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Upheaval from the Abyss: Ocean Floor Mapping and the Earth Science Revolution

Mr. David M. Lawrence

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The deep oceans are the last great frontier remaining on Earth. Humans have conquered the vast wilderness of the terrestrial surface, from the searing deserts and dark forests of the tropics to the icy polar regions. Today, anyone with enough ambition and money can travel upriver into the heart of the Borneo jungle, climb Mount Everest, or spend the night at the South Pole. But the oceans beyond the continental shelves remain forbidding, beyond the reach of science, adventurism, and commerce.

Not long ago, scientists viewed the ocean floor as a vast, featureless plain, an ancient repository of detritus eroded from the surface of an unchanging Earth. Light never reached the seemingly lifeless depths. The ocean basins were only of marginal scholarly interest. This all changed with the Herculean quest to discover what lay on the world's ocean floor—a quest that inspired the continental drift-plate tectonics revolution and overturned prevailing scientific notions of how the Earth’s surface was created, rearranged, and destroyed.

Upheaval from the Abyss spans a 130-year period, beginning with the early, backbreaking efforts to map the depths during the age of sail; continuing with improvements in research methods spurred by maritime disaster and war; and culminating in the publication of the first map of the world’s ocean floor in 1977. The author brings this tale to life by weaving through it the personalities of the scientists-explorers who struggled to see the face of the deep, and reveals not only the facts of how the ocean floor was mapped, but also the human dimensions of what the scientists experienced and felt while in the process.

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