

Book Reviews

Natural Selection and Patrick Matthew, by W. J. Dempster. Pentland Press, Bishop Auckland, Durham, 1996, xv + 365 pp., photographs, P/b 1-85821-356-8. Price £12.50

There should have been a Bateman cartoon entitled 'The biologist who doubted Darwinism'. The setting would be the Linnean meeting room, and radiating round this figure of fun would be evolutionists with eyebrows starting from the tops of their heads, molecular biologists with jaws dropped to waist level, and officers with hands clapped over their eyes like virgins facing a priapic monster. 'Darwinism' is now a tenet of faith. 'Darwinian evolution' is at the basis of modern biological philosophy, and those who doubt this view are regarded by their fellows as heretics or infidels. It has become a religion.

Darwin may have been a popularizer of evolution, but he was not its originator. The word 'evolution' occurs nowhere in the text of the *Origin of Species*. The presentation read to the Linnean Society was not by Darwin alone, but was a joint paper with Alfred Russel Wallace, whose *On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type* was crucial to the understanding of evolution. Now we have a new edition of a book by W. J. Dempster which argues that—by the time of this presentation of the Linnean Society—natural selection was already almost thirty years old. The theory arose in an earlier book on arboriculture, published in 1831, and well known to Darwin. Its author was Patrick Matthew, a Scottish fruit breeder, and Dempster's vivid and intriguing book reminds us of the importance of Matthew's conclusions.

Dempster is no defender of current fashions. He reinstates Lamarck as the true father of evolution, dismisses Richard Dawkins as arrogant and out of touch, and portrays Darwin as willing to launder reality if it helped boost his personal reputation. The author meanders through the life-story of Edward Blyth, contrasting Blyth's patronizing instruction of Darwin in the species Blyth studied on his travels, with Darwin's meanness of spirit in doing nothing to advance Blyth's *entrée* to the Royal Society.

Matthew was clearly a believer in the right of Anglo-Saxon society to dominate the world. Some of his attitudes have the look of fascism, as when he supported in *Emigration Fields* (1839) British colonists cutting down a few aborigines as you would "the encumbering trees". One detects little sense of censure of such attitudes in Dempster's writing. After mention of Darwin's view that the annihilation of savage creatures would result in there being no animal between "the Caucasian and the lowest baboon", Dempster comments that, "the negro, the Aborigines and the gorilla are still with us," adding: "The present state of gorillas, however, gives cause for concern."

There are repetitions in this book, and sometimes it seems to lose its sense of direction. The illustrations (just five in number) are indifferent, and there are some stylistic oddities, notably the frequent use of the exclamation mark. It remains a fascinating account of someone absent from encyclopedias, and missing from biographical dictionaries. We also see Matthew's retreat from the racist view of his middle years, exemplified by comments in a letter to Darwin in 1862 that: "I am not satisfied with my existence here to devour and trample on my fellow creature."

Where does this leave Darwinism? Does it show that the name of Darwin is wrongly associated with natural selection? There is a description even earlier than Matthew's. It argues that: "... the strongest and most active animal should propagate the species, which should thence become improved." This is Darwinism in a nutshell, and these are Darwin's own words—not Charles Darwin, but his grandfather Erasmus, writing in his essay *Zoonomia* of 1794. Charles Darwin later said he had read *Zoonomia*, the "similar views" in which did not produce "any effect on me." Erasmus Darwin clearly coined the concept, and Dempster now reminds us of Matthew's theory, which Charles Darwin also acknowledged. If this book has a single merit, it is to help demolish the legend surrounding Charles Darwin. It is high time 'Darwinism' was exposed as a myth, and this illuminating book helps us to bury it forever.