

Tales of a Hollow Earth

Tracing the Legacy of John Cleves Symmes  
in Antarctic Exploration and Fiction.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the hollow-earth theories of John Cleves Symmes and seeks to recognise and restore both his memory and his legacy. I outline Symmes' theory that the Earth is hollow and habitable within, and accessible via holes at the North and South Poles, consider the impact of this theory on the commencement of the United States Antarctic Exploration program, and demonstrate its lasting legacy within the genre of Symmesian hollow-earth fiction.

Previous scholarship has been intermittent, disparate and oddly contextualised, often assigning both Symmes and his theory to the world of the “weird and wonderful.” In order to study Symmes' legacy, I synthesise previous scholarship and show the continuing presence of his theory – at times unrecognised and unacknowledged – in fiction.

Commencing with a description of the series of publications in which Symmes publicized his idea, this thesis looks at his theory's reception, with a discussion of several books and letters published in response to the theory – from contemporary times through to the current day. In determining the legacy of his theory, rather than the theory itself, I look at possible and probable sources for Symmes' idea, and place it on the

continuum of natural philosophy and science from the thirteenth century so as to set Symmes' announcement in the perspective of its time. I then address Symmes' influence on the United States Congress, which culminated in the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842. Finally, I examine Symmes' legacy in fiction, commencing with an extensive discussion of *Symzonia*, which some posit was authored by Symmes, and continuing through to the present.

I find that while Symmes' theory, and the ensuing debate about a hollow earth, may have advanced the speed with which the United States commenced Antarctic exploration, with time this exploration would probably have happened anyway. His greatest legacy is through the establishment of a body of hollow-earth fiction based around the fictional hole which now bears his name; "Symmes' Hole" lives on in literature to the current day.

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Key words: John Cleves Symmes, Hollow earth, United States Exploring Expedition, *Symzonia*, legacy, early American fiction.

## Introduction

Recurring themes in Antarctic fiction include – separately or in combination – lost races, post war Nazi survival bases, flying discs, and a hollow earth. The weird and wacky theories that inspire these themes are found both in print, and on the Internet. In print, there has been hollow-earth fiction since the 1700s, with other novelists in the 1800s (most significantly, Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne) adding to that number, and the theme of a hollow earth in fiction has continued to the present day. Key in the words “hollow earth” to a Google search, and the response is about 284,000 items,<sup>1</sup> with suggested related searches of “hollow earth expedition,” “hollow earth ufo,” “hollow earth civilisation,” “voyage hollow earth,” “Richard E Byrd hollow earth,” and several others.

The relatively modern notion of a hollow earth came about when John Cleves Symmes (5 Nov. 1780-29 May 1829) issued the first of a series of circulars/broadsheets on 10 April 1818, proclaiming his theory that the Earth was hollow and habitable within.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, he believed that the Earth was hollow and accessible by holes at both the North and South Poles. His later publications elaborate on this basic thesis. Symmes’ hollow

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<sup>1</sup> Search conducted 22 April 2010.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to his multiple broadsheets explaining and expanding his hollow earth theory, he also wrote on other topics including Geological Principles, the original formation of the Allegheny Mountains, and the discovery of open seas at the Poles.

earth is variously described as being comprised of five, and at another time three, hollow concentric spheres, each accessible from the next, and with an inner light and heat source (an internal sun) which made life possible. Following on from this, Symmes suggested that the two auroras, *Aurora Borealis* to the north, and *Aurora Australis* to the south, were merely reflections of that inner light. He also claimed that animals which disappeared from the Arctic in winter had actually gone inside the Earth to escape the intemperate weather, and that when they re-appeared; their good condition was testament to the hospitable climate within the hollow earth.

Despite his ardent promotion of it, Symmes' theory might have sunk into oblivion were it not for the publication, shortly after the release of his broadsheets, of a novel called *Symzonia* (1820), written by "Captain Adam Seaborn." The identity of the person behind this presumed pseudonym remains unknown. Many later commentators believe it to be Symmes while others argue strongly against this. The debate itself is a point of interest, and will be discussed in some detail later, but the novel's authorship and intent are irrelevant to its influence and effect; coming as it did so soon after the initial release of Symmes' first broadsheet, it was obviously based on Symmes' theory and was highly influential in its own right. Later authors drew heavily on *Symzonia* and some (for example, Poe) reproduced sections from it in their own works. *Symzonia* was



followed by a large number of hollow-earth fictions commencing with Poe and Verne, and continuing to the present day.

Symmes' theory of a hollow earth "became known familiarly as 'Symmes' Hole'" (Seed 76), which would suggest a singular, large, but localised, cavern in the Earth's crust – essentially a large hole in the ground. However, as an extension of Symmes' original theory, Symmes' Hole refers to the hollow earth – hollow in its entirety, and accessible at both the North and South Poles. A number of authors of fiction use this starting point of a hollow earth to provide a framework and a notional locale for their settings.

Today, the notion of a hollow earth is laughable, but from the 1600s to the early 1900s the idea was treated more seriously, and attracted some serious thought from leading scientists of their time. Prior to Symmes, these scientists have included Johannes Kepler, Athanasius Kircher, and Edmund Halley. Later writers have tended to be dismissive of Symmes, and many references to him are included in books whose titles include words such as *discarded science, fads and fallacies, offbeat, UFOs, fantastical creatures, myths* and *extraterrestrial*. Moreover, many of these books while substantial, are either self-published or not published in a scholarly context, and lack a certain academic standing. Despite their pedigree, however, they form a useful source of information about

Symmes, his theory, and its impact on his world. While some have assigned Symmes and his hollow earth to the wacky end of science, others have recognised that, at least for a time, Symmes' ideas were plausible and worthy of some examination. Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies in The Name of Science*, and John Grant's *Discarded Science: Ideas That Seemed Good at The Time* are two such books which anachronistically assign Symmes to the fringes.

Although Symmes was not the first to propose a hollow earth, there are no confirmed sources or inspirations for his various theories, which appeared fully formed, and with little change throughout his remaining life. Although his focus and presentation changed slightly over time, he remained steadfast to the theory that the Earth was hollow. I consider possible and probable sources for Symmes' theory, based on his education and the immediate availability of scientific texts to him, and the scientific texts of Edmund Halley, Johannes Kepler and Athanasius Kircher from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Of Symmes and his theory(ies) much has been written. Almost as soon as his first theory was distributed it received review and comment. There was a continuing debate running through journals, newspapers (notably, the *National Intelligencer*), books and open/published letters. Four books were quickly published, and two more followed in the latter part of the century.

Symmes and his supporters called on the United States Congress to raise and fund an expedition south to examine his hypothesis, but when the eventual United States Exploring Expedition returned in 1842 from exploring the South Polar region, among other areas, without finding any sign of Symmes' polar hole there, his followers effectively had no further claim on Congress to pursue the theory. However, when Symmes' son, Americus, wrote up his father's papers in 1878, he called for a further expedition (to the north) to test his father's theory once again.

As will be seen, Symmes' theory was widely promoted, and used as a basis on which to lobby Congress for funding for exploration and discovery. The key literature relating to Symmes' legacy<sup>3</sup> in Antarctic exploration is that surrounding the build up to the voyages of the *Annawan* and *Seraph* under the leadership of Nathaniel B. Palmer in 1829, and the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842 under the command of Lieutenant Wilkes. Previous writers have comprehensively covered the history of the United States Antarctic exploration program, but Symmes' legacy in Antarctic exploration, leading to the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842, has only been given passing recognition by previous authors, with William Stanton in *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, ascribing to Symmes the position of being a prime instigator of

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, I am using legacy in the generalised sense of a bequest.

this program and acknowledges his role in the commencement of the US Antarctic programme, even if he was ineffectual in his time (8-40).

In the modern age, two authors claim that Symmes was also an influence on science. In *Subterranean Worlds*, Peter Fitting credits Symmes' "dream" [of Southern Ocean exploration] inadvertently leading "to the establishment of a national museum of natural history – the Smithsonian Institution – to house the more than 10,000 specimens collected [from the Wilkes' expedition]" (96). This may be according Symmes an influence well beyond his years, as although the Smithsonian Institution was established in 1829, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History was not opened until 1910.<sup>4</sup>

Duane Griffin approaches Symmes as a man ahead of his time, and one worthy of more recognition for his early influence on American science. In "Hollow and Habitable Within: Symmes's Theory of Earth's Internal Structure and Polar Geography," Griffin writes:

The Symmes affair played an important role in the development of American science. Symmes and his followers popularized the

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<sup>4</sup> The Smithsonian itself was established with assistance from the legacy of Englishman James Smithson who died in 1829, and left his estate to his nephew, Henry James Hungerford, stating that if his nephew died without an heir the money would go "to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge ...". The Smithsonian is now a major institution composed of sixteen museums and galleries, the National Zoo, and numerous research facilities in the United States and abroad. Wilkes' specimens would have been in storage until 1910.

idea of polar exploration and helped generate public support for federally funded exploration and scientific research. Moreover, through his correspondence and interaction with leading scientific figures of the day, he may have helped catalyse the movement away from the strident empiricism that dominated American science in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. (383)

Later, Griffin states that “If Symmes had any influence on the conceptual course of American science, it would have been by providing a model of a way of thinking that went beyond empiricism towards explanations of the unknown. His influence may have been quite direct” (391). Griffin writes of Symmes’ support, recognition and acceptance in general, and by Samuel L. Mitchill in particular.<sup>5</sup> Symmes had limited recognition beyond his native America, but Count Romanoff, Chancellor of Russia under Czar Alexander, requested Symmes’ services for a planned polar expedition. Despite declining that request, Symmes advised his audience and press “that he was pledged to Count Romanzoff [sic], Russian Chancellor, for an exploring expedition unless his countrymen sent him north on their own account” (Elmore Symmes 565).

In another article, “What Curiosity in the Structure,” Griffin discusses the relationship between the hollow earth in science and in popular culture. Despite his lack of formal training and qualifications, Symmes’ adoption of the tropes and outward appearances of science allowed him to impart an

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<sup>5</sup> Dr Samuel L Mitchill was one of the three men whom Symmes chose as his “protectors” in his *Circular No. 1*. Griffin describes Mitchill as one of the least remembered of the protectors, but notes that in Symmes’ day he was “America’s celebrity science superstar” (388).

air of authority and legitimacy to his theory. Griffin comments “These borrowings [from science] are almost always lacking the critical and reflective modes of practice and thought that characterise orthodox science, but they impart an air of authority and legitimacy that can be compelling, provided we don’t scrutinise them too carefully” (20). However, “many of his [Symmes’] listeners and commentators saw through such gobbledygook and pronounced his theory as ridiculous. But a great many others were won over” (21). Symmes was quoted as being the “Newton of the West,” and the “American Newton” (Stanton 10-11).

Prior to 1880, fictional hollow-earth responses related almost entirely to exploration, and these came to an end with Americus Symmes’ book, *The Symmes Theory of Concentric Spheres, Demonstrating That the Earth is Hollow, Habitable Within, and Widely Open About the Poles*, in 1878 and Elmore Symmes’ extensive three-part article in *Southern Bivouac*, in 1887, “John Cleves Symmes, the Theorist.” Discussions of Symmes and *Symzonia* were virtually non-existent from about 1890 to 1940, when they were resurrected again in conjunction with Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, although during this intervening time a small amount of hollow-earth fiction was published. Since that time, Symmes has been discussed by a number of authors, and a new edition of *Symzonia* republished in 1965. However, for the most part, the discussions have been scattered and disparate, and it is my intention here to link them in such a

way as to trace his legacy through the last 190 years, synthesising previous scholarship and distilling useful information from the broad bibliographies, which currently address various fictions of the hollow earth, and thus acknowledge and restore Symmes' place, and his legacy, in history.

However, Symmes' legacy in literature is far greater than his legacy in Antarctic exploration, and continues to the current day – both directly, and through his influence on early authors such as Poe. The continuing literary trend of hollow-earth literature has not gone unremarked. Critics such as Reginald Gibson, Glenn Negley, Arthur Lewis, Lyman Sargent, and Michael Burgess all examine hollow-earth fiction as a subset of utopian or fantastic voyages in literature. These authors have focused on providing plot summaries and bibliographies, rather than on Symmes' legacy therein. While, in some instances, there is a discussion of similarity between texts, this is not specifically acknowledged as a legacy of Symmes. Some analyses of hollow-earth literature do not cite Symmes as inspiration for the hollow-earth themes, but more often cite Poe. These authors include James Bailey, David Fausett, and David Seed. However, I will show that whether they were utopian, fantastic voyages, or science fiction, the common root was Symmes' very cogent, if incorrect, theory of a hollow earth.

As will be shown there are many variants of a hollow earth. With specific regard to hollow-earth literature, there are several lists of hollow-earth texts, and some which are labeled Symmesian, but many of these novels are not strictly hollow-earth, but are subterranean, or of passages through the Earth, and access to that hollow earth is not via the poles, but through volcanoes, tunnels, portals and boring machines – even a subway train from New York to Australia! One of my aims in this thesis is to trace Symmes’ legacy in fiction through a tightly-defined criteria of what is a Symmesian hollow earth.

John Cleves Symmes has been largely unrecognised in modern Antarctic science and exploration. Similarly, his place at the beginning of the forefront of hollow-earth literature is also not widely acknowledged, with modern hollow-earth texts being traced back to Poe, or possibly Verne. The diffuse cultural memory of a hollow earth has today obscured the memory of the man who codified it and presented it anew to the world in 1818. His memorial stands in the collective body of work written on the hollow earth, or about Symmes’ Hole, but few acknowledge Symmes the man, and his legacy in history. My aim in writing this thesis is to provide a better historical contextualisation of Symmes, which does not group him with “crackpots.”



This thesis is positioned within the relatively new discipline of Antarctic Studies. Antarctic Studies broadly encompasses anything which occurs within, impacts on, or is impacted by, the area bounded by the Antarctic Convergence Zone. Antarctic Studies covers topics such as Antarctica's role as a driver of (and responder to) climate change, connections between Antarctica and the world, and human influences in and on Antarctica. This topic comes within the area of human connection with Antarctica, recognising that Symmes' theory awakened an American interest in that continent beyond one of commercial gain by sealers. In writing of the historical hypothesis that the Earth is hollow and habitable within and accessible at the poles, this thesis considers that hypothesis in the contextual frame of history, science and literature. It is however, neither a history, science nor literature thesis, but includes elements of all three insofar as this topic impacts on Antarctica.

This thesis is divided into four chapters, each of which examines a different aspect of Symmes's legacy. Chapter One describes Symmes' theory/theories, with a discussion of their publication and reception. Contemporary and modern reviews of the theories will also be discussed.

Chapter Two will examine the influence that Symmes had on the beginnings of the United States Antarctic Research Program – through his theory, his lectures, and his influence on Jeremiah Reynolds – leading

eventually to public funding for an exploration program. When he published his *Circular No. 1*, Symmes also offered to lead an expedition of one hundred men to the Arctic to prove his theory. This proposed northern expedition continued to be his focus until his death, but his failure to obtain funding meant that the northern expedition never occurred. I look briefly at the 1829 expedition of the *Annawan* and the *Seraph*, and the lead-up to the Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842, for which ultimately the United States Congress voted funds; an expedition that would include an exploration of the Southern Ocean, and the continent we now know as Antarctica – in part to test the validity of Symmes’ claims of a hollow earth.

Chapter Three introduces the book *Symzonia*, again with a brief discussion of its publication and reception, and contemporary reviews. Written under a presumed pseudonym by “Captain Adam Seaborn” in 1820, debate about the true authorship of this book continues to the present day, and about whether it takes its place in literature as satire, utopian fiction, a fantastic voyage or science fiction. Previous discussions of the authorship of *Symzonia* will be canvassed and summarised.

Chapter Four provides a consideration of Symmes’ legacy in Antarctic Hollow Earth literature generally, with a review of selected literature up to the current time. I will show that his theory of a hollow earth has a legacy

not only in polar (particularly Antarctic) exploration but also literature, through a genre which has become known as hollow-earth fiction. I will show that Symmes' influence on exploration was minor in comparison to his influence on literature, and that his influence on literature continues to the current day. With time, the exploration would probably have occurred anyway, but his theory of a hollow earth and his writings had a wide-reaching impact in the realm of imaginative literature, influencing a number of later writers, both obscure and well known. This legacy is not in textual similarity, where passages of text can be traced directly from Symmes' writings to later fiction, but in the way in which Symmes' theory has been used by later authors who have used the hollow earth for their plot locations – complete with access via polar holes. Acknowledging those theorists and novelists who preceded Symmes, this chapter is an examination of his influence on the writers who followed, and the legacy of his theory.

A short conclusion discusses Symmes' lasting legacy through the United States Antarctic Research Programme, now operating under the National Science Foundation, and his lasting legacy in literature through the body of Symmesian literature of the hollow earth.

## **Chapter One: Symmes' Theories— A Historical Setting of the Scene**

Prior to 1818, there is a limited history of a hollow earth – either in the science of the day, or in literature. So the pronouncement by Symmes in 1818 had almost no lead-in, other than in restricted, scientific circles, and was a brand new concept to most who read it, and certainly to the general public.<sup>6</sup> This chapter will firstly introduce Symmes' theory of a hollow earth, before discussing possible and probable sources for his theory. I will then consider contemporary responses to the theory, some later nineteenth century responses and, finally, modern recognition of the theory.

