

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

27. Death and Dissolution

Without on-going effort the materials which constantly flow into museums can destroy them. Museums are about knowledge and its communication; the natural condition of collections is chaos.

Simon Knell in *Culture of English Geology*, on the cultural binding that prevents the museum's entropic fate.¹

Saull was the museum's soul. It was his ideological drive that bound its exhibits into a meaningful whole. Without this organized tension based around his talks it had no significance. It would disintegrate, and that is what Holyoake feared most.

Life looked normal at the beginning of 1855, a mundane alternation of professional archaeology and propagandist freethought. At a British Archaeological meeting on 24 January, Saull discussed the Isle of Wight. The island was slowly ceasing to be a rustic backwater, with fishermen's huts and a few lodging houses, although it was yet to see the seaside villas and hordes of holiday trippers.² Saull had, he said, been "a constant visitor to that island"—the last time in Spring 1854, typically to examine Wealden dinosaurs and Celtic barrows—and he talked on the Celtic-Roman transition, now pivotal to his museum's existence.³

In February, he was donating to the Secular Propagandist Fund and relishing one of Robert Cooper's "bold, unscrupulous, and shameless" attacks on the Bible at the City Road Hall of Science, Saull's stamping ground to the last. He talked to Cooper, praised his *London Investigator* and wished it well.⁴ That was on 25 February, and Cooper's lecture, on "Christian Evidences", shows the world turned full circle. This is where

1 Knell 2000, xvii.

2 Vitzelly 1893, 131–32; M. Freeman 2004, ch. 1.

3 *JBAA* 11 (1855): 66–67; 12 (1856): 186–87.

4 *LI* 1 (Feb. 1855): 168; 2 (1855): 46; *Young Men's Magazine* (Dec. 1854): 237; *Reasoner* 18 (25 Feb. 1855): 125.

Saull started, a quarter of a century earlier, with the Rev. Robert Taylor's indicted blasphemies at the Christian Evidence Society. Now Saull's life was to end in Strauss's age, with a very different "exegetical knife carving off ... the miracles into legends and myth."⁵ Strauss's sensational *Life of Jesus* was becoming part of that new wave of dissolvent literature pushing middle-class England into its own crisis of faith—those "honest doubters" (read bourgeois, non-socially-destabilizing), so frightened of being associated with the "scoffers".⁶ As for the "scoffers", those who had taken the brunt, and suffered denigration and incarceration, Strauss, rolling off their presses in three-h'apence parts, was just another weapon in what they considered a class armoury.

Days later, in early March, Saull burst a blood vessel in his lungs. He must have suffered chronic chest pains as he tried to draw breath and spat up blood. Over six weeks, his condition worsened. He remained conscious at the start, and drew up his final Will and Testament on 3 April. He was a born organizer, and a dying one: among his last requests was for a death-bed sojourner to help distribute the *London Investigator*. For these weeks, as he lay dying, he constantly worried over the proposed Metropolitan Institute, which "should be reared without delay" to house his museum.⁷ By late April, he was semi-conscious and the doctor held out no hope. He died on Thursday, 26 April 1855, five days shy of his seventy-second birthday.

As befitted a behind-the-scenes activist, a king-maker and facilitator, there was to be no lavish funeral, no cavalcade of flag-waving reformers through the city to Kensal Green, with bands and banners. No fanfare, nor even Holyoake's or Thomas Cooper's panegyrics over the grave to rally the living. It was all very different. We do not even know if the young bloods were there. In fact, the whole funerary episode was not only strange, but it raises more questions than it answers. The end of Saull's life, like the beginning, highlights how little we know.

"His funeral was attended by a number of old and valued friends", the *London Investigator* reported and then added, cryptically, "members

5 *LI* 3 (May 1856): 210.

6 A young T. H. Huxley's words: Desmond 1998, 657–58 n. 20; Strauss was already being sold in penny-halfpenny parts in 1843: *OR* 2 (18 Mar. 1843): 112. Larsen 2004, ch. 4; J. H. Brooke 1991, 265.

7 *Reasoner* 19 (22 Apr. 1855): 31; (29 Apr. 1855): 39; (6 May 1855): 47; *LI* 2 (1855): 46.

of a society with which he had been many years connected.”⁸ I think this is the City Philosophical Society, founded in 1808 by the “unlettered” silversmith John Tatum, at his house in Dorset Street. The society is well known to historians in its Regency manifestation (largely because Michael Faraday was a member), when it included science-fascinated autodidacts, and, interestingly, the political satirist William Hone. But it was presumed to have died out long before. Not only had it apparently survived in a shadowy form, but it was still in Tatum’s house.⁹ Of course it might have been resuscitated, or even infiltrated by Saull’s group, or they may have been there from its early days. It seems to have devolved into a select meeting group of old freethinking friends, relics from the heroic age of blasphemous chapels and co-operative start-ups. This is suggested by the *Reasoner’s* report in June 1855 that “At the last meeting of the City Philosophical Society, founded by the late Mr. Saull, Dr. Helsham delivered a biographical sketch [of Saull].”¹⁰ Saull’s having ‘founded’ it (that is, in 1808) seems surprising. But whatever his role, this reclusive set saw him out at the end.

Dr Arthur Helsham was part of this low-profile society, and his elderly group evidently arranged a private secular service and saw their old friend placed in the plot with Hetherington. Saull’s oldest living allies—every one nearly a septuagenarian—closed ranks around the grave. (See Appendix 6 for the biographies of this little-known group of activists.) Few were left, and they formed a freemasonry of surviving comrades. The *Reasoner’s* rather unsteady report reveals some of their names:

Mr. W. D. Saull was interred on Friday last [11 May?], in Kensal Green Cemetery, in *unconsecrated* ground, his grave being situated amid those of ‘Publicola,’ Hetherington, and Davenport. Mr. Henman spoke at the

8 *LI 2* (1855): 46.

9 Pettigrew (1840 4:10), who attended the society at its Regency height, even thought Tatum was dead by 1840 (he died in 1858). It was reported changing locations in *Journal of Arts and Sciences* 8 (1824): 271–72. The society was mentioned a few times in later years, e.g., *An American* 1839, 178; Mogg 1848, 169, when it was back at Tatum’s house. F. James 1992 on Michael Faraday’s membership.

