

A chivalric knight and deep sea dredging; or, 'the everlasting thunder of the deep'

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For Britons in the mid- to late nineteenth century the deep sea was starting to take a hold on the imagination. The successful attempt in 1858 to lay a telegraph cable between Ireland and Newfoundland drew political, corporate, and public attention to the seafloor. Scientists, whalers, and explorers focused their gaze downwards to the bottom of the ocean in search of new species, hunting grounds, and stories of derring-do. The most successful deep-sea exploration of the period was the voyage of HMS Challenger; a round-the-world journey which sought to measure and dredge the furthest depths of the ocean. This article works within recent scholarship in literature and science to look at the journal of Henry Nottidge Moseley, a naturalist on board the Challenger, and the vessel's figurehead, a chivalric knight, in order to examine connections between Victorian deep-sea exploration and the contemporaneous phenomenon of medievalism.

21 December 1872. *HMS Challenger* had been stripped of the former equipment necessary for her service as the flagship of Britain's Australia Station. As William J. J. Spry notes,

For some months previous to the date of her commission she had been in the hands of the dockyard officials, undergoing great changes both in equipment and internal accommodation, so as to fit her with every possible means for furthering the great work in hand.¹

The ship was turned from a warship into a ship of scientific research; the first major expedition which sought to explore the deep sea. Seventeen guns were removed and towards the forward part of the ship 'was placed the chemical laboratory for the purpose of analysing and testing the sea-water obtained from the different depths. Here were ranged retorts, stills, tubes of all sizes, hydrometers, thermometers, blow-pipes – in fact, all the usual paraphernalia found in laboratories'.²

Amongst this transfiguration one element remained in place. At the bow, just above the forepeak, tilting a few degrees towards the water was the figurehead; a three-quarter length figure of a chivalric knight in

¹ William J. J. Spry, *The Cruise of Her Majesty's Ship 'Challenger': voyages over many seas, scenes in many lands* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1877), p. 8 <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044072253974&view=1up&seq=7>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

armour, helmet, and heavy moustache (Fig.1). Designed by J. E. Hellyer in 1857 for the sum of £10, the figure remained with the *Challenger* until 1921.³



Figure 1: Hellyer, *Figurehead of the HMS Challenger* (c. 1857), wood
(National Oceanographic Centre, Southampton; © National Oceanography Centre)

Nineteenth century Britain was, of course, a society looking beyond its shores. The rise of medievalism – exemplified in novels like Walter Scott’s hugely popular *The Talisman* (1825) and, later in the century, in the juvenile fiction of Charlotte M. Yonge⁴ – sought to romanticise, encourage, and justify the nation’s imperial endeavours. Though most of these projects were carried out on the overland in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, it became increasingly important for oceanographers to map the waterways which provided a route to such colonies. A thoroughly mapped out and ‘known’ ocean meant quicker and safer trips. It also meant, as became clear in the laying of sea-floor cables in the 1850s, quicker communications for trade and political domination. The deep sea, therefore, became an increasingly important focus for scientific study. Science provided a means of establishing order over the ‘natural’ world and turned previously unknown spaces into imperial places ripe for control and exploitation.⁵

The expedition of the *Challenger* and the figurehead which, quite literally, led her journey is a pertinent place to begin a discussion on knowledge of the deep sea in nineteenth-century Britain and the contemporary resurgence of medievalism in the metropole. In order to draw parallels between medievalism and Victorian science this article focuses on the journal of Henry Nottidge Moseley, published as *Notes by a Naturalist on the ‘Challenger’* in 1879. This publication sits quite happily between

³ David Pulvertaft, *Figureheads of the Royal Navy* (Seaford: Barnsley, 2011), p. 209.

⁴ For more on military recruitment in chivalric literature, see Mike Horswell, ‘Creating Chivalrous Imperial Crusaders: the crusades in juvenile literature from Scott to Newbolt, 1825-1917’, in *Perceptions of the Crusades, Volume One*, ed. by Mike Horswell and Jonathon Phillips (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 28-47.

⁵ Michael S. Reidy, ‘From the Oceans to the Mountains: Spatial Science in an Age of Empire’, in *Knowing Global Environments: New Historical Perspectives on the Field Sciences*, ed. Jeremy Vetter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), pp. 17-8.

