

EDITORIAL

Some readers evidently think that *Magonia* and its *Monthly Supplement* are far too sceptical. Such readers should be reminded that whereas we have occasionally made the mistake of being too credulous we have never, ever, had to make any kind of apology or correction for being too sceptical.

OPEN AND CLOSED MINDS

Nigel Watson

'UFO hunter at MoD "kidnapped by aliens"' screamed the page 3 headline of the 7 February 1999 edition of *The Sunday Times*. I suppose it was bound to happen. Nick Pope 'claims' he was abducted whilst driving along a Florida road with his girlfriend. I put 'claims' in quotes because the report goes on to say that he does not deny or confirm this story because he has broken up with his girlfriend and does not want to involve her. How gentlemanly of him, how polite, how bloody convenient!

Here we have the author of *Open Skies, Closed Minds* slamming the door on a potentially valuable case. Besides the possibility of embarrassing a former girlfriend he had a couple of other reasons why he kept silent; one was because he was uncertain about what happened to him, and secondly, as an employee of the Ministry of Defence he did not want to be regarded as a crank. Oh dear, what a sensitive soul our man at the ministry is! Of course it could not have crossed his mind that writing UFO books, being interviewed in UFO magazines of dubious character, and coming out as a UFO believer would make the MoD regard him as at least moderately cranky if not exactly barking mad.

For the curious, his encounter story is that of 'Peter and Jenny' which is disclosed in his book, *The Uninvited*. The couple were driving along when they suddenly seemed several miles closer to their destination. A whole section of their journey was missing from their memory, and it was only under hypnosis that Peter/Nick recalled being lifted into a spaceship.

As this publication has noted before, getting hold of corroborative evidence for abductions always seems to hit a brick wall. In cases that have more than one abductee the other person either cannot be traced, does not recollect much, seems totally indifferent to the incident, goes missing - you name it.

Nick Pope's coyness about his own experience is more closed minded and censorial than the ignoring of, or censorship of, UFO reports. Having come this far he should not be allowed to get away with merely saying this was 'some truly bizarre experience'. This just titillates the UFO believers and for the rest of us it hangs around like a rancid red herring.

LITERARY CRITICISM

Nicholas Redfern. *Cosmic Crashes: The Incredible Story of the UFOs that Fell to Earth*, Simon & Schuster, 1999. £16.99

If you wrote a book which you wanted to be taken seriously, would you begin Chapter 1 like this? 'When I began conducting research into the crash of an alien spacecraft somewhere in the United Kingdom during World War Two, not for one moment did I expect that I would ultimately become

embroiled in an investigation that encompassed the deaths of the actress Marilyn Monroe and US President John F. Kennedy.'

Of course, as everyone knows, Kennedy and Monroe - and several other prominent Americans - were killed because they knew too much about the saucers and were about to reveal their secrets, and this could not be allowed to happen. If you tend to believe this kind of story then you will enjoy this book. As we have come to expect from Redfern, we have in his latest work a mixture of solid and painstaking research into official documents and the procedures of government departments, and fantastic yarns told by dubious characters and several notoriously unreliable UFO researchers.

Redfern's attitude to research seems to be to regard one source as being just as good as another, particularly when what he is told is capable of being interpreted as evidence for the ETH. When mundane explanations of apparent UFO incidents are offered to him, he brushes them aside. In his account of the Berwyn Mountain case he relies on the stories told to him by Margaret Fry and Tony Dodd, and others who have an interest in making this case the British Roswell. He dismisses the suggestion that strange lights seen on the mountain were wielded by men out hare hunting as 'a fantastically original theory'. He also appears to take seriously the absurd story told to Tony Dodd by a man claiming to have been a soldier who helped to transport the bodies of dead aliens from the area to Porton Down.

However, in an interview published in the latest issue of *UFO Magazine* (July/August 1999) he already seems to be backtracking a little, if only to grudgingly acknowledge the work of Andy Roberts in providing 'a down to earth explanation for the Berwyn incident'. This brings us to perhaps the most important case discussed in the book, because he links it with an alleged incident on Cannock Chase which is said to have occurred on a night in January 1974.

