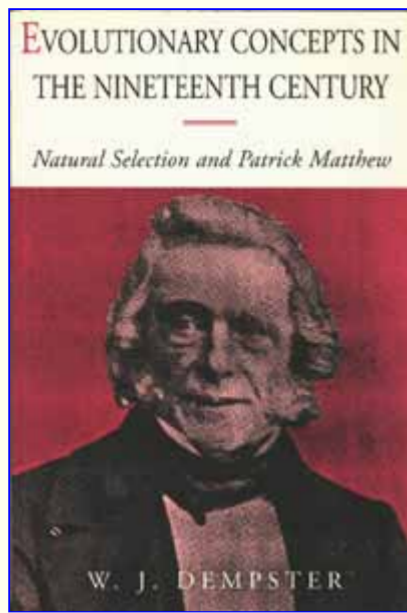


# Evolutionary concepts in the nineteenth century. Natural Selection and Patrick Matthew.

A review by Gert Korthof  
update: 31 Jul 2013 (first published: 4 Sep 1997)



W. J. Dempster, 1996  
Evolutionary concepts in the nineteenth century. Natural Selection and Patrick Matthew. [\(Contents\)](#)

"It is nonsense to suggest that the theory of evolution by Natural Selection was Darwin's own theory." (p. 47)  
"It is one of the injustices of the history of science that Matthew, the pioneer of the natural process of selection, should be brushed aside." (p. 40)  
"The three characters in the basic development of evolution are Cuvier, Lamarck and Patrick Matthew. The origin of species has no new ideas." (p. 29)

This is a book of someone who hates Darwin and Darwinists. It is written by a historian of science. Dempster is not a creationist. In some older creationist books, creationists used to attack the person of Darwin. We have gone a long way since then. Modern creationists do not attack the person, but the theory [\(12\)](#). However, Dempster likes attacking persons. Here is an astonishing demonstration of Dempster's attitude towards Darwin:

"In spite of his long debility, his daily throwing up and his frequent nervous interludes, Darwin's sexual ability did not decline. Allowing for the frequent miscarriages so common in those days he kept poor Emma almost permanently pregnant from 1839 to 1856." [\(14\)](#)

What on earth has *that* to do with his theory? It is quite clear from many more statements throughout the book, that Dempster cannot possibly tell an objective history [\(1\)](#). If one only reflects on the title of the chapter on neo-Darwinism: "Neo This and That", it's clear again that Dempster cannot distinguish between his emotions and a professional historical account. Matthew is the hero of the book. Matthew was the first to publish the concept of natural selection. Matthew predicted the existence of DNA. Matthew wrote about everything present in Neo-Darwinism including Punctuated Equilibrium! I am not implying that Dempster has all the facts wrong in his book. Some of Dempster's facts are not widely known among Darwinists. For example that Darwin wrote:

"I freely acknowledge that Mr Matthew has anticipated by many years the explanation which I have offered of the origin of species under the name of natural selection. I think that no one will feel surprised that neither I, nor any other naturalist, had heard of Matthew's views, considering how briefly they are given and that they appeared in the appendix of a work on naval timber and arboriculture". [21 April 1860].(p28). See also: [10](#).

Dempster does not say that Darwin lied, but complains that Darwin could and should have known the work because it was published by a well known publisher and was reviewed by a well known reviewer in a magazine to which Darwin had subscribed. Dempster's complains many times about injustices done to Matthew by Darwinists. Dempster's interpretation and selection of the facts is extreme anti-Darwin. However, the book is a rich source of all the influences on Darwin and Darwin's predecessors. The true founder of Evolution was Lamarck. Dempster is rewriting a history which gives Darwin too much credit and forget to mention Patrick Matthew, who set out the theory of natural selection for the first time in print (1931). However according to Ernst Mayr :

"Patrick Matthew undoubtedly had the right idea, just like Darwin did on September 28, 1838, but he did not devote the next twenty years to converting it into a cogent theory of evolution. As a result it had no impact whatsoever." [\(5\)](#).

Also, according to W. D. Hamilton:

"Credit in science is partly for effective communication, not just for right ideas. (...) Likewise Darwin, not Patrick Matthew, gets the credit for evolution by natural selection because Darwin wrote his ideas clearly and persistently with extreme multiplicity of illustrations, not as a few paragraphs (clear though these paragraphs also were) of note F of an Appendix to a book on *Naval Timber and Arboriculture*".[\(11\)](#).

Contrary to the impression Dempster gives the reader, it is not true that Patrick Matthew is never mentioned in the Darwin-literature. The astronomer Fred Hoyle [\(7\)](#) reports that the term "natural selection" was coined in 1831 by Patrick Matthew. Stephen Jay Gould (1985) mentioned him in *The Flamingo's Smile*, quoted by Daniel Dennett in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (p49) [\(2\)](#). Further Patrick Matthew has been mentioned as a precursor of Charles Darwin in Søren Løvtrup(1987) [\(3\)](#); in L.R. Croft (1989) *The Life and Death of Charles Darwin* (reported by James Hayward,1998 [\(6\)](#)) and in Gertrude Himmelfarb (1962) *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (p.184). Dempster does not mention such cases. It's true however that one doesn't find Matthew in the standard textbooks of evolution. There is at least one exception: Bergstrom and Dugatkin (2012) *Evolution* (textbook) fully acknowledge Matthew's contribution (pp 39-40).

This is what historian Peter Bowler [\(9\)](#) has to say about Patrick Matthew and Dempster:

One writer has even gone so far as to hail Matthew as the originator of the modern evolution theory (Dempster, 1996). Such efforts to denigrate Darwin misunderstand the whole point of the history of science: Matthew did suggest a basic idea of selection, but he did nothing to develop it; and he published it in the appendix to a book on the raising of trees for shipbuilding. No one took him seriously, and he played no role in the emergence of Darwinism. Simply priority is not enough to earn a thinker a place in the history of science: one has to develop the idea and convince others of its value to make a real contribution. Darwin's notebooks confirm that he drew no inspiration from Matthew or any other alleged precursor.

