

Reading the Rocks: How Victorian Geologists Discovered the Secret of Life

By Brenda Maddox

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Reading the Rocks: How Victorian Geologists Discovered the Secret of Life
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A rich and exuberant group biography of the first geologists, the people who were first to excavate from the layers of the world its buried history. These first geologists were made up primarily, and inevitably, of gentlemen with the necessary wealth to support their interests, yet boosting their numbers, expanding their learning and increasing their findings were clergymen, academics - and women. This lively and eclectic collection of characters brought passion, eccentricity and towering intellect to geology and Brenda Maddox in Reading the Rocks does them full justice, bringing them to vivid life. The new science of geology was pursued by this assorted band because it opened a window on Earth's ancient past. They showed great courage in facing the conflict between geology and Genesis that immediately presented itself: for the rocks and fossils being dug up showed that the Earth was immeasurably old, rather than springing from a creation made in the six days that the Bible claimed. It is no coincidence that Charles Darwin was a keen geologist. The individual stories of these first geologists, their hope and fears, triumphs and disappointments, the theological, philosophical and scientific debates their findings provoked, and the way that as a group, they were to change irrevocably and dramatically our understanding of the world is told by Brenda Maddox with a storyteller's skill and a fellow scientist's understanding. The effect is absorbing, revelatory and strikingly original.

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Editorial Review

Review
Reading the Rocks, the latest book by the frighteningly prolific biographer Brenda Maddox, relates how a handful of British men - and one woman - blasted out the intellectual cutting through which the theory of natural selection would follow ... Maddox, whose previous biographical scalps include George Eliot, DH Lawrence and Rosalind Franklin, has a fine eye for idiosyncrasy, the primacy of money and the sheer squawking rivalrousness of the academic world' -- Oliver Moody * The Times * Brenda Maddox's new book is about this magic moment in the history of modern geology ... the overall result is a fascinating picture of scientific life, and of fundamental changes in thinking, over a vital half-century ***** * Daily Telegraph * Maddox's book is a fascinating group biography of the pioneers of geology who eventually inspired Charles Darwin to develop his theory of evolution ... Maddox brings to life the personalities of the time and conjures superbly the excitement and controversy that the new science caused -- Ian Critchley * Sunday Times * The rock/collecting geek in me loved this enthralling group biography in Lunar Men-style of the first geologist -- A History Pick of the Month * Bookseller *

About the Author
Born in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, Brenda Maddox graduated from Harvard University (then Radcliffe) before moving to Britain to study at the London School of Economics. Her biographies of Elizabeth Taylor, D. H. Lawrence, Nora Joyce, W. B. Yeats and Rosalind Franklin have been widely acclaimed and she has won the Los Angeles Times Biography Award, the Silver PEN Award, the French Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger and the Whitbread Biography Prize. She was previously a senior editor at the Economist, and has also regularly contributed to the BBC as a commentator, to the New York Times as a critic, and was a longstanding columnist for The Times and the Daily Telegraph. She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1999 and was member of the Editorial Board of British Journalism Review and a past chairman of the Broadcasting Press Guild; she remains a vice-president of the Hay-on-Wye Festival of Literature. Maddox has two children and two stepchildren and lives in London and mid-Wales.

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