

RESEARCH

A Mistaken Attribution to Lady Mary Shepherd

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In addition to the 1824 and 1827 books known to have been written by Lady Mary Shepherd, another philosophical treatise, published in 1819, has sometimes been attributed to her. While evidence for this attribution has so far been inconclusive, this paper provides reasons for thinking that Shepherd was not, in fact, the author of this book. New external evidence is provided to show that the author was James Milne, an Edinburgh architect and engineer.

Keywords: Shepherd; Milne; authorship

Lady Mary Shepherd (1777–1847) was the author of two philosophical treatises, the 1824 *Essay upon the Relation of Cause and Effect* and the 1827 *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe and Other Subjects Connected with the Doctrine of Causation*. She also later wrote three essays: an essay on vision published in *The Philosophical Magazine* in 1828 and reprinted that same year in *The Kaleidoscope: or, Literary and Scientific Mirror*; her “Observations” on the work of John Fearn, published by Fearn—apparently without Shepherd’s consent¹—with his reply in *Parriana: or Notices of the Rev. Samuel Parr*; and an 1832 essay “Lady Mary Shepherd’s Metaphysics,” responding to Fearn and to Dugald Stewart, and concisely laying out her own philosophical views.² Shepherd’s work was apparently well regarded in her own time; in a history of philosophy published the year after Shepherd’s death, Robert Blakey (1848: 40) discussed Shepherd’s work and praised her as displaying ‘great acuteness and subtility.’

A third book, published anonymously in 1819, has also sometimes been attributed to Shepherd, but evidence to settle the question of authorship has so far been inconclusive. This paper provides hitherto unknown evidence to establish that Shepherd was not the author of the 1819 book, but that in fact it was written by a Scottish architect and engineer, James Milne.

The book in question is the *Enquiry Respecting the Relation of Cause and Effect: in which the Theories of Professors Brown, and Mr. Hume, are Examined; with a Statement of Such Observations as are Calculated to Shew the Inconsistency of these Theories; and from which a New Theory is Deduced, More Consonant to Facts and Experience. Also a New Theory of the Earth, Deduced from Geological Observations*, published anonymously by James Ballantyne in Edinburgh in 1819. Despite conceding that ‘Shepherd’s authorship is difficult to establish,’ editor Jennifer McRobert (2000: viii n11) included this edition of the *Enquiry* in her two-volume facsimile edition of Shepherd’s works published in 2000. As reasons to think Shepherd was the author, McRobert notes that both the *Dictionary of National Biography* and ‘a curious typewritten insert left in the Cambridge University copy of her 1827 book’ attribute the book to Shepherd (2000: vii).

The *Dictionary of National Biography* entry to which McRobert refers is evidently the entry on Shepherd’s father-in-law, Samuel Shepherd; until the online *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* was published in 2004, Mary Shepherd did not have her own entry. As Margaret Atherton (2006: 2902) has noted, the *Dictionary* entry for Samuel Shepherd says that Lady Mary was the ‘author of three philosophical treatises,’ a claim that was repeated in the online entry for Samuel Shepherd published in 2004 (Courtney 1897;

¹ Shepherd’s 1832 essay opens with the remark that she was ‘lately much surprised in finding that a few critical remarks which I had hastily made upon some passages in Mr. Fearn’s book’ had been published, since they were ‘really not intended for the public eye’ (Shepherd 1832: 697).

² Adopting the same condescending tone as in his previous writings on Shepherd, Fearn published a reply in *The Metropolitan* (Fearn 1832).

