John Michell Biography

John Michell

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Biography

John Michell is called the father of seismology, the study of earthquakes and vibrations within the earth. He was born in Nottinghamshire, England, in 1724. After earning degrees from Cambridge University, he served there as professor of geology. In 1767 he was appointed rector of St. Michael's Church near Leeds, England, and spent the rest of his life in this position.

Five years after a devastating earthquake hit Lisbon, Spain, in 1760, Michell introduced the idea that earthquakes emit shock waves. He had studied the frequency of earthquakes near volcanoes and proposed that the quakes might be caused by pressure released from within the earth. Although he could not explain the source of the pressure, he suggested that there might be water boiling below the surface of the earth caused by volcanic heat.

Michell also proposed that one could calculate the center of an earthquake by noting the time at which the motions were felt. Even though he had no hard facts or sophisticated technology to support his theory, this idea was proved by John Milne (1850-1913) over 100 years later.

In addition to his work in seismology, he is also famous in the field of stellar astronomy for two notable accomplishments. In published scientific work, Michell was the first to make a realistic estimate of the distance to the stars; he suggested that the stars were light-years away. In his other observations, he discovered the existence of physical double stars called binary stars. These works earned him election to the Royal Society in 1760. He is also known for having invented in 1784 one of the first torsion balance devices, similar to one Charles-Augustin de Coulomb later invented.