

Misrepresenting young-earth creationists to promote evolution and millions of years

A review of
The Seashell on the Mountaintop: A Story of Science, Sainthood, and the Humble Genius Who Discovered a New History of the Earth.
by Alan Cutler
Heinemann, London, UK,
2003

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Recently released and highly acclaimed as ‘popular science at its very best’, the new book by Alan Cutler called *The Seashell on the Mountaintop* raises perplexing questions. The book is said to be a sophisticated biography of the 17th-century Dane, Nicolaus Steno, whom Stephen Jay Gould called ‘the founder of modern geology’. But in reality, the book by Cutler projects a modern skepticism onto events that bears very little connection with the true history.

Although Cutler’s writing is witty and well researched, his whole outlook is coloured by such an anti-biblical mindset that he reads motives and consequences into events that are just not there. Cutler portrays Steno as discovering ‘deep time’—that the earth must be millions of years older than the Bible claimed. Nothing could be further than the truth.

Is this a rewrite of history aimed at discrediting the Bible? The New York Times’ review of the book makes that connection. It said

‘Nearly half the people of our country today don’t accept evolution. Predictably, they have trouble with concepts of the age and structure of the earth, the

generation of fossil remains, and cosmology itself.’ One could be forgiven for believing this book is an attempt to impact the thinking of those people.

The spin begins in the subtitle: ‘A story of science, sainthood, and the humble genius who discovered a new history of the earth.’ The wrong concept is tied up in the little word ‘new’.

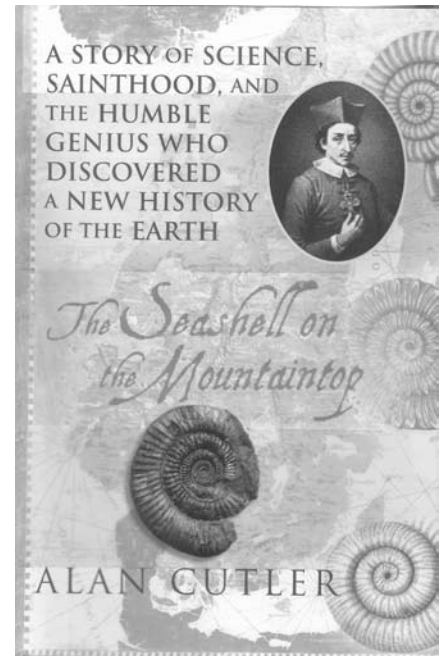
Let Barnes and Noble explain. In their web review they say

‘In 17th-century Europe, the Church was the supreme authority, and the Old Testament the unquestioned source regarding the timetable of the earth. But for Steno, seashell fossils on mountaintops could be explained only in the context of a world old enough to have produced them, a world millions or perhaps even billions of years old.’

Where did that idea come from? Certainly not from Steno.

It is most appropriate for the modern reader to recognize the remarkable geologic achievements of Steno. In his short *Prodromus* he set out (among other things) the basic principles of stratigraphy. These, as Cutler explains, are still routinely used by geologists to interpret sedimentary rocks. That’s why Gould called him ‘the founder of modern geology’. His scientific work was an incredible feat of observation and induction using the scientific method.

But it is clear from his writings that Steno was a biblical creationist. Perhaps that’s what gets up the nose of the modern secularist who does not want to acknowledge the biblical kick-start of a major field of science.



We can check for ourselves what Steno actually wrote in a modern English translation like the one by John Winter.¹ In spite of what Cutler says, the rocks do not represent a ‘testimony no less valid than the Holy Writ itself’. Rocks do not speak. People interpret them. Rather than discovering a conflict with the Bible, it is clear that Steno used the Bible as his historical framework for interpreting the rocks.

Take Steno’s explanation of the geology of Tuscany. He describes two periods when the area was covered with water and two periods when it was dry.² The first period Steno connects with the original creation during Creation Week described in Genesis 1. From Genesis, Steno recognized that the earth was covered with water initially. Steno says ‘In regard to the first aspect of the earth Scripture and Nature agree in this, that all things were covered with water’. Did Steno see a conflict? No! He saw a harmony between his scientific observations and the Bible. So much for the idea on the dust jacket that Steno’s seashells ‘demanded a far longer history for the earth than the roughly six thousand years suggested by the Bible’.

