualist', sceptical of geological catastrophes and loathe to allow Mosaical intrusions into geology.

As in London, so in Paris: Saull's museum spoke for him.[8] On being elected, Saull invited the Société savants to his exhibition in London, and many of them were to come over the years.[9] He also told them that he was working up an essay on astronomical causes of geological events and that he would submit it to them direct. He fully intended to pass over the British geologists, obviously expecting a better reception in Paris. The Société was more egalitarian than its British counterpart and receptive to planetary explanations. As a consequence, Sir Richard Phillips's astronomical views were better received.[10] By contrast, Saull complained that the London Society, with its empirical emphasis, shunning anything that smacked of cosmic and creational explanations, showed a "great reluctance" to investigate these larger "laws".[11] He found himself in effect excluded. Just as Whigs and Tories came together in the country to resist the wilder radical demands, so it was inside the gentlemanly Geological Society. Here a ruling elite of Anglican

4 *Bulletin de la Société Géologique de France* 14 (1833–4): 586.
5 Grayson 1983, 117.
6 Corsi 2021, 352; Fisher 1866, 2: 143–44.
7 Corsi 2021, which updates J. A. Secord 1991, and Jenkins 2019, 88–150, on Edinburgh's "Lamarckians", a catch-all category in need of being broken down.
8 It was mentioned by Boué 1836, 2: 555.
9 *Bulletin de la Société Géologique de France* 15 (1835): 67.
10 R. Phillips 1832a, 36; Marcel de Serres in 1836 was taking a similar astronomical approach to large scale geological events (D'Archaic 1847, 18). Rudwick 1985, 28.
11 Saull 1853, viii.

dons and London careerists closed ranks.[12] This ministerialist cabinet of geology steered clear of divisive issues and insisted on empirical papers dealing mostly with stratigraphy. In so doing they could present a united front as purveyors of incontrovertible facts.[13] All talk of creation, causation, and cosmology was tactfully ruled out to leave the science circumscribed and safe. To them, stratigraphic facts were uncontroversial; they were the rocks on which the dons and divines justified holding their mace of power. But obstreperous backbench radicals had a larger purview, which embraced astronomical causes and fossil filiation. For Saull, Sir Richard's orbital explanations of stratal regularity and alternate marine inundations fired him precisely because it opened the great question of origins.

It all came out in his book—the one promised to the French. This would appear in 1836 as *An Essay on the Coincidence of Astronomical & Geological Phenomena, Addressed to the Geological Society of France*. As the title suggests, it was explicitly presented to the French *savans*, in an attempt to gain a hearing.[14] Such a monograph would never have been sanctioned by the Geological Society, so he had to print it privately. In the *Essay*, once again, Saull invited "my brother members" of the Geological Society of France to his museum, which he suggested was set up stratigraphically to prove Phillips's theory of planetary oscillations driving global changes and faunal progress. Everything about the *Essay* would have been hated by the dons and divines at home. Not merely the spontaneous chemical origins of minute corals on the earth's original pulverized granite substrate; worse for the cosmically-averse geological gentry was the alternating hot and cold climates as a result of the planetary wobbles, with the poles migrating, and the oceans moving from one hemisphere to the other, leaving rock strata composed of sea sediments here and dry land there.[15]

Although Saull pitched his *Essay* at the French savans, it actually attracted attention on the fringe at home. Because he had directed the gaze away from the "bosom" of the earth towards the heavens, the best-known astrologer of the age, "Zadkiel" (Richard James Morrison),

12 Morrell and Thackray 1981, 2.
13 Rudwick 1985, 25; J. A. Secord 1986a, 22; O'Connor 2008, 18.
14 *Bulletin de la Société Géologique de France* 17 (1835–6): 151.
15 Saull 1836, 3, 5, 12–19, 30.

