

The Piltdown Forgery

Fiftieth anniversary edition with a new introduction and afterword by Chris Stringer
J. S. Weiner

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Paleoanthropology is a field of study well accustomed to controversy, heated arguments, and long stories of collaborations turned friendships, that are formed and fall apart as new and interesting discoveries take place. Nowadays, when a new hominin species is discovered, the news transcends the scientific and academic spheres and the fossils are even nicknamed after trendy science-fiction characters. Few such discoveries though, enjoy such a long-lasting and widespread attention as *Eoanthropus dawsoni*, more commonly known as Piltdown Man. Less so if they are eventually found to be a hoax.

Piltdown Man has been the subject of many papers and articles not only in specialized journals, but also in magazines that feature science-related news tailored for the general public, and thus, a very broad range of readers know the basics of the story: Charles Dawson, a lawyer and amateur archaeologist, found fragments of fossil bones and implements in a gravel bed in Sussex, and scholars based in some of the most reputable English institutions presented it to the scientific community in 1912, as a hominin from the Pliocene. Some forty years later, it was discovered that the “hominin’s” jaw was that of an ape (orang-utan) and the cranium, while human, was much younger than previously thought. Moreover, all remains had been artificially treated to make them look older than they were. This book is aimed at all of those who, whether working in this field or not, have ever wondered who was responsible for the forgery and hoax.

The Piltdown Forgery is the story of how the so-called “Dawn Man of Piltdown” was shown to be a fake. The text was originally written in 1955, by J. S. Weiner, a physical anthropologist from the University of Oxford, who together with K. Oakley (British Museum) and W. Le Gros Clark (University of Oxford), undertook a detailed and close examination using what—in the 1950s—were novel scientific analyses. These confirmed that Piltdown man did not fit among the different species in the human evolutionary tree because Piltdown was not a real fossil, but a very carefully prepared fraud.

The book is divided into two parts. The first one focuses on a re-examination of the Piltdown remains, and it accurately details each and every analysis performed, the results, and the significance of the evaluation of the pieces. In the second part, the author goes back in time and looks at how the discoveries took place, who the characters implicated in the archaeological work were, the subsequent research and reconstructions, what the motives of the perpetrator could have been, and, of course, “who was he?”

Weiner explains how the initial idea of re-studying the remains became a scientific research project, shortly after a meeting on Fossil Man, in London in 1953, and how the investigation developed. The reconstruction of the events from 1908, when the first findings occurred, until Charles Dawson’s death in 1916 is equally

detailed and accurate, clearly displaying the thoroughness of Weiner's study. This is complemented with information obtained from some of the main characters in the story, who were still alive when Weiner conducted his research (e.g., Teilhard de Chardin and Sir Arthur Keith, both died in 1955). The result is the most exhaustive account to date, as the cover of the book rightly stresses, of the most famous and successful hoax in science.

The reader is advised to not to expect Weiner's finger to point directly at the prankster, thus solving the mystery that has kept people interested in the subject. Despite the accurate and meticulous reconstruction of events, scientific beliefs, and friendships and animosities between the different characters, Weiner takes no stand in choosing who managed to earn the most points to take the blame.

On the one hand, perhaps that attitude is intentional, as Weiner aims to coherently explain a large array of factors that need to be considered in the least biased way: scholars implicated, their specific fields of research, Dawson's personal history, interests, amateur formation, links with the scientific community, the local associations and bodies related to the field, supporters of the authenticity of the discovery, its detractors, and those who moved from one camp to the other as the remains of three different Piltdown men came to light. The detail is so rich that I have to admit that at one point I was completely convinced that it had all been fabricated by Charles Dawson, in association with Arthur Smith Woodward and Teilhard de Chardin, in part because Dawson mentioned to Smith Woodward—in a note dated May 27, 1912—the presence of the French priest (de Chardin) in the work at the gravel pit, and added "He is quite safe."

On the other hand, Weiner can also be seen as taking sides in the affair. Every time he writes something that makes one leap to attention and think, "Yes! Dawson did it!," he cautions the reader that there are other issues that must be taken into account, and that no evidence is so clear as to signal anyone in particular. His perspective is maintained, even in the context of the episode in the summer of 1913, when Dawson was caught red-handed—staining pieces of bone in his office—by Captain St. Barbe. Dawson's actions are characterized as those done to harden the bone fragments, and Weiner mentions that Smith Woodward was aware of it. Why Dawson also stained the flint implements is then a complete mystery, one of the several in this story that will probably remain unanswered.

Indeed, this type of question abounds in the Piltdown mystery, and more so, as further details come to light: what prevented Sam Woodhead—the Uckfield Public Analyst and a good friend of Dawson's—from performing a chemical examination of the jaw (only the cranium was examined)? Why was the second set of fossil discoveries so readily accepted even when Dawson did not reveal their exact original location? And why did Dawson buy Castle Lodge and evict the Sussex Archaeological Society (of which he was a member), making himself truly unpopular socially and in a rather important official local circle?—which was probably why the Piltdown discoveries were completely ignored in the relevant chronicles of the time. The latter question may sound trivial, but it is very significant when trying to understand Dawson's eagerness to receive the recognition he thought he deserved. It may be important to note at this point that Piltdown Man was not his only "discovery" and that up to thirty-eight other "findings" of his have been proved to be hoaxes. Or was Piltdown a set-up with Dawson as an easy victim?

Weiner mentions the existence of the Ightham Circle, a group of amateurs interested in paleoanthropology who were convinced that there must have been a Pliocene Man, even if they had no solid proof of it. He also quotes Dawson writing to Smith Woodward in relation to some discoveries at Piltdown, as saying "How is

that for Heidelberg?" This is a clear reference to the mandible found in the Rösch sandpit in Mauer, near Heidelberg in 1907, from which Schoentensack proposed the species *Homo heidelbergensis*. Perhaps these facts merit more careful consideration than they have been heretofore granted, even by Weiner. Taking into account the early 20th century European international relations and politics, which would soon develop into World War I, one can safely guess that the new German fossil increased the longing for the discovery of Pliocene Man in England and the conviction that it was just a matter of time. Work at Barkham Manor, where the Piltdown gravel bed is located, started just a year later, in 1908.

The afterword by Chris Stringer is an excellent piece which analyzes the possible motives and likely culprits, and provides further details, such as the account of Sam Woodhead's widow, who remembers Dawson bringing bones to her husband and asking him how they could be made to look more ancient.

Overall, I found *The Piltdown Forgery* a good and very informative read. While the details of the chemical analyses described in the first chapters are difficult to follow for the non-specialist, and somewhat tedious, I very much enjoyed the reconstruction and piecing together of the different parts of the huge puzzle of the milieu in which the Piltdown discoveries took place. I wonder if my personal impression of the book would be different if Weiner had clearly singled out someone (or a group of people) as the culprit. Even though he did not do so, I could not help but make up my mind about who I think is the ultimate perpetrator. In fact, it is known that when Weiner visited Washington, D.C. in 1981, to give a lecture at Georgetown University regarding S. Jay Gould's accusation that the whole affair should be blamed on Teilhard de Chardin, he explicitly and clearly said that he was convinced that Dawson was the sole culprit, but he never put such a statement in print.

I cannot help wondering if Weiner may have overlooked a detail or two. Perhaps there are circumstances that were not considered in Weiner's investigation. Or the real perpetrator managed to conceal his identity. Knowing more details could produce a chain reaction that would point to someone else as the true author of the hoax. Clearly, Piltdown Man is set to be a mystery for years to come.