

THE GREAT MOON HOAX

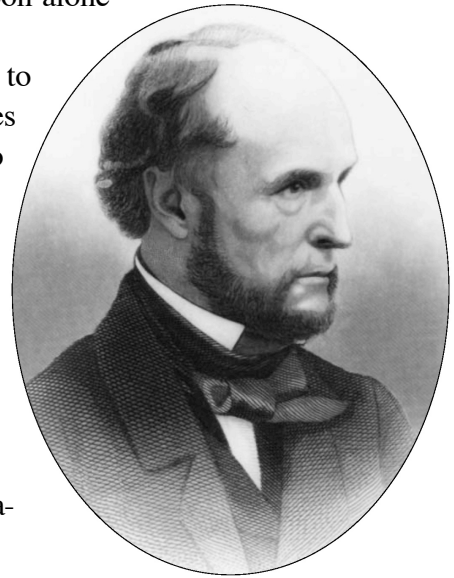
On August 25, 1835, the first in a series of six articles announcing the supposed discovery of life on the moon appeared in the *New York Sun* newspaper.

Known collectively as "The Great Moon Hoax," the articles were supposedly reprinted from the *Edinburgh Journal of Science*. The byline was Dr. Andrew Grant, described as a colleague of Sir John Herschel, a famous astronomer of the day. Herschel had in fact traveled to Capetown, South Africa, in January 1834 to set up an observatory with a powerful new telescope. As Grant described it, Herschel had found evidence of life forms on the moon, including such fantastic animals as unicorns, two-legged beavers and furry, winged humanoids resembling bats. The articles also offered vivid description of the moon's geography, complete with massive craters, enormous amethyst crystals, rushing rivers and lush vegetation.

The *New York Sun*, founded in 1833, was one of the new "penny press" papers that appealed to a wider audience with a cheaper price and a more narrative style of journalism. From the day the first moon hoax article was released, sales of the paper shot up considerably. It was exciting stuff, and readers lapped it up. The only problem was that none of it was true. The *Edinburgh Journal of Science* had stopped publication years earlier, and Grant was a fictional character. The articles were most likely written by Richard Adams Locke, a *Sun* reporter educated at Cambridge University. Intended as satire, they were designed to poke fun at earlier, serious speculations about extraterrestrial life, particularly those of Reverend Thomas Dick, a popular science writer who claimed in his bestselling books that the moon alone had 4.2 billion inhabitants.

Readers were completely taken in by the story, however, and failed to recognize it as satire. The craze over Herschel's supposed discoveries even fooled a committee of Yale University scientists, who traveled to New York in search of the *Edinburgh Journal* articles. After *Sun* employees sent them back and forth between the printing and editorial offices, hoping to discourage them, the scientists returned to New Haven without realizing they had been tricked.

On September 16, 1835, the *Sun* admitted the articles had been a hoax. People were generally amused by the whole thing, and sales of the paper didn't suffer. The *Sun* continued operation until 1950, when it merged with the *New York World-Telegram*. The merger folded in 1967. A new *New York Sun* newspaper was founded in 2002, but it has no relation to the original.



Richard Adams Locke

Following is a facsimile of part of one of the articles.

THE SUN

NEW YORK. AUGUST 25, 1835

GREAT ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES

Lately Made

BY SIR JOHN HERSCHEL, L.L.D., F.R.S., &c.

At The Cape of Good Hope.

[From Supplement to the Edinburgh Journal of Science]

Continued from Yesterday's Sun

On the eastern side there was one soaring crag, crested with trees, which hung over in a curve like three-fourths of a Gothic arch, and being of a rich crimson color, its effect was most strange upon minds unaccustomed to the association of such grandeur with such beauty.

"But whilst gazing upon them in a perspective of about half a mile, we were thrilled with astonishment to perceive four successive flocks of large winged creatures, wholly unlike any kind of birds, descend with a slow even motion from the cliffs on the western side, and alight upon the plain. They were first noted by Dr. Herschel, who exclaimed, 'Now, gentlemen, my theories against your proofs, which you have often found a pretty even bet, we have here something worth looking at: I was confident that if we ever found beings in human shape, it would be in this longitude, and that they would be provided by their Creator with some extraordinary powers of locomotion: first exchange for my number D.' This lense being soon introduced, gave us a fine half-mile distance, and we counted three parties of these creatures, of twelve, none, and fifteen in each, walking erect towards a small wood near the base of the eastern precipices.

Certainly they were like human beings, for their wings had now disappeared, and their attitude in walking was both erect and dignified. Having observed them at this distance for some minutes, we introduced lens H, which brought them to the apparent proximity of eighty yards; the highest clear magnitude we possessed until the latter end of March, when we effected an improvement in the gas-burners. About half of the first party had passed beyond our canvass; but of all the others we had a perfect distinct and deliberate

view. They averaged four feet in height, were covered, except on the face, with short and glossy copper-colored hair, and had wings composed of a thin membrane, without hair, lying snugly upon their backs, from the top of their shoulders to the calves of their legs. The face, which was of a yellowish flesh color, was a slight improvement upon that of the large orang outang, being more open and intelligent in its expression, and having a much greater expansion of forehead. The mouth, however, was very prominent, though somewhat relieved by a thick beard upon the lower jaw, and by lips far more human than those of any species of simia genus.

In general symmetry of body and limbs they were infinitely superior to the orang outang; so much so, that, but for their long wings, Lieut. Drummond said they would look as well on a parade ground as some of the old cockney militia! The hair on the head was a darker color than that of the body, closely curled, but apparently not woolly, and arranged in two curious semicircles over the temples of the forehead. Their feet could only be seen as they were alternately lifted in walking; but, from what we could see of them in so transient a view, they appeared thin, and very protuberant at the heel.

"Whilst passing across the canvass, and whenever we afterwards saw them, these creatures were evidently engaged in conversation; their gesticulation, more particularly the varied action of their hands and arms, appeared impassioned and emphatic. We hence inferred that they were rational beings, and although not perhaps of so high an order as others which we discovered the next month on the shores of the Bay of Rainbows, they were capable of producing works of

art and contrivance. The next view we obtained of them was still more favorable. It was on the borders of a little lake, or expanded stream, which we then for the first time perceived running down the valley to a large lake, and having on its eastern margin a small wood.

“Some of these creatures had crossed this water and were lying like spread eagles on the skirts of the wood. We could then perceive that they possessed wings of great expansion, and were similar in structure to this of the bat, being a semi-transparent membrane

expanded in curvilinear divisions by means of straight radii, united at the back by the dorsal integuments. But what astonished us very much was the circumstance of this membrane being continued, from the shoulders to the legs, united all the way down, though gradually decreasing in width. The wings seemed completely under the command of volition, for those of the creatures whom we saw bathing in the water, spread them instantly to their full width, waved them as ducks do their to shake off the water, and then as instantly closed them again in a compact form.



Images that accompanied the article