

Edgar Allan Poe's wonderful flight of fancy.(EDITORIAL)

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Steven Fossett's magnificent achievement in becoming the first balloonist to cross the south Atlantic Ocean brings to mind another aeronautical journey of sorts dating back 154 years.

New York Sun, April 13, 1844: "Astounding Intelligence by Private Express - from Charleston via Norfolk - the Atlantic Ocean Crossed in Three Days!"

The sensational headline was indeed cause for excitement as many New Yorkers celebrated the news of the first Atlantic crossing, by the balloon Victoria. The time, an incredible 75 hours! The Sun office building was besieged for hours as readers waited to purchase a copy of the newspaper proclaiming the event.

The article's author was later to remark, "I never witnessed more excitement to get possession of a newspaper." In the story, he called the Atlantic crossing "unquestionably the most stupendous, the most interesting, and the most important undertaking ever accomplished or even attempted by man." Although very detailed, technical and journalistic in style, the story was nothing more than a tall tale, a hoax committed on the public by a 35-year-old Edgar Allan Poe, who had recently come to live in New York.

The widespread fascination with balloon travel was inspired by the many aeronauts of the time who firmly believed in the possibility of an Atlantic crossing. The newspapers of the day devoted much space to the subject, causing public expectations to run high. Poe, sensing the spirit of the times, used his literary skills, weaving the names of actual people from the aeronautical world into the piece and adding first-person reporting, all of which contributed to the story's success.

Shortly after the one-page broadside was released, other less sensational newspapers exposed the report for the hoax it was. Poe, however, achieved his goal! He had succeeded in deluding the public and at the same time increasing circulation for the New York Sun.

A recent biographer, Jeffrey Meyers ("Edgar Allan Poe - His Life and Legacy," 1992), aptly suggests that "though Poe enjoyed perpetrating a hoax in order to show how easy it was to deceive the public, the story also had a more serious purpose. 'The Balloon-Hoax' is a telling satire not only on human gullibility, but also on the

contemporary infatuation with the idea of progress."

Poe remarked to a friend, "I disagree with you in what you say of man's advancement towards perfection. Man is now only more active, not wiser, nor more happy, than he was 6,000 years ago."

Unfortunately for the many air travel hopefuls, a manned crossing of the Atlantic was not to occur until Aug. 17, 1978, when three Americans in a free-floating balloon passed over south Wales toward the northern part of France.