

**GEOLOGY AND
GEOLOGISTS; OR, VISIONS
OF PHILOSOPHERS
IN THE 19TH CENTURY**

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Geology and Geologists; Or, Visions of Philosophers in the 19th Century by Robert Maxwell Macbrair

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ROBERT MAXWELL MACBRAIR

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GEOLOGY AND GEOLOGISTS:

OR,

VISIONS OF PHILOSOPHERS

IN THE

NINETEENTH CENTURY.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "THE GOODNESS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE,"

&c., &c.

Robert Marshall Mackenzie.

We have no experience in the creation of worlds.—CHALMERS.

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GEOLOGY AND GEOLOGISTS.

THE GEOLOGICAL PROTEUS.

No one will feel disposed to deny, that science has rapidly improved during the last few years; and has made us acquainted with many physical facts and principles of which we were previously ignorant. These facts and principles have generally been tested by an impartial scrutiny or a severe analysis; since learned men have usually been unwilling to admit the truth of any theory which will not bear a strict investigation. It would have been well for the credit of philosophers, had they exhibited a similar spirit of inquiry upon all occasions, and had refused to receive any hypothesis which could not be substantiated by an adequate proof. But the groundless opinions which they have entertained upon some subjects, and the theories which have been illogically raised from a few extravagant notions, are sufficient to throw a degree of suspicion upon all their reasonings: so that both the truth and error of their systems have been quickly discarded by numerous inquirers. It has too often happened, that a scheme founded upon very insufficient *data* has prepossessed the philosophic mind, the whole of whose subsequent efforts have been directed to establish his favourite hypothesis, without paying much attention to the difficulties with which it has been surrounded. All nature has been ransacked for materials wherewith to uphold the fancied fabric; mere shadows have been adopted for pillars of argument; the most glaring inconsistencies have been overlooked; and bold pretensions or high-sounding names have been used to gain over the unlettered part of the community.

In no science has this been more the case than in Geology; whose devotees have, with an ardour worthy of a better cause, been laboriously constructing some of the wildest schemes that ever entered into the imagination of man. Yet, strange to say, though several systems contradict themselves and one another on a hundred points, a deference has been paid to their

vagaries by the scientific world that is altogether extraordinary ; whilst the commonalty have looked on with amazement or terror, some hoping for a new exhibition of wonders, others fearing lest the ground of solid truth should eventually be shaken.

Reasons might be assigned for these very different kinds of feeling with which modern Geology has been regarded. A love of the marvellous seems natural to the human mind ; whence it happens that any bold projector of a wonderful system will quickly obtain a multitude of adherents ; and the more extravagant his doctrine, if it be only supported by a show of philosophy, the more likely is it to be admired. But there is also in the heart of man a proneness to infidelity, which makes it grasp at every thing that can throw any suspicion upon the truth of the Bible ; and amongst the votaries of science, there has frequently been a lamentable effort to banish a superintending Creator and providential Governor from his own world, by trying to account for every thing without his interposition. They worship the laws of Nature instead of Nature's God ; and seem to account it a triumph when they can perceive any imagined discrepancy between the facts of natural history and the declared truths of revelation. We are aware that some cosmogonists affirm that there is no real opposition between the current geological systems and the scriptural record of ancient events ; that the two accounts can be easily harmonized ; and that Moses and modern philosophers may be made to agree on subjects of natural history, however widely they may differ on religious topics. But this doctrine of accommodation can only be maintained by adopting a mode of biblical interpretation, far from according with the beautiful simplicity that marks every other part of holy writ.

Perceiving this evil, and animated with a laudable zeal to defend the faith once delivered to the saints, several Christian writers have endeavoured to check the rising systems of cosmogony. They have, however, been borne down by the superior strength of the opposing current ; and Geology still pursues her impetuous course, over precipices and under mountains, in the open plain and through fissures of the rocks, amidst central heat and polar cold,—now stagnating for a million of ages, (which are easily reckoned with a calculating-machine,) then boiling, bubbling, rushing headlong, and sweeping the world with a besom of destruction,—yet, marvellous to relate, leaving the germs of a new creation behind it, to become like a phoenix from its ashes, more glorious by means of a temporary dissolution.

The antagonists of Geology have not had fair play, nor have they always acted prudently in their mode of conflict. The enemy with which they have had to grapple is a perfect Proteus, changing his dogmas almost as frequently as the chameleon alters its colour. A few years ago, the *water* system of Baron Cuvier seemed to have extinguished the central fire of Hutton: but the latter was only smothered for a season—not defunct; for it has now so much revived as to have taken possession of the interior of our globe, leaving the outside only to the water; whilst the unfortunate crust of the earth is sorely vexed in its perilous situation between these rival elements, each of which has made fearful inroads upon its strata. Which of the two will finally conquer, has not yet been determined; though Dr. Pye Smith seems certain, in contrariety to Moses and St. Peter, that water will cause the next grand catastrophe. Why, then, should geologists complain so vehemently, as this reverend gentleman does, if a simple man should refuse to believe in this vaunted science, until its own professors shall have come to an agreement upon its first principles? We always thought that a science was something of a determinate shape, the truth of which any one might verify for himself, by following certain prescribed rules or modes of examination. Yet here is a body which will only bear dissection in its surface; for the moment that we put the scalpel a little inwards, there bursts forth a stream of fire or water which effectually hinders any farther operations.

Nor have we sufficient time to determine the outer strata of our planet, before we are interrupted by a new discovery, which nullifies all our former experience. A short time ago, Baron Cuvier was the *ne plus ultra* of Geology. His splendid discoveries in comparative anatomy seemed eminently to qualify him for anatomizing the structure of our globe; and he was supposed to know as much about the dead world under our feet, as he did concerning the living races of men and beasts. He nobly asserted the divine creation of our species, and that it must have occurred about the time mentioned by Moses; and thus he quashed the sceptical notions of former geologists, who supposed man to have existed for a vast period of time, and to have been gradually formed out of inferior beings by a progressive march of intellect in the combinations of matter. Cuvier, on the most incontrovertible grounds, overthrew these hypotheses, and proved that the human species had not lost its monkey-tail, according to Lord Momboddo, but had been really *made a man* at the very