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Recommended Readings

*Flat Earth: The History of an Infamous Idea*
by Christine Garwood, Thomas Dunne Books 2008
Reviewed by Michael Zimmerman

Garwood, historian of science at the Open University in England, has produced a thoroughly enjoyable and engaging first book. She examines the belief that the world is flat from a wide array of perspectives and makes a number of important points.

She demonstrates quite convincingly, for example, that, contrary to what most people believe, the ancients knew the world was not flat: "the earth has been widely believed to be a globe since the fifth century BC." Indeed, growing acceptance of a flat earth occurred in the 19th century and was largely promoted by Biblical literalists. Garwood does an impressive job of comparing those professing this belief with modern day creationists.

She also makes the case that it is all but impossible to argue effectively with true believers - Alfred Russel Wallace, co-founder of the theory of natural selection with Charles Darwin, ended up in years of litigation after he accepted a challenge to demonstrate that there is curvature to the surface of the earth. Modern believers assert that the space program is a "big, giant hoax." When, on the 25th anniversary of the first manned landing on the moon, a 1994 Washington Post poll estimated that approximately 20 million Americans thought the landing was staged on earth, it is obvious that some outrageous beliefs still hold sway.

Garwood is respectful throughout, analyzing the philosophical underpinnings of those who have doubted the earth’s rotundity.

- Michael Zimmerman is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and professor of biology at Butler University.