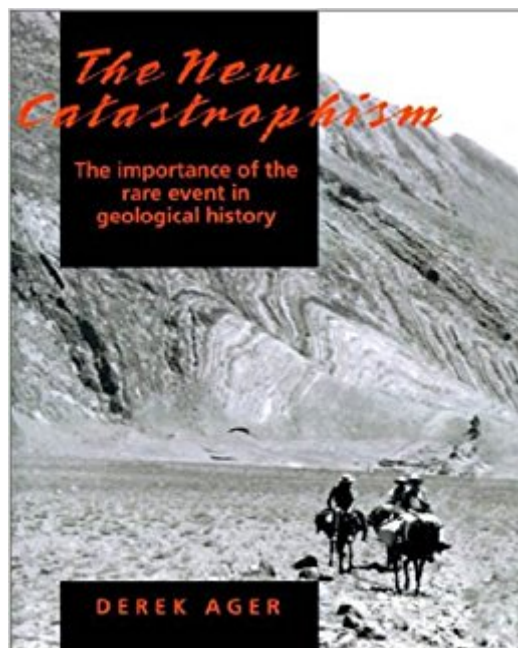




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# The New Catastrophism: The Importance Of The Rare Event In Geological History



## Synopsis

Rare and violent events through geological time are the theme of this readable and thought-provoking view of the Earth's history. The evidence for episodes and rare "catastrophic" happenings have been gleaned from the geological record in the author's travels all over the world. Such events are shown to dominate over the gradual and continuous processes that we see in the record of the history of the Earth. From hurricanes to episodic evolution, from colliding continents to asteroid impacts--the importance of these events are presented with many illustrations, both pictorial and anecdotal.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The writing is jargon-free, which makes the book accessible to a wider public than just students and professionals." Tony Hallam, *New Scientist*"His new work shares with its predecessor the qualities of originality, readability and seminality. I thoroughly recommend it....a feet-on-the-ground, sweat-in-the-eye encounter with an abundance of actual geological sites." Gordon L. Herries, *Nature*"...conversational, entertaining....Written for readers with an earth science background, the book could supplement an undergraduate level geology class or provide engaging reading for the scientist. Students should be inspired by the range of Ager's travels and perceptions; professionals will appreciate its thought-provoking ideas and controversies." Michael Hofferber, *Earth*"The New Catastrophism is a geology book aimed at the uninitiated reader...There must be few geology books that are hard to put down, but this is one...I will not look at a rock in the same way again." David Hughes, *Times Education Supplement*"...welcome and significant." Warren D. Allmon, *Science*"In

addition to its obvious appeal to geologists, this volume can be recommended as an interesting component of any 'history of science' collection." Robert F. Jack, Sci-Tech News"...an engaging look at the roles of uniformitarianism and catastrophism in defining the earth as we know it." Peter M. Whelan, Journal of Natural Resources"It is a pleasure to read and review a book that is both well written and scientifically informative. Such is the case with this book...." Charles Officer, American Scientist

Rare and violent events through geological time, from hurricanes to episodic evolution, colliding continents to asteroid impacts, are the theme of this thought-provoking view of the Earth's history, presented with evidence gleaned from the author's world travels.

MMMmmm, I'm not sure about this. I think I tend to agree with the other reviewers. It's an interesting book but difficult to peg. One might give it a different number depending upon on what aspect one focused. The book is delightful if you look at it as the musings of a very active geologist/paleontologist on the 20th century as he experienced it and on his life and work. This is certainly what the book amounts to, really, an autobiographical summary of a life spent doing something the author loved to do and in which he had some considerable success. The book was written at the end of the author's life, an end which he was fully aware was approaching at the time. It's a very nostalgic composition and at times a little sad. As a geology book, it's informative but not necessarily as a formal textbook. The novice might find the volume a little frustrating, since the author uses geological terms and theories that he does not really define well enough for the beginner to grasp simply from context. Furthermore, some of his referents are historical in nature, the terminology, as the author admits in the text, coming without apology from a pre-1950s, pre-plate tectonics milieu. One would almost have to have studied the history of the field to know some of these terms and to what they referred. As far as modern terminology goes, the beginner might like to read the book with a dictionary of geologic terms at his or her side. Without that, I suspect they will have difficulty making sense of what the author describes. The more advanced beginner should have less trouble with this aspect of the author's style. Certainly any US reader who has knowledge of the field might find the book enlightening, since it takes a more global perspective on geological formations and on paleontology. US books on geology tend to concentrate on US formations and paleontological type specimen, because we are fortunate to have nice examples of many in the country. US geology itself really tended to take off with works like Powell's in the Grand Canyon and Cope and Marsh on fossil forms. However the world is a big place, and it has abundant

