

WORKS

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JAMES HAMILTON

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OF THE LATE

REV. JAMES HAMILTON, D.D. F.L.S.

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BUCKLAND'S BRIDGEWATER TREATISE,¹

It is not difficult to realize the emotions of sadness and of awe in one who is conscious that his feet are standing on the soil which covers Herculaneum, or who pursues his solemn journey through the streets of Pompeii, and recognises in its houses and temples the records of what was transacting there seventeen centuries ago, almost as distinctly and vividly transmitted, as if the entire vitality of the city had been arrested in the moment of most unconstrained and various action, exhibiting one perfect specimen of the very way in which men went about their business and amusements—the way in which ladies dressed, patricians lounged, limners painted, tragedians acted, and gladiators fought,—when Vespasian reigned, and while the last of the apostles was yet alive. It is a strange thing to see cabinets of curiosities collected by naturalists, the contemporaries of Pliny, and the studies of authors who wrote when Seneca and Tacitus flourished, as they were left by their possessors at the on-coming of

¹ Reprinted from the *Presbyterian Review*, vol. ix. pp. 222-246, being a review of *Geology and Mineralogy considered with reference to Natural Theology*. By the Rev. William Buckland, D.D., Canon of Christ Church, and Reader in Geology and Mineralogy in the University of Oxford.

the fiery visitation; and no less strange and sad to see the relics of those who did not escape, the apartment crowded with victims who found their sanctuary their grave,—the skeleton, with a golden chain suspended from its neck, and rings set with jewels on the charred finger-bones, enfolding an infant in its arms. But does no emotion arise on the assurance that one and all of us are treading on the sepulchre of *worlds*, that our cities are built, and our fields reaped and sown on ruins which date ages before Pompeii, and that the very statues and monuments to commemorate the great amongst us are fashioned from the dust of generations that preceded us? Yet, if geology be not a dream, these things are so—man is but the sojourner of yesterday in his own world, and many a race enjoyed the lease of his domains, before their lord arrived to take possession.

“The land which warlike Britons now possess,
And therein have their mighty empire raised,
In antique times was salvage wilderness.”

The lore or the fancy of the poet of the *Faërie Queene* could carry him no further back; but as the world grows older, it becomes better acquainted with its earlier days; the “antique times” of Spenser are but the yesterday of geology, and we now know something of our island's history before it had even become a “salvage wilderness.” And as the speculation is a curious one, and to most who have carefully studied its evidence something more, we may be permitted to take a rapid glance at that history as it has been traced to us by modern geology; and the rather, as the changes to which our island has been sub-

jected convey an idea, nearly complete, of the successive transformations which the world's entire surface is alleged to have undergone.

Without, then, attempting the arduous upward flight through untold time, to contemplate our rudimental earth existing as a nebula of rarity incalculable and heat unutterable, we shall suppose the nucleus formed, the heat radiated off, and the nebula condensed into solid rock, invested by an ocean and an atmosphere.¹ Here we have arrived at the region which divides the known from the unknown—the *theories* of geology from the *hypothesis* of cosmogony. That this was the precise way in which the world was formed, no one has affirmed; but it has been suggested that thus it *might be*, and, from the number of conditions which the suggestion meets, some have been almost prepared to say that thus it *was*. It is on evidence of a kind altogether different that it has been asserted, that at some period, more or less remote, part of our earth's surface which we now inhabit lay under water,—the waters of a sea perhaps extending everywhere, and everywhere of equal depth. We have no proof that this primeval sea was the abode of any living thing. But by a process of elevation, to which it is doubtful if anything analogous now exists, the level uniformity of the rocky surface became disturbed, and the

¹ The nebular hypothesis of Laplace was formed by combining the suggestions of Sir William Herschel with the speculations of Leibnitz concerning the intense primordial heat of our planet. The plausibilities and defects of the hypothesis are comprehensively indicated by Mr. Whewell, in his *Bridge-water Treatise*, book ii. chap. 7, where its theological bearings are ably discussed. Dr. Buckland—see p. 40—assumes the hypothesis, at least to a certain extent.

