BOOK REVIEW

Lukas M. Verburgt (ed.), *William Whewell: Victorian Polymath*

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024. Pp. 367 + xiv. ISBN 978-0-8229-4829-2. $65.00 (hardcover).

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Many would agree that that the term 'polymath' is an overused descriptor of historical figures. Here we have a sturdy book of over 350 pages that tests our concerns on the matter when applied to William Whewell, usually regarded as a great moral philosopher, systematizer and historian of science. It is from the important Science and Culture in the Nineteenth Century series organized by Bernard Lightman and published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, and its high production quality accords with other works in that series. The editor of this volume is Lukas Verburgt, an independent scholar. It comprises an introduction plus eighteen relatively slim chapters (averaging approximately fifteen pages each) on various aspects of Whewell's life and work, each by a different author. The annotations are satisfyingly heavy – the notes take up eighty of the pages – although they vary in detail and quality of sources from author to author.

Whewell's polymathic capabilities are reasonably well displayed. His mathematical talent, his early works on mechanics and then his extraordinary original research effort on the tides, for which he should be much better known, followed by his efforts to defend Christianity by the melding of astronomy and natural theology, sit alongside his input into the historical sciences of philology and architecture. Whewell coined a number of words in common use today (although some were not popularized until the twentieth century), for instance 'scientist' and 'physicist', and he influenced the design and construction of elements of Cambridge city centre, a fact also seldom mentioned in the standard sources. The chapter discussing his efforts in palaetiology – another word Whewell appears to have coined, relating to the study of past phenomena (not limited to geology) using existing principles of cause and effect – is broad and interesting, but seems to conclude with more questions than answers. A separate chapter on the 'classificatory sciences' – a nod to Whewell's compulsion to systematize – suffers in particular from overlap with other chapters.

Those other chapters provide a well-rounded view of Whewell's labours and vocation. These include discussions of Whewell's engagement with society (the political economy, gender and the benefits of a liberal education) and with history of science (especially his efforts to support all knowledge through Baconian inductive processes), of the philosophy of science (including a compare-and-contrast exercise with Kant's rule-based efforts to secure the basis of scientific advancement) and of Whewell as a priest and staunch defender of the links between university, church and state.

The final chapter is an essay on the location and organization of the very large and seemingly not yet well-ordered Whewell archive in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. This will be useful to scholars who wish to access Whewell's papers directly, although it

seems clear that the organization of the material is an ongoing process that may result in significant change – hopefully improvement – over time.

The book lacks a narrative thread, although this is not unusual in a work to which so many authors have contributed. Perhaps Whewell's devotion to Baconian induction – highlighted several times throughout the text, sometimes gratifyingly in chapters where it might not be expected – might have formed an overall framework for the study. This lack does lead to considerable overlapping and repeated history, even down to the level of specific anecdotes. A story concerning the supposed rustic and uncouth manners of Whewell's North Country origins – a comment he purportedly made upon seeing a herd of pigs being driven past the Trinity College gates – is drawn from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry by Richard Yeo. The legend is, to begin with, scarcely convincing in support of the point being made and the less so given that the original source (an anonymous obituary of Whewell in *The Athenaeum* of March 1866) declares that it 'may or may not be true'. The yarn's retelling by several of the book's authors gives it a historical weight that it therefore does not deserve. Perhaps more meticulous editing could have reduced (or preferably eliminated) this and other repetitions, especially those relating to Whewell's early life.

The lack of a narrative and the various repetitions mean that the book is least likely to appeal to the general reader who would prefer to peruse it from beginning to end. The student or specialist scholar of any of the disciplines mentioned, however, will find the book a useful work of reference to introduce them to Whewell's impact on their chosen subject.

Further criticisms? The book provides written links to two appendices that can be accessed online only: first, a list of Whewell's published works (twenty-two pages), and second, a chronology of Whewell's life (five pages, so not very significantly longer than the four-page version included in the book) – why not include these in full for the price of the book? There may be some technical reason why the reader is forced to tap a complex invocation into a keyboard to gain little more than is in the book, an effort that is not very great, but which could perhaps have been avoided.

I should conclude by mentioning that there are two chapters which I found to be exemplars of brevity and clarity on complex subjects: Edward Gillin on 'Whewell and architecture' and David Phillips on 'Whewell and moral philosophy'. I do not suggest that these two chapters alone would be worth the cost of the book but certainly scholars of either subject, broadly construed across various historical disciplines, should regard them as necessary background reading.