



Creation Matters

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Debating Dawkins

by Paul G. Humber, M.S.

The title of this article is somewhat of a double-entendre. It describes e-mail correspondence I had recently with Dr. Richard Dawkins, one of the world's leading evolutionists. A primary topic of this correspondence was the February 1986 Oxford Union Debate between evolutionists and creationists. Dr. Dawkins, who now refuses to debate creationists, was himself a participant.

The recent exchanges, involving eight e-mail messages, reveal at least one deception in an account of the debate, affirmed even by Dr. Dawkins himself. Dr. Dawkins, currently a professor at Oxford and the author of many articles and books, and Professor John Maynard Smith debated Professors A.E. Wilder-Smith and Edgar Andrews at Oxford University on February 14th, 1986.

As there seems to be little actual record of this event, suggesting a possible cover-up, I sent an e-mail to Dr. Dawkins on May 28, 2003 asking if he had memory of it. He responded that he did, adding: "And the date (which of course I do not remember) is attested by the following article by the well-known historian of science Professor John Durant."¹ In his reply, Dr. Dawkins added, "Durant also records (which I had forgotten) that Maynard Smith and I won the debate by 198 votes to 15."

Questioning this tally, I wrote back:

Arthur Ernest Wilder-Smith mentions in his 1993 book, *The Time Dimension*, that the Creationists' side received 114 votes out of approximately 300 cast." I asked, "Is it possible that Durant's figure cited above ('15') should be '115?' The total (313) would then be much closer to 300 than Durant's 213 total. In other words, do you think there may be a typo in Durant's figures?"

Dr. Dawkins responded:

I have no idea. It is obviously possible. I do recall, however, that there was something fishy about Wilder-Smith's credentials. The 'About the Author' notes on the back of his books

claims that he studied 'natural sciences' at Oxford. This aroused my suspicions because 'Natural Sciences' is not a recognized degree course at Oxford (though it is at Cambridge). So I made inquiries and the university offices could find no record that anybody of his name had ever been registered at Oxford. If you are interested (I believe he is now dead) you might do well to investigate the authenticity of the three doctorates that he claimed to possess.

On May 30, I wrote back:

Thanks for responding, but I seek additional clarification. Previously, you had written, "Durant also records (which I had forgotten) that Maynard Smith and I won the debate by 198 votes to 15," but this does not seem to be quite accurate. First, there is no space between '1' and '5' in your quotation of Durant, but there is a blank space in Durant's account — suggesting all the more the possibility of a typo.

Dr. Dawkins responded to this point with, "Yes, except that Durant does mention 15 twice in his account."

I also wrote in my May 30 note, "The original numbers might have been 198 to 1(1)5, as I had previously suggested as a possibility. Second, do you have any memory of a landslide victory (numerically speaking) — even if you did not remember the exact numbers?"

The Oxford professor responded, "No, now that I think about it carefully, I do not have a clear memory of a landslide victory. And you are right that I probably would have, if it had been a landslide."

Near the end of my May 30 communication, I wrote, "It's hard to believe that there would be such a minimal accounting of such an interesting event."

To this comment, Dr. Dawkins responded:

Well, I don't actually think it was an

interesting event. I think it was rather an absurd event, and I would not now agree to take part in one like it, for the reasons given in my published correspondence with Stephen Jay Gould. I was younger and less experienced when I agreed to do that Oxford Union debate. Even then, I remember, I agreed to do it only to support a young student of mine who was one of the other speakers in the debate.

Dr. Dawkins continued:

Wilder-Smith I remember as a genial old buffoon, who had no understanding that Maynard Smith was running rings round him. Edgar Andrews cut an altogether less jovial figure. In his speech he tried to come across as a sophisticated scientist and philosopher, NOT as a bible-bashing fundamentalist creationist. But I had a copy of one of his books, and during my speech I started to read passages aloud in order to demonstrate that, in spite of his speech, he was really an old-style, 6-day Genesis, Adam-and-Eve creationist. Naturally that would not appeal to an educated Oxford audience. And Edgar Andrews tried DESPERATELY hard to stop me reading. He stood up to interrupt me repeatedly, probably four or five times, and tried to persuade the President to stop me reading. She repeatedly refused to stop me and I proceeded to read, whereupon Andrews finally gave up and sat with his head in his hands, looking for all the world like a broken man. Bizarre, when you think that all I was doing was reading whole paragraphs (not out of context, therefore) from his own book.

