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The triumph of the Dawsonian method

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ABSTRACT

Piltdown Man was the most notable forgery in 20th Century science. It was published in 1913 and the falsification was not uncovered until 1953. The forger was the amateur archaeologist Charles Dawson (1864–1916). Dawson 'found' or was present at the discovery of every fragment of Piltdown Man. Few have appreciated Dawson's skill; he did much more than merely provide material that fitted with prevalent theories of human evolution. He chose the type locality on private land, not generally accessible. Dawson was ostracized from the local amateur archaeological community, the group most likely to collect the Piltdown site without supervision. Finds were described by the leading palaeontologist in Britain, A.S. Woodward, whose expertise was in lower vertebrates. The leading palaeoanthropologists in Britain, Arthur Keith and G.E. Smith, mainly worked with casts and wasted energies debating theoretical issues. Yet Dawson's true genius was in presenting British palaeoanthropology with just what it wanted, a large-brained, Pliocene 'missing link'.

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1. Introduction

"Digging, I lay my hand on things. I discover an immediacy which disappears when the find becomes official and is displayed behind glass" (Golding, 1965, p. 66).

In August 1916, one hundred years ago, Charles Dawson (1864-1916), a successful solicitor in Sussex, died. At the time of his death he was the leading light among amateur palaeontologists and archaeologists in the British Isles, a fellow of both the Geological Society and the Society of Antiquaries, and discoverer of Piltdown Man, then the oldest fossil man known. He merited obituaries in the Geological Magazine (Woodward, 1916) and Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society (Harker, 1917). He had been nominated for Fellowship of the Royal Society (Walsh, 1996; Russell, 2003, 2012), but had not been elected at the time of his death. Arthur Smith Woodward, Keeper of Geology at the British Museum (Natural History), paid tribute to his friend: "Charles Dawson was one of those restless people, of inquiring mind, who take a curious interest in everything around them" (Woodward, 1948, p. 5); "To a capacity for taking pains, with endless patience, he added a sharpness of sight that never overlooked anything of importance ... [he was] in constant friendly communication with a wide circle

Piltdown Man (Figs. 1-3), Eoanthropus dawsoni, unveiled at a meeting of the Geological Society in London on 18 December, 1912, and described and published the following year (Dawson and Woodward, 1913), was the jewel in the crown of British palaeoanthropology for 40 years, until exposed as a forgery in the early 1950s (Weiner et al., 1953, 1955; Weiner, 1955). Instead of being a Late Pliocene or Early Pleistocene 'missing link' (Gee, 2013), Piltdown Man was shown to be a palaeoanthropological Irish Stew, mixing parts of a thick-skulled, modern Homo sapiens with an orang-utan. Yet even as a known forgery, Piltdown Man continues to exert a tremendous fascination for many. Books continue to be published on the hoax or, at least, discussing its implications for science (some 21st Century titles include Gribbin and Cherfas, 2001; Russell, 2003, 2012; Gundling, 2005; Stringer, 2006, 2011; Falk, 2011; Reader, 2011; Gee, 2013), including a 50th anniversary reprint of Weiner (2003). There are two Piltdown forgery bibliographies current online (Turrittin, 2006; Bate, 2014).

It now seems an incontrovertible fact that the perpetrator of the forgery was Piltdown Man's 'discoverer', Charles Dawson, most probably working alone, who died almost 100 years ago. Dawson found all the sites that yielded Piltdown Man and associated fossils, never divulged the location of the so-called Piltdown II site near Sheffield Park in Sussex, and was the only person present when all the remains were collected. After Dawson's death, no further remains were discovered despite Woodward's continuing efforts. Numerous accounts for the past 60+ years have speculated on

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of professional scientific men who helped him make the best use of his material" (Woodward, 1916, p. 477).

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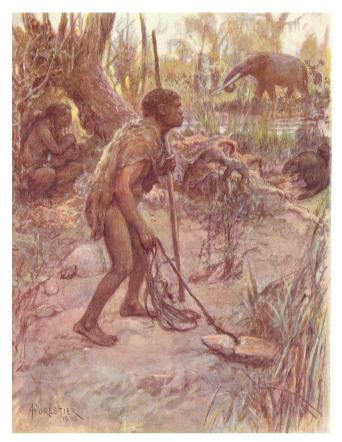


Fig. 1. Piltdown Man restored. "The first Englishman Piltdown, Sussex" (after Baikie, 1928, frontispiece). With a spear in one hand and the 'cricket bat' (Dawson and Woodward, 1915) on a rope in the other, Piltdown Man stalks a beaver, *Castor* sp., by the banks of the ancient River Ouse.



Fig. 2. Piltdown Man duplicated. A set of casts of the Piltdown Man skull and jaw fragments from the Piltdown I site, on display at Teylers Museum, Haarlem, the Netherlands (after Donovan, 2015a, Fig. 2). Sets of casts were sold on behalf of the British Museum (Natural History).

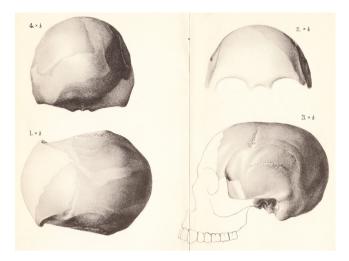


Fig. 3. Piltdown Man skull. Four views of a model restored by Woodward (after Dawson and Woodward, 1913, pl. 18).

other possible perpetrators of the hoax. Those that did not perceive Dawson as the mastermind behind Piltdown Man saw him as fooled either by a leading scientific brain with a grudge (for example, Millar, 1972; Gardiner, 2003; Stringer, 2012) or the dupe of, for example, a practical joke by local resident Arthur Conan Doyle or Dawson's own excavator, Venus Hargreaves (Walsh, 1996; Russell, 2003, 2012). Yet Dawson was most likely the Piltdown hoaxer because the case against him is strong and all other suggestions of involvement that have been made are weak to nonsensical. Most of the other suspects were accused without any admissible evidence, yet the indications of Dawson's involvement as a serial archaeological forger are overwhelming. This was Dawson's genius that few have admitted - he was a master of a shadowy side to scientific 'research' which allowed him to fool the top experts in Britain while he was alive (but not necessarily all palaeoanthropologists overseas; Bowler, 1986; Spencer, 1990a,b) and produce a forgery that not only had sufficient impetus to remain current for almost 40 years, but to continue to fascinate scientists into the 21st Century.

Dawson has not received the recognition that he deserves; he was the greatest scientific forger of the 20th Century who fooled many of the Great and the Good for 40 years. Piltdown Man was not a one off, as Dawson was perpetrator of many forgeries and plagiarisms in archaeology and geology (Walsh, 1996; Russell, 2003, 2012), but Piltdown Man was his pinnacle that should, probably would have gained him a Fellowship of the Royal Society were it not for his untimely death. The brilliance of this forgery, and particularly his method, has been ignored, surely in part because he showed himself, a country solicitor with no formal scientific training, better than equal to the best brains in palaeoanthropology. On the centenary of Dawson's death, and with apologies to Michael Ghiselin (1969), I celebrate herein the cleverness, audacity and luck that culminated in Piltdown Man - the triumph of the Dawsonian Method. I consider this method to have five principal components: Dawson's considerable experience in successfully implementing archaeological and scientific hoaxes; his antagonism of the local amateur community; his careful choice of a distinguished scientist to support his position; his cautious selection of the type locality, away from prying eyes; and his good timing, what we might less generously call Dawson's luck.

2. Forgeries and plagiarisms

Charles Dawson's many fraudulent contributions to academia have been exposed particularly by two authors, John Evangelist

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