

On Mad Scientists

History is rife with poignant examples of promising academics who went from renowned and respected to daft and deranged. In this issue we look at Dean William Buckland, once President of the Geological Society in England and the Dean of Westminster.



Naturalist and Anglican Minister William Buckland (1784-1856) was one of the early pioneers in the field of geology. Along with many lesser discoveries, he is credited with being the first person to scientifically describe a dinosaur, *Megalosaurus*, in 1824. In fact, he was the paragon of a perfect scientist. Until he went off the deep end, that is.

Buckland had always been a little odd to begin with. He was known to cover his desk with petrified reptile droppings and let free-range guinea pigs and jackals roam about his office. But by 1813 there were signs that the mostly innocuous scientist was moving in a very odd direction. That year, a student recounted the following episode in one of his lectures. "He paced like a Franciscan preacher up and down behind a long showcase ... He had in his hand a huge hyena's skull. He suddenly dashed down the steps - rushed skull in hand at the first undergraduate on the front bench and shouted 'What rules the world?' The youth, terrified, threw himself against the next back seat, and answered not a word. He rushed then on to me, pointing the hyena full in my face - 'What rules the world?' 'Haven't an idea', I said. 'The stomach, sir,'

he cried.

Buckland, it seemed, had a new fascination with the stomach and all things consumable.

The most pronounced symptom of this new behavior was that Buckland was somehow seized with an unquenchable drive to eat his way through the entire food chain. His dinner parties become infamous for their toasted mice, chilled insects, and stewed birds.

In addition, Buckland's extensive intercourse with all of nature's delicacies apparently convinced the scientist that he had developed superhuman powers of taste. According to the former geologist and historian Simon Winchester, the Rev. Buckland was with a party of friends at St. Paul's Cathedral when the group happened upon an oddly shaped stain in front of the steps. A few of them foolishly began speculating on the source of the stain, and before anyone could stop him, the Reverend was on his knees licking the dark substance. "Bat droppings!" he exclaimed.

Buckland's most famous eccentric exploit, however, nearly defies the imagination. The story is related by the famous raconteur Augustus Hare, on the Oxford University Museum of Natural History website. "Talk of strange relics led to mention of the heart of a French King preserved at Nuneham in a silver casket. Dr. Buckland, whilst looking at it, exclaimed, 'I have eaten many strange things, but have never eaten the heart of a king before,' and, before anyone could hinder him, he had gobbled it up, and the precious relic was lost for ever."

Despite his now supremely outlandish behavior, Buckland managed to be appointed Dean of Westminster in 1845. The old chap began failing in health however, and was bedridden for several years before cop-

ping in 1856.

True to his sense of humor, Buckland arranged to leave this world in style. The plot he reserved in the local graveyard turned out, surprise, surprise, to be above only a few inches of soil above an outcrop of dense Jurassic limestone. It took several sticks of dynamite to clear enough space for the coffin. Well, dear William, that's one way of going out with a bang. ☹

Sources:

Winchester, Simon. *The Map that Changed the World: William Smith and the Invention of Modern Geology*. Perennial, New York, 2002.

"William Buckland". Oxford Museum of Natural History. <http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk/geocolls/buckland/bio1.htm>



My, that ammonite looks tasty, doesn't it, Dean?

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