I followed up with additional inquiries to Dr. Dawkins on May 31. My persistence apparently upset him. He started to doubt that he

... continued on p. 2

was “dealing with somebody sane.” He asked:

Are you some kind of obsessive compulsive? I mean, what IS this obsessive interest in an utterly trivial event which happened 15 years ago or whenever it was? Just look at what you have written below. Anyone would think you were Sherlock Holmes on the track of a murder! I am not going to waste any more time. This correspondence is at an end. I replied to you originally out of courtesy, but enough is enough. And no, I am not interested in following up Wilder-Smith’s history. The man is too unimportant to waste time over.”

Exactly what was it that I wrote that upset this Oxford professor? My letter is as follows:

Thanks again for responding. In your most recent note, you wrote (regarding the numbers in Durant’s report), “Yes, except that Durant does mention 15 twice in his account.”

There is a problem with this, also. Neither time in Durant’s report, when fifteen is represented numerically, does it look like your representation for “15.” Not only is there a space between the two digits both times, but the numeral used for one does not look like your “1” or other numerals for one in Durant’s article. You mention (below) having your suspicions aroused about another matter, but I am suspicious that numbers in Durant’s report have been tampered with — especially in view of your not remembering such a landslide.

In this communication, I also offered Dr. Dawkins a fellow scholar’s opinion of Dr. Wilder-Smith:

One of the most remarkable things I discovered was the testimony of Dr. Dean Kenyon, Professor of Biology, San Francisco State University: “Dr. A.E. Wilder-Smith was one of the two or three most important scientists in my life. He very powerfully influenced my intellectual development and my change of opinion on the origin of man. His writings, in particular *The Creation of Life* and *The Scientific Alternative to Neo-Darwinian Evolutionary Theory*, and the discussions I had with him were outstanding and had a great impact on my views and thoughts on origins. He was a courageous, supportive and gracious man, and he is greatly missed.” It’s difficult to know how to put this together with your representation: “Wilder-Smith I remember

as a genial old buffoon....”

The matter of his having studied “natural sciences” at Oxford raised your suspicions, but there does not seem to be a claim that he was working for a degree in Natural Sciences. Surely Oxford teaches “natural sciences,” even if there is no specific degree track for it.

I also pursued the matter of Dr. Dawkins’ reducing Professor Andrews to “a broken man”:

Finally, referring to Professor Edgar Andrews, you wrote, “But I had a copy of one of his books, and during my speech I started to read passages aloud in order to demonstrate that, in spite of his speech, he was really an old-style, 6-day Genesis, Adam-and-Eve creationist.” This raises three related questions: Had there been a prior agreement not to bring religion into the debate? Was what you were reading religious? Might Professor Andrews’s protestations have been along the line that you were doing what you had agreed before the debate not to do?

To Dr. Dawkins’ credit, he subsequently wrote two apologies. In the first (May 31), he said, “I apologise. My last letter was not polite. There is no reason why you shouldn’t be interested in Wilder-Smith et al, if that is how you want to spend your time.” He added, nevertheless, that he thought some of what I was doing was “trivial.”

His second apology was revealing. He wrote:

I should apologise again. You are right that the Durant article looks tampered with. There really is a gap in the middle of the 15, on BOTH occasions where 15 is mentioned. You can verify this by copying it into a word processor such as MS Word. There is definitely a space in the middle. And the 1 is not a 1 at all but an l [*editor*: lower case L], as you can verify by telling the word processor to render it in All Caps. 15 becomes L 5!

