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The Victoria Institute, biblical criticism, and the fundamentals

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Science, Religion, and the Rise of Biblical Criticism

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE, BIBLICAL CRITICISM, AND THE FUNDAMENTALS

by Stuart Mathieson 

Abstract. The Victoria Institute was established in London in 1865. Although billed as an anti-evolutionary organization, and stridently anti-Darwinian in its rhetoric, it spent relatively little time debating the theory of natural selection. Instead, it served as a haven for a specific set of intellectual commitments. Most important among these was the Baconian scientific methodology, which prized empiricism and induction, and was suspicious of speculation. Darwin’s use of hypotheses meant that the Victoria Institute members were unconvinced that his work was truly scientific, but even more concerning for them was the specter of biblical criticism. This approach to biblical studies incorporated techniques from literary criticism, treating it as any other document. Since it also relied on hypotheses, the Victoria Institute members were similarly skeptical that biblical criticism was scientific, and spent much of their time attempting to refute it. In this way, they functioned as an incubator for the concerns that would animate the fundamentalist–modernist controversies of the early twentieth century.

Keywords: biblical criticism; evolution; fundamentalism; Ireland; philosophy of science; Victoria Institute

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Human evolution is commonly regarded as one of the most contentious issues in the relationship between science and religion. Indeed, this is a key component of the “conflict thesis,” which holds that science and religion are separate, mutually exclusive, and that their relationship is antagonistic. Contemporary debates about the teaching of evolution and Intelligent Design, the Scopes “monkey trial” of 1925, and the furor that followed the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) all appear to support this argument. Yet close analysis of each of these debates demonstrates that something other than the truth of a biological theory was at stake. In 1865, the world’s first explicitly anti-evolutionary organization, the Victoria Institute, or Philosophical Society of Great Britain, was formed in London. Although its rhetoric was stridently anti-Darwinian, it spent relatively little time discussing natural selection. Rather, it defended a specific set of philosophical and cultural values across a wide front. Its epistemology was drawn from the Baconian tradition of empiricism and induction, in which large amounts of empirical data were collected, and then inductive reasoning applied to general principles could be arrived at from observations, and which abjured hypotheses and speculation. Darwin’s use of hypothetico-deductive reasoning, in which a general hypothesis was generated first, and then tested against data, was therefore considered problematic and inauthentically scientific (Ruse 1975; Ayala 2009). Yet even more troubling for the Victoria Institute was a work of biblical criticism published only months after *Origin of Species*. This volume, *Essays and Reviews*, challenged the historical reliability of the Bible, questioned the possibility of miracles, and criticized Anglican doctrine on the afterlife, sparking a theological controversy that saw two of its authors tried for heresy (Ellis 1980). The Victoria Institute spent the following half-century denouncing biblical criticism as unscientific and providing a rhetorical space in which debates about science and religion were less about conflict between the two than about what it meant for something to be authentically scientific. In the early years of the twentieth century, several members of the Victoria Institute were contributors to *The Fundamentals*, an article series that aimed to establish and defend fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. *The Fundamentals* was a conservative response to liberalizing or “modernist” theological trends, and the broad movement that formed in its defense became known, often pejoratively, as fundamentalism. This article uses the Victoria Institute to trace the prehistory of fundamentalism from *Origin of Species* to *The Fundamentals*, arguing that it provided a forum in which concerns about biblical criticism were held to be a matter of crucial scientific importance, and one much more threatening than evolution. It then highlights the key contribution made to *The Fundamentals* by two Irish members of the Victoria Institute, Andrew Craig Robinson and Sir Robert Anderson, and demonstrates that

the common theme of their articles was a rejection of biblical criticism as unscientific.

THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

The Victoria Institute was formed in London in 1865, and headed by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the “evangelical Earl” of Shaftesbury (Reddie 1866). Although Shaftesbury was the organization’s titular president, his extensive commitments to governmental and philanthropic endeavors precluded his active involvement in its operation. The task of establishing the Victoria Institute fell instead to a small group drawn from Shaftesbury’s network of metropolitan gentleman evangelicals, who shared concerns about the threat to orthodox faith that was posed by evolutionary theories, the geological understanding of deep time, and biblical criticism. The two most influential of these figures were a Scot, James Reddie, and an Irishman, Captain Edmund Gardiner Fishbourne, who had become friends through their mutual evangelical network and a shared interest in naval technology. Reddie, a civil servant at the Admiralty, had hovered on the periphery of London’s intellectual circles, trying, and failing, to promote his idiosyncratic scientific beliefs, which included a more or less complete rejection of Newtonian physics. Learned societies such as the British Association for the Advancement Science and the Royal Society rejected several of Reddie’s papers and left him convinced that he was “a scientific heretic” (Reddie 1870, 379); his struggle to be accepted by the scientific establishment is a microcosm of the “shift of authority and prestige” so ably described by Frank Turner (1978, 359). In the early nineteenth century, many advances in the natural sciences were a result of the efforts of gentleman amateurs, often Anglican clerics who had the benefits of a university education and free time to indulge their interests. Yet as the century progressed, a class of professional scientists, typified by Thomas Henry Huxley and John Tyndall, were keen to see their disciplines secularized and become the preserve of specialists rather than parson naturalists. Both saw the controversy surrounding Darwin’s *Origin of Species* as the perfect opportunity to press their case, and in 1864 formed the X Club, a dining group of nine likeminded men united in pursuit of these aims (Barton 2018). In 1859, the year in which *Origin of Species* was published, Reddie made a patent application for a paddle that would “act as a propeller after the manner of the tail of a fish” (Reddie 1859). While the application was unsuccessful, Fishbourne was impressed with Reddie’s enthusiasm for marine engineering, and invited him to witness trials of a new screw propeller. This was followed by an invitation to present at a military think-tank, the Royal United Services Institution, where Fishbourne, a retired naval officer, was a leading member of the council. Reddie and Fishbourne forged a strong working relationship, between them undertaking most of the

