



Antonio Stoppani: the founder of Italian geology on the bicentenary of his birth.

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Abstract

Antonio Stoppani (1824-1891), the fifth of 15 siblings, started his ecclesiastical career in 1836, as a seminary student in Milan, where he was ordained priest in 1848. From a young age, he was captivated by nature, particularly rocks and minerals. Professor of Latin grammar at the seminary of Seveso, he soon resumed his interests in geology and natural sciences. Of liberal ideas, he was strongly committed to the unification of Italy during the Risorgimento. For his rebellious ideas against the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom (a crown land of the Austrian Empire in Northern Italy) and for his activities during the 1848 Revolution in Milan, in 1853 he was expelled from the seminary. Subsequently, he devoted himself to private teaching.

Stoppani curated a valuable palaeontological collection and published the first geological description of Lombardy. After the Italian Unification in 1861, he played a vital role in modernizing the Kingdom of Italy and resumed his teaching activity as Professor of Geology at Pavia University (1861) and then at the “Istituto Tecnico Superiore” of Milan (1862-1878), the first Polytechnic School in Italy. He actively contributed to the preparation of the Geological Map of Italy, delving into the study of mineral deposits and petroleum production, and showing interest in technical aspects of tunnels, canals, roads, and railways construction. Motivated by the belief that scientific knowledge was essential for economic and social progress, Stoppani continued to deliver public lectures and publish pamphlets on geology and paleontology. In 1871, he authored the first Italian geology manual, titled “Corso di geologia”.

While his extensive body of work is commendable, Stoppani's most renowned publication is “Il Bel Paese” (Il Bel Paese: conversations on the natural beauty, geology, and physical geography of Italy, 1876). The book follows Stoppani's field trips through Italy, arranged into an ideal journey from the Alps to Sicily, throughout which minerals, flora and fauna are studied. This volume not only unveiled Italy's geological and naturalistic features but also fostered national awareness among Italians, as acknowledged by eminent writers and historians of science.

In 1887, after a significant international trip, Stoppani resumed teaching, having interacted with notable scientists such as Eduard Suess. He integrated his initial studies in religious philosophy, delving into the relationship between science and faith, which culminated in the publication of his seminal essay “Dogma and the Positive Sciences”. His final work, “New essay of an exegesis of the history of creation according to reason and faith”, encapsulated the culmination of his lifelong research.

Stoppani's legacy is not only defined by his groundbreaking contributions to Italy's geological and palaeontological knowledge but also by his civic perseverance and efforts towards constructing a

modern society. His commitment materialized in active popularization endeavours, targeting a widespread audience. An assiduous scholar and researcher, Stoppani skilfully communicated his knowledge, transcending specialized language and making popular science accessible to the community. His deep conception of Nature as an ordered system favourable to human life is noteworthy, underlining the importance of a harmonious relationship between man and Nature.

Keyword

Italy, Antonio Stoppani, history of geology, paleontology