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<sup>6</sup> Prior discussions of a hollow earth were presented to scientific bodies, and published works would not have been widely distributed to the “man on the street.” In addition, at least one of these books was “banned” by the Vatican. In contrast, Symmes actively promoted his theory to “everyman.”

## Symmes' Theory – A System of Theories

Symmes' *Circular Number 1*,<sup>7</sup> of 10 April 1818, ran as follows:

### CIRCULAR

Light gives light to light discover – *ad infinitum*.

St. Louis, Missouri Territory, North America, }  
April 10, A. D. 1818. }

*To all the World:*

I declare that the earth is hollow and habitable within; containing a number of solid concentric spheres, one within the other, and that it is open at the poles twelve or sixteen degrees [i. e., 4000 to 6000 miles wide]. I pledge my life in support of this trust, and am ready to explore the hollow, if the world will support and aid me in my undertaking.

Jno. Cleves Symmes,  
Of Ohio, late Captain of Infantry.

N. B. – I have ready for the press a treatise on the principles of matter, wherein I show proofs of the above positions, account for various phenomena, and disclose Dr. Darwin's "Golden Secret."

My terms are the patronage of THIS and the NEW WORLDS. I dedicate to my wife and her ten children. I select Dr. S. L. Mitchill, Sir H. Davy, and Baron Alexander Von Humboldt as my protectors.

I ask one hundred brave companions, well equipped, to start from Siberia, in the fall season, with reindeers and sleighs, in the ice of the frozen sea; I engage we find a warm and rich land, stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals, if not men, on reaching one degree northward of latitude 82; we will return in the succeeding spring.

J. C. S.

Possibly expecting a poor response, Symmes attached a certificate of his sanity when sending out this circular. Five hundred copies were printed,

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<sup>7</sup> There appear to have been at least two versions of this circular prepared by Symmes, and different commentaries present them differently. I have not sighted a clear copy of an original.

and were distributed widely “to every college, municipal government, senator, and eminent scientist in the country – and then some more copies, to go to every major foreign university as well” (Collins, “Symmes Hole” 4), both within the United States and overseas.

A foreshadowing of things to come was evident in the very title of Symmes’ first broadside, *Circular No. I*. Shortly afterwards he issued his *Memoir No. II*,<sup>8</sup> which stated:

With dividers describe a circle on a plane of matter of loose texture, and in the centre add a very small circle; then draw a line through the centre. It is evident (as matter gravitates matter in proportion to quantity and distance) that either half of the inner circle, being almost equally surrounded by matter, must be very little gravitated centrewise; so being suspended, only a rotary motion is needed to throw it compactly toward the outer circle. This being admitted, it follows that half-way from the outer to the inner side of this circle of matter so thrown out, a like rarity, suspension, or balance of gravity should prevail, and hence a disposition to concentric circles; therefore it follows that successive similar subdivision should exist, gradually lessening in force or quantity. By applying this principle to the earth, I found the necessity of hollow concentric spheres. A decision of schoolmen on these lines shall be followed by additional positions, further explaining my new principles of hollow spheres, open at the poles, declared in a circular letter of 10<sup>th</sup> of April, 1818. John Cleves Symmes, of Ohio, late Captain of Infantry. (Qtd. in Madden)

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<sup>8</sup> There is no recorded reasoning for the change of terminology from “circular” to “memoir.” Possibly “memoir” suggested a more academic tone for readers. The Oxford English Dictionary quotes H. J. Todd’s *Johnson’s Dict. Eng. Lang.* from 1818 as follows: “*Circular Letter*: Modern affectation has changed this expression into the substantive; and we now hear of nothing but *circulars*... from superintendants of a feast or club.” The etymology of “memoir,” by contrast, links the word to official, and thus authoritative, documents (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Despite this, Symmes returns to the naming convention of “Circulars” from number 3 onwards. I suspect there was no significance in the naming.

Symmes had an ability to use the scientific jargon of the day to justify and support his pronouncements. Griffin writes that he

displayed a prodigious talent for devising ‘proofs’ for his theory by shoehorning information from his extensive and often idiosyncratic readings of encyclopaedias and compilations of natural history and natural philosophy, explorer’s accounts, atlases and geographies, and newspapers, as well as his own observations and experiments. (386)

In the course of 1818-19, Symmes published several more circulars in support of his theory. These later publications were part of the justification for his first circular, where each built on what had gone before, and in turn laid down a further foundation for what followed. All had a similar distribution as before. *Circular Three* related to Geological Principles. *Circular Four* discussed the original formation of the Allegheny Mountains, and *Circular Five* claimed the discovery of open seas at the poles. *Circular Six* outlined a number of items and principles proposed for future circulars. *Circular Seven*, entitled “Arctic Memoir,” was published in February 1819, and *Circular Eight*, entitled “*Light Between the Spheres*,” was published in August 1819 and reprinted for the public in the *National Intelligencer* (McBride, “Symmes’s Theory” 163). Given that each text was quite specific on its topic, and thus required reasonable amounts of thought, this was a prolific output over just sixteen months.

In his book *The Symmes Theory of Concentric Spheres, Demonstrating That the Earth is Hollow, Habitable Within, and Widely Open About the Poles*, Americus Symmes reproduced copies of Symmes' Circulars No. I, No. II, and No. III, including several hand-drawn diagrams "by J. C. S.," demonstrating among other things the probable general formation of the concentric spheres of the Earth. Whilst Symmes initially proposed that there were five concentric hollow spheres, his later writings concentrated on a single hollow earth.<sup>9</sup>

Symmes' private papers appear not to have survived. In an article in the *Southern Bivouac* in 1887, Symmes' cousin, Elmore, reported that Symmes had left four barrels of papers at his death, and while no listing of them is given, they are reported to be "on the subject of his military life and theory" (691). These papers were left to Symmes' son, Americus, with the understanding that they be kept to the fourth generation. If the theory proved erroneous in the meantime, the papers were to be destroyed. By inference, these were papers written by Symmes (rather than those that may have had influence on his writings), and by virtue of the sketches that were included in Americus Symmes' book, it can be assumed that he had these papers at hand, at that time. Since Elmore Symmes' article, there have been no further reported sightings or access to these papers. It is

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<sup>9</sup> Symmes' various broadsheets are reproduced in several publications. No one source seems to have them all. The layout, type and font varied within each document, and from one to another.



possible that they were destroyed after the Poles were reached and Symmes' theory shown to be wrong.

### **Possible Sources for the Theory –Symmes' Uncle's Library**

As regards his education, Symmes' childhood and youth would have not been particularly different from those of any of his peers. His uncle of the same name was a judge, noted for his negotiation of the Symmes Purchase,<sup>10</sup> and he may have had some influence on the thoughts and education of his younger namesake. Symmes (the younger), a retired captain from the United States army in the war of 1812 with Great Britain, had what Standish describes as “the usual semi-haphazard elementary education” (42). In his “Arctic Memoir,” printed in the *National Intelligencer*, 28 Feb 1819, Symmes writes: “I remember, when at the age of 11, (in Jersey) while reading a large edition of Cook's Voyages, my father (though himself a lover of learning) reproved me for spending so much time from work, and said I was a *book worm*.” McBride refers to Symmes having received “what was then considered a common English education ... improved by having access to tolerably well-selected libraries” (*Symmes's Theory*158). There are no confirmed sources for Symmes' inspiration, and unless it came to him in a vision, Symmes'

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<sup>10</sup> The Symmes Purchase consisted of a million acres of land between the two Miamis, bought by Judge Symmes from the government for sixty-six and two thirds cents per acre, after which sale the government increased the price to \$1.25 per acre (Elmore Symmes 555-556).

theory may well have been sourced from among these earlier maps and publications, and those of his uncle.

Beverley Bond's *Intimate Letters of John Cleves Symmes and his Family* is a collection of the family letters of Judge John Cleves Symmes (as opposed to his business letters). Bond writes, "Judge Symmes frequently mentioned his ... [nephews and nieces] ... especially his own namesake Captain John Cleves Symmes ... who inherited the same determination and love of adventure, as well as the scientific interest which distinguishes his uncle" (xxix). Judge Symmes, writing in a letter to another grandson in 1810, says "I thank you that you availed yourself of the fair opportunity of writing by Capt. Symmes" (35), again indicating a visit by the younger Symmes – possibly a visit so regular that the Captain could be relied upon to convey mail between the family. In an earlier letter to Mr and Mrs Peyton Short in 1799, he writes "Give my love to Cousine [sic] Polly and tell her to be a good girl her brother Johnny came to keep christmass [sic] with us and says they are all well at home" (58). In a letter to Peyton Short in 1805, the Judge writes:

John C. Symmes from the army, lately passed this place with five boats, with soldiers and ordinance stores for St. Louis, he came direct from Niagary [sic] to Albany, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh & there embarked – he says he was at Doctor John Henrys at Geneve in the Genesee-country, that the Doctor & his family are all well. He staid [sic] with us but two days and

proceeded down the river. He expects a furlough for six months on his arrival at St Louis. He will spend next winter with us. (71)

In a letter to his daughter in 1808, he writes "I forgot my love whether I informed you in my last that Capt. Symmes had married the widow of Capt. Lockwood, with six children. Who can account for such unaccountable marriages? Surely none" (143). Later in the same letter he adds a margin note:

March 10. Yesterday, I received a letter from Capt. Symmes, informing me that he had at last found his rib – he appears by his letter to be much pleased with his wife [and] says she is universally admired by all her acquaintance, and is perfectly military, both in her mind & constitution. But now he is distressed for fear of being ordered on some distant service, & in that case, obliged to leave his bride snivelling behind him. (144)

All of this suggests that Symmes, the younger, was a regular guest at the home of his uncle, over an extended period of time from childhood through to his adult life and marriage. Accordingly he would have had continuing access both to his uncle's library, to his mind, and to his uncle's circle of friends.

Reference works in the library of Judge Symmes are listed in *Intimate Letters* (93-95), and these show many volumes on Cosmography, Geography, History, Mathematics, a Gazetteer, plus Oratory and

Grammar.<sup>11</sup> While not specifically including those works discussed in the following section by Halley, Kepler and Kircher, nor any titles that clearly point to a *specific* source for his future publications, the books of his uncle's library would most likely have laid a significant foundation of general knowledge on which he would later develop his theory of a hollow earth. In "Arctic Memoir," Symmes writes "about the same age [eleven] I used to harangue my playmates in the street, and describe how *the earth turned*; but then, as now, however correct my position, I got few or no advocates," and thus reveals that since childhood he had had views on the form of the Earth.

### **Probable Sources for the Theory**

Although it was Symmes' earnest promotion of his hollow-earth theory which helped to capture the minds of future writers and readers, he was not the first to hypothesise a hollow earth. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cartographers drew maps in which water emptied into the North Pole in a whirlpool, hence implying some kind of hollow earth. Johannes Kepler's *Epitome Astronomiae Copernicanae* in 1618 proposed the idea that the

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<sup>11</sup> These books are not easily identified from the list provided in *Intimate Letters*, and WorldCat provides several options for some titles. However, while the specific titles may be unidentifiable, the general content of the works is clear.

Earth and other planets were composed of concentric shells.<sup>12</sup> Later scientists speculated whether the rings of Saturn were in fact the remnants of an outer shell.

Another early theory of the form of the Earth included water passing through it, often entering the Earth through a Polar opening. In “The Mythic Geography of the Northern Polar Regions: *Inventio Fortunata* and Buddhist Cosmology” Chet Van Duzer looks at two very distinct, and distant, traditional views of northern polar geography: a western European tradition based on a lost fourteenth century book *Inventio Fortunata*, and the traditional Brahmanic Hindu and Buddhist conception of the Earth, both of which involve a high mountain at the top of the world and water flowing in or out from this mountain in four streams.

Van Duzer discusses traditional sacred centres of the world, such as Jerusalem and Easter Island, which he says are usually located near the people in whose mythology they exist. However, the North and South Poles, which also have a “special central status” differ, in that they are

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<sup>12</sup> This was Kepler's great classic astronomical text book, in three parts, based on the laws of Copernicus. The first part represents a front-line defence of the Copernican system, and the arguments with which Kepler defends the movement of the earth according to this theory were entirely new in concept. His position for the relativity of motion carried him considerably further beyond Copernicus and formulated principles later given more detailed treatment in Galileo's *Dialogo*. Obviously this was a radical advancement to the theory of the formation of the world, and because of these arguments, part one was briefly placed on the Vatican's *Index Liborum Prohibitorum* from September to November, 1621, thus limiting its availability. The remaining books did not appear until 1621 and 1622. If Symmes was gathering ideas and forming his thoughts on a hollow earth, he would have likely encountered this text in a major library.

distant from all peoples, and recognised by many as “the crowns of the world, about which all stars dance, the points to which all compasses point their needles” (3). He focuses almost exclusively on the North Pole, and describes Gerardus Mercator’s map of 1595 in which the North Pole is located under a large black mountain, which is a magnetic lodestone. Surrounding the pole is open water, with four large islands that form a ring around it. These islands are separated by four large inward-flowing streams, which are aligned as if to the four points of the compass. The waters then come together in an enormous whirlpool beneath the Polar Mountain, and are absorbed into the Earth.

Mercator’s map is important for a number of reasons: Mercator himself was well known for his meticulous research and accuracy; it was a polar projection (looking down on the North Pole), rather than equatorial, so the geographic layout of the region was clearly shown; and Mercator is the better known of all the cartographers of that era – although he was not the first, or only, cartographer to publish a map that showed a similar geography. Van Duzer traces the sources back to several lost books, including *Inventio Fortunata*, labels this the *Inventio Fortunata* geography, and attributes its longevity of some one hundred and fifty years to the high regard in which Mercator stood. He writes:

It is also, I think, a testament for the great psychological and mythical power of the concept of the center. It was well-known that the North Pole was the true centre of the earth, and the author of *Inventio Fortunata* gave an account of the geography that was so mythologically satisfying, that it continued to be believed or at least repeated well past the time when scholars and explorers knew that the account was false. (10-11)

This period of “mythological satisfaction” extended almost to Symmes’ time, and includes the period when Burnet, Halley and Mather were writing their treatises on the hollow earth. The idea of mythological satisfaction – the link between acceptance of clearly false beliefs, and their acceptance by a willing people – has been discussed by Victoria Nelson in *The Secret Life of Puppets*, when she examines the mythological history of the poles, and discusses links between humans and the poles, from the days of early Greeks to the current time. The “romance” of the unknown – the poles in particular, stayed with humankind long after the unknown became known. Similarly, the concept of Symmes’ Hole continues to attract attention today although the holes themselves are known not to exist. Nelson writes “Symmes’s notions passed into popular folklore as the polar ‘Symmes Hole’ a belief that kept its currency among hollow-earth cultists in America and Europe well into the twentieth century” (150). Indeed, as recently as 2007 a tour was promoted to find the Symmes’ northern hole.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The group offered a 24-day cruise, costing \$US18,950 to discover the northern polar hole as proposed by Symmes. The cruise advertising states that there are NO GUARANTEES that this expedition will reach Inner Earth (Curry). The trip was cancelled.

Around the same time as Mercator, and after, several philosophers theorised about the form of the Earth – including the possibility of it being hollow. Kircher, in *Mundus Subterraneus*, citing Bartholemaeus Anglicus (Bartholomew of England, circa thirteenth century), describes the North Pole “beneath which the ocean flows with incredible speed through four channels into the sub polar regions, and is absorbed by an immense whirlpool” (Godwin 106-108). Kircher’s book on the underground world represented the first comprehensive scientific attempt to explain the mysteries lying beneath the surface of the Earth. Among the finely engraved plates and maps are stunning depictions of the Earth in cross-section showing a great central fire connecting with volcanoes at the surface and caverns filled with water that flow to undersea whirlpools and mountain regions; the eruptions of Aetna and Vesuvius (which Kircher witnessed); maps of the various continents showing ocean currents and vast underground lakes that supply water to springs and rivers; illustrations of mining; various fossils and figured stones; and the first known engraving of the mythical island of Atlantis. One of the maps within *Mundus Subterraneus* depicts what appear to be subterranean tunnels connecting the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas, which reflect Kircher's notion of water movement through the Mediterranean –not an entire hollow earth, but certainly hollowed out to the extent of the known earth. At the whole-earth level he described how water flowed through the



Earth in “unknown recesses and tortuous channels” to exit in a strong current at the South Pole (qtd. in Godwin 106-107).

Bishop Thomas Burnet writing in *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (translated from Latin to English in 1684) depicted a polar hole, out of which the flood emerges. Describing his theory in *Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson writes:

Carrying through a tradition of medieval Christian Neoplatonism out of Pythagoreanism, Burnet describes Earth as a “Mundane Egg,” with the shell the Earth’s crust, and its interior the yolk. He posits an historical sequence of three Earths: first, out of chaos, an original Edenic orb that was a fixed star... then the present “broken Globe” whose continents, crevices, mountains, and other irregularities are consequence of its humanlike Fall... (a geological “moral degeneration” in which a flood erupted from the waters already lying within the hollow Earth); and finally a third millennial Earth, restored.... (141-142)

Burnet’s earth again depicts the waters flowing through the Earth – only coming out this time, instead of flowing inwards.

