

“Reading Ourselves into the Subject”: Geophysics and the Revival of Continental Drift, 1951–1965

By the time that Blackett communicated his negative results to the Royal Society on his tests for a measurable magnetic effect from a rotating cylinder, he already had embarked on a new research program in the measurement of rock magnetism. He also had learned a great deal by the spring of 1952 about the hypothesis of continental drift, saying later at a 1964 symposium sponsored by the Royal Society that it had been about fifteen years earlier that “I along with many other new workers in the field of rock magnetism, started to read ourselves into the subject of continental drift.”¹

The German meteorologist and geophysicist Alfred Wegener had outlined his proposal for continental drift in his book *Die Entstehung der Kontinente und Ozeane*, first published in 1915 and appearing in English translation in 1924.² After considerable debate about Wegener’s data and methods, most geologists and geophysicists dismissed the hypothesis on both empirical and theoretical grounds. In 1950 Philip H. Kuenen wrote in a standard textbook that most geologists appear “to have lost faith in continental drift as a working hypothesis.”³ In the mid-1960s many American geologists still inclined against the hypothesis at a time when largely British-originated data, much of it linked directly or indirectly to the work of Blackett and his colleagues, had revived drift theory in England. When Neil Opdyke, a graduate in geology at Columbia University, arrived at Cambridge in the fall of 1955, he was astonished to find John Clegg, Mary Almond, and Peter Stubbs using data to argue for continental drift. Opdyke told them that they were “bananas” to look for conti-