

Research dissemination through conference papers and public talks

1. 'Patterns of Creation: Rockpools, Seaside Tourism and Natural Theology', Victorian Patterns BAVS conference, 30 August 2018.

[PROGRAMME](#) and [ABSTRACTS](#) are [downloadable here](#).

ABSTRACT

In 1858, George Henry Lewes, declared that the lovely sea anemone was 'now the ornament of countless drawing-rooms, studies, and back parlours, as well as the delight of unnumbered amateurs.' Lewes's *Sea-side Studies at Ilfracombe, Tenby, the Scilly Isles, and Jersey* (1858), along with volumes such as Philip Henry Gosse's *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853) and Charles Kingsley's *Glaucus; Or, The Wonders of the Shore* (1855) created a fascination with visiting, studying and reproducing the seashore. My paper will argue that the popularity of seaside science stemmed from the way it was promoted as a means of discovering patterns of design in the natural world: despite Darwin, natural history remained heavily indebted to natural theology.

Contemporary writer Linda Cracknell has described the intertidal zone as a space that 'enlivens imaginations; secreting the extraordinary in the ordinary rhythm of ebb and flow; swash and backwash.' Philip H. Gosse and Charles Kingsley would have approved of such sentiments; they acquired popularity as pioneers in the study of the secret life of the seashore and the exploration of its imaginative and theological appeal. The beautiful patterns on anemones, madrepores and zoophytes were seen as full of literal and symbolic meaning, an embodiment of the wonder and romance of the biodiversity of Creation, found in the most everyday species. Kingsley, an Anglican clergyman, and Gosse, a man of equally deep religious conviction and a member of the Plymouth Brethren, were part of an influential corpus of popular science books, in which, far from being a dilettante activity, fossicking among rock pools after zoophytes was a rugged, moral pursuit of God's truth and beauty. My paper will demonstrate the different ways that writers like Gosse, Kingsley, Rev. J.G. Wood, and others, offered new audiences a vivid glimpse of the design they perceived in nature, as well as their role in popularizing marine aquaria that offered urban populations the chance to experience the romance of the seashore.

2. 'Victorians and the Aquarium', 'Ocean Matters' Events and Activities, Public talk, Bristol Aquarium, 27 May 2018.
3. Position paper on the Victorians and Water, Viewpoints discussion event, Public forum, Bristol Natural History Consortium, 13 March 2017.
4. 'Preserving the Sea-Side: Natural History, Tourism and North Devon', NAVSA conference, Banff, Canada, 17 November 2017.

ABSTRACT

My paper will explore the mid-Victorian fascination with visiting and studying the sea-side. It argues that, while seaside science stemmed from a popular desire to have a hands-on engagement with the natural world, this approach threatened to undermine the very environment it wanted to preserve.

Popular enthusiasm for marine biology and the ecology of the seashore was part of the growth of mid-Victorian tourism and rational recreation. George Henry Lewes's own volume, his *Sea-side Studies at Ilfracombe, Tenby, the Scilly Isles, and Jersey* (1858), was part of this fashion, and based on a long coastal tour made by Lewes and his partner, Marian Evans Lewes, from May to August 1856. Their decision to begin their excursion in Ilfracombe, North Devon, was no accident. They were heading to a locale that was attracting an increasing number of natural history tourists, inspired by volumes such as Philip Henry Gosse's *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853) and Charles Kingsley's *Glaucus; Or, The Wonders of the Shore* (1855). Much of the influence of Gosse and Kingsley was that they promoted a new type of living, hands-on, natural history, one that was not dominated by the naturalist's study or the taxidermied sample.

Gosse declared 'Natural history . . . is far too much a science of dead things; a necrology. It is mainly conversant with dry skins, furred or feathered, blackened, shrivelled, and hay-stuffed'. In contrast, for him, science at the seaside was concerned with the necessity of understanding specimens in relationship to their dynamic coastal environment, which metamorphosed on a daily basis thanks to its tidal rhythms. Yet while popular science writers used the rockpools and beaches of Victorian Devon to evoke wonder at the everyday biodiversity around them, my paper suggests that the type of natural history they pioneered had inherent tension in its concept of environmental preservation.

The faultlines around the preservation of nature were further accentuated by Gosse's popularization of the marine aquarium. The coast was no longer a peripheral or remote space but was now mobile and reproducible, part of the domestic interior. The marine aquarium satisfied a drive to observe, domesticate, and conserve nature, but in a way that removed the specimens from their locale. When you could take the seashore back home with you and create an aquarium according to your decorative tastes, this damaged the very locatedness of marine environment that made it a space of social freedom and scientific wonder. Much to their dismay, the popularisation efforts of Gosse, Lewes, Kingsley, and others became the victim of their own success. Promoting hands-on engagement with the seaside was unsustainable to the marine eco-systems from which the specimens came. The biodiversity of the seashore was significantly harmed by the popularization of natural history and the number of tourists seeking specimens.

1. 'Science at the Seaside: Microscopes, Madrapores and the Romance of Natural History' NAVSA/AVSA conference, Florence, Italy, 18 May 2017.

ABSTRACT

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2. John Plunkett, 'Gosse and North Devon', RAMM, Public talk, 13 June 2017.

ABSTRACT

The work of Philip Henry Gosse encouraged the Victorian fascination with marine biology and the ecology of the seashore. This public talk will explore Gosse's role as the leading figure in an upsurge of popular scientific writing about the Devon coastline, which played an important role in the growth of popular science during the period.