Edmund Halley remains known for the comet of the same name, but in 1692 he suggested that there were three concentric spheres below the surface of the Earth, turning independently on a north-south axis, and nested within each other. He allowed that there may be life inside, supported by a source of light [and heat] like that of the sun. Halley had

helped to publish Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principa Mathematica* in 1687, and built upon it to develop his new theory. Leonhard Euler also theorised on the structure of the Earth, is said by some to be the source of the idea of polar openings (Standish 48), and is discussed by James McBride in his 1826 book on Symmes' theories. Euler was a follower of Halley, and John Peck writes he [Euler] "accepted Halley's theory and went further in asserting that the inner sphere [of the Earth] may be luminous and thus light and warm the inner surface of the outer crust..." (34).

Symmes himself acknowledges that he was an avid reader, and it is apparent that his uncle owned an extensive library. As a very wide reader, and possibly in more than his own native English language, Symmes was clearly influenced by the books in this library, which would obviously have had an influence on the formation of Symmes' thoughts on life generally. While the philosophers and scientists discussed above were prominent in their fields in their own countries and within science and academic circles, there has to be some question as to whether or not it is feasible that Symmes even had access to their written works, let alone read them. Walter Kafton-Minkel in *Subterranean Worlds* surmises that Symmes formed his ideas from reading about Halley's theory in Cotton Mather's *Christian Philosopher* (first published in 1721) (58), but Joscelyn Godwin, in *Arktos: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism, and Nazi Survival*,

suggests that “his [Symmes’] devotion to it betokens a more than literary influence” (110-111). Symmes’ son claimed that his father did not know of any other hollow-earth theories until well after he had developed his own in 1816, and published them in 1818. Tongue in cheek, Griffin writes “Intellectually, he [Symmes] was deeply versed in the scientific knowledge of his day, but he had never been indoctrinated in the Newtonian system and was, therefore, free of the constraints it imposes on imagination” (394).

### **Contemporary Responses to the Theory**

Almost as soon as Symmes’ first theory was distributed it received review and comment. There was a continuing debate running through journals, newspapers (notably, the *National Intelligencer*), books and other free-standing publications (such as published letters of support or rebuttal). Notable amongst these responses are four books by Thomas J. Matthews, James McBride, Alexander Mitchell and Jeremiah N. Reynolds.

Matthews’ *A Lecture on Symmes’ Theory of Concentric Spheres Read at the Western Museum* is a record of a lecture given in denial of Symmes’ theory, the tone of which is established at the very start with the inclusion of the following note:

Capt. Symmes gives notice that he intends to reply to Mr. Matthews' Lecture as soon as practicable. He gives Mr. M. credit for much ingenuity in his support of the old theory: and for sufficient candour in illustrating the new; -tho' on a few occasions, he appears to have misconceived the views exhibited in Capt. Symmes' Lectures. The reader is requested not to make up his mind on the following Lecture until he has perused the reply of JOHN CLEVES SYMMES. (2)

This reply does not appear to have survived, if it was in fact ever written, although it may be the book ascribed to McBride (see following). Matthews systematically attacks Symmes' theory, dismissing his claims, and supporting evidence, point by point. Drawing on established science of the time, he shows the impossibility of Symmes' theory.

Matthews concludes his lecture thus:

I have no other feelings towards Mr. Symmes than those of a favourable character, and I should be very sorry to present any obstacle as a bar to the prosecution of his favourite scheme, the examination of the Polar Regions. His perseverance, his zeal, I may say his enthusiasm have been sufficiently manifested by the untiring constancy with which he has maintained his opinions against the opposition of the world for more than six years. Such ardent and fortified spirits are but rarely to be met with, and are always an acquisition in society when their efforts are usefully directed. If therefore, our government should have any design to explore the polar seas, I think it would be likely to conduce both to the advantage of the nation and that of the world to give Mr. Symmes an opportunity of testing the truth of his hypothesis by actual observation. If the region he goes in search of, should prove a fairy land, still his enterprising spirit would be likely to render us better acquainted with the Arctic zone, and might possibly confer on him the honor of solving the problem which has hitherto proved so difficult, the actual existence of a North West passage. (14)

Matthews was clearly no believer in Symmes' theory, but he was willing to give him credit for an argument well presented, and emphasised the positives that might arise from the theory – however wrong it may prove to be. The search for the North West Passage (across the North Polar Sea above North America) was not finally resolved until the early twentieth century. As will be seen in the following chapter, the United States Congress did send an Exploring Expedition, and while no polar holes were found, much benefit accrued from that expedition.

McBride's *Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres: Demonstrating That the Earth is Hollow, Habitable Within and Widely Open About The Poles* is ostensibly written by "A citizen of the United States" and referenced in the British Library under Symmes, but in the New York Public Library (NYPL) under McBride, with the note that it was written "under the direction and with the revision of Captain Symmes."<sup>14</sup> It is possible that this book is intended as the definitive response to Matthews (see previous). For purposes of this thesis, McBride is assumed to be the author. This book received an extensive review in the *American Quarterly Review* of March 1827 – by McBride himself (McBride, "Symmes's Theory").

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<sup>14</sup> See McBride's *Pioneer Biography* (2.243); and "A short biographical sketch of Captain Symmes" (157-168).

It is a short book, of ten chapters, based on first-hand knowledge of Symmes, certain of his writings, and several of his lectures, all apparently tempered by the guiding hand of Symmes himself. With the strong possibility that this book was co-written by Symmes, it may also be considered part of his written legacy, and rank alongside his *Memoirs* and *Circulars*. It commences with an introduction to some of the different theories and opinions which have been advanced respecting the formation of the Earth, and their reception, before re-introducing Symmes' theory, and explaining the points wherein he differs from the old or generally well-received theories. Support and opposition for Symmes' theory is discussed, with all objections to the theory being answered. A recommendation to the Congress of the United States to authorise and fit out an Expedition for the discovery of the Interior Regions is also included, with suggestions as to the route "most proper" to be pursued to accomplish the object of the expedition. A short biographical sketch of Captain Symmes with some observations on the treatment which he has met with in the advancement of his theory concludes the book.

Mitchell's *A Treatise on Natural Philosophy, in Vindication of Symmes's Theory of the Earth Being a Hollow Sphere* is catalogued as lost by the library at Yale University, which links the book with Symmes the congressman, and not Symmes the subject of this thesis; the Library of Congress correctly links this publication to the latter. The Library of

Congress copy is inscribed to “James McBride from the Author.” Americus Symmes states that Mitchell was “conspicuous among the converts to the theory” (563).

Mitchell’s *Treatise* is twenty-four pages, and is written as the affirmative in the debate as to whether “the government of the United States should assist captain Symmes, in his contemplated voyage of discovery” (A2). Mitchell invokes creation theory, arguing that if it was good enough for the Lord to create the Earth, then it is good enough for man to fully explore it, and theorises that “This great concavity, (vulgarly called Symmes’s hole,) must contain a world more than ten times larger than the New World discovered by Columbus” (10). He writes, “A voyage round the world confirm[s] the system; but its failure will be no argument against it” (20-21). Mitchell cautions that an expedition to test a theory may fail to return, but that that does not negate the theory.

Reynolds’ *Remarks on a Review of Symmes’ Theory* is a re-publication of two letters to the editor of the *American Quarterly Review*, and a report on an investigation of a proposed expedition. Reynolds’s introduction “to the reader” states:

The reader will find the first [number] devoted to a physical review of the *Theory*, and, without entering into any detail, some general analogies of the solar system were urged in favour of the

doctrine. ... in the second number, it has been urged, that the Quarterly might possibly have been in error, in supposing the polar seas encumbered with perpetual ice; and that, independent of all speculation, the field for inquiry and scientific research was immense in the remote polar regions; and in the third and last number, it will be clearly seen, that every movement in relation to the expedition has been on those broad and liberal principles, which have always marked similar exertions by the citizens of other countries. (2)

Reynolds' skill was persuasive oratory and writing. It is possible to imagine that having published his first "number" he reviewed it and found it wanting – hence the second and third.

Despite a lack of critical acceptance, "Symmes' Hole" certainly entered quickly into popular discourse. Kafton-Minkel repeats Ohio historian Henry Howe's comment from 1900 that "'Symmes' Hole' was a phrase more or less... on everybody's tongue; the papers in the decade between 1820 and 1830 were more or less full of Symmes' Hole. If one suddenly disappeared, the reply often was, and with a grin: 'Oh, he's gone, I expect, down into Symmes' Hole'" (61).

### **Later Nineteenth-Century Responses**

The relevancy and urgency of Symmes' claim slowed with the return of the American Exploring Expedition in 1842, sent in part to address Symmes' theory, but conspicuously failing to find support for his claims. P. Clark,



who as a young man had heard Symmes lecture, wrote an article in 1873 recalling his theory, and then in 1878 Symmes' son, Americus Vespucci, wrote up his father's papers and reissued them in his book *The Symmes Theory of Concentric Spheres, Demonstrating That the Earth is Hollow, Habitable Within, and Widely Open About The Poles*. In part this was to re-claim the theoretical high ground for his father's memories from those who were now issuing their own theories of a hollow earth (in particular William Lyon, whose *The Hollow Globe, or the World's Agitator and Reconciler: A Treatise of the Physical Confirmation of the Earth* was published in 1871).

In 1882 E. F. Madden wrote an article for *Harper's New Monthly* in support of Americus Symmes, and calling for anew Arctic expedition along the outlines described by the Symmes (father and son). This was shortly after the disaster of the Charles Hall *Polaris* expedition, when Hall died, and his ship was abandoned and eventually crushed by ice, and Madden writes, "If Hall had been aware of the Symmes theory, he could have reached the pole, as he was within five or six hundred miles of it."<sup>15</sup> Presumably Madden was implying that shelter was close at hand for Hall, and that the deaths were needless, but in reality five or six hundred miles, even fifty or sixty, or five or six, can be too far for exhausted travellers in

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<sup>15</sup> Contradicting Madden, Griffin writes "At a reception before his departure. Hall shocked members of the American Geographical Society by announcing his belief in Symmes theory and his determination to find it [the hole]" (393).

polar conditions. Despite these renewed calls for northern exploration, nothing came of it, and there was no further exploration, north or south, for Symmes' holes.

### **Modern Recognition of Symmes' Theory**

While Symmes' theory was a much-debated topic during his lifetime, and again briefly when raised again by his son in 1878, it largely disappeared from serious debate until a series of discussions in the 1940s (see for example, Marion Miller's "The Theory of Concentric Spheres," Nelson Adkins' "An Early American Story of Utopia" and Conway Zirkle's "The Theory of Concentric Spheres: Edmund Halley, Cotton Mather & John Cleves Symmes"), and then more recently in a number of books and commentaries. These books have included Irving Wallace's *The Square Pegs: Some Americans Who Dared to be Different*, Paul Collins' *Banvard's Folly: Thirteen Tales of Renowned Obscurity, Famous Anonymity, and Rotten Luck*, and Keven McQueen's *Offbeat Kentuckians*. As their titles suggest, these discussions all contextualise Symmes amongst the quirky and the novel. More importantly, there have been at least four published reviews, in book-form, of the history of inner worlds and their various derivatives, all of which have accorded Symmes a substantial place in history, both for his theory and his influence on those who came after. These books are Walter Kafton-Minkel's *Subterranean Worlds*, Joscelyn

Godwin's *Arktos*, Peter Fitting's *Subterranean Worlds*, and David Standish's *Hollow Earth*, which all discuss Symmes' place in the imaginative literature of a hollow earth.

As well as being a major topic of these books, Symmes has also been the subject of several journal articles. In 2004, Duane Griffin dissected Symmes' *Circular No. 1* and placed it in the context of early nineteenth century American science, providing a platform on which to consider the influence that Symmes had on American science and culture. Griffin writes "Symmes's story predates the establishment of American academic geography by nearly three decades and the founding of the Association of American Geographers by nearly eight [decades]" (383). Griffin is not suggesting that Symmes influenced American geographical thinking, but that his ideas pre-dated formal *American* academic thinking by quite some years.<sup>16</sup> However, in 1818, there were few supporters of either Symmes, or his theory, and possibly so few that Symmes knew them each personally. In his "Arctic Memoir" Symmes confides:

I must not, however, say I get no advocates, for I have several. I particularly boast of two ladies, of bright and well informed minds, on the banks of the Missouri, who are able and earnest advocates, and devoted pupils; to them is due the credit of being the first to adopt what the world is so tardy in admitting. But, Col.

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<sup>16</sup> While Symmes himself may have been working in isolation, so to some extent were American geographers. Formal associations of Geographers had formed much earlier in England and Europe.

Dixon ... is, I presume, the most *important* pupil I have obtained, for he has long been actually engaged in the N. West Company and fur trade. He declared, in our first interviews, that I was certainly correct, and stated to me many important, otherwise inexplicable, circumstances, occurring high in the north, that were completely solved by my principle ...

Although there is no record of him having done so, Symmes may well have discussed his theory prior to publication with his supporters and advocates. Certainly it appears that “Col. Dixon” may have clarified Symmes’ thinking on more than one occasion.

Since his lifetime, Symmes’ theory has not been entirely relegated to the realm of the imagination. It receives continuing passing recognition in histories of polar discoveries or voyages. The very fact of its presence there, even briefly, suggests that Symmes’ theory still catches authors’ attention even today. Right or wrong, Symmes created a huge and continuing interest in the structure of the Earth. William Stanton, in his substantive book *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*, commences with a discussion of Symmes’ theory and assigns Symmes some of the credit for the drive behind the Wilkes-led expedition. The legacy of Symmes and his theory in Polar exploration, particularly the Antarctic, is discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Two: Symmes' Legacy In

### Exploration

In his very first *Circular*, Symmes laid the foundation for his future lectures and his lobbying for funding and support to explore his ideas further when he wrote:

I ask one hundred brave companions, well equipped, to start from Siberia, in the fall season, with reindeers and sleighs, in the ice of the frozen sea; I engage we find a warm and rich land, stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals, if not men, on reaching one degree northward of latitude 82;<sup>17</sup> we will return in the succeeding spring.

Symmes followed up this initial circular with others, and then commenced a lecture tour to promote his ideas, and in an attempt to generate a ground swell of interest among the population at large sufficient to ultimately persuade Congress to grant funds for the purpose of exploring the alleged polar openings and the world within the Earth which they led to.

At that time (1818), Antarctica had not yet been named, had not been identified as a continent, and had not been discovered or visited.<sup>18</sup> It's

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<sup>17</sup> 82° North runs through the northern-most part of Greenland, and from there to the North Pole is mostly water or ice. By comparison, the main United States/ Canada border west of the Great Lakes is at about 49° N.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion on the discovery of Antarctica, refer to A. G. E. Jones' *Antarctica Observed: Who Discovered the Antarctic Continent?*

possible that some sealers or whalers had sighted what is now known as the Antarctic Peninsula, but without knowing what it was, or what it was attached to. Symmes was not writing specifically about the Antarctic, but about “The Poles,” and promoting them as a location for access to his inner world. By extension of this, it would become necessary to visit either or both poles to establish the rights or wrongs of his theory.

Maps of the known world at that time showed a blank space in the Southern Ocean, with possible references to *Terra Australis Incognita* – the Unknown Southern Land (this was particularly the case with earlier maps). In order to explore any possible southern polar openings, it was first necessary to explore the south, about which the lack of knowledge was almost total.<sup>19</sup>

James Cook had circumnavigated the Southern Ocean in 1774 without sighting any land, and wrote in his journal of the forbidding and unwelcoming nature of the south (south of his tracks in particular). When Cook sailed the Southern Ocean, he reduced the unknown world by some fifty per cent, but there was still a lot to explore and discover, including whether or not there was even a continent there, or whether the south had an open polar sea similar to the north.

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<sup>19</sup> See Carl Murray’s *Mapping Terra Incognita*.

Set against this background of unknowns, Symmes' ideas were plausible. However, at the same time, this lack of knowledge presented even further hurdles to his ideas being pursued, as it would become necessary to explore the south in general, before addressing the specific questions of finding a possible southern polar hole which gave access to an inner earth. Ironically, while for Symmes the North was a better exploration option as it was easy to access and more well-known, the South was in a sense the better option in terms of the plausibility of his theory, as its lesser-known nature gave more scope for finding a polar opening to his hollow earth.

#### **Jeremiah N. Reynolds –North Pole: South Pole**

Symmes began a series of public lectures, commencing in Cincinnati "before a large audience February 4, 1824" (Elmore Symmes 562), travelling far from home to present his theory. While dismissed by many, he gained some highly influential supporters, among them Jeremiah Reynolds. Reynolds was the editor of the *Spectator* newspaper and became an early convert to Symmes' theory. He sold the paper in 1824 to join in lecturing with Symmes on the theory of a hollow earth. These lectures were often sold out to people who had paid fifty cents each to attend. Reynolds and Symmes eventually came to disagree over the theory of a hollow earth, with Reynolds apparently changing his view on polar access holes to the Earth's centre, thinking that they didn't exist. Almy writes "He

had no intention of convincing the world at that date (1827) that the Earth was hollow; he was content to show that ‘it might be so’” (232). They parted ways, with Reynolds focusing on the pending expedition of the *Seraph* and the *Annawan*.

