



# BIZARRISM

**Strange Lives**

**Cults**

**Celebrated Lunacy**

**Fig. 1.**

**Chris Mikul**

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# TALES OF THE HOLLOW EARTH

**I**'m all for common sense — in certain situations. But I've always got time for a bit of wild, uninformed speculation. And what better to speculate wildly about, from the comfort of your armchair, than the vast, unexplored interior of our own planet? Sure, those boring old scientists tell us that the earth is solid, that there's nothing down there but rock and a lot of rather frightening red-hot magma, but then, to borrow the immortal words of Mandy Rice-Davies, "They would, wouldn't they?"

Such was not always the case. Cosmological theories involving a hollow earth were part of orthodox science until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1692 British astronomer Edmund Halley — he of comet fame — in an attempt to explain variations in the measurements of the North Magnetic Pole, proposed a world made up of four concentric spheres, one inside the other, each separated by an atmosphere, and all turning about a common axis but at slightly different speeds. In a speculative mood, Halley went on to wonder whether each of these spheres might support life, just as the outer sphere supports us. For Halley, as for many early hollow earthers, one of the reasons for such speculation was simple, if somewhat puzzling to us today — economy. God, they reasoned, would surely not waste the vast interior of a planet by filling it up with rock. (This reminds me of the doddering old Christian Brother I once had as a history teacher, who solemnly told us that the pyramids were so big the Egyptians would not have wasted them on just one pharaoh each.)

Advances in physics and geology soon made theories like Halley's untenable. That left the business of promoting a hollow earth to enthusiastic amateurs, the first and most enthusiastic of them all being an American named John Cleves Symmes. An ex-soldier and frontier trader, Symmes retained Halley's concentric spheres separated by an 'aerial elastic fluid' but added his own idea of twin openings at the poles (the one at the north pole being 4,000 miles in diameter). These holes were joined so that the earth was in effect shaped like a



**The Vision of Cyrus Teed.**

Art: John Vineburg

doughnut, and it was possible to sail into the openings and reach the inner world.

In 1818 Symmes distributed a circular throughout America outlining his ideas and requesting funds to mount an expedition — to be led by him — into the northern opening. Undeterred by the ridicule with which this was generally met, the single-minded Symmes spent the next few years lecturing and hectoring, picking up some prominent supporters along the way (no less than nine petitions advocating Symmes's expedition were debated by Congress). After his death his work was carried on by his son, Americus, who was big on the idea that the interior world was inhabited by the Lost Tribes of Israel.

Other hollow earthers followed in Symmes's wake. One of the more indefatigable was Marshall Gardner, a sewing machine manufacturer whose masterpiece, **A Journey to the Earth's Interior; or, Have the Poles Really Been Reached?** appeared in 1913. Gardner kept Symmes's polar openings but jettisoned the system of concentric spheres, believing instead in the earth as a hollow bubble equipped with an interior sun. Gardner, in Jules Verne mode, wrote vividly of an internal world bursting with lush vegetation and roamed by

animals such as mastodons which were thought to be extinct. As with many of the early hollow earthers, one of Gardner's main themes was that here was a vast amount of land ripe for colonisation by the United States.

Gardner lived long enough to see both north and south poles reached — in 1911 and 1913 respectively — but went to his grave believing that instead of reaching the poles, which of course he did not believe in, the explorers had simply wandered aimlessly around the rims of his vaunted polar openings.

Meanwhile the theory of a hollow earth had been given a novel twist by the social visionary Dr Cyrus Teed. He too postulated a hollow earth warmed by a central sun, but then went on to suggest that we are actually living *inside* such a globe. This is what is known in Hollywood as a 'high concept'.

