

# Darwin's unpaid debt to Patrick Matthew

## **Science Fraud: Darwin's plagiarism of Patrick Matthew's theory**

Mike Sutton

Curtis Press, Great Yarmouth, UK, 2022

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A new book by Dr Mike Sutton, *Science Fraud: Charles Darwin's Plagiarism of Patrick Matthew's Theory*, claims to provide fresh evidence that Darwin plagiarized the work of Patrick Matthew.<sup>1</sup> Dr Sutton has a Ph.D. in criminology, has worked in the UK Home Office, and has advanced a number of arguments in a previous book *Nullius in Verba* relating to Patrick Matthew (figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The release of this latest book on 12 February 2022 has been reported in several mainstream UK newspapers, such as the *Mail on Sunday* and *The Times*.<sup>3</sup> The book, *Science Fraud*, is more focussed on Darwin's plagiarism of Patrick Matthew's work, but much of the material is in the former work, *Nullius in Verba*. It would have been helpful if Sutton had made it easier to determine what is new in *Science Fraud*. In this latest book he also responds to critics of the previous work and accuses some secular researchers of plagiarism of his own work (pp. 17–19).<sup>4,5</sup>

*Creation Ministries International* has commented on Darwin's plagiarism in the past, including with references to Sutton's previous work.<sup>6–8</sup> The 2015 paper by Dominic Statham in the *Journal of Creation* discusses much of Sutton's research in *Nullius in Verba* and previously published papers and research by others; it is worth reading for an overview (see also Mike Sutton's letter, and Dominic Statham's response<sup>9</sup>). In his latest

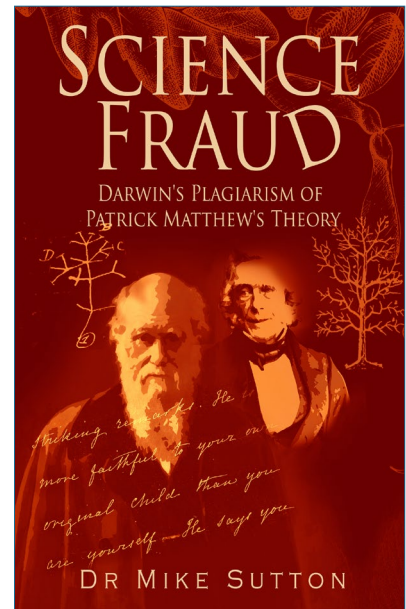
book he comments graciously on the misunderstanding with Dominic, but observes that the publication *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society* has acted less ethically, suggesting that others may be surprised that a creationist publication would show greater integrity than a science journal (pp. 17–19). We would wonder why he should be surprised by the good faith of a Christian organisation in moral matters.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Matthew became a landowner and agriculturalist, having inherited the Gourdiehill estate in Scotland from his uncle, Admiral Duncan. His work as the estate manager included nurturing fruit trees and growing crops of grain.<sup>10</sup> Like Darwin, his wealth allowed him the time to develop scientific theories and write books. He was probably an old-earth creationist and believed that multiple catastrophes had forced changes in plant and animal life over 'millions of ages'.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Darwin, Matthew seems to have had sympathy for intelligent design in guiding change over the various epochs.<sup>9,12</sup>

## **Darwin's plagiarism and excuses**

The evidence cited by Sutton relates to claims that Darwin did not know about Matthew's prior work; *On Naval Timber and Arboriculture (NTA)* (1831). Using tools for data analysis, Sutton shows that both Darwin and Wallace plagiarized Matthew's work. There are a number of assertions that Sutton makes in his latest book.<sup>1</sup>

Sutton shows that when Matthew challenged Darwin on the priority of the work Darwin's response was that the work was so obscure that no one had heard of it, and that what was published was only in the appendix (pp. 213–223).



Both of these claims can be shown to be false according to Sutton, as can the claim that Darwin continued to make inadequate defensive excuses for his conduct in private letters. A number of close contacts of Darwin had evidently read Matthew's work, including Robert Chambers.

