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Dr Woodward's Cabinet of Dangerous Dreams: Geology in the Age of Enlightenment

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When John Woodward died in 1728, in his sixtieth year, he left a will that for geology was to resonate to the present day. Not only did he leave £150 for the establishment of a professorship, still in existence today, but he also willed the University of Cambridge his precious geological collection. Although Professor of Physick at Gresham College, geology became Woodward's passion. His collection of rocks, minerals and fossils lead him to write his '*Natural History of the Earth*' in 1695, a work notable as much for, to us, its bizarre explanation for the formation of rocks, as for its basis in observation and experimentation.

Woodward was the first true geologist, inventing a classification of rocks, minerals and fossils that was used through much of the 18th century, and laying the foundation for geology as a modern science. Unfortunately, because of his acerbic nature, he was much maligned by his contemporaries – an 'egregious coxcomb', one called him. To Richard Mead, whom he fought in a duel over a disagreement on how to treat smallpox, he was 'a man equally ill-bred, vain and ill-natured'. Despite such sword fights, being pilloried in satirical plays and pamphlets, and being accused of plagiarism, Woodward emerges as a man of vision and responsible for dragging geology out of the Dark Ages and into the Age of Enlightenment.

