

REFLECTIONS

TERRA INCOGNITA

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As anyone with a GPS can testify, there are no unexplored places left on Earth. The gnomes of Google have been everywhere, except, perhaps, for the bottom of the sea, and their busy cameras have mapped every square millimeter and set it down in digital form, so that with a few clicks you can take yourself off to what our ancestors knew as “Terra Incognita”—formerly unknown parts of our planet about which they were free to spin all sorts of romantic fantasies.

Terra Incognita! “Unknown territory” is what that means. There used to be plenty of it. To the Greeks and Romans of the classical era, the known world consisted of the Mediterranean region, extending a little way north into Europe and a little way south into Africa. Aristotle, twenty-five hundred years ago, divided the world into five zones: the torrid zone, lying along the equator; two temperate zones, lying just to the north and south of the torrid zone; and two frigid zones, the Arctic and the Antarctic, at the poles of the Earth. But all that was theory. No one went to look. What was there to see? At the two poles were realms of ice, eternally frozen. Round the middle of the world were the blazing tropics, an endless belt of fearful heat where no man could survive.

Ancient geography reached its culmination about 150 A.D., with the work of an Egyptian geographer named Claudius Ptolemy, who wrote in Greek. He was one of those who believed that a second temperate zone lay beyond the tropics, and he drew fanciful maps of a vast southern continent, a huge land mass that might well be inhabited by people more or less like ourselves, or perhaps by ghastly monsters, a place of terror; but, in any case, forever cut off from the Mediterranean world by the fiery tropics—Terra Incognita Australis, the Unknown Southern Land.

A fourteenth-century map now in the British Museum gives us a whole circus full of bizarre dwellers in that southern land—the Androphagi, “creatures that each other eat,” and the Garamentes, in whose region the waters boil by day and freeze by night, and the Monoculi, who had a single leg and a single eye, and the Antipodes, “who dance in ecstasy and have sixteen fingers”; adjoining these cheerful folk are a tribe “whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders,” and a race without tongues, and one without noses, and one sort of folk whose mouths are so small they can only take nourishment through a straw.

But gradually bold mariners began to chip away at Terra Incognita. By the middle of the fifteenth century Portuguese explorers had crossed the equator and ventured on past it, until in 1498 Vasco da Gama had sailed completely around Africa and reached India. Columbus, meanwhile, had sailed westward across the Atlantic and found the islands of the Caribbean, and a few years later the Portuguese had reached the coast of Brazil, revealing the great continent that is South America—the coast of which the expedition of Ferdinand Magellan traversed until, at a latitude of 52 degrees S., they found a strait that cut across the tip of the continent and led to the Pacific Ocean on the far side.

But beyond it might still lie Terra Incognita Australis, the unknown southern continent. Ever southward went the ships in quest of it. A Spanish explorer thought he had found it in the early seventeenth century, but in 1642 the Dutch sailed completely around it, demonstrating that it was a gigantic island, which we now know as the continent of Australia—“the Southern Land,” but not the

unknown polar continent. That remained for nineteenth-century seamen to find—the icebound land we call Antarctica. Its outlines were revealed by a series of expeditions during that century, culminating in the Norwegian Roald Amundsen's attainment of the South Pole in 1911.

So the mysterious polar continent, speculated about so long, really did exist. But it was bleak and inhospitable, and much of it remained incognita well into recent times: fair game for the fantastic dreams of the early science-fictioneers. One popular notion was that the world was hollow at the poles. The chief theorist of that idea was John Cleves Symmes of Ohio, who tried without success to organize an Arctic expedition in 1818 to find the entrance to the planetary interior, and, failing that, wrote a fantastic novel called *Symzonia: Voyage of Discovery*, published in 1820 under the pseudonym of "Captain Adam Seaborn." In it, explorers aboard a steamboat specially equipped to resist the ice of the southern seas make their way past that barrier to the extreme southern latitudes, where they find that the sea is warm and the compass provides confusing information, and it becomes clear that they have sailed through a great hole in the Earth's surface into a strange new subterranean region that they name Symzonia. They find this interior land inhabited by a sturdy race of vegetarians and teetotalers who have created a perfect utopian society—so perfect that the Symzonians, fearful of being corrupted by these rough intruders from the outer world, hastily order them to leave.

