



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Prophet equals profit



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In our previous edition we followed the journey to Athlone of Samuel Rowbotham who arrived in the town in 1851 bearing an incredible message: 'The earth is flat. It forms a disc which, bounded by an immense wall of ice, floats upon a heavenly ocean of infinite depth. Above the disc moves the sun, a few thousands of miles away. There are no other planets but the earth, which sits at the centre of the universe.'

A teacher

Born in England in 1816, Rowbotham was a man of many characters and numerous pseudonyms. In his twenties, he had managed a commune organised along utopian socialist principles. After that commune fell apart, he pretended to be a doctor named Birley whose specialism was the pursuit of immortality: a calling that earned him many followers. By 1851, he had a new persona and a new mission. Rowbotham had transformed into 'Parallax' and he came to Athlone to share the hitherto hidden truth of earth's shape and its place in the cosmos: a truth that he claimed to have discovered in the scriptures and which he then confirmed through experimentation.

In late April 1851, Parallax gave lectures on two consecutive nights in Miss Gray's Hotel in Athlone during which he impressed many in the crowd, including a reporter for the Athlone Sentinel, a contemporary newspaper: 'The lecture of the second evening continued to a rather late hour, owing to the spirit with which the discussion was carried on; and the audience left strongly impressed with the startling facts to which they had been listening - the most sceptical at least philosophising

after the manner of Hamlet: "There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in thy philosophy."'

The Westmeath Independent was similarly impressed although its correspondent noted that some of the audience attempted to counter Parallax's arguments in a 'very animated discussion'. A local clergyman, Rev. Mr. McWhinney, was 'most zealous for the theory of the earth's rotundity; but although he brought forward some very strong arguments, Parallax maintained his ground'. Parallax's ability to remain calm and clear won the respect of audience members, including the Independent's correspondent: 'We have seldom met with a lecturer endowed with such strong argumentative powers, who in language so simple could present, so quickly and clearly, to the mind of the hearer the ideas that he wished to impart.' Such glowing reviews drew much attention to Parallax and local demand led to the scheduling of four more lectures. The first of these was held in the town's courthouse on 12 May 1851.

Flat wrong

According to the Westmeath Independent, the May lectures were a great success for Parallax: 'the lectures were most respectably attended, and produced a startling effect upon the audience, while the discussions created cheerfulness, and tended greatly to edify.' A recurring theme in the newspaper coverage is the manner in which Parallax responded to those who disputed his account of the earth's shape and its place in the universe. The Independent described how one guest, Michael Fitzgerald, 'an arithmetician,' declared 'that the possibility of proving the earth to be a plane or disc was monstrous'. The Independent's correspondent marvelled at the 'ease and lucidness' by which Parallax replied to Fitzgerald and other opponents among the audience: "We must say" the paper concluded, "he is evidently a man of gifted intellect,

and deep scientific attainments'. Parallax departed Athlone soon after those lectures, although he would subsequently write letters to both the Sentinel and Independent defending his teachings against opponents, particularly Rev. McWhinney.

Parallax's successes in Athlone would be replicated many times during subsequent years. Indeed, after returning to Britain, he spent the next three decades giving public lectures and, much to the frustration of his opponents, earning acclaim from audiences and in the media. Invariably, he followed the approach that had served him so well in Athlone. One London-based reporter lamented Parallax's ability to sway audiences: 'It seems impossible for anyone to battle with him... Mathematicians argue with him at the conclusion of his lectures, but it would seem as though they held their weapons by the blade and fought with the handle, for sure enough they put the handle straight into the lecturer's hand, to their own utter discomfiture and chagrin.' Another journalist, based in Plymouth, reported that Parallax 'treats his subject in a very clever and ingenious manner, and succeeds in drawing many over to agree with him'. A Leeds-based journalist was more blunt: Parallax, the person wrote, was 'as slippery as an eel'.

In 1865, Parallax catered to his fans by publishing 'Zetetic Astronomy: Earth not a Globe!'. Running to over 200 pages, the book was followed by further editions in 1873 and 1881, suggesting that Parallax had won a wide audience. By then, he existed in a virtuous circle of self-publicity: each lecture sparked a controversy; the controversies advertised his writings; those writings created a demand for more lectures; and so on.

Bad ideas, long tails

During the 1870s, as documented by historian Christine Garwood, Parallax was again using the persona of Dr Birley. As the self-proclaimed doctor, he sold an elixir



Earth rising above the moon, as photographed from the Apollo 8 spacecraft in 1968 (NASA)

designed to ensure long life, perhaps a thousand years or more. This product appears to have been his main source of income, earning him enough money to purchase a large house in London. Alongside his achievements in the field of quack medicine, he continued to promote his flat earth lectures and writings. It was those teachings that formed Parallax's legacy after his death in 1884.

One of Parallax's disciples, John Hampden, launched a journal that aimed to perpetuate his idol's ideas. Those ideas were brought to the United States by another of Parallax's followers, William Carpenter, who emigrated to Baltimore in 1879. Perhaps the most influential of Parallax's followers was Lady Elizabeth Blount who founded the Universal Zetetic Society in 1893. The Society, with its motto of 'Victory in Truth', was amply funded by Blount and it maintained a high profile throughout the 1890s. Its popularity was based

on a regularly published magazine, 'The Earth Not a Globe Review', which, despite its unwieldy title, had a readership in Britain, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, India and New Zealand.

Although the Universal Zetetic Society became inactive early in the 20th Century, it had already inspired a new generation of flat earth devotees. As individuals and in small groups, they kept writing and organising, striving to keep alive their beliefs. One such believer was an Englishman named Samuel Shenton, whose research led him to Parallax's, 'Zetetic Astronomy: Earth not a Globe!'. On reading the book, Shenton felt compelled to spread its message and, in 1956, he founded the International Flat Earth Research Society. Through that organisation, the work of Parallax found new life as a foundational text for flat earthers. Over a century after his triumphant visit to Athlone, Parallax's power as a prophet remained undimmed.