administration of the Victoria Institute. Reddie became the Institute's primary ideologist and editor of its journal, *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute (JTVI)*. Fishbourne, an associate of Shaftesbury's through their mutual friend William Cowper-Temple, was originally from County Carlow, but had seen twenty years of active service in the Royal Navy (Gregory 2010, 218). After being placed on the reserve list, Fishbourne became an archetypal "gentleman-evangelist" (Bebbington 2003, 159). He helped to establish charities such as the Royal Patriotic Fund, and the Naval and Military Bible Society and acted as honorary secretary for both organizations. Fishbourne was also heavily involved in evangelical work. He joined the Evangelisation Society as its secretary and was one of "ten well-known philanthropists" who funded and advised William Booth in his East London Christian Mission, which would go on to become the Salvation Army (Murdoch 1994, 58).

Fishbourne's social network and administrative expertise was crucial in establishing the Victoria Institute as a serious forum for debating science and religion. Yet Reddie was, if anything, even more influential. A capable administrator in his own right, Reddie also authored a manifesto, *Scientia Scientiarum*, that was sent to interested parties in the hopes of enticing them to join the Victoria Institute. Although much of the pamphlet was taken up by an overlong account of Reddie's grievances against London's scientific establishment, it also included a rather bellicose mission statement. This new philosophical society, the members of which were to be "professedly Christians" pledged "to defend revealed truth from 'the opposition of science, falsely so-called'" (Reddie 1866, 26). This last phrase, borrowed from Paul's letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:20 KJV) appeared again in the Victoria Institute's objectives, the first of which was to "investigate fully and impartially the most important questions of Philosophy and Science, but more especially those that bear upon the great truths revealed in Holy Scripture, with the view of defending these truths against the oppositions of Science, falsely so called" (Reddie 1866, 28). This use of language is instructive, since it highlights the Victoria Institute's conviction that science, properly understood and undertaken, would always accord with the Bible. However, several mid-Victorian intellectual trends appeared to threaten traditional readings of scripture. Some interpretations of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection suggested that humans might not be the unique outcome of an act of special creation. (Moore 1979; Bowler 2007; Livingstone 2014). Biblical criticism, particularly from William Colenso, the Bishop of Natal, and the authors of *Essays and Reviews*, treated the Bible like any other historical document, casting doubt on Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch, the Bible's reliability as a historical document, and the possibility of miracles. Science held a significant degree of cultural cachet in Victorian Britain. The scientific method, based on the inductive principles

of Francis Bacon in which empirical data from observation and experimentation were accumulated in order to provide compelling explanations, carried particular intellectual authority, and was credited with Britain's pre-eminence in commerce and industry (Yeo 1985, 280–87). Indeed, Richard Yeo argues that the “scientific method carried strong normative connotations in the nineteenth century, because of intellectual traditions which associated the proper use of reason with moral virtue” (1984, 21). The result was that appeals to Baconianism as a methodological ideal were commonplace. As Bernard Lightman notes, “to be deemed intellectually legitimate, ideas and theories had to be determined through scientific method” and at stake for those claiming to be authentically scientific was “immense cultural authority and intellectual prestige” (2007, 5). Conversely, deductive reasoning, hypotheses, and speculation were viewed with suspicion, as the preserve of worryingly abstract Continental thinkers and metaphysicians. Of course, many of the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century would have been impossible had investigators foregone hypotheses and instead stuck rigidly to empirical, inductive reasoning. Yet to committed Baconians, by using a hypothetico-deductive methodology Darwin had, whatever his results, acquired them through questionable means. Similarly, the higher critics had speculated rather than provide empirical evidence in support of their theories. As Reddie put it, “science has become, in our day, materialistic and wildly speculative, entirely through a disregard of Lord Bacon’s principles” (1866, 20). The Victoria Institute therefore hoped to dismiss Darwinian arguments, and those of the higher critics, as unscientific, depriving them of the prestige and intellectual authority associated with the scientific method. Because they had not used the Baconian methodology, such arguments were, as the Victoria Institute understood it, “merely pseudo-science,” and could be dismissed on epistemological grounds rather than being assessed on their own merits (Reddie 1866, 3). Further, to dismiss an opposing argument as pseudo-scientific carries the implication that one’s own argument is authentically scientific. The Victoria Institute was thus engaged in a process of boundary work, demarcating the boundaries of legitimate science in an attempt to retain its attendant cultural and intellectual prestige for their own arguments (Bourdieu 1975; Gieryn 1983, 1999). In evangelical thought, a corresponding philosophy of mind could often be found alongside this philosophy of science: the Scottish school of Common Sense direct realism. Advocates of Common Sense argued that the natural world, which included humans and their minds, was ontologically real and had been created by God. Using their mental faculties, it was possible for humans to clearly and directly apprehend true facts about the natural world. This of course involved the use of sense data, making it an empirical, Baconian, and scientific endeavor. Further, since this philosophy held that mental faculties were a gift from God, they were considered to be reliable if used

correctly, and so a careful reading of the Bible could also lead to similarly certain knowledge (Hoeveler 1981; Broadie 2010, 235–38). Intellectual commitments to Baconianism and Common Sense would feature heavily in the movement that would become known as fundamentalism half a century later (Marsden 2006, 16–18). Crucially, this heritage belies the misconception of fundamentalism as a movement that was anti-intellectual or even merely anti-scientific in origin; rather, these were extremely learned figures who operated according to a different epistemological framework.