Symmes was not merely writing a fantasy: he was trying to stir up interest in a real Antarctic expedition. His death in 1829 prevented that; but there was enough public interest in the idea to launch three such expeditions, a French one in 1837 and a British one in 1840, and, most significantly, an American one under the command of Charles Edward Wilkes, which, backed by a Congressional grant of three hundred thousand dollars, took to the sea in August 1838 and spent the next four years traversing the south polar seas.

In the course of his voyage, Wilkes skirted the coast of Antarctica for fifteen hundred miles, proving beyond doubt that the polar region was an immense continent, not, as some thought, simply a group of detached islands. When he returned, he found himself accused by officers who had a grudge against him of a "deliberate and wilful falsehood" in claiming to have discovered continental land, forcing him to stand trial. He was found not guilty, and the five volumes of his expedition report, published between 1847 and 1849, are one of the great documents of Antarctic exploration.

Even as Wilkes was preparing to set out, Edgar Allan Poe was writing the last of the great fantasies of Terra Incognita, his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Published in July 1838, just weeks before Wilkes' departure, it is a marvelous tale of maritime adventure that has retained its popularity into our own day, even though the Wilkes expedition demonstrated its geographical impossibility just a few years after it appeared.

As the Symmes book does, Poe's posits that the south polar sea is navigable. Though he stayed away from the hollow-Earth theory, he did assert that the Antarctic waters are warm—weirdly hot, in fact—and he invented a race of strange people that lived on the southern continent, utterly black of skin, not brown but black, even unto their teeth. *Everything* there was black, the plants and animals, even the water.

The natives are definitely not friendly, and, with wild cries of "*Tekeli-li, Tekeli-li*," they attack the white-skinned intruders, killing most of them and driving the narrator and one companion into hiding. These two survivors escape in a native canoe, paddling through milky water too hot to touch, and the last we see of them is as they approach "a limitless cataract" toward which the current carries them at "a hideous

velocity.” Poe leaves us with one of the strangest cliffhangers in all fiction:

“Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from behind the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li!* as they retreated from our vision . . . and now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.”

The end, right there. No explanation of the giant figure or of how Arthur Gordon Pym extricated himself from the perils of the polar regions. In a note that follows the last scene, Poe tells us that the final two or three chapters of Pym’s memoir have been lost. Perhaps he could not devise a proper resolution, or perhaps he had simply tired of writing such a long work.

Jules Verne, an admirer of Poe’s work, was among the many who were annoyed with the inconclusiveness of *Pym*, and in 1895 went to the trouble of writing a sequel to it himself, *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields*, which was translated into English as *An Antarctic Mystery*. Set eleven years later, it recounts the adventures of an expedition retracing Pym’s route. But by 1895 Norwegian explorers had actually set foot on the Antarctic mainland, and Verne, whose policy it was always to stay close to accepted fact even in his most imaginative novels, had no truck with warm polar seas, lost races, or mysterious gigantic figures. *The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields* provides us with a prosaic scientific explanation, altogether rational and plausible and devoid of all magic and mystery, of the giant white creature that Arthur Gordon Pym claimed to have seen.

Even though the twentieth-century polar expeditions of Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton, and Byrd meant that Antarctica was no longer Terra Incognita, enough of its interior remained unknown, so that as late as 1935 H.P. Lovecraft was able to set one of his finest stories there, the novella “At the Mountains of Madness.” Here he postulates a mountain range higher than the Himalayas at the center of the continent, and behind it a plateau where an alien race had established a great city in the time of the dinosaurs. The ruins of that ancient city are still there—Lovecraft takes us on a breathtaking tour of it—and even some of its inhabitants still survive. (With a tip of his hat to Poe, Lovecraft has them cry, “*Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*”).

But the coming of aviation made it possible to survey even the most remote parts of Antarctica, and by 1938, when John W. Campbell’s novella “Who Goes There?,” the best of all science fiction horror stories, was published, it adhered closely to all that was then known about its Antarctic setting. Antarctica is still the locale for the occasional science fiction story, as, for example, Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *Antarctica* (1998). But Robinson used a National Science Foundation grant to visit Antarctica himself and check out the territory—no lost races for him!—and the characters of his book navigate by GPS. The south polar continent can still be a setting for outstanding science fiction, as Robinson demonstrated with his usual skill. But, alas, it is Terra Incognita no longer. We will, I fear, never again be diverted by the sort of fantastic tales of our world’s unknown corners that provided such delight as recently as a century and a half ago.