



The Recent Inventions of the Flat Earth

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in *Flat Earths and Fake Footnotes*

<https://doi.org/10.54739/41g4>

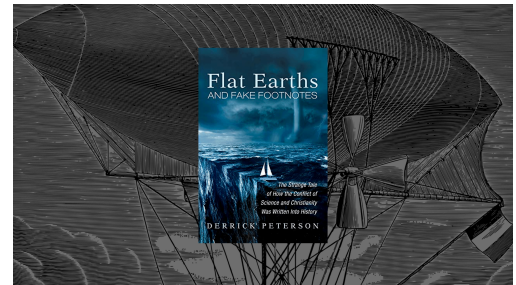
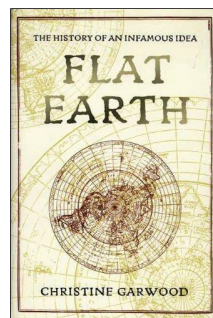


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It was the decade of the 1920s, and Samuel Shenton had a good idea.¹ Born the son of an army sergeant, he recalled after the First World War he would often stand in awe as zeppelins and other “bird-shaped” aircraft refused gravity and took flight. Already marvelously ingenious vessels, Shenton was curious how he could improve upon this technology for the benefit of humankind. Having learned—again to his amazement—that the earth rotates around its axis somewhere in the vicinity of 1600 kilometers per hour (or approximately 1000 miles per hour), the idea struck him: why not build a craft that would combine the power of gas and engine to float into the atmosphere carrying cargo? Resting anchored at high altitude, it would have but to wait as the earth spun its practiced course westward. Aided by this frantic twirl of the earth, after the proper amount of time the cargo craft would then simply descend upon its new destination far faster than anything yet designed. “Think of the possibilities,” he later gushed. “It was staggering!”²

Of course, Shenton’s plucky idea completely disregarded the fact that the atmosphere rotates with the earth. “Overlooking this crucial fact,” writes Christine Garwood, “Shenton wondered why no other individual had hit upon this simple but ground-breaking idea.”³ As it happened, the apparent uniqueness of his invention so startled him that he grew increasingly suspicious. Surely someone else had also thought of this design? When he was not plied with grant offers for what he took to be his obviously world-changing idea, the inkling that some sort of cover-up or conspiracy was afoot took hold of him, though he couldn’t yet say regarding exactly what. Styling himself a heroic lone figure seeking truth, he set out to prove the merit of his invention. While one might assume the rest of the story involves a somewhat melancholic Shenton getting on with his life after popping his imagined balloon with readily available information concerning



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atmospheric rotation, the truth is, as ever, so much stranger. In the course of his quixotic search, much to Shenton’s delight, he ran across an aircraft design quite similar to his own in the literature of the then almost-defunct Zetetic Society. In a panic of joy, Shenton recalls setting out to buy every piece of Zetetic material he could get his hands on. He was in awe with what he found, which would set the course of the rest of his life: no one would patent or purchase the rights to his machine because it would reveal a dark secret—the world not only did not rotate on its axis, it was completely flat, “just as the Scriptures described it.” When the space race came, Shenton, in turn, was one of the first to vocally suggest it was a hoax, because “the scriptures describe an impassable dome”; “circumnavigation of the globe is in reality making a circle above a flat plane”; and claims otherwise “are basically anti-God.”⁴

For those unfamiliar (perhaps blissfully so) with Zetetics, as the reader might have guessed by now, they were a society founded in the mid-nineteenth century and were dedicated to promoting and proving the flatness of the earth. Fancying themselves a guild of those seeking truth (“zetetic” means “seeker”), they were established by one Samuel Birley Rowbotham, and later given new life by the generous patroness Lady Elizabeth Blount, who changed the name to the Universal Zetetic Society.⁵ A showman to his core, for his public persona Rowbotham named himself “Parallax” (only one of several monikers he was to adopt through his life, another being “Dr. Birley, PhD” when he turned to hawking cures for that minor irritation we have named “mortality”), and marketed himself as a new Francis Bacon.⁶ Though today the epithet “Flat Earther” is typically meant to invoke those who cling to dogma in the face of obvious evidence, Rowbotham saw himself in stark contrast as an anti-elitist scientist, a Baconian Robinhood trying to put knowledge back in the hands of the people, as opposed to it being the sole property of the Royal Society. The highest irony here is that the use of the flat earth as an insult was, it appears, Francis Bacon who, as a good Protestant, taught not only that the Catholics held to the idea, but that they put many dissenters to trial for not holding it.⁷ Regardless, as an exceptional orator and intensely shrewd debater, in the guise of Parallax, Rowbotham swayed, confused, divided, and often generally convinced crowds as he toured around Britain with his entertaining mixture of the ludicrous and the ostensibly scientific.

