

The historical novel, an excellent entrée into the study of history, is quite in vogue these days. But in this fascinating new novel by Christina Eastwood that deals with the origin of evolutionism, a set of characters appear that one virtually never sees in this genre: English Particular Baptists. What a delight to read and see the depictions of these men and women about whom I have written at great length and thought much more. I was especially delighted that the missionary William Ward, the bicentennial of whose death is being remembered this year (he died in 1823), has a major role in this book. Highly recommended for young adults.

—Michael A.G. Azad Haykin

Professor of Church History

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Dr Darwin's
ASSISTANT

Dr Darwin's ASSISTANT

Christina Eastwood



40 Beansburn, Kilmarknock, Scotland

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To Lucy Hope Jones

There's only one blessing, there's only one song,
There's only one path we can travel along,
There's only one road up to heaven above,
It's the road that was opened by Jesus' great love.
O may that sweet blessing now rest on your head,
And may that safe path be the one that you tread.
O come to the Saviour, may He be your song,
And own Him your Captain through all your life long.

With love from
Nain

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Chapter one

FULL STREET

1859 and 1792



Hear him ye Senates! hear this truth sublime,
“He, who allows oppression, shares the crime.”

*(Erasmus Darwin, The Botanic Garden. Part II.
Containing The Loves of the Plants. A Poem.
With Philosophical Notes.)*

A hideous mantle clock is ticking away the seconds of 1859 and of the eighty-fourth year of my life. The fire is blazing; I feel the cold intensely these days. The small table beside me is littered with missionary magazines and pamphlets and thinly veiled appeals; appeals for funds for evangelising chimney-sweeps and guttersnipes; for Bibles for gypsies, road menders, mill workers and for special workhouse editions.

I close the well-bound new book, this so-called *Origin of Species*, and put it down on the side table with a bang that sends *Missionary Labours Among the Irish Navvies* and *Gospel Tidings for Tenement Dwellers* fluttering down to the hearthrug. I subscribe to all these things as liberally as I can, I think to myself testily. Why have they allowed this weed to flourish among them? Don't they see it will poison their efforts; destroy their message? What's the use in telling the canal boatman, "Jesus died for your sin" if all the other voices have already convinced him there is no such thing? What's the use if all the other voices – the squire and the magistrate, the don and the parson – have already convinced him that human beings are only the pinnacle of creation in the sense that they have fought and struggled and destroyed until everything else is beneath them? If he is already convinced that this hideous progress by slaughter is right – the only right? In all this time why have not they ...?

They? We ...? I ...? Matthew Batchelor? I pause, even in the flow of my righteous grumpiness: I have known this idea to be utterly false for over sixty years.

I take up the book again: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the*

Struggle for Life by my old master's grandson, lent to me by my very young friend, the vicar. "Well reasoned, interesting research. Promising young scientist, very promising. You'll enjoy it – being a medical man yourself."

He seemed surprised when I told him I'd read it already in the poetic version by the author's grandfather and I'd considered it stuff and nonsense for the best part of my over-long life. Then I had to apologise for my gruffness and blame it on my gouty foot.

I feel bad tempered still. I know what I ought to do and my tired old body revolts against the thought of so much labour. With difficulty I haul myself out of the fireside chair. I reach for my stick and hobble to the huge old writing desk that comes, like me, from another era. I gather pens, paper, ink. I rummage in the bookcase and dig out my old master's books of poems. If I have to write I'll head every single chapter with a quotation from his verbose, pompous, overblown verses, I think to myself irritably. Then I wonder if I can write anything now other than, "Two spoonfuls to be taken in water twice daily ... dissolve the powder in liquid and administer as required ..."

I dip my pen in the inkwell, determined to make a start. Briefly, I commit the undertaking to God, knowing that only He can give me the strength to complete what I should have begun years ago. I gather my scattered thoughts for a moment and to my surprise the old characters and personalities from the far distant past come crowding into clear focus in my mind. I shake my head, almost in disbelief. Then my pen begins to crawl its way slowly across the paper. In the wavering hand of

an old, old man, I trace out the most important episode in my life and the blank sheets start to teem with life.



It was comfortable in the kitchen in Full Street despite a wild March gale howling down the chimney and the cold rain hurling itself at the windows. Stout Mrs B had been baking and I was sampling the results. I was at that heroic age when somehow a lad is always hungry and kindly Mrs B was understanding. She was well aware from personal experience that those who grow up without much food are apt to be fond of it all their life. And I had certainly grown up in a situation where there was no food to spare.

