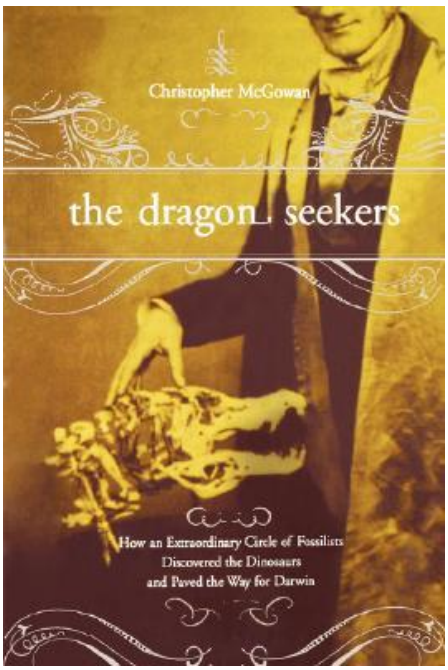

The Dragon Seekers: How An Extraordinary Circle Of Fossilists Discovered The Dinosaurs And Paved The Way For Darwin

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Against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, an extraordinary circle of fossilists struggled to make sense of a mysterious, prehistoric world--a world they had to piece together from the fossilized and often fragmentary remains of animals never before seen. In this transporting, seamlessly written book, Christopher McGowan takes us back to a time when geology and paleontology were as young and vibrant as genetic engineering is today. The nineteenth-century pioneers of these new disciplines were an eccentric lot, from different social classes and sexes, with a range of motivations in fossil hunting. These "Dragon Seekers" sought to persuade a populace raised on a literal interpretation of Genesis that the ground they walked was once a very frightening and unfamiliar place. A sweeping narrative history, The Dragon Seekers shows how these remarkable characters forever changed our interpretation of the world and its inhabitants.

The Dragon Seekers: How An Extraordinary Circle Of Fossilists Discovered The Dinosaurs And Paved The Way For Darwin Details

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From Reader Review The Dragon Seekers: How An Extraordinary Circle Of Fossilists Discovered The Dinosaurs And Paved The Way For Darwin for online ebook

Ciara says

a book about the origins of paleontology as a discipline! super-interesting! i mean, imagining to be among the first people to dig a collection of bones out of a cliff & realize that you are seeing the remains of an animal that has never been seen before by any living person. & not just that, but it's some kind of enormous lizard!

this book seeks to collect together the stories of the first few notable paleontologists & geologists, including mary anning, who was never allowed to join any of the geological societies of the time or really get much credit for any of the work she did because she was a woman. but she went fossiling everyday, found the first pleiosaur when she was twelve years old, & provided fossils & anatomical specimens to most of the notable paleontologists of the time, greatly contributing to the scientific record.

mcgowan writes about the stranglehold the anglican church had on the scientific community in the early 1800s--scientific discoveries that flew in the face of teachings from the bible could destroy a person's career, so some of the scientists sought ways to make their discoveries compatible with the bible. they sought evidence of noah's great flood & speculated that the fossil animals they were discovering may still exist in some unexplored corner of the world, because it questioned god's wisdom to suggest that he would create an animal & allow it to become extinct. others toyed with the idea of transmutation--an early but still flawed kind of evolutionary theory that sought to explain the fossil record by comparing bones against living specimens of modern animals. darwin drew on some of these ideas & research when working on origin of species.

some of the more interesting parts of the book (to me) contrasted early retrieval techniques against modern ones. nowadays, fossilists strengthen bones with plastics before digging them out of rocks, so the bones to don't drumble into pieces. early fossilists didn't have that kind of technology. they would have to sketch their discoveries before removing them from the rocks (when possible) & then fit them back together like puzzle pieces. mcgowan writes about a self-taught restorer named hawkins, who amassed a spectacular collection of fossils, which he proceeded to sell to museums. the problem is that his specimens were too perfect. when a skeptical curator poked the bones with a knife, he discovered that a large percentage were actually plaster replicas, perfectly colored to look like the real bones, & the stone in which they were embedded was a composite designed to look like real rock. this restorer had compromised the scientific record in order to have the most perfect specimens in the world, & some of the most eminent paleontologists of the day had abetted him in his ruse.

i also really enjoyed all the stuff about various scientists having big drama with each other, threatening to sue each other, etc. just goes to show, no matter who you are, what you do, or what historical time period you live in, people are always going to be short-sighted assholes.

