

AGNOSTIC EVOLUTIONISTS

The taxonomic case against Darwin

By Tom Bethell

The first time I saw Colin Patterson was at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in the spring of 1983. He was in the office of Donn Rosen, a curator in the museum's department of ichthyology, which is the branch of zoology that deals with fishes. Patterson, a paleontologist specializing in fossil fishes, was staring through a binocular microscope at a slice of codfish. In his mid-fifties and balding, he was wearing black corduroys and a smoking-jacket affair of the kind that I associate with the Sloane Square poets of the "angry young man" generation—the generation to which Patterson belongs by age, and perhaps by temperament. I would later spend time with him in London, at the British Museum of Natural History, where he is a senior paleontologist, and at Cambridge University, where we attended a lecture by the famous Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. He often conveyed an impression of moody rebelliousness: he is authoritative, the kind of person others defer to in a discussion; he is habitually pessimistic; and he seemed not at all sanguine about his brushes with other scientists—encounters that by the late 1970s had become quite frequent. Those with whom Patterson has been arguing are mostly paleontologists and evolutionary biologists—researchers and academics who have devoted their careers, their lives, to upholding and fine-tuning the ideas about the origins and the development of species introduced by Charles Darwin in the second half of the nineteenth century. Patterson, it seemed, was no longer sure he believed in evolutionary theory, and he was saying so. Or, perhaps more accurately, he was

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saying that evolutionists—like the creationists they periodically do battle with—are nothing more than believers themselves.

In 1978, Patterson wrote an introductory book called *Evolution*, which was published by the British Museum. A year later, he received a letter from Luther Sunderland, an electrical engineer in upstate New York and a creationist-activist, asking why *Evolution* did not include any "direct illustrations of evolutionary transitions." Patterson's reply included the following:

"You say I should at least "show a photo of the fossil from which each type of organism was derived." I will lay it on the line—there is not one such fossil for which one could make a watertight argument. The reason is that statements about ancestry and descent are not applicable in the fossil record. Is *Archaeopteryx* the ancestor of all birds? Perhaps yes, perhaps no: there is no way of answering the question." It is easy enough to make up stories of how one form gave rise to another, and to find reasons why the stages should be favoured by natural selection. But such stories are not part of science, for there is no way of putting them to the test."

By 1981, Patterson's doubts about evolutionary theory were finding their way to the public. A sentence in a brochure he wrote that year for the British Museum began: "If the theory of evolution is true . . ." In the fall of 1981, Patterson addressed the Systematics Discussion Group at the American Museum of Natural History. Once a month, the group meets in an upstairs classroom at the museum, opposite the dinosaur exhibit hall. The audience in any given month is likely to be made up of museum staff, graduate students from nearby universities, and the occasional amateur like Norman Macbeth, the author of *Darwin Retried*. (Systematics is a science of classification: taxonomists working in systematics study the way taxonomic groups relate

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REPORT 49

Appendage Y.