As early as 1822, Symmes had petitioned Congress for support and funding for an expedition to explore his theory, and this eventually received some votes in support, but was “tabled” and not further pursued. He filed a second petition in 1823 to both Houses, and a third in 1824 to the General Assembly of the State of Ohio, all to no avail. Reynolds gained support from the cabinet under president John Quincy Adams in 1828, and was permitted to address Congress on the subject of an exploring expedition. Approval was given to the extent that he succeeded in planning and fitting out an expedition to the South, but receiving a lukewarm reception from Congress, this proposed expedition was eventually cancelled by new President Andrew Jackson in March 1829 due to a lack of funds.<sup>20,21</sup>

However, with the assistance of private investors and supporters, Reynolds continued with the expedition, which sailed in 1829 (see the next section).

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<sup>20</sup> A more complete account of the organisation of the proposed expedition and its eventual cancellation is given by Robert Bartlett in *The Reports of the Wilkes Expedition, and the Work of the Specialists in Science*.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson was president of the United States from 1829 to 1837, and would have seen the preparation for the Wilkes’ expedition.



Reynolds sailed with the expedition, but was never popular with the crew, who mutinied and set him and another man ashore, in South America.

Reynolds again took up the lecture circuit on his return to the United States in 1834 in an attempt to rally popular support for Symmes' theory, which by now he had focused solely on the South, and continued to lobby the United States Congress for an expedition to explore both the Southern Ocean around the South Polar region, and also the South Pacific. It appears that having been south once, Reynolds was determined to return – this time with full government support. This eventually became the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842 under Lieutenant Charles Wilkes. Reynolds did not sail with the expedition, which while focused mainly on the South, did venture north also, but not beyond Puget Sound in the North Pacific, or New York in the Atlantic oceans.

From the time of his first announcement of a hollow earth in 1818, Symmes had eleven years before he died, which time he spent writing and developing papers, lecturing and petitioning for funding – all in support of his theory. Reynolds, who first met Symmes in 1824, waited fourteen years for the fulfillment of his vision, and did not give up even after Symmes had passed away. Symmes died in 1829, still convinced of his theory, and still focused on accessing his hollow earth via a hole near the North Pole.

Reynolds appears to have been a charismatic character who used both his gifts for oratory, and his pen, to pursue the sustained campaign to persuade Congress of the need both for an expedition, and for the need to fund it. The letters and speeches of Jeremiah Reynolds, and “Seaborn’s” *Symzonia*, caught the attention of many – obviously the United States Congress who approved and funded Reynolds’ proposed Exploring Expedition. One of Reynolds’ speeches to Congress in 1836 was published, and later reviewed by Poe in the *Southern Literary Messenger* of January 1837. Poe was impressed by Reynolds’ intelligence and energy in the pursuit of a southern exploration expedition, and later used a large section of the speech almost verbatim in his book *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.<sup>22</sup>

### **The 1829 Voyage of the *Seraph* and the *Annawan***

The first tangible legacy of Symmes in exploration was the 1829 voyage of the *Seraph* and the *Annawan* towards the south. A United States government-sponsored exploring expedition to the far south and the Pacific Ocean, under the command of Edward Fanning, had been planned for 1812, but was cancelled due to the commencement of the war of that year.

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<sup>22</sup> Poe was not Reynolds’ only significant literary connection. In 1839 Reynolds had a story published in *The Knickerbocker* magazine called “Mocha Dick,” telling the story of a whale which attacked and sank a ship. Herman Melville then used the same plot idea in his novel of very similar name, *Moby Dick*.

From that time until 1827, this exploring expedition was an on-again, off-again project, until Reynolds commenced a renewed campaign for funding from Congress. Based on initial government commitments, planning had already commenced for an expedition of science and exploration to the new continent,<sup>23</sup> and this expedition was eventually underwritten by Reynolds and Benjamin Pendleton, and led by Palmer in 1829, with Reynolds as one of the science team.<sup>24</sup> Curiously, despite the expedition being always referred to by the names of its ships, the *Annawan* and the *Seraph*, these two vessels missed their rendezvous with each other, and sailed separately to the south, effectively on two separate expeditions, not joining up until after the Antarctic section of their voyage. However, the *Annawan* sailed with the *Penguin* throughout its southern voyage, and these two ships were operated in conjunction with each other, effectively making the *Penguin* part of this expedition also.

The three ships sailed with private funding, but with tacit government sanction, and had a combined purpose of exploration, science and commerce. The exploration programme was ambitious and largely without results. In particular it was intended to chart islands, shoals and reefs of

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<sup>23</sup> I refer here to a “continent,” even though at that date, Antarctica had not yet been declared to be a continent.

<sup>24</sup> The discussion here of the voyage of the *Annawan* and the *Seraph* is based on that of Kenneth Bertrand from *Americans in Antarctica 1775-1948*. For a more extensive account, see also Edmund Fanning’s *Voyages Round the World*, and John Spears’ *Captain Nathaniel Brown Palmer: An Old-Time Sailor of the Sea*.

importance to sealers, and to relocate the [non-existent] islands variously reported by Captains Swain, Gardiner and Macy between 1800 and 1825.

Despite the lack of results from the exploration program, the science program appears to have been a success, although not widely recognised as such by the scientific community –either then or since. The science corps consisted of James Eights, John Frampton Watson and Jeremiah Reynolds, with two unidentified assistants. The scientific results of the expedition included the first discovery of a fossil in Antarctica (a recognition generally given to Larsen in 1892), a ten-legged “sea spider,” largely ignored until Bruce’s writings of 1903, and an appreciation of the significance of erratic boulders found in Antarctic icebergs as indicators of the nature of the bedrock of the Antarctic continent. A list of six of Eights’ scientific papers is included within Bertrand (156), and a more readable extract from those papers was published in 1834 as *The South Exploring Expedition. Extract From the Report of Dr. James Eights, Naturalist to the Late American Exploring Expedition of Brigs Seraph and Annawan*. Bertrand notes that “upon its return the expedition deposited 13 chests of natural history specimens with the Lyceum of Natural History in New York, and two chests were sent to Philadelphia” (151), and Peter Fitting, drawing something of a long bow, suggests Symmes’ “dream also led to the establishment of a national museum of natural history – the

Smithsonian Institution – to house the more than 50,000 specimens collected” (96).

Commercial interests were represented by sealing, by which means the expedition was intended to cover its costs, pay its crew, and return a dividend to its backers. This appears to have been moderately successful, and a proposed extension to the exploration program was deferred in favour of continued sealing in order that the crew would receive some income.<sup>25</sup> Of Symmes’ southern hole, nothing was seen. Nor was any mention of it included in the published reports.

### **The United States Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842**

The second tangible legacy of Symmes in exploration was the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842. This had its genesis in an expedition planned in 1812, but Symmes’ theory provided the additional impetus to finally undertake this expedition. An expedition of this nature and size generated a large volume of records, both before, during and after it sailed. Michael Rosove’s *Antarctica, 1772-1922: Freestanding Publications Through 1999* is a selected Antarctic bibliography, which includes a full listing of Congress records discussing, and leading up to the

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<sup>25</sup> For a wider discussion of early sealing voyages see also Edouard Stackpole’s *The Voyage of the Huron and the Huntress: The American Sealers and the Discovery of the Continent of Antarctica*, and Armstrong Sperry’s *South of Cape Horn*.

Wilkes expedition and its aftermath. These papers include letters, petitions, reports and bills from 1826 to 1912. The earliest apparently relevant here is a “Letter From J. N. Reynolds to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Upon the Subject of an Antarctic Expedition, Accompanied with Petitions From Inhabitants of Several States, Praying the Aid of Government in Carrying the Same into Effect. January 22, 1828.” This argued “in favour of an exploring expedition to the southern hemisphere on the grounds of commercial and national interest, with a resolution of the General Assembly of the State of Maryland supporting such an endeavor” (Rosove 429). Rosove does not say whether or not the letter includes any mention of either Symmes or the hollow earth, but presumably would have – had it been present.

Following their return from the south, Fanning and Pendleton also wrote to Congress, arguing “that Antarctic exploration is too difficult and too great a financial risk to be borne by individuals, begging consideration of a government-sponsored expedition for land discovery, science, and general commerce” (Rosove 432). Reynolds’ campaigning for Antarctic exploration continued both to Congress and elsewhere, until the date that the expedition finally sailed in 1838. At one point Reynolds, writing under the signature “*Citizen*,” discussed the “South Sea Surveying and Exploring Expedition; Wherein the Objects of the Enterprise, and the Causes Which

Have Delayed its Departure are Canvassed” (undated, but circa 1838) (Rosove 451).

On the continuum of American involvement in the Antarctic, the Wilkes expedition was but a further step on the eventual path to full exploration. According to Kenneth Bertrand, United States involvement started with early sealers, and included numerous sealing voyages in the 1820s, including those of the *Hersilia* in 1819-1820. Multi-boat sealing expeditions continued until 1823 when the seal population was so depleted as to render the expeditions unprofitable (3). James Eights and the Palmer-Pendleton Expedition followed in 1829-1831, all leading to The United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842. The initial commercial aspects of exploration [by the sealers] would likely have led in time to further southern exploration in search of new sealing grounds, and the expansion of sealing into South Shetlands is an example of this. Similarly, but not discussed further here, whaling from the South Pacific ocean would likely have led explorers further south also.

In *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica* Stephen Pyne refers to Wilkes’ United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842, as having

a bizarre mixture of purposes, among them ... the nationalist sentiments of Capt. Benjamin Pendleton and Josiah [*sic*] Reynolds, and the crackpot idea of William [*sic*] Symmes (the popularly styled

‘Newton of the West’) that a subterranean paradise existed in the Antarctic which could be entered through a colossal hole at the pole. (77)<sup>26</sup>

This expedition, which had been a long time in gestation, was a major undertaking for the Navy, and subject to much political pressure to achieve results. As well as discovering the world around them, it was an opportunity for the United States to take themselves to that same world. The Wilkes’ expedition was not an Antarctic expedition *per se*, but a proposed program of surveys and science extending through the Pacific and Southern Oceans, which would take a year longer than originally intended. It left the United States as a fleet of six ships, the *Vincennes*, the *Sea Gull*, the *Peacock*, the *Flying Fish*, the *Porpoise* and their supply ship the *Relief*, of which only the *Vincennes*, the *Porpoise* and the *Relief* returned, leading to the court martial (and eventual exoneration) of Wilkes.

The *Vincennes* and the *Porpoise* sailed some 2,400 kilometres along the edge of the Antarctic ice pack south of Australia, preparing several maps in the process. Later expeditions, including those of James Clark Ross, Carsten Borchgrevink, Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton would challenge the accuracy of Wilkes’ maps, claiming that in some instances

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<sup>26</sup> For a more extensive review of this expedition, see for example, Edmund Fanning’s *Voyages to the South Seas*; Kenneth Bertrand’s *Americans in Antarctica 1775 – 1948*; William Stanton’s *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*; Nathaniel Philbrick’s *Sea of Glory: The Epic South Seas Expedition 1838-1842*; Charles Wilkes’ *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, and also the *Autobiography of Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes, U. S. Navy 1798-1877*.



they had sailed over or near his reported landfalls without seeing land. However, from his many sightings of land during this cruise, Wilkes concluded that an Antarctic continent existed (rather than a collection of islands) – he was the first to do so. Of Symmes’ Hole there was no official report.<sup>27</sup> In his edited autobiography, *Autobiography of Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes, U. S. Navy 1798-1877*, Wilkes refers to Symmes’ theory, saying “There never was any thing more absurd [sic] and yet he was listened to” (358), thus acknowledging the theory but dismissing it as nonsense.

The Wilkes Expedition generated a lot of public interest on its return. David Tyler in *The Wilkes Expedition: The First United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842)* records an excerpt from the *New York Morning Herald* of 13 June 1842 regarding the return of the exploring expedition in less than congratulatory terms:

We understand that there is to be a nice mess dished up in short time in the shape of court martials, courts of inquiry, arranging of specimens, rock, etc., in the eating of which nearly all of the officers of the Exploring Expedition are to participate with finger glasses and napkins. It is said that there are at least a bushel and half of charges already preferred against Lieut. Wilkes, the commander-in-chief, and that several officers of the squadron have come home under arrest. It took four or five years to start

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<sup>27</sup> I can find no mention of a search for Symmes’ Hole in Wilkes’ official record (*Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*). Presumably there were enough discoveries and explorations which did occur, that Wilkes did not need to mention his “failure” to find a southern polar entrance to a hollow earth.

this expedition, four years for it to catch Vendeve,<sup>28</sup> knock down a mud village, discover Symmes' Hole, and survey the Sandwich Islands, and five years are yet to elapse before all is satisfactorily settled with the officers who command of the fleet. Verily it is a pity that poor Vendeve is dead. (Qtd in Tyler 370-371)

As this editorial excerpt makes clear, the Exploring Expedition came home in rather lesser splendor than it left. Ships and men were lost, and there was a general dissent among officers towards Wilkes, leading to his court martial and eventual acquittal. The casual mocking reference to the finding of Symmes' Hole indicates that this too was one of the publicly-perceived negatives of the expedition. Although first proposed in 1812, it had taken almost twenty years to establish this expedition since Symmes first raised it as a possibility, and it was a long time before the United States returned to the Antarctic in any major capacity with Admiral Richard Byrd in 1928. Tellingly, Symmes would also haunt this expedition: conspiracists claim that Byrd both met with Nazis, and flew "beyond the South Pole" to Symmes hole (Bernard 9).

### **Other Nations' Southern Interests**

One of the recurring theme variants of Symmes' theory was an open, i. e., ice-free, polar sea. This was initially supported in the south by the findings

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<sup>28</sup> Vendeve was a Fijian chief alleged to have killed a boat's crew from the American brig *Charles Daggett* in 1834 (Tyler 164).

of James Weddell in *A Voyage Towards the South Pole Performed in the Years 1822-24 Containing an Examination of the Antarctic Sea*. Weddell sailed to 74° 15' S. with the *Jane* and the *Beaufoy*, in the area now known as the Weddell Sea. This led some people to speculate that the South Pole was in a region of open sea, similar to the North Pole. Later, Ross took the *Terror* and the *Erebus* to 77° 56' S. in 1841 (now named for him as the Ross Sea). At their respective southern latitudes, both men encountered ice, and neither went on to the respective ice shelves, other than to gather ice for fresh water. Later, in 1842, when retracing Weddell's route, Ross was unable to penetrate further than 71° 30' S., and concluded "that Weddell was favoured by an unusually fine season" (Tomlinson 201). Earlier, D'Urville with the *Astrolabe* and the *Zélée* had been unable to even penetrate to 64° S.<sup>29</sup>

Although other nations were also looking southwards at the time, Symmes' legacy appears not to have travelled far from his home territory. Francis Spufford writes of the "profoundly American appeal in Symmes' idea" (68). Within the period of the Wilkes expedition, French and British expeditions also visited and mapped Antarctica: the French expedition led by Jules-Sebastian Dumont d'Urville in the *Astrolabe* and *Zélée*, which actually met with Wilkes on 29 January 1840,<sup>30</sup> and the British expedition

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<sup>29</sup> See Dumont D'Urville's *An Account in Two Volumes of Two Voyages to the South Seas...*

<sup>30</sup> See Dumont D'Urville's *An Account in Two Volumes of Two Voyages to the South Seas...*

of James Clark Ross in *Erebus and Terror*.<sup>31</sup> Neither Symmes, nor his alleged polar holes are mentioned in the accounts of either expedition. In this regard, Symmes', and Reynolds', persuasion and "political agitating" for exploration funding appears to have been confined to the United States alone. This, despite an earlier approach from the Russians (for assistance with a northern expedition) during Symmes' lifetime (see previous). Copies of his theory were disseminated overseas,<sup>32</sup> but the cause of the advancement of pure science by scientists does not always match the cause of the advancement of practical science (and exploration) by governments; governments were focused on mapping for commerce, and annexing new lands. Reviews of Symmes' theory, and of *Symzonia* (see following Chapter) had seen the prospect of an inner land as an opportunity for expansionism on a scale not contemplated since Columbus, but governments are more concerned with the real than the abstract. Every government-funded expedition, both before and after Symmes, was instructed to map and explore new coastlines and discoveries, and my presumption is that D'Urville and Ross, and the earlier expeditions of Thadeus Bellingshausen<sup>33</sup> and James Weddell, would have been no different.

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<sup>31</sup> See James Clark Ross' *A Voyage of Discovery and Research in the Southern and Antarctic Regions During The Years 1839-43*.

<sup>32</sup> Symmes distributed his *Circular No. 1*, and presumably later broadsheets also, to "every major foreign university."

<sup>33</sup> See Glynn Barratt's *Bellingshausen a Voyage to New Zealand: 1820*, and Frank Debenham's *The Voyage of Captain Bellingshausen to the Antarctic Seas 1819-1821*.