examples of exotic terrain and life forms, most of it unfamiliar to the US reader. The book definitely puts geology into perspective in useful ways by assuming a broader stance. For one thing, the author makes it much more apparent that a vertical core sample can be very misleading, from both the perspective of evolution and that of changing climate. Particularly in the former, the concept of extinction and when it can be said to have occurred can be distorted by looking at a single core sample from a specific region rather than at several taken world wide. This has become apparent as new data come from the scientific world of a more open China, where evidence of later survival or earlier appearance of plants and animals, let alone varieties of unknown life forms, have added to our knowledge base. This information has changed much of how the geological sciences view the past. From this perspective, the author is very experienced and has much to say on what he has learned. He has worked on almost every continent and been to many different countries, giving him a much broader view of earth history than those who remain within a specific venue. Because of the author's world wide experience, the book is valuable as a compendium of knowledge and interpretation; as such it is fortunate that he took the time to record it. Often what we know of geologic information is taken from a formal report in a journal, which by reason of economy if nothing else, is limited to objective information and tells us nothing about the musings of the authors, the actual tasks in collecting data or what might also have been said about it but printed. Useful too is the fact that the author makes it apparent that geologists do not all agree on all aspects of geology or on all interpretations of a specific site. The author states when he disagrees with mainstream thought and why and presents data to support his position. He also makes it apparent that it's "okay" to think outside the box, which I think is important knowledge for a beginner to have. Those with an interest in biographies of various contributors to the geological sciences might well find this a valuable book, as the author was active both before and after the tectonic revolution in geology in the 20th century. As such he is representative of those who went through the major paradigm shift that occurred at mid century. From a sociological perspective he probably provides insight into how individuals deal with that kind of massive about turn in their world concepts and adjust to the change. A fun book to read, but a difficult one to classify or direct.

Very few people know that the creationists were right all along regarding the catastrophic processes that shaped the geological features of the earth. Secular geologists (after overturning the catastrophism taught secularly up until ca. 1800) reluctantly began returning to catastrophism in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the uneducated populace are continually duped into believing (by the same secular philosophers) that sedimentary layers gather very slowly. On the contrary, what we

see all around the globe are rock deposited by catastrophic processes. In fact, sedimentary layers all around the world are global flood deposits. Why is so much of the rock around the world shale(mudrock)?

Derek Ager long ago and famously analogized sedimentation to the life of a soldier with the phrase "long periods of boredom separated by short periods of terror." It was in his first book, "The Nature of the Stratigraphical Record," that he forcefully promulgated this view. I unfortunately must suggest that the interested reader refer to this original incarnation rather than Ager's 1993 book, "The New Catastrophism," in which the author attempts to extend the soldier's perspective to the entirety of Earth history and virtually all Earth processes. Ager at the beginning warns the reader that the work is wide-ranging, drawing not only on his science (geology) but also on works of literature and poetry where illustrative. Alas, it is the latter material and the abundant asides that largely recommend the book--for the science is somewhat lacking in a book clearly intended for earth-science initiates. Because Ager ranges so widely, he cannot adequately cover the issues in a 200-page book. Even so, he comes across as inconsistent and sometimes conveys a lack of understanding of particular topics; the word "presumably" is used a couple of hundred times. He cites other work sparsely, making the book poor as reference. It is only infused with minimal historical context that could otherwise make it so rich. "The New Catastrophism" is replete with interesting stories, asides, and literary digressions: Ager had a great store of life experience (he died while the book was being published). However, if you're interested in his important scientific contributions, I would suggest referring to his earlier work.

Reading this book is real fun. Mr Ager is able to make modern sedimentology views easy to understand, not only to the professionals. I strongly recommend his book to anyone who is interested in earth sciences.

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