

[Free] Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians

Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians

Jeffrey Burton Russell

*audiobook | *ebooks | Download PDF | ePub | DOC*

 Download

 Read Online

#160342 in Books 1991-08-30Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.75 x 6.00 x 1.00l, #File Name: 0275939561132 pages | File size: 27.Mb

Jeffrey Burton Russell : Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. The Origins and Role of the "Flat Error" in History and Science.By New Age of Barbarism_Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians_ (1991) by medieval scholar Jeffrey Burton Russell is an interesting examination of the role of the idea that medieval Europeans believed the earth to be flat before Columbus (what Russell refers to as the "flat error"). Russell is to argue that while some ancient and medieval sources maintained a flat earth, most of educated Europe believed in a round earth even before Columbus and the final confirmation of Magellan. Today, the term "flat earther" has been taken on as a term of abuse hurled against those who object to certain theories or adhere to an alternative or religious point of view. The role of this term originates in the alleged warfare between religion and science which was pushed forward in the nineteenth century. Russell is to consider various understandings of the role of science and religion and to argue that this alleged "warfare" in fact is to rest on a fallacy. Russell notes how the "flat error" occurs in many mainstream and respected sources including appearing in the works of the highly respected scholar Daniel Boorstin. Russell argues that the role of the "flat error" can be understood as being a phenomenon as ethnocentric as the imperialism of the nineteenth century.The book includes the following chapters -Preface - explains the role of the prejudice among "educated people" that medieval Europeans believed the earth to be flat before the time of Columbus.The Well-Rounded Planet - considers the voyage of Columbus and the importance of this voyage, noting many of the objections to Columbus from the

perspectives of the American natives. Notes how many argue falsely that Columbus's voyage was used to prove to medieval skeptics that the earth was round. Considers the role of the "Flat Error" and why many educated people continue to believe it. Notes the role of Magellan in finally confirming that the earth was round and the continued belief by some that the earth is flat (not limited to mere eccentrics such as the International Flat Earth Society). Explains the role of geocentrism (which maintained a round earth) in the theories of Ptolemy and the Copernican revolution. Notes the role of Columbus and his support by the Spanish monarchy as well as the writings of Las Casas concerning Columbus's voyages. The Medieval Ball - considers medieval theories regarding the sphericity of the earth as opposed to the few medieval individuals who upheld a flat earth. Notes the role of Aristotle in maintaining a spherical earth surrounded by a crystalline shell of planets and the geocentric theories of Ptolemy. Explains for example how Columbus consulted the theologian and philosopher Pierre D'Ailly concerning the sphericity of the earth and notes the opinions of the antipodeans concerning humans living on the other side of the earth (explaining how these objections were anthropological and not based on opposition to a round earth). Notes the thinking of medieval individuals such as Roger Bacon and Dante, also noting the importance of medieval maps in proving that for these people the earth was round. Examines the thinking of St. Augustine who opposed a strict biblical literalism on certain issues and maintain that on certain issues Christians should defer to philosophers so as "not to appear foolish" before learned pagans. Brings up the fact that only two major individuals actually did maintain a flat earth. These were Lactantius and Cosmas Indicopleustes who were used as "scapegoats" for a later generation of philosophers. Flattening the Globe - explains the origins and role and persistence of the "Flat Error" in the nineteenth and twentieth century (the "flattening of the medieval globe"). Explains how the Flat Error arose in the thinking of many in which the ancient wisdom of the Greeks was contrasted with "medieval ignorance". Notice how the "Flat Error" was furthered by Enlightenment and anti-catholic forces prompted by Pope Pius IX's opposition to liberalism and modernism. Further notes how an idea of Anglo-American superiority came to further the development of the "Flat Error" in the "Know Nothing" movement. Explains the contrast between science and religion in the thought of Comte, Whewell, Draper, and Huxley. Explains the development of science and the idea of progress and how there arose the notion of an ongoing war between science and religion in the nineteenth century (especially as played out in the debates over Darwin). For example, considers the writings of Andrew Dickson White who was to maintain this "warfare" theory and notes how such issues as a "falling-off-the-edge fallacy" and the errors of Lactantius and Cosmas were used to prop up the nineteenth century Flat Error. Considers various issues concerning the role of science, positivism, and the relationship with religion and the question as to whether science is the only means of ascertaining truth. The Wrong Way Round - explains how the "Flat Error" persisted in text-books in America prompted by the writings of Washington Irving concerning Columbus. Explains the negative views various thinkers had of the middle ages and the origins of the false term "dark ages" to describe them. Considers the opposition between Protestantism and Catholicism as well as the appearance of the round earth in the thinking of Copernicus, Galileo, and Campanella. Explains the role of the enlightened Spanish monarchy in supporting Columbus's voyage. Around the Corner - considers some of the further issues raised by the "Flat Error" noting how the ancient Romans, Greeks, and Christian fathers nearly all agreed upon a round earth. Examines various theories regarding the role of science and religion including those of Duhem, Whitehead, and Koyre. Finally, explains how the term "flat earther" came to be used as one of abuse and how the "Flat Error" has persisted into modern times. This book offers an interesting discussion and perspective on the medieval period in Europe as it concerned the time before Columbus's voyage. The author shows the role of the "Flat Error" in disseminating the theory that the middle ages were a time of ignorance or in showing an alleged "warfare between science and religion". This book provides an interesting study that poses questions regarding the nature of science and religion and the role of the medieval world and modern myth.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Old Myths Die Hard By Nick Peters Recently, I had a conversation at a store with a salesman who was telling me that people in the past believed the Earth was flat, which I raised disagreement with. Online, one can hear this as a common objection. Often it is treated as an axiom and with the idea that the church was teaching otherwise. Consider this quote from Ingersoll in his essay Individuality It is a blessed thing that in every age some one has had individuality enough and courage enough to stand by his own convictions, some one who had the grandeur to say his say. I believe it was Magellan who said, "The church says the earth is flat; but I have seen its shadow on the moon, and I have more confidence even in a shadow than in the church." On the prow of his ship were disobedience, defiance, scorn, and success. A flat-earther is used to refer to someone today who is a fool and is going against the progress of science. It's certainly easy to write off people as believing this. I know in Elementary school and beyond I was taught that Columbus sailed around to demonstrate that the Earth was round and not flat. (Which even if that had been the case, considering he didn't circumnavigate the globe, he did not prove that anyway. If only I had know about Russell's book back then. Russell's book is incredibly short. You can easily read it in a couple of hours like I did. In doing so, you will have invested those hours well. Russell points out that after the time of Christ, there were only two people who really brought out the idea that the Earth was flat. How many followers did they get on that count? None. They were certainly the minority. Alas, these two are thought to be representative of the time as a whole, ignoring all the other evidence that indicates people knew it was round. Now of course, it could be that this did not extend to the