Courtney 2004).³ The insert mentioned by McRobert and included with one of Cambridge University's two copies of the 1827 book⁴ is a bookseller's description of the book that characterizes Shepherd as the author of the 1819 book.⁵

It seems likely that both these sources were relying on the widely used, four-volume 1882 *Dictionary of the Anonymous and Pseudonymous Literature of Great Britain* by Halkett and Laing. This source, which correctly lists Shepherd as the author of the 1824 *Essay* (1882: 1, 822),⁶ also names Shepherd as the author of the 1819 *Enquiry* (1882: 1, 773). However, a recent study of the *Dictionary* argues that it is 'a shaky foundation on which much modern scholarship has been built,' and that

it is sadly unreliable for the purposes to which it has been put to use. In many cases, the evidence cited in the *Dictionary* is vague, mistaken, or simply not acceptable by the standards of twenty-first century scholarship. (Orr 2013: 194)

While this study focuses on works published before 1800, it maintains that the problems with the evidence in the *Dictionary* are pervasive, because Halkett and Laing focused on corroborating the titles of books rather than the authors (Orr 2013: 198).

The conclusions drawn by other scholars have varied. Martha Bolton (2017) writes that 'although Shepherd's authorship of the earlier book is probable, it is not entirely certain.' However, noting 'the absence of strong external evidence,' Atherton (2006: 2902) has argued that 'it seems best not to accept this attribution to Shepherd,' since 'the nature of the argument in this third work ... does not display significant overlap with anything Shepherd has written, and is not driven by Shepherd's characteristic epistemological motivations.'

The 1819 book actually contains two quite different parts. The second part, the *Theory of the Earth*, has no echoes at all in any other writings by Shepherd. In an 1832 or 1833 letter to her friend Charles Babbage, Shepherd discusses a subscription to a lecture series by the geologist Charles Lyell, expressing delight that 'Ladies are allowed to Subscribe' and mentioning that she was very familiar with 'Mr Lyall's Book.'⁷ But in the published works known to be written by Shepherd, she does not mention theories of the earth, use geological examples, or otherwise evince any particular interest in geology.

The first part of the *Enquiry* does address some themes that appear in Shepherd's 1824 book: it criticizes Thomas Brown's account of causation,⁸ a topic Shepherd took up in the fourth chapter of the 1824 *Essay*. This part of the *Enquiry* also considers Hume, whose account of causation is the target of the first three chapters of the *Essay*; however, the *Enquiry* primarily examines Hume's accounts of power and force. Most strikingly, the *Enquiry* endorses materialism, writing that non-material things are really nothing at all: 'if it is something, then it must be material' (Milne 1819: 65). This is not a position Shepherd ever endorsed.

In addition to Atherton's reasons for doubting Shepherd's authorship of the 1819 book, it is also worth noting that while Shepherd refers in her 1827 book to the 1824 book,⁹ she never mentions having written an earlier book on Hume and Brown, or on geology. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that Shepherd would have had a book printed in Edinburgh in 1819. At that time she was well established in English social life; there are newspaper reports of her giving and attending parties in London and traveling to Bath, Cheltenham, and Tunbridge Wells in the period 1818–1820, but no records of trips back to Edinburgh.¹⁰ To be sure, she might have been able to publish in Edinburgh without having to travel there, but, given that her 1824 and 1827

³ The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* does currently include an entry for Mary Shepherd; it does not mention the 1819 book. See Perkins (2008).

⁴ See Cambridge University Library, Syn.7.82.221.

⁵ Liam Sims, email message to author, January 9, 2020.

⁶ While Shepherd published the 1824 *Essay* anonymously, she made clear in the opening sentence of her 1827 book that she was the author of the 1824 book (Shepherd 1827: xi).

⁷ Lady Mary Shepherd to Charles Babbage, Babbage Correspondence Vol. VII, British Library, Add. MS 37188 f. 121. Lyell gave two lecture series in 1833, one (closed to women) at King's College, and another at the Royal Institution that allowed women (Rudwick 1975: 249–50 and 251–59).

⁸ James Fieser suggests that the book is a response to Thomas Brown's 1806 *Observations on the Nature and Tendency of the Doctrine of Mr. Hume Concerning the Relation of Cause and Effect* (Fieser 2005: 87).

⁹ See Shepherd (1827: xi, xiv, 16, 71).

