

## EDITORIAL

If it were not for the development of the myth of alien visitations the study of strange aerial phenomena could have become a serious pursuit for amateurs, with the possibility of making useful contributions to scientific knowledge. Unusual phenomena do tend to be ignored or discounted by professional scientists until the accumulation of reliable evidence forces them to take them seriously.

A good example of this is the British tornado. In *The Daily Telegraph* (20 May 2000) Philip Eden notes that until about 50 years ago it was generally agreed among meteorologists that tornadoes never occurred in Britain. An important reference work by Meteorological Office climatologist Ernest Bilham entitled *The Climate of the British Isles*, published in 1938, made no mention of tornadoes. It was not until 21 May 1950, when a tornado caused serious damage in southern England, that British meteorologists began to take them seriously. Of course the British variety is much smaller and less spectacular than the American (everything is bigger in America) but that was hardly an excuse to ignore them.

Our knowledge of British tornadoes owes a lot to the work of amateurs, who continue to provide useful data. Their work is taken seriously by professionals because their data are generally precise and reliable. How different this is from the situation among ufologists, with their batty theories, their occult dabblings and loony conferences. If only the investigation of UFO reports could be pursued in a rational, scientific manner. If only . . .

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## A WEIRD WEEKEND

Nigel Watson

The location is Exwick Parish Hall, on the outskirts of Exeter. It is a hot sunny day. An old sky-blue Mercedes crunches into the hall's car park. The imposing figure of Jonathan Downes steps out of the car and marches into the hall. He shouts across to Nicholas Redfern:

'You bastard! You slap-headed bastard!'

Apparently, Jon had been waiting to pick him up, but Nicholas had got to the hall under his own steam.

This genial banter took place on the second day of a weekend-long event staged by the Exeter Strange Phenomena Research Group, which was drunkenly hosted by Jon (swearing man of Exwick) Downes.

The weekend had begun with a screening of Jonathan's dubious film, *The Owlman & Others*, on the evening of Friday 5 May. A full programme of lectures was held at the hall on the Saturday, and on Sunday there was a guided tour of Dartmoor and its mysteries, followed by a visit to Dartmoor Wildlife Park and talks on big cat sightings.

Emmet Sweeney began the Saturday session with the contention that the construction of pyramids and megaliths was in response to a cometary near-miss. This occurred in 1400 BC and it caused mountains to rise and huge tidal floods. The comet was 'seen' as a giant serpent which came

because the Gods were angry, and it explains why dragon mythology is prevalent throughout the world. Pyramids, and constructions like Silbury Hill, were built for human sacrifices to the Gods so that they would no longer be angry. Sweeney acknowledged that these ideas were developed by Immanuel Velikovsky, whom he regards as a Fortean hero, in his book *Worlds in Collision*.

A member of the audience, Dr Robert Morrell, contested the need to revise the chronology of Egyptian history to fit this theory but he and Sweeney remained at loggerheads. They also had a sustained argument about the validity of dating techniques, with Dr Morrell supporting modern methods and Emmet pouring scorn on the way the establishment sifts and selects its data through dodgy 'scientific' dating procedures. Of course, sifting and selecting is pretty subjective, especially when there are exciting theories to prove . . .

Continuing the theme of serpents and dragons Richard Freeman described the different types of dragons, from heraldic to worm-like that inhabit mythology and legend. He then went on to wonder if such myths came into existence as a way of explaining the discovery of dinosaur bones, or if sightings of large reptiles and snakes could have been responsible. A more imaginative theory is that dragons were real animals, which were able to fly by filling their stomachs with helium gas, and the expulsion of gases through their mouths accounts for their fire-breathing reputation. At the other end of the spectrum, dragons could just be a collective myth, or even thought forms created by the collective unconscious. Whatever your preferences, Richard concluded that dragons are firmly entrenched in our psyche, and they lurk in the shadows of our perception. Considering he was busy swigging from a bottle of lager throughout the talk, I think he was trying to lure dragons from the depths of his psyche, but then that is only one of my dodgy theories.

Worm-like serpents and dragons are said to protect the entrances to tunnels that riddle the area round Marsden Bay, Tyneside. Mike Hallowell revealed that a succession of rabbit-skin wearing hermits, who claimed to be reincarnations of the first hermit, lived in the tunnels. The Romans were thought to have hidden their loot in the tunnels, and several people who lived in them, from the 17th century onwards, suddenly and mysteriously became rich. Had they found the Roman loot, or that of the smugglers and wreckers who plagued the bay over the centuries? Another mystery is that the tunnel entrances attract intense paranormal activity, particularly apparitions of Cavalier soldiers.

Since Jon did not want talks on UFOs or aliens, and wanted a chance for other Fortean topics, my mind was grasping for ufological thoughts. So I relaxed in the thought that F.W. Holiday's *The Dragon and the Disc* neatly linked prehistoric remains with dragon worship and UFOs. In the light of the previous talks you could argue that UFOs are a lingering collective memory of a cometary near-miss, and that the tortured abductees are today's sacrifice to the Gods. How does that sound, Mr Velikovsky?

