

New Light on the Moon Hoax

MICHAEL J. CROWE, *University of Notre Dame*

IN THE September and October issues of this magazine, David S. Evans has presented an interesting recounting of the "Great Moon Hoax" of 1835. While engaged in writing a book on the history of the extraterrestrial life debate in the 1750-1900 period, I have encountered evidence which seems sufficient to prove that in fact the "moon hoax" was not a hoax at all, but rather a satire. A brief survey of pre-1835 ideas on the possibility of lunar life will set the stage for my main arguments.

By the mid-18th century, a number of astronomers had used observations of the sharpness with which the Moon occults planets and stars to cast serious doubts upon the possibility of a lunar atmosphere. Nonetheless, in 1780, just a year before his discovery of the planet Uranus brought him international prominence, William Herschel published a paper on lunar mountains wherein he justified lunar observation by urging that it could lead to such conclusions "as the great probability, not to say almost certainty, of her being inhabited." In a letter sent to the Astronomer Royal in conjunction with this paper, Herschel expressed the hope that Maskelyne would not think him a "Lunatic" because of his feeling that "... were I to chuse between the Earth and the Moon I should not hesitate a moment to fix upon the Moon for my habitation."

Herschel's favorable views of life were shared by Johann Schröter, the Lilienthal astronomer whose telescopic equipment was

second only to that of Herschel. In fact, in his writings, Schröter reported seeing a rich green field, a canal, and even a city on the Moon. The rashness of Schröter's claims was surpassed in the 1820's when Franz von Paula Gruithuisen, from 1826 director of the Munich Observatory, published a number of papers in which he claimed to have sighted lunar roads, fortifications, and other structures.

Astronomers were not alone in populating our satellite; theologians also did their share. Rev. Timothy Dwight, president of Yale from 1795 to 1817, populated most of the universe in the series of 173 sermons which he repeated every four years in a successful effort to bring his Yale undergraduates into America's "Second Great Awakening." These sermons, which may be read in Dwight's *Theology Explained and Defended*, contain such statements as that the stars "are known, with absolute certainty, to be universally suns, resembling our own. . . ." Concerning the Moon, Dwight maintains that "... it is most rationally concluded, that Intelligent beings in great multitudes inhabit her lucid regions, being probably far better and happier than ourselves." Dwight's sermons were so effective that in some years a third of Yale's graduates entered the ministry and very possibly followed Dwight in preaching an extraterrestrially enriched Christianity from their pulpits.

The doctrine of a plurality of worlds played an even larger role in the evangelical movement in early 19th-century Scotland, where Thomas Chalmers was the leading religious figure. Chalmers created a sensation in 1815 when he delivered seven sermons in Glasgow's Tron Church, eloquently blending pluralist ideas with evangelical enthusiasm to the delight of hundreds of listeners. His rapid rise to fame followed as thousands on both sides of the Atlantic read these sermons, published as Chalmers' *Astronomical Discourses on the Christian Revelation*.

The theme used for these sermons became a career for one of Chalmers' fellow Scotsmen. For over three decades, from his Dundee observatory, Rev. Thomas Dick deluged Britain and America with volumes in which astronomy was laced with pluralist religious themes and cosmic speculations. So great was Dick's fame in America that in 1850 an American journal noted: "Perhaps no foreign writer has been more generally read on this side of the Atlantic, for the last twenty years, than Dr. Thomas Dick." In his *Christian Philosopher* of 1823, Dick praised God's wisdom for having placed the Sun at just such a distance as best to "refresh and cheer us, and to enliven our soil. . . ." However, God's providential positioning of our



Rev. Thomas Dick in an engraving from his *The Sidereal Heavens* (1840).

Sun did not for Dick preclude life elsewhere in our solar system, even on the Sun.

In regard to the Moon, Dick called into question Herschel's "observations" of lunar volcanoes with the thought that "It would be a far more pleasing idea, and perhaps as nearly corresponding to fact, to suppose that these phenomena are owing to some occasional splendid illumination, produced by the lunar inhabitants, during their long nights." He went on to offer theological and astronomical arguments for the existence of "sensitive and intelligent" lunarians and even to predict that improved telescopes might furnish an "ocular demonstration" of their existence.

Dick's later books were filled with similar ideas; for example, in his 1828 *Philosophy of a Future State*, he estimated that 2,400,000,000 inhabited worlds exist in the visible universe and in his 1836 *Celestial Scenery* he calculated the populations of each solar system object, even the rings of Saturn! We laugh at such speculations, but American readers apparently took them seriously, one American college even awarding him an honorary doctorate.