This story came from a man who said he was a member of a television outside broadcast team who had received a tip-off about the incident. He said that when they arrived at the site of the incident the Army and the police were already there. Apparently two men in a car had seen what looked like a fireball coming down. They thought it was an aircraft crashing. One of the men, named Brummel, got out and went into the field. When he returned he said it was not an aircraft. He is alleged to have told the TV crew that it was a flying saucer.

Now we come to the important part of this story. It is alleged that when they were interviewing the man he was obviously ill, and he was eventually taken to Cotteridge General Hospital, near Woiverhampton, in an Army ambulance, where he died the next morning of radiation burns. Redfern makes no mention of checking that such a death occurred at the date and place stated. If it really happened it would make this the most sensational UFO story yet. Fatalities are occasionally reported in connection with UFO incidents, but they usually seem to occur in conveniently remote villages in South America. However, in his *UFO Magazine* interview, Redfern says: 'Now, I've been looking into the allegations concerning where he was taken, where he died and so on, and have literally hit a brick wall. Not because I can't track people down, but everyone I have tracked down has really clamped up, almost to a level of fear being expressed.'

Note the implication here. He fails to find any evidence of a death caused by severe radiation burns at the time and place in question, so instead of saying the story is almost certainly false he hints at a coverup. Of course, many readers find this approach preferable to that of more sceptical ufologists who are acutely aware that memories often become distorted with the passage of time, and that some people are pathological liars.

Redfern has often consulted Nick Pope in his researches, but he seems unwilling to accept his advice, based largely on his official investigations. Pope, who can hardly be regarded as a sceptic, told him: 'I do not believe there is any evidence to support the crash of any extraterrestrial craft in Britain.'

Yet Redfern persists in raking over old reports and trying to present them in a form which seems to suggest that they might be UFO crashes. For example, he devotes a chapter to the reports of mysterious craters which gained much publicity in the 1960s. Because of his habit of not consulting sceptics, or of ignoring or brushing aside their advice and information, he seems unaware that convincing natural explanations for these reports were provided within a few years of their occurrence.

The most notorious incident was the Charlton crater of July 1963. This gained enormous publicity, and questions about it were asked in the House of Commons. The usual cranks came out of the woodwork to get publicity for their batty theories, but the mystery was solved by Alan Sharp who gave his explanation in a review of Leonard Cramp's book *Piece for a Jig-Saw* (*MUFORG Bulletin*, February 1967).

Sharp explained it as being a classic example of a crater caused by a lightning strike on open ground. 'It displays radiating surface marks, removal of material and a central hole. It was preceded by

a violent thunderstorm accompanied by strong winds and was in an area of considerable storm damage to crops.' (Further information about these craters is available in the archives section of the *Magonia* web site - www.magonia.demon.co.uk.)

Many of the other incidents described in this book would have had their true explanations revealed to Redfern if he had paid more attention to sceptical and cautious investigators, rather than those who apparently see the function of ufology as being to provide entertainment for the masses.

Jack Finney. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Prion Books, 1999, £5.99

Originally published in 1954 as a three-part series in *Collier's Magazine*, titled 'The Body Snatchers', this gripping story of alien possession has served as the direct inspiration for three Hollywood movies.

It was first published in book form in 1955 with the more familiar 'Invasion of . . .' prefix, but Don Siegel's film version, which appeared in 1956, set new standards in science fiction cinema and Cold War paranoia.

Going back to the original book, which has not been available in the UK for the past 20 years, you can appreciate the snappy dialogue and the laughable pulp-fiction earnestness of the characters. Philip Kaufman's 1978 film version is faithful to the book in its references to weird/Forcean news clippings. One of the characters, Jack Belicecs, says he has clipped 'a couple hundred queer little happenings' and the book itself ends:

'You read these occasional queer little stories, humorously written, tongue-in-cheek, most of the time; or you hear vague distorted rumours of them. And this much I know. Some of them - some of them - are quite true.'

This queer story of aliens replicating and replacing humans is the stuff of nightmares. Film experts and SF fans have noted how this taking-over of human minds and bodies is a great metaphor for Communism, and/or the numbing and dumbing effects of modern technological society. In the sectors of ufology where people actually claim to represent aliens, or that their actions are controlled by them, this story is virtually a documentary for their own tortured lives.

