

NORTH EAST LONDON POLYTECHNIC

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES

THE FLAT EARTHERS

by Ellis Hillman

"Every schoolboy knows that the earth is a solid ball, slightly flattened at the poles, and surrounded by a cosmos of inconceivable immensity. Since Magellan sailed around the world in 1519, a few have doubted that the earth is round. Yet it is precisely because these views are universally accepted that the shape of the earth is such a happy field of speculation for the pseudo-scientist.

"Three eccentric theories of the earth have each won a surprising number of adherents in the present century: Voliva's flat earth;+ the view that the world is hollow and open at the poles,+ and - most incredible of all - that we are living in the inside of a hollow sphere."

Flat and Hollow - in Facts and Fallacies in the Name of Science by Martin Gardner.

It is difficult to believe that there exists any group of people who seriously entertain the belief that the earth is flat. Yet such is the case. There are such people.

If it were possible to design an instrument or meter to measure degree of absurdity provoked by a seemingly ridiculous proposition - the Flat Earth theory would almost certainly represent the top of the scale.

The Flat Earther has been the butt of politicians and comedians alike who regard him as the ultimate in absurdity. It is, therefore, perhaps of some interest to separate fact from fiction, and discover the real truth about the Flat Earth Society, its history, evolution and ideas.

History of the Flat Earth Society

The present International Flat Earth Research Society whose headquarters were in Dover has a long and remarkable ancestry. The late Secretary, Sam Shenton, had contacts with former members of the Zetetic Society, which was still flourishing at the turn of the century; this writer had the pleasure of meeting recently one of its most distinguished veterans - a nonagenarian lay preacher by the name of I.E. Wesley in Leicester. He found him a Noah-like patriarchal figure of great spiritual strength and impressive appearance. This society had its origins in the activity of the "Parallax", alias Charles Brough, in the last century. "The Zetetic", which he launched, described itself as a monthly journal of cosmographical science. It had on its masthead a quotation from Locke: "He who resolves to be just and yet will hear only one side, will be unjust in spite of his resolution."

In his "Address to the Reader", Charles Brough explains the necessity "for the appearance of The Zetetic in the ranks of journalism". He wrote: "... the growing interest which this all-important question of the shape and mobility of the Earth is being regarded, and the numbers that are daily espousing the cause which we advocate, seem in themselves a sufficient guarantee for the belief that the time cannot be far distant when public opinion will unanimously demand its speedy and final settlement.

++ Wilbur Glen Voliva was the General Overseer of Zion, Illinois, from 1905 to 1935. He propounded the view that the earth is shaped like a flapjack, with the North Pole, the centre and the South Pole distributed around the circumference. From a recent communication, it appears that the Christian Apostolic Church which he helped to create regards the Flat Earth theory as "a personal project of the late Wilbur Glen Voliva and not a doctrine of the Church".

No one who has, for a single moment, directed his attention to the subject, can fail to see its importance. Astronomy, Geology, Navigation, and all the arts and sciences which follow in their train, essentially depend upon a knowledge of the sure figure and condition of our world. Zeteticism affirms that it is not a globe but a Plane - vast, irregular, and immovable, "founded on the seas, and established in the floods", that the celestial bodies are not worlds and mighty globes but lights subordinate, and created for the service of the earth

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This journal continued from July 1872 to November 1873 propagating the Zetetic doctrine that the Earth is flat. The Zetetics found much of their evidence not only from the Old and New Testament, but also from the Apocrypha quoting the "Shepherd of Hermes" who with the word of strength fixed the heavens, and founded the earth upon the water.

Other arguments presented in this journal in support of the Flat Earth proposition are of particular interest. Thus, in the first issue, the "first" proof that "earth is not a plane" is developed as follows:

"The marine horizon, from whatever position it is viewed, always appears to be, and is, in fact, a perfectly level line, and since this appearance is the same in all parts of the world, its surface must be level, and therefore the Earth is a plane.

