



# The Origin of Continents and Oceans (Dover Earth Science)

*Alfred Wegener*

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Since its inception modern geology has been faced with an important group of problems: explaining parallel formations that are separated by great distances of sea; accounting for isolated life forms in widely separated areas (such as lemurs in Madagascar and India); explaining pre-pleistocene glaciations, and similar problems. The usual explanation has been to assume the one-time existence of land bridges (such as the hypothetical Lemuria) or parallelisms or diffusion with lost intermediary steps.

In 1915, however, one of the most influential and most controversial books in the history of science provided a new solution. This was Alfred Wegener's *Entstehung der Kontinente*, which dispensed with land bridges and parallel evolutions and offered a more economical concept. Wegener proposed that in the remote past the earth's continents were not separate (as now), but formed one supercontinent which later split apart, the fragments gradually drifting away from one another. Wegener created his supercontinent with attractive simplicity by tucking the point of South America into the Gulf of Guinea, coalescing North America, Greenland, and Europe, rotating Australia and Antarctica up through the Indian Ocean, and closing the remaining gaps. Wegener then explained various phenomena in historical geology, geomorphy, paleontology, paleoclimatology, and similar areas of science in terms of this continental drift. To back up his revolutionary theory he drew upon a seemingly inexhaustible find of data. Later editions of his book added new data to refute his opponents or to strengthen his own views in the violent scientific quarrel that arose. Even today this important question remains undecided, and geologists are divided into strongly opposed groups about the Wegener hypothesis. At the moment it seems to be gaining steadily in acceptance. It is one of the two basic theories of earth history, and since it has often been misrepresented in summary, every earth scientist owes it to himself to examine its theories and data.

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