hailed it as "the only possible theory of Geology which (*as far as it goes*) can be true". That "*as far as it goes*" was the rub. Zadkiel's *Horoscope* specialized in self-help science—astrology, phrenology, physiognomy, and predictive meteorology—but his underlying goal was to blend geology, astronomy, and astrology into a unified science, and Saull provided the key. Zadkiel was looking for respectability for his dubious science, trashed as charlatanry almost universally. He was an anti-Owenite, and bent astrology towards Christianity by blending in an element of free-will. For him "*one* only" geo-astronomer among the puffed-up Geological Society fellows had set his "course towards the pole star of universality in nature's causes" and that was Saull. His swinging poles, producing successive tropical and ice ages—and for the astronomical part Zadakiel gave Mackey's *Mythological Astronomy* the credit—set the foundation for this unified science. Zadkiel was to stretch the causation from Saull's "geological phenomena up, through the operation of meteorological causes, to those astronomical affections", and onward to astral influences.[16] He was piggy-backing to further his scientific respectability. Both Zadkiel and Saull, in their own ways, were trying to claw back some dignity and claim authority by standardizing around the scientific norms of uniformity, causality, and prediction. But Zadkiel's endorsement was hardly the sort that Saull wanted.

Ten days after his induction into the Société in 1834, Saull forwarded a parcel of fossils from Brongniart to Gideon Mantell. This suggests that Saull had carried the package back with him from France. Whether he had or not, he was hereafter a Continental conduit to English provincials.[17] More to the point, it shows his familiarity with Brongniart personally. But the real payoff for Saull in Paris was Brongniart's ultimate accolade. The Parisian expert made one of Saull's prize tree-fern trunks from the Oldham coal mines a new species, christening it after him, *Sigillaria*

16 Morrison [Zadkiel] 1841. On Morrison: Latham 1999, 176–77; K. Anderson 2004, 101–05.

17 J. A. Cooper 2010, 57. Since Mantell sent packages with people going to Paris, it is possible Saull carried this one back. Saull was a go-between for other Continental collectors: for example, in 1838 he presented a thousand Tertiary fossil shells to the Zoological Society of London on behalf of the Turin invertebrate palaeontologist Giovanni Michelotti: *MC*, 13 Dec. 1838, 2; *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* 6 (1838): 167. For his part, Saull sent books to Michelotti (1841, 10).

saullii.[18] Such immortalization would raise Saull's intellectual stock at home and make his museum more of a personal shrine. I suspect Saull sent or brought the best of his coal shale fossils to Paris for description, because Brongniart was publishing his monumental *Histoire des Végétaux Fossiles* in parts at the time (1828-37). Brongniart also "received" from Saull fossil fronds of a related fern found in the same slates, *Pecopteris*.[19] That said, these were probably all specimens bought in with Sowerby's collection, but Saull had gone, tellingly, to the French rather than the English for identification.

With a fossil named for him, Saull saw his standing improve. Nothing could better enhance the museum's reputation. This French appreciation was always the most welcome. Saull's biography would be published on the Continent and, eventually, his eulogy was to appear in Michaud's *Biographie Universelle*,[20] to contrast with the paltry obituaries at home. He was no prophet in his own land. Of course, the French did not really know him, making their biographies factually dubious: thus, Michaud glamourized him as the "Scion of a family of squires or knights, native of Devonshire"! But still it showed his greater impact on the Continent. As a result, his museum was listed in French *dictionnaires* and tourist guides, hinting at his European reputation.[21] It led to the ironic fiction of his 'aristocratic' pedigree, on account of the 'Devonshire' middle name (simply his mother's maiden name). But the polite fiction probably eased his slide through French scientific society.

As a result, when the antiquarian and flint-tool finder Boucher de Perthes visited Aldersgate Street he "expected to meet a duke", only to be greeted by "an honest merchant of the City, whom I found in his store putting on his shoes". Still the visitor was awed by the exhibition: none of the medals, Roman pots and Celtic axes on the ground floor prepared him for the fossil riches above: here was a lavish collection of

18 Brongniart 1828[–1837], 1: 456–57, pl. cli. The dating is problematic: the *Histoire* carried a date on the title page of 1828, but parts were added continuously through to at least 1837. Saull's *Sigillaria* was on page 456–57, and this part was published in 1836. Other illustrations of *S. saullii* occur in Mantell 1844, 1: 135; 1851, 32–33.

