



**Sand: A Journey
Through Science
and the Imagination,**
by Michael Welland
(OUP, £9.99)

It may well be, as the Bible says, a foolish man who builds his house on sand, but according to Welland in this fascinating study, “we are a society built on sand”. From computer chips (silicon) to concrete (75% sand and gravel), it’s all around us. Indeed, sand is one of the planet’s most ubiquitous materials and apparently each grain is unique. Beneath a microscope, a nondescript pile becomes a “dazzling collection of jewel-like grains”. Welland explains the origins of the grains (70% are quartz) and their part in the history of the planet. He also looks beyond the Earth to Mars - it has the tallest sand dunes in the solar system, and one of its sand seas is the size of Texas. Welland considers the way sand has inspired us, from the remarkable mandalas of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism to Willard Wigan’s carvings of individual grains of sand and Jim Denevan’s monumental land art on Californian beaches, which lasts only as long as the next tide. As Welland says: “There are worlds to see in a grain of sand and countless grains to see in our world.”

PD Smith