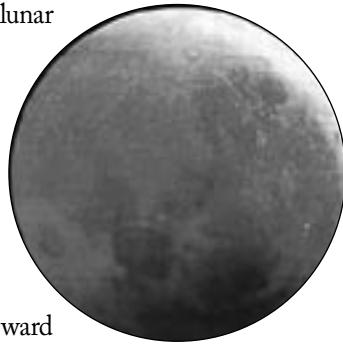




OUR NEAREST NEIGHBOR, VII

By Walt Robinson

Most of us have seen a lunar eclipse. The event is magical. It is one of the few events in recorded history blamed for deaths, turning points in wars and cultural changes for ancient societies. Even today, lunar eclipses account for people carrying out strange rituals to ward off impending doom.



Eclipsed Moon

Probably the most famous historical event connected with a lunar eclipse was the case of Columbus and the Jamaican Natives. The Natives at first treated Columbus almost as royalty. Over time his crew took advantage of them to the point that they cut off all food and amenities to the Europeans. Columbus, aware of an upcoming lunar eclipse, took advantage of the opportunity. He declared to the natives that the Almighty was unhappy. He didn't like the way the Natives were treating Columbus and his sailors. The Almighty would show his disapproval by removing the Moon from the sky. Of course when the eclipse happened, the Natives became terrified and pleaded with Columbus to rectify the situation. Only with the promise from the Natives of food and anything else Columbus and his men wanted, would he intercede and have the Almighty return the Moon. Of course the Natives agreed and with much nodding, smiling and posturing, the deal was



Columbus scaring the daylight's out of the Natives with a lunar eclipse.

sealed. Quite soon thereafter the Moon was its former brilliant self. It is doubtful that Columbus had much more trouble with the Natives.

And there were other lunar eclipses that changed the tide of history. Take for instance the fall of Athens during the Peloponnesian War. The account of this military takeover which took place in B.C. 413 was recorded by Thucydides. During the second major battle of the war, Athens had blockaded the



Warriors preparing for battle (top) before the fall of Athens. The Parthenon (above) is an ancient symbol of Athens.

Sicilian city of Syracuse. After two years of the blockade and sieges, the Athenians were ready to call it quits. On the night of their departure, they realized there was going to be a lunar eclipse, which for them was a bad omen. They delayed their departure. In the meantime, the delay allowed the Syracusans to overpower the Athenians and totally destroy the army and fleet. The Athenians were stunned. Their democracy was overthrown and the defeat resulted in the fatal decline of the jewel of the Greek civilization. Although there were probably other contributing factors for the fall of Athens, the lunar eclipse of B.C. 413 and the military defeat at Syracuse were key factors.

Although disputed by many theologians, it was thought for centuries that the lunar eclipse of March 13, B.C. 4, foretold

of the death of King Herod. (The principal source for the life of Herod is the works of Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote near the end of the first century A.D.) The eclipse occurred on the night after the execution of some Jewish patriots and probably was interpreted as a sign from heaven relating to their deaths. There have been many papers written on the subject of Herod and his lunar eclipse. Through analysis of lunar eclipses, calendars and other writings, it is now believed that Herod actually died sometime in early 1 A.D., after the lunar eclipse of December 29, B.C. 1. Whether or not the B.C. 4 eclipse foretold of his impending death depends on your interpretation.

In the January article I wrote about how, in 1453, the Byzantines were steadfastly defending Constantinople against the Ottomans, and that the Ottomans took advantage of an eclipsed full Moon on May 22 and captured Constantinople. Centuries later, the Ottomans met their fate. As recently as 1917 during World War I, Lawrence of Arabia took advantage of the same superstition to conquer the Ottoman town of Aqaba. As night fell, a lunar eclipse terrified the townspeople, who



Lawrence of Arabia

began beating cooking pots and firing shots into the air to ward away the evil spirits who had, as they believed, hidden the Moon. In the confusion, Lawrence and his Bedouin fighters were able to seize the town without loss.

Recently we had a solar eclipse in Africa. Lunar eclipses and solar eclipses are omens of impending doom for some modernday people. Aeneas Chigwedere, Zimbabwe's Deputy Minister of Education, Sports and Culture, stated that celestial features played a significant role in the lives of pre-colonial tribes of southern Africa. "The abnormality of the Sun or Moon, to them, pointed at an abnormality on earth," Chigwedere said, adding that it pointed at "disaster ... something negative or even human disaster or pestilence". For example, the lunar eclipse in February 1896 was followed a month later by the first Chimurenga war, marking the first uprising against British colonialism.

Lunar eclipses have at times resulted in strange happenings. Traditions and fears have brought about rituals, some of which

continue into the present day. As Americans we are sometimes unaware of the fact that in most of the underdeveloped countries throughout the world, people still continue to "make noise" to scare away whatever is devouring the Moon. As late as the 19th century, the Chinese navy fired cannons off the decks of its ships to scare away the dragon. In Japan, the people once believed that poison dropped from the sky during an eclipse.



Moon-eating dragon

To keep the poison from ruining their drinking water, they covered all their wells during an eclipse. In India, the people also believe a dragon is responsible for eclipses. During an eclipse, the people immerse themselves in water up to their necks, hoping that this kind of worship will help the Sun and the Moon defend themselves against the dragon. Some Eskimos turn over utensils to avoid them being contaminated from the bad rays of an eclipse. In 1974, sixteen people died in Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh when soldiers fired guns to frighten off the monkey they thought was eating the Moon.

And lastly, from the book of Revelations we see the prophecy that will signal the end of time.

I saw when he opened the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake. The sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became as blood. The stars of the sky fell to earth ... For the great day of his wrath has come; and who can stand?" (Revelations 6:12-13, 17 ASV).

Did you know that if you drove your car non-stop at 65 miles per hour, it would take you approximately five months to get to the Moon? Next month I will put some boring Moon facts into a different perspective.

Until then, may moonbeams light your path.



Walt Robinson has been a member of the Astronomical Society of Kansas City since 1987. His present duties include Webmaster for the society's Web site. He has presented many programs at the public nights at Powell Observatory and in Bonner Springs, Kan. where he lives.

Walt also runs the "Robinson Lunar Observatory" to spur interest in the moon among amateur astronomers. His recent "lunar light ray" program brought many amateurs together from across the United States and abroad to study and observe these events. An article written in the Astronomical League's Reflector explained the program, and as a result recruited many more interested amateurs into studying the moon.