19 Brongniart 1828[–1837], 1:348–9, and pl. 121, Fig. 1, for Saull's *Pecopteris plumosa* fronds.

20 Michaud n.d., 38: 47.

21 Duckett 1853–60, 12: 412.

> plants and fruits coming from the collieries of England, plants and fruits whose analogues do not grow any more but in the torrid zone. He pointed out to me a fossil tooth of shark of approximately ten centimetres length, having belonged to an animal from sixty to eighty feet. A femur of fossil elephant (cast) being close to one metre length, representing an animal of more than fifteen feet high.[22]

The Radical French Connection

The ennoblement belied "Citizen" Saull's subversive salutes at home to the past French revolutions. Red cap on, he would contribute to the fund for the widows and orphans of those who fell during the July Revolution of 1830.[23] Thereafter he would celebrate its victory over despotism at annual dinners, at which he would sing the *Marseilles*.[24] Anniversary commemorations were a way for the disparate radical and Owenite groups to consolidate around a mutually-beneficial event. Whether it was Tom Paine's or Robert Owen's birthday, the July Revolution, the celebration of trial by jury, or to erect monuments to old jacobins,[25] Saull was present every year, often in the Chair.

There remained immense interest in revolutionary sources in the pauper press, as, indeed, in the French Revolution's leaders. When Robespierre's sister died in 1834, it was expected she would leave evidence to dispel the middle-class calumnies about his supposed Terror. His "memory blasted by all the assassin pens" would be retrieved and returned to show a virtuous man, the *Poor Man's Guardian* prophesied.[26]

Radical funerals, too, took on a French aspect, making them suspect to a genteel nation. The unions and Friendly Societies had taken the last rite into their own hands, saying a solemn farewell to their members, with processions, bands, and choirs. Now the socialists were to take over the rite as they buried their own dead, often in the face of fierce opposition from the clergy. Not least, the pomp was valuable to attract the poor to the cause, and a "lavish ritual available even to the simple

22 Perthes 1864, 416–18.
23 *The Star*, 18 Aug. 1830, 3; 23 Aug. 1830, 1; 24 Aug. 1830, 1; 25 Aug. 1830, 1.
24 *Republican* (Hetherington), 25 June 1831, 8; *PMG*, 6 Aug. 1831.
25 For instance, the monument to commemorate Thomas Muir the Scottish Jacobin transported for sedition in 1793–94 (*MC*, 16 Mar. 1837, 2).
26 *PMG*, 9 Aug. 1834; 13 June 1835.

working man was considered a trump recruiting card."[27] As the radicals perfected their own final rite of passage, the tricolour-waving London citizenry further modified it by introducing French-style funeral orations. They celebrated radical life in death Continental style. When the old shoemaker and London Corresponding Society founder Thomas Hardy died in 1832, Saull urged the National Political Union to attend his funeral procession in force. It was to process through London from Pimlico to Bunhill-Row, where "his obsequies should be celebrated as the French were accustomed to celebrate those of their great men."[28] Among the entourage, with many mourners sporting tricolour ribbons, walked the spy alongside Hetherington. In front of them was

> the Barouche of Hunt in which he sat while Saul [*sic*], Thelwall, Gale Jones and others Rode in Carriages or Black Coaches ... We went with a very great crowd to Bunhill Fields Burial Ground were [*sic*] Thelwall delivered a long lecture over Hardys Grave.[29]

