

How 'man of science' was dumped in favour of 'scientist'

August 5 2014, by Melinda Baldwin



Man of science? Surely not. Credit: Egghead06, CC BY

JT Carrington, editor of the popular science magazine *Science-Gossip*, achieved a remarkable feat in December of 1894. He found a subject on which the Duke of Argyll, a combative anti-Darwinian, and Thomas Huxley, also known as "Darwin's bulldog", held the same opinion.

Carrington had noticed the spread of a particular term related to [scientific research](#). He felt the word was "not satisfactory", and he wrote to eight prominent writers and men of science to ask if they considered it legitimate. Seven responded. Huxley and Argyll joined a five-to-two majority when they denounced the term. "I regard it with great dislike", proclaimed Argyll. Huxley, exhibiting his usual gift for witty dismissals, said that the word in question "must be about as pleasing a word as 'Electrocution'".

The word was "scientist".

Today "scientist" is not only an accepted title – it is a coveted one. To be a "scientist" is to be someone with an acknowledged right to make claims about the natural world. However, as the 1894 debate suggests, the term has a fraught history among English-speaking scientific practitioners. In retrospect, Huxley and Argyll's rejection of "scientist" might seem quaint, even petty. But the history of the word is not just a linguistic curiosity. Debates over its acceptance or rejection were, in the end, not about the word itself: they were about what science was, and what place its practitioners held in their society.

A linguistic exercise

The English academic William Whewell first put the word "scientist" into print in 1834 in a review of Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences*. Whewell's review argued that science was becoming fragmented, that chemists, mathematicians and physicists had less and less to do with one another.

"A curious illustration of this result", he wrote, "may be observed in the want of any name by which we can designate the students of the knowledge of the material world collectively". He then proposed "scientist", an analogue to "artist", as the term that could provide

linguistic unity to those studying the various branches of the sciences.



George Campbell the 8th Duke of Argyll. Credit: Royal Collection, CC BY

Most 19th century scientific researchers in Great Britain, however, preferred another term: "man of science". The analogue for this term was not "artist", but "man of letters" – a figure who attracted great intellectual respect in Britain. "Man of science", of course, also had the benefit of being gendered, clearly conveying that science was a respectable intellectual endeavour pursued only by the more serious and intelligent sex.

"Scientist" met with a friendlier reception across the Atlantic. By the 1870s, "scientist" had replaced "man of science" in the US. Interestingly, the term was embraced in order to distinguish the American "scientist", a figure devoted to "pure" research, from the "professional", who used scientific knowledge to pursue commercial gains.

"Scientist" became so popular in America, in fact, that many British observers began to assume it had originated there. When Alfred Russel Wallace responded to Carrington's 1894 survey he described "scientist" as a "very useful American term". For most British readers, however, the popularity of the word in America was, if anything, evidence that the term was illegitimate and barbarous.

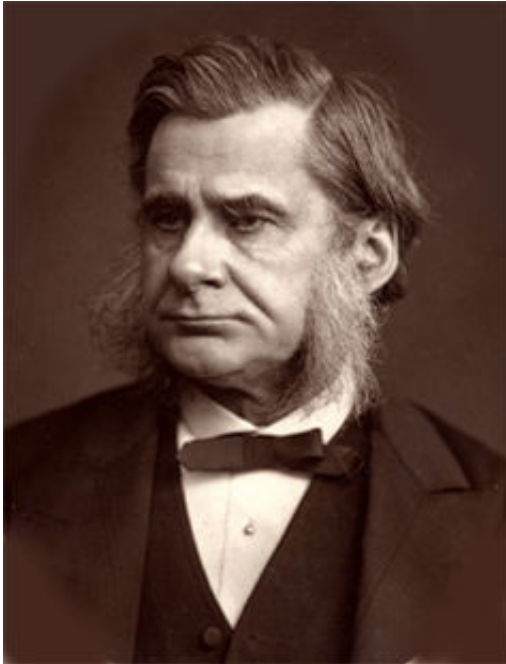
Feelings against "scientist" in Britain endured well into the 20th century. In 1924, "scientist" once again became the topic of discussion in a periodical, this time in the influential specialist weekly *Nature*.

In November, the physicist Norman Campbell sent a letter to the editor of *Nature* asking him to reconsider the journal's policy of avoiding "scientist". He admitted that the word had once been problematic. It had been coined at a time "when scientists were in some trouble about their style" and "were accused, with some truth, of being slovenly". Campbell argued, however, that such questions of "style" were no longer a concern – the scientist had now secured social respect. Campbell thought the alternatives were old-fashioned. Indeed, "man of science" was outright offensive to the increasing number of women in science.

In response, *Nature's* editor, Richard Gregory, decided to follow in Carrington's footsteps. He solicited opinions from linguists and scientific researchers about whether *Nature* should use "scientist". The word received more support in 1924 than it had 30 years earlier. Many researchers wrote in to say that "scientist" was a normal and useful word that was now ensconced in the English lexicon, and that *Nature* should use it.

However, many researchers still rejected "scientist". D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, a zoologist, argued that "scientist" was a tainted term used "by people who have no great respect either for science or the 'scientist'". The eminent naturalist E. Ray Lankester protested that any

"Barney Bunkum" might be able to lay claim to such a vague title. "I think we must be content to be anatomists, zoologists, geologists, electricians, engineers, mathematicians, naturalists", he argued. "'Scientist' has acquired – perhaps unjustly – the significance of a charlatan's device".



Thomas Huxley. Credit: Lock & Whitfield, CC BY

'Scientist' had to wait till World War II

In the end, Gregory decided that *Nature* would not forbid authors from using "scientist", but that the journal's staff would continue to avoid the word. Gregory argued that "scientist" was "too comprehensive in its meaning ... the fact is that, in these days of specialised scientific investigation, no one presumes to be 'a cultivator of science in general'".

Nature was far from alone in its stance. As Gregory observed, the Royal Society of London, the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the Royal Institution and the Cambridge University Press all rejected "scientist" as of 1924. It was not until after the World War II that Campbell would truly get his wish for "scientist" to become the accepted British term for a person who pursued scientific research.

Tracing the acceptance or rejection of "scientist" among researchers not only gives us a history of a word – it also provides insight into the self-image of scientific researchers in the English-speaking world in a time when the social and cultural status of "[science](#)" was undergoing tremendous changes.

Perhaps those who denounced the word might have been reassured by a glimpse into the future of the "[scientist](#)" – or perhaps they would still think that "scientists" might be better off as zoologists, chemists and physicists.

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