LONDON 1638 · COMPLETE IN MODERN ENGLISH

The Discovery of a World in the Moon

Is the Moon Inhabited?



JOHN WILKINS · 1638

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The Discovery of a World in the Moon

Is the Moon Inhabited? (1638)

Thirteen propositions that the Moon is a world like ours, with mountains, valleys, seas, air and perhaps inhabitants. Complete in modern English from the London edition of 1638

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Source: John Wilkins, *The Discovery of a World in the Moone. Or, A Discourse Tending to Prove, that 'tis Probable there May Be Another Habitable World in that Planet* (London, 1638; first edition, published anonymously). Rendered into modern English from images of the pages of this edition; engraved title page and diagrams from the same edition.

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PREFACE

A world in the Moon. In 1638 a small book with a bold title, *The Discovery of a World in the Moone*, appeared anonymously in London. It is not a novel or a dream but a chain of thirteen propositions, each proving one point step by step. First the author asks us not to reject an opinion because it sounds strange: the antipodes, too, were once laughed at. Then he shows that many worlds contradict neither reason nor faith, that the heavens are not made of changeless, "incorruptible" matter, and that the Moon is a solid, dark body shining with the Sun's reflected light. Following Galileo's telescope, he finds on the Moon seas and land, mountains, valleys and plains, and vaporous air around it, while to its people our Earth would be a great bright moon. The last proposition asks the question that made the book famous: does anyone live there?

Who Wilkins was. John Wilkins was born in 1614 and died in London in 1672. When the book appeared he was a young Oxford divine of only twenty-four. Later he became one of the leading English men of science. In 1648 he was made Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, and young students of nature met in his rooms, Christopher Wren and Robert Boyle among them. In 1656 he married Oliver Cromwell's sister Robina, becoming his brother-in-law; in 1659 he was briefly Master of Trinity College, Cambridge; in 1660 he was one of the founders of the Royal Society of London and one of its first secretaries; in 1668 he became Bishop of Chester. He also wrote on ciphers and secret writing in *Mercury, or the Secret and Swift Messenger* (1641), on machines in *Mathematical Magick* (1648), and, in the large *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668), devised an artificial language for all nations.

The year 1638. Wilkins wrote when the heavens had suddenly come much closer. In 1609–1610 Galileo turned his telescope on the sky, and in *The Starry*

Messenger (1610) described the Moon's mountains and valleys, four moons of Jupiter and countless new stars. In 1634, after Kepler's death, his *Dream* (our No. 85) appeared, a tale of a journey to the Moon and its people. But only five years before Wilkins's book, in 1633, Galileo had been condemned in Rome for defending the system of Copernicus. In 1638 Bishop Francis Godwin's romance *The Man in the Moone* (our No. 87) was also published in London. Two English clergymen wrote about the Moon in one year: one an adventure story, the other a book of proofs.

How Wilkins argues. In his note to the reader he honestly warns that he promises only probable, not undeniable, arguments, and wrote the work within a few weeks. Twice he cites Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, whose ideas later became the programme of the Royal Society and who taught that knowledge comes from observation, not from ancient authority. Yet he does not discard authorities: he calls witnesses — Plutarch and the old philosophers, Cusanus, the followers of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, even his opponents — and with calm irony shows where they go wrong. His chief rule sounds almost like a motto of modern science: the rule of our opinions is not Aristotle but truth.

Faith and the new science. Wilkins, a clergyman, took Scripture and the Church Fathers seriously. He does not question the Bible but, with St Augustine and others, explains that Scripture adapts itself to the understanding and speech of ordinary people, "as nurses are wont to do with their infants", and is not meant to teach astronomy. So a world in the Moon does not, in his view, contradict faith. On the hardest questions — whether the people of the Moon descend from Adam, and how they could be saved — he speaks with great care, inclining to think they are not men but another kind of creature.