10 *Reasoner* 19 (10 June 1855): 87. Saull and Tatum both applied to join the LMI Committee in 1825 (*London Mechanics Register* 2 [3 Sept. 1825]: 312–13), otherwise I can find no connection.

grave. Mr. Prout, Dr. Elsham [Helsham], W. H. Ashurst, jun., and a number of the old friends of Mr. Saull, were present on the occasion.¹¹

Obituarists were unexpectedly sympathetic, even if polite society was flummoxed by what it perceived as the incongruities of his life: his kindly heart yet heterodox “politics and religion as well as science”. A fellow archaeologist implied that the “excellence of his heart” and “kindness of his nature” trumped all.

He could differ, aye, and even dispute, but without any feeling of animosity or allowing his temper to be ruffled, and from the peculiarity of some of the opinions he entertained, and considering the manner in which they were occasionally met, this may be regarded as evidence of the benevolence of his disposition and character.

One word that cropped up was “enthusiast”, a polite term for ‘superficial’. He was uneducated (meaning an autodidact) and, as a result, driven to educate; he was wealthy yet “frugal” in habit, like so many old radicals; a liquor dealer who poured his profits into temperance societies (again supported by so many radicals), but most of all he poured it into his fabulous didactic museum. The sting was extracted from his ‘extremism’ by considering it the foible of a lovable eccentric, as if he could not really have believed the enormity of what he believed, atheism, evolution, and socialism—no longer crimes, but quirks.

In fact, *what* he believed was avoided altogether in the press obituaries as far too indelicate. Easier to concentrate on the seemingly harmless spectacle of his fossils: as the fusty *Gentleman’s Magazine* recalled, “Nothing would more delight this kind but crotchety philosopher than the pleasure of instructing and exhibiting his treasures to the lower classes, and for a long time he was honourably known among geologists as the working man’s friend.” The obituaries invariably ended on this “valuable”, “excellent” and “most instructive museum”, his main claim to fame, and pondered its fate.¹² This was to become the burning question.

11 *Reasoner* 19 (13 May 1855): 55.

12 The fullest obituary in the popular press appeared in the *GM* 44 (July 1855): 102; abridged versions of this were run in the *Illustrated London News*, *Literary Gazette*, and *Reasoner*. The learned society obituaries were: *JBA* 12 (1856), 186–87; *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 16 (Feb. 1856): 90. Foreign obituaries included the untrustworthy Michaud n.d., 38, 47.

All concentrated on the tangibles: his few learned papers, and the professional societies frequented by the clubbable man. None saw (or all carefully avoided) his lifetime of financing blasphemy chapels, Carlilean court cases, Owenite institutions, jailed insurgents, secular education, and anti-Christian propaganda. They missed his major presence behind the political scenes because it was barely visible, and the Robin Hood nature of his brandy trade, which siphoned the rich profits off to the poor. This funding, as his will would show, was to carry on posthumously.

The appreciation was so different in the secularist press, which understood his pump priming and proselytizing. Saull was a rarity, in Robert Cooper's view, a respectable champion of atheism. This self-made autodidact, having penetrated "the middle and commercial" ranks through trade, nevertheless transcended the sordid capitalism of that class, and devoted his profits to educating, defending, and politicizing the poor.¹³

The museum, "one of the sights of London" in Robert Cooper's words,¹⁴ was said by Helsham at the City Philosophical to be left to John Street, and so it was reported by many of the papers.¹⁵ In a sense it was, inasmuch as the organizers of the new Metropolitan Institution were based there. Others saw it going to the Metropolitan Committee, to be held for the new building. Even as the obituaries appeared, the confusion began. Matters were not cleared up by the *Reasoner's* bowdlerized publication of a small part of Saull's will (never mind its transcription errors). By now quite a lot was at stake, in terms of money and museum, for Saull's worth was proved to be £20,000,¹⁶ and his instructions were far from clear. The will, in short, was confusing. Collating and collecting the various debts and mortgages were the easy part—there was Owen's eleven-room town house in Burton Crescent, while a property in Byfield, Saull's Northamptonshire birth place, went to his younger brother Thomas (as did Saull's share of the wine

13 *LI 2* (1855): 46.

14 *LI 2* (1855): 46.

15 *Leicester Chronicle*, 21 July 1855; *Preston Guardian*, 14 July 1855; *Reasoner* 19 (10 June 1855): 87.

16 *Illustrated London News*, 30 June 1855, 647; *Reasoner* 19 (9 Dec. 1855): 296.

business).¹⁷ Most importantly, his socialist confrere and solicitor W. H. Ashurst would deal with the auction of Rose Hill mansion and its 62-acre estate, Owen's former house at the centre of the Harmony site.¹⁸ That was the straightforward part of the will.

The Tragic Drama of the Museum's End

It was the wording regarding the museum's fate that was convoluted. In fact Saull's will was an exercise in how to lose a museum. It stipulated:

First, that the museum contents and his scientific books went to Helsham "upon trust to place in or appropriate the same for the use and benefit of the Working Mans Hall or Literary and Scientific Institution John Street Fitzroy Square". It was the second "or" that made it controversial: either the museum was to go to the Metropolitan/Jenkins Institution (yet to be built)—*if* that is what he meant by "Working Mans Hall"—or it was to go to John Street (which was about to lose its lease).

Second, that five hundred pounds was bequeathed to

Mr. John Whittaker the Secretary of the said Literary and Scientific Institution John Street Fitzroy Square and the committee appointed to act with him under the will of the late Mr. Jenkins of Pinner the interest of such sum of five hundred pounds to be appropriated to the general purposes of the above named Hall and Institution.

So, the John Street Secretary was to get £500 to augment the Jenkins bequest to build the Metropolitan/Jenkins Institution, *if* the "Hall and Institution" referred solely to the projected Metropolitan/Jenkins Institution, and not to the John Street Institution as well!