¹My recounting of Shenton’s tale is here indebted to the phenomenal work of Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 219–80.

²Quoted in Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 221.

³Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 221.

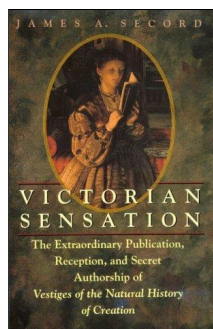
⁴Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 221.

⁵Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 154–87.

⁶Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 36–79.

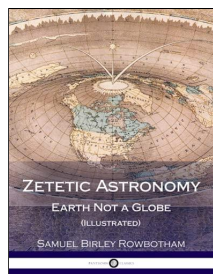
⁷Bacon, *The New Organon*, 87, section 89.

Despite the eccentricity of Zetetic views, they were not the only ones glorying in their own confessedly “alternative” sciences. In the Victorian scramble to institutionalize the newly minted concept of “the scientist,” a variety of conflicts and exceptional trajectories like mesmerism and phrenology sprang outward like free radicals under the centralizing pressures exerted via professionalization.⁸ Perhaps the most famous example of this was the anonymously penned *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, which we now



know was written by the Scotsman Robert Chambers. Though we cannot tell the remarkable tale of the *Vestiges* here⁹, it (far more than Darwin's *Origin of Species*) was largely responsible for priming the shape and course of later debates over evolution and religion. “Some people read the *Vestiges* as the epitome of scientific expertise; others dismissed it as the product of a dilettante. It all depended on what one thought profound knowledge really was.”¹⁰ Attempts to pry open spaces outside of the all-seeing eye of institutional science also helps account for the rising fascination with magic and the occult in the same period—which could, much like Rowbotham, quite ironically find precedent in the “Father of Modern Science,” Francis Bacon, who unabashedly described his project in terms of “purified magic.”¹¹ Indeed here Andrew Dickson White's project of rewriting Baconianism received a particularly juicy set of examples. For with the democratic elevation of “common sense” in Baconianism, the Flat-Earthers (while admittedly on the far fringes) could describe themselves as more or less within the pale of Baconianism, which because of its populism often had any number of uncontrolled sensibilities and agendas attached to it.

Rowbotham and his somewhat roguish disciples understood full well how to leverage populism against professionalization, and saw in the flat earth a wedge to drive into the still-tender trunk of elite science. “Working men have brains too,” as William Carpenter, one of Parallax's first disciples, was fond of saying.¹² To reinforce his point, with the controversy stirred over evolution, science, and theology by the bombshell that was the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, Parallax made sure his performances emphasized, by way of the image of the flat earth, that there was a war not just between stodgy professionals who thumb their noses at the common man's attempts to understand the world, but between religion and (professionalized, institutional) science. In Parallax's mind, these two wars were really one and the same. Thus, despite the fact that with the 1865 publication of *Zetetic Astronomy: Earth not a Globe!*, Parallax wanted to emphasize that his extensive compilation of scriptural proofs regarding the earth's flatness

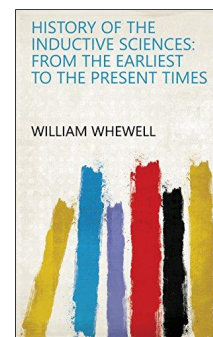


obtained only after his mathematical and observational data had been rigorously demonstrated, in truth, “Wherever he went, the same line of argument followed: science and the scriptures were at war, and both could not be right.”¹³ Thus, in a masterful (if not consistent) stroke, Parallax leveraged both true science and true religion to his cause. He combined them, or turned them against one another, as it suited his rhetorical purposes.

All of this seems, perhaps, like a bit of a sideshow from more serious matters that usually attend science and religion debates. Yet this is revealed as untrue when we look at how the flat earth intersected with the Victorian controversies of the day surrounding the professionalization of science, class conflict between “elites” and “commoners,” debates regarding the use of Scripture, and broader concerns over the legacy of Christianity. As it turns out, flat-earthers were some of the first to popularize the “warfare of science and Christianity” narrative. “Why did the battle rage [over whether or not Christianity held to a flat earth]?” asks Lesley B. Cormack. “Because belief in a flat earth was equated with willful ignorance, while an understanding of the spherical earth was seen as a measure of modernity.”¹⁴ But from the flat-earth's perspective, a “globose” earth represented the haughty and unproven claims of scientists who hated God and didn't read their Scriptures.

