

H-Net Reviews

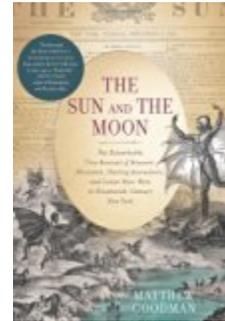
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew Goodman. *The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Dueling Journalists, and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth-Century New York*. New York: Basic Books, 2008. ix + 350 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-00257-3.

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Benjamin Day's "Extravagance": A History of the *New York Sun*

The Sun and the Moon is a mirror image of its primary subject: a most readable, interesting, delightful, well-written, and informative story. Author Matthew Goodman's work leaves the reader entertained, yet, like Goodman, just a bit bemused by these men and their devices to make as much money as they could off the average American citizen, gullible or not. Goodman tells the tale of Richard Adams Locke, his life, his work, and his relationships with New York journalists, as well as the story of (not to mention the fallout from) the *New York Sun*'s man in the moon hoax. There is Locke, there is Edgar Allan Poe, there is P. T. Barnum, there is Benjamin Day, there is James Gordon Bennett, and there is Moses Sperry Beach. The hoaxers and egos that people *The Sun and the Moon* are well worth the time and energy to get to know them so deeply.

The original archival research Goodman did to write this book deserves commendation. He interviewed descendants of some of the players, which adds a certain richness to the tapestry of these men's lives. He scoured archives in England and America and back again. And he ably moved from Day to Locke's father in Britain, back to Day, on to Barnum, back to Locke, then to Poe, next to Bennett—a masterful example of storytelling that makes this a good book for scholars as well as undergraduate and graduate students. Non-academicians interested in the period will also find this book well worth the time. In sum, the text is just a wonderful book to read and it is loaded with well-researched and well-documented his-

torical content.

Day's story is the focus of Goodman's research. Day found police reports to be the most promising content for his new paper, Goodman writes. He hired George Wisner to be his police and court reporter. These police reports, the *New York Evening Post* noted, did not "meet with our approbation, on the score of either propriety or taste.... To say nothing of the absolute indecency of some of the cases which are allowed occasionally to creep into print, we deem it of little benefit to the cause of morals thus to familiarize the community and especially the younger parts of it, to the details of misdemeanor and crime" (p. 37). Really, though, Wisner's police reports were wry and breathtaking in their simplicity: "William Smith, alias Fritz, 'got drunk by drinking too much.' The magistrate informed him that this was the way in which people always got drunk, and admonished him to lead a sober life in the future" (p. 37).

Day believed that his readers wanted to be entertained and informed. In fact, the best newspapers welcomed "bombastic panegyrics, jests, anecdotes, deaths, marriages, conundrums, enigmas, puns, poetry, acrostics and advertisement of every shade and color and form, from grave to gay, form lively to severe" (p. 44). Further, news involved not just the important, the powerful, or the well-to-do but "rather the 'shreds and patches' of everyday life" (ibid.).

So, when Day sought out Locke, who was writing for

James Watson Webb's *Courier and Enquirer*, as a free-lancer to cover the trial of "Matthias the Prophet" (a carpenter-turned-prophet-turned-murderer), a relationship was formed that would make Day a wealthy man and Locke an internationally famous one. Certainly newspaper historians know the story of Day's hiring of Locke after Day bought out Wisner. And every mass media history text tells the story of the great moon hoax, the bat-winged people on the moon as seen through the telescope of England's great Sir John Herschel, as originally published in the *Edinburgh Journal of Science* (which had been out of publication for two years before the hoax, but Locke may not have known). Every mass media history text has an image recreated from Locke's story. And most of the history texts tell of Poe's belief that Locke plagiarized the story from Poe's own "Hans Phaall—a Tale."

Few texts, however, provided proof that Locke was not born in the United States, as he and friends stated. Locke was born in East Brent, a small village in south-western England. His family was of good stock; his father, Richard, brought new farming techniques to Somerset County where the family lived, and advocated land reform to help farmers protect their own acreages. In addition, Richard also was a fine writer who produced substantive histories of Somerset. Although Richard Adams Locke claimed he was a direct descendent of John Locke, the noted philosopher, Goodman reports that, in fact, his great-great-grandfather was John Locke's uncle.

Most histories of Locke do address the drinking that finally led to his inability to work for or run a newspaper, as he tried to do after his stint with the *Sun*. Few texts tell of his financial destitution after he left Day's newspaper and his fragile ability to hold on to a middle-class way of life in the city. The last twenty years of his working life were spent as an inspector of customhouses (though he never became a naturalized citizen, Goodman points out). Locke never reclaimed his standing as a journalist.

And finally, no text delves into the rich, rich history of Herschel and his father William, who was the real pathbreaking astronomer. Sir John, a scholar in his own right, had little interest in astronomy, but felt compelled to complete his father's work at his death. And in so doing, Herschel amassed award after award for his work and became the preeminent astronomer in the world. And so it was that Herschel was completing his father's work—charting the Southern Hemisphere in Cape Town, South Africa—while Day and Locke were turning the *Sun* into a journalistic powerhouse in New York with the great moon hoax. Almost a year after the story ran

(no Twittering or texting going on here) another colorful character, Caleb Weeks, left New York for Cape Town to find an animal as strange as the giraffe for his own wild animal show. He asked at the hotel for Sir John. And of course, Herschel was living there. Herschel spent each afternoon in the hotel's back parlor reading the latest journals. Weeks asked for a meeting and reported that when he met Herschel, he had the honor to present him with the American report of Herschel's discoveries. "Surprise passed across John Herschel's face, his large pale eyes growing briefly larger. He was certainly flattered by the attention, he said after a moment, but he could not conceive how there might be an American report of his activities, as he had not yet written a report on the subject himself" (pp. 224-225).

Weeks left Herschel a copy of "A complete account of the latest discoveries in the moon" and left the astronomer to read. "No more than a few minutes later John Herschel strode into the room in a state of great excitement. 'This is a most extraordinary affair!' he exclaimed. 'Is this really a reprint of an Edinburgh publication, or an elaborate hoax by some person in New York?'" (p. 225). Herschel reportedly told Weeks his real report would be quite humble compared to the *Sun's* story.

As for Locke? In 1850, he wrote to Moses Sperry Beach who was editor of the *Sun* at the time: "Do you have any thing for me to do? My family is in a state of great exigency. If you have, you may depend upon it that, in anything I undertake I can render you effective service. Afford me a chance and you will see" (p. 295).

Goodman wrote that Beach never responded. Locke spent the rest of his career, as noted above, working for the city inspecting customhouses, retiring in 1862, and becoming a recluse, rarely seen outside his house. Despite his fame and his contributions to the *Sun*, when Locke died on February 16, 1871, no paper published his obituary, not even the *Sun*. The only notation was in the *Every Saturday* weekly magazine, which reported that no one seemed to notice when Locke's death was announced: "His brilliant essay made the fortune of the *Sun* newspaper; cravats and soaps and hair-brushes were named after him. He was a perfume in a shop window and the winning horse on the race-course. Since then his popularity has so completely died away" (p. 297).

At least in mass media history texts, Locke's notoriety has not died away. And many thanks to Goodman for bringing him and the New York of the penny papers back to life. The story was fabulous.

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