



All the Voyages Round the World: From the First by Magellan, in 1520, to That of Freycinet, in 1820 (Classic Reprint)

John Galt

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Excerpt from All the Voyages Round the World: From the First by Magellan, in 1520, to That of Freycinet, in 1820

Its superficies, according to the best calculations, occupies 131,701,440 miles, or about two-thirds of that of the whole earth. Philosophers have long speculated about its probable depth, without arriving at any certain conclusion. Some suppose that its bed is not more below than the hills are above the general level of the earth, which, if true, would make it, at most, in particular spots, between five and six miles deep. Buffon considers that its bed is equally irregular with all other surfaces, which we have better opportunities for examining; that there are numberless depths and shallows; that the greatest depths exist in the vicinity of the highest lands, and vice versa; and that the medium depth of the whole ocean does not, in all probability, exceed one-fourth of a mile. To this there seems no solid objection. The inaccuracy of our knowledge on the point arises from the incompetency of our instruments for sounding, none having yet been invented likely to answer the purpose at any considerable distance from the surface of the sea, though one instance is recorded where it was sounded so far as a mile and sixty-six feet.

The existence, however, of so many islands scattered in all the oceans, affords proof that the sea, far from increasing in depth as we recede from the shore, on the contrary, frequently shallows; and that while some of these irregularities appear as islands above the surface of the water, there are others not so high, known to the navigator as shoals against which he has to guard. Added to these, there are many thousands more of still less elevation, which neither the eye nor the lead and-line can reach, every practical sailor knowing that he cannot always depend upon the latter at a greater depth than 100, or, perhaps, 150 fathoms, but most commonly not to much. Nor is there, in general, much attention paid to this subject except when in the immediate vicinity of land.


As the mountains of the earth form its prominences, so the beds of the different oceans constitute its concavities, of which the largest is that of the Great Pacific, or South Sea, extending from the eastern shore of New Holland to the western coast of America, and occupying nearly one-half of our globe. The second in size is the Atlantic, connecting Europe with America; the Indian Ocean forms the third: to these may be added the Arctic and Antarctic, the Mediterranean, Baltic, and other seas, forming together an amazing body of water. The circumference of the earth, according to geographers, does not exceed 24,912 miles. To sail over this seems an arduous undertaking; but, in fact, to encompass it, a ships usually do, on account of contrary winds, currents, and occasional variations from the direct track, it is necessary for circumnavigators to traverse more than treble this space.

The knowledge of the figure of the earth, by which it was first supposed capable of being sailed round, has been gained solely from the progressive improvements of astronomy. This science is supposed to have made some progress among the antediluvians, whose lives, according to Josephus, the Jewish historian, were purposely prolonged by Providence for its advancement. Noah communicated all that was known on the subject to the Chaldeans, by means of his immediate descendants. The Egyptians succeeded to all the

scientific acquirements of these people, and, according to some writers, first conjectured the earth to be spherical, some time previous to the era of Solomon, the Jewish ruler, by observing the moon to fall into her shadow. This shrewdness of remark indicated considerable advancement in the science.

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