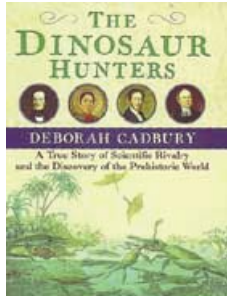


The Dinosaur Hunters: A True Story of Scientific Rivalry and the Discovery of the Prehistoric World

by Deborah Cadbury

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This book narrates the emergence of the dinosaurs within early 19th century vertebrate palaeontology through the life of Gideon Mantell, the collector of Wealden dinosaurs, and is set against his opposition to his great rival Richard Owen, the anatomist and politician who finally defined the Dinosauria in 1842. Major parts are also played by Mary Anning, the commercial collector of Lyme Regis, and William Buckland, the Oxford don and pioneering palaeontologist who attempted to reconcile Genesis and Quaternary geology.

Deborah Cadbury is a journalist (a TV producer) who has published one previous book, *The Feminization of Nature*, and as far as I know is neither a specialist historian nor a palaeontologist. This is very much a work of popular science and history. She has produced on one level a likeable and readable book focusing on human stories, with a mixture of the good old stories (none the worse for being repackaged for a new generation) and information drawn from new research by various workers, notably Hugh Torrens and Dennis Dean, and also Nicolaas Rupke and Martin Rudwick. It is enlivened with the characters' own words, sometimes drawn from unpublished archival sources. There is mercifully little if any fictionalized dramatic narrative. This would hardly be necessary given the intense lives and sad ends of all four, particularly Mantell, who died from an overdose of painkillers for his injured back, having already lost his wife, family, career, museum and collection in a vain attempt to gain social standing and win his fortune through fossils.

By the nature of such a book, Cadbury's portrayals are generally not new, but they

are fairly faithful resumes of current research. The account of Anning is reasonably balanced – no fictitious love affairs. And, although Buckland is a bit of the obligatory buffoon and Owen verges on being a caricature villain at times, this would not be far from how they were portrayed at the time. Much of the story will be familiar to those aware of the literature, but interesting elements, which I had previously missed, include reactions to the original *Plesiosaurus*

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skeleton and details of William Buckland's terminal dementia (was this, one now wonders in this vCJD-ridden era, caught from one of his more obscure zoological snacks?).

The inclusion of Anning seems surprising, given that she never found a dinosaur. But Cadbury is spot on here. For most of the time in question, the dinosaurs were a poorly known component of a general fauna of Mesozoic 'saurians', of which the then best known ones were the ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs, including Anning's finds. One strength of Cadbury's book within the popular science market is that it is not about dinosaurs as such, with the risk of hindsight from our very different 20th century notions, but about the developing early 19th century understanding of these difficult saurians as a distinctive subgroup within a mixture of mystifying bones and teeth. It is indeed, as the subtitle promises, 'a true story of scientific rivalry and the discovery of the prehistoric world', with the

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different political aims of Mantell and Owen influencing their models of the complete dinosaurs. It attempts to give the social and intellectual context of a time when hierarchies of class, sex, wealth, and metropolitan-versus-provincial antagonism

dominated a science that was still, in our terms, largely amateur.

On the debit side, and even allowing for the fact that this isn't setting out to be yet another dinosaur pictorial book, the illustrations are just not well enough reproduced and captioned. The text would also have benefited from a critical reading in final draft by a historian and a palaeontologist. The Great Chain of Being, that emphatically static statement of the plenitude of Divine creation, comes close at one point to being portrayed as a proto-evolutionary concept. I am also uneasy about the number of factual errors – as well as misspellings and anachronisms – for instance, Conybeare is wrongly shown as naming the first complete plesiosaur *Plesiosaurus giganteus*, and angiosperms are portrayed as the only plants that reproduce sexually. The implication that death at sea and sinking to the seabed routinely leads to fossilization of a corpse is quite misleading. There are and were plenty of scavengers to destroy even bones, except in special environmental conditions (which explains why Lyme Regis is so important for marine reptiles). It would also have been better to avoid the term 'lizard' as a translation for the Greek *sauros* (for instance, in calling a plesiosaur a sea-lizard) given its very specific use today for members of a restricted grouping of reptiles – the old Victorian 'saurian' is still useful here.

Cadbury's book has the merit of being abundantly referenced, enabling her assertions to be checked and interesting material to be followed up, but she omits some obvious sources. A look at Jim Secord's work on *Vestiges*, for instance, would have helped the relevant section (although Simon Knell's *The Culture of English Geology 1815–1851*, with its highly pertinent analysis of the multiple values of fossils as cultural and scientific objects, was doubtless published too late).

For once we have a popular book that tries to portray our predecessors and their saurian subjects in something approaching their own terms, without being overshadowed by the later 19th century discoveries of dinosaurs in Europe and America. It puts the good old anecdotes of mice on toast and dinosaur teeth in roadstone into what, to many, will be a fresh social and intellectual context. Yet it could undoubtedly have been better, and certainly more error-free. Readers of *Endeavour* catering for a further education class or an introductory science history course will still find it worth a look, while the general public will enjoy it, and no discipline these days can afford to turn down a chance of increased popular support.