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The reception of “Our Wandering Continents” (1937), from the correspondence of its author, South Africa geologist A.L. du Toit

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It is well known that Alexander Logie du Toit’s great work of synthesis, *Our Wandering Continents* (1937) [1], in which he made a compelling argument in support of the theory of Continental Drift espoused by American geologist Frank Bursley Taylor (1860-1938) and the German meteorologist Alfred Wegener (1880-1930), was quite severely rejected by the geological establishment, especially in North America [2,3], mainly because of a lack of a known viable mechanism for drifting.

Du Toit (1878-1948) had a very large global network of correspondents, to whom he sent copies of his book, including to some of his staunchest scientific opponents, such as Charles Schuchert at Yale, and Bailey Willis at Stanford. The recipients (supporters and critics alike) wrote back to du Toit upon receipt of, or after they had read, his book, and commented on his ideas [4]. Du Toit received friendly letters of admiration from supporters such as Americans Frank B. Taylor, Howard B. Baker and Reginald Daly; South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts (1870-1950); Dutch geologists Gustaaf Molengraaf (1860-1942) and Willem van Waterschoot van der Gracht (1873-1943); German geo-grapher Albrecht Penck (1858-1945); and the British palaeobotanist Albert C. Seward (1863-1941).

The dying Frank Bursley Taylor, in poor health with failing eyesight, had slowly read through half of du Toit’s book, and wrote gratefully (24.01.38, Fort Wayne, Indiana): “You certainly gave me a full measure of recognition as the first man to put the idea of continental drift on a firm scientific basis”. Baker (26.11.37, Detroit), waxed effusively about the book, and trenchantly observed: “To get right up and call Lyellian uniformitarianism in question certainly takes something that few geologists in this country possess. I guess they all like their jobs too well.” Daly (25.11.37, Harvard) remonstrated to du Toit that “you did not put me among the sympathizers with the migration hypothesis and yet for 18 years I have been imploring American geologists to take the general idea seriously!”. Smuts (25.11.37, Irene) recommended T.H. Holland’s Huxley Memorial lecture “Remains of Oceanic Basins and Continental Masses” to du Toit, and offered to send his own copy to him. Molengraaf (24.11.37, Wassenaar) wrote: “Being myself a staunch adherent of the ideas of Taylor and Wegener, I sincerely welcome the fact, that so competent a judge as yourself has taken up this case again and has written this book in order to elucidate and defend the fascinating hypothesis of “continental drifting”. Waterschoot van der Gracht wrote (07.11.37, Wylre, Netherlands): “your new book on continental drifting...is a most valuable new contribution to this baffling and controversial problem”. Penck, (10.12.37, Berlin), while unable to believe in the drift hypothesis, nevertheless praised du Toit for having provided a fitting tribute (“ein schönes Denkmal”) to the deceased Wegener. Seward had published a critical review in *Geological Magazine*, and du Toit (11.8.38) thanked him for his criticisms, which he addressed at some length. Seward replied (25.8.38, London) stating: “It is a relief to know you do not thirst for my blood! Your generosity is most welcome”. Schuchert (20.12.37, New Haven) wrote: “I like your enthusiasm, and surely you have presented the drift theory in its best form. I like your honesty, because you now tell us where you stand and why you prefer to stand on a sliding base”. Walter H. Bucher (07.07.39, Cincinnati) was “profoundly gratified by the facts you have

assembled” but was “doubtful as to the necessity for the explanation you consider inevitable”. Bailey Willis (24.11.37, Stanford), while disagreeing with du Toit, said: “I appreciate the courage with which you have set forth the state of the problem. You certainly have succeeded in putting the best possible face upon your solution of it.”

References:

[1] du Toit AL (1937). *Our Wandering Continents*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 366 pp.

[2] Oreskes N (1999). *The Rejection of Continental Drift*. Oxford University Press, New York, 432 pp.

[3] Frankel HR (2012). *The Continental Drift Controversy. Volume 1: Wegener and the Early Debate*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[4] Alex du Toit Archives, BC722, Jagger Library, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