All of this was just too good for White and Draper to ignore. Few images encapsulate, represent, and indeed perpetuate the concept of an epochal Christian “Dark Ages” better than the image of the flat earth.¹⁵ In fact, as it turns out, the coining of the very term “scientist” was accompanied by the myth of Medieval and antique belief in a flat earth. William Whewell (himself a Christian, mind you), who wrote one of the first histories of science, minted the term in the 1830's¹⁶, and indeed there in print appears the accusation of flat-earthism.¹⁷ This image of a flat earth also accompanies the idea of a thousand-year darkness, the dogmatic servility of Christianity, the forlorn, aeonic stillness of the world of the human intellect under the boot of the Church. The entire apparatus that is the flat earth stands for the ignorance of a Christian age emerges precisely with the very first usage of “scientist” in Whewell¹⁸, which swells to characterize the flatness of the entire age:

We have now to consider more especially a long and barren period, which intervened between the scientific activity of ancient Greece, and that of modern Europe; and which we may, therefore, call the Stationary Period of Science. ... In speaking of the character of the age of commentators [i.e. the Middle Ages], we noticed principally the ingenious servility which it displays ... the want of all vigor and fertility in acquiring any real and new truths. ... speculative men became Tyrants



13. Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 71.

14. Cormack, “Myth 3,” 29.

15. On early history of the myth of the flat earth, see Cormack, “Flat Earth or Round Sphere,” 363–85.

16. See: Ross, “Scientist,” 66–67; Cohen, *The Scientific Revolution*, 27–39.

17. Russell, *Inventing a Flat Earth*, 31–32.

18. Whewell, *History of the Inductive Sciences*, on the flat earth, I:195–97.

8. Turner, “The Victorian Conflict Between Science and Religion: A Professional Dimension,” 171–200.

9. Secord, *Victorian Sensation*.

10. Secord, *Victorian Sensation*, 21.

11. Josephson–Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, esp. 41–66.

12. Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 63.

without ceasing to be slaves; to their character as Commentators, they added that of Dogmatists. ... We have thus rapidly traced the cause of the almost complete blank, which the history of physical science offers, from the decline of the Roman Empire, for almost a thousand years.¹⁹

His use of the flat earth gave distinctiveness to the newly minted category of “the scientist” by differentiating it from a past, backward epoch. Simultaneously, it reinforced the continuing professionalization of science in Whewell’s day, thus removing a distinct source of intellectual authority from Victorian clerics. The flat earth could not be allowed, not just because it represented ignorance, but it represented the most offensive thing of all to Whewell: mixing ecclesiastical authority with scientific inquiry. When someone like Whewell puts a spot like “the Dark Ages” on his conceptual map of history, he is asserting a “do not cross” line. But, at the same time, he is thereby also asserting the nature of what he wants to be the “normal” terrain of his map. As such, however, paradoxically the “do-not-cross” is inscribed and made a part of how we represent ourselves to ourselves.²⁰ Without a dark age to put behind it, without a monster to slay, the bright light of science would not be so pure, or so clear. More often than not the mental maps we use, as moderns, want to appear devoid of such cartoonish things; as it turns out in practice, however, this is not the case at all. “The ‘Middle Ages’ is a mobile category,” remarks Kathleen Davis, “applicable at any time to any society that has not ‘yet’ achieved modernity, or worse, has become retrograde.”²¹ We are, as we have mentioned, merely much less honest than the ancients in representing our monsters explicitly, while we nonetheless fill our conceptual maps with them:

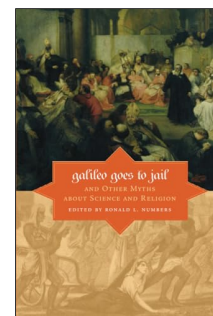
Just as Grendel [in *Beowulf*] frequents the borders of the Danish moors, the Middle Ages as a period continually threatens to disrupt modernity from its position on the edges of history: if the Middle Ages is popularly imagined as a time full of monsters, then it can also be said to operate itself as a *kind of historiographic monster* [emphasis added], challenging ideas of modernity as radically different.²²

