

THOMAS CONDON

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The death (February 11, 1907) of Professor Thomas Condon ended a life little known among scientists, yet a life of considerable service to geology.

Professor Condon was an unusual man in that he seemed to have no desire to publish the results of his study. There are but few papers, only eight strictly geological, and one book, published over his name. But the writings of the scientists of his day—Le Conte, Dana, Marsh, Cope, and others—are full of references to Dr. Condon, and all of them acknowledge his contribution to science by exploration and theory.

Condon discovered the famous John Day beds which have so enriched our knowledge of Tertiary vertebrates. Here he found some of the specimens of three-toed horses on which Marsh based his theory of the evolution of that animal.¹ In this instance Marsh gave the discoverer scant credit for his work, and the type-specimens remained in Yale Museum until after Marsh died. The same thing happened to many other valuable specimens loaned to Marsh, Cope, Gabb, and others. A fine lot of Pliocene birds from southeastern Oregon, loaned to Cope, were never returned. It was doubtless to the interest of science that these fossils fell into the hands of other men, but it was unjust to Condon not to acknowledge more fully his services, and not to return his specimens. In 1867 Professor Condon printed in the *Portland Oregonian* an account of what he then thought to be the first fossil horses found in America, the same specimens that Marsh described several years later. What a strange contrast between these zealous, ambitious paleontologists, and that lonely, unselfish but no less devoted worker in the wilderness of Oregon!

Condon's best friend and occasional companion was Joseph Le Conte, who accompanied him on several trips, and who always gave

¹ Professor Henry F. Osborn has said: "I believe that Professor Condon deserves the entire credit of the discovery of the Upper Oligocene horses in the John Day." (*Pacific Monthly*, November, 1906, p. 566.)

him the fullest credit when publishing his ideas or observations. These two old lovers of earth-science recall a comparison made by Suess,¹ in writing of an almost unknown geologist, Arnold Escher von der Linth:

On the one side stood Sir Charles,² the calm, superior philosopher, the lucid thinker and able writer; on the other, dear old Arnold Escher, who intrusted his admirable sketches and diaries to everyone indiscriminately, but to whom every line he had to publish was a torment, and who was perhaps only quite in his element up in the snow and ice, when the wind swept his gray head and his eye roamed over a sea of peaks.

From a scientific standpoint Professor Condon's best contribution is doubtless his paper³ on "The Willamette Sound." Condon showed that this Pleistocene body of water filled the Willamette Valley, and extended north to Puget Sound, with a probable length of about three hundred miles. He worked out its extent and depth by means of terraces along the Columbia River and the ocean.

Professor Condon's book, *The Two Islands*,⁴ is a popular account of the geological history of the original "Oregon country." The Klamath mountain group of southwestern Oregon and northern California was an island (Siskyou Island) in the Cretaceous sea, separated from the Sierra Nevada by Diller's Lassen Strait. The Blue Mountains, however, were not an island (Shoshone Island) at the time, for only in the Upper Cretaceous (early Chico) did the sea reach even the western part of the Blue Mountain region. But Condon's treatment of the subject brought out the striking geological difference between the two mountain groups and the rest of the state, showing that they are two regions of Paleozoic and Mesozoic rocks surrounded by Tertiary lavas and sediments.

Thomas Condon was born in Ireland, March 3, 1822. When he was eleven years old, the family moved to New York City; later to the central part of New York state, where Condon finished his education, taught school, and made a collection of New York paleozoic

¹ Preface to *Das Antlitz der Erde*, translation by Hertha Sollas.

² Sir Charles Lyell.

³ "The Willamette Sound," *Overland Monthly*, Vol. VII, No. 5, pp. 468-73 (San Francisco, 1871); Reprinted as a chapter in *The Two Islands*.

⁴ *The Two Islands and What Came of Them*. (Portland, Ore.: The J. K. Gill Co., 1904.)

fossils which later formed the nucleus of his splendid collection at the University of Oregon. He graduated from Auburn Theological Seminary in 1852, married Miss Cornelia Holt, and sailed for Oregon by way of Cape Horn.

For several years he had charge of the Congregational Mission at The Dalles, Oregon, then a small trading-post. It was while stationed at The Dalles that Condon made most of his trips into the interior, generally with military parties, gathering the fine Tertiary mammals in his collection. In 1872 he became professor of geology and natural history at Pacific University, resigning in 1876, to accept the same chair in the newly created University of Oregon. Here he remained until 1905, confining his teaching in later years mainly to paleontology. In these last years Professor Condon was too feeble to go into the field, but he had become so well known that people in all parts of the state were constantly sending him new specimens, knowing well the pleasure these gifts brought to the old naturalist who no longer could gather them himself. They were fresh links to the outdoor world, to the scenes of his early activities that he so enjoyed in memory.

Condon was one of those rare men that study science from an inherent love of nature, not merely for self-advancement, or for the praise of men.

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