Teed, who was born in 1839, was a doctor of what would now be called alternative medicine and a dabbler in 'electro-alchemy'. One night he was sitting in his alchemical laboratory in New York, pondering the mysteries of the universe, when he had a strange and erotic vision. A beautiful, golden-haired, purple-robed woman appeared who told him he had been reincarnated many times — once as Jesus Christ — and revealed to him the secrets of the cosmos. Teed, as Vernon Howell of the Branch Davidians would do many years later, adopted the name of Koresh (Hebrew for Cyrus) and began preaching his revelation to his patients, most of whom thought him unhinged. Undaunted, he moved to Chicago and during the 1880s acquired a large number of — mostly female — followers, attracted by the man's magnetic personality.

There was a lot more to Teed's ideas than an eccentric cosmology. Like many 19<sup>th</sup> century idealists he dreamed of setting up a utopian community, a New Jerusalem, the capital of the world. His opportunity came in 1890 when a German settler in Florida was persuaded to sign over 320 acres on Estero Bay to the Koreshans. Teed moved about a hundred of his followers there and set up the **Koreshan** Co-operative and Communistic Society, run, as its name suggests, on communist lines. Alcohol and tobacco were forbidden and celibacy was recommended for the community's upper echelons. Women occupied an exalted position in Koreshanity. The community was ruled by Teed, his long-time companion Anna Ordway, whom he had renamed Victoria Gratia, and a council of seven women representing the seven planets. (The fact that the majority of Teed's followers were women led, not surprisingly, to allegations of sexual impropriety on his part, but for once these seem to have been unfounded.) Teed's community prospered, with its population reaching 200 by the turn of the century.

According to Teed's cosmology, the sun, moon, stars — indeed everything we can see — are inside the earth and outside there is nothing. It was all quite literally a return to the womb — that of the earth goddess, the beautiful girl of his vision. Teed nevertheless continued to think of himself as a scientist, and cast about for some proofs. To this end, a device called the Rectilineator was

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constructed out of large T-squares, and over several months in 1897 experiments were carried out with it which proved that the earth was indeed, as Teed's theory required, concave. A large sign above the entrance to the **Koreshan** community proudly proclaimed "WE LIVE ON THE INSIDE".

Teed's mistake was to go into politics. Growing dissatisfied with the Democrats, for whom he had previously instructed his followers to vote, he formed the Progressive Liberty Party, which began to look like it might do well in the 1904 election. The tensions this caused led to a public brawl between Koreshans and locals, during which Teed was beaten about the head. He never fully recovered from his injuries and died three years later. His followers, expecting his body to undergo 'Theocrisis' (i.e. disappear in a flash of electro-alchemical light), laid it in state and watched, only to see it decompose. Eventually the health authorities forced them to bury it and the community Teed had founded went into a slow decline.

While soon forgotten in America, Teed's ideas had a second lease of life in Germany when several issues of a **Koreshan** magazine fell into the hands of ex-WWI pilot Peter Bender, who was so taken with them he came to believe that he too was a reincarnation of Koresh. He began to promote the 'Hollow Earth Doctrine' or 'Hohlweltlehre' vigorously, aided by the fact that he was friends with several high-level Nazis including Hermann Goering. In 1933 an engineer named Mengerling, who lived in the city of Magdeburg in Prussia, conceived an experiment to test the theory. His idea was a simple one. If we indeed live inside a hollow sphere, then a rocket launched vertically from Germany would, if it travelled far enough, eventually land in somewhere like Australia. Mengerling obtained financial assistance from the city council and the help of several rocket experts in Berlin. Unfortunately rocket technology in 1933 wasn't quite up to this experiment and when, after several test flights, a projectile was launched on 29 June it travelled vertically rather than horizontally (it must have provided a good day out for the locals though). The Hollow Earth Doctrine was put to the test at least once more ten years later. With Germany desperate for new weapons to win the war, the Naval Research Institute financed a study into the theory's naval applications (the idea here being that, if the surface of the earth is concave, objects at a distance — including enemy ships — might be detected by pointing a sufficiently powerful telescope at the sky). When the results of these experiments proved less than promising the Nazis apparently lost patience with Bender: soon afterwards he and his family were carted off to a concentration camp where they perished.

