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Once more unto the breach, dear friends, with T. T. Martin's unforgettably titled *Hell and the High Schools* (1923). In chapter 2—"What Is Evolution?"—Martin invites the reader to:

Hear a Professor of Chicago University [*sic*], that slaughter-house of faith, where they do as the old negro preacher said he was going to do, "Bredderin and sisterin, tonight I'se gwine to dispense wid the gospel and confound de scriptures"—is reported from his lecture room to have said, "The Divine creation of life is a pure humbug. Life originally happened. Life is made up of certain organic compounds; certain organic compounds were made by nature. The compounds came together in some manner and the result was life."

Martin then quotes, accurately, passages from John Tyndall and William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) asserting the impossibility of abiogenesis.

But the question naturally arises, who was the unnamed professor who supposedly described the divine creation of life as a pure humbug? I turned, naturally, to Luther Tracy Townsend's *Collapse of Evolution* (1905), the route through which so many such passages entered the creationist literature of the 1920s, and there found more or less the same passage, with the additional sentence "I believe that in a short time real life will be created in the laboratory," attributed to "[t]he professor of physiological chemistry in the University of Chicago" (which, however, Townsend tactfully refrained from describing as a slaughterhouse of faith). "For a man who professes to be a scientist to employ such language is surprising and almost incredible," Townsend complains. "Here is nothing but dogmatic assertion, of

which a canting clergyman, or mountebank, not to say scientist and university professor, ought to be ashamed." And so forth. But like Martin he fails to identify the target of his ire.

Poking around a bit, I found, in the 1905 *Kansas City Medical Index-Lancet*, a report—reprinted from something called *Exchange*, of which I am completely ignorant—on “A New Theory as to Life,” which discusses a lecture then recently delivered by Albert P. Mathews of the University of Chicago to his class in physiological chemistry. According to the report, “While refusing to dispute the theory of the Divine origin of life, Prof. Mathews took the stand that the present creation of life has been proved the result of purely physico-chemical reactions. ... Prof. Mathews predicted it is only a matter of time before life itself will be produced in the laboratory.” Although none of the sentences quoted by Martin or Townsend appears in the *Exchange* report, the timing, the description of the lecturer, and the general gist of the lecture all strongly suggest that Mathews was the scientist—although it’s noteworthy that Mathews, far from calling the divine creation of life “a pure humbug,” reportedly refused to dispute it.

Townsend may not, of course, have been reading that report in particular. Mathews’s lecture was widely reported—the first instance I spotted was in the Washington D.C. *Evening Star* for January 4, 1905, a three-paragraph story on the front page that included “While refusing to dispute the theory of the divine origin of life.” Later in the year, though, a number of newspapers published a brief article under the headline “The Artificial Creation of Life” with the byline “Professor A. P. Mathews.” Much of the passage quoted by Townsend and Martin appears in it, with capitalization used for emphasis (“LIFE originally HAPPENED”): there is no mention of any humbuggery, however, and although optimism about the creation of life in the laboratory is expressed, there is no suggestion that it will follow in a short time. I have to say that I’m dubious that the article was really written by Mathews, whose prose was rather more elegant and studied; I would not exclude the possibility that it was a reporter’s précis of his lecture.

Who was Mathews, anyhow? Albert Prescott Mathews (above) was born in Chicago in 1871; he graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1892 and from the Columbia University School of Medicine in 1898. He spent fifteen years at the University of Chicago, in the department of physiology, from 1901 to 1916, and then spent the rest of his career at the University of Cincinnati, in the department of biochemistry, from 1919 to 1939. He died in Albany, New York, in 1957, at the age of 85. According to the obituary in *The New York Times*, he was “noted for his original investigations in parthenogenesis, in biology the reproduction by means of the development of an unfertilized egg; upon the nature of nerve impulses, and in pharmacology.” He wrote a number of books, including a biochemistry textbook (1936) and a textbook on physiological chemistry that went into at least five editions (1916, 1920, 1925, 1931, and 1935), if the Library of Congress’s catalog is to be trusted.

I took a peek at the second edition of Mathews’s physiological chemistry textbook, which opens with a consideration of “The General Properties of Living Matter.” As in his reported lecture to his class, he insists that the origin of life is a topic susceptible to scientific investigation, but there is no mention of the divine creation of life and no description of anything as pure humbug. Of course, he might be expected to be on his best behavior in a textbook, where his words were recorded for posterity, as opposed to the lecture hall, but still there is no trace of animosity toward divine creation in the textbook. It is plausible to surmise, therefore, that Townsend managed to confuse a passage from Mathews—or from the pseudo-Mathews of the précis—about the physicochemical basis of life with his own judgment of its significance, viz., that divine creation would be a pure humbug if life were physicochemically based. But then he really shouldn’t have complained about the surprising, incredible, dogmatic language that he provided!

Photograph: Albert Prescott Mathews, from the photograph album of David Deck, digitized by the

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