At this point things get complicated, for the will then stipulated: Third, that if Helsham placed the museum "in the said Working Man's Hall", the interest on the £500 should rather be paid "half yearly to some person acquainted with Geology who may for the time being be the

17 Saull, Will, National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/2215. He also owned a counting house with cellarage adapted to the wine trade, also in Burton Crescent (*MC*, 3 Oct. 1848, 1). Three sisters, Caroline, Sarah, and Ann each received small legacies.

18 *Daily News*, 4 Aug. 1856, 8; *MC*, 12 Aug. 1856, 1. Tiffin chaired John Street meetings to liaise with Saull's executors on selling his Rose Hill Estate: *LI* 3 (Nov. 1856): 312; *Reasoner* 21 (21 Sept. 1856): 96; (5 Oct. 1856): 111; (12 Oct. 1856): 115; 22 (22 Mar. 1857): 45; (29 Mar. 1857): 50.

curator of my said Museum". And fourth, that Saull's 500 £1 shares "in the same Literary and scientific Institution" (by which he means the Metropolitan, *not* the John Street Institution) were also to be given to John Whittaker "for the benefit and general purposes of the said Institution".¹⁹

It was the stuff of legal nightmares, and, although the dying Saull obviously meant it all to go to the Metropolitan Institution Company (of which he had been a Trustee and driving force), his wording was anything but clear. Therefore, the courts were brought in to determine who was to be the recipient of the museum and money. Thus began the weary wrangling of a Chancery suit.

Meanwhile, the museum was cleared out, and in March 1856 the Metropolitan Institution Company made plans to hire a room for it, and settled on the defunct City of London Literary Institution nearby, at 165 Aldersgate Street.²⁰ This was destined to be its home until the hall could be built. But the expense was heavy, and it had to be paid for by voluntary donations. The trustees at this time said they planned to allow the public in free "*every Sunday*", explaining that, since the state refused to open public buildings on the Sabbath,

The working-classes must, therefore, take the initiative, and open all the museums and libraries under their own control on that day. The opening of the Saull Museum will assist the movement now in progress for obtaining a free Sunday for the people.²¹

The museum was being marshalled for the cause even after Saull's death.

It was a huge logistical operation, involving careful dismantling and packaging in hampers, with convoys of carters trundling up Aldersgate Street. Over 20,000 exhibits had been present in 1851, a figure subsequently increased as Saull continued to buy-in, collect on the Isle of Wight, and take in shipments, such as those from captains

19 Saull, Will, National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/2215.

20 This was where Richard Owen went to examine the reptile fossils for his continuing monographs: Richard Owen 1859, 22–24. The institution had been part gentleman's club for the City merchants, part scientific institution with a library and museum (Hill 1836, 1: 223–24). It had been wound up in 1852 (Timbs 1855, pt. 2: 459), meaning there was now space for storage there, perhaps in the old museum.

21 *Reasoner* 20 (9 Mar. 1856): 74.

searching for Franklin's expeditions. The *Mining Manual* confirmed that the museum comprised the "largest private collection of organic remains in the United Kingdom".²² Timbs's *Curiosities of London* at the time of Saull's death saw the "Geological Department" alone "exceeding 20,000 specimens",²³ and that takes no account of the stock piles of British Celtic and Roman ware collected in the 1840s. So the collection being relocated in 1856 was enormous.

It had always been a one-man show—as a London guide book put it, the museum's existence was "due to the perseverance of W. D. Saull".²⁴ In large part, it was an ideologically-driven endeavour, a shrine to utopian political dreams. The museum was to justify a distinct Carlilean Creator-free rise of life and substantiate the environmentally-driven inevitability of Owen's perfect society. But with Saull dead, this overarching meaning dissipated. He was the last link to this defunct world: Carlile was long dead, Owen was in his dotage—he had even converted to spiritualism in 1853²⁵ and was to die in 1858, aged eighty-seven. The museum dissolved into so many disparate items. The coherence was shattered, the living relationship Saull forged between the fossil fish and saurians, and aboriginal hut dwellings and Celtic ware, was all lost. The connective stories he told to visitors were now just echoes.

To make matters worse, the old generation, who sympathized with his Carlilean freethought and Owenite goals, and who might have helped preserve the museum intact, were themselves passing away. His younger brother, Thomas Saull, only fifty-three years old, died within months himself, on 1 October 1855.²⁶ Ashurst expired twelve days later, on 13 October, and Thomas Prout died in 1859. Meanwhile, their sons had grown respectable as solicitors (William Ashurst Jnr. and Robert Helsham), while John Prout, who retained his father's business, was described in Saull's will as a "gentleman". They did not have the same commitment or concern: theirs was a very different professional world.

22 *Mining Manual and Almanack for 1851*, 136.

23 Timbs 1855, 542.

24 Gilbert 1851, 139.

25 With socialism withering, a feeble Owen invoked the most sympathetic departed spirits as the new force to re-create the character of man. If his plebeian followers could not do it, then this less fallible agency could usher in the social millennium (Barrow 1986, 19–29).

26 MC, 5 Oct. 1855.

Saull's wife Elizabeth would herself die on 22 December 1860, aged seventy-one, the last close family tie with the living museum.²⁷

By July 1857, the Committee had chosen a site for the Metropolitan Institution. Many were sad to see John Street go—"there are legends clustered around its platform", mused Robert Cooper wistfully, for the "greatest of our leaders" once graced its "forensic forum." Yet the *London Investigator*, itself on the verge of collapse, hoped to see a "nobler building—one fitted to receive the treasures which the benevolence of Mr. Saull and Mr. Jenkins has endowed it with."²⁸

In May 1859, the Court of Chancery decided, correctly,

that the Metropolitan Institution Company was clearly the Institution meant by Mr. Saul [*sic*] (although wrongly described in his will) to which he intended to give the 500 shares he held in that company, the legacy of £500, his geological museum and library of scientific books.²⁹

And they charged Saull's estate costs to come to that decision. That should have been that, but the court wanted guarantees that an institution *would* be built to receive the museum. And the question remained as to what, meanwhile, "was to be done with the testator's geological collection, which was in 30 glass cases and packed in hampers, and how the costs were to be borne". And so the decision was referred back to the Chief Clerk of the court, and there it remained for a further year. The "weary business" finally terminated five years after Saull's death, in July 1860, when the court decided duty must be paid by the legatees (the Metropolitan Company) "but it would be a pity to raise it by the sale of the collection, which all parties seemed to wish to remain intact". The court decided that the museum should stay packed as it was, until the new institution was built to receive it, while the £1000 in shares and cash be released to the directors.³⁰

Building the Metropolitan Institution began at 12 Cleveland Street, Fitzroy Square, apparently a site they were already using for secular

27 *Observer*, 31 Dec. 1860, 8; *Reasoner* 26 (6 Jan. 1861): 14. But about her views we know very little, only that she contributed to funds to help the wives of jailed Chartists.

