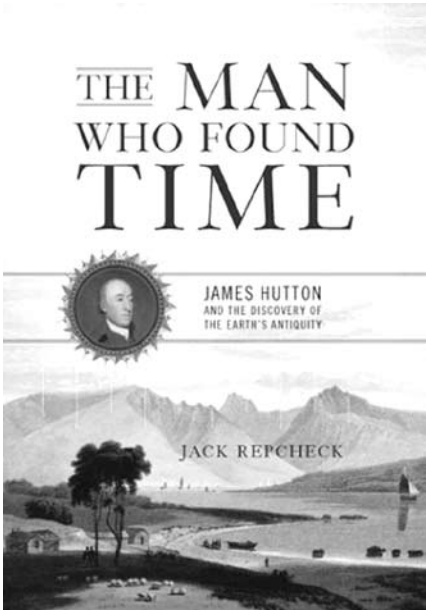
The man who made the wedge: James Hutton and the overthrow of biblical authority



A review of
The Man Who Found Time: James Hutton and the Discovery of the Earth's Antiquity
by Jack Repcheck
Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, MA, 2003

Tas Walker

This biography paints James Hutton's life in stunning detail against the background of his Scottish culture. Most people today have not heard of Hutton, but scientists call him 'the father of modern geology'. Repcheck ranks him as one of the four outstanding pioneers of science in the last 500 years whose concepts have revolutionized Western thinking.

The other three are Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin—all household names. Hutton never achieved the same recognition, yet his ideas profoundly changed the way modern people look at the world. Like a wedge, his ideas have split the connection between science and its Christian foundation.

The details of Hutton's life are engrossing. So is Repcheck's tour of 17th century Edinburgh. I enjoyed reading about the political turmoil, the armies, the battles and the intellectual environment of the time.

By including personal anecdotes, Repcheck warms our hearts. His style is so arresting and the atmosphere so enticing that we can unwittingly drop our guard and accept Hutton's ideas without rigorously assessing them. However, science should not be about feelings, but about logical arguments.

A good story

Good stories need conflict, and Repcheck introduces conflict in his first sentence, 'Before there was science there was the Bible.'

Hutton is the hero, 'freeing science from the straightjacket of religious orthodoxy.' His noble scientific aims were thwarted by ferocious attacks from 'the church and the scholars who supported it.' Sadly, he dies in 1795 and there seems 'little hope that James Hutton's theory of the earth would ever become widely accepted.' But John Playfair, James Hall, and eventually Charles Lyell take up the cause. Slowly the tide turns. By the mid-1830s, the battle is over.

> 'The Huttonian revolution was won, and the discipline of geology, finally freed from the blinkers of catastrophes, deluges, and universal oceans, could now get on with the difficult task of determining just what had occurred over the incredible expanse of geologic time.'

It's a good story, but real life is not so simplistic. In fact, Repcheck refutes himself in later chapters. Are science and the Bible mutually exclusive? Did Hutton live 'before there was science'? No! Repcheck himself describes many pioneers before the 1800s who made great scientific contributions and who believed the Bible.[1]

Newton and Kepler (pp. 42–43), famous for their discoveries about gravity, considered the Bible to be reliable. In fact, Repcheck describes how they meticulously developed biblical chronologies. Steno (p. 95) used the Bible to interpret geology (contrary to what Repcheck says).[2] He originated the geological principles of stratigraphy that geologists still routinely use today. Hooke and Moro (pp. 96–97) published on earthquakes. Burnet and Whiston (pp. 97, 98) wrote volumes on cosmogony and theories of the earth. Woodward (p. 98) pioneered paleontology. These scientists all believed the Bible and used it as their interpretive framework.[3] As Repcheck explains, their writings were the 'key books in the field', ones that Hutton would have studied. Yet they lived, if we accept Repcheck, 'before there was science.' Even today, 'after there was science', there are many top-rate scientists who believe the Bible about creation and the age of the earth.[4]

The book's opening statement perpetuates the myth that science is about reality but the Bible is about beliefs. It's a pity people don't understand that scientific facts do not speak for themselves. Scientists interpret facts by their worldview, by the philosophy they carry around in their heads. The opposition to Hutton's philosophy encountered in England, so colourfully recounted by Repcheck, demonstrates that truth.

Without doubt, Hutton made significant contributions to geological science. Repcheck describes them vividly, and it's enthralling to see the drama of discovery unfold.

We hike across the Scottish highlands to Glen Tilt near Dundee. There Hutton and his friends discover veins of pink granite cutting across black micaceous schist. This and similar finds at Galloway and Arran established that granites were emplaced while they were molten—a radical idea for the time. We row around the North Sea coast to Siccar Point, near Edinburgh, where Hutton explains an unconformity to his friends. This graphically demonstrated something of the geological upheavals that took place in the past.