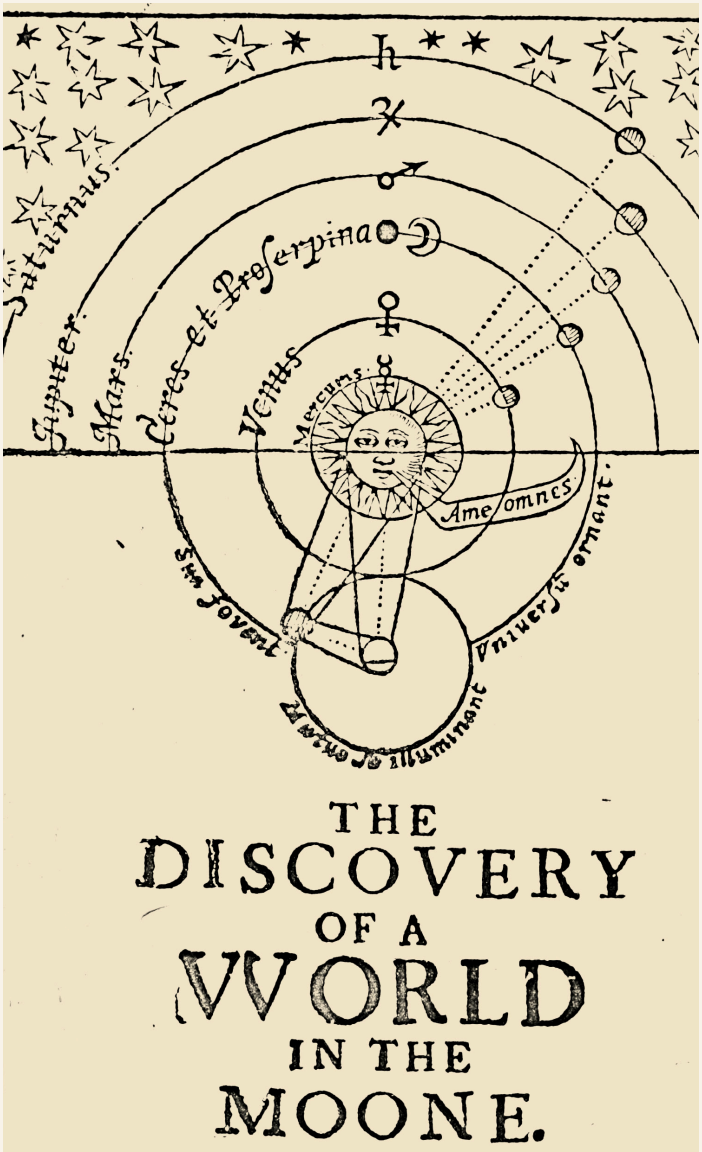
Thirteen and fourteen propositions. The book soon became well known. In the third edition of 1640 Wilkins added a fourteenth proposition — that it is possible for some of our posterity to find out a conveyance to this other world — and bound it with a new work, *A Discourse concerning a New Planet*, arguing that the Earth is a planet. Our translation follows the first edition of 1638, with

thirteen propositions. Yet even its last pages hope that future ages will find a way to know the people of the Moon better.

Influence. Wilkins was one of the first to write about the new astronomy not in Latin but in clear English for a wide readership. His way of thinking, built on observation and testing, later became the path of the Royal Society. The book helped make inhabited worlds a serious subject in Europe; its traces can be seen in Fontenelle and later writers.

Our series "Other Worlds". This book stands at the start of the series. Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638; No. 87) and Cyrano de Bergerac's *The World in the Moon* (1657; No. 88) fly to the Moon on the wings of fantasy; Fontenelle's *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (1686; No. 90) turns the question into a salon conversation; Christiaan Huygens's *Cosmotheoros* (1698; No. 91) reasons about planetary inhabitants as an astronomer; Voltaire's *Micromegas* (1752; No. 92) brings visitors to Earth from Sirius and Saturn; and Emanuel Swedenborg's *Earths in the Universe* (1758; No. 93) tells of spirits from other planets.

Our edition. This is the complete London edition of 1638, rendered sentence by sentence from Wilkins's English into modern English; nothing has been left out or retold. Period words and views are kept as in the original and calmly explained in the footnotes. Wilkins's own margin references are given as footnotes beginning "Margin:". At the beginning is the engraved title page of 1638, within the text Wilkins's woodcut diagrams, and at the start of the propositions modern colour illustrations. At the end each proposition or group has a commentary — "In plain words" and "What science says".



The original engraved title page, London, 1638: the Copernican system of the world, the Sun at the centre ("Ame omnes", From me, all) and below it the Earth and the Moon ("Mutuo se illuminant", They light each other)

TO THE READER

If among your leisure hours you can spare any for reading this discourse, and you hope to find something in it that may serve for your information and benefit, then let me advise you to come to it with an even mind, not swayed by prejudice, but impartially resolved to assent to that truth which, after deliberation, shall seem most probable to your reason. And then I do not doubt that you will either agree with me in this assertion, or at least not think it to be as far from truth as it is from common opinion.

There are two cautions I would willingly give you at the very beginning.

