

## Mary Eliza Root Prize 2022 winner report

By Adele Guyton

A common theme among the blog posts written by the Mary Eliza Root Prize winner that preceded me is the trip to Gladstone's Library coming at a good time. So it was for me as well.

In February 2023, when I visited, I had sprinted through revising a dissertation chapter, sent it off to my supervisors with my fingers tightly crossed, and was stressing about an upcoming article deadline. I recall telling myself as I set out for an overnight National Express – it is unreasonably difficult to get to North Wales from many places – that this was crazy. I should have turned this trip down, I thought. I simply did not have time for it, as beneficial to my research as it might be. As it happened, spending three days in Hawarden in the Reading Rooms and going for walks nearby was just what I needed to reset and remember that to do research, I had to slow down. I gave myself permission not to simply ransack the texts I had looked up on the library catalogue beforehand, but to browse the shelves for interesting items I might not have found otherwise.

My dissertation is focused on the representation of astronomy in German and British popular writing between 1890 and 1950. In order to exercise some bibliographic control over this project, I selected several periodicals from which to survey astronomy-related content. One of these is *The Boy's Own Paper* (1879-1967). Because the *BOP* was published by the Religious Tract Society, and astronomy has a long history with (natural) theology, for some time I have been seeking out nineteenth-century popular writings on astronomy and theology to inform how writers and editors for an evangelical publication might have seen the science. In a nutshell, this was the proposal I submitted to the VPFA prize committee.

As a result, I spent my days at the Gladstone browsing through some of the many nineteenth-century texts held there that connect the sciences and theology. One of the most interesting for my purposes was *Indications of the Creator. Extracts, Bearing upon Theology, from the History and the Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* by William Whewell. I had already been familiar with Whewell's views on astronomy from reading (about) his Bridgewater Treatise of 1833. But, this 1845 anthology of his writings on the natural sciences (including on astronomy extracted from the Bridgewater Treatise) made the enduring popular appeal of such accessible and theologically-inflected writings tangible for me. I had known from secondary sources that the astronomical writings of Whewell and other theologians such as

Thomas Chalmers were reprinted and translated for decades after their publication. Jon Potter wrote in his Mary Eliza Root Prize reflection that he found himself ‘musing wistfully on the people for whom these books were not historical sources but were fresh, new media’, and finding this anthology was similar for me. Reading Whewell’s Preface, which says that ‘lessons in Natural Theology always find a large class of willing readers, when there is anything of novelty in their form’ was the first time that I really *felt* that these texts had been popular. Another text that brought this home to me was a collection of Robert Taylor’s sermons, *The Devil’s Pulpit* (vol. 1). I skimmed this one, sleepy from the bus ride – but I found it significant that its subtitle was ‘Containing twenty-three astronomico-theological discourses’. The sermons were all from around 1830, and were (re)published posthumously by the London Freethought Publishing Company in 1882. Someone in the publication process must have thought that the phrase ‘astronomico-theological discourses’ would attract readers to a highly radical text. Comparing Whewell and Taylor – theologians from opposite poles of Protestantism – it became palpable to me that astronomy was deemed interesting and theologically useful across the religious spectrum of the mid-nineteenth century.

My second day at the library, after amassing a number of useful scans, I received feedback from my supervisors on the chapter I had submitted. It wasn’t easy feedback to incorporate into my idea of how fast I should be working. I had rushed the revisions. I needed to take a step back and reconsider some conclusions. Being at the library for this particular moment on the journey through my PhD research was, frankly, wonderful. The unfamiliar library environment paradoxically reminded me that there are other things in life than my dissertation. There were people around me at lunch and dinner who were from other walks of life and research, and who reminded me, in some touching conversations, that feedback is best received with a deep breath and a few days’ perspective. I had the opportunity to connect with some fellow Open University graduates in person for the first time. The lovely outdoors beckoned, and I took a long walk through the surrounding area. Some of the other Mary Eliza Root Prize recipients have compared the library to a ‘sensory deprivation tank’. While that seems true of the reading rooms, I found everything else about the place full of friendly interaction, right down to the retro Roberts radio in my bedroom.

Overall, my stay at the Gladstone gave me the space and time to remember that research requires breathing (though it also provided some really useful notes that I have since incorporated into the chapter that was giving me such a headache). I’m very grateful for the opportunity, and I will definitely try to head back to Hawarden sometime in the future – the Gladstone Library is a truly unique and welcoming place for a researcher!