In the very next paragraph, he added:

I am persuaded that somebody has tampered with Durant’s article, and I find it extremely bizarre. It cannot be Durant himself of course, for if he had wanted to give a false figure he would obviously just have typed a false figure. But whoever it was, it is weird to do it so INEPTLY. I mean, why use an L when you could use a

proper 1! And why not eliminate the space? It almost looks like a double bluff. Somebody wanted it to LOOK as though it had been tampered with! If I can find John Durant’s address (it’s a while since I heard from him and I know he has moved) I’ll tell him. He’ll be intrigued.

Concerning Professor Andrews, Dr. Dawkins wrote, “No, there DEFINITELY were no prior agreements about what not to bring in, neither religion nor anything else.” And, secondly he added:

Yes of course Andrews’s book was about religion. That was my whole POINT! He had been trying, in his speech, to disguise the fact that his real grounds for being a creationist were not scientific at all, but religious. That was why I was reading from his book, and that was why he was trying to stop me. But there were no prior agreements to violate.

On June 1, I wrote:

Since reading these words, I was sent an account which I had not seen before, written by Dr. Wilder-Smith. In his book, *The Time Dimension* (pp. 19-23), he reports on THE OXFORD UNION DEBATE: “Before the debate commenced **it was agreed in committee** in the Oxford Union’s President’s office that no religious or non-scientific, non-repeatable material should be introduced into the debate. Only repeatable, falsifiable scientific fact would be acceptable. To this point of policy the **representatives of both sides of the House readily and specifically agreed**” (emphasis added). He later continued, “A possible reason for the total coverage of the Oxford Union debate is, maybe, illuminated by Richard Dawkins’ impassioned plea to the audience before the voting took place and after the debate itself was over. Dawkins implored (the word he himself used) the voting public not to give a single vote for the creationist position, for every vote in favor of creationism would, he maintained, be a blot on the escutcheon of the ancient University of Oxford. . . . Since it had been agreed not to let religious factors play any role in the proceedings, Professor Andrews brought up the point of order, that no religious considerations should play any role. The president supported Professor Andrews and Richard Dawkins sat down.”

A “Theory” of the Roman Empire?

On June 18, 2003, I sent another e-mail message to Dr. Dawkins:

There apparently was an audio taping of the 1986 debate, and it is possible that I will be able to get a transcription of it in a month or so. I also have become aware of an article in *Origins* (May 1987, pp.10-11) that reports the outcome as 198 to 115. I have copied some of the *Origins* article below [editor's note: *Origins* quote is in italics below]. Feel free to comment, but I remember that you said you were busy, etc.

On Friday 14th February 1986 the Oxford Union Society (the debating society at Oxford University) held a Debate on the motion: "That the doctrine of creation is more valid than the theory of evolution." One of the speakers opposing the motion was Dr Richard Dawkins. David C. C. Watson was present and now comments on some of his arguments. RD: "The logical status of the evidence for the Theory of Evolution is just the same as the logical status of the evidence that the Roman Empire existed...."

Comment. a) There is no 'theory' that the Roman Empire existed. What has never been disputed as a fact does not require a theory to undergird it, mainly because it depends on human testimony, which is also the basis of true science. If a man is found murdered, there may be twenty different theories based on circumstantial evidence; but if twenty people saw him murdered, and their testimony agrees, it is absurd to speak of the 'theory' of how he died. There were millions of eyewitnesses of the Roman Empire; thousands of them wrote about it, and hundreds of these writings have survived — books, letters, decrees and monuments. In broad outline, their testimonies agree. They could not possibly have been faked; the evidence is indisputable. By contrast, Darwin's theory was hotly disputed from the day of its birth. Why? because nobody has ever observed macro-evolution in any country in any century in any shape or form — no fish becoming frogs, nor any of the fossils of the necessarily numerous transitional species.

I have received no response from Dr. Dawkins.

— PGH

Regarding Professor Maynard Smith, Wilder-Smith said that he “then stood up and said he was glad that I had stuck to pure science in the debate, science which was impeccable, but said that I believed in a small tribal God, which was not acceptable today. He and his friends believed that the whole, big universe was God which was a superior belief to mine. Again, I was attacked not on scientific but on purely religious grounds, which was entirely out of order.”

