

The Great Moon Hoax: Creatures in the Newspaper

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Six newspaper installments claimed a famous astronomer had discovered strange lunar life. The invented observations became a real publishing sensation, leaving an early lesson in the persuasive costume of scientific authority.

STATUS	Documented newspaper hoax
CLASSIFICATION	STR
MATERIAL	New York, United States; purported lunar observations
DISPOSITION	PUBLIC / SOURCED STORY
CATEGORY	Strange Files
RECORD TYPE	Secrets & conspiracies
STORY HISTORY	1835

THE ACCOUNT

In 1835, New York Sun readers were offered a Moon crowded with life. A series of six articles described creatures supposedly observed by astronomer John Herschel, including batlike people and buildings on the lunar surface. The newspaper supplied its audience with the feeling of witnessing a discovery at a distance. Someone else had looked through the remarkable telescope; everyone else was asked to trust the report.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

The Library of Congress identifies Sun reporter Richard Locke as the author and the supposed scientific reporting as a hoax. The stories were attributed to an invented intermediary, Dr. Andrew Grant, rather than being genuine discoveries by Herschel. Contemporary interest in possible lunar inhabitants helped make the fiction plausible. The articles are historical evidence of a deception, not evidence that any such beings were seen.

WHY IT STAYS WITH US

The campfire in this case was a printing press. A place readers could see overhead but could not inspect closely became an ideal setting for confident invention. The episode keeps its strange charm when clearly labeled: the astonishing event occurred on Earth, where a newspaper briefly gave an imagined world the authority of a scientific report.

WHERE THIS TELLING COMES FROM

Peoples and Creatures of the Moon

Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/finding-our-place-in-the-cosmos-with-carl-sagan/articles-and-essays/life-on-other-worlds/peoples-and-creatures-of-the-moon/>

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