"This may be proved to be the case by erecting at a suitable elevation on the sea shore a duly-levelled board, or a string - at right angles to a plumb-line - tightly stretched between two vertical poles. On looking towards the sea, the horizontal line for a distance of 20 miles may be easily observed, with the straight-edge, or string: but if the earth were a globe, the horizontal line would form an arc twenty miles in length, curvating both ways from the centre, at the rate of eight inches, multiplied by the square of the distance. Hence the horizontal line at either end of the distance ought to be depressed some 66 feet below the horizon in the centre. But as no such appearance is ever presented, it necessarily follows that the earth cannot be a globe, or other than a plane."

The Editor of The "Zetetic" was a prolific writer and correspondent and answered with comparative ease the inevitable questions that were asked by his critics. In June 1873, a W.H. wrote.

"To the Editor of The Zetetic. Sir, - How do you account for the rising and setting of the sun, if the earth is a plane?"

His editorial reply went as follows:

"In a long row of lamps the furthest is apparently the lowest. A lamp fixed on the top of a pole and carried away from an observer, appears to get lower and lower as the distance increases. So with the sun: as it passes from the meridian towards the north west it appears to sink until it touches the horizon.

"Still receding, the upper arc at length comes into vanishing point and disappears. Continuing its course beyond the North Pole, it first appears in the horizon in the north-east, and seems to ascend towards the south until it is again on the meridian. The whole is the effect of natural perspective."

Readers of the journal were informed in a small advertisement on the
that "sets of back numbers" could be obtained, post free for seven shillings
addressed "Editor of The Zetetic, 24 Leighton Road, Kentish Town, London."

Perhaps the most massive Zetetic Astronomy contribution to Flat Earth
literature was Parallax's own Zetetic Astronomy published in 1873 by John
This 425 page work became the source-book for nearly all the later writings
of prominent British Flat Earthers including the work of the same name written
jointly by Lady Blount and Albert Smith (who wrote under the name of Zeteticus)
in 1893.

The activities of Parallax were recorded at length in both the local and national
press, and even such eminent persons as Augustus De Morgan, President of the
Royal Astronomical Society, and Professor of Mathematics in Cambridge University
was moved to write in the Athenaeum Journal for 12th October 1872.

"The flat earth floating tremulously on the sea, the sun moving always over it,
giving day when near enough, and night when too far off, the self-luminous
moon, with semi-transparent invisible moon created to give her an eclipse
now and then; the new law of perspective, by which the vanishing of the
hull before the masts, usually thought to prove the earth is globular,
really proves it flat: all these and other things well fitted form exercises
in learning the elements of astronomy. Parallax, though confident in the
extreme, neither impeaches the honesty of those whose opinion he assails,
nor allots them any future in convenience." (Quoted "Zetetic Astronomy" p.416).

The Universal Zetetic Society was founded in New York in September 1873 and
in London in December 1883, as the Zetetic Society by Parallax and "others".
We are further informed that "many local branches were started in all the
principal countries" with the exception of Russia, "where the Earth is not
allowed to circulate."

A number of eminent Victorians associated themselves with this Society
whose President was Lady E.A.M. Blount and Vice-President, C. De Lacy Evans
M.R.C.S., Ph.D., etc., late surgeon of the Gold Coast. The committee included
Joseph Chamberlain Esq., Major-General Armstrong, Dr. E. Haughton, M.D.,
and an Archbishop, C.I. Stevens, D.D., LL.B. The motto was 'Veritate Victoria'.

George Bernard Shaw himself appeared to have been acquainted with the
indefatigable work of this Society and he relates a delightful story in his
"Everybody's Political What's What", which recreates the intellectual
atmosphere of those times.

"On another occasion I was present at a meeting addressed by a gentleman who
was devoting his life to combatting the modern heresy that the earth is
globular, and maintaining that it is flat. The debate that followed was
quite the funniest that I have ever attended. Opposition such as no
other atheist could have provoked assailed him and he, having heard their
arguments hundreds of times, played skittles with them, lashing the meeting
into a spluttering fury as he answered easily what is considered unanswerable.
When he was asked whether he had ever watched a ship through a telescope and
seen it sink beneath the horizon he blandly inquired whether the questioner
had ever used a telescope in this manner. Apparently nobody present except
myself and the Lecturer ever had. The lecturer went on, "I have myself
witnessed this interesting illusion. My questioner, though he admits he has
spoken from hearsay about the ships, has no doubt often stood on a railway
bridge and seen the two parallel tracks converge and meet in the distance. May
I ask him whether he believes that the two lines do actually converge and meet