Alexa Billow says

(also posted at fredscience.tumblr.com)

It’s an extraordinary cast indeed: Owen, who coined the taxonomic idea of dinosaurs; Buckland and Mantell, who discovered the first ones; Mary Anning, the finest fossil hunter of her generation. This group of contemporaries, active in England in the first half of the nineteenth century, gave us dinosaurs and other prehistoric reptiles as objects of scientific study. (We’ve always had them, of course, weathering out of rocks and visible to everyone. It’s the Victorians who started digging them up.) The book tells the story of the first dinosaurs and the birth of the disciplines of paleontology and geology. It was fun to read alongside The Gilded Dinosaur, as together they provide a contrasting picture of British and American science.

Though many of the players in this book are creationists, none more so than Buckland, the idea of transmutation of species was just starting to be kicked around. Darwin makes a cameo appearance, but the narrative cuts off just before the publication of Origin of Species. Prior to Darwin’s book, the ideas of evolution and extinction were thought to be mutually exclusive: either species remained static and perished in divinely appointed catastrophes, or they gradually transmuted into new forms. Darwin’s idea of natural selection provided a mechanism for both forces to coexist.

Had to knock off half a star for the bizarre chapter at the end, which jumps to the present day. The author is apparently an ichthyosaur specialist. They’re also clearly a fan of Mary Anning, which I can certainly support, but this story of ichthyosaur hunting in her home of Lyme Regis doesn’t hang together with the rest of the narrative. Still, Anning is given pride of place throughout the book and recognized as both a talented fossil hunter (which her contemporaries acknowledged) and a scientist (which they didn’t.) If you’re looking for a book that gives Anning her due place in history, this is a good option. Rating: 3.5/5 stars.

Stephen says

Ancient bones and magnets were both known to antiquity, but not until the 19th century did their importance begin to be realized. Attribute that to a quickly-developing worldview that regarded these things not as curiosities to be put aside with a pat explanation, but mysteries that needed to be solved – and mysteries, that once poked in to, transformed our understanding of the world. The quickening pace of fossil discoveries and the rising interest in placing them accurately, were essential in shifting the western understanding of the universe from one small, young, and personal, to one incomprehensibly vast, ancient, and cold as clockwork.

The “dragon hunters” driving these discoveries were not pre-Victorian John Horners; long before the days of science funded by governments and pursued by microspecialists, all that was needed for discovery were simple tools and insatiable curiosity -- or at least an interest in selling fossils to tourists. That brought together a mere villager, a clergyman, and a lawyer into the same company as natural historians – and that shared company was literal. The people of this book were not separate actors, but corresponded and worked together; in one chapter, a young Charles Darwin accompanied Charles Lyell along with two other fossil-hunters, and together they met another fossil hunter (Mary Anning, the villager) to poke around together, and are nearly trapped in a cliffside cave when the tide comes in. Together, they argued about what these things in the rocks meant.

While general audiences strongly associate Darwin with the theory of evolution, this chronicle of discovery makes it clear that the general idea of evolution predated Darwin, and was ventured by some theorists as ‘transmutation’. What caused transmutation was then unknown; the fossils discovered here spurred speculation. (Darwin’s contribution was identify the mechanism of natural selection that spurred speciation.) Some wondered if perhaps the Earth didn’t regularly shift from cold to tropical epochs and back again, with the life on Earth following them; perhaps one day these ancient lost creatures would return, like bats at dusk and wild geese in autumn. That was a little easier to sell than the idea that these strange beings had simply ceased to be, that Creation had chapters untold to men before. Although the discovery of these bones did not

force a shift of worldviews the way Charles Lyells' Principles of Geology and Darwin's Origin of Species did, they did open the door to those inquiries given how poorly they fit in to the previous understanding.

