



The Hidden Landscape: A Journey into the Geological Past

Richard Fortey

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'A very well written book about geology and geological history' Sir David Attenborough, *The Times*

'I travelled to Haverfordwest to get to the past. From Paddington Station a Great Western locomotive took me on a journey westwards from London further and further back into geological time, from the age of mammals to the age of trilobites...'

So begins this enthralling exploration of time and place in which Richard Fortey peels away the top layer of the land to reveal the hidden landscape - the rocks which contain the story of distant events, which dictate not only the personality of the landscape, but the nature of the soil, the plants that grow in it and the regional characteristics of the buildings. We travel with him as our guide throughout the British Isles and as the rocks change so we learn to read the clues they contain: that Britain was once divided into two parts separated by an ocean, that Scottish malt whisky, Harris tweed, slate roofs and thatched cottages can be traced back to tumultuous events which took place many millions of years ago. *The Hidden Landscape* has become a classic in popular geology since its first publication in 1993. This new edition is fully updated and beautifully illustrated.

The Hidden Landscape: A Journey into the Geological Past Details

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Jason says

What a wonderful book that combines geology, rocks, fault lines, natural history, tectonics, tramping and Scotland, all in one chapter and just about in every chapter. There's a touch of Bill Bryson to Fortey's writing - it won't leave you in stitches but will bring a smile to your face. Something that's difficult given the topic which is generally seen as dry. All of these interests are favourites of mine so when they appear in the one book, what more can you ask for. I've never been to Scotland though plan on visiting very soon - rather than the typical guide books, I think this will be dictating where we visit just so I can see the splendour of the rocks for myself.

Johanne says

Excellent guide to British geology - It helped me to have a bit of an easy overview before reading this (I read Lie of the Land) but it is a good non-academic guide to what shapes our landscape

Jonathan says

While highly informative and beautifully written, like all of Dr. Fortey's books, I didn't enjoy this one quite as much because it is meant for people who already have a much greater familiarity with British geography than I have, or for those who are about to take a walking tour of the British Isles and so would find the descriptions of the underlying geology of it all useful. I have an interest in geology and did find that I learned, and occasionally found the text entertaining, but it was mostly pretty frustrating. So, all you Yanks should leave off this book, unless you'll be hiking the Highlands or some other British natural beauty spot. There is a useful, if small, geological map of Britain and Ireland, and the illustrations are both helpful and lovely.

Ned Thacker says

Turns geology into poetry. Fortey believes that the spirit of place is largely determined by the rocks beneath, and provides convincing arguments as he tours Great Britain from the ancient mountains of Scotland to Suffolk's crumbling shore. Prose so evocative it makes one want to leap on the next charabanc to Lulworth Cove

Brynn says

Beautiful prose. At times way too many details. Overall, a good read and I found myself charmed by the author.

Solveig says

I read this book for our popular science book club, because I wanted us to go for a book on geology. Unfortunately, I came away from reading it feeling I had learned very little. Partly this is due to the authors tendency to write about British geography as if the minute details are common knowledge, and not providing a map with the important sites marked. The book also tends to harping nostalgically about what villages and farms in different parts of the British Isles used to look like. Many a chapter put me to sleep trying to read them.

Marts (Thinker) says

Travels through the British Isles with Richard Fortey exploring time and place by revealing 'the hidden landscape' through geology...

Barbara says

A Journey into the Geological Past by the palaeontologist Richard Fortey. The landscape in question is that of the British Isles - one whose superficial qualities, both natural and man-made, have been determined by the underlying rocks. As the British Isles are formed of many various rocks of different ages and origins, they offer a fascinating illustration of the history of Earth.

I have never come across a science writer who makes his topics more interesting. His style ranges from the poetically sublime to the dryly ridiculous. Unfortunately I could only get hold of this to read on my ancient black and white Kindle. As I have travelled over a fair bit of the British Isles, I could call many landscapes and townscapes to mind (or google them) but I never got a grip on the botany. For this creature of the antipodean subtropics the lyrically described trees and flowers (too numerous to google) which are specific to particular terrains are as unfamiliar as Shakespeare's bank whereon the wild thyme blows and have to be imagined.

Loved it.

Walter says

The Hidden Landscape: A Journey into the Geological Past by Richard Fortey

For me this is a delicious book which I read with enjoyment.