masses, but frankly, we have no real way of knowing that. I would wager that for most people who were working hard to put food on the table and care for their families, they did not really think about the shape of the Earth. In fact, if they had, well you just go and ask the local priest and the local priest will tell you what the fathers of the church have said and you'll hear that it's round. Russell also shows how this fed into a false idea of a warfare between science and religion, started mainly by people like John Draper and Andrew Dickson White. In many cases, this because a round of a group of people quoting each other as their own authorities and thereby seeking to establish their case as if it was heavily documented. (Read new atheist literature today and not much has changed.) While Russell's thesis is certainly correct and he goes into great detail to show a meeting Columbus had with officials never brought up the shape of the Earth and while his work is filled with scholarly notes, I would like to see future editions contain quotes within the text itself. What would most complete this book is to have a series of quotations from people in this time period on how the Earth was indeed spherical, such as Thomas Aquinas's in his Summa Theologica in the very first question. Still, this is a valuable book to read on the controversy. I wish I'd had it in the past instead of just buying into what my teachers taught me. In Christ, Nick Peters Deeper Waters Christian Ministries

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

DID NEARLY ALL EDUCATED PEOPLE IN COLUMBUS' TIME ACCEPT THE SPHERICITY OF THE EARTH? By Steven H Propp Jeffrey Burton Russell (born 1934) is an American historian and religious studies scholar, who is currently Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has written many other books, such as *Exposing Myths About Christianity: A Guide to Answering 145 Viral Lies and Legends*, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Cornell Paperbacks), *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, etc. He wrote in the Preface to this 1991 book, "The almost universal supposition that educated medieval people believed the earth to be flat puzzled me and struck me as dissonant when I was in elementary school, but I assumed that teacher knew best and shelved my doubts. By the time my children were in elementary school, they were learning the same mistake, and by that time I knew it was a falsehood. Most of the undergraduates I have taught have received the same misinformation... The Flat Earth error is firmly fixed in our minds; I hope this little book will do a little to help dislodge it." (Pg. xiii) He adds, "By the time Copernicus had revolutionized the way people viewed the planets---as revolving around the sun rather than the earth---the seed of the Flat Earth had been planted, but it did not grow to choke the truth until much later. When did it triumph and why? Who was responsible? There are the main questions of this book." (Pg. 5) He points out, "Of the objections posed to Columbus, none involved questioning sphericity... the opponents... argued that the circumference of the earth was too great and the distance too far to allow a successful western passage. They rightly feared that life and treasure might be squandered on an impossibly long voyage... The committee's doubts were understandable, for Columbus has cooked his own arguments... Columbus needed to persuade Ferdinand and Isabella that the journey across the ocean sea was not impossibly long, and to do that he needed to reduce two things: the number of degrees occupied by the empty sea, and the distance between degrees. (Pg. 8-9) He notes, "The Greeks' knowledge of the earth's roundness has never been disputed by any serious writers. The earliest Greek philosophers were vague, but 'after the fifth century no Greek writer of any repute' thought of the earth as anything but round... Pythagoras... Parmenides... Plato... Aristotle... Euclid... Aristarchus... and Archimedes ... all took the round view." (Pg. 24) So where did the Flat Earth myth come from? One major source was Anglican priest William Whewell, who "pointed to the culprits of Lacantius and Cosmas Indicopleustes as evidence of a medieval belief in a flat earth, and virtually every subsequent historian imitated him---they could find few other examples." (Pg. 31) Another source was John William Draper's book, *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science*. Russell observes, "Draper might not have been so successful had it not been for the emergence of the controversy over evolution and the 'descent of man.' This controversy seemed to Draper and his colleagues to be another major battle in the supposedly ancient 'war between religion and science.'" (Pg. 41) There was also Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science With Theology in Christendom*; Russell comments: "White's efforts to construct a new Christianity based on that 'higher religious spirit' were doomed, for scientific realists insisted that all truth was scientific and that there was no room for revelation, while traditional Christians insisted that if Scripture and tradition were dismissed, Christianity was left with no intellectual basis. By the time White reinforced Draper and Whewell, the Flat Earth Error had grown to a stature that entirely dwarfed the historical reality." (Pg. 42-43) He observes, "Where Protestants wished to darken the Middle Ages in order to discredit the papacy, Humanists such as Erasmus wished to restore the purity of the early church, which coincided with the late classical age of the early Roman Empire. Both the Protestants and the Humanists, demanding the restoration of a brilliant past, needed to posit a decline... The brighter the Humanists were to shine, the darker the preceding ages had to be painted. Petrarch... invented the term 'Dark Ages' about 1340... This left a growing sense that between the Good Classics and the Good Renaissance was a dark period of illegitimate authority in church and state and ignorance of arts and philosophy..." (Pg. 65-66) He concludes, "The assumption of the superiority of 'our' views to that of older cultures is the most stubborn remaining variety of ethnocentrism. If we were not so ethnocentrically convinced of the ignorance of stupidity of the Middle Ages, we would not fall into the Flat Earth Error. And we would not remain in it were we not afraid of the conceptual shock of realizing that our closest held assumptions are precarious. The hope that we are making progress toward a goal... leads us to undervalue the past in order to convince ourselves of the superiority of the present." (Pg. 76) This is an extremely informative book, that

should be considered "must reading" for anyone who wants to learn more about the history of ideas---and their misrepresentations.

Neither Christopher Columbus, nor his contemporaries, believed the earth was flat. Yet this curious illusion persists today, firmly established with the help of the media, textbooks, teachers--even noted historians. *Inventing the Flat Earth* is Jeffrey Burton Russell's attempt to set the record straight. He begins with a discussion of geographical knowledge in the Middle Ages, examining what Columbus and his contemporaries actually did believe, and then moves to a look at how the error was first propagated in the 1820s and 1830s--including how noted writers Washington Irving and Antoine-Jean Letronne were among those responsible. He shows how later day historians followed these original mistakes, and how this snowball effect grew to outrageous proportions in the late nineteenth century, when Christians opposed to Darwinism were labelled as similar to Medieval Christians who (allegedly) thought the earth was flat. But perhaps the most intriguing focus of the book is the reason why we allow this error to persist. Do we prefer to languish in a comfortable and familiar error rather than exert the effort necessary to discover the truth? This uncomfortable question is engagingly answered, and includes a discussion about the implications of this for historical knowledge and scholarly honesty.

About the Author JEFFREY BURTON RUSSELL is Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is a frequent contributor to history volumes, including the *Handbook of World History* and *The Transformation of the Western World*. Dr. Russell has also written fifteen previous books and contributed articles to scholarly journals, such as *History Today* and *Christianity Today*.