upheaving power sent mountain ridges, and possibly entire continents, above the waters. Then came the labour and conflict of elements. The new islands arrested the progress of the winds and tides, while, on the summits, clouds, which had formerly been idly emptied into their parent sea, burst, full charged with the treasures of a more than tropical evaporation. By the joint action of wind and wave, the new-formed land sustained progressive encroachments. The ocean undermined its cliffs, and torrents swept along its mountains and plains, carrying a copious alluvium into the grand receptacle. These products of the destroying forces were spread along the bottom of the deep, till, consolidated by the incumbent pressure and subterranean heat, they were in their turn uplifted, either by partial protrusions of the underlying rock, or a simultaneous elevation of the mass, carrying with them, in their stratified arrangement, the indications of their derivative character, again to undergo a process of waste and decay. It was after some of the British mountains, among the oldest in the world, had been thus produced—to judge from the scanty specimens which have reached our day in their peculiar mode of preservation—that the shallows of the sea were first planted with an appropriate vegetation. Then came the race of fishes; and, while a gulf of the ocean rolled its waves where Birmingham, and Leicester, and Nottingham, and Derby, and Manchester now stand, they were the pasture-fields of such crustacea as the trilobite, furnished with a pair of eyes, each mounting four hundred spherical lenses, and turning on a peduncle like a telescope in a stand; of

fishes, allied to the *Amblypterus*, feeding on sea-weed and soft gelatinous substances, and sharks, which again made these their prey. The land lay waste no longer, but cherished by a heat such as the tropics scarcely know, and the moisture of its insular station, a giant herbage sprang into luxuriant development. Equisetaceæ rivalled "the mast of some great admiral," in localities where their dwarfed representatives, the horse-tail and pipe-weed of our bogs, stand only a few inches high. Arborescent ferns, such as in our present earth demand the climate of the equinoctial islands, skirted the mountain-sides of Wales and Scotland. *Lepidodendra*, the club-mosses of that earlier era, attained the altitude of our loftiest forest trees; and coeval with these flourished plants of anomalous forms, to which our modern flora can supply no analogy, such as the *Stigmaria*, with its dome-shaped trunk more than a yard in diameter, whence shot out, in every direction, branches from twenty to thirty feet in length, to float in the marsh which formed its habitat. So that, to restore to our island the vegetation of the transition period, we must magnify the existing species on a scale of a hundred-fold, convert the meadow into an Indian jungle, and transfer to the Hebrides the forests of *Oceanica*. Were it not for the information handed down to us by the fossil flora—the self-registering thermometer of geology—who could have imagined that our coast once rejoiced in that temperature, which could we bring back again, and other things remain as they are, pine-apples might grow wild on the Grampians, and the lotus float upon the Tay?

When hurricanes and land-floods, and agents of slower effect had swept the forests of many successive seasons into the estuaries of such rivers as then flowed, depositing the future coal-fields of Wales, Northern England, and Scotland—the beds of vegetable origin alternating with strata of sand and mud, now familiar to us in their indurated forms of sandstone and shale; and an accession had been made to the habitable part of our extending shores, by the gradual emergence of this latter formation, the old races gave place to a new creation of plants and animals. We have now advanced to that grand epoch when the secondary series began, during which were formed the new red sandstone and magnesian limestone of Cheshire and Staffordshire, the lias of Lyme and Whitby, the oolite of Yorkshire and Oxford, the wealden beds of Surrey, Kent, and Sussex, the chalk of Wiltshire and Southern England generally. Could any necromancy recall that state of things, a journey through our island would reveal stranger sights than scared the subterranean wanderings of the heroes of the *Odyssey* or *Æneid*, with this advantage, that they would not, however strange, be *monstrous*. Should the adventurer be disappointed of that green carpeting, which gladdens our islands, he would find some compensation in the statelier features of the prospect. The Cycadites (whose nearest surviving kindred have found an asylum in China and the islands of the Southern Sea), with its short trunk and gorgeous crown of foliage—not a palm, for it has a solid stem; nor a pine, for the stem is simple; nor a fern, for it does not bear its fructification on expanded peduncles;