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[p. 6a]

‘The Earth Not a Globe. An Interview with Mr. John Hampden in Springfield Gaol.’

As we reported a fortnight ago, Mr. John Hampden, a gentleman residing at Croydon, who has been a prominent figure of late years in the dispute touching the shape of the earth, was committed for trial by the Orsett bench of magistrates on a charge of libelling, by means of a written postcard, Mr. Alfred Russell Wallace, who has for some time been occupying a residence known as The Dell, at Grays. There were already two indictments impending over Mr. Hampden for libelling the same prosecutor, but he was allowed to be at liberty on his own recognisances. On this last occasion, however, the bench required him to find two sureties of £50 each, and as these were not forthcoming on the occasion he was committed to Springfield gaol. The case will come on for trial at the Assize, which open on the 2nd of March and will no doubt possess considerable interest from the contention—the *fons et origo mali* out of which it arose. That contention was as to the shape of the surface of water, Mr. Wallace holding the accepted theory that it is convex, and Mr. Hampden seeming ready to risk all that he has in the world on the truth of the less popular theory that it is quite flat. As Mr. Hampden’s view is so entirely opposed to the prevalent notion, we had the curiosity to walk up to the gaol, the other day, to see what he had to say in sustentation of the faith that is in him. We were prepared, we confess, to meet a very irrational man, under the influence, and entirely under the influence of a very pronounced craze. But we soon found out our mistake. Mr. Hampden, whom we saw in the usual visitors apartment, and who is a man of advanced middle age and pleasant expression, talked with the exactest coherence, giving at once the plainest and the directest answer to every question we put to him, and never wandering even for a moment into a side issue, and, while we are not prepared to accept his theory, we are bound to say that he can marshal the facts which go, as he thinks, to support it, with conspicuous vigor and skill. To his ability in this regard he adds the manners of a gentleman and the polish, apparently, of high-class education. Narrating the history of his connection with the prosecutor, he said that Mr. Wallace was a private gentleman who, in 1870, when the foundations of the dispute between them were laid, was living in London, and subsequently he took up his abode at Barking, and later still at Grays. Mr. Hampden took exception to the statement, so often repeated, that there was ever a bet between them. A bet, he said, depends upon skill or chance, whereas, in this case, it was a simple undertaking on the part of Mr. Wallace to show that water was convex, like a rainbow, and on his (Mr. Hampden’s part) to show that it was as flat as the floor. The one who failed in this undertaking was to pay the sum of £500 to the other, and each deposited that amount in the hands of Mr. Walsh, editor of the *Field*. A referee was appointed by each party, and Mr. Hampden’s statement is that in case these referees could not agree they were to name an umpire, whose decision should be final. They met to test the question, five years ago exactly, on the banks of the old Bedford canal, which is known to be 20 miles in length and “as straight as a gun barrel.” The experiment took place at a spot not interrupted by bridges for the space of six miles, and Mr. Wallace’s referee contended that the survey incontrovertibly sustained his view that in this space the canal showed a correct proportion to the curve of the earth’s circumference, or in other words, had a fall from the centre of about 21 feet either way. Mr. Hampden’s referee held differently. “The water,” in Mr. Hampden’s words, “was found to be as flat as