1. That you should not look here for any exact, accurate treatise, since this discourse was only the fruit of some lighter studies, and those too huddled up in a short time: it was first thought of and finished within the space of a few weeks. Therefore you cannot reasonably expect it to be as polished as the subject would perhaps require, or as the author[1] might have made it, had he had more leisure.
2. That you remember I promise only probable arguments for the proof of this opinion, and therefore you must not expect every consequence to follow undeniably, or the truth of each argument to be measured by its necessity. I grant that some astronomical appearances may possibly be explained otherwise than they are here. But the thing I aim at is this: that they may probably be explained as I have set them down here. And if that is granted (as I think it must be), then I do not doubt that the impartial reader will find some satisfaction in the main thing that is to be proved.

1. The book appeared in 1638 without the author's name; he was John Wilkins (1614–1672), a 24-year-old Oxford divine, later Bishop of Chester and one of the founders of the Royal Society of London.

Many ancient philosophers of the better sort have formerly defended this assertion which I have laid down here, and it were to be wished that some of us would apply our endeavours more to the examination of these old opinions. For though they have long lain neglected by others, yet in them you may find many truths well worth your pains and observation. It is a false conceit for us to think that, amid the ancient variety and search of opinions, the best has always prevailed. "Time," says the learned Verulam[2], "seems to be of the nature of a river or stream, which carries down to us that which is light and blown up, but sinks that which is weighty and solid."

It is my desire that by occasion of this discourse I may rouse some more active spirit to a search after other hidden and unknown truths. For it must needs be a great hindrance to the growth of the sciences that men still plod on so upon beaten principles as to be afraid of entertaining anything that may seem to contradict them. An unwillingness to take such things into examination is one of those errors of learning in these times observed by the judicious Verulam. Questionless there are many secret truths which the ancients have passed over, that are yet left to make some of our age famous for their discovery.

If by this occasion I may provoke any reader to an attempt of this nature, I shall then think myself happy, and this work successful.

Farewell.

2. Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam (1561–1626), English philosopher and statesman, champion of the new experimental science; the image of time as a river comes from his Advancement of Learning (1605).

PROPOSITION I



Modern illustration

(By way of preface.) That the strangeness of this opinion is no sufficient reason why it should be rejected, because other certain truths have formerly been esteemed ridiculous, and great absurdities entertained by common consent.

There is an eagerness and hungering after novelty which still clings to all our natures, and it is part of that primitive image, that wide extent and infinite capacity, first created in the heart of man. For since its corruption in Adam, the heart, perceiving itself altogether emptied of any good, now catches after every new thing, thinking it may possibly find satisfaction among some of its fellow

creatures. But our enemy the devil (who still strives to pervert our gifts and beat us with our own weapons) has so contrived it that any truth now seems distasteful for that very reason for which error is welcomed: novelty. For let some upstart heresy be set abroach, and at once there are some who, out of a curious humour, and others, as if they had only been waiting for an occasion to be singular, will take it up as canonical and make it part of their creed and profession; whereas solitary truth can nowhere find so ready a welcome. The same novelty which is esteemed the recommendation of error, and makes that acceptable, is counted the fault of truth, and causes that to be rejected. How the incredulous world gazed at Columbus when he promised to discover another part of the earth! For a long time he could not, by his confidence or his arguments, induce any of the Christian princes either to assent to his opinion or to bear the charges of an experiment. Now if he, who had such good grounds for his assertion, could find no better welcome among the wiser sort and the upper end of the world, it is not likely that this opinion which I now deliver shall receive anything from the men of these days, especially our common wits, but disbelief or derision. It has always been the misfortune of new truths in philosophy to be derided by those who are ignorant of the causes of things, and rejected by others whose perverseness ties them to the contrary opinion — men whose envious pride will not allow anything new to be true of which they themselves were not the first inventors. So I may justly expect to be accused of meddlesome ignorance and bold ostentation, especially since for this opinion Xenophanes[3], a man whose authority was able to add some credit to his assertion, could not escape the like censure from others. For Natalis Comes[4], speaking of that philosopher and this opinion of his, says: *Nonnulli ne nihil scisse videantur, aliqua nova monstra in Philosophiam introducunt, ut alicujus rei inventores fuisse appareant.* "Some there are who, lest they should seem to know nothing, will bring monstrous absurdities into philosophy, so that afterwards they

3. Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570–475 BC), Greek poet and philosopher; ancient writers, Lactantius among them, credited him with the view that the Moon is inhabited.

4. MARGIN: Natale Conti, Mythology, bk 3, ch. 17. Natale Conti (1520–1582) was an Italian humanist whose Mythologiae (1567) was the most popular handbook of classical myth in the 17th century.