With this as background, we may turn to the "Great Moon Hoax." Readers of the Tuesday, August 25, 1835, New York *Sun*, a two-year-old daily with a circulation of 8,000, encountered an article with the headline:

GREAT ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES
Lately Made

By Sir John Herschel, LL.D., F.R.S., & C.
At the Cape of Good Hope

[From Supplement to the Edinburgh
Journal of Science]

Scientifically informed readers may have heard that John Herschel had gone to the



Rev. Timothy Dwight, from a portrait by Col. J. Trumbull. Courtesy Yale University Archives.

Cape to extend his father's observations to the southern skies, but they may not have known that the *Edinburgh Journal of Science* did not then exist. Allegedly written by Dr. Andrew Grant, billed as Herschel's assistant, this first article described Herschel's remarkable telescope, based on "an entirely new principle," which at 24-foot aperture produced a magnification of 42,000, sufficient according to Herschel for the study even of the entomology of the Moon. Although containing only promises that proofs of lunar life would be forthcoming, this first installment raised the circulation of the *Sun* to 12,000.

Wednesday's issue began with descriptions of some geological formations and lunar flowers, but soon, according to Grant, "our magnifiers blest our panting hopes with specimens of conscious existence." Bisonlike brown quadrupeds are then seen as well as a bluish goatlike animal with a beard and a "single horn." Some birds are also spotted and they are on the track of lunar fish as the Moon sets and the installment ends.

Thursday's issue offered even more fantastic animals, but it was the Friday installment which carried the most exciting revelations. With this issue, the *Sun's* circulation rose to 19,360, giving it the largest readership of any paper on this planet. Friday's readers met "Vespertilio-homo," bearded and winged bipeds, walking in clusters, apparently engaged in conversation. These bat-beings indulge in certain "amusements [which] would but ill comport with our terrestrial notions of decorum," but are nonetheless judged to be "rational . . . although not perhaps of so high an order as others which we discovered the next month . . ."

Magnificent churches were also described before the series concluded in the issue of Monday, August 31st, in which it was noted that an accident had incinerated much of the observatory. The same issue also offered for sale a booklet reprinting the entire series of articles; 60,000 copies of this booklet were soon sold.

The most remarkable fact about these articles was that their claims were very widely believed. The *New Yorker* described them as being "of outstanding merit, creating a new era in astronomy. . . ." According to one contemporary report, "Some of the grave religious journals made the discovery a subject for pointed homilies . . ." and, according to another report, a group of clergymen wrote Herschel "beseeching him to inform [them] whether science affords any prospects of . . . conveying the Gospel to residents of the moon. . . ." Of nearby Yale it was said that "Nobody expressed or entertained a doubt as to the truth of the story" and, President Dwight being dead, Professors Loomis and Olmstead came to New York to seek further details. According to Edgar Allan Poe, ". . . not one person in ten discredited [the articles]. A grave professor of mathematics at a Virginia college told me