One can dial the time for the emergence in from another angle as well. None of the great eighteenth century polemicists against Christianity—Edward Gibbon, David Hume, Denis Diderot, or others—ever accused the scholastics of believing in a flat earth. No doubt had they even whispered of this exotic belief, it would have been turned over the spit with morbid relish. We have seen how quick many were to pounce upon Lactantius and Cosmas’ opinions on the matter. But it wasn’t a point of polemic for the philosophes, because the scholastics didn’t hold to it. Early medieval theologians didn’t hold to it. The Patristic fathers and mothers didn’t hold to it. Flat earth belief did not exist in earnest until the nineteenth century, as we suggested above, and was largely an artifact of what would eventually be called in hindsight the evolutionary debates. The flat earthers, however much they represented a strange and extremely small group of oddballs

Were convenient symbols to be used as weapons against the anti-Darwinists. By the 1870’s the relationship between science and theology was beginning to be described in military metaphors. The philosophers (the propagandists of the Enlightenment), particularly Hume, had planted a seed by implying that the scientific and the Christian views were in conflict. August Comte (1798–1857) had argued that humanity was laboriously struggling upward toward the reign of science; his followers advanced the corollary that anything impeding the coming of the kingdom of science was retrograde. Their value system perceived the movement toward science as ‘good’, so that anything blocking the movement in that direction was ‘evil.’²³

The point of this admittedly eccentric historical excursion? As Herbert Butterfield noted in his seminal *The Whig Interpretation of History*, when we prioritize the present as the context in which to understand the past, this leads to the “over-dramatization”²⁴ of certain events due to overemphasis on qualities that supposedly led to where we are today. In our case, this means the many nuanced ways Scripture has interacted with science or natural philosophy in the past get lost in exchange for a few sensationalist examples—and these are themselves typically also misunderstood. The flat earth is one such sensation. As it turns out, Parallax and his followers had exceptionally bad timing, as they burned their sideshow into the minds of scientists beginning to write their own history textbooks, fashioning for themselves their sense of self-identity.

Ten years after “Darwin’s Bulldog” Thomas Huxley’s own mythologized debate with, and supposed besting of, Bishop William Wilberforce over the concept of evolution,²⁵ came the infamous “Flat Earth Wager.” One of Parallax’s more radical followers, John Hambden, challenged one of Huxley’s compatriots, Alfred Russell Wallace—the co-discoverer with Charles Darwin of the principle of natural selection—to prove that the earth was round. Hambden put £500 of his own money on the line for anyone who could prove to him the earth was not flat. Trying to muster up some good press, Hambden decided to target Wallace in order to land a big fish in the scientific world and show him a thing or two. Though one might expect someone with the prestige of Wallace to refuse such an outlandish contest, he was in between book projects and hurting financially. Unlike many of Wallace’s colleagues, such as Darwin, he did not have a private income to fall back upon. So, he took the bet, much to the delight of Hambden and the absolute perplexity of Wallace’s colleagues. Writing to his friend Alfred Newton, a professor of zoology at Cambridge, Wallace confided that he had taken on “a heavy wager” with one “of those strange phenomena” who do not believe in the earth’s roundness, and who is “willing to pay to be enlightened.” His light tone indicates Wallace had no inkling this wager was something he would regret for the rest of his life.²⁶ To cut a long story short, after a few false starts to find appropriate judges for the contest, Wallace was—perhaps to no one’s



19. Whewell, *History of the Inductive Sciences*, II: 181, II: 237, II: 271.

20. Morgan, *The Monster in the Garden*, 170–71.

21. Davis, “The Sense of an Epoch,” 41.

22. Bildhauer and Mills, “Conceptualizing the Monstrous,” 3.

23. Russell, *Flat Earths*, 35n.33.

24. Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation of History*, 53.

25. See chapter three in this book.

26. Quotes taken from Garwood, *Flat Earth*, 88.

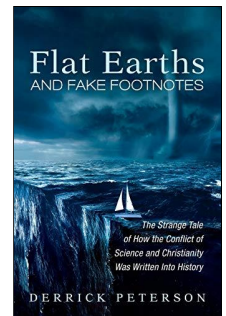
surprise—eventually declared the victor. The world was round! However, a furious Hambden spent the rest of his days hounding Wallace with threats upon him and his family. It escalated to such a point that the mild-mannered Wallace had to get a restraining order, and eventually he had Hambden arrested and later even committed to an asylum to protect himself from himself.