William Spry's *The Cruise of Her Majesty's Ship 'Challenger'* – a rather more literary text fit for the non-specialist – and the volumes of reports by Thomson and Murray which describe the results of the research in extraordinary length from the various experiments conducted on board.⁶ Moseley's text might be seen to incorporate literary, artistic, and personal reflections whilst also reporting on the experiments conducted by the author and others on board. Any connections between medievalism and late nineteenth-century deep-sea exploration, therefore, are most likely to be found in this text rather than the other two.

A reciprocity existed between the texts produced by persons of science, mariners, and writers of the deep sea. Matthew Fontaine Maury, the author of *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (1855), one of the founding texts for all deep-sea knowledge, spoke to whalers as they tended to stray from established shipping routes. Likewise, Jules Verne, the author of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, spoke to mariners who had previously worked on the telegraph cabling ships before moving to transatlantic voyages. Furthermore, Verne crafted his novel with a copy of Maury's *The Physical Geography of the Sea* on his desk.⁷ Such was the cyclical nature of the intertextual influence at work in these early days of deep-sea exploration. Moseley utilises Maury in order to bring lyrical verve to a section of *Notes from a Naturalist* – that section dealing explicitly with the deep sea – which Moseley himself sees of being of little interest in the general arc of his quest narrative. Moseley believes that, due to the lack of vegetation present on the seafloor, animals at great depths feed from the falling remains of other animals which live closer to the surface. Quoting Maury, Moseley writes: 'the sea, like the snow-cloud, with its flakes in a calm, is always letting fall upon its bed showers of microscopic shells'.⁸ This illustrates one of the major intersections between medievalism and science; the need to construct a quest-like narrative which, seemingly always, relegates the space of the deep sea to an afterthought.

This exemplifies one of the main issues facing writers of the deep sea, such as Moseley. The structural necessity of working within a framework of frontier-facing; the need to build a narrative of 'never-has-this-been-done-before' coupled with potentialities of danger and the exotic – from its Latin root of 'from the outside.' In the face of these influences Moseley begins to edit his journey. Stories occurring on land or on the top-sea are given precedent over those sections dealing with deep-sea life; the latter parts are put at the end of the journey in a section comprising only 2.7% of the entire journal.⁹ This is very little considering the *Challenger's* role as the first major deep-sea exploration vessel. The relatively small interest

⁶ Spry; and Henry Nottidge Moseley, *Notes by a Naturalist on the 'Challenger'* (London, 1879)

<<http://dbooks.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/books/PDFs/590700787.pdf>>; and C. Wyville Thomson and John Murray, *Report on the Scientific Results of the Voyage of the H.M.S Challenger during the years 1873-1876* (London: Longmans & Co., 1883), I – VIII.

⁷ Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005), pp. 26-7.

⁸ Matthew Fontaine Maury, quoted in Moseley, p. 582.

⁹ Moseley, pp. 576-592.

in the dredging operations of the *Challenger* is illustrated by the actions of the crew onboard. In the early dredges ‘every man and boy in the ship’ would come to see what the dredging net had brought to witness but ‘as the novelty of the thing wore off, the crowd became smaller and smaller, until at last only the scientific staff [...] awaited the arrival of the net’.¹⁰ Moseley’s account of deep-sea phenomena is pushed aside for a story of top-level (top-soil and top-water) close shaves and meetings with populations in confrontation rather than in cooperation. Moseley is, then, a challenger in his actions and attitude – whether to physical endurance, geographically ‘known’ limits, or native populations.

In Britain, Charles Kingsley, a novelist, scientist, and campaigner, began to make connections between medieval chivalric values and the man – for Kingsley it had to be a man – of science, specifically a naturalist such as Moseley, who would certainly have been aware of Kingsley through his writings and also through an acknowledgement by Charles Darwin in the second edition of *Origin of Species* (1861).¹¹ Kingsley believed in muscular Christianity (though he rejected the term) which appeared as a trope throughout the cultural landscape of our period.¹² Novels such as Scott’s *The Talisman*, John G. Edgar’s *The Boy Crusaders* (1865), and Charlotte M. Yonge’s *The Prince and the Page* (1866) created the archetype of a strong, masculine, Christian man who displayed chivalric virtues. Kingsley feeds into this archetype when detailing his ideal of a naturalist:

[...] he should be brave and enterprising, and withal patient and undaunted; not merely in travel, but in investigation; knowing (as Lord Bacon might have put it) that the kingdom of nature, like the kingdom of heaven, must be taken by violence, and that only to those who knock long and earnestly, does the great mother open the doors of her sanctuary.¹³

The role of the naturalist is to work upon nature with a force more akin to military endeavours than scientific study. ‘Brave and enterprising’ men who must take ‘nature’ by ‘violence’. This, too, is the language of a challenger confronting an opponent – whether that is an opponent in a duel or in a landscape, perhaps even against a landscape.

