1891: THE COLLINS-HOSKING DEBATE, CHRISTCHURCH

Over four nights in December 1891 two men traded verbal barbs at the Tuam Street Hall in Christchurch, New Zealand. At dispute was the worth of belief in God. The wrangling largely turned on how their audiences would understand science.

Freethought activist William Whitehouse Collins had challenged any Christian minister in Christchurch, New Zealand to meet him on the platform. On the 8th December through the pages of the *Press*, Free Methodist minister John Hosking accepted. (*Press*, 1891a)

The Collins-Hosking performance was one of the most scientifically oriented debates between secularists and Christians of the late nineteenth century, anywhere in the world. Both proponents mobilised contemporary facts of science in pursuit of particular ends by harnessing them to well understood cultural associations: of science, astronomy and the cosmos. This debate is a powerful example of how popular science thrives through cultural meaning, rather than the epistemic value that is so persistently a part of the self-perception of popularisers.

COLLINS AND HOSKING WERE EXPERIENCED DEBATERS

William Whitehouse Collins (Figure 1) trained as a professional secularist lecturer. Born to a politically radical tradition, Collins initially trained as a Baptist Minister before throwing his energies into secularism. One of the first graduates of the training program of the National Secular Society (NSS), including instruction in Collins was sent to Sydney as lecturer in 1885 (Royle, 1980: 153). He was a successful speaker and organiser but found his effectiveness diminished after involvement in a high profile obscenity prosecution for selling Annie Besant’s birth control manual. (*Evening News*, 1888) Collins moved to New Zealand in 1890, initially to Dunedin and then Christchurch.

By 1891 Collins was an experienced debater. Indeed, he had been trained in the format. Debates were the “most spectacular form of propagandism” (Royle, 1980: 154) for the freethought movement. Such performances had been pioneered by George Holyoake, on the side of religion, and the Reverend Brewin Grant, as defender of the orthodoxy, as early as the 1850s. They continued through until “the twilight of the twentieth century”. (Royle, 1980: 155)
Collins enthusiastically carried this tradition to the colonies. In Sydney he contested a Presbyterian minister, a Christian Evidence Society lecturer, a spiritualist and a former apostate. (Picton, 1889; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1886, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1889a, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1889b) In New Zealand Collins would continue to challenge clergy to debates. Although the Anglican Archbishop of Christchurch, Churchill Julius would “shirk that duty” (Dignus Vindice Nodus 1891), Hosking took up the challenge.

By this time John Hosking (Figure 2) had also enthusiastically defended his spiritual position in public debate. Like Collins, he had come to New Zealand via Australia, and while there had debated freethought lecturers in Melbourne and Brisbane. (*Press*, 1891b, *Telegraph*, 1889) Beyond the platform Hosking had a broader reputation as “something of a controversialist”. (Phillips, n.d.) At Fitzroy, while trying to persuade a tenant to vacate the church’s schoolroom, he was accused of emptying “a quantity of offensive matter on the floor”. (*Argus*, 1887)

The audience at the Tuam Street Hall could therefore expect to see some fine entertainment between two experienced performers. From the evidence of the crowds, and the memory of the debate, it would seem that they were not disappointed. (E. J. B., 1938; *Lake Wakatip Mail*, 1892)

**SCIENCE WAS CENTRAL TO THE DEBATE**

The Collins-Hosking debate occurred over four successive nights from the 15th to the 18th December 1891. Each disputant set the topic for two of the nights: Hosking for the first and third night, Collins for the second and fourth.

Scientific meanings and astronomical visions occurred across the debate. Hosking’s first night aimed for philosophical proofs for God’s existence. However, science entered many of these demonstrations. In seeking to show the need for a deity of ineffable power Hosking would point to astronomy:

A Being who can create stars can create solar systems; a Being who can create solar systems can create a universe. No other Being is equal to this task but the Being of Infinite Intelligence we call God. (*A Theological Debate*, 1892: 7–8)
Collins replied that if we are to accept the existence of something as limitless it might as well be nature, and that there is no need to posit a God. He particularly emphasised the materiality of space:

I am asked, have I taken my staff and travelled into planetary spaces and wandered among the beautiful orbs of Heaven that I can come back and say there is no limit to space. No; I declare this to be impossible, but surely it is my opponent who has done that, since he affirms the limitations of nature. (*A Theological Debate*, 1892: 16)

On the second night, Collins concentrated his argument on the lessons of science. For Hosking contemporary scientific opinion was an uncertain form of knowledge: “do modern Geologists agree among themselves?”. (*A Theological Debate*, 1892: 27) Still, in the tradition of natural theology, he would “bring forward my scientific facts” (*A Theological Debate*, 1892: 27) to show that demonstrated science was compatible with received religion. In this endeavour, too, would astronomy have a special place.

