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Origin of the Moon

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Already before the launch of Apollo 14 in July 1971, the end of the manned exploration of the Moon had been announced. It was to finish with Apollo 17 in December 1972, I learnt at the first British Moon Conference at Newcastle-upon-Tyne at the end of March 1971. The Conference, organised by Professor S.K. Runcorn of Newcastle University, heard from leading American space scientists what the plans were for Apollo 15, 16 and 17, but also that this would be the end. Apollo 18 and Apollo 19, planned originally by NASA were cancelled by the US Congress. The total length of American manned Moon exploration would thus be only three years and five months.

I found the discussions about the origin of the Moon most interesting and reported fully about these to my newspaper. Present at the Conference was Emeritus Professor Harold Urey from the University of California who had received the Nobel Prize in 1934 for his discovery of deuterium, the isotope of hydrogen. I had met him several times at La Jolla in California where he lived in quiet retirement, and later I invited him to join the Editorial Board of *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews,* which he graciously accepted. He was one of the kindest persons I ever met, immensely learned, of a world-wide reputation, but no longer as fit as he had been. Once when I visited him in La Jolla, his wife received me and urgently asked me to help her lift her husband from the floor where he had fallen and was unable to get up. I was glad to render this small service to him. He died in 1981.

It was due to the great reputation of Runcorn that Urey, then 78 years of age, came to England to speak about the origin of the Moon at the Newcastle Conference. From his work on deuterium he had moved on to the heavy isotope of oxygen-18, to the origin of the elements and to the age of the Earth and of the Moon.

Various theories had been proposed about the origin of the Moon, before and at the Conference, but Urey was of the opinion that the Moon had been 'captured' by the Earth. "Imagine what a very special situation this would give to the Earth. If the Moon had developed independently from the Earth, it might well be much older" Urey said. The theory that the Moon had been torn out of the Earth by giant tides was according to Urey "mechanically doubtful. The loss of volatile elements from the Moon, for example mercury which had not been found in any Moon rocks, makes me very skeptical about this theory" he said.

"If the Moon had been captured we could get observational data on the origin of the whole solar system" was Urey's final conclusion in March 1971 at the British Moon Conference in Newcastle.

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