

To a boy of enquiring mind it is a puzzle to grow up around the Wash. From the clay ridges the land has been drained, inland to the fen and seaward to the marsh, and as the peat has shrunk so the drains are left to stand over the fields. There is a smell of guano and decaying brassica, and an overwhelming illusion of water flowing upwards towards the sea.

It was, in short, a land in which it was natural for a boy to ask his mother to tell him what is the shape of the earth and understandable for his mother to reply simply that she supposed that the earth was, well, earth-shaped.

Now the village schools of that time were in some ways remarkably, if unknowingly, progressive. When Teacher marched Standard IV to inspect the crater left in a neighbouring field by a Zeppelin's bomb and duly recorded the object lessons as gravity and patriotism, she could not have known that her successors would squeak enthusiastically of the environment and relevance. She could, however, recall the traditions of rigorous inspection, the catechism and payment by results and knew that no good might come from elliptical, but nonconformist, answers.

It was, therefore, with the aid of an ebony ruler that the boy learned that the earth was round.

A scholarship boy from a humble family could not, of course, understand completely the changing world of the grammar school as masters who had been temporary gentlemen exchanged the mess for the common room and their dedication to the classics for an appreciation of that science of which she had recently had such a prolonged and emphatic demonstration. He could, however, understand the universal basis of the grammar school curriculum, namely the conviction that all previously acquired knowledge was not merely defective but a positive hindrance to the proper understanding and love of learning.

It was, therefore, almost unnecessary to reinforce with the tightly-knotted corner of a gown the evident truth that the earth was a sphere.

All printed references to the Headmaster were followed by the parenthesis "(Sometime Scholar of ...)" and the panelled walls of the school contained the names only of the scholar, the exhibitor and the head - with only the first being the occasion of a half-holiday. Aspirations are conditioned by environment and reproduction is for the schoolmaster a social as well as a biological requirement. And so the boy came to the third year of the sixth form and, like those who went before and came after, heard the three cheerful examples with which the Headmaster illustrated that a gentleman was a man who used words correctly. He learned how it was unforgivable to be a homosexual, but not to pronounce the word as if it had a Latin rather than a Greek root and how a gentleman might urge a girl to expect matrimony but not to anticipate it.

He also learned that the earth was an oblate spheroid.

And so to Cambridge, where he read Geography, wrote long essays, the first and last paragraphs of which were sometimes read by the more diligent tutors, was protected from Apostles by his sense of the moral and from politics by his sense of the absurd. He was also told, privately, secretly and by three separate dons, of the fundamental work with which each had preempted their rivals' exposure of the theory of the oblate geoid.

The principal qualifications for a First and a career as an Education Officer being a good memory and a simple faith in current doctrines, the boy duly achieved both. He became a distinguished representative of a distinguished generation - a man who understood both the opportunities of the Act and its careful balance of powers; became a change of kind and whose genial contempt for small-town solicitors created a happy immunity from the excesses of corporate management. Like most busy men he was, however, more concerned with the practice than the philosophy of his profession and it was many years later, in checking whether he was entirely accurate in describing Circular 10/65 as gibberish, that he chanced on a page of the office dictionary which perhaps revealed the nature of education to him as truly as it defined the word "geoid" for others.

For there he read:

"Geoid - earth shaped."