

PROFESSOR OWEN

CHAPTER I

1855–56

The Phoenix—The Crystal Palace at Sydenham—Juror of the Universal Exhibition at Paris—Knight of the Legion of Honour, 1855—Superintendent of the Natural History Department of the British Museum—Death of his Sister, Grace Owen—Cardinal Wiseman, Dr. and Mrs. Livingstone, 1856.

IN the year 1855 Owen's work 'On the Archetype and Homologies of the Vertebrate Skeleton' was translated into French and appeared under the title, 'Principes d'Ostéologie comparée; ou, Recherches sur l'Archétype et les Homologies du Squelette vertébré.'¹ The publication of his lectures on the 'Comparative Anatomy and Physiology of the Invertebrate Animals' reached a second edition. Before the beginning of his Hunterian course, he gave a lecture to a large audience at the Royal Institution on 'Anthropoid Apes.'

The subject chosen for the Hunterian Lectures this season was 'Fossil Remains;' but before delivering them Owen gave as an introduction to

¹ Paris: J. B. Baillière, 1855.

the subject three lectures in the Theatre of the Royal College of Surgeons explanatory of Hunter's MS. essay 'On Extraneous Fossils.' In relation to this course Owen remarks: 'The palæontological is now the only department of the museum which has not been systematically elucidated in this theatre, to the extent at least of the time at my command. . . . It will be observed that Hunter, in his general collection, illustrates the three ways in which the anatomy of animals may be broadly and philosophically followed out.

'There is a series of organs in their mature state, traced from their simplest to their most complex conditions, as in the first division of the physiological series.

'There is a series of the progressive changes or stages in the development of each organ in the embryo and fœtus of different species, as, e.g., in the second division of the same great series.

'There is, thirdly, a series of entire animals, occasionally dissected to show the general collocation of their organs, and arranged, as in the physiological series, in the ascending order, commencing with the more simple forms and proceeding gradationally to the Mammalia and to Man.

'The Council of this College has confided to me the making of the catalogues of these exemplifications of animal structures, and of the methods by which those structures may be studied. And those catalogues have been completed and published

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with one small exception, relating to the vertebrated province of the series arranged according to the classes of animals. . . . In the session of last year I concluded the series of lectures in which the animal organisation was treated of according to the classes of animals, beginning with the lowest and ending with the highest. . . .

‘ Now John Hunter had not neglected the field of anatomical inquiry presented by fossil organic remains. He lived to publish little respecting them. The scientific world probably first became aware of the fact that he had paid any attention at all to them when Hunter communicated to the Royal Society of London, in 1793, his paper on the fossil bones presented to that Society by His Most Serene Highness the Margrave of Anspach. . . . Those men accustomed to think, who heard or read that paper, would recognise in it the mind of the great Master. It is characterised by the same broad views and acute insight into the phenomena under review, by the same unexpected illustrations, which only a wide embrace of facts could have suggested, by the same bold excursions into fields stretching away far beyond the immediate subject of the memoir, which peculiarly mark all the papers from Hunter’s pen.

‘ In those letters which are introduced into the life of John Hunter prefixed to Palmer’s edition of his works, scarcely one of them omits a recommendation to Jenner to secure for his correspon-

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dent and revered teacher, Hunter, whatever fossil remains might fall in his way.'

Owen was evidently regarded more or less, all through his life, as legitimate prey to the numerous inquirers as to the nature and habits of such monsters as the cockatrice, the phoenix, and the bunyip (this last monster being an imaginary creature which hailed from Australia, whose skull turned out to be merely that of an embryo sheep). He has left a description of his interview with an Oriental personage who had come to inquire about the phoenix.

On April 15 he writes: 'A grave Oriental with his interpreter were ushered into my study, as I was preparing my lecture. After due salaams and the visitors seated, the interpreter stated that they were from the Turkish Embassy in order to ask my opinion of the phoenix; whether I believed there had ever been such a bird, and what was the last scientific intelligence regarding it. Of course I told them nothing was known beyond old tradition. The Turk then took from an inner recess of his vest a crimson velvet case, which contained a most beautiful ladle, the handle of carved coral and gold, jewelled, the bowl of a kind of fine horny material, half rose colour and half cream colour, united at an angle. This, with a few similar ladles, had been in the Sultan's jewel-house for many centuries, and was held to be made—the bowl—out of the beak of the phoenix. My opinion

was respectfully requested as to whether such was the case, or, if not, from what bird's beak the bowl had been made.

'After some research in the museum I found the head and beak of the bird which must have yielded such a bowl as that of the Sultan's ladle. The bird is a very rare one, a native of Ceylon, and called the "Helmeted Hornbill," or *Buceros galeatus*. Sir Joseph Banks had presented a specimen of it. The head and beak were brought into my study and handed to the Oriental. He examined it very deftly, comparing the beak with the bowl, and then exclaimed with astonishment and reverence, "God is great! That surely is the bird!" I took a large sheet of paper, and wrote a brief certificate of the nature and country of the bird from which the Sultan's ladle had been made, and gave it to the Turk, requesting the interpreter to write down the name and titles of the individual to whom the precious article had been entrusted. It was as follows: "Mohammed Abu Said, Chief Spoon and Ladle-maker to the Commander of the Faithful."

'So much for the phoenix.'

