

## **Eccentric Lives And Peculiar Notions**

*By John Mitchell*

The flat-earth movement became dormant in Britain in the early 1970s with the death of its last active promoters, Samuel and Lillian Shenton of Dover. They blamed its decline on the 'anti-God, globe-earth indoctrination' of modern education. Yet there are always a few Zetetics who take their own view of things and will dispute orthodoxy down to its very roots. One of the most obstinate was William Edgell of Radstock, Somerset, head of the well-known building firm still active in that town. In his book, *Does the Earth Rotate?*, he complained that whenever he asked his teachers at school for proof of the round-earth theory, all he received was smiles. The object of his book was to persuade authority to reform the education system in accordance with reason, by which he meant the flat-earth doctrine. He described simple experiments by which to disprove the theory of the earth's rotation. These included the usual throwing of balls aloft from moving trains, cars and liners, and he also showed how to convince oneself with a telescope that the Pole Star is a mere 5,000 miles distant, not the fantastic 3,680,000,000,000,000 miles given in textbooks.

Like many independent thinkers, Mr Edgell was an inventor. He discovered such useful devices as the automatic weighing machine and the free-wheel for bicycles, and he also invented the airless tyre at a time when everyone else was concentrating on a pneumatic version. His much repeated motto was 'Truth will always win'.

America, the haven of heretics, still boasts a Flat Earth Society, energetically managed by Mr Charles K. Johnson and his wife Marjory of Lancaster, California. It incorporates the remnants of other organizations, such as the Zetetics, the Shentons' group and the followers of Wilbur Glen Voliva of Zion, Illinois. That city was long the headquarters of American flat-earth loyalists, several thousands of them, who largely populated it. They were members of the Christian Apostolic Church, founded in 1895 by John Alexander Dowie, a Scottish prophet and faith-healer. His rejection of the spherical earth followed, as is usually the case, from his literalizing the Bible. Ten years later he himself was rejected by the sect in a revolt led by Voliva, who ruled Zion until he died in 1942. His was a strict government, based on the code of the Scriptures, as he interpreted them. Much of the city's income was from the fines of unwary visitors for crimes such as smoking in the street, driving at more than five miles an hour and whistling on Sunday. There were also profits from Zion Industries, a highly successful manufacturing business run by Voliva on behalf of the community.

Voliva also ran a powerful radio station, daily proclaiming the flatness of the earth and prophesying its imminent destruction. In this respect he was like Rowbotham, who believed that the earth would shortly be consumed by fire. Voliva set several successive dates for the cataclysm, and their uneventful passing did nothing to weaken his authority over the people of Zion. He used to offer \$5,000 to anyone who could prove that the earth was not a flat plane, and since he was impervious to anyone else's arguments he never found it necessary to pay out.

Charles Johnson, heir to all the flat-earth kingdoms of the west, is very religious and patriotic. He and Marjory live in a lonely house with many dogs, cats, chickens, but without piped water or electricity. They regard themselves as the last bastion of true Christian orthodoxy in a world corrupted by socialism, atheism and the heresy of a revolving earth. They blame it largely on Britain where these evils were nurtured and where, so they say, the Church of England first established the round-earth dogma. But they are hardly less scornful of the Bible-belt fundamentalists of their own country, who, while holding the line against Darwinism and the anti-scriptural theory of evolution, have given way on the basic issue about the shape of the earth.

Modern photographs of the earth from space, showing it as a globe, present a challenge to the Johnsons which Parallax, Blount and Voliva never had to face - though no doubt they would have been equal to it. The Johnsons simply deny that the space program ever took place. The whole thing is a hoax. On their outspoken journal, Flat Earth News, they say that the NASA scientists and the world's rulers are all well aware that the earth is flat, but the British Government prevents them from revealing that fact. Arthur C. Clarke was hired to write the script for the first moon landing, and the valuable rights to the production were allowed to America at a Kennedy-Khrushchev meeting in return for Cuba. Hollywood was well able to simulate Armstrong's historic walk on the moon's surface. As proof of this, the Johnsons have dug up a 1950 film, Destination Moon, which closely prefigures the NASA effort nineteen years later. They are well aware of the conspiracies going on around them, nor are they alone in their scepticism. Quite a number of books have been published in America which question the authenticity of the 1969 moon landing. Charles Johnson claims that the majority of people do not really believe in it. 'There's a certain lurking sanity in everyone's mind,' he says.

There are very few instances where a person with decided views on whether the earth is flat or spherical has ever been converted to the opposite belief. a notable case was President Paul Kruger of the Transvaal Republic. In 1900, while on his way into exile on board of Dutch man-of-war, he was invited by the captain to step onto the bridge and watch the process of navigation.

As a member of the fundamentalist Dutch Reformed Church, Kruger believed literally in the pillars and corners of the flat earth. He learnt from the captain that the ship was navigated on the basis of the earth being spherical, inspected the sextant and other instruments, and then went below for his Bible and threw it into the sea. If the earth was really a globe, he said, then the Book was untrue and of no further interest to him.