28 *LI* 4 (July 1857): 61–62.

29 *Metropolitan Express*, 13 May 1859, 4; *Reasoner* 24 (12 June 1859): 191.

30 *Times*, 28 June 1860, 10; *Reasoner Gazette*, 8 July 1860, 111; 15 July 1860, 115; *Reasoner* 25 (15 July 1860): 232.

lectures. These were cancelled as the scaffolding went up. By February 1861, the hall walls were thirteen feet high and, by April, the roof was on and joists laid, allowing a public meeting of the shareholders to take place inside for the first time, despite the thicket of scaffolding. The Metropolitan Institution, or Jenkins Institution, or Cleveland Hall as it was coming to be called, could at last be seen in the round, and it looked a "spacious and comely edifice", in fact "the handsomest building the Freethinkers of London have possessed". The ancillary rooms would devolve into "a library, museum, and schools", or such was the idea that Spring. The sale of more shares widened the ownership, and plans were laid for a tea party and festival on 3 June in the finished building, and they began selling shilling tickets for a ball on 10 June. More information was released: it would contain,

besides the Large Hall, appropriate Committee Rooms, Museum, Library, Reading and Class Rooms for the Tuition of Adults, and school Rooms for the Education of Children of both sexes, and where the industrious classes can assemble to acquire and communicate useful knowledge freed from all sectarian influence and control.

The museum was still on the cards. Thus was the building inaugurated on 3 June, with tea in the school-room, and the 500 guests retreating afterwards to the hall above for the speeches on "unsectarian education, mental freedom, political enfranchisement". Functioning by this point was the "large hall, three school-rooms, coffee-room, library, and several minor rooms, adapted to the wants of the working-classes for committee purposes. There are already a number of children in the schools." The plan was for a "free lending library" and the museum to be added.³¹

They had Saull's books for the library, and, at this point, the fossils should have been unpacked for the museum. It had always been his dream, and it was the wish of the dying man. Yet, despite everyone agreeing with the court that the museum should not be sold, the fossils remained stowed in wine hampers.

Ironically, there had never been a better time for a visual display of fossil evolution and human development. The middle classes had

³¹ *Reasoner* 26 (13 Jan. 1861): 18; (24 Feb. 1861): 127; (3 Mar. 1861): 139; (31 Mar. 1861): 202; (14 Apr. 1861): 228; (28 Apr. 1861): 247; (12 May 1861): 276; (19 May 1861): 288; (26 May 1861): 300; (16 June 1861): 334.

taken a shine to the *Origin of Species* (1859), which Charles Darwin had published with great trepidation—although a 15s cover price (a week’s wage for the poorest) signalled that it was not destined for the wrong hands. Punters pushed it into a third edition by 1861, with seven thousand copies in print.³² That year, T. H. Huxley provocatively stretched its bounds in an *Athenaeum* spat over the similarities of human and ape brains, where an angry Richard Owen accused him of wanting to make man “a transmuted ape”.³³ The inflammatory issue, simmering in polite society since the *Vestiges*, had emerged into the open. The public was clamouring to see the evidence for evolution in museums.³⁴

Saull’s museum at such a moment would have been able to draw fresh reserves for his monkey-ancestry and aboriginal rise. But the exhibits only had meaning in situ with Saull’s explanations. Now he was gone and the fossils were hampered. Among freethinkers, the ideological issue of monkey men had spluttered on. That campaigner for life’s godless rise, William Chilton, was an arch-“scoffer”, and, no less than Huxley, would tactically defend the dignity of man as the “son of an ape”, against clerical “rudeness, puerility, and ignorance”, but for his own class, in his own time.³⁵ Chilton’s had been a tragically early demise (he died a month after Saull), but human parentage remained a potent anti-clerical weapon in the Halls. Whether the *London Investigator*’s obligatory “Origin of Man” series (finished just before Saull’s death), or 26-year-old John Watts’ “Theological Theories of the Origin of Man” at City Road Hall of Science (delivered and published as the Cleveland Hall was going up in January–March 1861), the warm topic just kept getting warmer.³⁶ There was no better time for Saull’s museum, providing some Owenite spiritualist could summon up Saull’s ghost to explain its evolutionary import.

Not that this was impossible. With the decline of socialism had come a rise of the emancipationist spiritualists, even the ‘Social Father’ himself

32 R. B. Freeman 1977, 85. No mind that the *Origin* grew out of a vastly different Malthusian context (Hodge 2009), Saull’s palaeontological display would have been just as amenable to Darwin’s ‘common ancestry’ theme in this plebeian venue.

33 Richard Owen 1861, 395.

34 Rev. R. S. Owen 1894, 2: 38–39.

35 Chilton 1854.

36 *Reasoner* 26 (20 Jan. 1861): 47, 48.

would die one. For many marginalized Owenites, now marching to the millennium guided by the spirit powers, contact with past heroes was a feature of *séances*, and Saull's ghost was evidently still hovering overhead. Once it was even summonsed. A co-operator-turned-medium, Dr Jacob Dixon, formerly Secretary of the Labour Exchange,³⁷ a man who had moved from homoeopathy to mesmerism looking for self-help patient cures, then to spiritualism, called up "Devonshire Saull" by mistake one day at a *séance*. The ethereal Saull was understandably nonplussed according to the medium.³⁸ But then the arch-materialist's spirit was forever being dragged into uncongenial realms.