the floor of this gaol." The referees disagreeing, should, Mr. Hampden urges, have appointed an umpire, but he alleges that Mr. Wallace, instead of waiting for an umpire to be called in, rushed off at once to the editor of the *Field*, 100 miles away, and stating he had won, received the £1,000, the possession of which he is said to hold up to the world now as a conclusive argument that he sustained his theory. Such is the [justification] Mr. Hampden gives for the post cards which he has of late addressed to Mr. Wallace, and which have led to the present proceedings. As a rule, Mr. Hampden spoke kindly and courteously of the opponents whose names he mentioned during our conversation. He was severe, indeed, upon Mr. Wallace only. Recurring to that gentleman, and having stated that he was the author of a book on the Archipelago, and a member of many learned societies, he observed, with more than a little disdain, that you might often see his name in connection with Darwin's maintaining that mankind originally came from apes. On our asking Mr. Hampden what were the facts upon which he chiefly relied for upsetting the theory of the earth's rotundity, he sharply remarked that there was no occasion to upset what had not been proved and did not exist. For the fact in watching a ship out at sea the hull first disappears from sight, and gradually the upper parts of the vessel, till, last of all, the highest mast is not to be seen, he accepted by saying that it was merely a result of perspective. The same thing, he remarked, would be apparent in the case of a wagon travelling along a road, or in viewing a long line of street lamps; in both cases you would lose sight of the bottom of the object first and gradually of the higher parts. On our objecting that, if you used a telescope, the hull of a ship disappeared from sight while the bottom of a lamp did not, Mr. Hampden met us by saying that a sufficient length of straight line could never be got on a road or street, otherwise the same phenomena precisely would be observed. If the earth were curved, he objected, the ship or wagon disappearing in the distance would turn the horizon at an angle, whereas the hull, as long as it remains in view, was unquestionably level. "I deny," remarked Mr. Hampden subsequently, "that there is such a thing as curve in the world. But it is a mere matter of measurement. There is engineering science enough in the world to determine the exact surface of water, and it ought not to be left as a mere private squabble between myself and Mr. Wallace." Incidentally, he mentioned that within the last three weeks the *Daily News* had published, in connection with the proposal to facilitate communication between England and France, a diagram which showed the line from Dover to Calais to be perfectly straight, whereas, on the convex theory, there ought to have been a difference of 600 feet, that being the proportion of the curve there would be on 30 miles of the earth's circumference, if it were a globe of the accepted size. "If I had published it," was his comment, "people would have said—oh, there's Mr. Hampden with his straight lines again." Reminding him of the old illustration of a ship circumnavigating the world and coming back again to the same spot, Mr. Hampden pooh poohed it as any evidence that the world was round, and said it would be just as reasonable if a man were to walk round the gaol, and on getting back to the place from which he started declare the building to be a globe. It is not easy to communicate clearly the idea of a flat world without the aid of a diagram. It is best perhaps to describe it as an ordinary pasteboard globe, spread out flat, having only the northern centre and a southern circumference; beyond which or even near which, no ship has ever sailed. Mr. Hampden maintains, of course, that the earth is stationary, the sun moving round daily over its flat surface. Immediately under the sun will readily be understood to be the tropics; on either side of these as we travel north or south, the temperature would naturally decrease until the regions farthest distant from the action of the sun, would be found fringed by impassable barriers of ice, providentially provided, we presume, to save inquisitive mortals from trespassing beyond the limits of their world, and which we are in the habit of terming the arctic and antarctic poles. Answering a series of further questions, he said that, as he understood, Mercator's map did not differ materially from the maps which he (Mr. Hampden) had issued; that a lively interest was

being taken in the flat theory in Germany and America, England being always the last in any advanced ideas; that he had himself paid special attention to it because he had studied engineering and had sufficient leisure at his command; that in his opinion any two competent civil engineers could settle the question in an afternoon if they chose, but that they were afraid of running counter to the professional geographers, who were mysteriously allowed to control the common sense of the world; that it would be as reasonable to deny that there are hills and valleys in the world as to deny that there are flats, specimens of which flats were to be found in the fens of Holland and of the Midland counties; that Newton himself assumed facts to get his theory and stated before he died he did not believe in it; that Copernicus said every man was a fool who took his statements for truth; that these masters, having given up their theory, had been out-Heroded, as was generally the case, by their disciples; that he (Mr. Hampden) had in vain challenged the professors and others to discuss the subject on any platform in London; and finally, that his only object was to fight the battle of truth, the flat theory being the theory of ancients and the Bible, which declared the earth to be “immoveable,” and not a revolving sphere, and gave no indication, which there was not a single fact to support, that the planets were inhabited. Mr. Hampden declared, at one juncture of the interview, that despite all the sneers, ridicule, and personal annoyance he might be exposed to, he would contest his question to the end; and we left him under the impression that he was a man who would very likely adhere to his word. Yesterday, through the interest of Mr. Hampden’s son-in-law, a solicitor, at Bristol, two sureties were found in the town of Chelmsford, and the defendant was liberated on bail.]

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2016.