### **Americus Symmes' Re-Statement of His Father's Theory**

Symmes' final legacy in exploration came about the efforts of his son, Americus. In 1878, Americus Symmes published the collected works and wisdom of his father in *The Symmes Theory of Concentric Spheres*. In the almost fifty years since John Cleves Symmes had died, the memory of his theory had faded. Despite the United States' and other national expeditions to the south, no polar hole had been discovered. Worse than that, for Symmes' son, other authors were now publishing theories of a hollow earth and claiming them as their own. Americus Symmes' book was an attempt to re-gain the theory of a hollow earth for his father (despite the fact that Symmes was not the first to expound it), and he used the book as a platform to launch a final attempt to gain Congressional support for an expedition toward the North Pole to prove once and for all the alleged correctness of his father's theory.

If the South had been relatively sparsely visited, the North was a veritable hive of activity by comparison. John Franklin had disappeared with all hands in the ships *Erebus* and *Terror*, on a quest for the North-West Passage, and a number of rescue missions had been northwards looking for him. As well, there had been further several exploration groups to the north, many of whom had suffered heavy loss of life. Included in this group was the expedition of Charles Hall, whom Americus Symmes

singled out as one who would have benefited from a knowledge of his father's theory, but as was shown above, he probably did know, and the knowledge would not have helped him in any case.

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Symmes legacy in exploration is marginal. The United States already had intentions of exploring the South before Symmes first announced his theory, but exigencies of war, budget and domestic affairs combined to constantly delay and defer any action toward an expedition. Symmes' theory, the promotion of it by him and Reynolds in particular, and the general world appetite for exploration and colonial expansion all combined to bring about the major expedition lead by Wilkes in 1838-1842. I believe that while the exploration would have probably eventually taken place, Symmes's theory advanced the timing with which it happened.

### Chapter Three: *Symzonia*

A bare two years after Symmes began issuing his proclamations and broadsheets, a novel appeared which used his theory of a hollow earth as a reality, and then proceeded to recount the exploration of that inner world. *Symzonia*, written and narrated by “Captain Adam Seaborn,” and published in 1820, was not the first hollow-earth novel, although it was one of the earliest, and is arguably one of the best known. *Symzonia* is discussed here as a key link between Symmes’ theory and the avalanche of hollow-earth writing that was to come. *Symzonia* popularised the hollow earth in a way that Symmes’ own writings and lectures never did.<sup>34</sup>

*Symzonia* purports to be a record of a voyage south – and through the southern polar hole to the Earth’s interior – which sailed 1 August 1817. The narrator builds and outfits a ship for a sealing expedition in the Southern Ocean (the Falkland Islands and South Georgia are the starting locations), and proceeds south from there on a voyage of discovery of new lands. They reach the sea ice at 83° S, and are carried through the ice on strong currents, until at some point their compass is no longer useful, and indicates to them, that even though supposedly sailing south, they appear to

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<sup>34</sup> This thesis is not a literary criticism. I am interested in tracing reactions and responses to *Symzonia* rather than analysing the text itself and I am more interested in its existence and its influence, both why it was written and in what followed after, than its specific content. If Symmes wrote it, it is part of his legacy of published work; if not, it is part of the legacy of his direct influence on the author.

be near the equator. In accordance with Symmes' theory, the captain supposes that they have passed over the rim of the Earth, and sailed north, into its centre. They sail on, and come to a peopled land, which the captain names Symzonia. The people of Symzonia are very white,<sup>35</sup> and their buildings and clothing are also white. They speak a musical but unintelligible language, which is quickly taught to Captain Seaborn, and he in turn teaches them English. The interior world is lit by two suns by day and two moons at night, each refracted through the polar openings.

The citizens of Symzonia elect a legislature of Worthies, presided over by the Best Man. Symzonia appears to possess an early weapon of mass destruction (a dirigible flame-thrower), the thought of which is sufficient to deter any enemies from without, and suppress any discontent from within. The residents, "internals," are convinced that all "externals" are vicious people like their known enemy the Beelzebubians. The weapon of mass destruction is both a protection from attack, and has also apparently been used in the past, as the people now banished to an island on the outside of the Earth still live in fear of it. Their banishment left a perfected people, and a perfected society inside. Eventually, Seaborn and his crew are asked to leave the inner land, for fear that they will contaminate the people with

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<sup>35</sup> The racial dynamics of white supremacy at work in the novel have been examined by Elena Glasberg in "Antarcticas of the Imagination: American Authors Explore the Last Continent 1818-1982" (131-144), and Johan Wijkmark in "One of the Most Intensely Exciting Secrets: The Antarctic in American Literature, 1820-1849" (74-76).



their ideas. Seaborn sails out and picks up a sealing party he had left behind, together with a large load of seal skins. They sail to China, where the skins are exchanged for trade goods, and then onwards eventually to New York, where he loses all to an agent. Unable to return to *Symzonia*, he writes his book to earn the money in order to do so.

*Symzonia* may have been based on the voyages of the sealers to the South Atlantic, circa 1815-1820. Several parts of the book closely follow the story of Nathaniel Palmer, specifically the voyage of the *Hersilia* in July 1819; this voyage would have occurred about the time of writing, and shortly before the publication date of *Symzonia*.<sup>36</sup> Details in *Symzonia*— the landing for supplies of fresh meat and anti-scorbutic grasses in the Falkland Islands, the transportation of the seals skins for sale in Canton, a forward cargo of Chinese goods for America, and the price received for the skins by Captain Seaborn of *Symzonia* in Canton (\$2.75 each) — are all typical of the time.

Critics have argued about the structure and purpose of *Symzonia*: is it a vehicle for the promotion of Symmes' theory, or an adventure yarn? James Bailey, in the introduction to his 1965 edition of *Symzonia*, writes that “the evident intention of the book is to ‘prove’ Symmes’ theory in a matter-of-

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<sup>36</sup> The sealing and sailing experiences recounted in John Spears' *Captain Nathaniel Brown Palmer*, published as a historical record in 1996, would have been common knowledge around the ports of New England circa 1820.

fact record of discovery of the internal world.” In an essay for *American Studies* William Lenz writes: “The visionary clearly outdistances the immediate and practical in ‘Captain Adam Seaborn’s’ *Symzonia*. ...What the book seems to prove is a general cultural awareness of Symmes’ theory” (52). Founding of the book in the known – sailing, sealing, commerce – and progressing to the unknown a step at a time, made it more likely to be perceived as credible; an important factor in its reception.

### **Reception of *Symzonia***

As a hollow-earth narrative, illustrating Symmes theory, *Symzonia* entered a reading market eager for accounts of explorations. William Lenz writes “Narratives of exploration were enormously popular in early nineteenth century America” (41). These included not only “exploration, travel and adventure, the publication of foreign works in American editions ... [and] of narratives of American exploration and exploitation” (41), but also “literary reviews of narratives of all types in American periodicals” (41). Literary reviews in magazines “usually printed extensive extracts from each work and often contained speculative articles on past, present or future exploration” (42). Exploration narratives available to the American public between 1815 and 1830 would have exceeded fifty from just two periodicals –the *North American Review* (Boston) and *the American*

*Journal of Science* (New Haven) (42). For nineteenth-century American readers, exploration narratives were “educative, escapist, exotic and addictive” (42).

A book like *Symzonia* could therefore have expected to be well received. It was published into a market where readers were already well versed in reading of new discoveries and adventures, some of which, while true, would also have seemed fanciful for the time. *Symzonia* may have been a step further into the unknown, but was accepted because it *might* have been possible, even though that was unlikely – even then. Another five years later, and its publication would probably not have met with the same acceptance, as American sealers had almost exhausted the southern seal fisheries, and Antarctica had been visited. The lessening of the unknown world would also have lessened the possibility of the voyage told within *Symzonia*.

Of a list of nine representative magazines listed by Lenz, only *The North American Review* contained a review of *Symzonia*, which “assumed ... its readers' familiarity with Symmes while taking the narrative less seriously [than Symmes' theory]” (Lenz 52). The reviewer damned Symmes, his theory and *Symzonia* with backhanded praise, writing:

We take leave, out of justice to merit to say, that we think Col. Symmes fairly entitled to the credit of a theory, which never entered into the head of any other man before; and of which, much as we should expect from the fruit of his lecturing – if he lectures as well as he speculates – we have strong doubts whether it will ever enter into the head of anybody again. (141)

Most readers would have received the book as fiction, as did the reviewer, yet the reviewer creates an elaborate charade of treating it as an exploration narrative. The anonymous commentator spends three and a half pages discussing the “superficial taste of men” (137) in “the almost exclusive attention they have paid to the external surface of the globe. ... All the while, the honest solid interior, the root and heart and kernel, the marrow and pith, the sacred penetralia of our globe have remained worse than unexplored” (135). He (or an unlikely she)<sup>37</sup> discusses Symmes’ theory before turning to the novel itself in order to frame the context of the book for readers. He continues:

We have thrown together these ideas, by way of forestalling the favor of our readers to the projects of our ingenious countryman, one of the few men of the day, who seems to have pursued these analogies, and to have emancipated himself from the slavery of superficials. Col, John C. Symmes, whose original and highly instructive correspondence has, till the appearance of the work at the head of our article [*Symzonia*], been communicated in the columns of the government paper, seems to have caught, what may literally be called an *insight* into the nature of the earth, and to have disclosed the astonishing fact, that this globe we inhabit is but a shell, and that its interior is actually accessible. (138)

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<sup>37</sup> Based on margin notes in the copy held by the Library of Congress, this review is sometimes attributed to Jared Sparks.

Accepting, although seemingly tongue-in-cheek, Symmes' theory of a hollow earth, the reviewer then proceeds to also accept *Symzonia* as a true re-counting of a voyage to that hollow earth – “a voyage *actually* undertaken and carried on with success, in pursuance of Col. Symmes' discoveries” (*italics mine*) (138). The review then lists possible favourable outcomes arising from the voyage as “A vast accession of territory, probably of the richest kind” (139) and “A great market for our produce” (140), adding slyly, “Should the Internals refuse to eat, drink, and smoke, as we direct, there then will doubtless be found ways to compel them” (140).

The reviewer likens Symmes to Columbus, writing “If the mere conception of a north-western passage, which he did *not* find out, has given his glory to Columbus, what a title to immortality does the colonel [sic] possess!” (140). Indeed, he engages less with *Symzonia* than Symmes, with the final comment thus:

But it is time to draw to a close, and we beg leave to recommend the discoveries of Col. Symmes again to the public. His success with the unexplored interior of our earth is so signal, that we advise him next to turn his attention to the moon, unless as some features in his speculations lead us to think, he has already done it. (143)

This is a thinly-veiled jibe at Symmes, suggesting that a society within the Earth is as likely as one on the moon.<sup>38</sup> Overall, this is not so much a review of *Symzonia*, as an opportunity for the reviewer to demonstrate his knowledge of Symmes' theory – at the same time engaging the reader in a pretense to conspire together that both the book, and Symmes' theory, are real, while winkingly acknowledging their shared assumption that both are outlandish. Symmes' theory, not just *Symzonia*, was topical at the time, and readers would have possibly expected the magazine to carry a review of the book, but the reviewer clearly believes that Symmes' theory is nonsense, and writes in a way that shows his assumption that the readers agree with him.

A second review from *The Literary Gazette* of January 1821, is even less kind, commencing “The concentric, as it would perhaps be more proper to call them the *eccentric* theories of captain John Cleves Symmes, have given rise to the present work” (26; original italics). The review includes brief outlines of key plot elements and includes several passages from the text, and concludes “From the extracts we have given, the reader will be able to form some idea of the manner in which this book is composed. It is, upon the whole, dull and uninteresting... The author is, however, very

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<sup>38</sup> Lenz refers to Joseph Atterley's *A Voyage to the Moon*, from which an *American Quarterly Review* article of March 1828 quoted “I returned to the telescope, and now took occasion to examine the figure of the earth near the Poles, with a view to discovering whether its form favoured Captain Symmes' theory of an aperture existing there” (61, n40).

good natured, and if there is nothing brilliant in his observations, there is nothing to offend” (28). The unidentified reviewer is clearly not enamoured with the book.

### **Questions of Genre: Defining *Symzonia***

Various writers have classified *Symzonia* as science fiction, utopian fiction, a fantastic or extraordinary voyage (these two terms – fantastic or extraordinary – are used almost interchangeably in some texts, with some writers favouring one over the other), satire, even a burlesque (of Symmes’ theory). *Symzonia* has been claimed as a first by some, in several categories – the first science fiction novel, the first *American* science fiction, the first American utopian fiction. Before these claims can be examined, it is necessary to consider some definitions of the relevant literary genres.

Science fiction is a much-debated term, and ultimately one that does not have a clear, accepted definition. I adopt here Bailey’s 1947 definition.

Bailey writes:

A piece of scientific fiction is a narrative of an imaginary invention or discovery in the natural sciences and consequent adventures and experiences. The invention must be imaginary at the time the romance is written... The discovery may take place in the interior of the earth, on the moon, on Mars, within the atom,

in the future, in the prehistoric past, or in a dimension beyond the third; it may be a surgical, mathematical, or chemical discovery. It must be a scientific discovery – something that the author at least rationalizes as possible to science. (Bailey, *Pilgrims* 10)<sup>39</sup>

Geoffroy Atkinson defines an extraordinary voyage as:

A fictitious narrative purporting to be the veritable account of a real voyage made by one or more Europeans to an existent but little known country – or to several such countries – together with a description of the happy condition of society there found, and a supplementary account of the travelers' return to Europe. (ix)

He notes the distinction of extraordinary voyages is the “authenticated realism” of their setting. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* writes that the fantastic voyage “is the most important [literary form] in the ancestry of science fiction” (406) and in its simplest form is “a set of episodes whose function is to present a series of dramatic encounters” (407).

These definitions suggest a book typically of three parts: the outwards trip to the new land or new situation, the stay there with accompanying discoveries and experiences, and the return home – often with a perilous ending, which typically destroys all hitherto carefully preserved proofs of the voyage.<sup>40</sup> *Symzonia* has these three trip elements present, including the

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<sup>39</sup> It may be problematic to use Bailey's definition here when Bailey is one of those quoted later as having a view on the authorship of *Symzonia*, but this definition is also quoted in the *Dictionary of Science Fiction*. In using it here, I have not set it as the standard by which all others are measured, but as one which is useful for my analytical purposes.

<sup>40</sup> In the case of the new situation being created by a chemical discovery or something similar, the outwards and return journeys may not require travel in the literal sense, but a change of mindset.



perilous ending, and thus fits the definition of an extraordinary voyage. However, more commonly, extraordinary voyages are unable to be positioned in either place or time, and exist only in an imaginary geography, and an undefined time. In this regard, *Symzonia* meets neither criterion, as the location of the hollow earth is clearly defined, although none the less imaginary, and the date is defined in the text and is set in the [then] present – it neither looks forward nor back in time. However, there are elements of imaginary voyage present.

Advocates for classifying *Symzonia* within science fiction are also easy to find. Claudia Silverman, for example, claims that *Symzonia* was the first science fiction work.<sup>41</sup> To the extent that Symmes presented this theory as scientific, then *Symzonia* does fit this category as defined above. There are, however, problems with Silverman's claim. Technically, her classification is anachronistic. Edward James, writing in David Seed's *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and its Precursors*, assigns the first use of the term "science fiction" to a treatise on the poetry of science in 1851, and not then again until 1927 (once), and more commonly from 1929 on. But even if one accepts that while there may not have been a *recognised* science fiction genre prior to that time, it nonetheless existed, then Mary

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<sup>41</sup> The publishers of a 1979 reprint of Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins, a Cornish Man: Relating Particularly His Shipwreck Near The South Pole* also promote it as a book "which can well lay claim to be the first genuine science fiction novel set in Antarctica" (back cover).

Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a far more obvious "first,"<sup>42</sup> and is often cited as the earliest example of this genre.<sup>43</sup>

Others favour labeling *Symzonia* as a utopia. Utopian fiction likewise has a plethora of definitions. In "Utopia – The Problem of Definition" Lyman Sargent discusses the problem of defining Utopia and writes:

The word Utopia, as coined by More, means nowhere and implies nothing relevant to the quality of the nowhere. It could be good or bad. ... Topia comes from the word topos or place. 'U' is the equivalent of 'ou', meaning no or not; or we can ... say that 'u' is to include both 'ou' and 'eu' (good). For More certainly was also making a pun on eutopia (good place). (137-138; original emphasis)

In *British and American Utopian Literature*, Sargent defines utopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail" (xii), and a utopian satire as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of contemporary society" (xii).

Symzonia, the place, is certainly non-existent and is described at some length by the narrator, as a place with all the arts and inventions of the outer world, with no poverty, state-regulated labour, and a regulated

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<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, *Frankenstein* has an Arctic setting with one of the protagonists searching for the open north polar sea.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Brian Aldiss' *The Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*.

system for sharing goods. Selfish citizens had previously been expelled from the land, and those who remained are a kindly, calm and intellectual race. This, then, is a utopia, or more particularly a variant on this genre in which citizens themselves rather than just society are perfected, termed an “Ideal Moral Commonwealth” (Davis 27). Davis writes “The perfect moral commonwealth tradition accepted existing social arrangements and political institutions. Society is to be made harmonic by the moral reformation of every individual in society” (27). Essentially, in this genre it is individuals that are perfected not society itself – the perfect society follows from perfected individuals. *Symzonia* would seem to have elements of both, as it has both new systems of social organisation (regulated sharing of goods etc) and perfected individuals.

