

Letters to the editor

Behind the scenes

I refer to Tas Walker's review of the book *The Map that Changed the World* by Simon Winchester that appeared in Volume 16(2) of *TJ*.¹ Your readers may be interested in some of the behind-the-scenes activities related to this book.

Simon Winchester was an undergraduate in the department of geology at Oxford University in the mid-sixties. At that time Dr Ronald Oxburgh was the Department head and has since become Lord Oxburgh and president of the Geological Society of London.

After graduation from Oxford, Winchester took to writing rather than grubbing about among fossils and rocks and has since become a very successful 'inky-fingered Fleet Street journalist'. This is his description of himself in his correspondence with me. He has written articles for the *Smithsonian* and the *National Geographic* and in 1998 produced the national bestseller *The Professor and the Madman*. The unlikely subject for this work was the history of the *Oxford English Dictionary* yet this is soon to become a major movie starring Mel Gibson. Such is the power of the well-written word.

I had asked Simon Winchester if his popular account of William Smith had been a commissioned work from Lord Oxburgh and the Geological Society of London? It is no secret that the geological fraternity has been badly rattled by the awkward questions raised by creationists. It seemed to me that Winchester's rise to literary fame and his geological background presented an ideal opportunity to establish the authenticity of the geologic column more securely in the public mind. I was quite up-front with this inquiry and he replied very graciously, explaining that Lord Oxburgh 'had been helpful in more ways than the simply technical' and had given his enthusiastic support. However, neither Oxburgh nor the Society had commissioned the work but rather it was his publishers, HarperCollins.

He stressed, as he did in the acknowledgement to his latest book, that he owed his greatest debt to Professor Hugh Torrens who had for years been, and is still, labouring on a definitive biography of William Smith. Torrens had kindly made all his research material available to Winchester that he might produce a popular account. That account, *The Map that Changed the World*, appeared at the prime door-front space of the principal booksellers in North America about August 2001. This was barely a year after *The Professor and the Madman*! Clearly, there were financial motives on the part of the publishers but readers here may recognize that the Divine hand has been replaced by the greased palm!

However, I want to stress that Simon Winchester was a gracious and generous correspondent and I can thoroughly recommend his books as good reading.

Ian Taylor
Kingston, Ontario
CANADA

References

1. Walker, T., Don't Blame the map, *TJ* 16(2):25–27, 2002.