

The Reign of the Dinosaurs

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Book Reviews

The Reign of the Dinosaurs

By Jean-Guy Michard
1992, 144 p., \$16.95

Volcanoes: Fire from the Earth

By Maurice Krafft
1993, 202 p., \$16.95

Fossils: Evidence of Vanished Worlds

By Yvette Gayrard-Valy
1994, 192 p., \$16.95

All books translated by I. Mark Paris
"Discoveries" Series
New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.

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The "Discoveries" series of works, published originally in Paris, France by Gallimard, constitutes one of the "best buys" available to scholars in this era of high costs and low budgets. They are small books (17.5×12.5 cm) and, perhaps for that reason, have evaded notice; I have seen no reviews of any of them in a geological journal. Yet they contain such excellent epitomes of a wide range of information, and are so attractively presented and richly illustrated, that they do not merit such neglect.

Each book in the series — there are many others, on non-geological themes — contains an initial section printed on glossy paper, in which most illustrations are in colour and which constitutes the main text. This is supplemented by a

second section, "Documents," presenting additional information and with illustrations wholly in monochrome. In the French edition, this is also printed on glossy stock, but in the American edition is on cream bond, with a consequent slight loss of illustration quality. In general, however, the illustrations are so sharply reproduced that they serve as excellent sources for teaching slides and can be enlarged to screen size without significant loss of quality.

Since French is a somewhat more cumbersome language than English, the English translations are slightly shorter than the original French editions: *Les fossiles; empreinte des monds disparus* occupies 208 pages, *Fossils*, 192 pages. The cover illustration on the French edition of that book depicts a dramatic unearthing of a frozen dinosaur: the English, an excellent, but decidedly tamer, photograph of a fossil fish (irritatingly, unnamed and undated). However, the illustrations within are unchanged.

All three works were written by experts. Jean-Guy Michard and Yvette Gayrard-Valy are both associated with the Institute of Palaeontology of the National Museum of Natural History, Paris. The late Maurice Krafft was the founder of the Centre de Volcanologie Vulcain, France; his book was published posthumously, since he and his wife Katia died in the eruption of Unzer volcano, in Japan, on June 3 1991.

All three works include a historical section. That in *The Reign of the Dinosaurs*, although properly commencing with Robert Plot's unwitting description of a dinosaur bone in 1677, passes over the subsequent history of British discoveries in favour of an extended account of French finds, and is imprecise in its treatment of early 19th century events in England. Moreover, the *Iguanodon* finds at Bernissart, Belgium, are misrepresented as the remains of a

herd. Much else in the work, however, is satisfactory. The question of dinosaur extinction is given a balanced consideration, while the lengthy quote from Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and the brief treatments of dinosaurs in cartoon and on screen are alike endearing.

Fossils: Evidence of a Vanished World begins with a fascinating treatment of observations of fossils by classical writers and continues with a discussion of the folklore of fossils. The ensuing treatment of the early history of paleontology is so entertaining and thorough that this work deserves to be on the shelves of all geological historians. Other aspects of the study of fossils are treated more briefly, in the "Documents" section.

Volcanoes: Fire from the Earth is almost wholly a history of the observations of volcanic phenomena and the progressive — albeit by no means logical or continuous — growth of understanding of these most dramatic geological events. The splendid reproductions of paintings, from oriental as well as from western works, greatly enhance the value and interest of this study, while the "Documents" presented are especially fascinating.

All three works, then, can be very highly recommended, in particular as an admirable stimulus to interest in the history of our science. Personally, I'm seeking out the whole "Discoveries" series and have also learned much about the history of archeology!