EARLY POINTS OF CONFLICT

The prominence of evolution in contemporary debates about science and religion might give the impression that an organization established to investigate matters of science and religion in the years following *Origin of Species* would be principally concerned with biology. Yet the Victoria Institute hosted an average of eleven lectures each year, and in its first twenty years, only sixteen of the more than 200 papers delivered had evolution, Darwin, or natural selection as their main focus. Of course, these topics arose parenthetically or in discussion, but they were not usually the primary subject, and when they were, they were often framed in terms of Darwinism being an ideology, and how this manifested in the work of others such as Huxley, Tyndall, and Herbert Spencer. While Darwin's theory of natural selection was important, for the Victoria Institute it was one of many considerations: much wider issues than a biological theory were at stake.

If evolution was an important but not decisive factor, the key to understanding the Victoria Institute's *raison d'être* is the event that precipitated its formation. On May 16, 1865, Bishop Colenso delivered a paper at the Anthropological Society of London. Among the audience were several prominent early members of the Victoria Institute, including Reddie, Fishbourne, and the Revd W. J. Irons. Colenso was a particularly adept courter of controversy, having drawn the ire of Anglican evangelicals for dedicating a book to F. D. Maurice, a theologian who had been dismissed from Kings College, London, for heterodoxy. Colenso's own views were considered not only heterodox but heretical: the biblical criticism in his *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua, Critically Examined* (1862) provoked a storm of controversy that saw him tried for heresy and deposed from his bishopric (Larsen 1997). Having travelled to London to successfully appeal this decision, Colenso took the opportunity to present several lectures. While his paper at the Anthropological Society was ostensibly on missionary work in South Africa, he raised several controversial points about the Bible and science. Colenso claimed that "the elementary truths of geological science" contradicted "the accounts of the Creation and the Deluge,"

and invoked Frederick Temple, a contributor to *Essays and Reviews*, to argue that “the simple facts revealed by Modern Science” were “utterly irreconcilable with Scripture statements, if these are taken as announcing literal historical truth” (Colenso 1865, cclxxiv). Reddie and Irons leapt to their feet at the lecture’s conclusion, and their condemnation of Colenso was so protracted that the meeting had to be terminated with several members, including Fishbourne, still waiting to speak. Irons, who was a prebendary of St. Paul’s Cathedral and vicar of Holy Trinity, Brompton, had impressed Reddie with his acerbic contribution to a volume that took aim at *Essays and Reviews* (Goulburn et al. 1862). The two bonded over the threat of biblical criticism and discussed the possibility “of a philosophical union among all ‘who name the Name of Christ,’ our common Lord, to confront the devastating literature which, in new and various forms, ultimately denies that Name” (Irons 1871, 284). After Colenso’s lecture, these plans were quickly made a reality and within a fortnight a circular had been dispatched to the press announcing the formation of “a new Philosophical Society for Great Britain” (Reddie 1866, 5).

According to George Marsden’s rule of thumb, a fundamentalist is “an evangelical who is angry about something.” Marsden recognized that this somewhat arch quip was “unscientific shorthand,” although it clearly resonated strongly enough with the prominent televangelist Jerry Falwell for the latter to adopt it (235, 323n9). Nevertheless, he was certainly correct to highlight that militancy was a defining characteristic of fundamentalism. Although the early years of the Victoria Institute’s existence predate the emergence of fundamentalism as an identifiable movement, it had no shortage of evangelicals who were vociferously opposed to, and often positively incensed by, those trends that would later concern fundamentalists. Reddie, author of the Victoria Institute’s call to arms, was often the main belligerent. The chemist John Hall Gladstone used the penultimate lecture of the Victoria Institute’s inaugural season to plead against needlessly placing science and theology in conflict, and instead argued that the two could be mutually beneficial (1867, 388–420). Yet the response to this rather measured paper was less than enthusiastic. The Revd Irons saw in Gladstone’s lecture “a kind of patronage of theology, a kind of treatment which I think, as theologians, we do not desire” (406). Next came a lengthy diatribe from Reddie. Reddie highlighted the scientific insights of the Bible, followed by a refutation of Newtonian gravitational theory, with quotes from the 1674 edition of the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, which he appeared to have brought with him in the hopes of such an opportunity presenting itself. It was not until *JTVI* was published, however, that Reddie’s other contribution would be noticed; in addition to attaching some observations about Gladstone’s argument, he had omitted several paragraphs of Gladstone’s paper, “at the request of the Council, as trenching upon purely theological and controversial points” (420).