Figureheads made for naval vessels after 1750 began to represent individual figures rather than groups. The figures represented would often try to work in relation to the ship’s name.¹⁴ In the case of *HMS Challenger* a chivalric knight was chosen. Jousting matches were an integral aspect of the resurgence of

¹⁰ Moseley, p. 578.

¹¹ Adeline Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), p. 180.

¹² For more on Kingsley and ‘muscular Christianity’ see Donald E. Hall, *Fixing Patriarchy: Feminism and Mid-Victorian Male Novelists* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

¹³ Charles Kingsley quoted in Buckland, p. 185.

¹⁴ Michael K. Stammer, ‘Ship-decoration’ on *Oxford Art Online: Grove Art Online* (2003), <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2095/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T078308>> [accessed 18 February 2020].

medievalism in the long nineteenth century and beyond. The Eglinton Tournament, or the ‘revived Eglinton Tournament’, of 1839 was a jousting competition that sought to re-enact previous such tournaments in what was thought to be their original fashion.¹⁵ The Earl of Eglinton, serving as Lord of the Tournament, was dressed ‘In a Suit of Gilt Armour, richly chased.’¹⁶ Most others were dressed in ‘suit[s] of polished steel armour’.¹⁷ Illustrations of the tournament focus on competition and victory rather than merely displaying costume. For instance, James Henry Nixon’s *The Presentation of the Knight* depicts a victorious knight being displayed to a crowned female figure who looks on from a balcony.¹⁸

These various tropes of medievalist representation find their way into Hellyer’s figurehead for the *Challenger*. Hellyer’s knight is clad in Tudor-styled armour, like that worn at the Eglinton Tournament. Stopping three-quarter length down the figure, the base comes to resemble a horse-saddle with red cloth – perhaps representing a caparison worn by knights to signify an allegiance in various forms (Fig.1). A figurehead of a similar design, maker unknown, was made for the *Sir Lancelot* clipper which undertook merchant expeditions to China in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Like the knight of the *Challenger*, the *Lancelot* figurehead has a heavy moustache, dark hair and blue eyes. His gaze is also slightly upwards as if to mirror the presentation of the knight in Nixon’s *Presentation of the Knight*.²⁰ The posture of the figures points us to one of the most significant features of the Victorian chivalric code: the association between violence, courtship, and good manners. For Walter Scott, chivalry saw the marriage between religious zeal and ‘devotion to the female sex.’²¹

Part of the performance for religious zeal was the taking of the Holy Land and representations of knights in art and literature very frequently portray the chivalric figure ‘saving’ a female companion – often scantily dressed if not completely nude – from an immediate danger. This is exemplified in *The Knight Errant* by Sir John Everett Millais (Fig.2). Millais maintains the chivalric virtues of the knight by casting his glance to the back of the female figure’s head, suggesting an unwillingness to take advantage of the nude woman before him. At the same time, Millais allows the viewer, *voyeur*, to maintain a complete view of the nude figure. This rather disturbing moral double standard allows the artist to celebrate Victorian chivalric values whilst also maintaining the viewer’s male gaze upon the bound woman. Furthermore, the physical power

¹⁵ Mark Girouard, *Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 8.

¹⁶ Eglinton Castle. *Programme of the Procession from the Castle to the Lists, at the Tournament, at Eglinton Castle, Aug. 28th and 29th, 1839* (1839), p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ James Henry Nixon, *The Presentation of the Knight*, pencil, watercolour and bodycolour on paper, 36 × 51 cm (Private Collection, Abbott and Holder JV, Bridgeman Images) <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2170/en/asset/341208/summary>>.