Eugene Kernes says

This book describes the history of paleontology, geology, and evolution. A lot of the science behind the search for fossils and interpretation of the fossils is explained in great detail. Science takes time to obtain a proper findings, made even harder due to the extraction of fragile fossils and made rare by geological events that crush the dinosaur skeletons. The theory of evolution would not have been possible without the work of Cuvier in the field of anatomy or of Lamarck's theory of transmutation. Many of the fossilists held non-secular beliefs about their work which sometimes slowed down the proper interpretation and understanding of the events in the past.
The author does a very good job at presenting the information. Each key fossilist is discussed in terms of what they have found and their responses to various groups who help an interest in the field. Some Fossilists such as Hawkins, like in many if not all profession, tried to deceive the data by adding or creating parts in large amounts to the fossils discovered. Many fossilists were collectors only part time while completing their practice in medicine or surgery. Other fossilists like great Anning found and sold the fossils to various collectors through sheer perseverance and love for the fossils.

Elizabeth Wilson says

If you think you knew how dinosaurs were discovered, since this topic is covered in several books about dinosaurs in general, think again. I know about Buckland, Owens and Mantell, but I didn't understand how what they did changed understanding of a part of Earth Science. Beyond this, you can see how others contributed to the understanding of Life on this planet. These include Mary Anning, whom almost no one mentions, as well as the other Big Guns. If you like this, try the The story of Life in 25 Fossils, by Donald Prothero.

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nick says

maybe ill go back an re-listen to this, since it was interesting in both a entertaining and informative way. but some parts definetly needed visuals or to be more descriptive like other areas.

Lara says

Fascinating look at the pre-Darwinian fossil hunters and the ways they tried to make sense of their finds. McGowan talks about their relationships to each other and the ways in which they influenced one another, and it made for a really interesting story. There were a couple bits that didn't seem to quite fit or that I somehow missed the connections for, but for the most part I found it super interesting and well narrated (although at the beginning I found the narrator's voice really perplexing, because it was like, part English, part Australian or New Zealander, and part...Canadian? I couldn't figure it out. It eventually settled into full-

on English though, and then I could relax). Well worth a read or a listen if you're at all interested in paleontology or the history of science.

Josh Gulch says

While the title is perhaps a mite bit misleading in regard to the role that dinosaurs played to these early fossilists, this ought not to detract from the narrative. Indeed, the true stars of this tale are the often overlooked icthyosaurs, plesiosaurs, and the intrepid individuals who realized the relevance of the assorted remains they were plucking out of mountains and beaches. While the dinosaurs that they discovered opened the floodgates for the thousands of known species that followed, it is important to not forget the other denizens of prehistoric times.

McGowan did a top-notch job in presenting a relatively obscure subject. Much can be found on ichthyosaurs as an extinct reptile, but the likes of Mary Anning, William Buckland, Thomas Hawkins, Robert Owen, and their contemporaries are often overlooked. We know Buckland and Owen as names attached to a handful of different species, but their actual lives often go overlooked. McGowan's study serves not only as a history of early paleontology but also as a series of biographical sketches. The interconnectedness of the lives of these individuals allows their stories to flow into and out of one another's worlds. The narrative is allowed to pass from one person to the next, each fossil hunter handing off a baton to the next and, more often than not, having it passed back to them. These were people who not only shared a similar passion but also knew and worked with each other ... or, at the very least, had a few choice things to say about their contemporaries.

