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There Is No Darwin's Greatest Secret

Mike SUTTON, *Nullius in Verba: Darwin's Greatest Secret*, Thinker Media [First Digital Edition], Kindle Edition 2014.

Mike Sutton is an English criminologist. In 2001, he became Reader in Criminology at Nottingham Trent University. He is also a co-founder of the *Internet Journal of Criminology* and a laureate of the British Journal of Criminology Prize for his research on hackers.

Sutton is the author of the book entitled *Nullius in Verba: Darwin's Greatest Secret*. His book was published in 2014 by Thinker Media, an independent digital publisher, and was intended for the Kindle reader device. Sutton underlines that his book was “rejected by all the major science publishers” not because of its substantive value,¹ but because it shows that Charles Darwin (1809-1882) does not deserve to be called “the greatest Revolutionist in natural history of this century, if not of all centuries”.² *Nullius in Verba* contains twenty long chapters, but the most important is the fourth chapter entitled “*Nullius in Verba* Charles Darwin. Because Many Naturalists Did Read”.

The main aim of Sutton's book is to convince his readers that Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) independently plagiarized Patrick Matthew's (1790-1874) prior-published idea of evolution by natural selection from his

¹ See Mike SUTTON, *Nullius in Verba: Darwin's Greatest Secret*, Thinker Media [First Digital Edition], Kindle Edition 2014, loc. 340.

² Letter from Hewett C. Watson to Charles Darwin (21 November 1859), Darwin Correspondence Project, University of Cambridge, <http://tiny.pl/h42mn> (29.03.2016).

1831 work **On Naval Timber and Arboriculture**.³ Matthew was Scottish fruit farmer. In his book, above all, he discussed different methods of tree cultivation, from which timber was intended to build the Royal Navy ships. The title of Matthew's book did not indicate any references to the species problem. Darwin claimed that he heard nothing about Matthew's book and was completely convinced that no naturalist paid attention to it. Nevertheless, after publication of **On the Origin of Species**, he honorably admitted that Matthew published the theory of natural selection many years before him:

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.⁴

It is worth noting that Matthew wrote in one of his letters that Darwin's contribution was much bigger than his own:

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 *a priori* recognisable fact — an axiom, requiring only to be pointed out to be admitted by unprejudiced minds of sufficient grasp.⁵

Sutton was not the first author to underline Matthew's views on natural se-

³ See Patrick MATTHEW, **On Naval Timber and Arboriculture; with Critical Notes on Authors, Who Have Recently Treated the Subject of Planting**, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Greene — Adam Smith, London — Edinburgh 1831.

⁴ Cited in: John VAN WYHE (ed.), **Charles Darwin's Shorter Publications: 1829-1883**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge — New York 2009, p. 299.

⁵ Letter from Patrick Matthew to *The Gardeners' Chronicle* from 12 May 1860, PMP: The Patrick Matthew Project, <http://tiny.pl/g7j8b> (29.03.2016).

lection.⁶ But he is the first to write a book which, as Sutton claims, proves beyond all reasonable doubt that Darwin had committed one of the biggest scientific frauds in the history of science.⁷ The plagiarism is one of the most serious accusations towards a scholar. If Sutton is right and Darwin was a plagiarist, it will be the most shocking discovery in the history of science. But he must present hard evidence to convince anyone that Darwin read Matthew's book before 1859 and had known those fragments concerning natural selection. Eventually, he should prove that Darwin learned about Matthew's idea from one of his friends or correspondences. Sutton writes that:

[...] if anyone could prove that Darwin read **NTA** before he wrote the **Origin**, and/or that anyone, who influenced Darwin's thinking on evolution did so because they read **NTA**, then the already illicit Darwinist excuse for denying Matthew full priority would be disproved and all the relevant science history books would have to be re-written.⁸

Sutton used Google Search Tools — the method which he called Internet-Date-Detection — to show which authors within Darwin's social circle read Matthew book and could directly or indirectly inform Darwin about his views on natural selection. The English criminologist writes about authors, who definitely read it (because they cited Matthew's book), and those, who were likely to have read **On Naval Timber and Arboriculture** (because they first used so-called Matthewisms, i.e. phrases coined probably by Matthew). Sutton's list included: Robert Mudie (1777-1840), James Main (1775-1846), Timothy A. Conrad (1803-1877), Peter Mark Roget (1779-1869), Cuthbert W. Johnson (1799-1878), Prideaux John Selby (1788-1867), Ebenezer Emmons (1799-1863), Simon Wilkin (1790-1862), Thomas Laycock (1812-1876), Baden Powell (1796-1860), Joseph Leidy (1823-1891), Adam Black (1784-1874), William Jameson (1815-1882), John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843), Robert Chambers (1802-1871), John Murray III (1808-1892). It makes one wonder that most authors