Within *Symzonia*, the author describes several aspects of American and British society and mores, which are a thinly-veiled criticism of those aspects of those two societies, but this is not a consistent theme throughout the book, and so *Symzonia* could be said to have aspects of utopian satire within it. In “An Early American Utopian Fiction,” Bailey states that *Symzonia* is the first “native American utopian fiction” (285).<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> In contrast to Sargent above, Bailey writes “the first native American utopian fiction is generally supposed to be Mrs. Mary Griffith’s anonymously published ‘Three Hundred Years Hence.’ ... *Symzonia* ... is, however, sixteen years earlier” (“An Early American Utopian Fiction” 285).

<sup>45</sup> Lyman Sargent in *British and American Utopian Literatures* says the earliest known utopia published in the United States was William Smith’s *A General Idea of the College of Mirania* (24).

However, Lyman Sargent, in a note to Peter Fitting,<sup>46</sup> writes “There are at least half a dozen US utopias predating *Symzonia*, going back to 1659.”

Ultimately, the classification of *Symzonia* as science fiction, utopian fiction, a fantastic or extraordinary voyage, or a burlesque is less important than the extent to which within each or any of these genres it can simultaneously be claimed as a satire. Novels in the genres of science fiction or utopia fiction very much lend themselves to this; *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* states that “from the earliest days of proto science fiction, satire was its prevailing mode” (1049), quoting *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* definition of satire as “literary work ‘in which prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule’” (1049).

A satirical example from *Symzonia* follows:

We bore up for *Sandwhich* land, not that I had any belief in the existence of any *such* land, for I had always been of the opinion, that the English placed this supposed land on their charts as an English discovery, stretching it along from the polar seas to latitude 57° south, that they might, whenever any land should be discovered in that unexplored quarter, have a pretense for laying claim to it as a British discovery. (40-41)

Here, the author is ridiculing the extent of the British Empire, and challenging the way in which it had been established in the South,

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<sup>46</sup> See Fitting, 206, n4.

allegedly based on dubious claims, and possibly those of Captains Swain, Gardiner and Macy discussed above.

By defining the genre of *Symzonia*, it positions the book within a particular body or style of literature. Debating the genre of *Symzonia*, while important and interesting as a topic in itself, also becomes relevant to the widely discussed question of authorship, as many authors write predominantly in one style or genre.

### **Questions of Authorship**

Many commentaries have alleged that Symmes wrote *Symzonia* himself to promote his cause, and many authors will comment of this book words to the effect of “it is now generally accepted that the author was Symmes.” However, against the weight of some other scholars, I will argue here that this is unlikely, although the question of the authorship of *Symzonia* must remain unsolved for the time being. A review of reasons for and against Symmes as author follows, with discussions of other possible authors of the book.

A possible early clue to authorship comes from Elmore Symmes, who writes “The word ‘Symmesonia’ is the name he [Symmes] desired given to a continent, when one was discovered in the concave” (628). One possible

construct of this comment is that Symmes couldn't wait for the discovery of the internal world, and created it in fiction instead – using, with a slight change, the name he already chosen.

In a preface to *Symzonia*, the author, “Seaborn,” writes that he took advantage of “all the lights and facilities afforded by the sublime theory of an internal world, published by Captain John Cleve [sic] Symmes...” (vi). This misspelling of Symmes' middle name may have been an error, or it could have been a deliberate ploy of Symmes to disguise his authorship by even misspelling his own name. As might be expected whether or not the author was in fact Symmes, the pseudonymic author distances himself from Symmes by referring to him in the third person. Within *Symzonia*, the author discourses at some length on Symmes' theory, ostensibly explaining it for his crew, but in reality expounding it for the reader. This promotional element within the text has led some commentators to attribute authorship to Symmes.

One of the strongest advocates of this position is James Bailey. In his introduction to a 1965 reprint of *Symzonia* he writes extensively of the question of its authorship, stating “it seems probable that John Cleves Symmes is the author – even though ‘Cleves’ is misspelled as ‘Cleve’ in the Preface [to *Symzonia*].” Bailey continues, “The Library of Congress ... [catalogue] card erroneously described the book as ‘A burlesque on

“Symmes’s Theory of Concentric Spheres”, but this dull and earnest book is no burlesque.” Bailey states that *Symzonia* was originally catalogued by the University of North Carolina Library with Symmes as the author and no mention of “Seaborn” at all. This is significant, as the book’s accession number indicates that it was acquired soon after publication, when authorship could more readily be established, and extant anecdotal evidence may have pointed to Symmes as author. Bailey then cites “internal evidence” from within the book itself in support of Symmes’ authorship: that it promotes polar exploration, part of Symmes’ crusade; the extravagant praise of Symmes’ “Sublime theory of an internal world” in the preface; the clear explanations of Symmes’ theory and expounding of his ideas about the temperature of the polar regions; the evident intention to “prove” Symmes’ theory; and finally the fact that the discovered internal continent is named Symzonia in honor of Symmes.

Those who concur with Bailey include David Seed, Victoria Nelson and Arthur Lewis. Seed claims that *Symzonia* “is now accepted to have been written by Symmes himself” (77). His substantiation for this claim comes from the British Library Catalogue, and also from Robert Almy’s article “J. N. Reynolds: A Brief Biography with Particular Reference to Poe and Symmes,” which deals with the influence of Symmes’ imagery [from *Symzonia*] on Poe. Victoria Nelson’s *The Secret Life of Puppets* refers to the author of *Symzonia* as “one ‘Captain Adam Seaborn’, a nicely

allegorical Divine Human sobriquet most likely concealing Symmes himself' (149). The entry for *Symzonia*, written by Lewis, in *Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, lists the author as "Captain Adam Seaborn [John Cleves Symmes, Jr] (1780-1829, USA)" with no further discussion as to authorship (592).

Those who take the opposite view often do so on the basis that the description of Symmes' theory in the novel is not promotional but satirical. Marion Miller, in "The Theory of Concentric Spheres," summarily rejects Symmes as author, stating "A man of Symmes' earnest character would scarcely burlesque his own theory, even to attract attention to it" (510). In *It May be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, Francis Spufford is highly critical of *Symzonia*, calling it an "anonymous satire" (71), and suggesting that to assign the writing of the novel to Symmes is to credit him "with a sense of the ridiculous he certainly never possessed" (72). Spufford does not discuss authorship further, but clearly believes the author was not Symmes: "Dashed off with journalistic speed, as it [*Symzonia*] must have been, it was not just produced to pop the Symmesian bubble with a satirical pin, but quite as much because the hollow earth made for a good story" (72-73). Writing in *Science Fiction Studies*, R.D. Mullen also discusses the authorship of *Symzonia*, but with special reference to Stanton's omission of any reference to *Symzonia* in his book *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842*. On being



questioned by Mullen about the omission, Stanton responded “I am as certain as I can be that Symmes was not Seaborn. Symmes wrote only lectures, communiqués, and letters-to-the-editor. Moreover, he was in dead earnest. Seaborn’s banter would only have puzzled him” (99).

The most recent two additions to the discussion on authorship come in Peter Fitting’s notes to *Symzonia* in *Subterranean Worlds* and Johan Wijkmark’s PhD dissertation, “One of the Most Intensely Exciting Secrets: The Antarctic in American Literature, 1820-1849.” Neither of these authors accepts Symmes as author, with Wijkmark pointing out a number of inconsistencies within *Symzonia* regarding Symmes’ theory – inconsistencies which Symmes himself would not be expected to make (43).

The “Seaborn” or Symmes debate is not the limit of the discussion on authorship, and at least two other names have been proposed as author of *Symzonia*. The possibility that Jeremiah Reynolds may have authored this book probably does not fit the time frame, as Reynolds’ connection to, and involvement with, Symmes came after the publication of *Symzonia*. Reynolds was an influential convert to Symmes’ theory. He edited a

magazine, and was later a contemporary of Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>47</sup> and was to lobby the United States Congress for funding for a polar expedition to explore Symmes' theory (see the previous chapter). His written output was prodigious, but his effort was primarily targeted towards gaining Congressional support and funding for expeditions to explore Symmes' theory of a hollow earth. In an article in *The New England Quarterly* in 1975, Hans-Joachim Lang and Benjamin Lease make a case for Nathaniel Ames as the author. Ames wrote for the *Manufacturers and Farmers Journal* and authored several books (including *A Mariner's Sketches* [1830] and *Nautical Reminiscences* [1832]) that "combined authentic nautical detail with a lively satiric imagination" (245). As a sailor, Ames had the at-sea experience,<sup>48</sup> which would have allowed him to gather authentic material both for his acknowledged writing and also for *Symzonia*. Lang and Lease point to distinct similarities between *Symzonia* and Ames' books, but while he may have penned all three books (*Symzonia* and the two books above); I suggest that alternatively he may have borrowed from *Symzonia* for his own two later works. In any case, the knowledge of sailing and the sea evident in *Symzonia* can be found in

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<sup>47</sup> Reynolds and Poe appear to have never met in person. This is discussed further in Robert Almy's "J. N. Reynolds: A Brief Biography With Particular Reference to Poe and Symmes," and Aubrey Starke's "Poe's Friend Reynolds."

<sup>48</sup> See Rhys Richards' *Sealing in the Southern Oceans 1783-1833*.

many novels of the time, so the link between Ames and *Symzonia* is not strong.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the doubts about the authorship of *Symzonia*, there appear to be no doubts, or at least no discussion, of the authorship amongst Symmes' contemporaries and family. The authors of the books discussed in Chapter One (Matthews, McBride, Mitchell, and Reynolds) focus predominantly on Symmes and his theory, and do not discuss the authorship of *Symzonia*. Neither do Symmes' family members (Americus Symmes in *The Symmes Theory of Concentric Spheres* and Elmore Symmes in "John Cleves Symmes, the Theorist" – a son and cousin respectively), who write extensively of Symmes' theory, but not of *Symzonia*. That none of the six authors mentioned above raises the authorship issue is significant, but not conclusive. Their failure to discuss authorship could indicate that they knew it was Symmes but chose not to say, or that they knew it was not Symmes, and so glossed over the authorship. Yet, to the extent that the novel is a major illustration of Symmes' theory, the fact that they all ignore *Symzonia* is strange. If it had been written by Symmes himself, it is most probable that at least McBride would have discussed this, particularly as Symmes appeared to have been a strong guide to McBride in the writing of *Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres*. However, there is a problem

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<sup>49</sup> See also, A.G.E. Jones' "The Poynter Journal: The voyage of the *Williams* to New South Shetland, 1819-1820."

here: if the authors in question were Symmes' supporters, then offering any serious discussion of *Symzonia* could potentially undermine Symmes' theory, given that there are elements of parody and satire within it. Likewise, for a Symmes detractor, the book may add fuel to a fire already burning too brightly.

On the balance of probabilities, I do not believe that Symmes wrote *Symzonia*. Symmes' effort – almost totally, to the point of exhaustion and finally, death – was focused on obtaining funding for an expedition to prove his theory. His time was limited, his days were numbered, and he had no reason to put forward the elaborate utopia that takes up a lot of the novel but has little relevance to the theory, nor the time to do so. Writing *Symzonia* would have been a distraction to his plans for obtaining funding from Congress, and from his lectures exhorting the public to his platform.

There is, however, no clear determination on who wrote *Symzonia*, or why. In terms of this thesis, both its authorship and intent are irrelevant to its *effect*: coming as it did so soon after the initial release of Symmes' first broadsheet, it was obviously based on Symmes' theory, and it was highly influential. Later authors drew heavily on *Symzonia* and some (for example, Poe) reproduced sections from it verbatim in their own works. The next chapter looks at later hollow-earth fiction which builds on both Symmes' theory and *Symzonia*.

## Chapter Four: Symmes' Legacy In

### Fiction

If *Symzonia* was the first literary response to Symmes' theory, then it was by no means the last. Since *Symzonia*, to the present day, there have been a continuing number of literary fictions with a hollow-earth theme. "Symmes' Hole" entered the language as a recognisable, if fictitious, place, and was used by later authors as the location of the setting for their own novels, and as inspiration for other locations within the Earth.

Symmes and *Symzonia* are inextricably linked, although, as seen previously, there is still debate about who wrote *Symzonia*. Accepting that Symmes is not proven to be the author of *Symzonia*, and I do not believe him to be so, it is now necessary to conjecture that *Symzonia* is nonetheless his biggest written legacy, as without Symmes there would be no *Symzonia*, and in turn *Symzonia* helped promote Symmes' theory. Even without Symmes acknowledged as author, *Symzonia* became a powerful influence on later authors, especially Edgar Allan Poe, who in turn led other authors to set their novels within the Earth, for example Jules Verne. The influence of *Symzonia* on Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (referred to hereafter as *Pym*) can be directly traced by the comparison of passages within the text, but is not otherwise identifiable as

blocks of text elsewhere in works of either Poe, or later authors; however, the *theme* of a hollow earth is clearly visible in *Pym*.

There are a large number of hollow-earth fictions, but surprisingly few which could be classed as strictly Symmesian, with a hollow earth and polar access. In a recent edited edition of *Pym*, Frederick Frank and Diane Hoeveler say that the polar access to the hollow earth is a particular adaptation (by Symmes) of earlier literary theories (252, n1).<sup>50</sup> Previous writers had set their fiction within the hollow earth, and populated it, but had not accessed it via the poles, except in one instance, discussed later, which was not strictly a hollow-earth novel.

In selecting fiction for this chapter, I have referred to several bibliographies of science fiction or utopian works. These books include Lyman Sargent's *British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography*, Thomas Clareson's *Science Fiction in America 1870s-1930s*, Everett Bleiler's *Science Fiction: The Early Years* and Bruce Walton's *A Guide to the Inner Earth* and *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Each of these authors approaches their bibliography differently: for example, Sargent's is chronological, and lists publication details, plus limited commentary on the utopian aspect of each entry,

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<sup>50</sup> "Although the idea of lost civilizations at the center of an earth of concentric spheres dates back to antiquity, the idea of hollowness of polar holes was Symmes's own proposition" (252).

whereas Clareson lists entries by author, with publication details and a plot summary. As well, authors previously discussed, including Fitting, Kafton-Minkel, Seed, Standish and Wijkmark, all list and discuss books with hollow-earth themes, and provide extensive bibliographies. Continuing my synthesis of relevant research, I will discuss selected titles from these sources, and the way in which Symmes' ideas have been used by writers since the publication of his theory. Note that whereas Bailey, Fitting, Kafton-Minkel, Seed, Standish and Wijkmark are examining the hollow earth *in toto*, my focus is on Symmes' hollow earth only, and this is only a very minor subset of the total body of hollow-earth fiction.<sup>51</sup>

The term "hollow earth fiction" pre-supposes that other forms of literature – drama and poetry – have engaged very little with Symmes's ideas. Elizabeth Bradfield in her 2010 collection, *Approaching Ice*, has included one poem titled "Polar Explorer Capt. John Cleves Symmes (1820)" (3), but Symmes has not attracted the same attention of playwrights or poets that other (real) polar explorers, such as Scott or Shackleton, have, in either drama or poetry. One tenuous connection was made by Frederick John in his article "The Yawning Hole" in *Cincinnati Magazine* of December 1973, when he links Symmes' Hole to the classic poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (commonly ascribed to Clement Moore), as the place where

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<sup>51</sup> My selected works are listed chronologically. For the most part, I have been able to locate copies of texts discussed, but where that has not been possible, I have quoted from other sources. Many of the texts are very obscure and hard to obtain, hence my reliance on these secondary sources.

Santa lives. There have also been films made from various hollow-earth novels, notably Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.<sup>52</sup> This review is focused on fiction only, and my approach to this selected review of hollow-earth texts is as follows: firstly I will describe, for purposes of this thesis, what is meant by a hollow earth with specific reference to Symmes' hollow earth. I will then consider literary precedents to Symmes (this complements my discussion of scientific precedents to Symmes' theory in Chapter One). This chapter continues with a discussion of Symmes and Poe, particularly the relevance of Symmes' hole to Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle" and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and two sequels to *Pym* (written by other authors). I will then consider Symmes's legacy in literature beyond Poe, through to the present day.

### **Symmes' Hollow Earth Defined**

There are various understandings of what is encapsulated in the term "hollow earth." In *Encyclopédie de l'Utopie, des Voyages Extraordinaires, et de la Science Fiction*, Pierre Versins offers two types of hollow-earth locations for fictional settings. The first type of location is *gruyère*, referring to a depiction of the Earth like a holey Swiss cheese with one or more major caverns, and *calabasse*, denoting a depiction of the

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<sup>52</sup> Sometimes called *Voyage to the Centre of the Earth*.