as they seem to him to do?' Thereupon another questioner, boiling with rage, rose and shouted, 'Can you deny that if you start from Liverpool and keep travelling due west or east you will find yourself in Liverpool again?' 'Of course you do', said the lecturer, and traced a circle on the flat table top with his finger. The next questioner, confident that he was cornering the lecturer this time, played his ace of trumps with 'In an eclipse the shadow of the eclipse body is round! How do you account for that?' 'So is the shadow of the griddle, which is the flattest thing on earth', was the reply.

"I joined the debate to declare that the lecturer had answered and silenced all his opponents, who had only picked up and parroted a string of statements they had never thought out nor verified.' And further on he comments: "They assumed that I believed the earth to be flat, and concluded that this indicated not only gross ignorance of science, but abhorrent moral delinquency. It was evident that the writers would have seen me, if not burnt at the stake, at least imprisoned for a year, with entire satisfaction. I might have written the leading article in The Free Thinker for twenty years without provoking a single abusive postcard."

What is not evident from this revealing story is the curious fact that according to Margaret Cole it was in the Zetetical Society that Sidney Webb first met Bernard Shaw to form a close friendship which lasted for sixty years.

The famous Rudyard Kipling short story "The Village That Voted The Earth was Flat" with its amusing description of the geoplanarians also lends some support to the belief that he had some acquaintance with the late Victorian or early Edwardian Zetetics.

The Zetetics were clearly quite an influential society.

MODERN TIMES

In more recent times, the propaganda of the International Flat Research Society has had an increasing impact on a sceptical public. The Guardian and the Observer have both interviewed its indomitable Secretary. Shortly after the publication of the Gemini photographs, Sam Shenton, interviewed by John Fairwell, had this to say to the Guardian. "The whole thing hinges upon the photographs being taken from a moving vehicle and this photograph clips one portion of the horizon. If the camera was turned round in another direction it would clip another portion of the horizon, thus showing the vehicle was still earthbound." ("Flat All Round", 10th June 1965). And Eric Clark's summary of Sam Shenton's belief runs as follows: "Astronauts just circling around over a flat surface. Ships disappearing over the horizon? Just perspective. Photographs from space showing a curve on the earth's surface? Distortion caused by the wide-angle lens in the camera." (Observer, 28th August 1966)

Sam Shenton's latest pamphlet, The 'Plane' Truth once obtainable for 2s., ably sums up the modern flat earth position. It is not only in Britain and the United States that Flat Earth Societies and propagandists have flourished. In South Africa, a certain Ernst Lodewicus Venter published a small 46 page book entitled 100 Proofs that Earth is not a Globe (with supplement) in Bloemfontein in 1940.

In Germany, Holland and Portugal, Flat Earth publications have received a considerable boost from public reactions to articles appearing in the Press on the subject.

In Lisbon, a H. Benedy published A Terra Nao e Esferica in 1960, and about the same time a nationally famous Dutch Flat Earther Klaus Dykstra published his Pleidooi voor de Platte Aarde.

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Perhaps this worldwide mushrooming of Fundamentalism reflects something deeper than just an escape from the ever accelerating scientific and technological revolution. Perhaps the Flat Earther represents a last-stand defence against the acceptance of everything, however incredible, that science has to teach us. By questioning the most fundamental of our assumptions, he forces us to re-think our most cherished prejudices. His continued presence in this bewildering "scientific" world of ours is surely not to be denied.

P.S. It would be churlish to fail to refer to at least one of the Hollow Earth theories propounded by Army Captain John Cleves Symmes who sent a letter dated St. Louis, Missouri Territory, April 10, A.D.1818 - -

"To All the World

I declare the earth is hollow and habitable within; containing a number of solid, concentric spheres, one within the other and that it is open at the poles twelve or sixteen degrees. I pledge my life in support of this truth, and am ready to explore the hollow, if the world will support and aid me in the undertaking."

Two documents were attached to this manifesto. One was the announcement of a book (which never appeared), and the other a certificate of sanity!

(Willy Ley's "Watchers of the Sky", p.513).

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