Strangely enough the blurb on the book does not mention Abel Ferrara's 1993 release, *Body Snatchers*. At the time, I wrote that this film 'neatly articulates the fear of beings out there that are cold, methodical, emotionless, who by sheer weight of numbers infiltrate and take us over' (*Strange Magazine*, No. 14). In this version the invaders are more clearly metaphors for our growing indifference and fear of our neighbours, the threat of ecological doom and the spread of AIDS.

This book is a key text on the fear of alien invasion and the loss of human identity, and deserves to be on all ufologists' shelves. More importantly it warns us what one too many news clippings can do to us.

Nigel Watson

LETTER

Karl Pflock, in addressing your remarks about there being no cases with multiple independent witnesses 'which cannot be explained with reference to sightings of aircraft or natural phenomena' gives three quality UFO cases which he rates as his favourites (*MMS*, No. 16). Of these three, one can definitely be cast by the wayside and at least one other is of dubious value.

The Rapid City, South Dakota radar-visual multiple witness case was rated very highly by Ruppelt, it is true. He described it as the best unknown in the Blue Book files up to that point (August 1953). He says it was 'thoroughly investigated' but that Blue Book were left with nothing but a big question mark over it.

Not so with Donald Menzel and Lyle Boyd, who adequately dispose of it in their book *The World of Flying Saucers* (1963), pp. 167-171. And if you don't like Menzel's treatment then Gordon D. Thayer, for the Condon Committee, convincingly disposes of it in similar terms on pp. 132-136 of the Condon Report (*Scientific Investigation of Unidentified Flying Objects*, Chapter 5, 'Optical and Radar Analyses of Field Cases'). So much for Ruppelt's investigation, which clearly was not as thorough as he claimed. Ruppelt even got the date wrong. Just because one investigator (even the official USAF one) finds a case compelling in no way proves that it is compelling.

Karl's second case, the Vermillion case in Kansas in June 1950, did not involve independent witnesses as they conferred with each other at the time. The sighting looks good on the basis of the

descriptions given in Loren Gross's history of the events of 1950. However, there was no investigation of any kind so we have only the raw data. The literature abounds with such cases. After reading Allan Hendry's book would anyone take this case at face value? I wouldn't. Rev. Vermillion was reluctant to call it a 'flying saucer' at all!

Karl's case 3, the RB-47 radar-visual of 17 July 1957, has been dealt with by many writers, including the Condon Committee (this time they got the date wrong), Menzel and Taves, Sagan and Page, Klass, Brad Sparks, etc., etc. Naturally, their conclusions differ according to which side of the fence they are on. I prefer to suspend judgement on it. A difficult one yes, but nowhere near good enough evidence for the ETH.

So, shall we say, out of Karl's top three UFOs, at least one and a half belong in the IFO category. Which are your next three, Karl?

Christopher D. Allan, Stoke-on-Trent

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The world has gone Star Wars crazy again, with the release of the long-awaited prequel to the original trilogy. The first Star Wars film was a turning point in the production of blockbuster special effects-filled movies, and for good or evil it is a milestone in Hollywood history. It has also had an equally huge influence on how people conceive of future space exploration and contact with aliens.

Yet in the beginning no one was more surprised than George and Marcia Lucas at the phenomenal success of Star Wars. The film was released on 25 May 1977, and it quickly became more than just another movie. Within two months the film broke all box office records and became the highest grossing film of all time (this honour is currently held by Titanic).

Since 1977 the film has gathered a vast and constantly growing fan following that believes in 'the force' and embraces the characters and narrative structure of this fictional universe. Many of the fans claim the ideas and concepts in these films have shaped their own lives more than anything else. The film has had the same life-shattering impact as a UFO encounter.

Dean Conrad's book helps us understand why Star Wars is so popular by surveying it in 8 chapters, which consist of:

1. A short biography of George Lucas and a chronicle of the Star Wars success story
2. Literary influences on the characters in Star Wars
3. Filmic influences and myth making
4. Science fiction influences
5. How the plot of Star Wars uses cliff-hangers and climaxes
6. Comedy and casting
7. The special effects developed specially for Star Wars
8. Conclusion. Sequels to Star Wars and spin-offs.

As the publisher of this book I am obviously biased, so all I can say is buy it, right now (please). **Nigel Watson**

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