

Symmes's hollow
earth theory and how
edgar a. poe came to
be exposed to it



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John Cleves Symmes (1779-1838) of Ohio, a former captain U. S Infantry and an amateur scientist, was a pioneer of the hollow-earth theory. He devoted the last decades of his life to prove that the earth and all heavenly bodies were made up of concentric shells with entrances at top and bottom, the Earth itself consisting of five concentric spheres. Symmes believed that the Earth's poles was an opening (which he called a " Symmes Hole") where the oceans flowed in and out. He also claimed that the interior of the Earth was inhabited.

He was a zealous champion of his own theories and was able to gather a popular following, in spite of his theories being of a particularly bizarre nature. He traveled around the country sharing the hollow earth theory and raising money to send an expedition to the hole at the North Pole. He could even manage persuade politicians about the need of exploring the truth of his claims. When Symmes petitioned Congress for money to finance the voyage, the proposal received twenty-five votes. The idea of another world within (or beneath) the earth is a very old one.

Caves were known in most parts of the world, and a superstition must have naturally grown in the dwellers or explorers of these caves that these dark and mysterious holes in earth would lead to secret and fantastic subterranean continents. Further, in the ancient times, there was a common notion in some cultures of the world of the buried dead not being truly dead, but living somewhere under the earth. In the modern era, this largely superstitious belief jumped from the realm of myth to the realm of pseudo-scientific theory. In 1665, a Jesuit priest Athanasius Kircher published a learned treatise titled " Mundus Subterraneus".

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While this work did not propose a full-fledged hollow earth theory, it speaks of “ an intricate system of intercommunicating cavities” beneath the planetary crust. The hollow earth theory as we know it was, most interestingly, first advanced by a mainstream scientist — none other than Edmund Halley, the illustrious contemporary of Isaac Newton. In 1691, Halley suggested that the earth was a shell 500 miles thick, with two inner shells and a solid inner sphere, all capable of sustaining life. He supposed that the earth might consist of concentric, but not separated, circles in order to explain the phenomena of terrestrial magnetism.

Edmund Halley presented a new sort of thinking about the earth's interior, radically different from the earlier Greek and Roman mythology of Subterranean worlds, or religious metaphysics like the Buddhist Agartha, concerning hollow earth. It was a serious attempt at scientific thinking, and in fact happens to be the first scientific hypothesis to draw on Newton's revolutionary ideas (Standish 16). In 1721, Reverend Cotton Mather (the infamous clergyman of New England during the Salem Witchcraft Trials) supported Halley's ideas and elaborated upon the hollow earth theory in *The Christian Philosopher*.

Also in 1721 was published the anonymous *Relation d'un Voyage du Pole Arctique au Pole Antarctique par le centre du monde*. In 1738 appeared *Fieux de Mouhy's Lamekis ou Les voyages extraordinaires d'un Egyptien dans la terre interieure*. In 1742, Danish author Ludvig Baron von Holberg, published an early science-fiction story by the name of *Journey to the World Under-Ground* in which its protagonist Nicholas Klimius falls through a hole in the

Earth and finds it hollow, and inside a central sun with a number of inhabited planets.

The inner shell of the Earth is also inhabited, and Klimius has a number of adventures on this plane. In 1821 was published Jacques Collin de Plancy's *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*. Just prior to that, in 1820, an American writer under the pseudonym of Adam Seaborn published a fictional narrative of the hollow earth, "Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery" in which Captain Seaborn, inspired by Symmes ideas, ventures into the south pole opening, where he finds a happy people inhabiting a utopian world. Incidentally, it was the first utopian novel by an American). This world has two suns and two moons, which are probably our own sun and moon reflected from the twin polar openings. It is very much possible that John Cleves Symmes himself was Adam Seaborn. (It goes without saying that Symzonia is named in honor of the Captain himself). The first comprehensive "non-fictional" account of the hollow earth theory, was "Symmes' Theory of Concentric Spheres" published in 1826 by a follower of Symmes, James McBride.

According to McBride's exposition, Symmes ideas owe significantly to Edmund Halley and his article on Magnetic Variations. However, it is very much possible that Symmes came across Halley's work through Reverend Mather's writings. Much later, in 1878, Americus Symmes, the son of the Captain would organize all the writings of his father and publish them under the title "Symmes' Theory of Concentric Spheres: Demonstrating That the Earth is Hollow, Habitable Within, and Widely Open at the Poles. "

By the mid-1930's Symmes Hole Theory has become the butt of many jokes in the media. It had long been widely discredited in the scientific circles. Even the theory's most visible proponent, Jeremiah Reynolds, chose not to promote it. However, the idea of a visionary expedition to the poles persisted. In 1836, the United States Congress passed a bill establishing the first American naval exploration (Fitting 95). The United States South Seas Exploring Expedition also led to the establishment of a national museum of natural history, under the name The Smithsonian Institution.

In 1838, Charles Wilkes set sail from Hampton Roads, Virginia, in command of the five ships of the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition, which just two years later, "discovered" Antarctica officially. Symmes' grassroots campaign, and Reynolds' continual lobbying of Congress and gradual building of support had a considerable role in making this expedition happen; the historian Willian Stanton has shown a connection between the Symmes Hole theory and the motivating force behind the U. S. Exploring Expedition of 1838-42.

Wilkes himself saw Symmes as the originator of the expedition he led. Symmes's most enthusiastic follower for a long time had been Jeremiah Reynolds, who organized his speaking tours. When Symmes retired from his campaigning to launch a polar expedition, Reynolds took over the mantle for the time being. However, he later dropped the hollow earth theory and merely focused on lobbying the Congress vigorously for sanctioning funds for a polar expedition. Edgar Allan Poe supported Reynolds in his quest for federal financing. Poe described the south Pacific "as a vast field for national enterprise.

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Poe argued that investment in an expeditionary voyage would benefit both commerce and science. Both Poe and Reynolds argued that the voyage would yield “ a capital of intelligence,” depicting science as a form of social capital (Whalen 154). Poe also makes use of the Symmes theory in three different works. In Hans Pfaal (1835) he makes mention of a balloonist's noticing a great hollow at the pole. In Manuscript Found in a Bottle (1833), he describes a sort of zombie-ship manned by living dead, being sucked into a whirlpool near the South Pole.

In the Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838), Poe portrays a fantastic sea voyage, full of wonders, terrors and disasters, only dropping some hints about an inner world that can be accessible by southern polar opening. As we can see, Poe never explores the wonderful depths of the inner world but contents himself with tantalizing allusions to it. It was left to Jules Verne to take a headlong dive into the marvels of the inner world, populated by prehistoric creatures, in his classic SF novel Journey to the Center of the Earth (1864).