

William Diller Matthew

President

William D. Matthew was born on 19 February 1871 in St. John, New Brunswick. He acquired his interest in the natural sciences from his father, Dr. George F. Matthew, who was a well-known and highly skilled amateur paleontologist and an authority on the geology, paleobotany, and fossil amphibian tracks of New Brunswick.

In graduate work at Columbia University, he studied geology, mineralogy, and metallurgy, which provided a solid back-ground for his subsequent research in paleontology. He received the doctorate in 1895 and the same year joined the staff of The American Museum of Natural History as an assistant in the Department of Vertebrate Paleontology. He rose to Assistant Curator and then Curator in the department and Curator-in-chief of the Division of Geology, Mineralogy, and Paleontology. In 1927, after 32 years service with the Museum, he left to become Professor of Paleontology and Curator of the Paleontological Museum of the University of California at Berkeley. His courses in paleontology, despite their reputation as difficult, were taken by hundreds of students, many of whom went on to distinguished careers in the field.

Although his early publications were in the field of geology, for example, crystallography and the structure of rocks in New Brunswick, the main body of Matthew's research dealt with mammalian paleontology. His first major project after coming to the American Museum was to catalog, pack, and ship to the Museum the extensive collections of E. D. Cope. This task introduced him to the mammal fauna of the Basal Eocene of New Mexico, which he later designated as the Paleocene. In the course of his career he was to work on fossils of nearly every major group of mammals, including carnivores, insectivores, primates, marsupials, rodents, edentates, and ungulates. He played a leading role in fossil collecting expeditions to many localities in the western states and Florida, as well as Mongolia, China, and Java. In addition to his basic studies on the phylogeny of various groups, he also contributed to general theories concerning the arboreal origin of mammals, the mode of formation of the mammal fossil-bearing strata in the western United States, and the major patterns of the origin and dispersal of the mammalian fauna of the world. It was the latter subject, treated in his book *Climate and Evolution*, published in 1915, for which he was most widely known outside the field of paleontology. The book was a healthy antidote to the tendency at the time of erecting hypothetical land bridges to explain the distribution of related groups separated by ocean barriers. Although some of the major conclusions have not stood the test of time, the book remains one of the classic works in biogeography.

In addition to his technical writing, Matthew contributed many articles to *Natural History* magazine and authored handbooks and guide leaflets on various fossil exhibits at the museum. He was active in preparation of public exhibits. He was especially concerned with mounting fossils in a life-like posture and was a pioneer in the use of comparative myology and osteology for this purpose.

His scholarship and solid contributions to paleontology brought him numerous

honors from scientific societies during the course of his career, including election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of England. He was a Charter Member of ASM and, in addition to his term as president, also was a member of the original Council and Vice-president. He also served as President of the Paleontological Society in 1929.

He was married and had two daughters and a son. He died on 24 September 1930 following an illness of several months.

Obituaries

Gregory, W. K. 1930a. William Diller Matthew 1871–1930. *Natural History*, 30:664–666.

Gregory, W. K. 1930b. William Diller Matthew, paleontologist (1871–1930). *Science*, 1878:642–645.

Gregory, W. K. 1931. A review of William Diller Matthew's contributions to mammalian paleontology. *American Museum Novitates*, 473:1–22.