1. Genesis says, “In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth.”
Science says “Astronomical facts go to prove that other worlds were created before our own. It is therefore the right order to mention “the Heaven” first. (*A Theological Debate*, 1892: 28)

Collins poked at this exegesis, including the attempt to explain light and dark on Earth before the creation of the Sun by means of a luminous atmosphere: “such are the miserable straits into which they are driven when they attempt to reconcile the Bible with science”. (*A Theological Debate*, 1892: 32)

On the third night, Hosking turned back to a philosophical approach but again scientific perspectives would play their part. That “man retains from year to year a unity of consciousness” in the face of the continual reorganisation of matter within an organism, as shown by “the latest science” was a significant point for him.

Hosking would also appeal - again - to the uncertainty of scientific knowledge: “astronomers differ in their classification of the number, magnitude, and distances of the stars” while also drawing strength from the reasoning nature of humans to show a transcendent aspect of mind. (*A Theological Debate*, 1892: 43). Collins would turn this back to a question of understanding the
biological nature of brains. Perhaps inevitably this introduction of biology turned to discussion of evolution, and the particular opinions of both Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer.

Collins’ fourth night was again devoted to scientific reasons to disregard scripture, although on this occasion his focus was on the historical and philological sciences. The physical sciences were mostly absent, but not entirely so– the “distinctly astronomical origin” of Christmas was counted as a point against the reliability of the Bible by Collins. *(A Theological Debate, 1892: 75)*

Hosking would not be drawn by this detail but would instead defend Christianity on broader grounds of social utility: “It teaches that women are on equality with men.” This progressivism was particularly contrasted with “the Pagan nations” like “the aboriginals of Queensland.” *(A Theological Debate, 1892: 75)*

**EACH DISPUTANT DEPLOYED TRADITION**

Over all four nights both Collins and Hosking were keen to stress science. Yet they did so with different ends in mind. Collins was eager to present a very physical picture of science within which he could deploy his materialist assumptions and point out errors of fact in scripture. Hosking contested the reliability of scientists but stressed the universal aspect of knowledge itself. Both strategies were techniques for connecting scientific understandings with social meanings. For both of them, astronomy was particularly useful.

These cultural connections between science, rationality and religion were particularly strongly expressed by Collins and Hosking. In comparison, the debate between two paragons of the movements, Bradlaugh and Brewin, barely mentioned science beyond a note that one could “identify Divinity with the universe.” *(Discussion on Atheism, 1890: 8)*

Both proponents of the Collins-Hosking debate were at pains to show that “the latest science” supported their position. In seeking to enrol astronomy within their performances, each was drawing on a well-established tradition.

Organised freethought had its heyday in the late nineteenth century, but its roots went back at least as far as Thomas Paine and others in the eighteenth. *(Royle, 1980: x)* Debates and disputation were an important technique for freethinkers: not only did they draw audiences and revenue, their performance itself suggested a dichotomous view of the relations between secularism and religion.
Astronomy was also an important cultural resource for freethinkers by 1891. Freethought was well associated in Australia and New Zealand with the visit of astronomer Richard Proctor, and the controversies that visit engendered. (Bush, 2017b) Collins himself would draw upon the banning of Proctor’s lecture by Henry Parkes in order to enlist memories of the astronomer in the cause. (Sydney Morning Herald, 1890) Joseph Symes, Collins’ forerunner as NSS lecturer in Australia, had an even greater focus on astronomy than Collins, albeit with an unusual interpretation. (Bush, 2017a: 347–348)

One month after his debate with Hosking, Collins would engage on the platform with another opponent with astronomical inclinations. Alexander Bickerton, who would argue for a “medium line” between conventional religion and freethought, would become New Zealand’s most colourful evolutionary polemicist, known, amongst other things, for his theories of astronomical cataclysm. (Bickerton, 1898, 1905; Press, 1892b)

Theological concerns about the lessons of astronomy were considerably older than organised freethought. The implications of a ‘plurality of worlds’, for example, was not just a nineteenth century concern, but had been one of considerable interest ever since the thirteenth century. (Crowe, 2001; McColley, 1936)

More proximately to 1891, astronomy had been important for the tradition of natural theology. The Bridgewater Treatises, perhaps the fullest expression of this viewpoint, devoted one full volume to astronomy, in which William Whewell (1833) (Whewell, 1833) would insist that ‘the heavens declare the glory of God’. Australasian lecturers, including Hosking, took up that sentiment with alacrity. Notable colonial lecturers from this tradition include the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne Dr Moorhouse, and the famous amateur astronomer John Tebbutt. (Argus, 1883; Tebbutt, 1878) While natural theology was less pronounced in New Zealand, High Court Judge Christopher Richmond is one high profile example. (Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle, 1870)

**ASTRONOMY WAS IMPORTANT TO THESE DISPUTES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

Counterposed traditions of freethought and natural theology came to a head in the nineteenth century. Natural history, geology and astronomy were the three sciences most central to these disputes. However, each was involved in a different way. By the mid-nineteenth century,
geology had already established a timescale that exceeded literalist reckonings of the Bible. (Rudwick, 1985: 42–43) In the mid-nineteenth century, virtually overnight, the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* made natural history the centrepoint of clashes between scientific and literalist viewpoints.