John Watts, equally an arch-materialist with an equal distrust of spiritualism, was a new generation secular missionary, but his case shows how much he could have benefited from the museum. He was the son of a Wesleyan preacher, and had learned his preaching techniques well. As a compositor by trade (like Chilton), with type in his hand and words in his head, he was a voluminous reader, and became sub-editor of the *Reasoner*.³⁹ He threw himself into Darwin's *Origin*. He gave a fair epitome of it in the *National Reformer*, coming to the conclusion that Darwin leaves us "to infer that he includes man,—considered in his corporeal capacity, of course,—amongst the earthly products of 'descent with modification.'"⁴⁰

Strauss had taught the secularists to look at the *evidence* for Gospel statements. The former Oxford tutor Richard Congreve, lecturing on "Positivism" in Cleveland Hall, was stressing "the laws which govern the world"⁴¹ and "the dignity with which [man] submits to them". Put those two approaches together and it explains why Watts' simultaneous lectures in 1861 on the "Origin of Man" in Cleveland Hall was less an attack on Genesis and more a detailing of the proofs of the laws of evolution. And, did he but know it, some of the best fossil proofs were, *as he spoke*, only a few yards away, still packed in W. D. Saull & Co hampers. The audience now craved the "latest intelligence", not a theological

37 See Jacob Dixon to Robert Owen Correspondence, Co-operative Heritage Trust Archives, Manchester, ROC/4/23/1-4; *Crisis* 2 (20 June 1833): 196.

38 *Spiritual Magazine* 5 (1 Feb. 1864): 80; Podmore 1907, 2: 610-11.

39 *National Reformer*, 11 Nov. 1866: 305-06.

40 *National Reformer*, 4 Jan. 1862, 6; 18 Jan. 1862, 5-6; on Spencer: 12 Dec. 1861, 2; 28 Dec. 1861, 6-7.

41 *Reasoner* 26 (7 Apr. 1861): 214; (21 Apr. 1861): 238-39.

bash. And Watts was at his best passing on the newest “scientific views on the subject of man’s appearance on the earth.” He could have put Saull’s fossils to advantage, particularly as the two men had shared a goal. Watts, like Saull, had an ideological slant: he sent auditors away with the benevolent Owenite view (far from a Malthusian tooth-and-claw Darwinism), that

our forming a part in the great whole of animal existence ... instead of conveying the idea of degradation, should induce a better feeling and kinder treatment to those animals it had pleased us to class among the “brute creation”.⁴²

Watts’s twopenny pamphlet on the “Origin of Man”, unlike a 15s book, was to change culture, not pretend to stand aloof from it.

The exuberant young Watts, sustained by this positivist air, was “Taking [nature’s] facts for our guide”. He stressed that aboriginal mankind was a contemporary of extinct cave bears and big cats. This was suggested by Brixham cave finds of human bones gnawed by hyaenas. Then there were the flint knives “mixed with the bones of animals now extinct”. He could have pointed to Saull’s specimens. And geology, by cataloguing life’s rise from the “lowest orders”, “polypi, worms” and so on, though the “corals, shell-fish” and eventually fish and reptiles, then “up to man”, preserved the sequence “exactly as it must have been had the one been developed from the other.” The Cleveland Hall talk was made for Saull’s cabinet, which was designed to illustrate just this—that “man, myriads of ages ago, had his origin in the animals now lower in the scale than himself.”⁴³

There was no denying an audience for lectures highlighting Saull’s fossils—and in the very institution which had them secreted away. But the moment was lost. And the audience itself was changing, with the growth of clerks and domestics, who were less concerned with a

⁴² *Reasoner* 26 (27 Jan. 1861): 62.

⁴³ *Reasoner* 26 (17 Feb. 1861): 102–04; (24 Feb. 1861): 119–21; (3 Mar. 1861): 132–34. On the Brixham cave finds in 1858–63, see Riper 1993, ch. 4; Boylan 1978; Grayson 1983, 179–85; Wilson 1996; Bynum 1984. Watts repeated his talks at the City Road Hall of Science on 22 March 1862 (*National Reformer*, 21 Mar. 1863, 8). Watts’s potential was never realized. He became ill with consumption in 1863 (aged 29), and died in 1866, aged thirty-two. He was buried in Kensal Green, near Saull, Davenport and Hetherington (*National Reformer*, 3 June 1866, 345; 11 Nov. 1866, 305–06; Royle 1974, 283).

pointed Owenite explanation of evolution.⁴⁴ The fossils were, as the *National Standard* had once said, a sealed book without Saull,⁴⁵ and with his death the book was being re-sealed. The directors of Cleveland Hall, with different priorities, were losing a sense of its relevance as a whole. Nor was there a willingness to take responsibility.

It was not as if Cleveland Street had lost direction. It remained secularist through the 1860s (evangelicals and spiritualists only got hold of it in the early 1870s). Religious critics continued to damn it till the end of the sixties: “Every cock can crow on his own dunghill”, sneered one, “and at Cleveland Hall the Secularists have it all their own way, and are merry at the expense of their opponents. Nor is this all; they often indulge in a style of abuse which sounds even to tolerant ears uncommonly like blasphemy.”⁴⁶ To Saull’s ghost it must have seemed like old times, blasphemy again. But with his demise the space-cluttering exhibits had lost their *raison d’être*. And without his esoteric understanding, or the paid curator/lecturer he stipulated in his will, they remained a fragmented jumble, all coherence gone.

The Fate of the Fossils

Eight years after Saull’s death, in 1863, the directors got rid of the lot. Twenty five years in the making, the haul valued at over £2,000,⁴⁷ and no less valuable intellectually, it made no difference to the directors. Nor did they care that Sowerby’s historic specimens were included. Without constant curating and reinforcement of their social purpose, collections anyway tend to disintegrate.⁴⁸ But this one, boxed, lost from sight, and its moral meaning interred with Saull, was an extreme case. The stowed

44 Anon 1904, 322, said that Saull’s “money was devoted to carrying on a school, which gradually became little more than a place of evening amusement for the young men and women employed at large shops in the neighbourhood”, implying that this caused the Directors to lose interest. Actually, Saull’s bequest had gone into the building fund; it was Jenkins’s money (£100 a year annuity) that financed the school (*Reasoner* 26 [16 June 1861]: 334).

