



The Myth of the Myth

Derrick Peterson

in *Flat Earths and Fake Footnotes*

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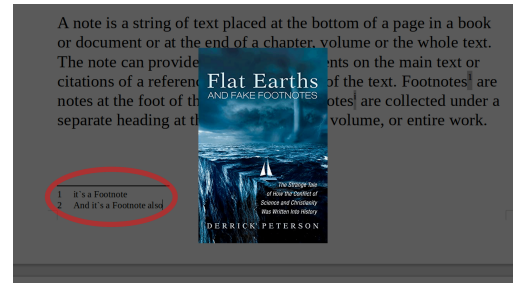
In a remarkable piece of detective work to which we are much indebted, Jeffrey Burton Russell traces the emergence of the myth through history. The real perpetrator comes with a man named Washington Irving (1783–1859) who was the author of both *Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. Irving's work was the *Da Vinci Code* of its day: he was writing fiction with historical research thrown in, in order to satirize his distaste for pedantic historians. "Irving knew how to use libraries and archives, and the public was fooled into taking his literary game as history."¹ In this work, a very artful and elaborate account of Columbus standing before the Inquisitors attempting to convince them of his journey appears.

[The Council] was comprised of professors of astronomy, geography, mathematics, and other branches of science, together with various dignitaries of the church, and learned friars. Before this erudite assembly, Columbus presented himself to propound and defend his conclusions. He had been scoffed at as a visionary by the vulgar and the ignorant; but he was convinced that he only required a body of enlightened men to listen dispassionately to his reasonings. ... Columbus was assailed with citations from the Bible and the Testament: the book of epistles of the apostles, and the gospels of the Evangelists. To these were added expositions of various saints and revered commentators: St. Chrysostom and St. Augustine, St. Jerome and St. Gregory, St. Basil and St. Ambrose, and Lactantius ... Mathematical demonstrations was allowed no weight, if it appeared to clash with a text of scripture, or a commentary of one of the fathers.²

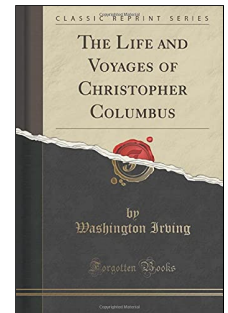
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¹Russell, *Flat Earth*, 50.

²Irving, *Christopher Columbus*, 61–62, 47–51.

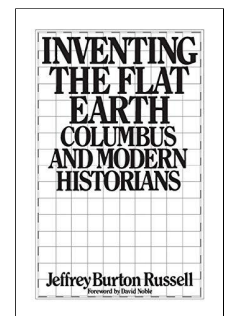


This is all quite literally made up. Irving wanted to turn Columbus into a mythical figure, "the hero of a romantic novel, or an epic modern Odysseus or a Faust ... or an American Adam, the First Man of the New World ..."³ Irving's work was a sensation, but its intent, it seems, lost on everyone. While Irving spread the myth at a more popular level, Jean-Antoine Letronne (1787–1848) secured it as an academic commonplace. Learned in Latin, Greek, Egyptology, and mathematics, the



intelligent and charming Frenchman was adored by his contemporaries, and those who eulogized him declared him a "secular saint."⁴ He got on well with all manners of government, supported his widowed mother, engaged in secret acts of charity that were not known to be his work until after he passed on, fathered ten children, became director of the *Ecole des Chartes*, then Inspector General at the University of Paris, and eventually would obtain the chair of history at the College de France. Living the life of what seems to be ten men undoubtedly leaves one with little spare time, but Letronne still managed to squeeze in some blistering polemics against Christianity. In particular our interests turn us toward an essay of his, "On the Cosmographical Opinions of the Church Fathers," (1834).