This book, focusing on England, Scotland, and Wales with a bit of Ireland, is a little like a Historical Geology text, but it is different. First it is a personal text written almost like a memoir. Second, although it is organized stratigraphically, that is, beginning with the oldest rocks and finishing with the youngest, the information is tied to landscape rather than to modern stratigraphic nomenclature. And, landscape here

means not just rocks but plants, architectural building materials, roads, water, walks, and more and more.

Attempting to think of an American equivalent to this book, and the nearest I can come is something like a mixture of C. B. Hunt's *Physiography of the United States* and something written by Ann Zwinger. It is possible that for students this might be better (more interesting) than a typical *Historical Geology* text.

Fortey states that: "Instead, what I want to explore are the connections between geology and landscape." (page 1). It seems to me that Fortey chose what to include in the text by choosing his favorite "connections" and then stringing the most interesting "connections" together into historical sequence. "This is a book about connections between geology, natural history and ourselves." (page 14). He has something here which may help us learn and enjoy the vast factual detail that goes with landscape and geology: "Somehow, the enjoyment of the trick is more satisfying than the explanation." (page 1). His connections that have irony or represent a paradox seem to give him and the reader special delight. Part of his theme is: "Much of the character of our country is governed by its geology, and determined by the rocks." (page 13). For me his connections make everything more memorable.

Fortey is seeking something more general, and more holistic than just landscape in the usual sense: "But all these evidences of past activities sit on the bedrock of geology. Human endeavours do not succeed if they deny the geological realities. This hidden landscape is a part of all our lives." (page 27). For him landscape really includes "hidden landscape" or includes all of the underlying reasons or connections which give understanding to why the totality of landscape is the way it is. "For the way we understand landscape has to do as much with what is in our minds, as with what we think we see with our eyes."

There are seventeen chapters. Each chapter is more like an essay than a text chapter. Below is the table of Contents with my more prosaic geologic translation of the chapters in parentheses, where needed.

1)Journeys to the Past (Introduction) 2)Names, Origins, Maps and Time 3)The Oldest Rocks (Precambrian)
4)The Great Divide (Lower Phanerozoic and Moine Thrust) 5)'Here be dragons': Caledonia (Northwest Iapetus Coast) 6)The Southern Uplands (Southeast Iapetus Coast) 7)The Land of the Ordovices (Ordovician)
8)The Red and the Black (Devonian) 9)Fells and Dales (Lower Carboniferous - Mississippian) 10)Coal and Grit (Upper Carboniferous - Pennsylvanian) 11)Lost in the Sands (Permian and Triassic) 12)Vales and Scarps: the Jurassic 13)The Weald (lower Cretaceous) 14)The Chalklands: Downs and Flints (upper Cretaceous 1) 15)The Chalklands: Beechwoods and Trout Streams (upper Cretaceous 2) 16)Tertiary Times (Tertiary and Volcanism) 17)East Anglia: Sky and Ice.

As an American you have to put up with: downs and dales, fells and vales, but that is not a bad thing. Still the constant assault of geographic names can wear one down.

Fortey loves words and names, and in Chapter 2 makes a forceful and eloquent argument for appropriate taxonomy and words. I understand that the numerous new words adds to the poetry of this book, and I appreciate them as a source of new "stumpers" for my friends; but there were times for someone like myself who does not know cnocs from cromlech when looking things up became a bit tiresome. My plea, mostly, would be directed toward a second edition with the addition of two or perhaps three helpful index maps designed to help the reader.

The book serves as a travel guide: "It was in Dulverton that I ate the perfect cream tea. There is no greater sensual indulgence: cream so thick it is reluctant to leave the spoon, strawberry jam heavy with fruit, and crumbly scones with a hint of astringency to balance the sugar in the jam, and all piled up as high as they will go. Although it is possible that the cream originated on the New Red Sandstone in Mid-Devon, I prefer to believe that it was produced by cows grazing water meadow flanking the lower reaches of the nearby

River Barl or the River Exe" (page 125). You also get advise on the best Ale, best Stilton, and how to find Amber.

There is humor: "Between the Lower Greensand, which may not be green, and as we have seen is often rusty with iron, and the Chalk, which is definitively white, there is the dark Gault Clay and the Upper Greensand, which, surprisingly, actually is green" (page 209).

