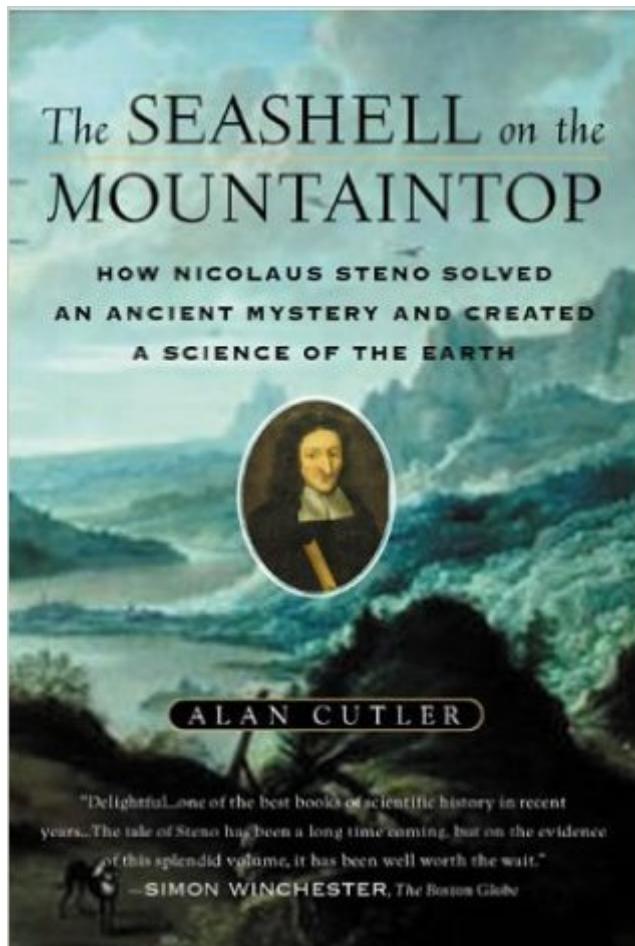


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# The Seashell On The Mountaintop



## **Synopsis**

Seventeenth-century scientists were baffled: How did the fossils of seashells find their way to the tops of mountains? Nicolaus Steno, hailed by Stephen Jay Gould as "the founder of geology," solved the puzzle, looking directly at the clues left in the layers of the Earth. Paradoxically, at the same time his ideas were undermining the Bible's authoritative claim as to the age of the planet, Steno was entering the priesthood and rising to bishop. He would ultimately be venerated as a saint and beatified by the Catholic Church in 1988. A thrilling tale of scientific investigation and the portrait of an extraordinary genius, *The Seashell on the Mountaintop* is the story of how a scientist-turned-priest forever changed our understanding of the Earth and created a new field of science.

## **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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