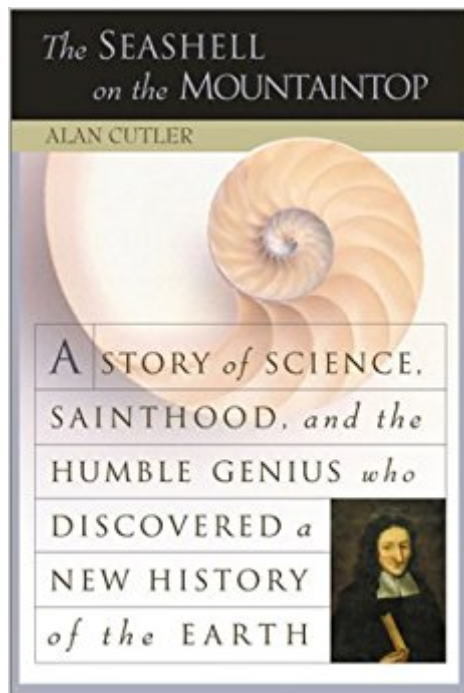


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# The Seashell On The Mountaintop: A Story Of Science Sainthood And The Humble Genius Who Discovered A New History Of The Earth



## Synopsis

In the bestselling tradition of *The Map that Changed the World* and *Longitude* comes the tale of a seventeenth-century scientist-turned-priest who forever changed our understanding of the Earth and created a new field of science. It was an ancient puzzle that stymied history's greatest minds: How did the fossils of seashells find their way far inland, sometimes high up into the mountains? Fossils only made sense in a world old enough to form them, and in the seventeenth century, few people could imagine such a thing. Texts no less authoritative than the Old Testament laid out very clearly the timescale of Earth's past; in fact one Anglican archbishop went so far as to calculate the exact date of Creation...October 23, 4004, B.C. A revolution was in the making, however, and it was started by the brilliant and enigmatic Nicholas Steno, the man whom Stephen Jay Gould called "the founder of geology." Steno explored beyond the pages of the Bible, looking directly at the clues left in the layers of the Earth. With his groundbreaking answer to the fossil question, Steno would not only confound the religious and scientific thinking of his own time, he would set the stage for the modern science that came after him. He would open the door to the concept of "deep time," which imagined a world with a history of millions or billions of years. And at the very moment his expansive new ideas began to unravel the Bible's authoritative claim as to the age of the Earth, Steno would enter the priesthood and rise to become a bishop, ultimately becoming venerated as a saint and beatified by the Catholic Church in 1988. Combining a thrilling scientific investigation with world-altering history and the portrait of an extraordinary genius, *The Seashell on the Mountaintop* gives us new insight into the very old planet on which we live, revealing how we learned to read the story told to us by the Earth itself, written in rock and stone.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Written with obvious gusto, and containing witty and elegant prose that seems to flow by effortlessly, this is popular science at its very best. Nicolaus Steno (aka Niels Stensen in his native Danish) was a gifted dissectionist with a deft touch. He discovered the glands that produce tears (before this discovery, it was thought that when a person got extremely upset their brain leaked water, and this water came out through the eyes as tears!). Branching out from his anatomical studies, he studied seashells embedded in mountains and came to the conclusion that the sediments had been produced in the oceans. He also theorized that either the oceans had once been higher, or the mountains had been uplifted. These conclusions were far from obvious at the time, as the periods necessary to produce thick layers of sediment and to raise mountain ranges would be quite lengthy....which would conflict with interpretations of the Bible which stated that the world was about 6,000 years old. In order to avoid this conflict, many people- rather than admit that seashell fossils were actually seashells- came up with the notion that the "shells" had actually grown right inside the rock. Therefore, they weren't really seashells! Steno was a very religious man (he was born a Protestant but converted to Catholicism) but he didn't believe in interpreting the Bible literally. He eventually gave up science, but not out of any conflict with his religious beliefs. He just believed it was more important to convert Protestants back to the "true faith." The author does a wonderful job of immersing the reader in the intellectual climate of 17th century Europe, so that we can understand the scientific and religious debates detailed in the book. Mr.

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