

6. IUGS International Commission on the History of Geological Sciences (INHIGEO) - Anniversaries

Charlotte Murchison (1788-1869): a woman not allowed into the classroom but who worked in the field 230 years ago

For hundreds of years, even into the last quarter of the twentieth century, the history of geology has been dominated by male figures and prominent male protagonists. Women were barred from university posts until 1920, and apart from some exceptions, geology has developed without the involvement of half of humankind, as history handbooks point out. This is true when considering that academic careers were not accessible for women. However, it is not accurate because of the fact that women in their private lives took on the roles of “assistants” to their husbands. In the nineteenth century managing a household was solely in the hands of women, and only a few wives had the privilege to support their husbands’ scientific work privately. Many of these women were well educated, particularly in foreign languages. They translated texts for their husbands and arranged collections in their kitchens.

Despite having no access to academic institutions, some women, especially in Great Britain, were self-trained and developed their knowledge further by sharing their husbands’ interests. One of them was Charlotte Murchison (1788-1869), who was married to the well-known geologist Roderick Murchison. She accompanied her husband and Charles Lyell on a long journey to Paris in 1828, during which Charlotte assisted her husband and conducted independent fieldwork. Charles Lyell was impressed by her knowledge on fossils and her enthusiasm:

Usually, “we have generally begun work at 6 o’clock & neither heat nor fatigue have stopped us, [not even for] an hour. Mrs. M. is very diligent, sketching, labelling specimen & making out shells in which last she is an invaluable assistant.” (quoted after Kölbl-Ebert 1997: 41).



Fig. 7 - 'The Light of Science' a satirical cartoon by Henry T De La Beche (1832). Charlotte Murchison shines the light of science, dispelling the darkness which covered the world (<https://trowelblazers.com/charlotte-murchison/>)



Fig. 8 - Charlotte Murchison, her husband, Sir Charles Lyell, Lyell's clerk George Hall, and an unidentified gentleman travelling in southern France in 1828 as illustrated in Henry Faul & Carol Faul, It began with a stone. A History of geology from the Stones Age to the Age of Plate Tectonics, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983, p. 128, fig. 8.1. [Public Domain].

Two years later, when Charles Lyell was appointed first professor of geology at King's College, London, a number of women asked for permission to attend his lectures. Lyell explicitly refused, not even allowing Mrs Murchison to attend, because he thought that women in the classroom would be "unacademic". Some women ignored the ban thereby triggering a public debate and, as a result, the university council decided that women were to be admitted to the entire course. A friend of Charlotte's, Mrs Somerville, wrote in a letter: So you can see that we are making quite an impact "on the laws of learned societies, reform is nothing" compared to this (quoted after Kölbl-Ebert 1997: 41).

Self-confident women, such as Charlotte Murchison, served as role models for the following generations. But, it was not until the twentieth century that women not only handled hammer, pen and spoon, but were permitted to be responsible for their own research.