

Strange and lordly encounters

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The House of Lords yesterday had some strange encounters of the third kind with an unidentified flying peer, otherwise known as the Earl of Clancarty, who holds the romantic notion that the Ministry of Defence has a secret file on little green men that it is trying to hide from the rest of us.

Lord Long, who is a Lord in Waiting and not a bit romantic, at least when it comes to flying saucers, stoutly defended the Ministry of Defence, declaring firmly that any interest the Government might have in visitors from outer space was based on the possibility that these objects might be manned by little red men with unpleasant intentions towards our defences.

He pointed out that there had been 750 sightings in 1978, 550 in 1979 and only 350 in 1980. After that, things seemed to have got worse (or better if you are a fan of little green men) and there were 600 sightings in 1981.

An observant Labour peer, Lord Wynne-Jones, suggested that that might have something to do with the advent of a Conservative government and that everyone was going round the bend. On the other hand it could have something to do with the recession, which we are told raises the height of women's skirts and so presumably the number of UFO sightings.

But Lord Clancarty was having none of this frivolity. With an endearing faith in the accuracy of newspaper reports and the single-mindedness of reporters in their eternal searching after truth, he pointed out that last year there had been more than 2,000 authenticated UFO reports in the national press.

Were they passed on to the Ministry of Defence, and if so what happened to them? The noble earl was unable to pierce the defences of Lord Long.

Indeed, Lord Long seemed so concerned to deny any shenanigans by the Ministry of Defence that the more sceptical of his audience might well have leapt to the conclusion that there was something more in this than met the eye.

Lord Paget of Northampton, a former Master of Foxhounds, with his feet firmly in the stirrups, if not on the ground, suggested that flying saucers, identified or unidentified, were no menace to our defences and that a lot of time was wasted on this nonsense.

But by this time Lord Long was firmly on the side of the saucers. The Government, he said, was waiting for an invitation from outer space to discuss these problems. One can only hope that Lord Paget will have a strange encounter on his way home tonight.

That will teach him not to describe little green men as nonsense.

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