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New Lunar Discoveries

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In August 1835, the American newspaper, *The Sun*, published a series of incredible astronomical reports attributed to Sir John Herschel, one of the leading British scientists of his time. Thanks to a "telescope of vast dimensions and an entirely new principle", Herschel and his team had apparently discovered traces of alien life on the moon, from water and forests to animals and temple-like constructions. Known as the "Great Moon Hoax", the articles were in reality produced by journalist Richard Adams Locke as a way to ridicule theories of the extra-terrestrial proposed by some of his contemporaries. The following extract from "Day Two", in which the astronomers discover animal life, is a fascinating example of 19th-century sci-fi that for some time was taken as truth.

Keywords: 19th Century, Aliens, Great Moon Hoax, Science fiction.

Until the 10th of January, the observations were chiefly directed to the stars in the southern signs, in which, without the aid of the hydro-oxygen reflectors, a countless number of new stars and nebulae were discovered. But we shall defer our correspondent's account of these to future pages for the purpose of no longer withholding from our readers the more generally and highly interesting discoveries which were made in the lunar world. And for this purpose, too, we shall defer Dr. Grants' elaborate mathematical details of the corrections which Sir John Herschel has made in the best tables of the moon's tropical, sidercal, and synodic on which a great part of the established lunar theory depends.

It was about half past nine o'clock on the night of the tenth, the moon having then advanced within four days of her mean liberation, that the astronomer adjusted his instruments for the inspection of her eastern limb. The whole immense power of his telescope was applied and to its focal image about one half of the power of his microscope. On removing the screen of the latter, the field of view was covered throughout its entire area with a beautifully distinct, and even vivid representation of basaltic rock. Its color was a greenish brown, and the width of the columns, as defined by their interstices on the canvass, was invariably twenty-eight inches. No fracture whatever appeared in the mass first presented, but in a few seconds a shelving pile appeared of five or six columns width, which showed their figure to be hexagonal, and their articulations similar to those of the basaltic formation at Staffa. This precipitous shelf was profusely covered with a dark red flower, "precisely similar," says Dr. Grant, "to the Papaver Rhoeas, or rose-poppy of our sublunary cornfields; and this was the first organic production of nature, in a foreign world, ever revealed to the eyes of men."

The rapidity of the moon's ascension, or rather of the earth's diurnal rotation, being nearly equal to five hundred yards in a second, would have effectually prevented the inspection, or even the discovery of objects so minute as these, but for the admirable mechanism which constantly regulates, under the guidance of the sextant, the required altitude of the lens. But its operation was found to be so consummately perfect, that the observers could detain the object upon the field of view for any period they might desire. The specimen of lunar vegetation, however, which they had already seen, had decided a question of too exciting an interest to induce them to retard its exit. It had demonstrated that the moon has an atmosphere constituted similarly to our own, and capable of sustaining organized, and therefore, most probably animal life.

The basaltic rocks continued to pass over the inclined canvass plane, through three successive diameters, when a verdant declivity of great beauty appeared, which occupied two more. This was preceded by another mass of nearly the former height, at the base of which they were at length delighted to perceive that novelty, a lunar forest. "The trees," says Dr. Grant, "for a period of ten minutes, were of one unvaried kind, and unlike any I have seen, except the largest kind of yews in the English churchyards, which they in some respects resemble." These were followed by a level green plain, which, as measured by the painted circle on our canvass of forty-nine feet, must have been more than half a mile in breadth; and then appeared as fine a forest of firs, unequivocal firs, as I have ever seen cherished in the bosom of my native mountains.

Wearied with the long continuance of these, we greatly reduced the magnifying power of the microscope, without eclipsing either of the reflectors, and immediately perceived that we had been insensibly descending, as it were, a mountainous district of a highly diversified and romantic character, and that we were on the verge of a lake, or inland sea; but of what relative locality or extent, we were yet too greatly magnified to determine. On introducing the feeblest acromatic lens we possessed, we found that the water, whose boundary we had just discovered, answered in general outline to the Mare Nubium of Riccoli, by which we detected that, instead of commencing, as we supposed, on the eastern longitude of the planet, some delay in the elevation of the great lens had thrown us nearly upon the axis of her equator. However, as she was a free country, and we not, as yet, attached to any particular province, and moreover, since we could at any moment occupy our intended position, we again slid our magic lenses to survey the shores of the Mare Nubium. Why Riccoli so termed it, unless in ridicule of Cleomedes, I know not; for fairer shores never angels coasted on a tour of pleasure.

