

## Book Reviews

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**James A. Secord**

*Victorian Sensation: the  
Extraordinary Publication, Reception,  
and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of  
the Natural History of Creation*

Chicago: University Press of Chicago,  
2001. xviii + 624 pp. hb. £22.50.  
ISBN 0-226-74410-8.

*Vestiges* was the publishing sensation of 1844. Bringing together facts and ideas from astronomy, geology, embryology, phrenology, anthropology, and linguistics, the anonymous author expounded the first popular theory of evolution to appear in English.

James Secord's large and ambitious book traces the story of *Vestiges* from its inception to the posthumous unveiling of Scottish publisher Robert Chambers as the author. But it is more than just a 'reception study': it is packed with insights into many aspects of Victorian culture, from hack journalism to fashionable society, from scientific education to the intricacies of Scottish church politics.

We tend to assume that doctrines of evolution were deeply shocking to the Victorians, but initial reactions to *Vestiges* were surprisingly favourable. Prince Albert read the book aloud to Victoria; an elderly admiral gave a copy to his daughter; and William Gladstone, then a Tory and a Tractarian, found he could reconcile it with his beliefs. In early speculation on the identity of the author, the prime suspects were a Tory baronet and a Whig countess. In the 1840s evolution was not universally seen as fatal to religion and social order.

Yet *Vestiges* failed to win support in one crucial area: the scientific community. The book was riddled with errors and misjudgements, which betrayed its author's lack of scientific credentials. For scientists, it was an intrusion on their professional domain, and a threat to

their hard-won respectability. While few expert responses were as virulent as that of Adam Sedgwick, who savaged the book in the *Edinburgh Review*, the general verdict was firmly negative. Pondering the implications for his own unpublished ideas, Charles Darwin resolved to take his time, and reinforce the factual basis of his theory. He would not be another 'Mr Vestiges'.

In an age of intense religious beliefs and conflicts, it was inevitable that religious views would influence reactions. *Vestiges* itself was not overtly hostile to religion. It envisaged a process of evolution by divine law, in which each new form emerged as a pre-ordained development from its predecessor. For some devoutly Christian thinkers, including Gladstone, this was sufficient to save the book and its author from the imputation of infidelity. But for those described by Secord as 'evangelicals' (including the evangelical wing of the Church of England, most English non-conformists, and the Scottish Free Church), the scheme of *Vestiges* left no place for the Christian message of sin and redemption. The book was all the more dangerous for its veneer of piety. Opposition was fiercest in Scotland, especially when the Edinburgh gossip began to point to Chambers as the author. The 'evangelicals' organised a campaign of lectures, sermons, and publications to counter the threat. But even here the hostility should not be exaggerated. A boycott of the Chambers publishing house was considered but rejected (293). The only tangible impact on Chambers himself was to prompt him to withdraw his candidacy for Lord Provost of Edinburgh (295). This falls some way short of martyrdom.

It is impossible here to do more than hint at the scope of this immensely rich and entertaining book. Admittedly there is a danger of overstating the importance

of *Vestiges*. Viewed in extreme close-up, any object will dominate the landscape. On a broader view, it assumes more modest proportions. I note, for example, that in all the published correspondence of Darwin, Lyell, Hooker, Huxley, and J. S. Mill, comments on *Vestiges* would fill only a page or two. But this should not detract from the value of Secord's study. Everyone interested in Victorian Britain should read it.

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**W. A. Dembski and J. M. Kushiner, (eds)**

***Signs of Intelligence: Understanding Intelligent Design***

Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001. 224 pp. pb., US \$12.99, ISBN 1-58743-004-5

This collection of fourteen papers on 'intelligent design' includes contributions by well-known authors like Michael Behe and Phillip Johnson. A number of interesting papers, such as those on cosmology and the philosophy of science will have to pass without further comment, in order to address the core issues. I shall offer comments on selected quotations under three headings that are recurring themes throughout the book:

*The concept of Intelligent Design.* Dembski's introduction sets out 'What Intelligent Design is Not' and uses the word 'intelligent ... simply to refer to intelligent agency (irrespective of skill or mastery) and thus separates intelligent design from optimality of design' (7). It is then puzzling to be told that 'Optimal design is perfect design and hence cannot exist except in some idealised realm' (7). I confirmed with an engineer that what I thought engineers meant by optimal design was not perfection but whatever was most conducive or favourable to a particular end, given the constraints of certain fixed conditions. But this view seems to be assigned to ID – it 'fits our ordinary experience of design, which is

always conditioned by the needs of a situation and therefore always falls short of some idealised global optimum' (8). Reading on, we are informed that 'Just because we can always imagine some improvement in design doesn't mean that the structure in question was not designed' (9). In addressing the problem of evil Dembski points out that 'Design by intelligent agency does not preclude evil. A torture chamber replete with implements of torture is designed' (9), while 'Philosophical theology has abundant resources for dealing with the problem of evil' (10). Finally, 'The design theorist is not committed to every biological structure being designed' (10) and the search for design is claimed to be 'Not Religiously Motivated' (12) – something which I question.

Taking the preceding assertions all together, one is left wondering what value any establishment of the ID programme might have for Christianity. If the universe might have been designed, but 'we can always imagine some improvement in design'; if, like a torture chamber, design theory allows that it might have been designed by a malevolent agent; and if some biological structures might not have been designed at all, we appear to be handling a very slippery concept indeed. Certainly the writer recognises that 'the good that God initially intended is no longer fully in evidence', but we have no means of knowing what the world would have been like if humankind had not sinned but exercised its full managerial responsibility. I left the introduction with a growing sense of unease.

*The target of concern.* As expected, this book displays a deep antipathy to evolution by natural selection – 'you can have God or natural selection, but not both ... given natural selection, God would be redundant' (44); 'Darwinian just-so stories' (20); 'a widely disputed theory, one that is facing ever more trenchant criticisms' (17); 'an a priori commitment to metaphysical naturalism' (25); 'the