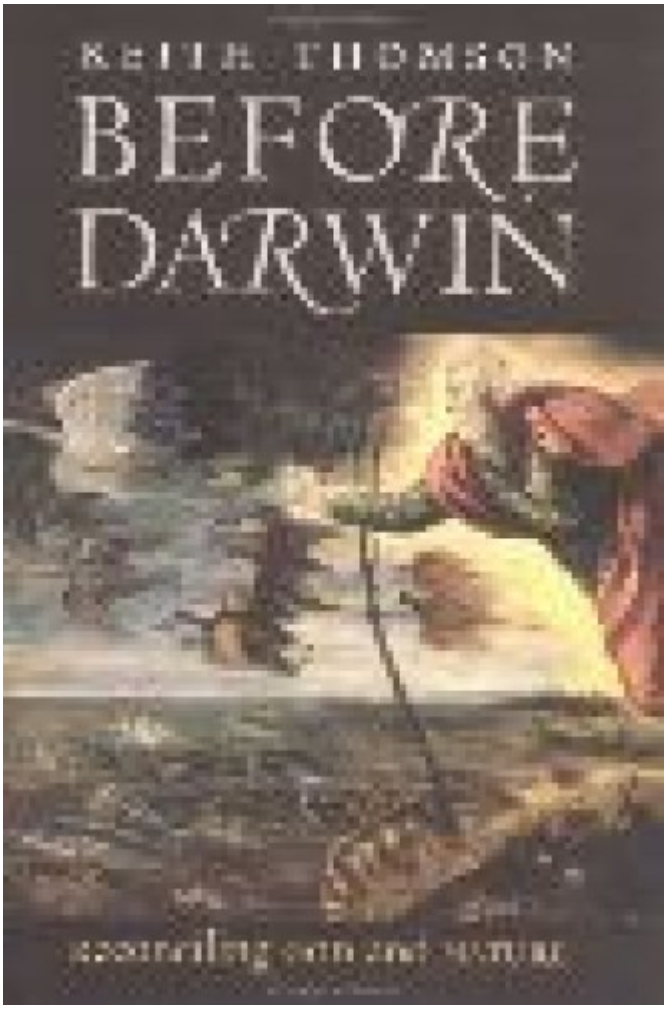
Lenten roadmap

reviewed by J. David Pleins in the April 18, 2006 issue

In Review



Before Darwin: Reconciling God and Nature

Keith Thomson
Yale University Press

An engineering professor from Germany who was attending my course on the Genesis debates was flabbergasted to learn that in the U.S. a sizable number of

people think that modern science is optional. “In my country,” he explained, “whether it’s a state school, a Lutheran school, or a Catholic school, we all teach the same science.”

It doesn’t help matters when President Bush plays to his base by endorsing the conservative Christian hankering to teach creationist dogma alongside evolutionary biology in public schools. Will our children be better informed if they think that Genesis 1 is on a par with modern science?

Before any more children get left behind, we have a much-needed corrective to muddled thinking in *Before Darwin*: *Reconciling God and Nature*. Keith Thomson, professor emeritus of natural history at the University of Oxford, is not trying to show us how to reconcile God and nature; rather, he takes us through an array of failed attempts to do just that from the 17th to the 19th century, failures that inevitably paved the way for Darwin.

The history of science is strewn with the wreckage of theological ideas about God’s intervention in nature that have been tried and found wanting.

Thomson guides us back to a time when scholars wrestled over whether fossils were rocks that grew in the ground or were the remnants of Noah’s flood; when nighttime and sleep looked like they were made for each other by a celestial Mechanic who wound up humans to fit the earth’s clock; and when the earth was presumed to have been created a few centuries ago but deceptively made to look millions of years old.

But those days are over—or should be.

Thomson’s entertaining read shows us that long before the current slick marketing campaign of the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, creationist ideas were worn out on the treadmill of scientific advance. Or, as Thomson puts it, were “swept away or eroded, drop by drop, fact by fact.”

Thomson takes us down that road where scientific insight triumphs over theological wishful thinking:

John Locke tells us to found faith on “good reason,” while David Hume urges us to cast shaky systems into the flames.

Thomas Paine expounds: “The deist needs none of those tricks and shows called miracles to confirm his father, for what can be a greater miracle than creation itself,

and his own existence?”

James Hutton turned the earth into a long-lived geological blast furnace, a view that “made science and a literal interpretation of biblical creation virtually irreconcilable.”

Francis Bacon and Isaaci Newton taught us to rely on observation and experimentation.

Robert Hooke helped us to see that the seas, hills and mountains must have taken shape over countless ages through uplift and erosion, not because of a one-time event such as the creation week of Genesis or Noah’s flood.

William Smith discerned that geological layers and particular fossil assemblages go together, hand in glove. There are lost ages out there that are entirely unknown to the Bible.

All these figures lead us to ask the hard questions and follow the evidence where it leads, revising or abandoning our cherished theological views accordingly.

But history teaches a hopeful lesson for religionists with ears to hear.

The great irony of the rise of evolution, as Thomson so ably demonstrates, is that religiously minded scientists actually contributed to the “troubles” by insisting that we look for mechanical reasons behind the workings of nature, shunning quick fixes that rely on miracles to explain nature’s processes or on thumping the Bible to sneak a shortcut through nature’s maze of seemingly impenetrable facts.

The greatest irony of all is that Darwin’s chief sparring partner in this regard, natural theologian William Paley, actually caught glimpses of the evolutionary workings of nature but refused to embrace the idea. It took a Darwin to grasp that natural selection, not divine tinkering, made better sense of the data.

Yet it’s not all about science.

As Thomson so keenly sniffs out, Paley feared evolution because he feared social change. He, like many of his contemporaries, preferred to think that poverty and misery were the givens of nature. Authority and wealth were to be enjoyed by the privileged few.

Could it be that the modern purveyors of creationist intelligent design also fear social revolution, freedom and the power of science to reshape our destiny?

For some *atheism* means “no god”; it is a view that causes literalists to fume. For others it means “not that kind of theism.” Thomson’s work reminds us that any theism worth its weight is going to have to catch up to the advances of modern science.