Its polemical stance is made known immediately. In the very first sentence Letronne recounts acidly that until recently "all science was to be based on the Bible."⁵ Astronomers were "forced to believe" that the earth is flat, and though a few theologians like Augustine and Origen knew better, Letronne makes sure to emphasize that they were marginal figures. Our friend Cosmas, whom we met earlier, also makes an appearance. In the course of six detailed pages oozing with all of Cosmas' bizarre opinions including the idea that the earth is a tableland, flat beneath the vaulted heavens Letronne gives the impression that Cosmas was well known, influential, important. The reader may recall, however, that Cosmas had only just then in Letronne's own time been rediscovered and unceremoniously baptized by nineteenth-century



³ Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 56.

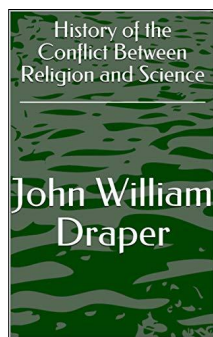
⁴ Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 59.

⁵ Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 60.

historians as representative of that backwater they declared the “Dark Ages.” We have a record of only one individual who had read Cosmas, St. Photius, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Photius, who had garnered a widely reputed honor of being the most well-read scholar of his age and who is referred to in a recent history as “the leading light in the 9th century renaissance,” had in turn nothing nice to say about Cosmas.⁶ “The style is poor,” he says, “he relates much that is incredible from a historical point of view, so that he may fairly be regarded as a fabulist rather than a trustworthy authority.” Indeed, Photius then goes on to mention that it is specifically Cosmas’ view on the flat earth that he finds so bizarre: “the views on which he [Cosmas] lays special stress are: that neither the sky nor the earth is spherical, but that the former is a kind of vault, and the latter a rectangular plane.”⁷ In other words the only person to have apparently read Cosmas sees him as something of a misguided fantasist notable for holding such an outlandish view. It is, to say the least, a bold strategy for Letronne to then hold up Cosmas as exemplary of an entire era while simultaneously making the argument that two of Christianity’s most seminal theologians—Augustine and Aquinas—were in this case ignored as the black sheep of Christ’s ramshackle flock.

Nonetheless, this haphazard backwardness, for Letronne, essentially summarized the whole Christian legacy: “The flat earth theories ... dominated up to the time of Columbus and Magellan, and even persisted afterward, but finally the discoveries of Kepler, Huygens, and Newton erased the childish ideas that the theologians had defended inch by inch as orthodox.”⁸ Yet despite the fact that much of this could have been discredited by a slight glance at many of the sources to which Letronne was supposedly pointing, by the time he wrote this essay his sterling reputation made checking his footnotes apparently unnecessary. His focus on Cosmas as singularly significant was passed on as a bad habit to many like Charles Raymond Beazley, for example, as well as his general impression of the church fathers as a confused band of miscreants who, despite the stupidity of their views, “had three irresistible arguments: persecution, prison, and the stake.”⁹

Both Irving and Letronne’s works found their way into the pages of two men with whom we are already quite familiar: John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White. Given that the title “Flat Earther” is still used to indicate anyone who holds dogmatically to an outlandish view in the face of science, one can imagine the sort of currency Irving’s and Letronne’s tale had for men who wanted to portray the length of history as one of the heroic struggles of science in the face of dogmatic repression. “[White and Draper] saw the Flat Error as a powerful weapon.”¹⁰ And so, they made it a mascot of their story. White took Irving’s portrayal of Columbus and weaponized it to create

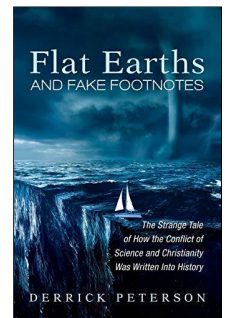


the popular anti-science image of institutionalized Christian cosmography:

Many a bold navigator, who was quite ready to brave pirates and tempests, trembled at the thought of tumbling with his ship into one of the openings into hell which a widespread belief placed in the Atlantic at some unknown distance from Europe. This terror among sailors was one of the main obstacles to the voyage of Columbus.¹¹

