

H. ALLEYNE NICHOLSON - A GREAT VICTORIAN PALEONTOLOGIST

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The session on Paleontological Databases was held at the 1998 GSA Annual Meeting in Toronto within a few months of the centenary of the death of one of the best Victorian taxonomists, H. Alleyne Nicholson, and provided an opportunity to recall his contribution to taxonomy. Nicholson is largely unhallowed in the history of science, but his contributions to invertebrate paleontology in the last quarter of the 19th century were prodigious. Nicholson's approach to taxonomy was a modern one at a time when others were busy multiplying species. He emphasized the variation inherent in living and fossil species. In a 30 year career he published 167 papers, mostly as a single author, and 12 textbooks on zoology, paleontology, and geology. In the year 1875 he published 18 substantial papers (327 printed pages in all). His **Manual of Paleontology** (1872-1889) went through three editions of ever increasing size (610 pp, 1042 pp, 1624 pp). The **Manual of Zoology** went through seven editions, the **Textbook of Zoology** through five, the **Textbook of Geology** through four editions ([Benton 1979](#)). He made important contributions to the study of corals, bryozoans, and graptolites many of these with thin sections that he made himself. Stromatoporoid specialists regard him as a "patron saint" for his many papers and massive **Monograph of the British Stromatoporoids** (1886-1891). One hundred years later no modern study of this group fails to reference this work as it is still relevant and perceptive of problems facing taxonomists in every generation ([Hinde 1899](#); [Woodward 1903](#)).

Both the time and place of the Toronto meetings made it appropriate to remember Nicholson. He taught at the University of Toronto between 1871 and 1874 as Professor of Natural History. During this time he described many fossils from Ontario and the northern mid- continent states and wrote reports on the **Paleontology of Ontario** and the **Paleontology of Ohio**. He also taught at Newcastle, St. Andrews, and finished his career at Aberdeen.

Nicholson's position as professor of Natural History at Toronto was not established for him; the first appointment to it was 20 years earlier ([Desmond 1994, p. 168](#)). In 1851 a destitute British scientist recently returned from a long voyage of discovery in the South Pacific applied for the same position. He was not considered the best candidate for the post, and it was given to the brother of a prominent politician. How different might have been the history of science in Canada, had the Toronto professorship been awarded to Thomas Henry Huxley.

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