A beach of brilliant white sand, girt with wild castellated rocks, apparently of green marble, varied at chasms, occurring every two or three hundred feet, with grotesque blocks of chalk or gypsum, and feathered and festooned at the summit with the clustering foliage of unknown trees, moved along the bright wall of our apartment until we were speechless with admiration. The water, we obtained a view of it, was nearly as blue as that of the deep ocean, and broke in large white billows upon the strand. The action of very high tides was quite manifest upon the face of the cliffs for more than a hundred miles; yet diversified as the scenery was during this and a much greater distance, we perceived no trace of animal existence, notwithstanding we could command at will a perspective or a foreground

view of the whole. Mr. Holmes, indeed, pronounced some white objects of a circular form, which we saw at some distance in the interior of a cavern, to be bona fide specimens of a large cornu ammonis; but to me they appeared merely large pebbles, which had been chafed and rolled there by the tides. Our chase of animal life was not yet to be rewarded.

Having continued this close inspection nearly two hours, during which we passed over a wide tract of country, chiefly of a rugged and apparently volcanic character; and having seen few additional varieties of vegetation, except some species of lichen, which grew everywhere in great abundance, Dr. Herschel proposed that we should take out all our lenses, give a rapid speed to the panorama, and search for some of the principal valleys known to astronomers, as the most likely method to reward our first night's observation with the discovery of animated beings.

The lenses being removed, and the effulgence of our unutterably glorious reflectors left undiminished, we found, in accordance with our calculations, that our field of view comprehended about twenty-five miles of the lunar surface, with the distinctness both of outline and detail which could be procured of a terrestrial object at the distance of two and a half miles; an optical phenomenon which you will find demonstrated in Note 5. This afforded us the best landscape views we had hitherto obtained, and although the accelerated motion was rather too great, we enjoyed them with rapture.

Several of those famous valleys, which are bounded by lofty hills of so perfectly conical a form as to render them less like works of nature than of art, passed the canvass before we had time to check their flight; but presently a train of scenery met our eye, of features so entirely novel, that Dr. Herschel signalled for the lowest convenient gradation of movement. It was a lofty chain of obelisk-shaped, or very slender pyramids, standing in irregular groups, each composed of about thirty or forty spires, every one of which was perfectly square, and as accurately truncated as the finest specimens of Cornish crystal. They were of a faint lilac hue, and very resplendent.

I now thought that we had assuredly fallen on productions of art; but Dr. Herschel shrewdly remarked, that if the Lunarians could build thirty or forty miles of such monuments as these, we should ere now have discovered others of a less equivocal character. He pronounced them quartz formations, of probably the wine-colored amethyst species, and promised us, from these and other proofs which he had obtained of the powerful action of laws of crystallization in this planet, a rich field of mineralogical study. On introducing a lens, his conjecture was fully confirmed; they were monstrous amethysts, of a diluted claret color, glowing in the intensest light of the sun! They varied in height from sixty to ninety feet, though we saw several of a still more incredible altitude. They were observed in a succession of valleys divided by longitudinal lines of round-breasted hills, covered with verdure and nobly undulated; but what is most remarkable, the valleys which contained these stupendous crystals were invariably barren, and covered with stones of a ferruginous hue, which were probably iron pyrites.

We found that some of these curiosities were situated in a district elevated half a mile above the valley of the Mare Fœcunditatis, of Mayer and Riccioli; the shores of which soon hove in view. But never was a name more inappropriately bestowed. From "Dan to Beersheba" all was barren, barren – the sea-board was entirely composed of chalk and flint, and not a vestige of vegetation could be discovered with our strongest glasses. The whole breadth of the northern extremity of this sea, which was about three hundred miles, having crossed our plane, we entered upon a wild mountainous region abounding with more extensive forests of larger trees than we had before seen – the species of which I have no good analogy to describe. In general contour they resembled our forest oak; but they were much more superb in foliage, having broad glossy leaves like that of the laurel, and tresses of yellow flowers which hung, in the open glades, from the branches to the ground.