There was a quiz at 5 p.m. between Jon's team and the visiting speakers. Jon was at his most vocal now; he cursed at the knowledge and/or luck of his rivals, and when asked to calm down a bit he brilliantly replied: 'It's my party and I can swear if I want to.' Fortunately, his team won by one point, so WW3 was avoided.

Looking as if he had been attacked by a gang of blood-sucking vampires, David Farrant gave the next presentation. He sat on a chair next to the stage and said he did not believe in vampires as depicted in Hammer Horror movies. Psychic phenomena exist in three forms, he said. There are image ghosts that have no intelligence, moving poltergeist-type phenomena could be the creations of the subconscious or unconscious mind (he did not rule out many different levels of consciousness) and, finally, there are outside entities that can communicate with humans.

In his mission to investigate sightings of a tall, dark entity, with glowing red eyes, seen near Highgate Cemetery in 1969 and the early 1970s, David became a target for police and media attention. He was arrested by the police when he was conducting a 'psychic seance' at night in Highgate Cemetery. They said he was trying to find a suitable corpse to drive a stake through, which David hotly denied. He was taken to court and dubbed a vampire hunter by the press. Strangely enough the magistrate's name was Christopher Lea. On this occasion he was acquitted, but his fame caused an escalation of desecrations at Highgate Cemetery.

The police were not happy with this situation, and although David avoided Highgate Cemetery after his court case in 1970, by 1972 he was lured to the grave of a pirate in Barnet. A tall, dark, ghostly figure was seen there, but when David went there one night all he saw were eight burly police officers. After being held for three hours, he was finally charged with indecent behaviour with a woman in a churchyard. When it came to court he was fined £10.

In 1973 he went to a burnt-out house in Crouch End, on a mission to communicate with the dead. Since it was a cold winter's night, he and his colleagues lit a fire on a thick tin lid. Residents of a

nearby home must have seen it and reported it to the police. This time he was arrested for arson, and he went to the Old Bailey, but he was acquitted again.

An architect who parked his car outside Highgate Cemetery came back to it to find a skeleton inside it. The police suspected David and raided his flat, where they found material on Wicca, pictures of naked women (nothing obscene, said David) and an altar. The police thought he had robbed a grave, and that he wanted the skeleton so that he could attempt to communicate with the dead. He called the police liars but his real downfall was because, by his own admission, he was guilty of sending two effigies to police officers at Barnet police station. The judge took a dim view of this behaviour, and he gave David two years' imprisonment for sending the effigies and desecration. Apparently, his fellow inmates were reasonably sympathetic to his plight and he had some good conversations about the occult in prison. One can only admire his stubborn refusal not to be swerved from his psychic studies, although this is a lesson in not taking on the law or attracting media attention.

Malcolm Robinson obviously knows how to avoid vampires; he was full of energy and enthusiasm. He began researching UFOs and ghosts in the late 1970s, and was a complete sceptic. Now he thinks there is something real and mysterious going on; in his own experience at haunted houses he has been touched by ghostly presences, he's seen psychic lights, and heard ghostly singing. In dealing with the tabloid press he has seen his investigations sensationalised but without the consequences suffered by David Farrant.

The last talk was by UFO author Nicholas Redfern, who looked at the CIA's involvement with Noah's Ark. Through the Freedom of Information Act, he received a 500-page file titled 'The Ararat Anomaly'. It took two years for the agency to respond to his request, and he had almost forgotten about it. The file tells how, in 1949, a US pilot returning from a spying mission photographed a boat-like structure on Mount Ararat, Turkey. In the 1950s this was taken sufficiently seriously for them to launch an expedition to investigate the 'boat'. Since then the CIA seems to have dropped its interest in the matter, although Nicholas thinks there are more files that have yet to be rediscovered in their archives.

Noah's Ark seems an unlikely candidate for CIA interest, but the agency did set up 'Operation Often' which attempted to use black magic and voodoo to fight the enemies of the US of A. They were certainly willing to use myths and superstitions against their enemies, so it was not a great leap of imagination to use religious discoveries to reinforce Christian, democratic values if the opportunity arose.

As the day progressed Jon Downes got louder and more boisterous, so it is left to our imaginations what he was like the next day on Dartmoor. Nevertheless, the conference was imaginatively put together, with a high calibre of speakers from far-reaching parts of Britain, and I hope it will become an annual event.

Often the people you meet at such conferences are more interesting than the official events, and in this case I had the opportunity to talk to Robert Morrell and Sid Henley. They were the leading lights of the Nottingham UFO Investigation Society (NUFOIS), in the 1970s, and their Meadow Lane headquarters held many meetings and was the home of the original UFOIN files. I visited the place several times, and it was a handy place to conduct research. Over the years, like most UFO groups NUFOIS fell apart, and Meadow Lane is now the base for Robert and Sid's Fortean secondhand book business. They are not so interested in UFOs, and expressed the opinion that modern ufology is not very aware of past research/mistakes. In the light of this I looked up an old issue of NUFOIS's *UFO Research Review* published in the summer of 1975 (price 25p). This contains articles on map reading, radiation and the ufologist, and a long compilation of Scunthorpe UFO reports by Nigel Watson. Interestingly enough there is mention of Dorothy Kilgallen's 1955 report, about British scientists and airmen examining a wrecked 'mysterious flying craft'. The same story appears in Nick Redfern's recently published *Cosmic Crashes* book, but with the passage of time such throwaway bits of gossip become the stuff of grand theories and Government manipulation.