45 *National Standard* 3 (18 Jan. 1834): 44–45.

46 Ritchie 1870, 378.

47 *UR*, 15 Sept. 1847, 83.

48 Jardine, Kowal and Bangham 2019.

exhibits were said to be in a “lamentable state”,⁴⁹ and taking up space, so they were ditched.

The British Museum was quick off the mark and sequestered the show-stopping exhibits. In fact, the Cleveland Hall Secretary, oblivious to the fossils’ real worth, *offered* the British Museum the pick for the bargain price of £30. For this ridiculously-small sum, the museum obtained 201 of the prize specimens, chosen by the keeper of geology, George Waterhouse, undoubtedly guided by Richard Owen, now superintendent of the natural history departments. A quarter were reptiles, fifty fossils, including the *Iguanodon* sacrum made the foundation of Owen’s “Dinosauria”. Twenty-seven other parts of *Iguanodon* were taken, as well as a cranium of *Crocodylus spenceri*, an ichthyosaur skull, and more. Ten mammal fossils were selected, including four remains of whales. To these were added 45 fish fossils, 69 invertebrates, “the greater portion of which are specimens figured and described in “Sowerby’s Mineral Conchology”, Waterhouse reported. On top of this were 27 plants—Saul’s famous coal-seam fossils, one being the type specimen of *Sigillaria saullii*, we presume.⁵⁰ It was daylight robbery of the poor by a state body top-heavy with the country’s wealthiest aristocrats. Saul would have been turning in his grave.

Just *how* much of a steal was evident from the market price of fossils. For decades a good ichthyosaur skull could fetch anything from £6 to £25 at Stevens’ sales, or a mammoth skull from 12 to 144 guineas. Commercial collectors in Whitby were asking £30 for fossil crocodile skulls.⁵¹ This alone suggests that a single Saul fossil could have been worth the £30 knock-down sum asked for the lot. Knowledgeable collectors got a good price—they could talk up the real value. Mantell had sold his 20,000-object cabinet to the British Museum for £4000 in

49 Anon. 1904, 322.

50 British Museum, Central Archive, Trustees Original Papers, Department of Geology, Report respecting Offers for Purchase, 5 Aug. 1863, No. 6607. The sanction for this purchase: Trustees Minutes, 8 Aug. 1863, C10,408; House of Commons, *Finance Accounts I.-VII...1863-4* (28 Apr. 1864): 24-26. Other keepers acquired some of Saul’s antiquities in 1863 (Hobson 1903, 109; Walters 1908, 324, 372, 435).

51 Mantell 1846; Knell 2000, 206, 217.

1839.⁵² Roach Smith sold his antiquities, likewise, for £2000 in 1856.⁵³ This casts into relief the paltry sum paid for Saull's choice exhibits bequeathed to guardians ignorant of their worth. The figure seems even more shocking given the price that the British Museum was asking for casts of their fossils: £4 10s for an *Ichthyosaurus intermedius* down to 8s for an *Iguanodon* humerus. They were charging, in effect, more than they paid for Saull's original, figured and 'type' specimens.⁵⁴

The Metropolitan managers hived off the duplicate fossils and sold them at auction in June.⁵⁵ Why only the *duplicates* is puzzling.⁵⁶ What happened at this point is an even greater mystery, as is the destination of the remaining fossils, antiquities, ethnographic exhibits, Petrie's skeleton, Hibbert's skull, and the rest.

By all accounts, an unscrupulous con-man carted away seven van loads of remains, as if they were so much bric-a-brac. We do not know whether he paid the managers, or was doing them a favour. Silver-tongued John Calvert, a self-aggrandizing "mining engineer" and "gold prospector"—better known in the mineralogical press as a "blackguard" and "charlatan", and those were the politest things said of the man called "Lying Jack".⁵⁷ Calvert, evidently, cleared the lot out in 1863. The man was a scammer who claimed to have discovered gold in Australia. Even if the near libellous tittle-tattle is colourfully over-inflated, there is a sense in which it helps explain events. It is possible that he not only took Saull's fossils after his death, but conned Saull in life. Calvert's father, a friend of William Blake, indulged his pagan lifestyle to the distress of friends, and son John was probably sympathetic to Saull's

52 Cleavelly and Chapman 1992, 321–26.

53 PP. *British Museum. An Account of the Income and Expenditure of the British Museum for the Financial Year ended the 31st day of March 1857*, 2.

54 *Synopsis of Contents of British Museum. Sixtieth Edition* (1853): 270.

55 *Express*, 12 June 1863, 1.

56 Although described as "a valuable and interesting Collection of Fossils" by Stevens's sale room, in their auction of 13 June 1863 (*Athenaeum* 1858 [6 June 1863]: 731), these were apparently only duplicates: cf. Cleavelly 1983, 255; Chalmers-Hunt 1976, 102. Very little is known about the dismantling of Saull's collection by the uncaring Metropolitan managers, leaving many questions. How did they know which were duplicates? And why, then, did they not auction the valuable originals?

57 My knowledge of Calvert owes much to Mick Cooper, pers. comm.; M. P. Cooper 2006, 85–105; Embrey and Symes 1987, 73; Sherborn 1940, 29; M. A. Taylor 2016, 89; Anon. 1904, 322.

freethought. Given this sympathy and Calvert's puffed-up credentials, Saull put him up for a Geological Society fellowship, unsuccessfully.⁵⁸ So Calvert would have known of Saull's valuables. Calvert amassed his own huge "museum" (some 26-million specimens, he claimed unflinchingly!). As a dealer, he profited from buying cheap, and even more from his speculations, taking gold-discovery investors for a ride, so Saull's collection might have seemed an enviable target. Doing the artless managers a favour sounds like Lying Jack's style.