In 1959 Ray Palmer, who had made quite a stir in the '40s by publishing Richard Shaver's stories about an underground race of evil, hypnotising dwarfs called deros, began to promote the idea that flying saucers came not from outer space but from the interior of the earth. His chief piece of evidence for the existence of polar openings — from which UFOs emerged — was the claim that

famed polar explorer Admiral Richard E. Byrd, in expeditions in 1947 and 1956, had flown over the north and south poles and found lands 'beyond' them, facts which Palmer claimed the government had suppressed. Byrd had indeed been on expeditions in these years (although they had in fact both been to the south pole) but the tale of polar openings seems to have been made up by one F. Amadeo Giannini, who wrote about it in his book **Worlds Beyond the Poles**. This tale has proved to be an extremely tenacious one. What was purported to be Byrd's uncensored log of the north pole trip was published as a book in 1990, and excerpts continue to pop up in alternative and conspiracy magazines. In the log Byrd describes flying over rolling green hills and spotting what looks like a mammoth. Suddenly, flying saucers appear, emblazoned with swastikas! Byrd's plane is forced to land and he is met by several blond, German-speaking men who take him to a glowing 'crystal city'. Here he meets the 'Master', who says that they have been observing 'our race' and warns Byrd that we are on a path to atomic destruction. (Byrd had obviously wandered into a variation of the idea that a group of Nazis — usually including Hitler — had escaped Germany in secretly developed flying saucers or 'fluegelrads' and were hiding out beneath the Antarctic.)

The Nazis are also linked to the hollow earth via a cluster of stories about Agharti, a legendary underground city somewhere in Central Asia which is said to be the home of a race of superior beings. Basically a corruption of certain Buddhist ideas (in particular the story of Shamballah, a hidden city which is sometimes thought of as a real place) the legend originated in the writings of a 19<sup>th</sup> century French political philosopher, Joseph-Alexandre Saint Yves, who advocated an authoritarian system called 'synarchy' — as opposed to anarchy. As an example of a society run along such lines, Saint Yves wrote about 'Agharta', which he claimed to have learned about through telepathic communication with the Dalai Lama. With the spelling changed to Agharti, the city was popularised by a Polish scientist and explorer, Ferdinand Ossendowski, in his 1922 blockbuster **Beasts, Men and Gods**. According to Ossendowski's colourful account, he was travelling through Mongolia when a succession of monks and lamas all told him the same strange story. In 1890, they said, a personage with the grand title of the 'King of the World' had ap-

Hitler's escape to the centre  
of the Earth went well, until...



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peared to them to deliver a great prophecy — a tale of coming wars and tribulations which would only end when the King and his subjects emerged from Agharti to bring about peace. Variations of this story have been kicking round for years. In the Nazi version, the city becomes the home of evil Tibetan monks who helped Hitler in his rise to power in the '30s.

The supposed polar discoveries of Admiral Byrd figure largely in Dr Raymond Bernard's **The Hollow Earth**, which is the best-known book on the subject. Bernard — a pseudonym for Walter Stieglitz — was a health food crank and confirmed celibate who had been warning people of a coming nuclear holocaust since the '50s (he lived on an island off Brazil which he claimed was outside fallout range). He also dreamed of a super race of females who reproduced parthogenetically, and came to believe they lived inside the earth. Bernard's attempts to sell land on his island were seen by some as little more than a real estate scam, but it seems that Bernard genuinely believed in the interior world, and he himself suffered at the hands of con men who claimed they could show him a way into it.

Whatever science may say about it, the hollow earth is such a neat and satisfying concept it's unlikely to ever disappear. A recent story doing the rounds of the New Age press told of a 1991 international expedition to the north pole led by Danish scientist Edmund Bork, which had passed through a polar opening and found a land of tropical vegetation, lit by its own sun, with a warm shallow sea and a peaceful population of humans — the ideal holiday destination in fact. Let's face it, we live on the skin of a large rock hurtling at unimaginable speeds through a vast, cold, mysterious and potentially dangerous universe. Wouldn't it be nice to go inside?





**The Vision of Cyrus Teed.**

Art: John Vinberg