



## Plate Tectonics: An Insider's History Of The Modern Theory Of The Earth

By Naomi Oreskes

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Can anyone today imagine the earth *without* its puzzle-piece construction of plate tectonics? The very term, "plate tectonics," coined only thirty-five years ago, is now part of the vernacular, part of everyone's understanding of the way the earth works. The theory, research, data collection, and analysis that came together in 1967 to constitute plate tectonics is one of the great scientific breakthroughs of the 20th century. Scholarly books have been written about tectonics, but none by the key scientists-players themselves. In *Plate Tectonics*, editor Naomi Oreskes has assembled those scientists who played key roles in developing the theory to tell - for the first time, and in their own words - the stories of their involvement in the extraordinary evolution of the theory. The book opens with an overview of the history of plate tectonics, including in-context definitions of the key terms that are discussed throughout the book. Oreskes explains how the forerunners of the theory, Wegener and du Toit, inspired how scientists working at the key academic institutions - Cambridge and Princeton Universities, Columbia University's Lamont Doherty Geological Observatory, and the University of California-San Diego's Scripps Institute of Oceanography - competed and collaborated until the theory coalesced in 1967.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Widely dismissed as crank science in earlier generations, the theory of plate tectonics--which explains the movement of continents in geological time, as well as the formation of the earth's major features--is now largely accepted as fact within the scientific community.

Drawing on the memories of major theoreticians in the field, scientist and historian Naomi Oreskes offers a vivid history of just how that transformation occurred. She describes the early quest on the part of James Dana, Alfred Wegner, J. H. Hodgson, and other scientists to account for the mechanics of earthquakes and certain puzzling features of geomorphology, a quest widened and strengthened by the work of deep-ocean explorers who were able, beginning in the 1960s, to study tectonics at work far below the surface of the world's waters. Such advances, as pioneer Peter Molnar and others explain, did not immediately change the way geologists went about their work, but they quickly went on to revolutionize science--and then, as such things do, to become orthodox.

A useful reference for students of geology and the history of science, this book is also easily accessible to nonspecialists. --*Gregory McNamee*

#### From Publishers Weekly

Readers who went to school before the late 1960s will probably remember that their science teachers couldn't explain why South America and Africa seemed to fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. It was not until 1968 that the theory of plate tectonics was formulated and quickly accepted by scientists around the world. This collection of 18 essays is written by the researchers (such as Frederick J. Vine and Lawrence Morley) who made the discoveries that established the phenomenon of plate tectonics. While the idea of "continental drift" had been proposed as early as 1596 and reappeared at various times throughout history, scientists had always rejected it. Then in the late 1950s and '60s, geologists discovered great rifts in the undersea mountain ranges that girdle the ocean, as well as regular patterns of alternating magnetic polarities in the ocean floor. These and other findings confirmed continental drift and explained the existence of volcanic islands and even earthquakes en masse. Readers with little or no background in geology will be able to follow these well-written and generally jargon-free personal accounts, but the book will appeal most to hard-core science buffs and budding geophysicists.

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#### From Library Journal

When the fundamentals of plate tectonics are explained in any basic geology textbook, it is easy to forget that in the 1960s it was a revolutionary idea that completely transformed earth science. "As the far-reaching success of these ideas became clear, we all rapidly became famous," writes Dan McKenzie, then a geophysics graduate student at Cambridge who launched his academic career on the new discoveries. McKenzie is one of 17 scientists invited to contribute personal memories of those early days to this collection of essays, edited by Oreskes (history, Univ. of California, San Diego). This is an important historical record, and it is fascinating to read how, once the data became available, the details of sea-floor spreading, mid-oceanic ridges, and subduction zones began to form a complete and convincing model. Nonetheless, this is largely an academic history of research and conferences, computer models, and the race

to publish. For an overview of how plate tectonics works, academic libraries should buy a textbook such as Kent C. Condie's *Plate Tectonics and Crustal Evolution* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997. 4th ed.), and school libraries should consider Helen Roney Sattler and Giulio Maestro's *Our Patchwork Planet* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1995). Amy Brunvand, Univ. of Utah Lib., Salt Lake City  
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