The precarious state of ufology can also be gauged by the fate of the original UFOIN and NUFOIS files. A former member of NUFOIS took them away and neatly filed them in his home. Unfortunately, he suddenly died and his relatives gave Robert and Sid 24 hours to collect them, or they would end up in a skip. They collected the files, which had been tipped unceremoniously out of the filing cabinet, and they passed them on to someone they can no longer remember the name of. When you think of all the effort expended to collect such data, and the territorial in-fighting over cases and witnesses, this story just shows how ufology is but an ephemeral whim.

**NOTES AND NEWS from Nigel Watson** =====

**Changing babies.** David Sivier's article in *Magonia* No. 69 mentions how different cultures in the past have rejected 'difficult' or 'abnormal' children, and branded them as changelings.

On a personal level this is an understandable coping strategy. I have been told about a couple in London who had a Downs Syndrome baby, but they would not accept it as their own. The mother had given birth to four healthy babies previously, and she could not believe her fifth was any different. Both mother and father thought that the staff had swapped this baby with their healthy one and no persuasion would change their minds.

However, they did not totally reject the baby as the mother said she would breast feed it until she got her healthy one back. I don't know what the eventual outcome was, but it looks as if there was a glimmer of hope that they would accept it as part of their family.

Given that such suspicions exist in contemporary 'enlightened' societies, it is no wonder that the notion of changelings was so potent in the past. It is also not such a great leap of imagination to go from hospitals to scientists, to aliens, replacing fetuses or babies for their own purposes.

**Escape from Freedom.** Near the end of 1999 I received a rather strange video called *Freedom 2000*. It was fronted by a woman called Heather Bell who calls on young people in Scotland to fight the repressive forces of the establishment. There are constantly changing images behind Bell as she threatens to blow up buildings, hack bank computers, contaminate petrol and soft drinks. She is quoted as saying: 'We will do what we have to do. It's either freedom or death, whatever is necessary.'

Lothian and Borders Police and the Serious Crime Squad took an interest in the video, and it was not too surprising when I got a letter from Heather Bell which said: 'Unfortunately, due to the unpredictable reactions from the authorities, I have had to leave the country urgently and go overseas temporarily.'

*The Sunday Post* (Glasgow), of 7 and 14 November 1999, featured the stories with the headlines: 'Anarchists threaten to destroy Scots industry' and 'Anarchist flees as Scots group probed'.

This is all sensational stuff, but it isn't exactly what you would expect of a blood-thirsty anarchist video. The background images are all carefully composed and controlled by fancy special effects, and Heather Bell gets to wear virtually everything in her wardrobe. These are very arty and style conscious anarchists. Another problem with the video is that you have to wade through what seems like hours of Bell telling us this is a very subversive, anarchist, revolutionary and naughty video. Any subversive will fall asleep before they find out her plans for the overthrow of Scotland.

Everything became clear when I got another letter from Bell, headed 'Freedom 2000 Was A Huge Hoax!!' But No One Thought It Was Funny!' She went on to say: 'Heather Bell is NOT an anarchist! Heather Bell is a fictional character, an actress, whose aim was to create emotion and unsettle the audience. Well, she certainly did that!!'

Rather than frighten people, Michele Baird, the creator of Heather Bell, claimed *Freedom 2000* is a satire, using ridicule to expose vice and folly. Isn't that what crop circle makers and 'experimental' UFO hoaxers say? I'm sure John Rimmer would agree that these are all cases of art attacks.

**Saucer pictures.** *The Sunday Times* of 26 March shows recently discovered pictures of Project Y. This was a vertical takeoff jet that looked like a flying saucer. It was designed by British engineer John Frost, and was built by Avro-Canada at their laboratory near Toronto. Funding for it ran out in 1954, but Frost continued on a scaled-down saucer-type aircraft, which was nicknamed the Avrocar. Dreams of making the Avrocar an aerial equivalent of the jeep ended in 1961 when US funding was withdrawn.

Over the years these projects have inspired rumours that the British government was the mastermind behind the UFO mystery. Only recently, Nicholas Redfern in *Cosmic Crashes* (Simon & Schuster, 1999, pp. 278-279) suggests that a UFO sighting in 1956 over Manchester was caused by an experimental craft from AVRO's Woodford works. He goes on to state that it was either a back-engineered alien vehicle, or we had advanced terrestrial technology which was kept from the public arena. With such advantages why hasn't British technology dominated the world? Or is it a case of our aliens not being as good as those who have crashed in other countries?

**I'm Jack.** Surprise, surprise, it wasn't the curator who pretended to be Spring-Heeled Jack in the Scooby-Do serial mentioned in the last issue of the *Supplement*. Turns out it was the manager of the Sherlock Holmes Gallery who didn't like working with a hippy slob, and it was his way of closing the gallery and getting out of his work contract.

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