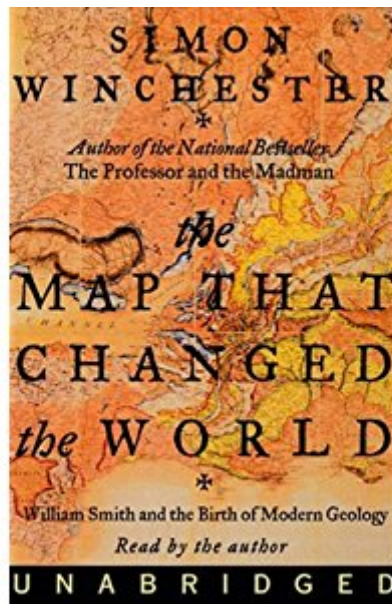


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The Map That Changed The World: William Smith And The Birth Of Modern Geology



Synopsis

Following the hugely successful hardback, this extraordinary tale of the father of modern geology looks set to be the non fiction paperback for 2002. Hidden behind velvet curtains above a stairway in a house in London's Piccadilly is an enormous and beautiful hand-coloured map - the first geological map of anywhere in the world. Its maker was a farmer's son named William Smith. Born in 1769 his life was beset by troubles: he was imprisoned for debt, turned out of his home, his work was plagiarised, his wife went insane and the scientific establishment shunned him. It was not until 1829, when a Yorkshire aristocrat recognised his genius that he was returned to London in triumph. "The Map That Changed the World" is his story. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the last unit of my semester earth science class at an Orange County, California high school, I frequently come face to face with fundamentalist Christian views of the geological time scale. I'm told that the scale is a fiction made up to support the theory of evolution. I explain to my students that the pattern of strata and fossils that guided [and still guide] the building of the geological time scale is very real and exists independently of the explanation of the pattern. I explain that people like William 'Strata' Smith and others who followed him established that the pattern exists years before Charles Darwin convinced the scientific world that evolution happened. I don't want to kill their faith, but I won't lie to them. Now Simon Winchester has given us a book that I can hand to my students and say, "here's how William Smith figured it all out." In *The Map That Changed The World*,

Simon Winchester [in a very British and somewhat hyperbolic fashion] tells engagingly of the life of William 'Strata' Smith, surveyor, self-taught geologist, and maker of the first geologic map. I've known of Smith since my days as a student geologist [I can't recall that my professors ever mentioned the great map; their emphasis was always on Smith's discovery of the principle of faunal succession, or as Winchester writes in the book, "In his opinion, he wrote, all the rocks that had been laid down as sediments at a particular time in a particular place are laid down in a way that has much the same characteristics, and most particularly just the same fossils, and always appear in the same vertical order, in the same stratigraphical order, no matter where they are found.

This is a potentially fascinating book for readers who like biography, geology, landscape, England, rocks, or fossil ammonites. All right, I admit I was suckered by the cover: the hb dust jacket unfolds into a single large geological map of England, Wales, and southern Scotland! It is *The Map That Changed the World* in 1815 by revealing the rock strata beneath an entire country: the existence of time and order, of coal beds, building stone, ores, and soil types, all now made predictable. The fact this 1/13th size version of the immense hand made and coloured original by William "Strata" Smith won't stand magnification might have warned me about the text within. Once beyond the exciting promise of the clever jacket and quality presentation I was increasingly disappointed. Winchester's biographical construction of Smith's life, while chronological overall, casts Smith's remarkable rise from the farm, and his wonderful scientific observation and insight, as a morality play against 18th century class prejudice and religion ("the blind acceptance of absurdity"!) taken quite out of historical context. Aside from Smith never having been involved in religious controversy (see pp. 195-96), the authorial tactics make it hard to follow Smith's story rather than Winchester's arch exegesis. Despite the frequent assertions of how earth-shaking was Smith's map, the book is such a farrago of description, quotation, flashforward, biography, travel, snide remark, foreshadowment, reconstruction, admiration, speculation, flashback, asides, suggestion, British nostalgia, coincidence, and digressive (but not scholarly) footnotes that the revolutionary consequences of Smith's innovations in stratigraphy, fossil assemblage, and mapping are buried and never come across coherently and convincingly.

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