3. with John Plunkett, 'Science at the Seaside: Pleasure Hunts in Victorian Devon', Landscaping Change conference, Bath Spa University, UK, 30 March 2016. Click [here](#) for timetable.

ABSTRACT

Coastal landscapes are always changing thanks to tidal ebb and flow; they are also subject to human cultivation and the pressures of the tourist industry. This paper traces the work of a public engagement project that sought to recover the submerged history of the North Devon coast before it was indelibly associated with seaside tourism. Before the commercial heyday of Devon's resorts, its coast was a place of discovery and inspiration, somewhere to visit and enjoy a hands-on engagement with the environment.

The rich history of scientific and literary writing about the North Devon coast deserves to be better known and celebrated as part of our living heritage. In 2013, we received a grant of £30k from North Devon Fishery Local Action Group (FLAG) to work on the public engagement project 'Science at the Seaside: Pleasure Hunts in North Devon'. We sought to highlight a neglected aspect of south-west heritage; namely, the growth of seaside science and environmental tourism in North Devon during the Victorian period. Working at the intersection of archipelagic criticism, literary geography, and studies of the sea and maritime culture (what has come to be called 'blue cultural studies' by Steven Mentz), our aim is to recover the layer of meanings attached to North Devon seascapes that have been lost or contested. The rockpools, beaches and marine biodiversity of North Devon attracted many individuals, literary and scientific, local and distinguished.

Those helping to popularize North Devon included other well-known writers such as George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, Charles Kingsley and the naturalists Philip Gosse and George Tugwell, all of whom published accounts of their explorations. 'Seaside science' was so popular because it accorded with the Victorian belief in 'rational recreation' – the notion that leisure time should be used in a way that was both educational and entertaining. With this mind, we used our FLAG grant to create a programme of activities with Ilfracombe Museum in a similar spirit of experiential learning in recognition of the intangible heritage the North Devon coast embodies. The organised events included a number of hands-on, family activities, ranging from Victorian rockpool rambles and handicraft workshops to marine collages, nature writing retreats and a symposium on 'Curious Objects'. The success of the museum education programme motivated us to extend our activities into schools.

Thanks to funding from Bath Spa and Exeter Universities, we were able to design workshops for Devon junior schools to be delivered by PhD students. We were amazed at the interest shown by junior school teachers; we also found ourselves in a new world of Key Stage 2 learning outcomes, national curriculum objectives and the challenge of translating our research into workshops suitable for years 3-6 students. What knowledge can you expect of these age groups? How can you relate the Victorian passion for natural history to children's own curiosity about the seaside? Our paper as a whole describes the way our activities tried to encourage awareness of their local environment for a range of Devon audiences, as well as to foster historical interest in understanding the coast as a living cultural landscape in which change is inherent, and is reflected in the lives of the people who visit or inhabit it.

4. 'A Naturalist's Own Story: Philip Gosse and the Gender Politics of Victorian Natural History', The Politics of Literature and Science, BSLS Winter Symposium, University of Exeter, 3 December 2016.

ABSTRACT

The North Devon coast attracted many literary and scientific visitors such as George Henry Lewes, George Tugwell, Charles Kingsley and Philip Gosse, who explored, collected and displayed scientific specimens, as well as published accounts of their visits. This essay argues that there is a rich history of writing about the North Devon coast, which deserves to be

examined further not only because of the national role that it has played in the growth of Victorian popular science and seaside tourism but more importantly because of its emulation of masculine ideals in a modern period characterized by industrialization and the dominance of technology. Looking at Gosse's *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853), alongside Lewes's *Sea-Side Studies: Ilfracombe, Tenby, the Scilly Isles, and Jersey* (1858), among others, as he sets out to find material referents of his identity in the landscape of North Devon, the gendering of the coast is keeping with the way in which his narrative is determinedly masculine from the outset as it makes scientific exploration of seaside something more about indulgence and adventure rather than responsibility.

The modern age, the age of cities and machines, the age of realism, often seemed to be the antithesis to the world of romance or of epic, with its fantastic quests and adventures. Yet, when we look at some of these Victorian narratives growing around the male body of the natural historian, we see the fascination with commemorating epic heroism, no more so than the creation of Trafalgar Square or Nelson's Column. The fantastical nature of Gosse's adventure, which harks back to the heroic quests of romance, is balanced by plain narration and scientific descriptions. Gosse's emphasis on the wild beauty of the coastal landscape he explores can be understood to announce a journey away from London – represented by unhealthy city life – towards a more primal form of existence in North Devon. According to this reading, then, there's something of an irony to the fact that the 'pleasure hunts' that Gosse undertakes lead him into a terrain devoid of the pressures, concerns and trappings of modernity, where he can really discover what it is to be a man. It is completely in this vein of defining masculinity through this type of raw physicality that rockpooling – and science at the seaside more generally – are proposed as means of rejuvenating the male body, providing him and any other prospective natural historian, with a vigour which city life would sap from them, allowing their pulses to grow strong again, and blood to pump through their veins.

5. with Patricia Zakreski, 'From Embroidery to Taxidermy A History of Victorian Women's Handicraft', Victorian Week, Ilfracombe Museum, Public talk, 9 June 2014.

ABSTRACT

This public talk focuses on natural history specimens taxidermy and unprocessed plant and animal fibres and the role they played in women's engagement with handicraft, inviting museum visitors to think about the materials women used and the sources of their arts and craft.