Gladstone, unsurprisingly, declined to renew his membership, although he continued to attend meetings infrequently. This was not an isolated incident. The first paper delivered at the Victoria Institute had come from the chemist and religious author George Warington, who had been made a member of the society's council and might have expected to be safe from Reddie's criticism. However, Warington gave a paper "On the Credibility of Darwinism" and refused to simply assert that Darwin's theory had no credibility, instead suggesting that it was a plausible hypothesis (1868, 39–62). Having also mentioned gravitation, Warington no doubt considered himself lucky that Reddie closed proceedings by saying only that he was "if possible only the more persuaded that the theory of Mr. Darwin is *inharmonious, inconsistent, and utterly incredible*" (62). At the next meeting, however, Reddie presented a paper of his own, "On the Credibility of Darwinism (in reply to Mr. Warington)," which sparked such a lengthy debate that discussion had to be adjourned until the following session, when another council member, the Revd Walter Mitchell, used his position as chair of the meeting to deliver his own refutation of Warington's arguments before allowing a response (Reddie 1867, 63–128). Charles Darwin, after reading the exchange, sent a letter to his fellow naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, noting that that Warington had "read an excellent & spirited abstract of the 'Origin' before the Victoria Inst. & as this is a most orthodox body he has gained the name of the Devil's Advocate. The discussion which followed during 3 consecutive meetings is very rich from the nonsense talked" (Darwin 1867).

As the responses to Gladstone and Warington's papers demonstrate, while other members of the Victoria Institute might have shared his enthusiasm for tackling the arguments of Darwinism and higher criticism, Reddie was clearly the most vocal among them. Indeed, Reddie's vituperative streak led to a rapidly declining membership and the reluctance of some distinguished figures to accept invitations; one professor did not want to be associated with a society whose leading figure "actually did not believe in the theory of universal gravitation" (Reddie 1870, 380). Reddie's habit of haranguing prominent scientists such as Huxley, who was ambushed after a lecture at Sion College in 1867 and declined to repeat his argument before the "tribunal" of the Victoria Institute, was also unlikely to endear the Victoria Institute to the wider scientific community (Reddie 1868, 335). However, Reddie died in 1871, and administration of the society fell to Captain Francis W. H. Petrie, who was keen to arrest the slump in membership and to rehabilitate the Victoria Institute's public image. Petrie's approach was a success, with hundreds of new members joining in his first few years. A list of the Victoria Institute's publications published in 1879 had subtly quarantined the first six volumes, edited by Reddie, into a separate series; by 1887 the rationale for this had been made clear, and those volumes published under Petrie's superintendence

were described as the “New Series. Being the volumes containing the more modern papers” (editorial material in *JTVI* 1869, 451; *JTVI* 1887, 393). Yet the combative approach did not entirely disappear with Reddie. Another of Darwin’s friends, George Henslow, suffered a similar fate to Warrington and Gladstone in 1874, when he gave a paper that cautiously suggested that religious thinkers could reconcile their beliefs with evolution (Henslow 1874). Henslow was an Anglican curate, the archetypal parson naturalist, and might therefore have expected that the Victoria Institute would be particularly amenable to his views. However, Henslow’s paper drew a particularly strong response from the assembled members and he, like Warrington and Gladstone, instead turned his efforts to the Christian Evidence Society, a moderate body for Christian apologetics (Johnson 1981; Mathieson 2021, 58–59, 62).

In 1885, the presidency of the Victoria Institute, vacated by the death of Shaftesbury, was offered to George Gabriel Stokes, the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge. A respected figure in the field of physics, Stokes took over the presidency of the Royal Society in the same year, succeeding Huxley. Yet he was also a well-known evangelical from a Church of Ireland family in County Sligo, who wrote and lectured frequently on natural theology and religious topics such as the doctrine of eternal punishment. Under Stokes and Petrie, the Victoria Institute thrived, boasting lectures from luminaries such as Lord Kelvin and Sir Robert Ball. The combination of Stokes’s scientific prestige, reputation as an earnest evangelical, and restrained manner saw a surge in membership and a range of quality papers from religious thinkers keen to share their views with a sympathetic audience. One such member was the Canadian geologist John William Dawson, who David Livingstone has described as “one of Darwin’s most astute and articulate opponents,” and who was committed to Baconian induction and Common Sense through his Scots Presbyterians heritage and education in Edinburgh (2014, 92). Indeed, Dawson perfectly expressed the continuing importance of the Victoria Institute’s intellectual heritage when he expressed his fear that “that our old Baconian mode of viewing nature will be quite reversed” and that the Victoria Institute offered an opportunity to “restore our English science to the domain of common sense and sound induction” (1874, 389).

SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the Victoria Institute was justifiably confident in its position as the leading forum for religious scientists, with almost two thousand members. Among these were the two previous presidents of the Royal Society, Kelvin and Stokes, and its current president, Lord Lister, was also an occasional attendee. This had ended a run of three successive X Club members as Royal Society presidents: Joseph

Dalton Hooker, William Spottiswoode, and Huxley. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was no longer the most widely held account of speciation, in what Huxley's grandson Julian described as "the eclipse of Darwinism" (Huxley 1942). The cultural authority of the Victoria Institute membership *vis-à-vis* the natural sciences seemed relatively secure when compared with the 1860s; in any case, the relationship was certainly less fraught. Yet the threat from higher criticism remained, particularly since a moderate form known as "believing criticism," which accepted the scholarly assessment of textual scholars without agreeing that this constituted a threat to the spiritual truth of the Bible, had become increasingly popular. The Victoria Institute, and conservative evangelicals more generally, retained the view that such criticism was epistemologically unsound since it was not based on Baconian induction or Common Sense (Parsons 1988, 239–57; Rogerson 1995). Their response was to mount an attempt to counter criticism with science, by applying the Baconian methodology to emerging disciplines such as archaeology and related fields such as Assyriology. The Egyptologist Flinders Petrie, nephew of the Victoria Institute's honorary secretary, led the charge, and many of his colleagues, including Archibald Henry Sayce, Gaston Maspero, Édouard Naville, Gaston Maspero, and Hormuzd Rassam were also recruited.