This was too little, too late. The damage had been done, and the image of a fanatical Christian touting the flat earth against scientists stuck. Far from being confined to the fictional imagination of Irving or the academic networks of Letronne, after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* the flat earth migrated into the polemical toolbox of evolutionists (some Darwinian, some otherwise) to use as a bludgeon against any who doubted the way the new evolutionary winds were blowing. They cannot be wholly to blame for this. Parallax and his disciples as we saw were in many ways responsible for using the flat earth as rhetorical fuel for the warfare metaphor's fire in the nineteenth century, only from the opposite side. Promoting a biblical literalism that would even make later six-day creationists blush,²⁷ the flat-earthers were primarily a distraction, a weird and vocal minority that struck at what turned out to be an inopportune moment taking just enough pressure off of historical investigations pertaining to whether Christians actually believed in a flat earth that it stuck at a very formative time of historical writing done in the name of self-fashioning and carving out professional and personal identities. As Russell summarizes the history, "the reason for promoting both the specific lie about the sphericity of the earth and the general lie that religion and science and in natural and eternal conflict in Western society," went hand in hand, with the ultimate end game of this mythological partnership being "to defend Darwinism."²⁸ The

social and political forces that were shaping the newly minted concept of "the scientist" internalized the threat of the flat earth as yet another wicked device of Churchmen meddling where they had no business, and so felt the need to produce polemical antibodies for it.

One recent historian, after surveying a sample of 130 textbooks, notes the first college textbooks incorporating the myth began to appear at the turn of the century—though several astronomy textbooks following Letronne appeared slightly earlier. But especially in the 1960's during the heyday of secularization theories in the human sciences the appearance of the flat earth accelerated even further.

"Adopting the anti-clerical posture of Washington Irving and other nineteenth-century polemicists, textbook authors began to depict ancient and medieval Christians as exceedingly anti-intellectual about the earth's shape, and more."²⁹ Indeed, to this very day it sticks as a point of argument paired to evolutionary theory:



[If Christians] insist on teaching your children falsehoods—that the earth is flat, that 'Man' is not a product of evolution by natural selection—then you must expect, at the very least, that those of us who have freedom of speech will feel free to describe your teachings as the spreading of falsehoods, and will attempt to demonstrate this to your children at our earliest opportunity. Our future well-being—the well-being of all of us on the planet—depends on the education of our descendants.³⁰

The pairing of the falsehoods Christians teach—that of the flat earth, and the denial of evolution by natural selection—are no arbitrary pairing but, as we have seen, historically generated. Yet with this pairing that Dennett invokes is a strange lopsidedness. For, as we have seen, natural selection was rejected by many card-carrying evolutionists—even Huxley for a time. The representation of Christians in the pairing is not just mythology, but one that is frozen into a particular form, while what constitutes legitimate Darwinism is allowed the growth and hindsight of time. This is a common rhetorical strategy, and an important one to keep in mind as we move to the next chapter. For there are fewer things about Christianity considered quite so frozen and immovable as the Dark Ages, a thousand yawning years of no learning or advancement that Christianity foisted upon the world.

29. Keas, *Unbelievable*, 47.

30. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 519.

27. The Flat Earth is more trouble for many "literalists" than they perhaps care to admit, for as has been emphasized by many, taken literally scripture seems to assume—if not teach—a flat earth. See: Parry, *The Biblical Cosmos*, 17-25; moreover, a literal reading could also demand that a solid dome is what holds up the heavens and restrains the chaos waters, as Boccaletti, *Waters Above the Firmament* details. Nonetheless, the flat earth, along with these other features, have been consistently seen as sorts of divine accommodation, typology, allegory, and the like, which demand to be couched in broader theological and philosophical themes rather than taken as straightforward cosmological reason. Cf. Brown, *Days of Creation*; Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Story*. This is so, too, as we have outlined, because of the Christian affirmation that reason dictates the spherical earth and is attested by Pagan wisdom. Such traditions were, to cut a long story short, broadly erased from memory in the twentieth century due to the political associations given to scriptural authority, making it appear such literalism was tried and true "Christian tradition" rather than, for the most part, a brand new practice not even a half-century old by the time of Scopes. See: Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*; Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*; Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins*.

28. Russell, "The Myth of the Flat Earth".

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