THE MAKING OF GEOLOGY

Earth science in Britain
1660–1815

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To my parents
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Preface

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Which Subject, if we consider as it is thus represented, doth look very like an Impossibility to be undertaken even by the whole World, to be gone through within an Age, much less to be undertaken by any particular Society, or a small number of Men. The number of Natural Histories, Observations, Experiments, Calculations, Comparisons, Deductions and Demonstrations necessary thereunto, seeming to be incomprehensive and numberless: And therefore a vain Attempt, and not to be thought of till after some Ages past in making Collections of Materials for so great a Building, and the employing a vast number of Hands in making this Preparation; and those of several sorts, such as Readers of History, Criticks, Rangers and Namesetters of Things, Observers and Watchers of several Appearances, and Progressions of Natural Operations and Perfections, Collectors of curious Productions, Experimenter and Examiners of Things by several Means and several Methods and Instruments, as by Fire, by Frost, by Menstruums, by Mixtures, by Digestions, Putrefactions, Ferments, and Petrifications, by Grinding, Bruising, Weighings and Measuring, Pressing and Condensing, Dilating and Expanding, Dissecting, Separating and Dividing, Sifting and Treining; by viewing with Glasses and Microscopes, Smelling, Tasting, Feeling, and various other ways of Torturing and Wracking of Natural Bodies, to find out the Truth or the real Effect as it is in its Constitutions or State of Being.

(Robert Hooke, 1705: 279)

No Stone hath been left unturned.

(J. Woodward, 1695: 44)

Indeed, if the face of the earth were divided into districts, and accurately described we have no doubt that, from the comparison of these descriptions, the true theory of the earth would spontaneously emerge without any effort of genius or invention.

([J. Playfair], 1811: 209)

If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.

(John Ruskin, letter of 24 May 1851 to Henry Acland.
The works of John Ruskin, xxxvi: 115.)