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Verdt

Wundt

If you spend any time looking through creationist literature, you will become accustomed to lists of scientists who supposedly reject evolution, doubt Darwin, and the like, although the exact complement of the lists changes over time, of course. A famous example is from Luther Tracy Townsend's *Collapse of*

Evolution (1905), which mentions:

scientists who have devoted their lives to the investigation of nature's phenomena and who have taken rank in the past and who take rank to-day with those who stand the highest in their departments of study—such men as Agassiz, Beale, Carpenter, Dana, Davy, Dawson, Faraday, Forbes, Gray, Helmholtz, Herschel, Lord Kelvin, Leibnitz, Lotze, Maury, Pasteur, Romanes, Verdt[,] and hundreds of others ...

Townsend, as Ronald L. Numbers notes in *The Creationists* (1992), “assembled one of the earliest—and most frequently cribbed—lists in order to prove that ‘the most thorough scholars, the world’s ablest philosophers and scientists, with few exceptions, are not supporters, but assailants of evolution.’”

Even though Townsend provided his list in a tidy alphabetical order, I am not going to work my way through it systematically; that would be dull. Instead, cutting to the chase, I want to ask: who the heck is Verdt? There is no Wikipedia entry for anyone named Verdt, nor is there apparently any listing for a Verdt in standard reference works such as the *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. Townsend himself is no help: in his *Bible Theology and Modern Thought* (1883) and his *Evolution or Creation* (1896) he gives similar but unalphabetized lists, both including “Verdt” but with no first name. His followers are not helpful either: John D. Charles in *Fallacies of Evolution* (1917), to take a single example, gives a similar list, misspelling “Lotze” in the process, but still not providing a first name for Verdt.

Could it have been a typographical error? Sure; that wouldn't be surprising at all. But for what? Verdi? It would be odd to include the Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) in a list of scientists in the first place; moreover, Verdi was not religious and somewhat anticlerical (and the owner of a copy of Darwin's *Origin*, I find). Vernet? There was a family of French painters of that name, but why include a painter in such a list? And the youngest of them, Émile Jean-Horace Vernet, died in 1863, a bit early to reject Darwinism. Verdet? Émile Verdet (1824–1866) was a French physicist who was more important for his teaching and editing, which helped to promulgate the theory of the conservation of energy in France, than for his research; if he expressed any view about evolution, the origin of life, and so forth, I've been unable to find any mention of it.

I was about to conclude that there was no way of knowing whom Townsend might have had in mind when I looked at the pad where I had scrawled “Verdt” and realized that Townsend probably composed in longhand. A little experimentation convinced me that it would be very possible for him to have written “Wundt” and for whoever prepared the typescript to have read “Verdt”—see the illustration above. Then all that would have been required is for Townsend to have overlooked the mistake when he examined the proofs. Presumably the error would have occurred with *Bible Theology and Modern Thought* (if not before) and then would have been carelessly propagated through his later writings; Townsend's oeuvre was quite repetitive. But if Townsend had Wundt in mind, then the question becomes: who the heck was Wundt?

The answer is not far to seek: Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt (1832–1920), the father of experimental psychology. Wundt accepted evolution *sensu lato*, and even formulated a theory of instinct based on evolution, but he moved from accepting to rejecting the importance of natural selection. As Solomon Diamond writes in his “Wundt Before Leipzig” (2001):

[A]lthough one often meets quotations from Wundt's later works in which he expressed great appreciation of Darwin's achievement, when these are read in context it will be found that they are always followed by a rejection of the basic concept of Darwinian evolution (which is development in response to blindly operating forces) and by insistence on a view of evolution consistent with German idealistic philosophy and therefore directed primarily by teleological rather than accidental forces.

Accordingly, Wundt is often named in the early twentieth-century creationist literature as a scientist who abandoned Darwinism or rejects evolution, although he is not usually quoted as doing so—perhaps because no suitable passage was ever translated into English. (The main exception involves a passage from 1892 disapprovingly quoted by Ernst Haeckel in *Die Welträtzel* [1895–1899], translated into English in 1900.)

Curiously, Townsend himself manages to cite Wundt by name repeatedly. In *Biblical Theology and Modern Thought*, he writes, “We could cite Lotze, Wundt, Helmholtz, and others ...”; in *The Bible and Other Ancient Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1884), he mentions “Heinrich Frey, Lionel S. Beale, W. H. Dallinger, Lotze, Wundt, Helmholtz, and other of the profoundest thinkers of Europe and America”; in *Adam and Eve, History or Myth?* (1904), he quotes Haeckel on the antievolutionary conclusion supposedly reached by “most modern investigators of science” (see [“Riled about Haeckel”](#) [6]) and gives his list of such: “E. Dennert and Goette, Edward von Hartmann and Edward Hoppe, ... Paulson and Rutmeyer, W. Max Wundt and Zoeckler.” I guess that it goes to show you the paramount importance of proper copyediting!

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