Finally, there is one curious mistake in Dempster I want to mention. According to Dempster "Darwin in the last paragraph of every edition of the *Origin* dragged in the Creator [contrary to Matthew] and only later regretted he had truckled to society." (p24). The famous last paragraph reads:

"There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into few forms or into one ...".

Now Dempster blames Darwin for unnecessarily dragging in the Creator. However, the words "by the Creator" are not present in every edition [\(4\)](#). In the 2nd edition "by the Creator" is introduced after "originally breathed." [\(9\)](#). For example in my 1972 Penguin paperback copy of the first edition there is no Creator in the last paragraph. Also in Stephen Jay Gould's copy there is no Creator. Dempster is completely unaware of this fact. It would have been better, if Dempster had have clarified the matter by investigating Darwin's original manuscripts [\(13\)](#). That's the job of a historian of science.

Dempster's book is good reading for old-fashioned creationists who hate Darwin and the Darwinists as much as Dempster does. But beware: Dempster is an atheist and takes the existence of evolution and natural selection for granted.

**"Evolutionary concepts in the nineteenth century. Natural Selection and Patrick Matthew."**  
by W. J. Dempster  
The Pentland Press, 1996  
365 pages.

**Contents:**

1. Patrick Matthew, Horticulturist and Writer
2. Natural Selection - The Appendix to Naval Timber and Arboculture
3. Confrontation with Darwin
4. The Confrontation between Scientific Observation and Biblical Orthodoxy
5. The Use of Selection by Nineteenth-century Breeders
6. The State of the Species Debate in 1836
7. Charles Darwin's Predecessors
8. Matthew the Obscure
9. Edward Blyth and his Classification of Varieties
10. Neo This and That
11. Natural Selection and its Justification of Colonialism
12. Patrick Matthew's Review of Descent of Man

**Bibliography.**  
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### Notes:

1. The production of Dempster's book was paid by the 'Trustees of the Patrick Matthew Trust'.
2. A review of Dennett's [Darwin's Dangerous Idea](#) on this site.
3. Løvtrup devotes three and a half pages to Patrick Matthew (["Darwinism: The Refutation of a Myth"](#)). However, Løvtrup is not mentioned by Dempster.
4. Letter to New Scientist 12 October 1996 by A.E. Parrott.
5. Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought*, 1982, page 500.
6. James Hayward, *The Creation/Evolution Controversy*, 1998 p54.
7. Fred Hoyle(1983) *The Intelligent Universe. A new view of creation and evolution*, p244.
8. Compare this with what Darwin wrote in: **"THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES. TWO ESSAYS WRITTEN IN 1842 AND 1844"** on the site [The Complete Works of Charles Darwin Online](#) (search: 'God' or 'Creator'). With a site like this it is easy to investigate Darwins works! For example it appears that Darwin uses "the Creator" 6 times (apart from the one mentioned) in the first and sixth edition (and probably all editions) of *The Origin of Species*.
9. Peter Bowler (2003) *Evolution. The History of an idea*, third edition, p.158.
10. In the *Origin of Species* 3d ed. (See [Complete Works of Charles Darwin](#) website), there is "An historical Sketch of the progress of opinion on the origin of species" (10 pages). Darwin wrote (page xvi):  
"In 1831 Mr. Patrick Matthew published his work on 'Naval Timber and Arboriculture,' in which he gives precisely the same view on the origin of species as that (presently to be alluded to) propounded by Mr. Wallace and myself in the 'Linnean Journal,' and as that enlarged in the present volume. Unfortunately the view was given by Mr. Matthew very briefly in scattered passages in an Appendix to a work on a different subject, so that it remained unnoticed until Mr. Matthew himself drew attention to it in the 'Gardeners' Chronicle,' on April 7th, 1860." ...
11. *Narrow Roads of Gene Land. The collected papers of W. D. Hamilton.* Volume 2, p.211.
12. I am sorry to say that this is not true anymore. See for example: [Richard Weikart's From Darwin to Hitler](#) and Jerry Bergman (1999) [Darwin's Passion for Hunting and Killing](#), ICR, Institute of Creation Research. [ added: 21 Jul 2013 ]
13. Robert J. Richards (2012) points out that "But the point to be made is simply that when he [Darwin] worked out his theory from 1837 to 1859, he was a theist who believed that the laws of nature, including natural selection, were designed by the Creator. (...) Darwin only objected to the direct, seriatim intervention of the Deity, the Lord creating each species individually. (...) But these laws, as he frequently affirmed, were secondary causes imposed by God. The laws thus bore the imprint of an all-powerful intelligence and moral actor." in: ["Darwin's Principles of Divergence and Natural Selection: Why Fodor was Almost Right"](#). [ added: 28 May 2014 ]
14. However, this is not unusual *for the time*. "Before te coming of [the age] of fossil fuels, the average woman had to spend most of her adult life bearing and rearing children ..." Ian Morris Chapter 4 *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels. How Human Vales Evolve*, Princeton University Press, 2015. [ added: 27 May 2015 ]

### Further Reading

- [Patrick Matthew \(1790-1874\)](#) is discussed in the section 'Preludes to Evolution' of the page 'ENTER EVOLUTION: Theory and History'.
- John Wilkins (2003) [Darwin's Precursors and Influences](#). Patrick Matthew is mentioned on [this page](#).
- [There is no Darwin Conspiracy](#) by Young Earth Creationist (!) Todd Wood

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