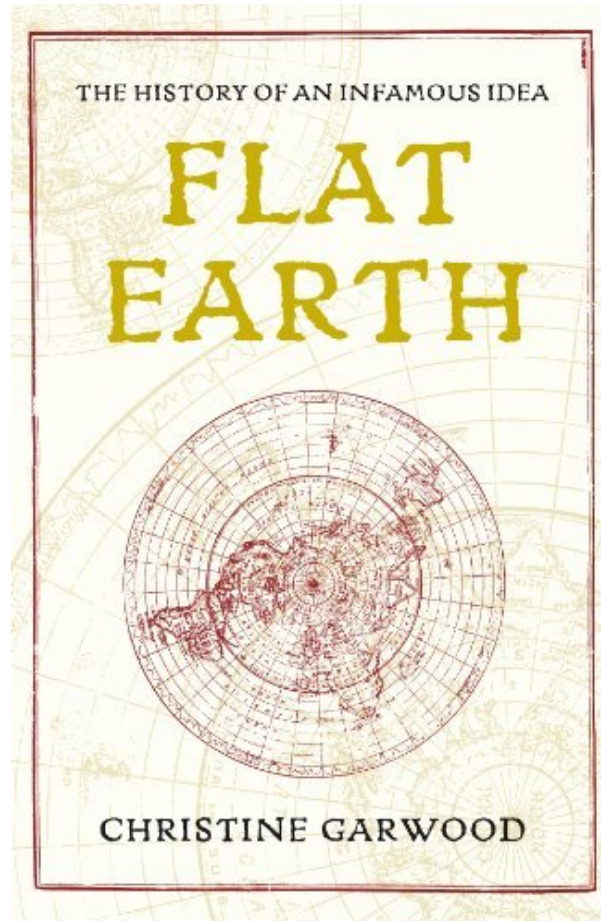
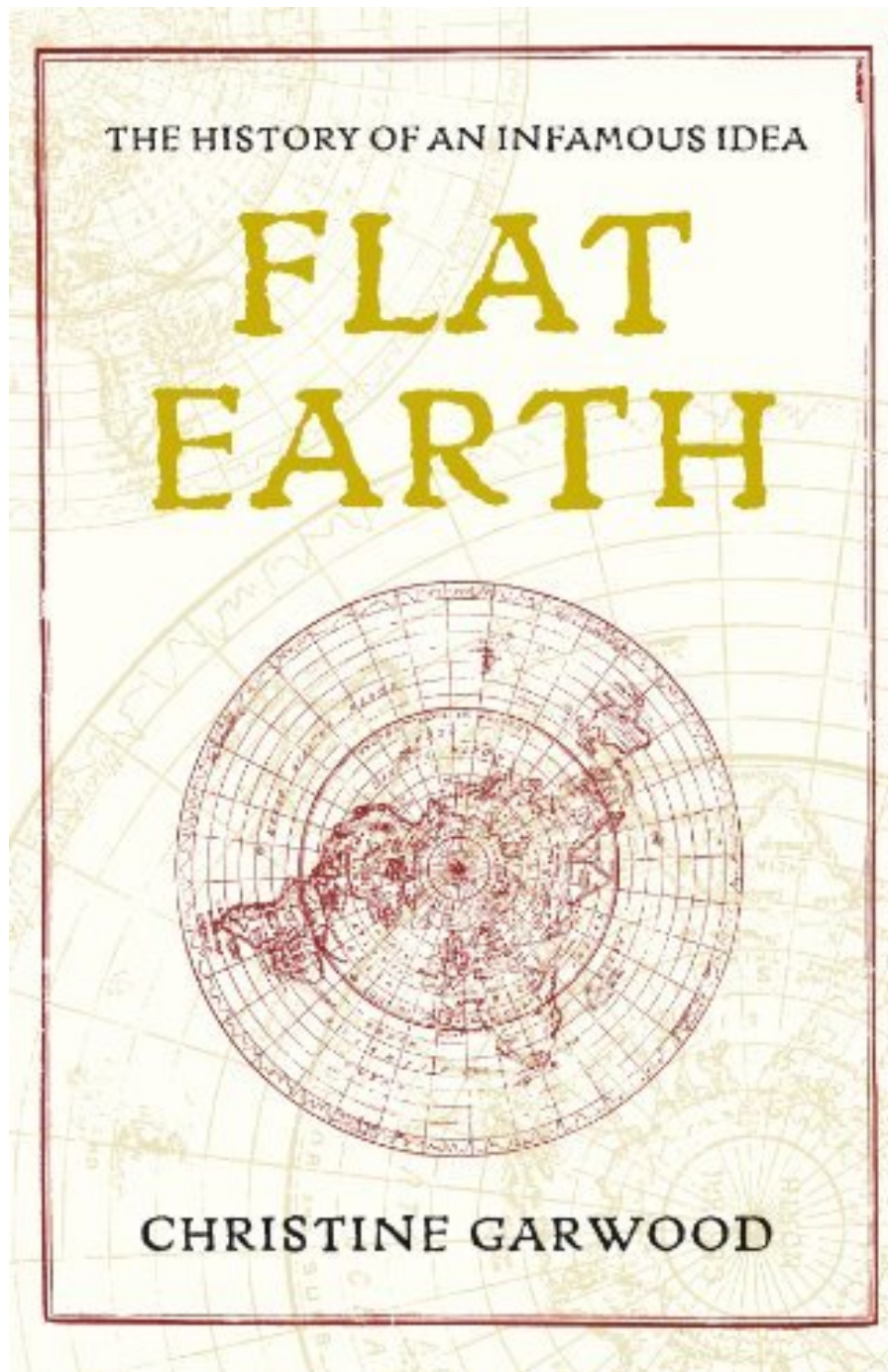


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A MASTERFUL HISTORY OF AN OFTEN-RIDICULED MOVEMENT

By Steven H Propp

Christine Garwood is a freelance writer and researcher; she has also written *Mid-Victorian Britain (Shire Living Histories)* and *Museums in Britain: A History*.