A better scholar than Draper—who portrayed Columbus as assailed by the “Grand Cardinal of Spain,” berating Columbus with flat earth arguments supposedly from “St. Chrysostom and St. Augustine, St. Jerome ... St. Basil and St. Ambrose,”¹²—White knew that those like Augustine and Aquinas—quite inconveniently for his thesis—were in full support of a round earth. So, he painted them, much as Letronne did, as unique lights, lost in the smugly self-satisfied murk of the majority of Christian faith. Yet, again, if your argument relies on painting Augustine or Aquinas as a “minority” in the Christian thought of the West, and “those two pipsqueaks”¹³ Lactantius and Cosmas as representative of the orthodox, something has gone wrong.

The story takes an unexpected and interesting turn, however. White cites Irving in support of the Columbus tale. When Russell traces this citation in White’s work back to Irving, he finds a footnote supporting Irving’s story for the Flat Earth and Columbus which reads in total: “Mss. Bibliot. Roi. Fr.” For those confused by the phrase, this is academic shorthand, though it may as well have been a sorcerer’s incantation for all the good it did. When translated into full script, it reads: “manuscripts in the French royal library.”¹⁴ Which is to say, at this point, Irving is having a laugh, and is hardly bothering to cover up his ruse. He is, in essence, saying with this fake footnote: “*somewhere* in the French royal library there are unnamed, unspecified documents which totally support my story.” As Russell kept his detective hat on, the mystery unfolded back further, to an intriguing origin: Copernicus, in a rare moment of self-promoting polemic, likened those who did not believe his assertion that the earth traveled around the sun to Lactantius, “though Copernicus was careful not to blanket either ancient or medieval Christianity with Lactantius’ error [as he himself was a devout Catholic].”¹⁵ Such caution did not last. As recently as 1998, historian R. Youngson claimed that Giordano Bruno (whom we shall meet shortly in a coming chapter) was burned at the stake for, among other things, denying the belief held so dearly by the Church that “the earth was flat and supported on pillars.”¹⁶ And, as we mentioned at the outset of this chapter no less a commentator than Thomas Jefferson ends up simply conflating the flat earth with the notion of heliocentrism (that is, the earth rotating around the sun) when he asserts that Galileo was put before the Inquisition for claiming the earth is a globe.¹⁷ This idea of history fit well with



6. Louth, *Greek East and Latin West*, 159.

7. Quoted in Cormack, “Flat Earth or Round Sphere?” 381n.19.

8. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 61.

9. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 60.

10. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 43.

11. White, *Warfare*, I:97.

12. Draper, *Conflict*, 65.

13. Gould, “Late Birth of the Flat Earth,” 43.

14. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 96n.148.

15. Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*, 70.

16. Youngson, *Scientific Blunders*, 282.

Jefferson's Enlightenment notion that modernity was the continuing history of an "unsparing sunrise" burning away the fog of ancient ideas and institutions.¹⁸

Even stranger, the sparse instances of the flat earth, the strange nature of the fake footnotes that account for it, were all overlooked because, as it happens, modern forms of flat earth belief began to arise contemporary to Draper and White, Irving and Letronne, giving their histories, no doubt, the air of plausibility. In fact, as we have

mentioned far from being a storied legacy of Christianity the flat earth is largely an artifact from what came to be understood as the debates over Darwinian evolution and the professionalization of science in the latter half of the nineteenth century. And this origin is no mere piece of trivia, for it is precisely in the same period that the first few waves of writers authoring histories of science—and so giving legitimacy to their new profession—were putting pen to paper. In this way not just the flat earth—but the notion of the warfare it often represented—came to nest themselves firmly into the self-perceptions of scientists, even religious ones.

¹⁸Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 165–66.

¹⁹Quoted in Neem, "The Early Republic," 37.

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