Earth as similar to a hollow gourd; literally a hollow earth (874-877). Peter Fitting, in *Subterranean Worlds: A Critical Anthology*, further divides the second of Versins settings again, and includes a hollow earth “adorned with lesser sun, stars and planets” (8), and a hollow earth which is inhabited on the underside of the Earth’s crust, as for example in Holberg’s *Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground* (1741). Fitting then adds a third type of hollow-earth depiction in which the Earth is neither holey nor hollow, but has subterranean passages (8-9), which might include, for example, *Relation d'un Voyage du Pole Arctique, au Pole Antarctique*, an anonymous tale from 1721.

A hollow earth, in what ever form it takes, is but one part of the setting; there is also the question of access – getting there, and returning. Alexander Krappe in *The Subterraneous Voyage* dates voyages through the Earth from *The Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor*, which was translated into English as early as 1706 (Gove 201). *Sinbad* is a series of fantastic voyages, which used supernatural means to travel, and does not require “access” as such to a hollow earth. By contrast, in *Symzonia* the heroes sail over the edge of the Earth into the world within, and then return the same way, sailing back to their home port, via China. The use of polar access limits the choice of passages to and from the inner world; however, when fictional characters visit the hollow earth by paths other than via the polar holes, their return (outwards) route to our known world may be different

from the inwards route. The use in other fiction of access via sink holes, volcanoes, portals, caves and underground passages is far more common than Symmes' polar holes.

This hollow earth, and polar access path, was followed in *Symzonia*, and when considering Symmes' legacy in literature, other fictional settings with subterranean caves or passages can be excluded as non-Symmesian. (Of course, Symmes may still have been an influence, along with others, in the choice of a hollow-earth setting). Similarly, entrances to a hollow earth via caves or volcanoes, or via a river disappearing into the ground, will not generally meet my criteria unless they are located south or north of the polar circles. It would be almost impossible to trace Symmes' legacy if it was extended to all hollow-earth fiction, and with some exceptions, as noted, I have limited the selection discussed to those which fit my very tight criteria.

### **Literary Precedents of *Symzonia***

Before Symmes, and before *Symzonia*, there already existed a hollow earth in both fiction and in the natural philosophy texts of Kepler, Kircher, Halley and Euler. Religion and natural philosophy are often closely allied in Renaissance texts, as people struggled with the concept of the form, and the formation, of the Earth, and the two could be almost interchangeable in

some eyes. This is why, for example, the Vatican banned Halley's book,<sup>53</sup> as his new theory of the form of the Earth was not in accordance with biblical ideas.

Two examples of this crossover between religion and natural philosophy, which are relevant to a hollow earth, are Cotton Mather's *Christian Philosopher* of 1721, which Kafton-Minkel claims influenced the formation of Symmes theory (58), and Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's *The Messiah*, first written in German in 1748, and translated to English in 1763. *The Messiah* is a ten-volume religious poem, based on the natural philosophy of the day, in which (in the first canto) the angel Gabriel descends from heaven into the hollow centre of the Earth through a great opening at the North Pole concealed by a cloud. Kafton-Minkel writes that Klopstock's inner world is like the one proposed by Leonhard Euler, with the addition of the polar opening and various theological trappings. He adds that *The Messiah* has never been well-known in English-speaking countries, even though Klopstock was one of the premier poets of his time in his native Germany (61). Despite the explicit combination of hollow earth and biblical imagery, this fictional work was not banned by the Vatican – certainly it would have been known to them, but it may not have been prominent enough, as opposed to Kepler's book.

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<sup>53</sup> See note 12 on page 23.

Pre-dating Symmes' theory by eighty years, Ludvig Holberg wrote *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground* in 1741. Although Holberg was Scandinavian, *Klim* was first published in Latin, and the first English translation was in 1742. Fitting describes *Klim* as "the first major representation of the hollow earth," although "there is little development of the idea beyond the setting, which is little more than a pretext for Klim's adventure" (40-41). Klim falls into the hollow earth through the Earth's crust, where he finds an inner sun with the planet Nazar revolving around it. After diverse adventures within, Klim eventually falls into the same hole which delivered him into the inner earth, and returns to the Earth's surface.

Another relevant fictional work is a "quaint little French book published anonymously in 1720, describing an imaginary voyage from the North Pole to the South Pole through the centre of the Earth and divers adventures on the way" (Mill 62). In *Life Interests of a Geographer 1861-1944: An Experiment in Autobiography*, Hugh Mill refers to his translation of an (un-named) work that would appear to be the book *Relation d'un Voyage du Pole Arctique, au Pole Antarctique, Par le Centre du Monde, Avec la Description de Ceperilleux Passage, & des Choses Merveilleuses & Étonnantes qu'on a Découvertes Sous le Pole Antarctique ...* first published in Amsterdam in 1721 and quickly re-published (twice) in Paris in 1723. Mill's translation appears not to have survived, and this book is not available in English, although Fitting has given a summary and

included translated portions in *Subterranean Worlds* (64-77). It is an account of a whaling ship, which is sucked into a whirlpool near Greenland and emerges at 71° 8' S. After encountering a variety of adventures (a volcano, a pyramid with fiery reflections, and a structure of white stones) the whalers set sail for the Cape of Good Hope (from my translation of the text). This book is neither subterranean nor hollow-earth, but fits into Fitting's final category of a passage through the Earth.

A book which is often mistaken for a hollow-earth novel is Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins, a Cornish Man: Relating Particularly His Shipwreck Near the South Pole* (1750), which the publishers of a 1979 reprint promote as a book "which can well lay claim to be the first genuine science fiction novel set in Antarctica" (back cover), was originally published in London in two volumes. This book tells the story of Peter Wilkins, who is shipwrecked near the South Pole, and who spends more than 30 years there amongst the warring tribes of Glumms and Gawreys. While there he saves the life of, and eventually marries, a beautiful flying woman named Youwarkee. The book tells of the strange world of the Glumms and the Gawreys and their laws, manners and customs, and may well have been inspired by Johnathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. This book was swiftly copied after its initial publication in London in 1750: it was followed in the same year by a publication from Ireland, and many other editions have appeared since that time, both in

English and German. During his time in this southern land, Wilkins discovers a grotto or subterranean cavern through which his adventures continue. This was not the hollow earth yet to be promoted by Symmes, nor that experienced by the members of the 1721 French imaginary voyage.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, this is not hollow-earth at all, but is subterranean only. Fitting points out that this is often mistaken for a Symmesian hollow-earth novel, due in part to its long title including “His shipwreck near the South Pole; his wonderful passage thro’ a subterraneous cavern into a kind of new world” (202).<sup>55 56</sup>

As illustrated by *Klim* and *Relation d'un Voyage du Pole Arctique, au Pole Antarctique* above, the hollow earth is clearly not the sole preserve of English-speaking authors. Giovanni Casanova, better known for his sexual adventures, wrote *Isocameron* in 1787, which recounts the tale of a brother and sister who are shipwrecked, trapped in a lead trunk, and who fall through water, air and fire to land in the centre of the Earth (Fitting 85). Edward and Elizabeth immediately marry, and Elizabeth has twins every year, who in turn, marry at age twelve and also produce twins every year. The world of the Megamicres within is divided into eighty kingdoms, already heavily populated with one hundred and twenty million inhabitants

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<sup>54</sup> See also Paul Baines’ comments, qtd. in David Seed’s *Anticipations* (10).

<sup>55</sup> Paltock is named “Pullock” in some editions.

<sup>56</sup> Fitting is referring to Marjorie Nicolson’s entry for *The Life and Adventures in Voyages to the Moon* (Nicolson 138-140).

in each kingdom (9.6 billion in total). Fitting writes that Casanova puts forward “theological arguments for proposing the inner Earth as both plausible and a possible site for the Garden of Eden,” (89) a theme that reappears in later texts.

While all these novels are located within the shell of the Earth, either as a passage, subterranean, or in a hollow earth, the one book with polar access and egress is not a hollow earth novel, but a novel about a passage through the Earth, and none of the subterranean or hollow-earth novels here have polar access. Symmes theory was clear and unequivocal: “The earth is hollow, and habitable within, and accessed via holes at the poles.” Although the hollow earth existed pre-Symmes both in literature and natural philosophy, Symmes made it a well-defined, useable and accessible concept; the abstract had become “real,” allowing it to be used as a template by future writers, who no longer had to invent locations for their plots, or imaginative means of getting their heroes and heroines there and home again (even though, of course, many did).

### **Symmes and Poe**

In the period circa 1800, there were no copyright laws as we know them today, and popular works were quickly copied and republished. Not only were books copied *in toto*, but substantial portions of some books were

also used for content in subsequent books. In drawing on the extant knowledge of the day, the author of *Symzonia* was following a strong tradition used in imaginary voyages. Whilst not him- or herself using material from other writers, “Captain Adam Seaborn” was creating a new genre on which future authors could base their own plots, and possibly from which to copy passages. One such author was Edgar Allan Poe. Silverman’s 1998 study of Poe details many of the links between the earlier works of “Seaborn” (1820), Reynolds (1827) and Benjamin Morrell (1832) and Poe’s writing.<sup>57</sup> These include examples of Poe’s writings, which are directly copied from those earlier works. Frank and Hoeverler also discuss this and write that “Poe adapted Symmes’s science to Pym’s discoveries as well as his presentation of the fantastic as factual, but he disregarded the utopian content” (252). He used blocks of text from *Symzonia*, and re-focused the theme of the whiteness of the Symzonian people, representing all that was good, to the blackness of the people in *Pym*, to shift the “tone of the narrative from happiness to horror” (253).

In *Symzonia* the heroes explore the inner earth and return alive. Poe first wrote his “MS. [Manuscript] Found in a Bottle” in 1831, claiming it to be a scrap of text recovered from a ship which perished in the southern whirlpool. The “MS.” is allegedly written by a man who is thrown overboard from a mysterious, seemingly supernatural vessel. Frank and

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<sup>57</sup> See also Aubrey Starke’s “Poe’s Friend Reynolds.”



Hoeveler describe “MS.” as a précis for *Pym*, set as it is with clear references to the South Pole, and the “supposition ... of the polar speculator and Symzonian theorist, Jeremiah N. Reynolds” (20). Poe followed that with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* in 1838 wherein the hero encounters many horrific experiences before he sails his ship to the bottom of the world. The book ends with the ship, and the hero, teetering on the brink of a great cataract, presumably into the centre of the Earth. From our perspective now of time and distance, and recognising what we would now term Poe’s plagiarism from *Symzonia* (and others), the imaginary hole into which this cataract falls would likely have been connected in the minds of contemporary readers with the imaginary polar hole alleged to exist by Symmes<sup>58</sup> – despite the fact that in *Symzonia*, the ship sailed over the rim of the Earth into the interior with no mention of a cataract.<sup>59</sup> The preface to the book tells of Pym’s return to the United States.

Sources for Poe’s *Pym* extended to more than just *Symzonia*. Frank and Hoeveler include an appendix listing six primary sources for the novel, including *Symzonia* (ascribed here to John Cleves Symmes), James

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<sup>58</sup> This is in direct contrast to the North Polar location for the inward flowing rivers described by Van Duzer, which is also a much older idea. It is more likely that Poe would have taken his idea from Symmes than from the civilisations discussed by Van Duzer, although Poe did also write of a *northern* whirlpool in “Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaal.”

<sup>59</sup> Readers may also have linked the whirlpool in “MS. Found in a Bottle” to Symmes’ Hole, but the stronger links of *Pym* to *Symzonia* would suggest a stronger, more definite link to Symmes’ Hole in *Pym* than “MS.”

McBride's *Symmes's Theory*, and Reynolds' *The Voyage of the Potomac ... During the Circumnavigation of the Globe in the Years 1831, 1832, 1833, and 1834*.<sup>60</sup> They write that Poe used a mix of both current books of sea travel and exploration "to give the novel its air of verisimilitude" (249), which with extracts from *Symzonia* and his own imagination combine to create a novel of lasting interest. Poe's editorial "Note" attached to *Pym*, as an afterword, was so detailed that at least one reviewer believed it to be an actual narrative (262).

There have been many analyses of *Pym*. Frank and Hoeveler's edited *Pym* is as much about other commentaries and analyses, as about the novel itself, with the Select Bibliography having sections for Editions, Interpretations and Critical Approaches, Sources and Influences, Primary and Secondary Bibliographical Studies, and Poe Websites and Other Internet Resources. They place *Pym* in the context of Poe's other writings – The Salt Water Trilogy, comprising "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1831), *Pym* (1838), and "A Descent Into the Maelström" (1841). Poe apparently never met either Symmes or Reynolds, but was impressed by Reynolds' writing, and his lobbying of Congress for funding and authority to establish an expedition to explore the alleged South Polar openings to Symmes'

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<sup>60</sup> Other sources for *Pym* include R. Thomas' *Remarkable Shipwrecks*, Jane Porter's *Sir Edward Seaward's Narrative*, and Archibald Duncan's *The Mariner's Chronicle*.

hollow earth, and “reviewed Reynolds’ ‘Address’ in the Messenger” (Almy 234).<sup>61</sup>

Poe’s novel has inspired several sequels, including Jules Verne’s *Antarctic Mystery: The Sphinx of the Ice Fields*, first published in French in 1897 as *Le Sphinx des Glaces*, in which the hero travels to Antarctica on a mission whose secret object is the rescue of Arthur Gordon Pym, not returned to the United States as Poe would have us believe, but abandoned in the mysterious south. Verne’s *An Antarctic Mystery* used Poe’s novel as a foundation point, picking up the narrative eleven years after the disappearance of the hero in *Pym*. In *Antarctic Mystery*, the expedition described finds the “ossified corpse” of Arthur Gordon Pym encased in ice, and attempts to explain the outstanding questions left by Poe at the abrupt finish of his novel. Another novel purporting to complete Poe’s *Pym* is Charles Dake’s *A Strange Discovery*, first published in 1899, which revisits Antarctica and finds a lost race who escaped the excesses of the Roman Empire. Both novels stand alone, complete in themselves, but with no hollow earth or polar hole, and the connection here is to Poe, not Symmes. Verne and Dake were not alone in attempting to finish Poe’s novel, and Frank and Hoeverler discuss this in an appendix to their edition of *Pym*, writing “Several major literary figures have written sequels to or

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Almy’s “J. N. Reynolds: A Brief Biography” further explores the links between Poe and Reynolds.

have ‘finished’ Poe’s novel by providing scientific endings or realistic closing chapters to explain Pym’s odd disappearance” (270).<sup>62</sup>

### **Symmes’s Literary Legacy Beyond Poe**

When Symmes announced his theory, he sent it to several overseas institutions, and an almost immediate fictional response came from France, following very soon after the first American response (*Symzonia*). In 1821 Jacques Collin de Plancy wrote *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*. Fitting says that *Voyage* “along with *Symzonia*, is the most complete attempt to explain the existence of an internal world. It begins with an explicit reference to Symmes” (131). In *Voyage*, the crew of a fishing boat, which catches fire off Greenland, abandon ship and come ashore on an island near Spitzberg. Once there a group of the crew head north in search of food, and as they travel north the countryside gets warmer, until they reach the polar mountains, “where they are violently sucked into the underworld by a whirlwind” (Fitting 131). They experience various adventures within, visiting the countries of Albur, Sanor, and Banois before eventually returning to the Earth’s surface at the South Pole.

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<sup>62</sup> In addition to Verne, Frank and Hoeveler refer to works by Herman Melville, Charles Baudelaire, and Henry James (270-286).

A serialised hollow-earth fiction followed shortly after Americus Symmes' book of 1878. In 1880-81, the *Cincinnati Commercial* published "Mizora: A Prophecy" by Mary Lane, which was later separately published in 1890. Standish describes *Mizora* as possibly "the first feminist utopia – certainly the first set in the hollow earth" (192). The narrator/heroine in *Mizora*, Vera, escapes Russia on a whaling ship which sinks in the Arctic. She joins with some Eskimos and travels with them as they head north in the northern spring, until they come to an open polar sea at about 85° latitude. In a boat provided by the Eskimos she drifts north across the sea

into the closing pages of *Arthur Gordon Pym*: her boat is caught in a fast current and travels in an accelerating circle... Not inconveniently, a 'semi-stupor, born of exhaustion and terror, seized me in its merciful embrace.' She later awakes along a broad river flowing through paradise. (Standish 193)

Very little information is given of the geography of the interior, which is described as inside a "hollow sphere, bounded North and South by impassible oceans" (qtd. in Fitting 161). When it is time for the return home our heroine is taken by a Mizoran woman (there are no men) "in a motorised boat against the current and out to the upper world" (Fitting 161). Jean Pfaelzer describes Vera's travel to the inner world thus: "Sucked into an oceanic swirl, she descends into the luminescent, egalitarian and female *undersea* world of Mizora" (*italics mine*) (xii), and later describes Mizora as being in a transcendent geography (xvi), but

otherwise does not discuss it. Pfaelzer appears to overlook the location of that “transcendent geography” locating it under the sea, rather than inside the Earth.

Shortly after *Mizora* was serialised, a book by Mrs J. Wood, called *Pantalleta: A Romance of Sheheland*, was published in 1882, in which the main character “drives a surprisingly advanced airplane, shaped like the American bald eagle, into a land in the earth’s insides” (Teitler vii). Standish reports that his entry and exit to the inner world were via the North Pole (200). This book may have been a response to *Mizora* and “Mrs Wood” was “likely the pseudonym of a man unappreciative of efforts towards women’s rights” (Standish 199) expressed in that novel.