From Genesis 1, Steno also recognized that when the earth was completely covered with water, life had not yet been created. He said,

‘That there was a watery fluid, however, at a time when animals and plants were not yet to be found, and that the fluid covered all things, is proved by the strata on the higher mountains, free from all heterogeneous material.’³

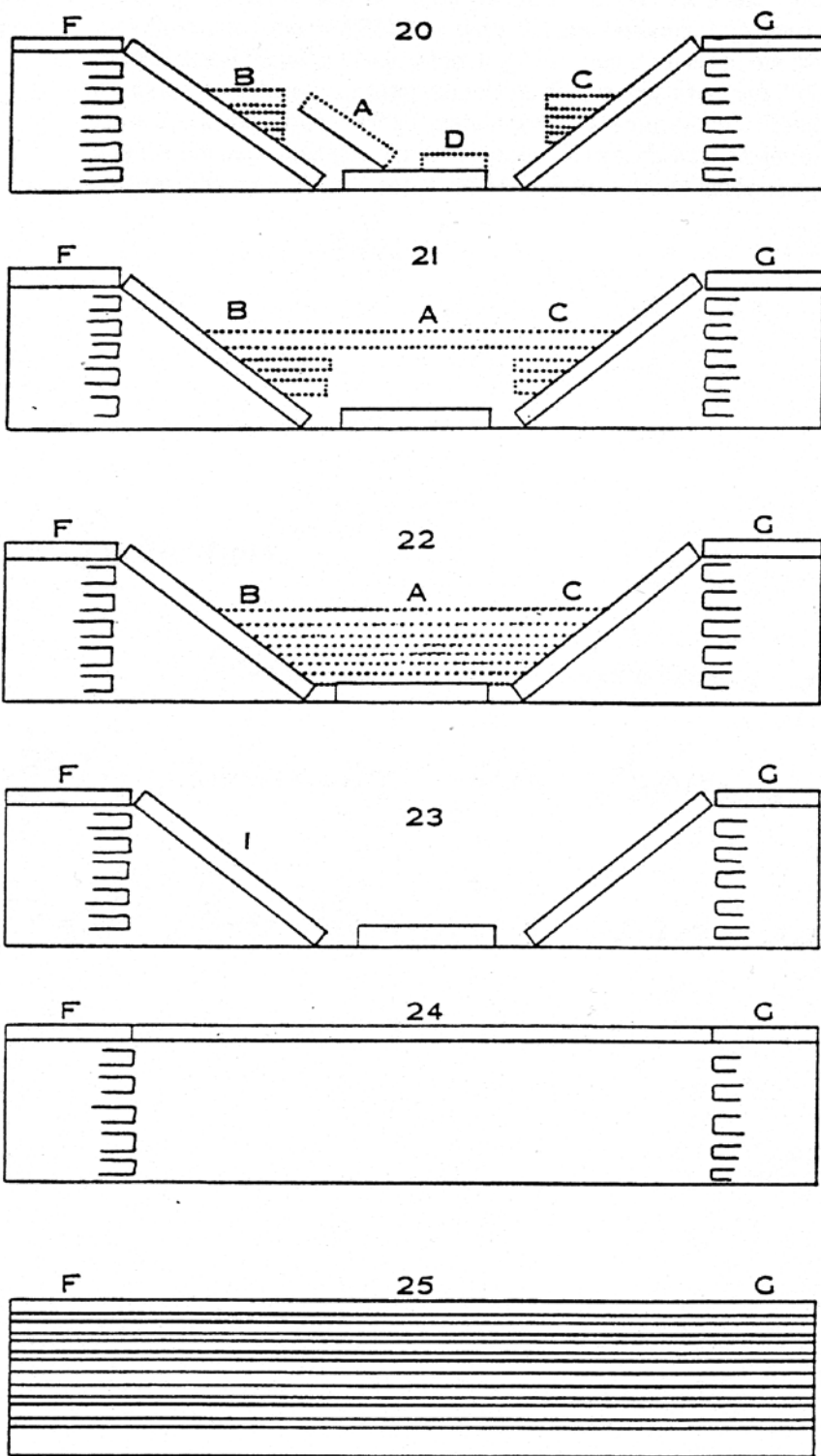
Where on earth did Cutler get the idea that Steno discovered a ‘new’ history of the earth?

Biblical creationists today would agree with Steno’s brilliant interpretive framework, based as it was on the true history of the earth in the Bible. And biblical creationist geologists still use Steno’s principles of stratigraphy. There is nothing inherent in those principles that introduce ‘deep time’ into geological thought. But those principles need to be qualified with the findings of modern-day creationist sedimentological research which significantly alters the way they should be applied.^{4,5}

However, few creationists today would agree with Steno that the strata in the higher mountains were always formed during Creation Week. Today we have a much larger concept of the biblical Flood than people of Steno’s time. There is still discussion in creationist circles in the 21st century about the exact location of the pre-Flood boundary (we have lots more information about the geology of the world than Steno did).⁶ However, most creationist geologists would assign much of the strata in the higher mountains to the Flood event.^{7,8} But, Steno still did an excellent job connecting Scripture with reality using observation and induction—a powerful scientific approach.