¹⁹ *Figurehead of the Sir Lancelot*, wood, 155 × 68 × 57 cm, Cutty Sark Trust, London <<http://figureheads.ukmcs.org.uk/sir-lancelot/>>.

²⁰ Nixon, *The Presentation of the Knight*.

²¹ Walter Scott, ‘Chivalry,’ in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Britannica.com. 2015 (2018). <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Sir-Walter-Scott-on-chivalry-1987278>> [accessed 19 February 2020].

belongs to the knight; his instrument of liberation (sword) might just as easily be used as a weapon of domination and threat.



Figure 2: Sir John Everett Millais, *The Knight Errant* (c. 1870), oil on canvas, 184 × 135 cm
(Tate, London; photo © Tate, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-the-knight-errant-n01508>)

A curious parallel exists between the Victorian naturalist and the chivalric knight in this regard. Whilst appearing to celebrate and have a genuine interest in species, fauna, and the deep sea, the Victorian naturalist approaches their subject with a weapon as much as with a sketchbook. Kingsley's dictum that nature 'must be taken by violence' appears to be true throughout Moseley's journal. One of the more set-piece moments in his journal takes the form of an encounter between Moseley and a sea-elephant. Coming upon the animals by the Kerguelen Islands, Moseley and Lieutenant Channer attempt to stun the sea-elephant by 'hammering him on the snout with a stick heavy loaded with lead' but to no effect.²² The 'beast raised its head and opened its huge mouth to the widest, showing formidable teeth and a capacious pinkish gullet, from which proceeded loud and angry roars'.²³ A sense of added danger is created by reference to *Anson's Voyages Around the World* which describes the painful death of a sailor from a sea-lion's bite.²⁴ After the challenge with the sea-elephant the chivalric tropes continue. Moseley recounts trading a relic from the meeting with a sailor for a sovereign and a bottle of whisky. The character of the sailor is stressed by Moseley who says that, for the sailor, 'it was a matter of honour with him that he should get a drink for his shipmates out of the proceeds'.²⁵ In this singular event, therefore, we see chivalric themes of one-on-one militarism, bravery, and a sense of fraternal moral duty.

It is at the level of the deep sea, however, that the links between medievalism – personified by our chivalric knight figurehead – and Victorian science become rooted in time and place. Increasingly, from the

²² Moseley, p. 201.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Richard Walter, *Anson's Voyage Around the World: the Text Reduced* (Online: Gutenberg, 2005) <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16611/16611-h/16611-h.htm#anson-09>> (ch. 9, para. 5 of 5).

²⁵ Moseley, p. 204.

Romantic period onwards, the sea had come to represent an archive; a place to peer into the past of the earth whilst also offering an opportunity to ‘renew’ oneself with the healing powers of the water.²⁶ The metaphor of the sea as a holder of the world’s history was gendered female. In Roden Noel’s ‘Sea-Slumber Song’, the sea-mother cradles the listener as the poem moves under the surface of the water.²⁷ The history of the earth, for the scientists on board the *Challenger*, was theirs, in a sense, for their own discovery – just as in the female nude in Millais’s painting discussed above. As the first major deep-sea exploration voyage, the tomes of research and knowledge produced by *HMS Challenger* would define the deep sea for future researchers. The creatures dredged from the seafloor were mostly dull to Moseley’s interest. The exceptions, however, were those capable of creating and emitting their own light: ‘sometimes the sea far and wide, as far as the eye can see, is lighted up with sheets of a curious weird-looking light, and wherever the water breaks a little on the surface before the breeze, the white foam is brilliantly illuminated’.²⁸

Moseley metaphorically – through writing his journal – and literally writes his name upon these creatures. Pyrosoma must have its surface stimulated in order to emit its light once out of water. To demonstrate this Moseley writes: ‘I wrote my name with my finger on the surface of the giant pyrosoma, as it lay on deck in a tub at night, and my name came out in seconds in letters of fire.’²⁹ This act mirrors the signing of an heraldic hereditary on the history of a nation. During the long nineteenth century in Europe, particularly in Britain and France, when industrial workers were creating more and more evidence of their labour upon the surface of the landscape, the wealthy sought more innovative methods of excluding these efforts from memory.³⁰ One way in which this was done was through a return to, and promotion of, heraldic symbols. What better way to prove your worth than to have it guaranteed by your ancestors? Indeed, one of those taking part in the Eglington Tournament, the Earl of Craven, was wearing the actual armour worn by his grandfather when he took part at Eglington as the Knight of the Griffin.³¹ When we look at the figurehead on the forepeak of *HMS Challenger* we can see at its base emblems of heraldic lineage. Moseley’s act is one of possession, rather than simple animation of the properties of pyrosoma. Moseley decides to enact his own self-signifier, his name, upon the creature and then delight in seeing it come to life in bright lights.