The hope that higher criticism could be defeated by science was perhaps most evident in the Victoria Institute's choice of theme for its first essay prize. In 1900, long-standing council member Robert Halliday Gunning died, leaving a considerable fortune. Gunning had amassed his wealth in somewhat mysterious circumstances, seemingly through commerce in Brazil, where he became a favorite of the emperor, Pedro II, before returning to his native Scotland and establishing himself as a philanthropist. In 1887, Gunning had endowed a series of bursaries and prizes to celebrate Queen Victoria's jubilee, followed by a lecture series at the University of Edinburgh, his alma mater, in 1889 (*Scottish Medical Journal* 2003, 54–57). Another prize fund was endowed so that the Victoria Institute might award an essay prize, to be established after Gunning's death. According to the endowment, the prize was to be awarded "in recognition of services rendered to the object of" the Victoria Institute, "viz: the reconciliation of science with religion" (Anonymous 1892). Yet the particular form in which science was to be understood was emphasized by the suggested title for the inaugural Gunning prize essay: "The bearing of recent oriental discoveries on Old Testament history." The eventual winner was a conservative Free Church minister, the Revd John Urquhart, whose frequent admiring references to the work of Victoria Institute members might have gone some way toward his victory (Urquhart 1906, 18–54). However, the council was also impressed by the entry from Andrew Craig Robinson, to the extent that it presented him with an honorarium of five guineas and invited him to speak at a later session (Robinson 1906, 154–82.)

ROBINSON: DEFEATING THE CRITICS WITH THE MONUMENTS

Robinson was the Church of Ireland minister at Ballineen in west Cork, a rural region with a substantial Roman Catholic majority. In 1860, he had graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, an institution that was throughout the nineteenth century renowned among evangelicals as a nexus of “intellectual eminence, conservative theology, and biblical divinity training.” The theoretical merger of the established churches of England and Ireland following the 1800 Acts of Union created a paradoxical “increase in the independence religious professionalism of the Irish Church” (Akenson 2016, 25). It also provided an opportunity for hundreds of Irish clergymen, mostly graduates of Trinity, to take up posts in the notionally united but practically separate English church; Fishbourne’s friend William Pennefather was one notable example (Acheson 2018, 14, 30–31). A policy of awarding nonresident degrees meant that many Englishmen without the means to attend Oxford or Cambridge instead became graduates of Trinity, where they were exposed to a distinctively Irish strain of Anglican evangelicalism that emphasized the apostolic succession and, occasionally, some High Church influences among its otherwise markedly Low Church theology and ecclesiology (Akenson 2016, 125; McCormack 2018, 143–58). Indeed, in 1906, at least sixteen of the 167 Anglican clerics among the membership of the Victoria Institute had been educated at Trinity. Most were based in England or Ireland, although some could be found as far afield as Honduras, Canada, and Cyprus. However, Robinson did not immediately enter the clergy and after graduation instead returned to Cork in order to become a stockbroker, before finally being ordained as curate of Kinsale in 1892 (Cole 1903, 46). The Church of Ireland had enough of a foothold in the city of Cork to construct a fairly modest cathedral, Saint Fin Barre’s, to which Robinson wrote a guide (Robinson 1897). Yet in the rural hinterland where Robinson was based, the population was sparse and the population of protestants sparser still. Robinson’s relatively isolated location and small number of adherents may have stiffened his resolve to produce a scientific defense of the Bible. The same circumstances may simply have given him sufficient leisure time to indulge his scholarly interests. In either case, Robinson threw himself into researching the latest discoveries from the ancient near east, and from these constructing a philosophical rigorous response to higher criticism.

Robinson had a keen interest in history, having been a member of the college historical society while at Trinity (University of Dublin College Historical Society Annual Address 1859, 37). He also held a special affection for the Bible and the traditions of the Anglican communion, celebrating his ordination by becoming one of 500 subscribers to a privately published facsimile edition of the original Book of Common Prayer (Anonymous 1896, 6). That same year, he published the first in a series of articles

