

DISCUSSIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

FLYING SAUCERS AND "DOODLEBUGS"

In his book, *Flying Saucers*,¹ Dr. Donald H. Menzel, Professor of Astrophysics at Harvard University, attempts to explode the myth of this phenomenon. The Reviews Committee was asked to bring this volume to the attention of the Society as an example of how fraudulent devices may be exposed by a scientific evaluation of the facts. This is, of course, in reference to the problem of the miracle "doodlebugs" which are constantly being presented to the petroleum industry.

Dr. Menzel is an authority on the principles of optics with special application to interstellar phenomena. He is able to attribute the documented cases of the flying saucers to illusions which result from the passing of light through ice crystals and air lenses; to the Northern Lights, comets, and meteors; to man-made objects such as kites, balloons, planes, search lights; and even to practical jokers. He further establishes the illusory nature of the flying saucer by reviewing similar occurrences throughout history, from biblical times to the newspaper accounts of the scare of 1897.

The two closing chapters review the possibility of a flight to the moon within the foreseeable future and debate the pros and cons of the existence of life on Mars and Venus. Apparently the primary obstacles to a flight to the moon are the sum of five billion dollars and the problem of organizing the earth's scientific talent.

The book is interesting as a well documented collation of the data pertinent to the flying saucer question. The book is not written for enjoyable reading. It is excessively wordy and, as far as its literary qualities go, it is definitely an amateurish effort. As for the conclusions, there are many instances in petroleum exploration where erroneous and costly conclusions have been reached in arguing from the known to the unknown because of the incompleteness of the known facts and because of their incorrect relationships. Two things come to mind. One is contained in the book itself in a direct quotation of the great scientist Thomas A. Edison, who was instrumental in exploding the scare of 1897. During this explanation, Edison correctly described the future airship as a "mechanical contrivance." But he continues by making the absurd prediction that such airships, if constructed, "would be only toys." The second incident is a newspaper item which appeared about the same time as the book *Flying Saucers*. This account briefly described the visit of Field Marshal Montgomery to Canada to inspect a model of a disc-shaped airship which contained within its central area a large gyro. This airship would be capable of reproducing the many characteristics that have been reported about flying saucers. Therefore the question of flying saucers must remain open, but amenable to more authentic solutions after consideration of the evidence presented by Dr. Menzel.

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¹ Published by Harvard University Press, 319 pages, 1953.

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