

Primary Source:

"Ode to the Royal Society," by Abraham Cowley



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Introduction

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Royal Society Fellow Abraham Cowley's 1667 "Ode to the Royal Society" was published in Royal Society Fellow Thomas Sprat's official *History of the Royal Society* (1667), making it part of the institution's early self-presentation. As a primary source from the Society's founding period, this poem provides insight into how Fellows understood their work and its significance.

As you read, underline language that you think suggests links between scientific discovery and imperialism.

Discussion questions

- How does Cowley use military and conquest language to describe scientific work?
- What role do you think religious imagery plays in justifying the Royal Society's mission?
- How does the ode show the Royal Society's intended role in British competition with other empires or naturalists?

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Source: Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge* (T. R. for J. Martyn and J. Allestry, 1667) B1r–B2v. The source excerpts have been edited and annotated for modern readers. The original text may be found at the location listed in this citation.

Note: Historical sources often contain language that modern readers may find outdated or offensive. Despite this problematic language, it is important to preserve it when analyzing history because it helps us recognize how perspectives and power dynamics have shifted over time.

To the Royal Society.

Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last,

(The author compares English naturalist Francis Bacon, considered a founder of modern science, to the biblical Moses, leading British science toward its illustrious future)

The barren Wilderness he passed,

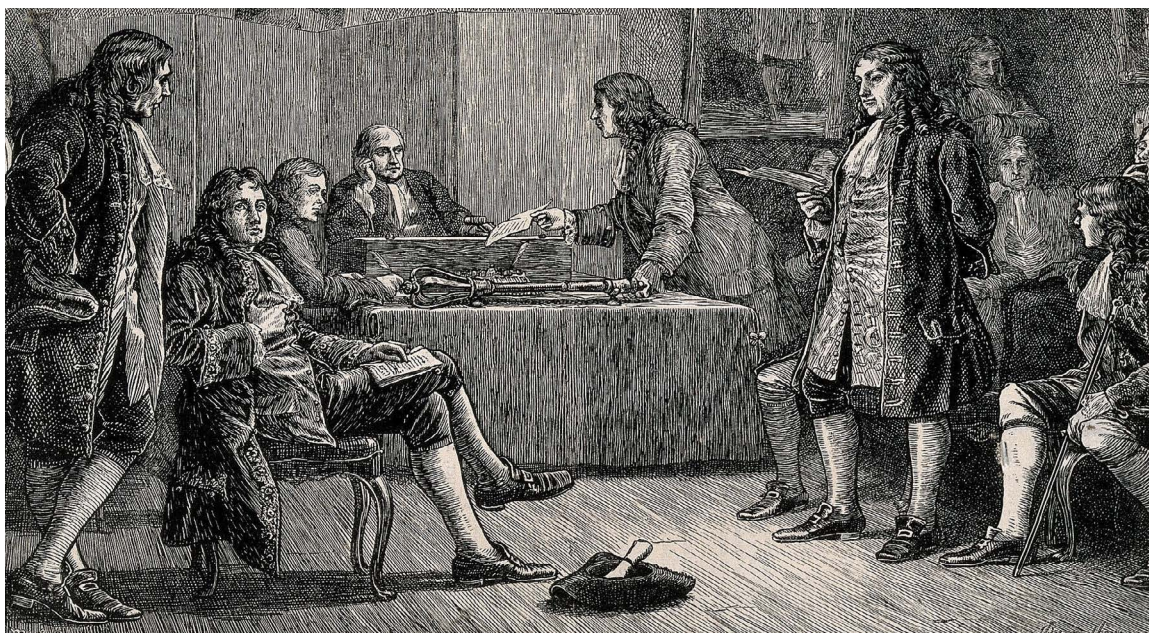
Did on the very Border stand

Of the blessed Promised Land,

And from the Mountains, Top of his Exalted Wit,

He saw it himself and sh[owed] us it.

It is time to Discover Worlds and Conquer, too;



19th-century engraving of Royal Society members meeting at Crane Court in London.



Later map of the British Empire, 1850s.

To [fathom] the vast depths of Natures Sea:

From you, great Champions (in the context of this lesson, “Champions” refers to British naturalists), we expect to get

These spacious Countries but discovered yet;

Countries where yet, instead of Nature, we

Her Images and Idols worshiped see:

These prominent and wealthy Regions to subdue,

Though Learning has whole Armies at command,

A better Troop she never drew together.

God with Design has pick[ed] out you,

To do these noble Wonders by a Few



An example of a Copley Medal, an award granted by the Royal Society starting in 1731 for outstanding contributions to the field of scientific knowledge.

Image Citations

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Peter Lely, Portrait of Abraham Cowley, c. 1666-1667, National Portrait Gallery, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Abraham_Cowley_by_Sir_Peter_Lely.jpg

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“Royal Society, Crane Court, off Fleet Street, London: a meeting in progress, with Isaac Newton in the chair,” wood engraving by J. Quartley, 1883, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wellcome Collection, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Royal_Society_Crane_Court_off_Fleet_Street_London;_a_meet_Wellcome_V0013122.jpg

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John Bartholomew, British Empire throughout the world exhibited in one view, 1850s, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/item/98687124/>
Royal Society Copley Medal, CC BY-SA Teresa Stokes, <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/17932/royal-society-copley-medal/>