She wrote in the Prologue of this 2007 book, “the military metaphor employed by Draper [History Of The Conflict Between Religion And Science] and White [A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom]... seized the popular imagination ... warfare became the common framework for analyses of the relationship between science and religion ... the idea that medieval people thought the earth was flat and Columbus discovered it was round and was recycled until it became standard fare... The myth is all too convenient: the flat-earth idea has become shorthand for ‘Dark Age’ stupidity... before the Enlightenment ear of progress and science... we can assume a sense of superiority and security in our progress from an ignorant and deluded age... Under these circumstances, it is somewhat ironic that ... flat-earth belief has a chronology far stranger than all the inventions.” (Pg. 13-14)

She states, “the Bible presents a reasonably clear and consistent view of a tiered universe based on the Sumero-Babylonian model. In this system, the cosmos consists of the vault of heaven... or ‘firmament,’ containing the sun, moon and stars (Genesis 1:14-17). The Bible teaches that these heavenly bodies move across the stationary earth (Psalms 19:1-7), while the firmament rests of pillars or mountains (Job 26:11) rooted in the flat earth below... The earth ... is generally depicted as an immovable disc or ‘circle’ (Job 26:7), supported on water (Psalms 24:2) or in empty space (Job 26:7)... As for its shape, it is generally spoken of as a flat disc, so that if one travelled far enough one would eventually arrive at the ‘ends of the earth’ (Deut 13:8, 28:64; Isa 5:26; Ps 135:7). Within this scheme, the four corners of the earth (Isa 11:12, Ezek 7:2) might refer to distant regions, unless taken literally, when the earth could be considered rectangular or square.” (Pg. 16-17)

She points out, “early Church fathers were not Biblical literalists who believed that the Bible was the only authority on the natural world or that the earth was a plane. The majority accepted that it was a globe, took the scriptures allegorically or simply sidestepped the issue and any associated controversy. However, there were always extremists in any field, and Lactantius and Cosmas Indicopleustes were joined in the promotion of Bible-based flat earth belief by an atypical few, most notably Severianus, Bishop of Gabala (c. 409), and his contemporary, one-time Bishop of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom (344-408)... Among a number of radical flat-earth arguments, the most common was the ‘fable of the Antipodes’---that there could not be an undiscovered side of the earth where crops and trees grew upside-down and people walked with their feet above their heads... For flat-earth advocates, the idea of the Antipodes was absurd so they reasoned that the earth must be flat.” (Pg. 23)

She notes, “a globular earth has been the educated consensus since at least the fourth century B.C. Despite this, the flat-earth idea... has been transformed into a political tool by modern storywriters hunting for an angle, or by polemicists seeking to argue their case for science against supposed Christian closed-mindedness. It is here that history takes a strange twist indeed... For the flat-earth idea has undergone a revival through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries---the work of a movement of true believers determined to prove that conventional scientific knowledge is a delusion, the Bible is literally correct and the earth is flat.” (Pg. 34)

In the 1860s, Clark Edward Kettle offered various proofs of the circular earth: “the round shadow the earth cast on the moon during an eclipse, the invisibility of the Pole Star over certain lines of latitude on the earth’s surface, the changing seasons, the positions of the fixed stars, and several more besides... Kettle ascribed [John] Hampden’s disbelief ... to the simple fact that he had not personally observed these phenomena, and tied up this argument with the pertinent question, ‘You have not seen your own brains---do you believe you have any?’” (Pg. 91-92)

Astronomer Dr. Bryan Andrew wrote an article defending the Flat-Earth Society, saying “there was an undercurrent of seriousness to the society’s purpose that was deserving of further consideration. Most telling for him was the assertion that, while everyone accepted without question that the earth was a globe, not one person in twenty could have provided... one cogent reason why this was so... They continued to believe implicitly that it was a sphere---because this fact had been imparted to them repeatedly and with confidence. For Andrew, this was a critical point about the public understanding of science and the social role of expertise... That a fact becomes truth was not due to its demonstrability or even to its implicit veracity but to repetition, lazy-minded acceptance and the authority with which it was told.” (Pg. 300)

She concludes, “While at first glance the history of the flat-earth idea may seem simplistic, quaint or even arcane, in reality it is more complex and wide-ranging than generally supposed. Most notably, the belief is not merely a matter of Biblical literalism, for modern flat-earth campaigners co-opted scientific as well as scriptural proofs in their bids to promote their unorthodox cause... At base level, even zetetic philosophy was promoted as a Baconian fact-finding mission, and objective quest to find the truth, while rhetoric alluding to common sense, empiricism, reason and logic was as much a feature of zetetic publications as Biblical quotations and statements of faith... in the face of space exploration and shifting world-views they emphasized ‘scientific’ and political arguments pertaining to democracy and freedom of thought.” (Pg. 353-354)

This is a fascinating, well-detailed and not unsympathetic history of a movement that is often dismissed in a cavalier fashion. It will be “must reading” for anyone wanting to seriously study this movement.

[NOTE: Those who enjoy this book may also like *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians*.]

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