Sutton is further critical of the science establishment that worked to promote the Darwin narrative—Darwin was turned into an icon or idol of science at the expense of others. He suggests that the same active censorship is still at work as the scientific establishment works to protect the reputation of Darwin, despite the evidence of plagiarism. In his criticism of the action of secular scientists, he quotes Dempster: "The suppression of the work of Patrick Matthew since 1831 raises doubts about the so-called intellectual integrity of many scientists"<sup>13</sup> (p. 23).

This correspondence between Darwin and Matthew occurred several months after the publication of Darwin's work, *On the Origin of Species*. Matthew had replied to a *Times of London* review of Darwin's book that had been extensively quoted in the *Gardeners Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette* in the edition of 3 March 1860.

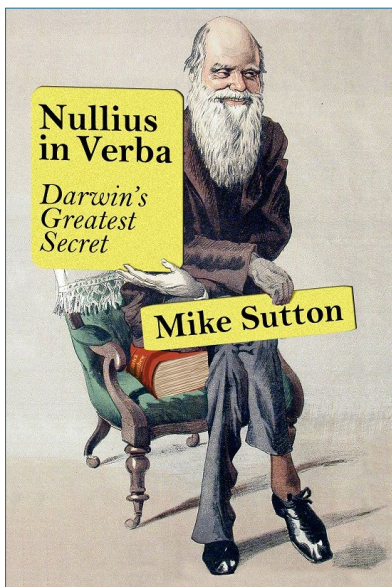


Figure 1. Sutton's *Nullius in Verba*

His letter was published in the 7 April edition.

“This discovery recently published as ‘the results of 20 years’ investigation and reflection’ by Mr. Darwin turns out to be what I published very fully and brought to apply practically to forestry in my work ‘*Naval Timber and Arboriculture*’, published as far back as January 1, 1831.”<sup>14</sup>

Darwin responded on 13 April, acknowledging Matthew’s priority in publication:

“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 apparently any other naturalist, had heard of Mr. Matthew’s views, considering how briefly they are given, and that they appeared in the appendix to a work on *Naval Timber and Arboriculture*. I can do no more than offer my apologies to Mr. Matthew for my entire ignorance of his publication. If another edition of my work is called for, I will insert a notice to the foregoing effect.”<sup>15</sup>

Darwin offered to add a comment to Patrick Matthew in a subsequent edition, and he later referenced Matthew’s prior work in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Origin*, even quoting another letter from Matthew. While Sutton focusses on the question of plagiarism from these passages, one may see a hint of sarcasm and irony in Matthew’s comment, which Darwin published approvingly in his own defence—maybe it was a case of Matthew ‘damning with faint praise’. Matthew had claimed his observations were axiomatic, ‘a self-evident fact’, whereas Darwin had to work it out slowly and carefully.

“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 ‘*Gardener’s Chronicle*,’ on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1860. ... To me the conception of this law of Nature came intuitively as a self-evident fact, almost without an effort of concentrated thought. Mr. Darwin here seems to have more merit in the discovery than I have had; to me it did not appear a discovery. He seems to have worked it out by inductive reason, slowly and with due caution to have made his way synthetically from fact to fact onwards; while with me it was by a general glance at the scheme of Nature that I estimated this select production of species as an à priori recognisable fact—an axiom requiring only to be pointed out to be admitted by unprejudiced minds of sufficient grasp.”<sup>16</sup>

After this correspondence in the *Gazette*, Darwin wrote to Lyell to reaffirm his innocence of plagiarism on the grounds of its obscurity:

“... some few passages are rather obscure but it, is certainly, I think, a complete but not developed anticipation! Anyhow one may be excused in not having discovered the fact in a work on ‘*Naval Timber*’.”<sup>17</sup>

It is not entirely clear why Darwin would seek to justify himself to Lyell,

bearing in mind their close connection and Lyell’s sympathy and knowledge of Darwin’s plans for around 20 years.<sup>18</sup>

### Matthew's work had been cited by Darwin's friends

Chapter 3 represents the bulk of the book, and the most relevant part. Sutton identifies those who had read Matthew’s work, *On Naval Timber...*, prior to 1858, and who had replicated phrases from that work in their own writing. He calls this ‘First to be Second (F2B2)’. Then he identifies those on that list who were close to Darwin.