Where is the collection now? This is the strange part. Even before his death in 1897, Calvert started unloading his own hoard on Stevens's auction room, and more went under the hammer after his death.⁵⁹ But the bulk, said to be 100,000 shells, fossils, and minerals, gathered cobwebs and dust in a brick building in East London. They supposedly still included the "W. D. Saull coll. ... appropriated from the Metropolitan Inst."⁶⁰ The Natural History Museum turned the collection down in 1938. Finally, the trove, now "absolutely filthy with ... London dust and soot", was bought for £2,000 by a New York dealer, Martin Ehrmann, that year, and he had students pack the lot for shipping to America.⁶¹ Expert mineral dealers in New York then processed the collection and brochures were printed, but none mentioned Saull.⁶²

And so, for the present, the trail has gone cold. Saull's remaining fossils and antiquities, his ethnographic exhibits and radical relics, all the items that gave his museum its evolutionary coherence and rationalist identity, have disappeared like Arthur in the mist.⁶³ The whereabouts of Hibbert's head and Petrie's skeleton is unknown. Effectively, the largest private "geology" museum in early Victorian London, possibly in Britain, had vanished. The breakup of the Aldersgate Street museum

58 Mick Cooper pers. comm. Calvert (1853, 46) cited Saull in *Gold Rocks of Great Britain*.

59 *Athenaeum* 3652 (23 Oct. 1897): 543; 3690 (16 July 1898): 82.

60 Sherborn 1940, 29.

61 Smith and Smith 1994; cf. Sherborn 1940, 29, who thought the Calvert collection went to Tottenham Castle Museum.

62 Mick Cooper, pers. comm. Some of the collection went to the Smithsonian (*Geological Curator* 3 [June 1982]: 236–37, 242–46), but the provenance of many specimens is unknown.

63 There have been parallel losses to the city. A few years later, Bethnal Green lost the chance to house a fossil museum, when Antonio Brodie's efforts to leave his Pleistocene Mammalia from the Ilford brick pits to the community's East London Museum was thwarted by government indifference (W. Davies 1974, xiv).

prevented the possible re-construction of its meaning for a Darwinian age, and the loss precluded a posthumous celebration of its creator. Any lingering regard for Saull vanished with the museum's dissolution.

Trashing Reputations

"The human race", the *Reasoner* once said in a diatribe against Moses, "has forgotten its own birth" and filled the void with its imagination.⁶⁴ The metaphor just as aptly applied to Saull's museum: lost, and its memory erased by a posthumous trashing of Saull's reputation. What sealed Saull's fate finally was his entry in that self-confident *fin de siècle* compendium, the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The *DNB* was a huge exercise of discretion, compression, proportionality, and balance, even if the optimum was not always achieved in its 29,000+ entries. But at least, as Lawrence Goldman said as the superannuated texts were updated and digitized, it was a fair "reflection of late Victorian views of national history".⁶⁵ The original intent was to include quirky and offbeat subjects—broadening the dictionary's scope with lesser luminaries whose lives were to highlight the imaginative potential of disparate souls.

Saull probably only squeezed in to the *DNB* because the editors were scouring *Gentleman's Magazine* obituaries.⁶⁶ But that disdainful source was problematic. The fogeyish magazine had shuddered at atheism as "an intellectual insult, a social nuisance, a religious pestilence, and a moral curse"—when it dared mention the subject at all. And, believing that socialists were the "only class openly professing infidelity", the *Gentleman's Magazine* took aim at them too, not that it often stooped to such "wretched trash". It loathed the "filth" of socialism and thought that, whatever socialism's benevolent intent to ease the sweated brow, it had to be "leavened by religious impulses and motives".⁶⁷ So the *Gentleman's Magazine* was never going to warm to Saull. The *Gentleman's* obituary strained to be fair to the "crochety philosopher", even though his knowledge was "superficial", but it pointed to its own censorious

64 *Reasoner* 26 (6 Jan. 1861): 10.

65 Goldman, "Making Histories".

66 Atkinson 2010, 221, 223, 225, 227.

67 *GM* 35 (May 1851): 467–68, 519–23.

review of Saull's *Notitia*, which castigated Saull's belief that the Goddess of Reason's enthronement would be a blessing. The magazine's dismissive stance set the *DNB*'s tone.

Matters were exacerbated by the *DNB*'s choice of obituarist. The *DNB* might have spread its net widely, but "Religion" remained the dominant "field of interest" (a statistic corroborated by the 1995 digitization of the old *DNB*.)⁶⁸ The emphasis was on classical learning, clerical piety, good breeding, and scientific merit. The *DNB* offices were in Waterloo Place, off Pall Mall, and the selection of biographers was whittled down to the most reliable *habitués* of London's surrounding clubland. Yet a hack's competence was in proportion to his social and temporal distance from his subject. Therefore, putting a priest with a dual geological calling in charge of a mis-categorized, blasphemous Owenite, dead half a century, who financed freethought and ran a museum for rationalist ends, was spectacularly bad planning. The entry went to the Rev. Professor T. G. Bonney.

Bonney wrote seventy entries for the *DNB*, exclusively on geologists. Unfortunately, Saull, mis-filed as a "Geologist", was parcelled out to him. Bonney was a curate's son who, from his gentrified upbringing to his genteel life at St John's College, Cambridge, was not au fait with the atheist Owenite milieu. His "charmingly written"⁶⁹ *Memories* hailed St John's good life, where gastronomy vied with geology. He was an ordained priest and honorary canon of Manchester Cathedral, "a scientific parson, but quite *sans reproche*," said the old agnostic T. H. Huxley,⁷⁰ meaning a working petrologist (rock expert) who did not let his cloth intrude. Bonney defended evolution in the religious press, and, in common with his Spencerian age, saw it stretch from crabs to civilization.⁷¹ Nevertheless, he had no truck with Herbert Spencer's view on religion.⁷² Bonney insisted that "the earth's history tells its tale of purpose, not of the blind working of physical forces". And the Bible

68 Even if the editors dismissed one enthusiast's list of 1400 hymn-writers sent for consideration: Atkinson 2010, 227; Maitland 1906, 367.

69 Rastall 1937.

70 T. H. Huxley to Henrietta Huxley, 5 Feb. 1889, Huxley Archives, Imperial College, London.

71 Bonney 1921, 37; 1891, 23.

72 Gay 1998, 49.

was morally inspiring, even if Genesis was allegorical.⁷³ Saull, with his virulent distrust of organized religion, was not his ideal subject. Bonney balked at freethought. He actually penned the Saull entry in 1897 after combatting its latest manifestation, 'agnosticism', in his Boyle Lectures at the Chapel Royal in Whitehall.⁷⁴ So even if Canon Bonney had known Saull's views, he would have strained to situate them sympathetically.

