



Was
Darwin
Wrong?

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

A review by Gert Korthof

4 Sep 1997 (update 12 Nov 1999)

"It is nonsense to suggest that the theory of evolution by Natural Selection was Darwin's own theory."(p47)
"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."(p40)
"The three characters in the basic development of evolution are Cuvier, Lamarck and Patrick Matthew. The origin of species has no new ideas."(p29)

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. 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."

It is quite clear from many more statements throughout the book, that Dempster cannot possibly tell an objective (hi)story. (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:



"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
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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

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"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).

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).

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) and in L.R. Croft(1989) *The Life and Death of Charles Darwin* (reported by James Hayward,1998 (6)). Dempster does not mention such cases. It's true however that one doesn't find Matthew in the standard textbooks of evolution.

There is one curious mistake in Dempster I want to mention here. 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. The strange fact is however that the words "by the Creator" are not present in every copy of the *Origin* (4). 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. Who is responsible for including/ omitting those words ? 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. 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.

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.

Links:

- [Patrick Matthew \(1790-1874\)](#) is discussed in the section 'Preludes to Evolution' of the page 'ENTER EVOLUTION: Theory and History'.
- [Darwin's Precursors and Influences](#) by John Wilkins.

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