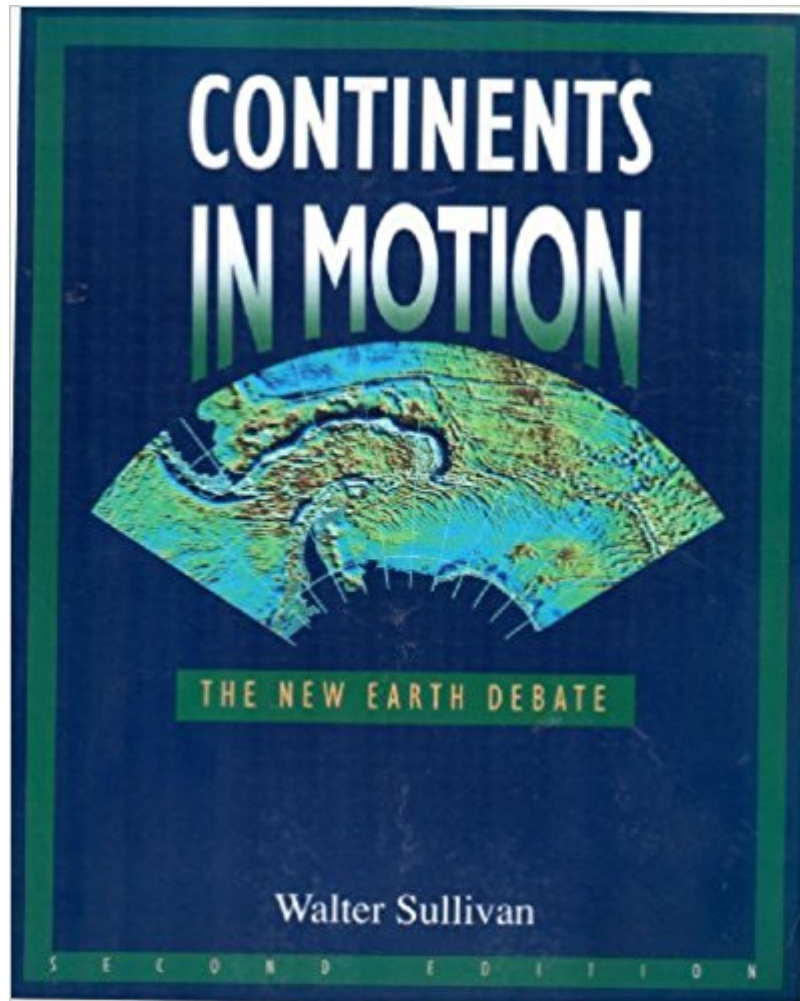




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Continents In Motion



Synopsis

"A history of discovery as revealing as the ways of science." The New York Times "Offers the purest intellectual excitement, the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake...." Wall Street Journal "Beautifully illustrated, superbly written, and thoroughly documented." San Francisco Examiner This book presents a history of the idea of continental drift, which revolutionized our understanding of geology. Sullivan presents the idea from its tentative beginnings in the 19th century to the accumulation of overwhelming evidence in the 1960s. The second edition is extensively updated to reflect our current understanding of the basic geophysics underlying continental drift as well as more recent corroborating evidence. The book is written at a slightly more technical level than the average New York Times science news story. Walter Sullivan, as Science Editor of the New York Times, witnessed many of the scientific discoveries described here, having, for example, accompanied four research expeditions to Antarctica.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Best book available to explain the history of plate techtonics and how the evidence was accumulated. It is written in a clear and informative fashon. Everyone should read this book. It makes the earth much more understandable.

Book was delivered on time and as expected in perfect condition. Written in 1974 It is a classic example of a timely book valuable to scientists and layman.The concept of continental drift was becoming more widely accepted no doubt assisted by this book.

Very interesting and well written book.

Walter Sullivan (1918-1996) was the award-winning science editor for the New York Times from 1962 to 1987 and was the author of several classic books on science, including "Assault on the Unknown" (about the International Geophysical Year of 1957-8), "We Are Not Alone" (an early examination of SETI), "Black Holes: the edge of space, the edge of time" and this one on the revolution in geology that occurred when we discovered that earth's continents really do move and how they manage it. The notion that the continents move is not new; if you could stick Africa and South America together in just the right way, they would seem to be two broken pieces of the same continent. Alfred Wegener was the first one to try to get all the evidence together to prove this, something he worked at for many years, publishing his results in the 1920s. He was not believed. He was right and the rest of geology was wrong, of course, but it is understandable that they were skeptical. The earth is a complex place and, though there were many geologists who were mapping and exploring, discovering the myriad details as to the age, structure, and chemical makeup of the earth, the notion that continents could move seemed impossible. How can rock move through other rock? How, indeed! The evidence was there: some very different parts of the earth seemed to be very like other parts that are very far away. They seemed to be fragments of the same kind of terrain, and the process of finding that out took lots of geologists, lots of work, and lots of years. While the evidence built up, the mechanism that managed to move them remained hidden. This book discusses a lot of this research as well as many theories that ranged from conservative to downright crazy (e.g. the work of Velikovsky). The research expeditions are not slighted: the Challenger expedition of the late 19th Century, followed by dozens of others over many years. I'm not sure if there were more research expeditions or theories of how and why the earth is the way it is, but all of the important ones are discussed within. Most of the theories stemmed from real facts: geological phenomena that have been observed, measured, and explained -- sometimes believed, sometimes not. Sometimes it took a lot of time and debate to convince the skeptics. Geology, it seems, is a lively subject. And the contributions came from many kinds of science: paleontology, astronomy, physics -- one of the more interesting ones came from P.A.M. Dirac, a great physicist and contemporary of Einstein. His theory was that long, long ago gravity was much weaker than it is now (ALL gravity, not just the earth's). That caused quite a stir and was considered, and shot down, by the geologists of the time. The book covers many kinds of expeditions: to study the sea floor, to measure magnetism at various places on the earth, variations in gravity over the earth's surface, and,

of course, the more popular, well-known things like earthquakes, volcanoes, tidal waves, ice ages. The planet has been explored and mapped out in great detail. The changes in magnetism found on the seafloor proved to be crucial in finding out how the continents move. This led to the realization that the earth's crust sits atop a number of massive plates, which themselves move. Plate tectonics is now an accepted fact, is now acknowledged as the mechanism by which the continents move. This is an exhaustive -- and, if you don't pace yourself, an exhausting -- history of the discovery of plate tectonics, one of the most important things that defines what the earth is. It runs some 400 pages, has many diagrams and drawings and photographs, running (probably) in the neighborhood of 200,000 words or so. I read the book a couple of times in the 1970s when I had to borrow it, and a couple more times after I bought the second edition (1991); I always find it fascinating and entertaining. Mr. Sullivan was a skilled writer and a thorough researcher of his topics. I am no geologist, but I learned a lot from this book. It truly is a classic, one of the best and most thorough works on the history of science I've ever read or seen. If you want a shorter, simpler version of the story, I would recommend "Continents in Collision" from the Time-Life "Planet Earth" series. It too is very readable.

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