"The Dragon Seekers" was an interesting and fairly breezy read, chock full of information about an infrequently-told subject. McGowan does a nice job in presenting the world these persons inhabited and the ideas they held to heart. It may come as a surprise how many of these early fossilists had little good to say about Darwin's new theories. Buckland, for instance, despite having the honor of discovering the first named dinosaur, stood by his belief that these giant reptiles must have been killed off during the great flood. Owen, despite coining the name "dinosaur," was eventually cast off by the scientific community over his disavowal of Darwin. These are pre-Darwin fossil hunters, with no scientific background, who opened the doors for the great scientific discoveries that followed in their wake.

In any regard, you'll learn more about ichthyosaurs than you ever thought you'd need to know. This is not a bad thing. Everybody should know a thing or two about those magnificent animals.

Spicy T AKA Mr. Tea says

This was definitely a nice diversion from some of the stuff I've been reading. Interesting in its own way and a nice introduction to some very eccentric pre-Darwinists. These were people that used the sciences of geology and paleontology to bolster the Bible's version of life. That is until more evidence was discovered that made it more and more difficult to believe Genesis. It was a fairly quick read and pretty accessible. I intend to read the *Origin of Species* by Darwin and then move into the realm of eugenics. So this is a nice beginning to a train of study that should lead me down some very dark paths. It'll be interesting to say the least.

Kenzie Townsend says

Who doesn't love a good science story with a gender gap? Don't answer that. Mary Anning was a very interesting woman who found her first fossils in her teens to support her family. She was self taught and the book gives her much praise along with the more known scientists in early fossil study. I enjoyed the parts that connected Mary and felt the disconnection to the rest of the story. Maybe, it just needed visuals. It was easy to see Mary clopping through sand because every kid has done a field study of every backyard looking for fossils.

Mich Must Read says

This is a history of how Paleontology came to be. It is told through correspondence and archives from early fossil hunters, naturalists, geologists and other like minded individuals that had an interest in these newly discovered creatures. It also discusses how the science community and non-science community reacted to new information coming to light.

I thought that this book would have more about Mary Anning than it did, but she is referenced as a peripheral as she was in real life. There is a chapter about her in the beginning and any contact she had with other scientists is laced all through. I think it is meant as a framework to the book. There is apparently not that much information that is available on her.

While there is a fair amount of technical information about the fossils found and the theories that were being formed in the light of these discoveries, they are all given in a clear concise manner. The technical information is balanced well with vivid stories of the fossil hunters finding their way in society. This is a great beginners book for anyone interested in evolution, Paleontology, or Geology.

www.michmustread.com

Christina says

I picked up this book with the intent to gain a more historically accurate look at the life of Mary Anning (having just read a fictionalized account of her life in *Remarkable Creatures*). Although at times academic and somewhat technical, it was engaging, flowed well, and was highly readable. I found my interest increased as the terminology and leading theories of the day became more familiar. The book not only covers the foremost geologists, biologists, and emergent paleontologists of the day, it also delves into the religious theories, general mindset, and even politics of the period. It was a fascinating glimpse into the men (and one woman) at the beginning stages of paleontology. I found Mantell particularly interesting. This is certainly not my usual genre, but I now feel primed to read *The Origin of Species* :). Solid three and a half stars.

Kim says

I have to say that the book fulfilled its promised of being specifically about the closed group of fossil hunters, their findings, and the way they slowly changed the scientific climate to pave the way for Darwin and his Origin of Species to be published. Ithe was a very detailed account of their lives, including the

societal pressures that created the environments for them to display work, or the things that shaped their conclusions. For instance, possible neanderthal remains were attributed to Romans because it better fit the beliefs of the time than what they saw.

A great book for someone like me who wants to see not just the science but also the sociological ramifications of these findings.

Kaitlyn says

Delightful! Fascinating and well told account of the early days of fossil hunting. I appreciated that he topped and tailed the book with appreciation and recognition for the work of Mary Anning.

Daphne says

A splendid little book about the history of paleontology. I've read so many of these books through the years about the same characters, but I just can't seem to get enough of them.