These mountains passed, we arrived at a region which filled us with utter astonishment. It was an oval valley, surrounded, except at a narrow opening towards the south, by hills, red as the purest vermilion, and evidently

crystallized; for wherever a precipitous chasm appeared—and these chasms were very frequent, and of immense depth—the perpendicular sections presented conglomerated masses of polygon crystals, evenly fitted to each other, and arranged in deep strata, which grew darker in color as they descended to the foundations of the precipices. Innumerable cascades were bursting forth from the breasts of every one of these cliffs, and some so near their summits, and with such great force, as to form arches many yards in diameter. I never was so vividly reminded of Byron's simile, "the tale of the white horse in the Revolution." At the foot of this boundary of hills was a perfect zone of woods surrounding the whole valley, which was about eighteen or twenty miles wide, at its greatest breadth, and about thirty in length.

Small collections of trees, of every imaginable kind, were scattered about the whole of the luxuriant area; and here our magnifiers blest our panting hopes with specimens of conscious existence. In the shade of the woods on the south-eastern side, we beheld continuous herds of brown quadrupeds, having all the external characteristics of the bison, but more diminutive than any species of the bos genus in our natural history. Its tail is like that of our bos grunniens; but in its semi-circular horns, the hump on its shoulders, and the depth of its dewlap, and the length of its shaggy hair, it closely resembled the species to which I first compared it. It had, however, one widely distinctive feature, which we afterwards found common to nearly every lunar quadruped we have discovered; namely, a remarkable fleshy appendage over the eyes, crossing the whole breadth of the forehead and united to the ears. We could most distinctly perceive this hairy veil, which was shaped like the upper front outline of a cap known to the ladies as Mary Queen of Scots' cap, lifted and lowered by means of the ears. It immediately occurred to the acute mind of Dr. Herschel, that this was a providential contrivance to protect the eyes of the animal from the great extremes of light and darkness to which all the inhabitants of our side of the moon are periodically subjected.

The next animal perceived would be classed on earth as a monster. It was of a bluish lead color, about the size of a goat, with a head and beard like him, and a single horn, slightly inclined forward from the perpendicular. The female was destitute of the horn and beard, but had a much longer tail. It was gregarious, and chiefly abounded on the acclivitous glades of the woods. In elegance of symmetry it rivalled the antelope, and like him it seemed an agile sprightly creature, running with great speed, and springing from the green turf with all the unaccountable antics of a young lamb or kitten. This beautiful creature afforded us the most exquisite amusement. The mimicry of its movements upon our white painted canvass was as faithful and luminous as that of animals within a few yards of the camera obscura, when seen pictured upon its tympan. Frequently when attempting to put our fingers upon its beard, it would suddenly bound away into oblivion, as if conscious of our earthly impertinence; but then others would appear, whom we could not prevent nibbling the herbage, say or do what we would to them.

On examining the centre of this delightful valley, we found a large branching river, abounding with lovely islands, and water-birds of numerous kinds. A species of grey pelican was the most numerous; but a black and white crane, with unreasonably long legs and bill, were also quite common. We watched their pisciverous experiments a long time, in hopes of catching sight of a lunar fish; but although we were not gratified in this respect, we could easily guess the purpose with which they plunged their long necks so deeply beneath the water. Near the upper extremity of one of these islands we obtained a glimpse of a strange amphibious creature, of a spherical form, which rolled with great velocity across the pebbly beach, and was lost sight of in the strong current which set off from this angle of the island. We were compelled, however, to leave this prolific valley unexplored, on account of clouds which were evidently accumulating in the lunar atmosphere, our own being perfectly translucent. But this was itself an interesting discovery, for more distant observers had questioned or denied the existence of any humid atmosphere in this planet.

Notes

The full collection of articles that constitute The Moon Hoax by Richard Adams Locke can be found here.

Cover Image: Ralph A. Blakelock, *Moonlight*, c. 1885-1893. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA

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