²⁶ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840*, trans. by Jocelyn Phelps (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 97-100; and Rozwadowski, p. 7. [Accessed 20 February 2020.]

²⁷ Karen Leistra-Jones, “‘The Deeps have Music Soft and Slow’: Sounding the Ocean in Elgar’s *Sea Pictures*”, in *Music and Letters*, vol. 97, no. 1 (2016), p. 64.

²⁸ Moseley, p. 574.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

³⁰ Pierre Nora’s distinction between ‘memory’ and ‘history’ in ‘Between Memory and History: Le Lieu de Mémoire’ in *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (1989), pp. 7-24.

³¹ Girouard, p. 8.

This is a tentative attempt at connecting nineteenth-century medievalism with scientific research. By taking two occurrences on *HMS Challenger* – the figurehead and the writing of Moseley’s journal – it is hoped to demonstrate patterns of thought, hidden prejudices, blind-spots, and structural problems which occur between the two phenomena. Rather unusually, the argument is brought to fruition in the person of the film director James Cameron. This occurs in two instances. Firstly, in his film *Titanic* (1997), which features numerous bearded men rather self-consciously performing acts of chivalry whilst at the same time framing highly damaging depictions of working-class characters (Jack, played by Leonardo DiCaprio) whose only job is to save and then die (rather than the knightly role of save then marry).³² Famously this film also features deep-sea footage of the sunken *RMS Titanic*. Extraordinarily, a founding scholar of modern medievalist studies, Mark Girouard (referenced throughout this article) begins his book *Return to Camelot* with a discussion of accounts of chivalric acts performed on the *Titanic* – some sixteen years before the release of Cameron’s film.³³

The second, but more illustrative example, is James Cameron’s own exploration of the deep sea as portrayed in his film *Aliens of the Deep*.³⁴ As the writer Stacy Alaimo points out, the film shows very little of the deep sea or the creatures that live there and instead decides to focus on the technological dramas which proceed and follow from an exploration into such areas.³⁵ Cameron names this descent vehicle *Deepsea Challenger*³⁶ and, despite various minor acknowledgments towards deep-sea life, the essential theme of the film is the human conquering of the unknown and the ‘pure’ space of the deep sea. The genealogy of *HMS Challenger*’s name, therefore, provides a final insight into how memories of the voyage have been upheld and used. That the memories should converge, in theme and tone, so strongly with Victorian medievalism is cause for further research. Explorations to the deep sea, therefore, were not undertaken by quiet scientists interested only in species, fauna, and oceanography. Imperial projects occurred in the ocean’s depths too. Historical and artistic justifications and motivations for such journeys came in the form of Victorian medievalism. Within ‘the everlasting thunder of the deep,’ as E. G. A. Holmes writes in ‘Liscannor Bay’, ‘there is never silence,’ but, as we have seen, a conquering of the natural world and a science of imperialism and exploitation.³⁷

³² *Titanic*, dir. James Cameron (20th Century Fox, 1997).

³³ Girouard, p. 4.

³⁴ *Aliens of the Deep*, dir. James Cameron and Steven Quake (Walt Disney Pictures, Walden Media, and Earthship Productions: 2005).

³⁵ Stacy Alaimo, ‘Feminist Science Studies and Ecocriticism: Aesthetics and Entanglement in the Deep Sea’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Greg Garrard (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), (pp. 188-204), p. 193.

³⁶ Ker Than, ‘James Cameron Completes Record-Breaking Mariana Trench Dive’, *National Geographic News* (2012)

<<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/3/120325-james-cameron-mariana-trench-challenger-deepest-returns-science-sub/>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

³⁷ E. G. A. Holmes, ‘Liscannor Bay’, in *Sea-Music: An Anthology of Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Amelia Sharp (London: 1887), p. 148.

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