on cuneiform inscriptions and higher criticism in the conservative evangelical journal *The Churchman* (Robinson 1896). Extracts from an essay in which Robinson challenged biblical criticism were republished in the American evangelical periodical *Salvation* in 1903 and 1904, and similar arguments appeared in a short book, *Leviticus* (Robinson 1903, 1904, 1905). Yet it was in his Gunning essay that Robinson's arguments were most clearly stated. Robinson's main target was the documentary hypothesis, which had been popularized first in Germany by Julius Wellhausen and then introduced to England by Samuel Rolles Driver. In *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, which appeared in English with a preface by the renowned believing critic William Robertson Smith, Wellhausen synthesized the efforts of German biblical scholars throughout the nineteenth century, particularly Karl Heinrich Graf, and so the theory was commonly known as the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis. Wellhausen argued that the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, could have not all have the same author, who was traditionally understood to be Moses. Instead, he suggested that the evidence favored four separate sources, from separate authors and separate times, that were amalgamated into one document much later. Wellhausen was similarly skeptical of the historical reliability of other biblical books, such as Chronicles, arguing that a scholar "might as well try to hear the grass growing as attempt to derive from such a source as this a historical knowledge of the conditions of ancient Israel" (1885, 215). Robinson used his Gunning essay to challenge what he felt were unsupportable assertions in the documentary hypothesis, such as the claim that at the time of Moses, the Israelites did not have the advanced literary culture necessary to produce a work such as the Pentateuch. For Robinson, this was an outrageous piece of speculation, as his appeals to the common sense of his audience demonstrate. "Did the leaders of the Israelites," Robinson asked, "when they crossed the Red Sea instantly forget all the culture and learning of the land of Egypt which they had just left, so that neither Moses nor any other among them rose to any literary effort beyond the most primitive and rude?" (1906, 171). Emphasizing the Victoria Institute's hostility toward speculation, Robinson pointed out that the tolerating such an approach would allow the higher critics to "inscribe whatever theories their imagination may lead them to conceive, unchecked by the wholesome restraint which the admission of the existence of contemporary documents would impose upon them" (1906, 172). Here, Robinson argued that restraint from speculation and argument only from existing evidence as a matter of morality; higher criticism did not only epistemologically unsound, it was also morally questionable. However, Robinson was convinced that evidence from cuneiform inscriptions and Egyptian hieroglyphics supported the view that the critics had challenged, "that the Old Testament is an honest history of the people of Israel—not to say a record inspired by the Spirit of God" (1906, 154)

Robinson noted the existence of Babylonian creation myths, and an account of the epic of Gilgamesh, which mirrored the Noachian deluge, and concluded that these were evidence that the Biblical narratives of creation and the flood were not mythical. Yet Robinson concentrated much of his efforts on matters of history, and three particular issues to which Robinson would frequently return. First, there was Abraham, who was, according to the critics, “an imaginative fiction of later times, an edifying story composed to reflect back and embody in the concrete person of an individual the religious ideas of a later age” (1906, 157). Next was the story of Abraham’s wife Sarah and her handmaid Hagar, and finally the use of the name “Jerusalem” in the Pentateuch. According to the biblical narrative, Abraham had been in Babylon before he was called to become the patriarch of the Jewish people. Robinson pointed out that Wellhausen had noted this, but had failed to explain it, considering it unnecessary. And yet, Robinson argued, there were no ancient Hebrew historical figures with the same name, while recently discovered cuneiform inscriptions demonstrated that cognates had been used frequently in Babylon. Abraham’s wife Sarah was infertile, and so offered Hagar to Abraham as a second wife. This was repeated with Abraham’s grandson Jacob, who took two concubines alongside his wives Rachel and Leah, but never again in the Bible. Robinson noted that Theophilus Pinches, a prominent Assyriologist and Victoria Institute member, had suggested in 1902 that this variant of polygamy was a common custom at that time. The recent decryption of the Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian code of law, Robinson argued, made clear that this was a Babylonian custom. This both strengthened the claim that Abraham was of Babylonian origin, and that the biblical account of his life was grounded in historical truth. Finally, Robinson turned to the fact that Jerusalem was not mentioned in the Pentateuch, pointing out that cognate names such as Shalam and Salem, which had been mentioned in Genesis, appeared in the list of Palestinian cities captured by the pharaohs Rameses II and III. Considered together, Robinson argued, this was hard evidence, hewn into stone walls in ancient Egypt and Babylon, that belied the abstract speculation of the critics.

Robinson had developed his approach in a series of articles for *The Churchman*, and he continued to use that journal to test early versions of later arguments (Robinson 1908, 1909a, 1909b). In 1906, a fellow Victoria Institute member, the Anglican minister W. H. Griffith Thomas, was appointed as *The Churchman*’s editor and instituted a link with the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago (Treloar 2013, 24). A. C. Dixon, pastor of Moody Church, sufficiently impressed oil magnate Lyman Stewart with a 1909 sermon that he was invited to become the first editor of *The Fundamentals*, the article series defending biblical orthodoxy that Stewart was sponsoring (Sandeem 1970, 188–89; Marsden 2006, 118–19). Dixon, alongside subsequent editors Louis Meyer and Reuben Archer

Torrey, clearly found *The Churchman* and the Victoria Institute a useful source of potential contributors. Indeed, that year Victoria Institute members Robinson, Handley Moule, John James Lias, W. St. Clair Tisdall, William Hay Aitken, Henry Wace, Samuel Thornton, Archibald Henry Sayce, Arthur Moule, and Robert Baker Girdlestone all contributed articles to *The Churchman*. Efforts from Robinson, Sir Robert Anderson, Handley Moule, and Griffith Thomas all featured in *The Fundamentals*, as did articles from their fellow Victoria Institute members H. W. Webb-Peploe and Melvin Grove Kyle.