This set the pattern for Owenite funerals. These were important events, for with celebration came cohesion, while the whole shebang acted to raise the Owenites' profile.[30] No lonely burial here; the fallen were treated to a full send-off. The religious aspect was shunted aside—dwelling not on a future state but a past one well lived in aid of the community, with the emphasis on the value of comradely morality and shared values. The radicals and Owenites developed this set of customs in a hostile culture by working up these Gallic-style obsequies. Saull would make the point at the graveside of numerous old firebrands over the years. He would follow "the excellent example of our enlightened brethren in Germany, France, and other countries on the continent of Europe, who ... speak to the assembled friends and relatives of the virtues, the patriotism, or the philanthropy of the deceased", thereby firing up the living to continue the good fight.[31]

Even French revolutionary failings could provide Saull his moral. At one debate in Theobald's Road, on abolishing the Established Church,

27 Yeo 1971, 102.
28 *MC*, 18 Oct. 1832; *Examiner*, 21 Oct. 1832; *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 21 Oct. 1832, 439. On Thelwall's own funeral, see Thelwall 1837, 430.
29 HO 64/12, f. 157; *Cosmopolite*, 20 Oct. 1832.
30 Nash 1995a, 158–62; A. Taylor 2003.
31 Saull 1838a.

he used France as a cautionary tale: "we must be careful not to pull down one house before we [have] built another." He knew from his trips that "France was evidently not prepared to realize the advantages of the revolutions which had taken place there". Rational institutions must be in place before the irrational ones are pulled down, lest reactionary elements fill the vacuum. Disestablishing the church, which he supported, would be successful once a proper secular schooling was accepted, which required a cultural shift.[32]

Even more did he use these trips to point up British backwardness, especially in its religious toleration. He reverted to this time and again, scoring political points on a variety of fronts. As a Common Councillor for his Aldersgate ward, he complained that potential delegates had to swear an "odious" oath, to abjure the "damnable and heretical 'Catholic' faith". Such an "abominable" sectarian ban showed that Continental countries were "far before us in religious toleration; he was a member of a learned society in France [Société Géologique], but on his election he was not asked his creed", he said.[33]

Comparisons with the French peasantry were equally unfavourable to their British counterparts. The "degraded condition [of] our unhappy countrymen" stood in contrast to that of their French cousins.[34] After one trip with Owen to France,[35] Saull's home-coming lecture on "Geology, in connection with the social and moral improvement of the people" unravelled into a panegyric on French institutions and peasantry. The Francophile reported that there were "no turnpike gates, no hedges shutting out the weary and footsore passenger from a view of the green fields". This gave him a view of a land cultivated more productively in small patches, which reduced poverty (because there was no law of primogeniture, so all sons received a patch to grow their staples). And the land's "produce is not as with us, carried away by drones who eat, but labour not".[36] Nothing would spoil Saull's idyll. No mention here

32 *TS*, 28 Apr. 1835, 2.
33 *TS*, 26 Dec. 1835, 4; Saull 1837.
34 *NMW* 8 (22 Aug. 1840): 124.
35 In 1837: Claeys, 2005, 9: 274–76. Saull tried and failed to get Baume discharged from Fleet Prison to go with him on this trip: P. Baume to W. D. Saull, 3 and 9 June 1837, Manx Museum MM 9950 uncatalogued: I am indebted to Roger Cooter for this. On Owen in Paris: *NMW* 4 (28 Oct. 1837): 3–4.
36 *NMW* 3 (30 Sept. 1837): 397–98.

of the new French "profitocracy", the "crafty middlemen" who had subsequently stolen the revolution from the artisans who had manned the barricades.[37] Nor was there mention of the poor being robbed, despite NUWC complaints about France's bourgeois plunderers. Perhaps a rosy view was best for a wine wholesaler, a middle-man himself, with shopocrats now being placed alongside aristocrats as hate figures, and profits becoming the new radical target. Rose-coloured spectacles left his view of *la grande nation* undimmed. A rejected prophet in his own land, and garlanded in Paris, Saull needed France.

37 Weisser 1975, 39–41; Dinwiddy 1992, 213, 217; *PMG*, 3 Aug. 1833, 248.