

BURSTING BUBBLES FROM THE FLAT EARTH TO APOD

Here I sit in front of my ancient Dell Dimension 1100, poking around the APOD site yet again. What, you may ask, is APOD? I'm glad you asked that question. APOD stands for Astronomy Picture of the Day, a NASA website that offers curious people like me a chance to get a close-up look at the wonders of this amazing, puzzling universe. I've been spreading the word about this site to anyone who will listen.

It's no wonder that humankind has been intrigued by the stars since we first walked on the earth. They're sparkling there night after night, winking magically and mysteriously as we gaze upward in childlike awe and wonder. I still look up at the sky, but these days my eyesight isn't as sharp as it used to be. Besides, I can see much more of that majestic splendour which envelops us and stretches away to infinity by sitting in front of my computer.

I spend countless hours exploring the APOD site. I see some of the most astounding pictures of the universe, ranging from life on this "pale blue dot" as Carl Sagan called it, to almost close-up shots of Alpha Centauri, the nearest star system to earth, a mere 4.3 light years, or 40 trillion kilometres away. The fact that Alpha Centauri A is very much like our sun is creating considerable interest among astronomers. There's the Virgo cluster of galaxies and our next-door neighbour, the Andromeda Galaxy, just 2.5 million light years away, but approaching the earth at breakneck speed. Scientists believe that the Milky Way and Andromeda will merge into one super galaxy around 4.5 billion years

from now. But the union will happen so gradually that any intelligent beings living on the earth at that time won't notice unless they have a really high power telescope or a seat on the latest version of the orbiting Hubble observatory.

Through APOD, we see stars being born in our own galaxy and elsewhere, middle-aged stars like our sun, stars giving off vast explosions of gamma rays as they die, spinning off spectacular supernovae, supergalactic winds swirling through the cosmos at thousands of kilometres per second, galaxies in a never-ending tug of war, and on and on it goes. From the comfort of your swivel chair, you can gape in amazement at galaxies with such telling names as Sleeping Beauty, Sombrero, Fireworks, Pinwheel, and Cartwheel. Or check out the Flaming Star Nebula, Red Square Nebula, the Dumbbell Nebula, the Crab Nebula, the Starburst Galaxy, Tadpole Galaxy, or the Galaxy in a Bubble.

Speaking of bubbles, I was born on Fogo Island. Life on the island in the 1950s was rather like living in a bubble, isolated from the rest of the world. The name Fogo reportedly comes from the Portuguese word *fuego*, which means fire, a supposed reference to the fires the Beothuck had lit on the island. As in many parts of this province, stoking bonfires and *janneying* were two of our strongest traditions. The Flat Earth Society calls Fogo Island one of the four corners of the earth, a curious claim to fame the Islanders haven't quite cashed in on yet. It's still not too late to erect a

Flat Earth billboard at Farewell to entice a few extra visitors onto the ferry bound for Change Islands and Fogo Island. Brimstone Head overlooking the town of Fogo might give the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, Niagara Falls or the CN Tower a run for their money yet. And why not? I've heard it said that if you climb to the top of Brimstone Head and drop a rope down the hole they say is in the middle, the rope will catch fire. I've never had a chance to check out that story because I regret to say I haven't ventured to the summit of Brimstone Head. Maybe someone who has taken part in the annual Brimstone Head Folk Festival can vouch for the veracity of that rope-burning tale.

These days, the Fogo Island ferry is kept pretty busy shuttling travellers back and forth between Man O' War Cove and Farewell, especially during the summer months. Fogo Island is one of the few places which has survived, even prospered, despite the enticements of Joey Smallwood's resettlement program. The Fogo Process and the co-operative movement it has spawned have been hailed and imitated around the globe. Too bad it hasn't been imitated more here in this province where life in the outports is viewed by some in positions of authority as a curiosity rather than the essence of who we were and who we are.