⁶ See W.J. DEMPSTER, **Patrick Matthew and Natural Selection: Nineteenth Century Gentleman-Farmer, Naturalist and Writer**, Paul Harris Publishing, Edinburgh 1983; W.J. DEMPSTER, **Evolutionary Concepts in the Nineteenth Century: Natural Selection and Patrick Matthew**, The Pentland Press, Edinburgh — Cambridge — Durham 1996.

⁷ See SUTTON, *Nullius in Verba...*, loc. 3053.

⁸ SUTTON, *Nullius in Verba...*, loc. 545.

from that list died after publication of the first edition of **On the Origin of Species**. If they really knew that Darwin plagiarized Matthew, why did none of them write about this alleged scientific fraud? Even if we assume that all authors from the list above read Matthew's book, there is still a point to consider: which of them paid attention to the very few fragments concerning evolution by natural selection? The answer is... one. Only John Loudon wrote one ambiguous sentence in his 1832 review:

One of the subjects discussed in this appendix is the puzzling one, of the origin of species and varieties; and if the author has hereon originated no original views (and of this we are far from certain), he has certainly exhibited his own in an original manner.⁹

This is probably the only published opinion from 1832 to 1859 that underlined the fact that Matthew had asked a question about the origin of species. By the 1832, Darwin began his voyage on the Beagle, and at this time he still believed that species were immutable; he was more interested in geology than biology. There are no historical sources that can confirm the hypothesis that Darwin read Loudon's review and under its influence read **On Naval Timber and Arboriculture**, or that one of his correspondents paid his attention on Matthew's book. But even if he read this review, he could only have learned that Matthew's views were expressed in an original way but were not new (although Loudon was not certain of their value).

Most of above-indicated authors, as Sutton claims, cited the phrases that were used for the first time by Matthew. But there is also the possibility that these phrases were used independently. History of science knows many examples of independent discoveries.¹⁰ If scientists sometimes present the same conclusions, why it is so strange that some authors used the same phrases writing on similar issues? But there is another problem with Matthewisms. In his investigation, Sutton used materials that was scanned and had OCR conversion. But the list of materials in the electronic archives like Google books is not complete and

⁹ Anonymous (attributed to John Loudon), „Matthew, Patrick: **On Naval Timber and Arboriculture**”, *Gardener's Magazine and Register of Rural & Domestic Improvements* 1832, vol. 8, p. 703 [702-703], <http://tiny.pl/g7phk> (08.03.2016).

¹⁰ See Robert K. MERTON, **The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations**, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1973.

perhaps never will be. For example, Sutton claimed that Wilkin more likely than not read **On Naval Timber and Arboriculture**, because he used one of Matthewisms (“figure is best accommodated”) in his book of 1835 — **Sir Thomas Browne’s Works: Including His Life and Correspondence**.¹¹ But Wilkin was only the editor of the Browne’s works, and the alleged Matthewism was used by Browne in 1658 (his book is also scanned on Google books).¹² Due to this fact, it is hard to believe that Wilkin ever read Matthew’s book and paid attention to his considerations on evolution by natural selection. This is only one example, which shows that research based on electronic books archive and search tools is insufficient to proclaim that there is no doubt that Darwin was a plagiarist.

Sutton’s line of reasoning can be reduced to one simple pattern: since Wilkin could read Matthew, then he must have done so, and because he could have discussed his evolutionary views with Joseph Hooker (1817-1911), then he did, and since Hooker could have informed Darwin about Matthew’s book, then he did. But all of this is inferred by Sutton without offering any hard evidence that this really happened. Similar situation concerns Mudie, Main, Conrad, Roget, Johnson, Selby, Emmons, Laycock, Powell and Leidy.

Moreover, Sutton writes about terminological similarities between some phrases in **On Naval Timber and Arboriculture** and **On the Origin of Species**. But an attempt to draw a conclusion on the ground of those similarities is often a risky practice. Loren Eiseley (1907-1977) in his long article published in 1959 also claimed that Darwin was a plagiarist.¹³ Eiseley maintained that the obscure word “inosculate” indicates that Darwin read Edward Blyth’s (1810-1873) papers, which appeared in 1836 and 1837. Further research shows that

¹¹ See Simon WILKIN (ed.), **Sir Thomas Browne’s Works: Including His Life and Correspondence**, vol. III, William Pickering, London 1835, p. 340, <http://tiny.pl/g7pxj> (28.03.2016).