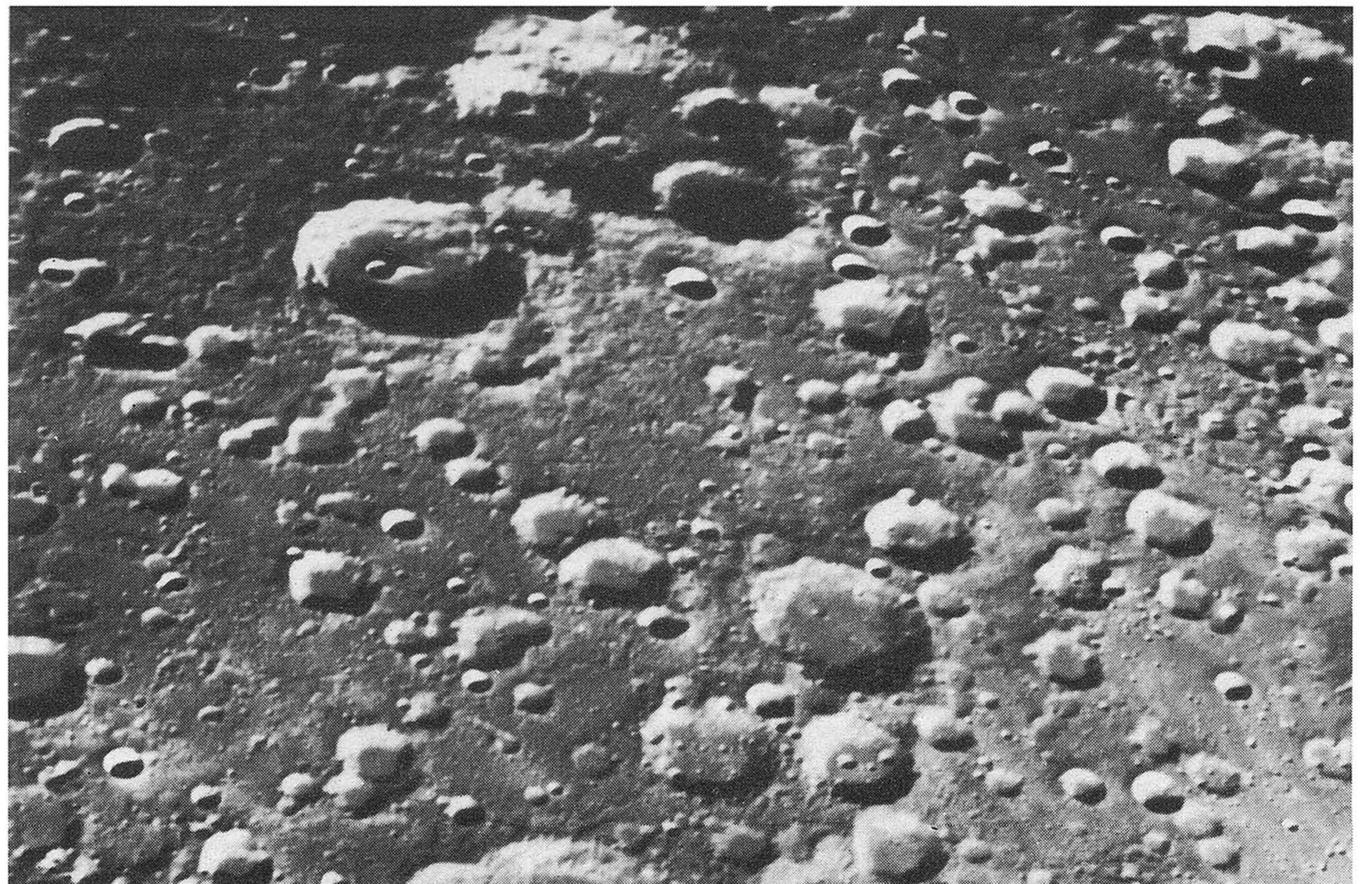


Richard Adams Locke — hoaxer or brilliant satirist?

that he had *no doubt* of the truth of the whole affair."

The bubble finally broke when the *Journal of Commerce* sent a man named Finn to the *Sun* to request permission to reprint the series. He was met by a reporter named Locke who suggested: "Don't print it right away. I wrote it myself."

The scientific expertise shown by Richard Adams Locke (1800-71) in these articles is widely attributed to the education he received at Cambridge University. What is insufficiently appreciated is that *Locke did not write them as a hoax*; rather, as he himself later stated, *he wrote them as satire*, a satire too sophisticated for his Dick- and Dwight-deluded readership. As William Griggs, the editor of an 1852 reprinting, pointed out:



William Herschel thought he would like to live here. Lick Observatory photo.

. . . we have the assurance of the author, in a letter published some years since, in the *New World*, that it was written to satirize the unwarranted and extravagant anticipation upon this subject, that had been first excited by a prurient coterie of German astronomers, and thence aggravated almost to the point of lunacy itself . . . by the religio-scientific rhapsodies of Dr. Dick. At that time the astronomical works of this author enjoyed a degree of popularity . . . almost unexampled in the history of scientific literature.

Any doubts about Locke's satirical intentions may be laid to rest by reading his articles with this suggestion in mind and some knowledge of Dick's fantastic claims. Consider only the example of Locke's lunar beaver which "resembles the beaver of the earth in every other respect than in its destitution of a tail, and its invariable habit of walking upon only two feet. It carries its young in its arms [and lives in] huts . . . constructed better . . . than those of many tribes of human savages, and from the appearance of smoke in nearly all of them, there is no doubt of its being acquainted with the use of fire." The wit of Locke's articles was eventually enjoyed by John Herschel and by the French Academy of Sciences where Arago read them amidst "repeated interruptions of uncontrollable and uproarious laughter."

Thomas Dick, however, did not find them funny. In his 1836 *Celestial Scenery* they served as an occasion for a lecturette directed at persons made gullible by insufficient knowledge of astronomy, and for a sermonette directed at their author. Ranking Locke not as a satirist, but "in the class of liars and deceivers," Dick urged him to remember "that all such attempts to deceive are violations of the law of the Creator, who is the 'God of Truth' . . ." Despite Dick's pronouncement, one may suggest that the "God of Truth" is also the "God of Satirical Truth" who may even have a place for persons like Locke — whose satires, brilliant though they may be, failed at first to find an appreciative audience.