Wilder-Smith added: “Subsequent efforts on the part of a librarian employed by the University of Oxford to obtain from the Oxford Union my address and a report on the debate were answered to the effect that it knew of no such debate ever having taken place and could give no information as to my person or even my present address. Thus I was obliged to send to the librarian concerned a photocopy of the invitation which the Oxford Union had sent to my correct address in Switzerland and which has in the meantime never changed, together with their formulation of the title of the motion before the House. The librarian obtained my address from friends in Australia as it was not forthcoming from Oxford.”

Perhaps now I can better understand why you are reluctant to debate those who believe that life in

all of its brilliance could not have come about by non-intelligent chance. If there is some truth to what Wilder-Smith wrote, you had a challenging experience in 1986 and do not want it repeated. Should you ever change your mind, please let me know. I also would like to know why the debate numbers were changed from 198-115 to 198-15. Do you have John Durant's email address?

On June 2, Dr. Dawkins wrote regarding the idea that there was some agreement in committee:

That is pure fantasy. A lie. It never happened. In any case, it would have been absurd to reach such an agreement, since the creationist position IS a religious position. How could one POSSIBLY debate it, for or against, without mentioning it? I would never have agreed to such a thing. It would be like agreeing to a debate on pigs and then agreeing not to mention pigs.

Further down in Dawkins' letter, he wrote, “Wilder-Smith's account lies somewhere between fantasy, lies, and paranoid delusion.” Regarding Dr. Wilder-Smith's statement that there was a cover-up of the debate having actually occurred, Dr. Dawkins wrote:

Cover-up? WHAT cover-up? I have agreed that John Durant's figures have been tampered with. But that is nothing to do with the Oxford Union or with Oxford University. That is not a cover-up, that is a dis-

honest individual, some kind of hacker perhaps, with access to a particular non-official web-site.

Regarding the matter of an impassioned plea to the audience, Dawkins wrote:

I may well have said something of the kind, in the course of my speech. It is the sort of thing one does say when asking people to vote in a debate. I do think every single vote in favour of creationism would be a disgrace to Oxford, or indeed to any university. I say so frequently and I shall continue to do so.

As to Dr. Wilder-Smith's statement that “Professor Andrews brought up the point of order, that no religious considerations should play any role” Dawkins responded:

If this is a reference to Andrews's pathetic and undignified attempts to stop me reading from his own book, it was ME the president supported, and ANDREWS who sat down (eventually, after several attempts to stop me speaking). I told you that before. My memory is extremely clear on the matter. I do not remember what he actually said when trying to get the President to stop me, but I remember very clearly that it was he who eventually sat down (with his head in his hands).

I would like to interject an editorial comment here. Dr. Wilder-Smith's book was written about six years after the event. Dr. Dawkins,

who initially reported the debate result as 198 to 15, eventually affirmed that he did not remember such a landslide. If his memory was so fuzzy about the debate outcome, how can one be sure of his “extremely clear” memory of a lesser aspect? In our email exchange he is writing, not six years after, but seventeen years after the event!

In response to Dr. Wilder-Smith’s recollection of Professor Maynard Smith’s words (“Regarding Professor Maynard Smith, Wilder-Smith said that he ‘then stood up and said he was glad that I had stuck to pure science in the debate, science which was impeccable, but said that I believed in a small tribal God, which was not acceptable today’”), Dawkins wrote:

I don’t remember, but it is plausible that Maynard Smith might have said something like this in passing, before getting on to the main part of his speech. It is not an ‘attack’ but a highly justified point. I would gladly make it myself, any time.

In response to Wilder-Smith’s statement, “He and his friends believed that the whole, big universe was God which was a superior belief to mine. Again, I was attacked not on scientific but on purely religious grounds, which was entirely out of order,” Dawkins wrote:

I do not remember in detail what Maynard Smith said but, as one of the world’s leading scientists, it is inconceivable that he would have devoted more than a small proportion of his speech to such matters, if any. If he did, it certainly would not have been out of order.”