Steno’s belief in the Bible did not stop at Genesis 1. He also believed in the global Flood described in Genesis 6, 7 and 8 and used the Flood to explain the fossils he found in the rocks. Steno linked the Flood to the second time the earth was covered with water. He even speculated on the pre-Flood topography, using the biblical record as scientific data. Steno wrote ‘Nature proves that the unevenness was great, while Scripture makes mention of mountains at the time of the flood’.⁹

Steno also clearly stated that his geological investigations confirm



Schematic diagram by Steno of the geologic structure and geologic history of Tuscany—probably the first geologic cross section ever made. When the strata were first deposited (diagram 25) they were flat and horizontal. After the water receded from the land, Steno envisaged that huge cavities were eaten out (diagram 24) causing the strata to collapse, forming mountains and valleys (diagram 23). Steno envisaged these events occurred during Creation Week. During Noah’s Flood, Steno envisaged that the sea deposited new strata (diagram 22) which were undermined after the water receded (diagram 21) and collapsed leaving the present landscape (diagram 20).

Scripture:

‘Nature does not oppose Scripture in determining how great that height of the sea was, seeing that: 1. Definite traces of the sea remain in places raised several hundreds of feet above the level of the sea ...’¹⁰

And that is the testimony of biblical creationists today. When we start with the Bible as our way of interpreting the scientific evidence we find that it makes sense. Perhaps that is why so many people do not accept evolution and the millions of years, and why books such as this one need to be written to put different spins onto past events to try to convince people otherwise.

As for the idea of millions of years, Steno knew nothing of them. The suggestion of one reviewer that Steno came to see that ‘seashell fossils on mountaintops could be explained only in the context of a world old enough to have produced them, a world millions or perhaps even billions of years old’ is total nonsense. Utter fabrication. Steno accepted the plain statements of Scripture. He believed in a young earth. He discussed the question of time in detail so there is no excuse for anyone to get it wrong.

In his careful deliberations, Steno discussed when Tuscany was covered by the waters of Noah’s Flood—the deluge that deposited the sediment which contained fossils of shark’s teeth and marine shells. Steno says: ‘In regard to the time of the universal deluge, secular history is not at variance with sacred history, which relates all things in detail.’¹¹ In case the reader did not get the message, the translator of Steno clearly wrote in a footnote that Steno accepted the chronology of Usher which assigned the creation of the world to the year 4004 BC. But the modern secularist is used to bending the facts to promote his theories,¹² even the most stubborn ones. And this book even uses the young-earth creationist, Steno, to promote the concept of ‘deep time’.

Concerning chronology, Steno went on:

‘The ancient cities of Tuscany, of which some were built on hills formed by the sea, put back their birthdays beyond three thousand years; in Lydia, moreover, we come

nearer to four thousand years: so that it is possible thence to infer that the time at which the earth was left by the sea agrees with the time of which Scripture speaks.’¹¹

For Steno, geology and Scripture agreed that the Flood was some 4,500 years ago. There was no conflict, no problem.

Steno clearly believed the recent biblical Flood explained the geology he observed in Tuscany. But through his book Cutler continually assails the Flood in his not-so-subtle attacks on the reliability of the Bible. He is constantly raising what he calls ‘disconcerting questions’ such as ‘The shells resembled species that lived in salt water, but forty days and nights of rain would have made a freshwater Flood’. Or, ‘How could so many shellfish become spread so widely in a flood that, according to the Bible, had lasted no more than a year?’ And then what he calls the ‘stickier problem’:

‘The Bible said God had created the solid earth and gave it its form in the very first week. Noah’s Flood happened much later. How, then, did seashells get *inside* rocks, which had supposedly already been created when the Flood took place?’

None of these are problems for modern creationists. Both freshwater and marine fossils are to be expected because the Flood catastrophe affected the land and the sea. The huge geographical extent of the strata and seashells is no surprise because the Flood was global. And it produced billions of fossils buried in sediment laid down by water all over the earth. It is absurd to suggest that the Flood can’t explain the evidence, especially today when there is a wealth of creationist literature on these issues. All that is needed is to consult such resources as *The Answers Book*¹³ or Google the web to find abundant answers to such questions, and to hundreds of other alleged difficulties as well. Sadly, this assault on the reliability of the Bible is woefully misinformed.

The major thesis surrounding Cutler’s book is hugely wrong. One could be excused for suspecting it is an attempt at revisionist propaganda to influence that part of the population who do not accept evolution. Or per-

haps it is an exercise in writing what some people want to hear rather what really happened. Either way, readers of Cutler’s book need to be aware that this biography subtly misrepresents the relationship between the science and the Bible, Steno’s attitude to it, and the implications of Steno’s discoveries for geology. For a reliable assessment of the issue, read Steno directly.

References

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