In many late nineteenth-century novels the inner-earth was to become an ideal setting for a utopian settlement. In 1892, William Bradshaw wrote *The Goddess of Atvatabar; Being the History of the Discovery of the Interior World and Conquest of Atvatabar*, which Sargent labels a borderline utopia, where “hopeless love is the ideal” (Sargent, *British and American* 93). In this book, the protagonists sail north, and over the rim of the world inside the hollow earth, and Bradshaw provides a very complete map of the interior – complete with polar holes at both the North and South Poles. As with several of the hollow-earth novels discussed here *Atvatabar* is illustrated, but in this case it is illustrated extensively, with what

Standish calls a “hypersensuous quality” (211). Unusually, though, not only does Captain White, the commander of the *Polar King*, which first enters Atvatabar, sail into the inner world, but the navies of both the United States and England also join him. This is a departure from the common theme of the narrator returning to his homeland ship-wrecked and with all proof of his inner-world journey destroyed. Presumably, the captains of the navy ships will also be able to verify the existence of Atvatabar.

In the fictional field produced by an already off-beat theory, some works stand out for their strangeness. An 1895 book by John Lloyd, *Etidorpha*, is described by Standish as “easily the weirdest hollow-earth novel of all” (218). One contemporary review called it “a book like to nothing ever before seen; a book in which are blended, in a harmonious whole., romance, exact science, alchemy, poetry, esoterism, metaphysics, moral teachings and bold speculation” (qtd. in Standish 218). Standish reports that Lloyd, a pharmacist, was alleged to have been on psychedelic drugs at the time he wrote the book (218). The narrator descends through the Earth from Kentucky (obviously not a Polar access), and visits the lost world within, guided by a blind humanoid. Once there he gains occult enlightenment into the higher forms of love (*Etidorpha* is Aphrodite spelled backwards) (*Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* 727). Described by the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* as deriving “from the theories of John Cleves Symmes” (727), it is Symmesian only to the extent of its hollow-

earth geography and the use of a “‘Sphere of Rest,’ a concentric inner sphere at the point where the shell of energy holding the earth together resides and where gravity is nullified” (Kafton-Minkel 268).

In fiction, people visit the hollow earth by a number of means including air and sea. Before aircraft were flying in 1903, balloons and airships were the main means of air travel to the inside world. In Charles Beale’s 1899 book, *The Secret of the Earth*, the heroes build an airship to fly to the North Pole, where they pass through a polar opening almost a thousand miles across. They visit the inner world, where they find treasure, and are regarded as gods, and then leave through an Antarctic opening (Clareson 17).

Willis Emerson’s *The Smoky God or a Voyage to the Inner World*, from 1908, is “a lost race eutopia” (Sargent, *British and American* 141),<sup>63</sup> which follows Halley’s theories, and the previous fictions of Casanova and Beale, by locating the original Eden inside the hollow earth (Standish 228). In *Smoky God*, a father and his son set off on a fishing voyage and eventually sail over the rim of the Earth, near the North Pole, into Symmes’ Hole. Inside they find a rich, warm land peopled by gentle giants twelve feet tall who worship the inner sun (*Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* 380). Eventually attempting to leave for home again via the northern entrance,

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<sup>63</sup> Sargent defines “eutopia” as a good place, and different from “utopia,” being no place (Sargent, *British and American* xii).



the pair is beaten back by strong winds and turns southward where they exit through the Antarctic hole.

The hollow earth was clearly on the minds of *actual* Antarctic explorers (as opposed to the *fictional* explorers so often portrayed). In 1908, Douglas Mawson (then a member of Ernest Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition) wrote "Bathybia" for *Aurora Australis*, the first book to be published in Antarctica. In this story an exploration party on the polar plateau discover a volcano, a river and warm humid air; giant creatures fight each other and the toadstools are large enough to shelter beneath. As a large frozen beast thaws out and attacks the men, the narrator, Mawson, wakes to find it was a dream. This is not Symmesian, and is barely beneath the Earth, but is included here to show that the idea of a hollow earth and imaginary beings was relevant even to hardened expeditioners and scientists.

As Symmes, and also *Symzonia*, have influenced later authors, so some of those same authors have become outright household names in their own right (for example Poe, and Verne), and have in turn had many future works based on their writing. Standish writes that "The number of hollow earth stories dropped off drastically after 1910, largely because polar exploration revealed no Symmes' holes" (241). However, against that trend, another author who would become a household name, Edgar Rice

Burroughs wrote *At the Earth's Core*, which was initially serialised from 1914, and then published in 1922. This book was filmed in 1976, and was the first of six that Burroughs wrote about the inner world – a place he called Pellucidar. While Pellucidar may be similar in all aspects to Symmes' inner earth (but with dinosaurs), the heroes use an out-of-control tunneling machine, intended for coal-mining, to bore downwards from the Earth's surface. It is therefore not Symmesian, but introduced here to set the scene for two later Pellucidar novels, *Tanar of Pellucidar*, and *Tarzan at the Earth's Core*, which introduce a polar opening as a means of letting in pirates and rescuers respectively. Of Bradshaw's, Beale's, Emerson's, and Burroughs' books, Bailey writes "[these books] may owe something not only to Symmes's theory of a hollow earth, but [also] to *Symzonia*" ("An Early American Fiction" 293).

Just as any novel can be part utopian, part fantastic voyage – as with *Symzonia* – novels can also include multiple themes, of which the hollow-earth might only be one, or where the hollow-earth portion of the novel is almost incidental to its main purpose. Steve Utley and Harold Waldrop's short story, "Black as the Pit, from Pole to Pole" (1977), is one such story which encompasses multiple themes and genres. Terry Carr, the editor of the anthology in which it appears, writes "The adventures they imagine evoke memories not only of Shelley, but also H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and Herman Melville, to name only three" (71). The story starts

with a clear acknowledgement of Symmes – re-stating his announcement of 10 April 1818 “that the earth is hollow; habitable within; containing a number of solid concentric spheres” (71), and then proceeds directly to a reference to Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Like a catch-all roundup of previous hollow-earth fiction, the story also includes Symmes, Reynolds and Poe; the *Annawan* and the *Seraph* are there, but not Wilkes. Beasts from within the Earth enter and exit at will through polar holes to feed on animals on the outside. This short story owes something to Symmes, but also to Shelley, Melville and others, and while it is Symmesian in part, that part is minor.

Some books have complicated story lines, possibly built around Symmes and his hollow earth, but not developing the traditional themes of entering and exploring the hollow earth, and meeting people there. Ian Wedde’s *Symmes Hole* curiously does not even include Symmes or *Symzonia* in the acknowledgements section. Wedde neither confirms nor denies the existence or otherwise of an *actual* hole, but uses it as a locale to background a swirling Pacific epic.

Standish refers to a recent resurgence of hollow-earth novels (283), and discusses Richard Lupoff’s *Circumpolar*, and Rudy Rucker’s *The Hollow Earth* (283-284). I will discuss both of these, and an Indiana Jones book—*Indiana Jones and the Interior World*, by Rob Macgregor.

Richard Lupoff's *Circumpolar* is set in the 1930s, on a doughnut-shaped alternate earth, and is the story of an air race around the poles between Amelia Earhart, Charles Lindbergh and Howard Hughes against the Bloody Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, and his brother Lothar and Princess Irina Lvova of Russia. Ultimately, the race leads through the poles, inside the hollow earth where they meet and evade an underground civilisation there. Standish calls it a "light-hearted romp," "degenerate," and "the stuff of parody" (284), but, whatever its genre, this alternative history has a Symmesian setting for the fictional race, with both polar access and an internal civilisation.

The children's book *Indiana Jones and the Interior World* is borderline Symmesian, with Indy being captured, drugged and transported, via ship, into the Earth from an island off Santiago, Chile. Once inside, he is caught in a power play between the king, and a group wanting to overthrow him and make contact with the Nazis (the book commences in 1928), when together they would conquer both the inner and outer worlds. The inhabitants of the interior are able to pass to the outside via a solar portal that "opened twice a year and only for a few minutes each time" (Macgregor 1), but it transpires there are other portals from the inner world to several places on the surface of the Earth – not just polar areas. Indy works with Salandra, the king's daughter, to stop the opposition group

before they make contact with the Nazis, and in so doing experience all the joys and the horrors of the inner world.

Rudy Rucker's *The Hollow Earth: The Narrative of Mason Algiers Reynolds of Virginia* bears tribute to both Symmes and Poe, mentioning them both by name. The hero here, Mason Reynolds, meets up with Edgar Allan Poe, and later travels with Jeremiah Reynolds<sup>64</sup> to Antarctica to descend into Symmes' Hole using a hot-air balloon. Right at 90°South they fall through the ice into the centre of the Earth to a place of near-zero gravity, but later return to the outer earth by way of a floating bubble, which surfaces through the sea – possibly in the Bermuda Triangle (Rucker 295). Rucker freely borrows themes from both Poe's writing and his life, including Poe's wife, Virginia, who also briefly appears. In the afterword to the book, the "Editor" [of Mason Reynold's narrative] discusses his research into Mason and the hollow earth, giving several references, both real (Symmes, Jeremiah Reynolds, Poe, Wilkes and Stanton), and imaginary (Mason Reynolds' journal). While not strictly following Symmes' method of entering and exiting the hollow earth, this is a Symmesian hollow-earth book from its title to its final pages.

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<sup>64</sup> No relation. Mason Reynolds recounts "[Jeremiah] Reynolds's South Sea pamphlet said he was from Pennsylvania, but my family has been in Hardware since 1710" (67).

As seen above with *Indiana Jones*, the hollow earth is not the sole preserve of adults. Another relevant – but very different– children’s book is Geraldine McCaughrean’s *The White Darkness*, in which the fourteen year old narrator Symone, Sym for short, has an Antarctic fixation, which eventually leads to a trip there, with her uncle. It transpires that Sym’s obsessive uncle is on a search for Symmes’ Hole, and this most modern of searches will not be by ship or plane, but overland by Hagglund, a tracked vehicle. Despite the calming reassurance of assistance of Sym’s constant friend-in-her-head, Titus Oates (of Captain Scott’s polar party), they fail to find any polar hole other than several deep crevasses, and hence no inner world. So, in this respect, *White Darkness*, while clearly linked to, and engaged with Symmes’ ideas, is not Symmesian fiction.

Finally, returning the fictional circle almost to its commencement with *Symzonia* in 1820 is a small self-published book from 2008: “John Seaborn’s” *Return to Symzonia: An Antarctic Adventure* has the hero visit his father, a scientist at the South Pole station, in the present day. He is out walking one day and falls into a crack in the ice, and eventually, after some wandering, through into the interior of the Earth. There he experiences some brief adventures, and is eventually carried on a river back to the outside world – to arrive just off the Antarctic continent. Despite its name, the book is not really Symmesian, in that the hero’s travels through the Earth (although polar located) are more passage-like than concerned with

polar openings, and the interior is more subterranean, with a system of caves, than a hollow earth in the Symmes sense.

Throughout all these novels, Symmes' legacy is evident, either through a character within the story-line, when his theory is discussed, or by the location of the plots within the hollow earth coupled with the method of accessing that hollow earth via holes at the North or South Poles. That other themes are present, or that Symmes is incidental to the plot, is irrelevant to this thesis. That his name and his theory are present in some form or another is sufficient for his legacy to have continued; it shows a continuing cultural awareness of both Symmes and *Symzonia*.

## **Conclusion: Symmes' Lasting Legacy**

The aim in this thesis has not been to determine whether or not Symmes was crazy and his theories nonsense. Rather, it is to suggest that his achievements were substantial despite the later falsification of his theory: this one man either independently thought up the notion that the Earth was hollow (even though others had published this theory previously, it is entirely possible that Symmes was unaware of their writings), or codified much of the previous thinking about a hollow earth into a simple to understand theory, which was able to be understood by “the masses.”

Following on from Symmes' broadsheets and memoranda, and particularly *Symzonia* in 1820, the presence of Symmes' publications had a definite legacy in several books that followed, including obviously those which directly addressed his theory, but also those of Poe, Leslie, Verne and Lyon (within his generation), although these authors may have been influenced also by writings prior to Symmes. These books may have been influenced not only by Symmes' theory but also by *Symzonia*.

Symmes is most probably not the author of *Symzonia*. He did not have the time; his energies were more directed to public speaking and lobbying, and the writing and issuing of his series of broadsheets; and the writing style



and skills needed were quite different between Symmes' broadsheets and *Symzonia*. Nonetheless, *Symzonia* itself became an important literary legacy, alongside Symmes' theory.

Without Symmes' input, it is likely that some form of United States Antarctic exploration would have occurred in any case. That may have been for commercial reasons (new hunting grounds for sealing or whaling), or for nationalistic expansion to counter other countries' exploration and possible territorial claims, for example, the British and French expeditions of circa 1838. However, Symmes and his theory provided one platform on which to pursue the United States Congress for funding for exploration.

Despite all this, the question has to be asked: Did people really believe in Symmes' theory? Clearly there were those who outright disbelieved, but Symmes also had some supporters. However, it is likely that even Reynolds was not a true believer, changing his stance from support to acceptance, then to denial, and finally acting as a major promoter of the theory and using it to push for a program of exploration. For him it appears that Symmes' theory was just an expedience – a means to an end.

Influence is transitory at best, and is sometimes a chance of timing; given enough time, many events will happen of their own accord. Legacy, however, is lasting. What is important to consider here is whether or not

Symmes' theory advanced the time-line of United States' exploration of Antarctica. The evidence provided in this thesis suggests that it did, however, it was not just the notion of a hollow earth, but a veritable campaign by Symmes, and ultimately Reynolds, which finally convinced Congress that there was value in an exploratory expedition.

Poe's *Pym* may be influenced less by Symmes than *Symzonia*, and with a definite lean toward Reynolds, and it may have been an expedience for Poe, looking for a good plot line on which to hang his written-for-market novel. Similarly, later writers possibly owe more to Poe than to Symmes for their inspirations of a hollow-earth setting, but the number of Symmes-themed novels suggests there was a cultural memory, even if it is not explicitly recognised or acknowledged. Symmes' name remains alive in literature with book titles such as *Symmes Hole*, and *Return to Symzonia*. Symmes' presence in literature today is irrefutable, because it is there, and thus his memory – and his legacy – remains.

In exploring Symmes' legacy, further research is required in the literature arena, particularly the literature which may have been an influence on the formation of his theory. While detailed analysis of the contents of Symmes' uncle's library are beyond the scope of this project, this would be one useful direction for further Symmes scholarship. It may yet be possible to locate the actual books from this library, in which case they may also

contain marginal annotations in Symmes' own handwriting indicating his interest, agreeable or otherwise, in some parts of those texts.

There are several bibliographies of hollow-earth interest, and a useful tool for further research would be an annotated bibliography of all hollow-earth fiction, with entries extended to explain methods of entry to the hollow earth, and whether they are true hollow-earth fictions, or subterranean. Several authors have included relevant works in their hollow-earth studies, and on-line Antarctic literature bibliographies include Fauno Cordes' *Tekeli-li* and Elizabeth Leane's *Representations of Antarctica*. An annotated bibliography is beyond the scope of this thesis, but would be a useful resource for future research.

John Cleves Symmes clearly influenced many of those with whom he had direct contact. These people included his son Americus Vesputius Symmes, and James McBride, who both wrote in his defence, and Jeremiah Reynolds who was influenced by Symmes' ideas, and his ability to think and write, and who took up a program of speaking, writing and lobbying in support of Symmes' ideas. The final page has yet to be written on the authorship of *Symzonia*, so it is not possible to know whether or not "Captain Adam Seaborn" ever met with Symmes, or heard him speak, but "Seaborn" was clearly influenced by Symmes' ideas, and influenced in a way that extends beyond the possible expediency of Reynolds.

The primary people influenced directly by Symmes (McBride, Reynolds and Americus Symmes) in turn became an influence on those who followed. The United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842 owes as much to Reynolds as to Symmes, but without Symmes, Reynolds would possibly not had the idea or the platform from which to launch his campaign for the Expedition. The books of McBride and Americus Symmes, some fifty years apart, bracketed the period in which the Exploring Expedition was planned and executed. McBride's book, possibly written with the assistance of, and definitely the guidance of Symmes himself, helped to establish and expand Symmes' theory of a hollow earth. It assisted in the campaign to commence exploration, whereas Americus Symmes' book, written well after his father's death but with father's papers at hand, was instrumental in re-focussing the world to the theory of a hollow earth, and re-presented Symmes' theory to the world. A world about to be bombarded by the literary adventures which shortly would proceed to explore it – again and again.

Symmes' greatest legacy is probably the body of fiction set in, or in some way connected to, the hole which bears his name. "Symmes Hole" is still a mythical place, but one to which fictional explorers still travel from time to time. Whether or not Symmes himself wrote *Symzonia* is not so important as that it was written and based closely on his theory. and that from this one novel have come so many others. Symmes has left a lasting legacy.

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