Astronomy was invoked in a different way. The scientific facts provided by astronomy were the size of the Universe and the implied age of stars. As with geology these established a timeframe that extended much further back than Ussher’s chronology.

These facts barely changed throughout the nineteenth century. William Herschel published an estimate of millions of years early in the century, and by the 1850s the idea of stars as millions of light-years distant was commonplace. (*Adelaide Observer*, 1847; Herschel, 1802) Yet astronomers remained coy about these details throughout the century, and specific details were rarely described. John Herschel would only claim that “among the countless multitude of such stars, visible in telescopes, there must be many whose light has taken at least a thousand years to reach us” (Herschel 1833). Even Richard Proctor would deflect the role of astronomy in setting this timescale, claiming that, in considering the ages of planets, astronomers “have to be beholden to the geologist for such data as enable them to arrive at any satisfactory theory” (Proctor 1880).

In these nineteenth century debates, the cultural status of astronomy was at least as important as the specific facts understood through the science. Public discussion of astronomy drew on a cluster of epistemic resources that had been stabilised over the preceding centuries. Astronomy was the first, and most exact science – for some it was “the queen of sciences”, for others a history of astronomy stood for a history of thought itself. (BAAS, 1834; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1884)

Astronomy had a strong emotional appeal as well: it spoke to the grandest scale of the Universe, and the most powerful and destructive forces imaginable. The ‘astronomical sublime’ was a common feature of popular lecturing on the subject. (Golinski, 2017) In their debate Collins would emphasise the former of these and Hosking the latter; both were consciously enrolling the associations of the celestial science.
ASTRONOMY REMAINED CENTRAL TO COLLINS’ AND HOSKING’S LATER ACTIVITIES

Although they would not meet again in debate, for some years after 1891 the freethought activist and Methodist minister would continue to revolve around each other. Hosking gave several lectures in the Canterbury region on “What we learn from the starry Heavens” in order to demonstrate the presence of a Creator. (Press, 1892a) At the same time, Collins was lecturing on topics such as “The Story of the Heavens”, “A Trip to the Moon”, and “Astronomy, Mythology and Theology”. On June 18, 1893, the two men would deliver public lectures about astronomy simultaneously, less than a kilometre apart (Figure 3). (Press, 1893)

Well into the twentieth century, Collins would present a naturalistic view of the universe through his astronomical lecturing on topics such as “The Story of the Heavens”, “A Trip to the Moon”, and “Astronomy, Mythology and Theology”. (Auckland Star, 1914, Otago Witness, 1893, Star, 1903) In his Elementary Astronomy lecture he gave special prominence to Newton “whose investigations once and for all shut out the notion of the miraculous as applied to astronomy and showed that everything was amenable to law”. (Evening Star, 1893)

Hosking continued lecturing and debating. (Woodville Examiner, 1895) He also continued controversy. Having participated in uniting a Methodist Church three years earlier, he left in 1899 in order to run for parliament, unsuccessfully, and immediately formed a new church “in opposition to the united body”. (New Zealand Herald, 1900) He later returned to Australia and added further to his public reputation when he advertised for a wife. (Truth, 1919)

THE COLLINS-HOSKING DEBATE PROVIDES A SHARP FOCUS ON SCIENCE IN SOCIETY

Close in time and space, William Whitehouse Collins and John Hoskings had divergent worldviews. They could draw on the same facts with very similar techniques and technologies in order to pursue radically different ends.

The cultural resources of astronomy were particularly important. Popular science was invoked throughout the debate and ideas of rationality and religion were central to all perspectives.

As William Whitehouse Collins and John Hosking walked out of the Tuam Street Hall on the 18th December 1891, few people had been persuaded. But their performance of a cultural dispute echoes today.
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NOTES

i Collins’ grandfather had been jailed as a Chartist leader during the ‘Bull Ring’ Riots of 1840 for helping print anti-police placards. (Roberts, 2008: 60)

ii In 1892, back in Sydney, Collins engaged in a triangular debate with Presbyterian and Unitarian ministers Sutherland and Walters, at the conclusion of which Collins and Walters presented Sutherland “with an album in recognition of the manly and courteous manner in which he had defended his orthodox faith.” (*Australian Star*, 1892: 7)