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Department of Palaeontology

Luther D Sunderland,
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USA

Your reference

Our reference

Date 10th April 1979

Dear Mr Sunderland,

Thanks for your letter of 5th March, and your kind words about the Museum and my book. I held off answering you for a couple of weeks, in case the artwork you mention in your letter should turn up, but it hasn't.

I fully agree with your comments on the lack of direct illustration of evolutionary transitions in my book. If I knew of any, fossil or living, I would certainly have included them. You suggest that an artist should be asked to visualise such transformations, but where would he get the information from? I could not, honestly, provide it, and if I were to leave it to artistic licence, would that not mislead the reader?

I wrote the text of my book four years ago. If I were to write it now, I think the book would be rather different. Gradualism is a concept I believe in, not just because of Darwin's authority, but because my understanding of genetics seems to demand it. Yet Gould and the American Museum people are hard to contradict when they say that there are no transitional fossils. As a palaeontologist myself, I am much occupied with the philosophical problems of identifying ancestral forms in the fossil record. You say that I should at least 'show a photo of the fossil from which each type 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.

So, much as I should like to oblige you by jumping to the defence of gradualism, and fleshing out the transitions between the major types of animals and plants, I find myself a bit short of the intellectual justification necessary for the job.

Thanks again for writing.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Patterson

An amazing admission by an honest evolutionist, of the lack of fossil evidence to support the theory of evolution. Dr. Patterson was at the time in charge of the British Museum's fossil collection—the largest fossil collection in the world!