Sutton points out that in fact Matthew’s work had been cited and reviewed by many of Darwin’s friends and associates, including in thirty publications, and some publications that Darwin himself had read (pp. 35–36). From this list are eight people, some anonymous, but the list includes John Loudon, who reviewed NTA in 1832, Adam Black, Matthew’s publisher, and Prideaux John Selby. This suggests Darwin’s appeal to ignorance in comments to the *Gardiner’s Chronicle* was at best in error, at worst deliberate fraud to pass off other’s ideas as his own.<sup>2</sup> Sutton asserts that Darwin’s claim of ignorance does not stand up to scrutiny, and that, contrary to Darwin, Matthew’s argument had appeared throughout his book and not just in the appendix (pp. 213–223).

Another claim of Sutton is that Matthew was the first to utilize a phrase “the Natural Process of Selection”, which clearly is very similar to the one Darwin later made his own. Sutton suggests that Darwin deliberately changed this to the ‘Process of Natural Selection’ (pp. 37–47), commenting elsewhere: “Darwin realised he had no choice but to use the same words so he called it the Process of Natural Selection. He shuffled the words and hoped nobody would notice.”<sup>22</sup>

Emma Darwin inadvertently made an admission in a letter to Patrick Matthew; a letter written by her because Charles was too ill to write. Emma wrote: “He is more faithful to your own

original child than you are yourself” (pp. 50–51, 159).<sup>19</sup> This suggests an acknowledgment of priority to Matthew, although, in fairness to Darwin, he had already acknowledged that in the 1861 edition.

### Ostracism and censorship

Sutton points out that there has been determined activity to censor information about Matthew’s priority in subsequent years, even to the present day. This is borne out by the fact that so few people have heard of Matthew’s work in present times. Darwin has become a sort of idol for naturalism, and even Wallace’s contribution has become a footnote.<sup>20</sup> Sutton points out that Wikipedia continues to try and bury the evidence, although it may be acknowledged that the platform is wide open to abuse from anonymous or self-regulated sources.

Sutton discusses the campaign to discredit and ostracize Matthew in chapter 4. Lyell appears as a figure who worked closely with Darwin and Wallace and had reason to discredit Matthew, who appears to have been a Christian Chartist. (The Chartists campaigned for better rights for the poor against the nobility.) His catastrophism was evidently at odds with Lyell’s uniformitarian arguments. Matthew’s view of natural selection and speciation was also in the context of intelligent design. In 1867, Matthew was prevented from speaking at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Dundee. Although Matthew had prior claim to the theory, his paper was ordered last in the proceedings, which meant the meeting ran out of time, thus silencing him (pp. 102–105).

In chapter 5 Sutton discusses earlier attempts to get to the bottom of Darwin’s plagiarism, and notes the difficulty encountered with not having the ability to search large data bases; for example, in works by Dempster that too readily accepted Darwin’s excuses (p.107).<sup>11</sup> Sutton also shows that although Darwin claimed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Origin of Species* that he

was “not familiar” with Buffon’s work, there is ample evidence from the online *Darwin Correspondence Project* that he was well acquainted with the works (pp. 114–116).

In chapter 6, Sutton comments that the work outlined in his previous book had experienced fierce resistance from the Darwin-supporting establishment, what he called the ‘Darwin Industry’ (p. 107). In this chapter, *Beyond possible coincidence?*, he responds in more depth to some of those criticisms.

### Summary

There is a lot of detail that readers may find difficult to wade through in this book, and more detail than can be given in this review, although it is useful for those wishing to conduct further research. We welcome the publication of this new book by Mike Sutton regarding Patrick Matthew’s prior claim to natural selection, as it highlights further some of the machinations of Darwin and his inner circle of friends. We can only speculate on the motives, but Sutton suggests it is related to Lyell’s campaign to reinforce his belief in slow and gradual processes in geology, and similar regarding Darwin’s evolution. Matthew had believed in catastrophism and occasional revolutions in biological change. Matthew’s commitment to natural theology and intelligent design were also an anathema to those who wished to pursue science without any reference to God. Evidence that Darwin’s friends worked to isolate Matthew as a central character in the evolution narrative is also telling; as also is the ongoing campaign to silence and discredit those who question the ‘sacredness’ of Darwin in the present day. This will resonate with creation scientists who have struggled with their careers and studies for daring to question the narrative of evolution.

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