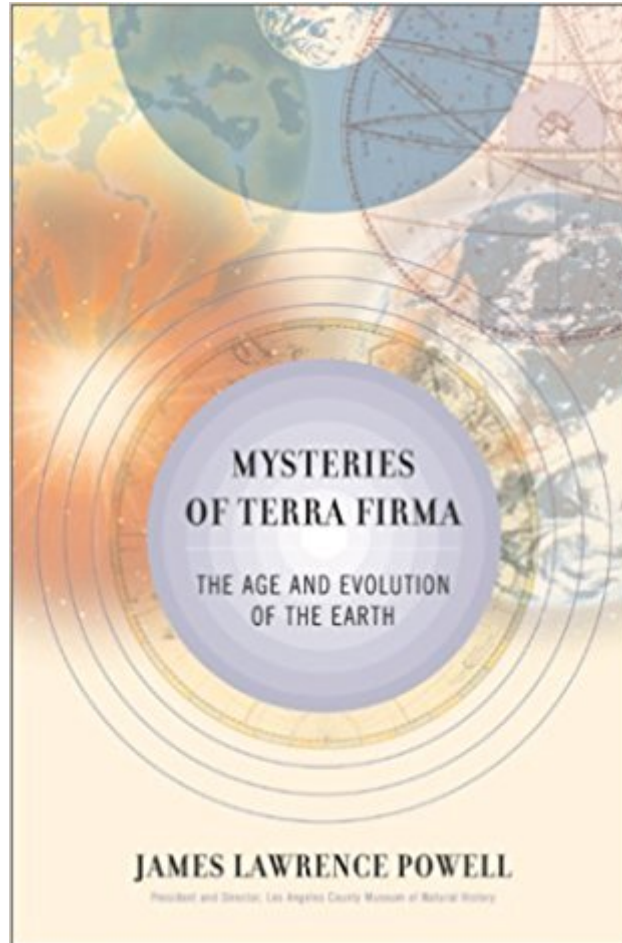


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Mysteries Of Terra Firma: The Age And Evolution Of The Earth



Synopsis

The head of the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum explores the way in which three geologic revolutions have forever changed the way we see ourselves and our place in the universe. Everyone knows what geology is, but few people realise that almost everything we know about the planet Earth is barely a hundred years old. Here, James Powell unearths a wholly new perspective on the history, and human impact, of an oft underestimated science. Beginning the the 'revolution of time', Powell reveals how we came to know how long the earth has existed and helps readers begin to fathom an astounding fact: if all of the 4.5 billion years of geologic time were compressed into 24 hours, Homo Sapiens would have arrived only in the last second. Next, the 'revolution of drift' the discovery of plate tectonics, explained how the ground we walk on came to be and how it will change in the future. Lastly, the 'revolution of chance' followed from the recognition that the earth, indeed the entire solar system, has been bombarded from the beginning by innumerable meteorites, some of them as large as moons. And if the tape were layed again, the history of the solar system would unfold differently: it might never again provide for conditions under which humankind could evolve. This revolution transformed our understanding of how lucky we are to be here at all.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an excellent history of the attempt to determine the age of the earth and moon and to understand how they have evolved geologically. The author divides the book into three sections, dealing with "time, drift, and impact", i.e. the dating of the earth, the discovery of continental drift, and the discovery of the importance of impact events on the history of the earth and moon. (A better

title for the book would have been: *Mysteries of Terra and Luna: The Age and Evolution of the Earth and Moon*".) One of the things I like the most about this book is its depiction of how the scientific process and human foibles interact to produce the following 3 common situations: 1) a theory later shown to be true is initially seen as preposterous and is rejected by the scientific establishment; 2) eminent scientists continue to cling to outdated theories long after evidence to the contrary becomes overwhelming, and 3) even when there is overwhelming evidence for a theory, some scientists with reputable credentials attack it on flimsy grounds. This may well be relevant to the current controversy over anthropogenic global warming. I also enjoyed some of the quotations the author prefaces the chapters with. Particularly nice is a quote attributed to Goethe to the effect that "to be uncertain is to be uncomfortable, but to be certain is to be ridiculous". Another one I liked attributed to the evolutionist Thomas Huxley is "how incredibly stupid not to have thought of that". I read this book shortly after I read another one with which it overlaps: *Nature's Clocks*. I must say that the latter is better written. The author of the former does not always express himself as clearly as he could. He sometimes uses a technical term without properly defining it.

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