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Richard Owen: Victorian Naturalist (Practical Guide Series; 2)

Nicolaas A. Rupke

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Richard Owen (1804-92) was, after Darwin, the most important figure in Victorian natural history. He was, for most of the six decades of his career, Britain's foremost comparative anatomist and vertebrate palaeontologist. Leader of the nineteenth-century museum movement, he founded London's monumental Natural History Museum, wrote and published copiously and won every professional honour. Positioned at the cutting edge of Victorian science, his work attracted enormous general interest, and he himself came to symbolise 'natural history' in the public mind. His company was sought by royalty (Prince Albert), prime ministers (especially Sir Robert Peel), and by contemporary literati such as Charles Dickens. Owen was, however, a controversial figure whose disagreements with colleagues developed into epic power struggles, the most notorious of which were with Darwin and Huxley. As the most renowned opponent of natural selection, Owen was type-cast as a Cuvierian creationist and became the bete noire of the Darwinian evolution debate. In this comprehensive intellectual and scientific biography, Nicolaas Rupke argues that Owen was no simple-minded anti-evolutionist and, moreover, should be freed from the distortion of the evolution dispute that was only a minor part of his work, yet has come to dominate his memory. Using the museum movement as the primary context of explanation, Rupke throws new light on a wide area of Owen's activities. He reveals the central division in Owen's scientific oeuvre between the functionalism of Oxbridge natural theology and the transcendentalism of German nature philosophy. This epistemological duality confused and puzzled his contemporaries as well as laterhistorians. But as Rupke convincingly demonstrates, it was a fundamental extension of the intellectual and political manoeuvering for control of Victorian cultural institutions, and an inextricable part of the rise to public authority of the most articulate proponents of the scientifi

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