

No stone unturned

We should not rule out geological clues found in unexpected places, argues Martin Rudwick

The Rocks Don't Lie: A geologist investigates Noah's flood by David R. Montgomery, W.W. Norton, £17.99/\$26.95



WHEN a book's subtitle mentions a geologist and Noah's flood, alarm bells ring. Will this be creation science, peddling flood geology and ideas

of a "young Earth"? Not in the case of *The Rocks Don't Lie*. As head of the geomorphology group at the University of Washington, Seattle, David Montgomery is well placed to provide the scientific evidence underlying ancient tales of floods.

This book may not change the minds of any creationists, but with luck it may cause some of the undecided – of whom, in the US, there are alarmingly many – to pause before supporting claims that creationist ideas deserve

"equal time" in the public sphere.

He wraps together the history of Earth with the story of those who have unravelled it, and shows how and why creationists are out on a limb, and a precarious one at that. Yet Montgomery doesn't fall

into the trap of simply rubbishing their ideas. In refusing to pitch science against religion, he relates how scientific investigation and biblical interpretation have generally matured in tandem.

He provides, for example, a lively account of climbing out of the Grand Canyon, passing through the material records of an Earth history of unimaginable duration. He shows why the creationist explanation of the

Ancient religious stories may provide insight into real geological events



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canyon, in which a sudden flood event deposited thousands of feet of varied rocks and then scoured out the canyon through them, is simply untenable – unless the physical world worked utterly differently a few millennia ago.

From his own fieldwork in Tibet, he recounts clear evidence of a geologically recent local catastrophe that is matched by a local folktale about such an event.

He then argues that the most notorious flood story of all may likewise be a faint trace of a real historical catastrophe somewhere in the Near East. Geologists who have come to that conclusion before have been attacked both by creationists, for demoting the biblical flood to a merely regional event, and also by scientists, for allowing even a little historical reality into the Genesis narrative.

Wouldn't it be better, Montgomery argues, if we took pointers from these ancient tales, which may be rooted in real events? We can only hope that his book will be received with the same open-mindedness with which it was written. ■

Martin Rudwick is a historian of geology and author of *Worlds Before Adam* (Chicago, 2008)

Stop that racket!

Discord: The story of noise by Mike Goldsmith, Oxford University Press, £16.99/\$29.95

Reviewed by Andy Coghlan



MOST days it started around 9 or 10 am, and carried on until early evening. Usually it was Chopin, played ad nauseam by the piano student next door. The playing wasn't bad, just incessant – for nearly two years.

After an experience like that, it didn't surprise me to learn in Mike Goldsmith's spectacularly good book that the word noise is

derived from "nausea". But *Discord* is far from a morose dirge about one of today's major blights. It is full of rich anecdotes, scrupulously researched historical narrative and lucid descriptions of the sometimes bewildering science of sound.

Goldsmith shows that noise pollution is no modern problem. The Greek colony of Sybaris, founded in 720 BC, banished potters, tinsmiths and other noisy tradespeople to outside the city walls. In London, the first official noise complaint was in 1378, against an armour-maker.

London rapidly became the world's noisiest city, followed inevitably by New York, but the actual science of sound took

longer to mature. Goldsmith hilariously describes how Isaac Newton used "fiddle-factors" to "calculate" the speed of sound. With the industrial revolution came a new thrum to modern life, which only grew with the rise of trains, planes and automobiles.

"Noise pollution is not just a modern problem. The first official noise complaint in London was made in 1378"

Yet it wasn't until the 1930s that the decibel was born, providing a way to measure sound levels and impose some control over them.

Goldsmith points out that managing noise is not just about being pernicky. Research shows

that constant exposure to noise can increase stress and lead to heart attacks. Our bodies react to noise even when we're asleep.

Great strides have been made to control big sources of background noise, particularly in Europe, but neighbour nuisance remains largely untackled. Goldsmith hopes that inconsiderate noise will become as socially unacceptable as other antisocial habits, such as smoking in public. "Unwanted noise is bad; inescapable noise is terrible," he writes.

I will keep that in mind because, ironically, I'm getting my own piano tuned today. I have been revisiting some Chopin pieces that I grew to loathe – only when the neighbours are out, of course. ■