

READERS with long memories may recall that six years ago *New Scientist* published an essay by James Oberg entitled "The Failure of the Science of UFOlogy". In it, Oberg roundly criticised UFO researchers for their unscientific approach. The article was followed in 1983 by a pained reply from two British UFOlogists, Jenny Randles and Peter Warrington. *Science and the UFOs* is their attempt to answer Oberg's charges in book form. How well do they fare?

The message of their book is not a new one. It is that UFOs are a mystery worthy of scientific attention. That seems a modest enough claim—yet recall that UFOs have already received more than 35 years of study without gaining scientific acceptance. The authors compare UFOlogy with theories such as continental drift, which was not established for many decades. That comparison is unwarranted, however, for those theories made specific predictions that could be tested by observation. UFOlogy's problem is that it has an abundance of observations which do not seem to fit any theory.

Randles and Warrington, who are not scientists, are neither as eloquent nor as persuasive in presenting their case as was astronomer Allen Hynek in *The*

## Pie in the sky

Science and the UFOs

by Jenny Randles and Peter Warrington, Blackwell, pp 215, £12.50

Ian Ridpath



*UFO Experience* 13 years ago. That book heralded a false dawn for UFOlogy and it seems unlikely that Randles and Warrington's offering will fare any better, particularly when read alongside a good sceptical book such as Robert Scheaffer's *The UFO Verdict*.

Randles and Warrington serve up an all-too-familiar litany of unexplained reports. Yet, as Oberg pointed out, just

because a sighting is unexplained does not mean that it is inexplicable, given more information. It is disappointing to find that their examples include single-witness cases, to which UFOlogists traditionally assign low weighting, as well as several cases that they must know are highly suspect, if not downright fraudulent. As Randles and Warrington say: "Too many UFOlogists are incapable of

seeing the self-inflicted faults of the subject".

Anyone reading this book would not learn of the various groups and individuals who have investigated such reports at least as carefully as Randles and Warrington but who have concluded that there is nothing in it.

I do not consider myself a UFO investigator, but the few cases that I have looked into have not persuaded me that the subject is worth any further time or effort. These cases included one investigated by Randles herself and which, in her last book, she glowingly termed "the world's first officially observed, and officially confirmed, UFO landing and contact". I found prosaic explanations that had been overlooked by Randles and her colleagues.

From time to time, UFOlogists have predicted that proof of the reality of UFOs is just around the corner, yet this prediction has never come true. I will make three predictions of my own: that this book will make no measurable change in the attitude of scientists to UFOs; that UFOs do not represent anything new to science; and that even by 2010 ("the year we make contact", as the film posters have it) UFOlogists will still be chasing forlornly the final proof that never comes. □