Robinson's contribution, "Three Peculiarities of the Pentateuch," was heavily indebted to his essays for the Victoria Institute and *The Churchman* (Robinson 1911). It began with an abridged version of his discussion of Jerusalem, and then introduced two themes that he had highlighted in *The Churchman* as being unexplained by their absence from the Pentateuch: the use of ritual music, and the absence of the title "Lord of Hosts." Robinson argued that the only explanation for why these did not feature in the Pentateuch, despite being part of the religious tradition of Israel during the time at which the Pentateuch was supposedly compiled, was that the Pentateuch was written earlier than these traditions became customary. While the constraints of such a short article meant that Robinson had to concisely synthesize his arguments, they also encouraged him to develop a pithy manner of expression, which he combined with his earlier flair for rhetorical questions and incorporated into the form of his later lectures. A particularly strong example can be found in the six Donellan lectures that Robinson was invited to give at Trinity in the 1912–1913 term (Robinson 1913). These lectures represent perhaps the clearest distillation of Robinson's work, combining the forceful argumentative style of his Gunning essay and the pithy expression of his article for *The Fundamentals*. Robinson's argument retained the broad contours of his earlier approach, repeating entire passages from earlier work on Abraham or Jerusalem more or less word for word. Indeed, the key theses had changed remarkably little since Robinson's essay for the Gunning Prize and changed even less in following works. Yet the Donellan lectures do have a distinctive rhetorical flourish, replete with capitalization, italics, and dashes to mark particular points of emphasis. They also have a more obvious appeal to logic and rational argument, and perhaps some influence from the legal rhetoric in which his compatriot Anderson excelled. For instance, the story of Sarah and Hagar is presented as a "TEST CASE, in which an incident in the life of Abraham can be laid side by side with an actual Code of Laws contemporary with the period." Robinson argued that this case "gives to the theory that the history of Abraham is an imaginative work of fiction or romance – CONTRADICTION – EMPHATIC and DIRECT" (1913, 10). Similarly, the documentary hypothesis, "no matter what number of scholars

should endorse it -IS LOGICALLY-AND ABSOLUTELY-IMPOSIBLE TO BE TRUE” (Robinson 1913, 16).

ANDERSON: DEFEATING THE CRITICS WITH PROPHECY

Of course, Robinson was not the only Irish member of the Victoria Institute who contributed to *The Fundamentals*, nor was his strident rhetoric in defense of the Bible unique. Both qualities he shared with Sir Robert Anderson. Anderson had entered Trinity to read law in 1859 and joined the college historical society, becoming its secretary and then president (University of Dublin College Historical Society Annual Address 1864, 67). Although Anderson was raised as an orthodox Presbyterian, an encounter with the evangelical preacher John Hall resulted in a born-again experience. He threw himself with great enthusiasm into lay preaching, undertaking what his son described as “commando raids” in counties Kerry, Sligo, and Mayo in the aftermath of the 1859 revival (Moore-Anderson 1947). Anderson associated with many key revivalist figures, including Joseph Denham Smith, a prominent member of the Brethren, and Henry Bewley, a wealthy Quaker who also associated with the Brethren and who was instrumental in bringing American evangelist Dwight L. Moody to the British Isles (Akenson 2016, 53). However, a call to the bar curtailed Anderson’s work as a travelling evangelist and he instead established himself as a criminal lawyer. Through family connections and his expertise in Fenian political violence, Anderson stumbled into a police career in England, eventually becoming rising to the rank of assistant commissioner at Scotland Yard during the notorious Jack the Ripper murders. However, Anderson did not allow his duties to completely overtake his interest in theology and authored a series of books on religious topics.

Anderson brought a particularly forensic approach to his writing. In a work on science and religion, for instance, Anderson claimed that no proof existed to support the theory of human evolution, that it was “a matter of inference only.” This argument, he continued, “would not pass at the Old Bailey” (Anderson 1889, 12). The theory of abiogenesis, that life had sprung from matter, Anderson denounced as “a mere philosophical theory, unsupported by even the faintest shadow of evidence.” Worse, it was “practically incapable of proof” (Anderson 1889, 12). Arguments that used such flimsy grounds were the preserve of “pseudo-scientists and sham philosophers” (Anderson 1889, 19). However, Anderson dedicated less than half of his book on science and religion to dealing with questions of evolution and natural science. The remainder was spent mounting an impassioned defense of the Bible against the higher critics and skeptics. In a vivid reference to Common Sense direct realism, Anderson argued that “our knowledge of the external world is, for the practical purposes of life, absolute and unquestioned” (1889, 80). Such an approach was of course

entirely congruent with the Victoria Institute's philosophy, yet it was not until 1896 that Anderson became a member. One particularity of Anderson's approach was his interest in prophecy; the Victoria Institute's constitution forbade explicitly theological topics, although in practical terms this prohibition was rarely, if ever, enforced. Nevertheless, prophecy became the subject for which Anderson was best known. *The Coming Prince* (1881), a treatise on the prophecies in the book of Daniel, went through eleven editions before his death in 1918, and changed subtitles several times to draw attention to its assault on higher criticism (Anderson 1881; Anderson n.d.) In a preface to later editions, Anderson explained that he had been troubled "by the German infidel crusade of "the Higher Criticism"" and resolved to test the historical reliability of Daniel through his own study (n.d. ii). Although he, in common with Robinson, paid tribute to the work of archaeological and philological work by Victoria Institute members such as Archibald Henry Sayce, which had established a historical basis for biblical events, Anderson took his defense of scripture in a somewhat different direction. Higher critics such as Driver, he contended, had spent so much time attempting to prove that Daniel was not the work of single author giving a contemporaneous account of the destruction of Jerusalem, that they had missed the significance of the prophetic seventy weeks described in that book, after which Jerusalem was to be rebuilt. These seventy weeks were divided into three sections, of seven, sixty-two, and one week, and in each of which a prophetic week represented different measures of real time. Efforts to calculate the measure of time denoted by a prophetic week had been a common pursuit of biblical exegetes, with the most popular interpretation suggesting that they were weeks of years. Through this approach, argues Donald Akenson, "modern Christian interpreters learned the use of calendar time as an analogic concept" (2016, 389). Indeed, reckoning the seventy weeks was a central concern of the Powerscourt conferences at which John Nelson Darby and his fellow Irish evangelicals attempted to decode biblical prophecies in order to determine an account of the end times; these efforts would result in the pessimistic interpretation known as dispensational premillennialism. Anderson's experience with Brethren preaching meant that he was well-versed in this eschatology, and he used it to produce an understanding of Daniel that he considered historically grounded; with this, he could dispatch higher critical arguments while satisfying himself that the seventy weeks were part of an authentic prophecy that was in the process of being fulfilled. Anderson reckoned Daniel's weeks as years of 360 days and used these to calculate that sixty-nine weeks of years had elapsed between the order of the Persian king Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem and the crucifixion of Christ. "That day," he argued, "on which the sixty-nine weeks ended, was the fateful day on which the Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah" (Anderson n.d. vi).

