



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## Flat county, flat earth



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On a late April evening in 1851, Miss Gray's Hotel in Athlone hosted an extraordinary gathering and for those in attendance, the wealthier strata of local society, it was to be an evening of distraction and edification.

During the previous six years, Ireland had suffered tragedy after tragedy. Famine, and the official response to that famine, had devastated the country and the suffering still continued. On that evening, however, the focus would not be on human travails. It would, instead, offer a new way of looking at the cosmos. For some, perhaps, the evening offered the promise of enlightenment.

They had gathered to hear a man speak. No, that is not a fair description. They had congregated to hear a prophet, more than a mere man, a being in possession of hidden knowledge. The prophet had come to share his knowledge and to expose a reality wilfully obscured by contemporary science. The prophet's name was 'Parallax' and he would proclaim an incredible truth to the people of Athlone: the earth was

flat.

Birth of a prophet

'Parallax' or, to give him his earthly name, Samuel Rowbotham, was a man of many faces and many histories. He was born in in Stockport, England in 1816, although the details of his early life are unclear. By the late 1830s, according to historian Christine Garwood, Rowbotham was managing a commune in the Cambridgeshire fens that was based on the ideas of Robert Owen, the reformer and proponent of utopian socialism.

After that commune failed, Rowbotham took on the persona of 'Dr Birley, Ph.D.' and relocated to the north of England. While living as Dr Birley, he explored the possibility of curing all diseases and of increasing human lifespans by thousands of years, the secrets of which he uncovered within a remarkably short time. Using yet another pseudonym, 'Tryon', he published a series of booklets in which readers were advised that an immensely long life could be attained by avoiding foods containing high levels of phosphorous.

Yet, as he entered his thirties, Rowbotham was unsatisfied. His pronouncements on human aging had not led to kudos, riches and a place among the pantheon of great thinkers. Certainly, he had followers, people who took his advice

and who paid for the privilege in the hope of achieving long lives and, possibly, immortality. To the scientific establishment, however, he was just another crank. Perhaps, that is why Rowbotham's thoughts turned to his former life in the commune on the flat Cambridgeshire fens. While living in that landscape, Rowbotham had conducted experiments which, he claimed, proved that the earth was not a globe. So, in the mid-1840s, Rowbotham chose a new mission: one in which he would defeat the scientific establishment and bring truth to the people. But, to win that victory, he would need a new and grand persona: Parallax was born.

Behold the truth

That was the version of Samuel Rowbotham which travelled to Ireland in 1851. Athlone, it seems, was the first stop on his Irish journey. It is not clear why he chose Athlone; perhaps he was drawn to the region's flat countryside. Shortly after arriving in the town, Parallax gave two lectures in Miss Gray's Hotel which were described by a local newspaper, the Athlone Sentinel: 'A gentleman under the pseudonym of "Parallax" has been astonishing large and respectable auditories of our townspeople on the evenings of Monday and Tuesday, in Miss Gray's Large Room, by his lectures on Zetetic Astronomy. The



A map from 1892 that claims to show a flat earth (Boston Public Library)

nature of these lectures is extraordinary – explaining that the earth is not a globe, but a fixed circular plane or disc; that the sun moves in the firmament, and that, in fact, our present astronomical knowledge is altogether fallacious, and inconsistent with natural phenomena.'

The Sentinel provided an accurate summary of Parallax's teachings in which the earth was described as a circular disc in whose centre sat the North Pole. That disc was bounded on all sides by a great wall of ice. Parallax came armed with 'various diagrams' and he 'referred to several experiments

made throughout England to prove that the surface of the sea is perfectly level, and that any appearance to the contrary arises from the laws of perspective.' His trump card, however, was the Bible and his lectures were replete with scriptural quotations as he explained that the earth, which was created in six days, was less than 6,000 years old. According to Parallax, the earth was located at the centre of the universe. Indeed, the earth comprised almost the entire visible universe. The earth disc floated on a heavenly ocean, described by Parallax as a 'fathomless

deep'. The sun was located hundreds or, at most, thousands of miles above the disc and the stars a short distance beyond that. No other planets existed: the earth was God's special creation.

Today, Parallax's teachings can be seen as a mish-mash of Creationism and Flat-Earthism. He described them as 'Zetetic', a term whose origins could be traced to a Greek philosopher named

Pyrrhon who, over two thousand years earlier, accompanied the army of Alexander the Great as it trekked from Macedonia to India. Pyrrhon's encounters with varied forms of philosophy led him to conclude that equal arguments can be offered on both sides of any proposition. As such, the search for fact was a waste of time. It was a useful precedent for Parallax since it allowed him to summarily dismiss centuries of scientific enquiry as wrong-headed and doomed to grievous error.

A master

By the time he reached Athlone, Parallax was a smooth performer: calm and intelligent, shielded with supporting arguments and wrapped in a veneer of rationality. That had not always been the case. A few years earlier, during a public debate in which he was unable to defend his teachings, Parallax literally ran away from his opponent. In Athlone, however,

audiences could see a master at work. Parallax was part contrarian and part prophet. But, above all, he was a showman.

It proved a potent mix and one that evidently impressed the Athlone Sentinel as can be seen in its depiction of his lectures: 'The audience listened with the deepest attention, and appeared astounded at the revelations of the lecturer. At the close of each lecture, some gentlemen entered the lists with Parallax, and a lively and interesting discussion ensued, which much edified the hearers. Parallax, however, maintained his principles with infinite tact and ability, and answered the various crotchety interrogatories started, in a masterly manner.'

It is clear that the Sentinel was open to hearing Parallax's message. At the very least, the paper enjoyed his contrarian nature and willingness to reject the scientific elites. Perhaps the Sentinel's reception encouraged Parallax to remain a little longer in the town. It was part of his usual strategy to descend upon a location and give multiple lectures across a week or two, with the controversy that surrounded his initial talks creating publicity for the subsequent lectures. Parallax, as we shall see in the next edition, was not finished with Athlone.