The age of the earth

But the book is not just about science. It celebrates the battle that established a different way of thinking in the West. It's about the conflict of worldviews fuelled by Hutton's philosophy. As we gather from the title of the book, that battle is over the age of the earth:

> 'The belief that the earth was less than 6,000 years old was deeply entrenched in the psyche of most Christians' (p. 23).

The message is very clear. An earth billions years old is incompatible with the Bible (he's right there!).

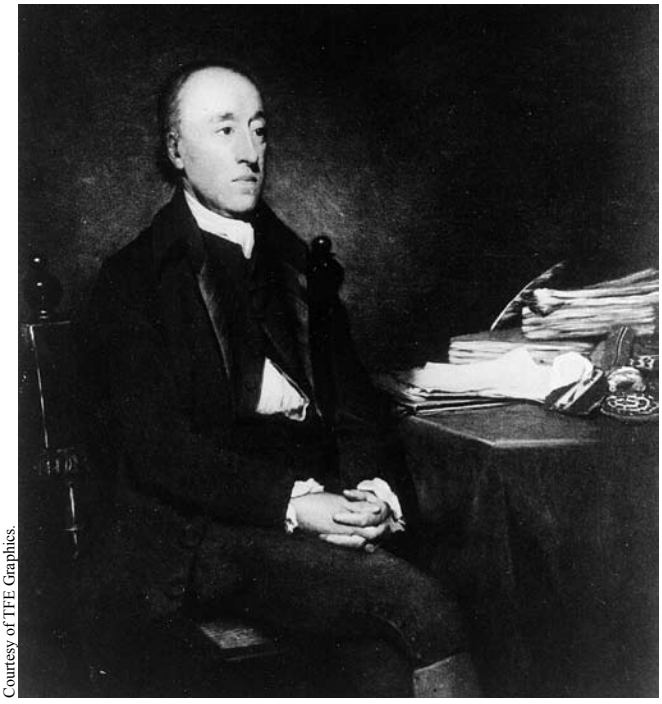
> 'If the book of Genesis was correct, man was created only five days after the earth was; if Hutton was correct, the earth had existed for eons before man came along' (pp. 4–5).

It's a message that elates the secular world, intent on casting off divine restraint. A sense of gleeful defiance exudes from the dust jacket, which says Hutton's work 'helped free science from the straightjacket of theology'.

Repcheck also makes it clear that a young earth was the orthodox teaching of the church through the ages. Long-age compromisers today try to say that the young earth is a modern aberration. That's not true and Repcheck clearly explains what people believed at the time of Hutton:

> 'However, the Book of Genesis did say that the earth was formed on the First Day of Creation and that Adam was created five days later, a sequence that everyone knew had occurred almost 6,000 years ago' (p. 3).

If the church had believed otherwise, why did Hutton and the other long-age promoters have to fight to get their ideas accepted? And Repcheck makes it very clear that the church based this belief squarely on the plain teaching of the Bible.



Courtesy of TFE Graphics.

James Hutton completely ignored the Bible and the Deluge.

> 'The Scottish Presbyterian Church, the English Anglican Church, the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church—indeed, all Christian churches, their clergies, and their followers—believed that the earth was not even 6,000 years old. This belief was a tenet based on rigorous analysis of the Bible and other holy scriptures. It was not just the devout who embraced this belief; most men of science agreed that the earth was young' (p. 14).

How compromised are the mainstream denominations today. Their leaders and academics duck and weave, trying to avoid the issue, trying to say the Bible is silent on the matter, trying to harmonize the Bible with the millions of years, and trying to revise history to say the church never believed in six days.

Found time?

The book's title, *The Man Who Found Time*, also propagates the myth that 'science is reality'. How could Hutton find time? Did he stumble on it as he walked across a field? Repcheck confuses concrete scientific discoveries with Hutton's intangible philosophy.

Discoveries involve things that scientists can observe and measure. Scientists have discovered penicillin, plesiosaurs and protozoa, and measured the speed of light. But we cannot discover or measure geological time. Even Hutton recognized that, and Repcheck quoted him:

> 'As there is not in human observation proper means for measuring the waste of land upon the globe, it is hence inferred that we cannot estimate the duration of what we see at present, nor calculate the period at which it had begun' (p. 152).

So James Hutton did not 'find' geological time. Rather, he invented the concept based on assumptions:

> 'Since deposits usually settle at a modest rate, perhaps only an inch a year, it took hundreds of thousands of years for enough sediment to build up …' (p. 21).
>
> 'Hutton realized that even though erosion was constantly occurring, it nonetheless operated quite slowly' (p. 115). Thus 'from the mid-1760s, Hutton was already arguing that the earth was ancient …' (p. 114).