And there is wise advice: "Nothing in geology is more certain than change: even the cliffs on which you stand are doomed."

In conclusion this is great book. My hope is that book will engender more like it.

Nikki says

Geology is not my thing, generally -- in fact, aside from one other book, which was by Richard Fortey as well, I've generally found it quite boring. The attraction here is Fortey's writing, which is clear and passionate. Beautiful, even. Most of that is the sheer enthusiasm and inventiveness with which he treats his subject: metaphors and vivid descriptions abound, even as he's being very clear about the geological forces at work and what the features of the landscape mean.

Unlike *Earth: An Intimate History*, this book discusses solely the geology of the British Isles. It touches on most areas as it does so, going through Scotland and Wales, Cornwall, East Anglia, some of the small islands offshore... It's not an exhaustive list, of course, but it goes from the oldest rocks of our islands to the newest, discussing their formation and weathering, and what that means for the landscape and the future. It might be surprising that even in a book originally published twenty years ago, there's a lot of discussion of the potential of climate change to completely alter our landscape, but I think that's because it takes a long view (necessarily so!). Whether climate change is man-made or not isn't important: it happens, either way, and part of the story of geology is climate change.

Honestly, I take away as little understanding of schists, gneisses and nappes as I started with; it's the kind of information that won't stick in my head. But I enjoy the way Fortey presents it, and so thoroughly enjoyed it even knowing I'm not going to retain the information.

P J says

It must be quite sad to be a creationist. Stand on the beach near Bude and try to imagine that all these strata, these folds, this drama, came into being a meagre few thousand years ago rather than 300 million years ago. How narrow is such a vision, how bleak, what a betrayal of human intelligence, of human curiosity. You have to try also to imagine a capricious deity, moving in ways mysterious indeed, taking the trouble to plant all this overwhelmingly convincing evidence of high antiquity just to tempt geologists, palaeontologists and archaeologists into doubt and sin. A god like that would be capable of any low nastiness (well I almost forgot about Job).

Richard Fortey's fine book takes us on a journey back into reality, starting with a very distant reality, and he is the most eloquent and enthusiastic of guides. It is a journey he has done already, although then he did not begin at the beginning, collecting fossils from rocks sometimes generous and sometimes parsimonious. For

us he recounts the story of the creation of Britain and Ireland more straightforwardly, beginning with the gneisses of the Western Isles – at 2,900 million years old not the oldest rocks we know of (there are rocks in Canada and Australia that are 4,000 million years old) but old enough, eh? Rolling across the country and through time he enthuses about the deposits of ever younger rocks piling one after the other through the shales of the Cambrian, my own native red sandstone of the Devonian (a mere 400 million years) then the coal of the Carboniferous and so on. The Jurassic of Dorset where the young Mary Annan collected so many dinosaur fossils was buried in the end by the chalk. Over this again were laid the clays of the London basin. The last event to majorly shape the land was of course the ice; the last major glaciations ending just 10,000 years ago, long, long after the first humans wandered around Happisburgh or even Boxgrove.

This are memorable descriptions here – ‘The Welsh Devonian mountains cast their Old Red Sandstone debris eastwards and southwards, where it comprises the widest belt of these rocks in the country. From Ross-on-Wye west to Llandilo is sixty miles, from Bridgenorth (Shropshire) south to Newport, seventy, and all of that on ‘Old Red’. Its outcrop passes to either side of the South Wales coalfield, which, being a great syncline, assures us that the Old Red must scoop beneath it, as a hand might hold a bowl.’

In areas of knowledge not geological, scholarly editing might have avoided some errors such as salt mining at Droitwich originating in the ‘Dark Ages’ when in fact it is Iron Age. Even much less scholarly editing might have avoided dates being rendered as 1,900 in several places. These are minor flaws though in a book that is a joy to read and packed full of gripping stuff.

I saw ‘The Hidden Landscape’ on the ‘recommended’ table in Blackwells (the proper Broad Street shop). Unlike the other books, there was only one copy left. That was it – impulse made me buy it in case there were no more. I’m so glad.

Jack Bates says

Absolutely brilliant. I'm a big fan of Fortey's accessible popular science writing and this is really great, I've read it three times.