¹² See Thomas BROWNE, **Pseudodoxia Epidemica; Or, Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents, and Commonly Presumed Truths**, R.W. for Nath. Ekins, London 1658, p. 312, <http://tiny.pl/gtl6z> (28.03.2016).

¹³ See Loren C. EISELEY, „Charles Darwin, Edward Blyth, and the Theory of Natural Selection”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 1959, vol. 103, no. 1, pp. 94-158.

Eiseley was wrong and Darwin not only knew this word, but also used it before 1836.¹⁴

There are two different questions in the case of Darwin and Matthew. The first question has to do with Matthew's alleged influence and the second involves the modern view of Matthew's contribution in the history of evolutionary theory and the Darwinian revolution. The analysis of the Scottish farmer's views reveal some important differences from classical Darwinism and its impact (for example: understanding what is today called microevolution and macroevolution, role of sexual selection, the question of the origin of complex organs by natural selection or design in nature). It seems that Darwin's acknowledgement to Matthew in his letter to *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, and putting the latter's name in the list of predecessors in the historical sketch in **On the Origin of Species**, was fair enough.

Sutton presents many different possible ways that Darwin could have known about Matthew's views on evolution by natural selection. He demonstrates possibilities, but offers no hard evidence that even one of these ever actually occurred. The author on *Nullius in Verba* is the authority in criminology. In order to summarize this short review, I use some criminological analogy. Kowalski was charged of killing Smith. Prosecutor has no hard evidence that he did it (no murder weapon, fingerprints, witness testimony, etc.), but his charge was based on the strong belief that he could. This was not enough to condemn Kowalski and every judge will pronounce sentence of acquittal.

Sutton's accusations towards Darwin seem to be unjustified. But it cannot be said that his book is completely worthless. Science cannot be an activity absolutely closed for unpopular views. Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994) often underlined that the essential requirement of scientific development is the clashing of many mutually contradictory views.¹⁵ Edward Forbes (1815-1854), for exam-

¹⁴ Letter from Charles Darwin to John Henslow (24 November 1832), in: Nora BARLOW (ed.), **Darwin and Henslow: The Growth of an Idea. Letters, 1831-1860**, University of California Press, Berkeley — Los Angeles 1967, p. 62.

¹⁵ See Grzegorz MALEC, „Naturalizm metodologiczny w sporze ewolucjonizmu z kreacjonizmem w świetle poglądów Paula K. Feyerabenda”, *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 2012, vol. 9, pp. 139-153 [131-154], <http://tiny.pl/xhzfm> (29.03.2016). The first part of the comprehensive study of

ple, was an author of the theory of polarity. Although his hypothesis never gained many advocates, it induced Alfred Russel Wallace to formulate and publish his famous Sarawak Law.

Roy Davies is another author, who claimed that Darwin was a plagiarist.¹⁶ His book was reviewed by Todd Charles Wood, who entitled his article „There Is No Darwin Conspiracy”.¹⁷ The same can be said after reading Sutton’s book.



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Feyerabend’s views was published by Krzysztof J. Kilian (see Krzysztof J. KILIAN, **Poglądy filozoficzne Paula K. Feyerabenda: Cz. 1: Program metodologiczny**, Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, Zielona Góra 2014).

¹⁶ See Roy DAVIES, **The Darwin Conspiracy: Origins of a Scientific Crime**, Golden Square Books Ltd., London 2008.

¹⁷ See Todd Charles WOOD, „There Is No Darwin Conspiracy”, *Answers Research Journal* 2009, vol. 2, pp. 11-20, <http://tiny.pl/g7pmr> (28.03.2016). Further research are published by van Wyhe and Rookmaaker (see John VAN WYHE and Kees ROOKMAAKER, „A New Theory to Explain the Receipt of Wallace’s Ternate Essay by Darwin in 1858”, *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society* 2012, vol. 105, no. 1, pp. 249-252, <http://tiny.pl/g7pm9> [28.03.2016]; John VAN WYHE, **Dispelling the Darkness: Voyage in the Malay Archipelago and the Discovery of Evolution by Wallace and Darwin**, World Scientific Publishing, Singapore 2013).