These assumptions, of course,

involve a wilful rejection of the biblical record. As soon as we assume slow rates of erosion and deposition, we discount the catastrophic effects of the global Flood. As Repcheck noted,

> 'Hutton completely ignored the Bible and the Deluge …' (p. 4).

Battle of worldviews

The essence of a good story is suspense, and authors create suspense by placing obstacles in the way of their heroes. Hutton is Repcheck's hero whose goal is 'truth'. And the obstacle? Repcheck casts the church, the Bible and 'entrenched belief' as the villain, thwarting his hero at every turn:

> 'The church and the scholars who supported it would not graciously cede the history of the earth to the impious, perhaps blasphemous, Hutton' (p. 24).

Thus, Repcheck portrays the church's opposition to Hutton's new geological ideas as opposition to truth. He paints the intellectual climate as stifling:

> 'The extraordinary hold of the Bible prevented genuine freethinking about the history and working of the planet, and the few open-minded scientists who did emerge were quickly censured by the church' (p. 101).

Repcheck forgets that most of the institutions of learning were established by the church. He also overlooks that the Christian worldview birthed modern science in the first place, as philosophers of science recognize today.

So real life is not so simple. The battle is not between science and religion, between truth and superstition, as Repcheck paints it. It is a battle between two worldviews, between two religions—humanism and biblical Christianity. That puts a different light on events from the way Repcheck depicts them.

Rather than being bigoted, unthinking and heavy-handed, the church of Hutton's day was simply defending its worldview. Every worldview starts with axioms—unprovable beliefs—its adherents understand to be true. Every institution works within a worldview and protects its basic beliefs. Anyone who challenges the paradigm is no longer considered part of the club. Understandably, and legitimately, that institution has the right to put them out with, 'Find your own place to promote your ideas. You don't belong here.'

Today the situation has reversed. The atheistic/evolutionary worldview, which Hutton championed, is now the dominant view in the West. Its defenders don't see themselves as biased, narrow-minded and bigoted. But try to publish a young-earth interpretation in a secular scientific journal today. Universities sack professors who speak against evolution. Academics use activist courts to ban criticism of evolution in schools. Recently, presidents of seven scientific institutions lobbied the U.S. government to ban a book where Ph.D. geologists and others interpret Grand Canyon from a young-earth perspective.[5] It's normal to defend one's worldview, and evolutionists do it vehemently. Academic institutions today are far more stifling than the Christian ones Repcheck describes.

Lessons to learn

The Man Who Found Time is very readable and contains a wealth of historical information. It will reinforce the faith of the secular mind.

Repcheck's message is one that compromising Christians need to learn. Compromisers need to stop kidding themselves that the age of the earth is a side issue. The age of the earth is the wedge that 'shattered the biblically rooted picture of Earth and separated science from theology' (p. 4).

Hutton's concept of an 'ancient age of the earth came as a revelation to Darwin' (p. 6), and Darwin drove the wedge further.[6] Hutton took away 'the divine beginning of things' but Darwin 'took the concept of the divine away from man away altogether' (p. 5).

Repcheck is right about the impact of Hutton's theory on the once-Christian culture of the West: 'First, it questioned the veracity of the Bible, and second, it displaced humans from close to the start of time' (p. 4). We need to face the fact that if we, as Christians, are to reclaim the culture, we have to re-establish the authority of the Bible as reliable in every area. And that begins with creation in six days.

Thus, we need to engage the issue of the age of the earth and retake the ground that has been lost. It is a battle that must be fought, but one that can be won.

References

1. E.g. see: Williams, A., The biblical origins of science, *TJ* **18**(2):37–40, 2004.
2. Walker, T., Misrepresenting young-earth creationists to promote evolution and millions of years, *TJ* **18**(1):34–36, 2004.
3. Not surprisingly, they didn't agree with each other in all their interpretations of the rocks or the Scriptures. Nor would modern creationists agree with them on every point. But they were doing their scientific work within a Christian worldview.
4. Ashton, J.F., *In six Days: Why 50 Scientists Choose to Believe in Creation,* New Holland Publishers, Sydney, Australia, 1999. This is just a sampling of literally thousands of scientists around the world who believe the Genesis account of creation and the Flood.
5. Matthews, M., Geologists in an uproar, <www.answersingenesis.org/docs2004/0106gc.asp>, 6 January 2004.
6. This relationship is explored in Grigg, R., Darwin's illegitimate brainchild, *Creation* **26**(2):39–41, 2004.