On April 20 Owen attended the opening ceremony of the Crystal Palace, which had been removed to Sydenham. It is thus described in the diary: 'To London Bridge about eleven. Babbage in our carriage; crowd tremendous. We kept together till fairly in the Palace. R. could not find his

ivory ticket when he left home this morning, and the official at the turnstile would not let him in, in spite of Babbage offering to prove his identity. At last Babbage found some person of importance who recognised R. at once, and so we got in finally. We saw the Queen, Prince Albert, and the Emperor and Empress of the French file past as they walked along the gallery; the Empress, having gone a little way, sat down on a chair, and we afterwards heard that she found it so comfortable that Prince Albert gallantly bought it on the spot and presented her with it. The upper gallery was not open to the public, to prevent crowding on the light spiral staircase. Mr. and Mrs. Charles Darwin there; we walked about a bit with them. The Honourable Artillery Company also there in full force; the officers of R.'s old corps seemed delighted to meet him again. Home about eight.'

The following extracts are also taken from the diary :—

'*May* 11.—R. dined with Lord Ashburton. He met the Duc d'Aumale there, who was pleasant in manner and evidently knows something of fossils. There were present Thomas Carlyle, Mr. Thackeray, Lord Stanley, &c.'

'*June* 5.—About three o'clock there came in Landseer and E. W. Cooke, hot, weary, and luncheonless. They had been to a private view of J. J. Chalon's pictures, which are to be sold, and

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had missed their train. Cooke has all the enthusiasm of a child over the trees, shrubs, and flowers in the garden. Landseer enjoyed them as much, but was quieter. They were never tired of looking at the pictures in the dining-room, but had to go off early to a dinner of Academicians at the Star and Garter.'

On July 16 Owen started for Paris in order to perform much the same services for the Universal Exhibition of 1855 as he had done for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. On the resignation of Prince C. L. Bonaparte he was appointed Chairman of the Jury (XI.) on 'Prepared and Preserved Alimentary Substances.' This, of course, included wines. Some half-dozen of his letters are preserved, but as the proceedings are somewhat similar to those described at the time of the Great Exhibition the following extracts may suffice :—

'*July 18, 1855.*—I have attended a meeting of the Institute, and, oddly enough, the learned body was engaged in discussing my merits, amongst others, relative to a vacancy in the list of eight foreign members. At present, I am a "corresponding member" only, like Lord Brougham, Brewster, &c.'

'*July 27, 1855.*—[Milne Edwards] lives now in Cuvier's old house, and many pleasing recollections and associations arose on entering the well-known door. The general arrangement of the

old dwelling—its subdivision into many small rooms—is much as it was ; the fittings and furniture in a gayer Parisian style. . . . The morning occupations of our jury are curious and various, each one well adapted to its end, but performed amidst a scene of gesticulation and action and a Babel of seeming altercation which renders the result, when we come afterwards coolly to sum up the notes, surprising to me. Take the following as an example : Time, 7 A.M. ; subject, Wines of Austria ; scene, Grande Exposition, in a small whitewashed chamber with a skylight ; a table with green cloth, and books, papers, writing materials ; another with rows of bottles of wine, corkscrews, &c. Hampers of wine on one side of the room. President and two or three members of jury in green velvet *fautouils* ; three experts seated in a corner of the room with a tin pail before them, each with a silver chalice like a Highland quaigh, and a small napkin. The Austrian Commissioner and the representatives of the several wine-growers ; a man in green and silver uniform to uncork ; a grinning negro to serve the wine to the tasters ; a worthy ‘ blouse ’ to hand and take back the sample-bottles. Commissioner calls out the number and vintage-year of the sample. A juryman enters it in a ruled book, the uncorker uncorks the bottle ; the grinning negro pours a little into the pail, then fills the chalice. Each taster agitates the wine, carries it

to his nose, draws it slowly into his mouth, rinses and spurts it out into the pail; then the three interchange knowing remarks in a low tone, their heads together, and bawl out a number, 3, 6, 10, as the case may be, indicative of their verdict as to quality. The same entered by secretary of jury and vouched by president. After each trial the expert wipes his chalice and recommences. After five or six trials water is served to each, with which he rinses out his mouth and chalice, then wipes his tongue with his napkin. The trial recommences: Number and vintage of bottle called; clack goes the cork; black Hebe bottles up the sparkling ruby or gold-coloured wine in the silver chalices; sniffing, rinsing, smacking of lips, and all goes into the pail. Two of our experts are *décorsés*, and their jovial fellow is bearded like the pard. Strange and outlandish are the shapes of the bottles, and quaint their labels, from Hungary and Bohemia. As the tasting progresses, the din of discussion waxes louder and fiercer. Any peculiarly fine wines are submitted in *petits verres* to the jury; the progress is from the ordinary to the *recherchés*; most delicate and *aromés* were some, and more especially the concluding sample entitled "Tokay-Essence, du Cru de Monak, du Comte George Andrassy." It was grievous to see the amber-coloured, sparkling Tokays liberally added to the now almost brimming pailful of the mix-

ture of all the choicest wines of the Austrian Empire.'

'*July* 31, 1855.—You may expect me home any day after the receipt of this. . . . The Prince [C. L. Bonaparte] drove me in the Bois de Boulogne yesterday, after the Institute, and called upon one of his brothers [Pierre], to whom he introduced me. In the evening I played two games of chess with the Duke of Brunswick (the Diamond Duke), and won one.'

On August 3 Owen returned from the Exposition Universelle 'with an opinion of the French,' as he writes, 'raised to a high degree in respect to their abilities and disposition.' For his services given to the Exhibition the Emperor of the French created him a Knight of the Legion of Honour, but the decoration itself did not arrive till Christmas.

On Owen's return from Paris, his wife went to Wirksworth for rest and change, and the Professor wrote her (September 13) the following doleful account of his domestic experiences during her absence:—

'Cook was seated in a chair, bending herself double, shedding maudlin tears, and complaining of great pain. Of course there was nothing to be done before getting her to bed. When Sister E. had helped her to undress and got her covered up, I went upstairs. She was knocking her head about the pillow, bewailing her fate; maundered