My late grandmother had lived in the poorest part of Derby town, not far from Mrs B's own birthplace. Since the time she had lost my grandfather and all her money with him, my grandmother had had a hard life. When, after the death of my own parents at a young age, I joined Grannie in the little backstreet, my life was hard too. Hearty meals were not frequent. As a result, Mrs B's cooking was one of life's great joys to me now that I lived and worked at the third house in Derby's happily named Full Street. Mrs B never begrudged me my food and this evening was no exception. Besides I had been at the meeting at County Hall that evening. She had not. She wanted all the particulars.

"And was there really a black man on the platform, Matt?" she asked for the hundredth time, "and did he talk to the meeting?"

I nodded, my mouth too full of Mrs B's succulent and rich fruit cake to answer politely for a moment. "Yes," I said when the mouthful was properly demolished, "Mr O-*laud*-ah Equ-i-a-no," (I was rather proud of the way this rolled off my tongue) "Mr Olaudah Equiano, and he told us ..." I came to a sudden halt.

"Go on," she prompted eagerly, for Mrs B was a great one for news and gossip and it would increase her stock with Dr Erasmus Darwin's other servants, and those of our neighbours, if she could recount some of what this most unusual visitor to Derby had said. But all at once I felt sick and pushed away the plate of cake. The former slave's too vivid account of what he had endured had been nauseating. Quickly, I tried to shut his descriptions of the stench and festering human filth of a slave ship out of my mind but it was too late: my stomach was churning. Now the sight of food, even Mrs B's cake, became revolting.

"I can't," I groaned. "It was vile ... disgusting – I feel queasy just remembering it."

"You have gone a funny colour, Matt," she admitted. "Here! You can go outside if you're going to be sick – not in my nice clean kitchen, if you please!"

I stood up obediently to leave although the bilious feeling in my stomach was passing now. Suddenly, above the howling of the wind in the chimney a sepulchral voice spoke from the fireplace, "Cook, s-send M-Matthew to m-me; I need a w-word with him – oh, and some m-more coal in my s-s-s-s-study."

I jumped at the disembodied voice. I was still not quite used to the sudden sound of my employer speaking through

his invention, a tube which communicated from his study to the kitchen. Pulling myself together I grabbed the coal scuttle which fortunately was already filled and waiting. "I'll take it, Mrs B," I said and set off for Dr Darwin's study.

I tapped on the study door and received an immediate summons to come in. The Doctor was sitting at his round writing table, his huge bulk filling and overflowing the corner chair on which he sat. He was engrossed in his writing, his right arm resting on a plump cushion for support. I took the coal scuttle over to the fireplace. The high wind had made the fire burn briskly and now all that remained was a bed of red glowing embers. I mended the fire carefully, layering on the coal with plenty of gaps. The wind sucked the smoke that rose from the new coals straight upwards and within seconds bright flames were licking at the gasses that came off the black lumps. I stood back, quietly. The Doctor's huge full-bottomed wig still bent over the slanted writing board and I waited until he sanded the paper carefully and then pushed back his overloaded chair.

"M-Matthew," he began, "the m-meeting at County Hall this evening about the p-petition to p-parliament for the abolition of the s-slave t-trade, was it well attended?"

"O yes, indeed, Sir," I replied eagerly. "Mr Strutt was in the chair, Mr Evans seconded the motion and the Hall was packed to the doors."

"D-did you g-get it all d-down in shorthand?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied proudly for I had mastered his system for note-taking completely. "I have it here," and I reached into my pocket for the neatly folded paper.

“Excellent!” he replied, “I was d-disappointed n-not to get b-back from my call to poor Mr B-Boothby in t-time but he is my p-patient – and you have the n-notes so no harm is d-done.” He ran his eye over the pages I had given him. “Excellent,” he repeated. “B-but now you m-must take c-care, M-Matthew. T-too m-much p-proficiency in short-hand can ruin your s-spelling in l-long-hand if you are n-not c-careful.” He continued to read the paper rapidly. “Ah, g-good,” he said warmly. “W-Ward from the *D-Derby M-Mercury* also addressed the m-meeting. He will g-go f-far that young m-man.” Then with an abrupt change of subject he continued, “N-now, M-Matthew, the d-dispensary t-tomorrow: Dr B-Berridge will be t-taking m-my p-place. He w-will be d-doing sm-mallpox in-noculations f-free of charge and I want you t-to ...”

I listened carefully to my instructions. I felt important working at the dispensary where Derby’s sick and poor could get prescriptions and advice for free: it gave me a certain standing in the town.