After retiring from the Metropolitan police in 1901, Anderson used some of his newly acquired leisure time to frequent meetings of the Victoria Institute, where friends such as Handley Moule, Bishop of Durham and author of a foreword to his *The Bible and Modern Criticism*, were leading members (Anderson 1905). Although he never presented a paper, debates often featured particularly cutting philosophical observations from a still-sharp legal mind. A paper from James Orr, another contributor to *The Fundamentals*, had given a particularly nuanced account of higher critical arguments about the historicity of the Old Testament. In response, Anderson reminded the audience that such matters had an important epistemological element and should be left to those with “practical experience in dealing with evidence—a category which does not include the Critics” (Orr 1912, 120). Similarly, Anderson returned to his argument of decades earlier when, in a debate following a lecture on evolution, he argued that evolution was “a mere theory, and a theory, moreover, which is not only unproved, but obviously incapable of proof” (MacBride 1915, 112). Intriguingly, despite his habit of recycling arguments, when Anderson was approached to contribute to *The Fundamentals*, he composed two new articles. One, an account of sin and redemption, was a forcefully stated if otherwise unremarkable account of the evangelical understanding of those issues. The other, however, turned again to legal analogies, drawing a distinction between “a typical French judge and an ideal English judge,” with the former determined to convict the accused, the latter determined to establish the truth. (Anderson 1915, 70). The chauvinism of such an approach aside, Anderson aimed to connect in the minds of his readers the difference between a morally correct pursuit of truth, prosecuted according to the common transatlantic heritage of empiricism and Common Sense, and the dangerously speculative approach of Continental metaphysicians; here was a particularly striking example of how the intellectual commitments most important to the Victoria Institute were an integral part of the message of *The Fundamentals*.

CONCLUSION

Anderson died in the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918. Given his pugnacious approach, it is little wonder that, in Geoffrey Treloar’s assessment, he would almost certainly have become a fundamentalist had he survived into the 1920s. Yet Robinson too exhibited a bellicose streak, and, although Treloar does not offer an opinion on whether or not he might have become a fundamentalist, it seems fairly certain that the outlook and militancy that he shared with Anderson, and indeed many members of the Victoria Institute, would have similarly inclined him toward fundamentalism (Treloar 2013, 32). The Victoria Institute offers an unparalleled opportunity to examine the prehistory of fundamentalism. It was formed in the aftermath

of *Origin of Species* and *Essays and Reviews* as a response to the twin threats of Darwinism and biblical criticism and was an active forum for conservative evangelicals well into the twentieth century. As its alternative title, the Philosophical Society of Great Britain, suggested, it was a stronghold of the intellectual commitments that Marsden would identify with fundamentalism: Baconianism, Common Sense direct realism, and a belief in the historical reliability of the Bible. Crucially, the Victoria Institute shows that these intellectual commitments held a continual importance for conservative evangelicals, who regularly and passionately articulated them in its lectures and debates. Due to its ostensible commitment solely to matters of science and religion, the Victoria Institute did not in principle discuss matters of pure theology, and so the other defining characteristics of fundamentalism as an intellectual phenomenon, prophecy and eschatology, did not regularly feature in its lectures. Nevertheless, investigation of other works by Victoria Institute members shows that they maintained a strong interest in prophecy, with Anderson one of the most renowned writers on the topic in late Victorian Britain. Concentrating on specific Irish contributors to *The Fundamentals*, and their membership of the Victoria Institute, allows a more focused understanding of these specific intellectual commitments. Such a study suggests that Irish evangelicals remain a vein that could yet be richly mined. It also shows a clear link between the milieu of conservative Irish evangelicals and the wider transatlantic evangelical movement from which fundamentalism would emerge. These Irish evangelicals were graduates of Trinity College, were influenced by prophetic debates, and resolutely committed to the historical authenticity of the Bible. Not only did they fit seamlessly into an organization such as the Victoria Institute, but they also had a role in shaping its outlook, and that of conservative evangelicals more broadly, through their writing, lecturing, and debating. Most importantly, they were contributors to a transatlantic community of conservative evangelicals; a crucial link between a religious minority in Ireland and a movement that would sweep the United States in the years after the First World War.

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