In a positivist age, looking for positive scientific attainments—in, say, stratigraphy, fossil classification, or field-work—Bonney could find none in Saull. Bonney simply compressed the *Gentleman's Magazine's* dismissive snubs of Saull as a crotchety ignoramus. The entry damned with no faint praise at all. Saull "was more enthusiastic than learned". His astronomical explanations of geological events "indicate the peculiarity of his opinions". And his re-publication of Sir Richard Phillips shows him "attacking Newton's theories of gravitation." No one would want to know more, but if they did, they were sent to the *Gentleman's Magazine*.⁷⁵ One could never learn of Saull's King-making Carlile benefactions, his financing of the "Devil's Pulpit", or indeed dozens of other radical and co-operative venues, his Labour-Exchange pioneering, or his treasurer's work on so many Owenite and reform causes, national and local, let alone the gigantic enterprise that was his open, didactic, working-man's geology museum, the largest private one in London.

DNB entries were quasi-oracular pronouncements for a century. They were the first and sometimes the only port of call for scholars. So a dismissive entry could dampen research for decades. Yet, sympathy *could* have been achieved. The *DNB* aimed for it: "High-churchmen were to be allotted to high-churchmen", it was said at the start.⁷⁶ And they achieved it in ten Holyoake-authored entries: on early deists, co-operators and radicals, notably Carlile and Hetherington. The Holyoake entries were sensitive to context and knowing in their appreciation. Holyoake was by now eighty-years old, and as sharp as ever. In Saull's day, he had moved from political atheism to a more intellectually accommodating secularism, backed by Saull. In these later years, he was on cigar-smoking terms with the new aristocracy of intellect. How different, then,

⁷³ *Guardian*, 16 Oct. 1895, 45; Clodd 1902, 186; Bonney 1891, 91.

⁷⁴ Bonney 1891.

⁷⁵ Bonney 1897.

⁷⁶ Maitland 1906, 368.

if he had written Saull's entry: the freethinker he knew well, and the financier who realized his dream of a freethought palace in Cleveland Street—itself still going.⁷⁷ But he did not.

The last word must go to the greatest Victorian palaeontologist, Richard Owen. The gaunt, goggle-eyed eighty-year old, just knighted in 1884, was resting on his staggering output of 600 publications. He had been sidelined by the brusque Darwinians to a lonely life in Sheen Lodge, in Richmond Park, a present from Queen Victoria. Forty-three years earlier, on the top floor of Saull's Aldersgate Street museum, Owen had found one of his key fossils, the *Iguanodon* sacrum. It had been the basis for his most enduring creation—the dinosaur—a creature that was acquiring its iconic status thanks to the bone rush in the American West. His life now closing, Owen repaid the debt.

There was some irony to it. The towering figure of his day, Owen had tried Canute-like to stem the transmutationist tide. A devout Anglican, he approached his descriptive work like a religious duty, for his fossil animals, "in the Psalmist's words, 'were telling the glory of God'." With Bonney, he believed the continuous steps from nature to civilization showed "foresight, intention, and successful attainment", and anyone doubting it he called congenitally blind.⁷⁸ He had fought tenaciously and occasionally cleverly against the bestial threat of a transmuted-ape inheritance. Yet here he was in 1884 acknowledging an old Owenite freethinker, who had openly dethroned God and made heavenly man a shaved monkey.

Owen cut a forlorn figure, looking for peace and closure in the twilight years. A widower, whose only son was about to commit suicide, he spent his days finishing his magnum opus, *A History of British Fossil Reptiles*, which included a number of Saull's ancient saurians. The four-volume compilation stitched together a long-running series of Palaeontographical Society memoirs, the first from 1849, and it was only now being wrapped up.⁷⁹ At the same time, Owen was reconsidering some barely decipherable slabs that had once been in Saull's museum.

77 William Morris thought it "a wretched place, once flash and now sordid": Boos, "William Morris's Socialist Diary." It was the home of foreign anarchists in the 1880s, and revamped as a Methodist mission with a food depot for the needy in the 1890s: *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 35 (May 1986): 141–44.

78 Richard Owen 1860, 314; Gruber and Thackray 1992, 71–74; Rupke 1994a, 210–16.

79 Dawson 2012, 664.

They had come over with the £30 job-lot to the British Museum in 1863. Having spent four years (1880–1884) overseeing the transfer of exhibits to the new Natural History Museum in South Kensington, Owen was re-examining these problematic fossils. The slabs in question contained partial jaws, scutes, and bits of skeleton. Back in 1851, when he first described and illustrated them, he thought this was a young crocodile, of indeterminate species.⁸⁰ Thirty-three years later the Grand Old Man of palaeontology finally gave it a name. Tucked away in his newly-added index, Owen called it *Crocodylus Saullii*.⁸¹

For a moment, Saull's kindly ghost must have smiled. But *Crocodylus Saullii* suffered an ephemeral existence. Almost immediately the name was challenged and dumped.⁸²

So *Saullii* disappeared from the record, along with Saull himself. His legacy would have been an Everyman's museum of palaeontological and cultural evolution, had it not been destroyed by uncaring secularists at the onset of the Darwinian age. All that survived was a tattered reputation, hanging in the air like the tail of a Kilkenny cat after being devoured by Victorian orthodoxy. Martyrdom was a popular theme in the French-style obsequies championed by Saull. The fate of this genial socialist facilitator was far more ignominious. He simply vanished.

80 Richard Owen 1851, 45, Tab xv.

81 Richard Owen 1849–1884, 2: index vi.

82 A. S. Woodward 1885, 496, 507. Smith Woodward was wrong to suggest Owen had called it *C. Saullii* in 1851; he only did so in 1884. Smith Woodward himself thought Saull's specimen was more likely the newly-named tiny crocodile *Bernissartia*. Buffetaut and Ford (1979) re-examined Saull's slab to confirm that it is *Bernissartia*, a one-metre long crocodile with a short skull and blunt rear teeth for crushing hard-shelled prey.