Having once numbered among Derby’s poor myself, I knew exactly how valuable the dispensary was. And for the same reason I craved any sort of standing in Derby. For I was bent on bettering myself. My friend William Ward, of whom the Doctor had just so warmly approved, had risen from poverty himself to the respected position of newspaper editor at the precocious age of eighteen. Young as I was, I was keen to imitate him in my chosen field.



The *Derby Mercury*, of which Will was editor, was owned by the printer, Mr Drury. He had been anxious, when he first promoted Will to the post of editor, about Will's rather radical articles, for under Will's editorship the *Mercury* ran an anti-slavery piece in almost every issue, sometimes with details as gruesome as those that had made me feel so sick that evening. Far from driving readers away, however, the *Mercury's* circulation had soared under Will's hand. Any misgivings Mr Drury might have had about his readers' appetite for drinking in abolitionist propaganda with their morning tea were allayed.

Will was fearless in pursuit of the abolitionist cause and indeed of any other good cause that came his way. He did not care where that often dangerous pursuit led him and he dragged me with him whether I wanted or no. Will attended the little Particular Baptist chapel in the town and like me they must have wondered what to do with him at times. But no one with a kind heart or a love for his fellow man could help admiring Will Ward. No wonder the Baptists kept on welcoming him, for they were kindly people themselves, though more cautious than Will: he would charge into any good cause without worrying about where it would lead or who might be charging with him. But the *Mercury* did well with Will at the helm so Mr Drury gave him a free hand. In the end this led to the most monumental trouble for one newspaper though not for the *Mercury* – but I'm running ahead of myself.

Nowadays, if you walk down Agard Street, you cannot fail to notice the Baptist chapel. But at this date the building was half finished and draughty. The low benches, acquired from

some former schoolroom, were unyielding and the chapel was almost bare of other furniture. But that didn't matter to us. We were young in any case. The older members must have found the benches uncomfortable but I don't remember ever hearing anyone complain. Mr Archer, the dignified banker, was generally the preacher so he just stood up – which was just as well. With his long legs, if he sat on one of the benches, his knees would have bumped his chin. And our singing had kept us warm, too, that past winter.

It was mainly for the singing that I had attached myself to the Particular Baptists (I considered their ideas rather narrow) – and my friendship with the up and coming Will, of course. Do you know *Rippon's Selection*? It was a brand new hymn book in those days. Fortified with the brief résumé of how to read musical notation that is printed just inside the front cover, we sang with a gusto that was the envy of every other non-conformist chapel in Derby. No mumbling, quavering, chilly stuff for us! There might have been higher intellectual standards and more up-to-date preaching to be found at Derby's other Dissenting chapels, especially Friargate, but they could not sing half as well as the Agard Street congregation! Three or even four real parts – we would have raised the roof if there had been much of a roof to raise. “How Firm a Foundation, Ye Saints of the Lord,” you should have heard us! I know for a fact that on the particular evening I'm going to tell you about there were several people standing outside just to listen to us – which makes what happened that evening all the more strange.

It was not long after Olaudah Equiano's visit and we were at the prayer meeting. The chapel was quite crowded but one

bench at the back was still empty. A big flat basket of provisions stood on it. One of the farmers' wives had brought it to quietly distribute the contents to some of the poorer members after the service. I distinctly remember walking past it and smelling the scent of new bread and a bunch of daffodils mingled with a slight whiff of Derby cheese. It brought back childhood memories. The timely arrival of exactly the same kind of generous baskets had kept Grannie and me from painful hunger not so many years ago. I settled down on my corner of the bench next to Will, waiting for Mr Archer. The memory stirred by sight of the basket served to strengthen my determination never again to be in such dire need if I could help it.

Mr Archer was a successful banker but he was no idler. Sometimes when it came to the week-night prayer meeting you could tell he was exhausted. Often he came straight from his ledgers and account-books to the service without even time for a meal. But on this dark, dreary evening there was not a trace of weariness about him: he was agog, that's the only way to describe it, with the news he had just had from Northampton.

"Four hundred million of our fellow men throughout the world in a state of pagan darkness!" he agonised. "All perishing! What pains and expense does it not deserve to rescue at least some out of so many millions from ruin! And now, at last, we can all help to do something about it." And he actually waved the paper that he had in his hand. In the light of the oil lamp by the improvised pulpit I could see he was beaming with joy. "In Northampton this very week, there has been an association meeting. Mr Ryland, Mr Hogg, Mr Fuller, Mr Sutcliffe," these

were the leading ministers of the denomination, “they have founded a society called,” he glanced down at the paper, “called The Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen.”