¹⁰ For example, in December 1818 Lady Mary Shepherd was reported to have left Brighton for Bath "Brighton," *The Morning Post*, December 22, 1818, 3. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000174/18181222/026/0003?browse=true>. In September 1819 Shepherd and her husband were noted as having arrived in Cheltenham "Arrivals," *Cheltenham Chronicle*, September 9, 1819, 3. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000311/18190909/019/0003>. Had Shepherd embarked on a trip to Edinburgh in 1818 or 1819, that presumably would have been noted in one of the British newspapers.

books were published in London, it seems likely that, had she sought to publish anything in 1819, she would have done so with a London publisher.

Without any clues regarding who else might have written the 1819 book, it has so far not been possible to establish decisively that Shepherd was not its author. However, newspapers in Shepherd's day typically published lists of books recently published or about to be published. *The Scots Magazine* noted the publication of the 1819 *Enquiry* by the Edinburgh publisher James Ballantyne, but the magazine's announcement did not name the author.¹¹ However, the *Enquiry* was evidently published again in 1821, this time by the Edinburgh publishers Constable & Co., for a book by the very same title was advertised in two Edinburgh magazines in July 1821,¹² and in these cases an author was mentioned. *The Scots Magazine* included the book in its "Monthly List of New Publications," where it was identified as being by 'James Milne, Architect, Edinburgh.'¹³ An advertisement in *The Caledonian Mercury* was more specific, mentioning two books that were 'Published Lately, by the same Author': *An Inquiry Into the Theory and Principles of Bridges and Piers, with Theoretical, Practical, and Critical Observations*, and the first volume of *The Elements of Architecture*.¹⁴ This attribution to James Milne also explains the fact that the *Enquiry* is listed (with a tentative date of 1819 and 'publisher not identified') in the University of Edinburgh Library catalog as having been written by 'James Mill (1773–1836)'.¹⁵ James Mill, father of John Stuart Mill, was in fact named James Milne at birth (Ball 2014), but there is no evidence that he wrote the 1819 *Enquiry*.

Little is known of this "James Milne, Architect, Edinburgh." One source identifies an architect named James Milne, born around 1778, who lived and worked in Edinburgh between 1809 and 1834 and published *The Elements of Architecture* in 1812; however, this source does not mention the book on bridges and piers ("DSA Architect Biography Report" 2016). Another source that lists a James Milne mentions the book on piers and bridges, but expresses uncertainty about whether he authored the book on architecture (Chrimes and Cross-Rudkin 2002: 445). The *Caledonian Mercury* advertisement indicates, however, that the same person wrote both, as well as the 1819 *Enquiry*.

It seems clear, then, that Shepherd was not the author of the 1819 *Enquiry*. Although Shepherd's philosophical corpus can now be characterized as smaller than some scholars have thought, there is yet a possibility that more work by Shepherd is extant. Shepherd's daughter, Mary Elizabeth Shepherd Brandreth, mentions in a memoir that her mother wrote 'metaphysical disquisitions' about Hume and Priestley before she married in 1808 (Brandreth 1886: 28–9). McRobert (2000: vii) and Atherton (2006: 2901) identify these writings as Shepherd's 1824 *Essay Upon the Relation of Cause and Effect* and 1827 *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe*. However, Shepherd's daughter actually contrasts the 'manuscript metaphysical essays' with the books, which she says 'were written some years later' (Brandreth 1886: 29). And while the 1824 book does meet Brandreth's description of the 'metaphysical disquisitions' insofar as it engages with Hume, neither of the books engage at all with Priestley.¹⁶ Might an earlier essay by Shepherd on Priestley still exist?

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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¹¹ "Monthly List of New Publications," *The Scots Magazine*, December 1819, 559. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000547/18191201/028/0071?browse=true>.

¹² In these two advertisements, the word 'Enquiry' in the title is spelled with an 'l.'

¹³ "Monthly List of New Publications," *The Scots Magazine*, July 1821, 73. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000547/18210701/017/0079>.

¹⁴ *The Caledonian Mercury*, July 12, 1821, 1. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000045/18210712/001/0001>.

¹⁵ University of Edinburgh Centre for Research Collections, Special Collections, Zm.5.25/2.

¹⁶ Shepherd mentions Priestley once in the 1827 book, in a footnote (Shepherd 1827: 52n).

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