In answer to the words of Wilder-Smith, “Subsequent efforts on the part of a librarian employed by the University of Oxford to obtain from the Oxford Union my address and a report on the debate were answered to the effect that it knew of no such debate ever having taken place and could give no information as to my person or even my present address,” Dawkins wrote:

That is utterly ridiculous. Such debates are a matter of record, and this debate was nothing out of the ordinary. The very idea that records were deliberately suppressed suggests a kind of paranoid vanity on Wilder-Smith’s part. Why would anyone WANT to suppress anything so trivial as his name? Why would anyone be so naïve as to think you COULD suppress an event which was attended by hundreds of people, and very probably reported in the university newspaper. If the library was unable to find some record or other, Wilder-

Smith should simply have asked them to look again. Librarians do sometimes file things in the wrong place. Things go missing. When that happens, you look somewhere else. To conclude from the fact that somebody couldn’t FIND something that there has been a conspiracy to SUPPRESS it is classic paranoia.

Again, I would like to interject some comments. One is hard-pressed to find any reference to this event except in Durant’s faulty website and in Dr. Wilder-Smith’s book. (See sidebar, A “Theory” of the Roman Empire.) I have contacted the Oxford Union and received the following response:

Your e-mail to the Union regarding the debate in 1986 has been forwarded on to me and I have been asked to get in touch. Unfortunately we won’t have any of the information you require on the debate, indeed it sounds like you have more than we do. The only records kept of debates are the title, speakers’ names and result. We don’t hold any other information such as reports or fliers (there wouldn’t have been any, only the title of the debate published in the term card). Unfortunately I can’t even give you the result for this debate. The results are noted in a large minute book which spans several years. I’m sorry to say that the minute book in question was either lost or stolen many years ago, which is a great pity. I’m sorry the Union can’t be of any help to you. If there is anything else though you feel I might be able to help with then please do not hesitate to get in touch.

As to Dr. Dawkins’ comment about paranoia, why did he himself feel compelled impassionedly to plea for a zero vote on the creation side? He used the notion of *suppression* four times and asked why would people be motivated to do this. The Apostle Paul offers an answer (Romans 1:18). The facts seem to be that the record book is missing and the numbers in Durant’s report are false. I am not in a position to judge who did what or when, but much of the information that should be available to the public is misleading.

In my June 1 e-mail to Dr. Dawkins I also wrote, “Perhaps now I can better understand why you are reluctant to debate those who believe that life in all of its brilliance could not have come about by non-intelligent chance.” He responded:

If you seriously think that evolution is equivalent to ‘non-intelligent chance’ you have a lot of learning to do. May I recommend that you read

something about evolution before making such ill-informed statements. I have devoted three of my books (*The Blind Watchmaker*, *River Out of Eden*, and *Climbing Mount Improbable*) to explaining that evolution by natural selection is the very OPPOSITE of a chance process.

Professor Dawkins also, apparently, does not allow that there are any sound scientific arguments on the creation side. I wrote him again offering to send him “more than 20,”³ but he did not respond.

In summary, an Oxford Union Debate occurred on February 14, 1986. The Oxford Union has little if any institutional record of it. Despite Dr. Dawkins’ plea, there were apparently 115 votes for the creation position (more than 37%). This was done near Darwin’s turf. Imagine flat-earthers going to NASA and convincing over 37% of the scientists there that the earth is flat. Maybe creation science is not as closely akin to flat-earthism as Dr. Dawkins supposes (see his *Free Inquiry* article⁴). If unwilling to receive what I offered him in support of creation science, perhaps he should listen more closely to what knowledgeable creation scientists are saying.

Notes

¹ On June 10, 2003, I inquired of Dr. Dawkins if he objected to my quoting him in an article. He wrote back on the same day, “I do not object.”

² Durant, J. n.d. A critical-historical perspective on the argument about evolution and creation. *Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion*, AAAS, www.aaas.org/spp/dser/evolution/perspectives/durant.shtml.

³ Humber, P. 2003. Comparing creation and evolution. *Creation Matters* 8(2):5-8. Reprints are available at www.creationresearch.org/creation_matters/reprints.htm

⁴ Dawkins, R. 2003. Why I won’t debate creationists. *Free Inquiry* 23(1)

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