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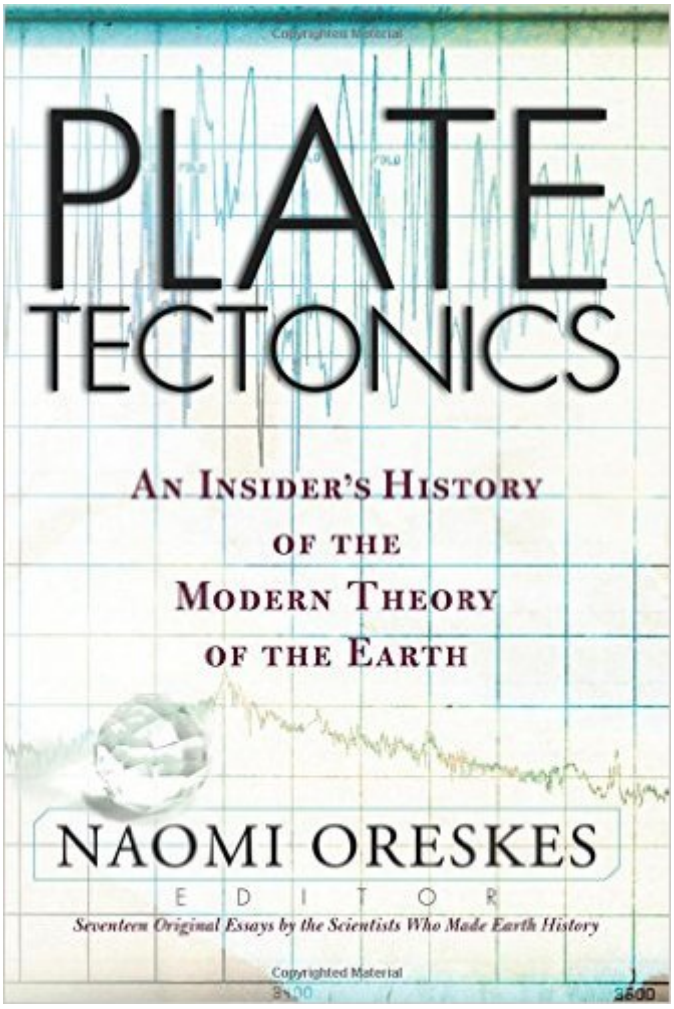
Plate Tectonics: An Insider's History Of The Modern Theory Of The Earth



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Synopsis

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 the late 1960â ™s 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 crucial roles in developing the theory to tell - for the first time, and in their own words - the stories of their involvement in the extraordinary confrimation 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, raised questions that were finally answered thirty years later, and 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 Institution of Oceanography – competed and collaborated until the theory coalesced.

Book Information

Paperback: 448 pages
Publisher: Westview Press (February 4, 2003)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0813341329
ISBN-13: 978-0813341323
Product Dimensions: 6 x 1 x 9 inches
Shipping Weight: 1.7 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)
Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (11 customer reviews)
Best Sellers Rank: #123,519 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Geology > Plate Tectonics #13 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Geophysics #242 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Earth Sciences

Customer Reviews

This book will delight all historians of science. The indefatigable Naomi Oreskes, known for her excellent history of continental drift and plate tectonics, has assembled reminiscences by the surviving founders of plate tectonics theory. Dr. Oreskes deserves the highest praise for this. Alas,

the senior figures such as Arthur Holmes and Harry Hess are no longer with us; the writers of these essays were graduate students in the critical early 1960s. Now elders themselves, they recall the excitement of coming on the scene just when all was breaking loose. Even the most sober number-crunchers manage to write with infectious enthusiasm. The theories are explained in a notably accessible fashion, and the varied intellectual currents of the time (and, in some essays, subsequent decades) are brought out. My one complaint--as a reader interested in the history of science--is that the writers don't say much about their personal lives. One suspects that some of them have no personal lives beyond number-crunching. Most, however, hint at or partially reveal rich and interesting backgrounds that clearly affected their thoughts. Only Peter Molnar does much more than hint, and, although he claims that one reader called his essay "unexpurgated," even he is rather reticent. Still, this volume is a gold mine, providing a very different look at one of the most "revolutionary" (in scare quotes) theoretical advances in the history of science. The consensus here seems to be that it was indeed a revolution, at least in the eyes of American graduate students of the 1960s, but not a Kuhnian revolution brought about by highly intellectualized "paradigm shifts" (Kuhn 1962); it was brought about by new field methods that brought floods of new data.

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