I knew that the idea for such a society had been discussed and discussed and discussed. I also knew that Mr Archer had been frustrated that it never got any further than discussion. But now a real, solid step had been taken: no wonder he was so delighted.

Will, keen on societies of all sorts, leaned forward on our rickety bench to listen – here was something that might go in the *Mercury*. Mr Archer went on, “Do we really believe the gospel? And yet we are prepared to allow the greater part of the world to remain in ignorance! Surely, if we ourselves have known the healing power of the gospel, if we know the Saviour, we should long for Him to be *universally* known.”

“If we know the Saviour ...” Phrases like that – and there were quite a few of them when Mr Archer was preaching – always gave me an odd feeling. What did it mean, this “know the Saviour”? Was there was a hole in my experience; something those around me had that I did not have, perhaps? I looked round the chapel at the mix of people in the congregation. There was scarcely a stratum of Derby society that was unrepresented, from threadbare silk weaver to prosperous banker. No, I dismissed the thought. Surely it was just some sort of expression, a shorthand figure that indicated all the various qualities of someone who went to chapel as I did.

Will was scribbling away now; he was as fast at shorthand as I and eager to get the details right for the newspaper. Mr

Archer's words began to appear on Will's paper in a steady stream, "The soul of a Hindu or an African is surely *the same as mine* – capable of enjoying God's favour and love, capable of communing with Him, glorifying Him, and being happy in His smile for ever! How then can I ignore him?" That would go down well with the *Mercury's* abolitionist readers.

There was absolute silence in the motley congregation as we listened engrossed. In fact, it was this silence which made me almost sure that I heard something – like a sigh – at the back of the chapel. But if I had heard anything it passed from my mind as Mr Archer went on to explain what the Society proposed to do and how even we at the chapel could all help. Volunteers were to be sought who would become missionaries. The Society would raise money to send them to wherever on earth it was thought that there was most need and to provide for them while they were out there. "If God has blessed us with much earthly substance, let us offer free-heartedly to the Lord what is in reality His," entreated Mr Archer earnestly.

I looked round again as he spoke. The more shabby among us did not have much "earthly substance". They were probably wondering how they were going to help if subscriptions were needed. Dr Darwin was a kind employer but my wages were almost non-existent. It did not normally concern me that not much in the way of actual cash came my way. I was learning from the doctor all the time and it was not just practical medical learning that he provided. His researches were much more profound than mere everyday medicine. His interest in natural philosophy – science – had led him to conclusions

about the very nature and origins of life itself which were deeply interesting. For anyone as keen as I was to get on in the world in the future, they were worth getting to grips with. But sometimes it frustrated me to realise that saving for a university medical training was always beyond my grasp. There was certainly not much “earthly substance” available and nor would I have wanted to contribute it to the missionary cause if I had had any. No, I’m afraid it would have gone straight into the Matthew Batchelor advancement fund! I was as glad therefore as the most destitute member to hear Mr Archer continue, “and whether we can or cannot honour the Lord in this with our substance let us attend the generous donations of those that are able to contribute to the support of His cause with our most fervent prayers.”

And with that the chapel members really did get down to it. They were as fervent in prayer as they were in singing and the better-off members were just as heartfelt as the poorer ones in their earnest prayers for the new Society. As I listened it was clear that, in pounds and in prayers, Agard Street in general would be more forthcoming than Matthew Batchelor in particular.

Towards the end of the meeting I thought I heard that strange sigh again – or was it just someone whispering a low “Amen” to old brother James’s plea that God would provide missionaries for the Society to send even from among those gathered at Agard Street?

We finished by singing Thomas Gibbon’s “Father, is not Thy promise pledged” which ends with two rousing verses exactly to the point:

DR DARWIN'S ASSISTANT

*From east to west from south to north
Now be His name adored!
Europe with all thy millions shout
Hosannas to thy Lord.*

*Asia and Africa resound
From shore to shore His fame
And thou America in songs
Redeeming love proclaim!*

We could be heard right across Derby!

The meeting was over. Farmer Brown's wife slipped to the back to collect her basket of good things before her less well-off neighbours went out into the chill March wind. I turned to Will, who was energetically putting the finishing touches to his notes, "... concluded in singing the well known hymn that ends with the lines, *Asia and Africa ...*"

A piercing scream came from the back of the chapel and the farmer's wife crumpled up in a faint.