

“Sir H. T. De la Beche : his Contributions to the Advancement of Science, and the Circumstances in which they were made ”

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Never having been made the subject of a biography, Henry Thomas De la Beche (1796–1855) is almost unknown outside the geological world and today is little more than a name even to geologists, and yet his influence upon the development of geology in this country was greater than that of any of his contemporaries.

The story of his life, revealed by his diaries and correspondence (as yet unpublished), is full of interest and inspiration, whether we follow him as a young man making the Grand Tour; as a plantation owner in Jamaica interested in the physical and spiritual welfare of his slaves; as a pioneer in the newly emerging science of geology; as a successful overcomer of official inertia, persuading the government of his time to establish a geological branch of the Ordnance Survey (later the Geological Survey), a Museum of Economic Geology (later the Museum of Practical Geology in Jermyn Street and now represented by the Geological Museum), the Government School of Mines and of Science applied to the Arts (later the Royal School of Mines which became the nucleus of the great complex of educational institutions in South Kensington), and the Mining Record Office (the forerunner of the Mines Department of the Home Office and the technical branch of the Ministry of Mines); as adviser to the Admiralty upon the choice and efficient use of fuel, and to the Board of Health on the planning and sanitation of towns; as pioneer in enquiries into the causes and prevention of explosions in coal mines and in propaganda directed towards raising aesthetic standards in the ceramic industry; and last but by no means least, in his ordinary human relationships—loyal and appreciative of loyalty, sincere and intolerant of hypocrisy, as jealous for the reputation of his assistants as for his own, as pleased as the next man when praised and as resentful of criticism that he felt to be undeserved.

The personal history of his early days is not irrelevant to a consideration of his contribution to geology, for it shows the beginning of the characteristic traits which made his later work possible—his capacity to observe and accurately to record his observations in words, on maps, or by means of sketches, and his interest in men which enabled him to secure official support for his project to make a geological survey of England and Wales, and to build up, from a one-man organisation with authority to spend £300, the Geological Survey and its ancillary institutions that, in his own time, found a home in the Museum of Practical Geology in Jermyn Street.

It is not possible in an abstract to enter into details concerning De la Beche's work, but it is abundantly clear that his greatest contribution to the advance of science in this country lay in his success in securing, for the first time on a large scale and a permanent basis, Government recognition of and support for scientific investigation. We must not, however, overlook the fact that his direct contributions to geology, pure and applied, especially the latter, entitle him to a place amongst the greatest geologists of his age. Being to a large extent unobvious because buried in official reports they are less well known than the contributions of his contemporaries and less than they deserve.