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A NEW TECHNIQUE FOR DETECTING LIFE ON OTHER PLANETS?

IN A RECENT article in the scientific journal *Nature* (1) the authors discuss a model that predicts features of terrestrial planets orbiting nearby stars, that should be discernible in the light curve obtained by low-precision photometry.

“For extrasolar planets similar to Earth, we expect daily flux variations of up to hundreds of per cent, depending sensitively on ice and cloud cover as well as seasonal variations. This suggests that the meteorological variability, composition of the surface (for example, ocean versus land fraction) and rotation period of an Earth-like planet could be derived from photometric observations. Even signatures of Earth-like planet life could be constrained or possibly, with further study, even uniquely determined.”

By making photometric measurements at different wavelengths it might be possible to detect vegetation.

“On Earth vegetation has a dramatic sudden rise in albedo by almost an order of magnitude at around 750 nm, known as the ‘red edge’. Vegetation has evolved this strong reflection as a cooling mechanism to prevent overheating which would cause chlorophyll to degrade.”

Reference

1. Ford, E.B., Seager, S. and Turner, E.L. “Characterization of extrasolar terrestrial planets from diurnal photometric variability”, *Nature*, Vol. 412, 30 August 2001, 885-887

LITERARY CRITICISM

Reviews by Peter Rogerson



Michael David Hall. *UFOs: a Century of Sightings*, Galde Press, 1999. £32.50

This is the first history of ufology and UFO cases by a professional historian since David Jacobs’s *The UFO Controversy in America* a quarter of a century back. As a historian, Hall declines to supply “explanations” for the cases, and notes the problems with the ETH, though readers will detect in his selection of cases, and commentary, a general pro-UFO bias. However, he has little time for Roswell, pointing out that if something as exotic as a spacecraft had been discovered in 1947, it would have been months before anyone realised what they were dealing with. In Roswell they knew what was up at first sight. Hall hints that perhaps some sort of really big military, possibly nuclear, secret was involved. He also has a few kind words to say about Phil Klass.

The strength of this book is the detailed study of the US government policy, and his use of the private papers of Ed Ruppelt, which gives some idea of the complexities involved. Of particular interest is his naming of a new candidate for the ‘father of the ETH’,

the aeronautical engineer Alfred Loedding, who seems to have been the driving force behind the infamous Estimate of the Situation. The trouble is that no one since Ruppelt has seen the Estimate, and we cannot say what the arguments used were, though other Air Force documents from this period suggest that the idea being floated around was that the Martians had seen the nuclear bomb explosions and were coming to see what was going on. Hall has met with members of Loedding's family, and his son claims to have remembered investigating landing reports back in the 1940s. Is this a false memory? If not this is very interesting indeed.

The case reports should be very useful, and there is much early material for the ufologists to get their teeth into. One low-level report from Circleville, Ohio now appears on the basis of the report here to be a CEIII, and there are a lot of cases, which, if they occurred exactly as reported, would be very puzzling indeed. Looking at these stories reminds us of how easy it was in the early 1950s to argue for the ETH. Hall points out that Loedding and others who supported the ETH never had any positive evidence in its favour; they argued from elimination. There is evidence of an exotic technology, it isn't ours, it isn't the Russians', it must be the ETs' (which usually meant the Martians).

Looking at these stories today, what strikes us is that they don't so much represent what we in 2001 would think of as an advanced technology or the work of ETs, but a kind of advanced 1940s and 1950s technology, a mixture of speculative ideas about revolutionary aerospace designs and 1930s comic-book ideas of 'spaceships'. This is the 'advanced technology' of the world before satellites and computers, and remote imaging.

Though Hall notes the role of the Cold War from time to time, I was surprised that as a historian he really paid very little attention to the cultural climate. For example, it seems obvious now how much war-time experience and imagery pervades these stories. The flying saucers behave in many ways like ultra-high-performance German or Japanese fighters, flying in formation, engaging in dog fights, etc. Just how many of the pilot UFO witnesses had been on active service in the war, and how many had been trained either explicitly or implicitly to see an enemy aircraft behind any ambiguous light in the sky and react accordingly? We don't know the answer to that question.

Is it a coincidence that as the War receded into memory, UFO reports become more tenuous, more exotic and "paranormal". Hall notes how ufologists now have become diverted into the pursuit of crashed-saucer rumours and wild abduction stories, because there are no good classical UFO cases around. (It also might be that while access to the Project Blue Book files is relatively simple for anyone willing to fork out for the microfilms, access to the records of civilian UFO groups is next to impossible.)

One should be able to recommend this book as an excellent source of good-quality UFO reports, and when I first obtained it, that's what I intended to do, but reading through it gave me some serious doubts. For I have come to doubt the accuracy of the accounts given, because in a number of cases that I know well, the accounts here are inaccurate; indeed the report of the Hill case is one of the most inaccurate I have come across. Were the reports compiled from memory, reconstructed from hastily written notes, or what? Also, though Hall does introduce more foreign reports than most American UFO writers, I came to the conclusion that his knowledge of the subject was not all that deep. Perhaps one can only evaluate it after being deeply involved for decades.

That caveat means that two of the most important cases in the book, apparent EM-type cases from before the modern UFO wave, need to be re-examined in the original sources. US readers should try to get hold of a magazine called *Sky Trails* for June 1933 and check the story of Colin Murphy who is reported as claiming that, in late September 1926, seventy miles from Salt Lake City his DC4 biplane was 'buzzed' by a sort of wingless cylinder, ninety feet long and eight to ten feet thick. Every time the object came within 150 ft his engine misfired,

EDITORIAL

The outrageous and tragic events of 11 September are a stark reminder that we are all threatened by real dangers, and real and evil conspiracies. Contrast, if you will, these realities with the imaginary dangers and imaginary conspiracies which exercise the minds of far too many ufologists: government conspiracies to hide The Truth about the UFOs; the project conducted by the Greys to produce human-alien hybrids; and other fantasies. Is it too much to hope that many ufologists will now abandon these silly notions and emerge into the real world, to give what help they can to deal with real conspiracies?

forcing him to make an emergency landing only to see the object shoot away.

British researchers need to get access to *History of the III Fighter Squadron RAF*, London Press, 1947, for the following story from 5 July 1933, when at night a flight of four Hawker Fury fighters encountered a "huge circular light" which dropped down from above into the centre of their formation. Captain Nigel Tomkins's engine cut out forcing him to crash land. Another pilot, Bruce Thomas, came even closer, suffering not just an engine failure but burns to his hands and face. Clearly if the book can be traced and confirms that this account is reliable, then all efforts should be made to track down flight logs and other original documentation, check the local press for the period, and even try to track down descendants of those involved. [A preliminary check with the library at the RAF Museum, and the British Library, has failed to trace this book. JR]

British researchers might also like to try to find something more about a vague reference by Ruppelt to an incident on 16-17 January 1947, in which two fighters intercepted a violently moving object over England.

Despite the errors, and the price, this is an important book, and one that ufologists should add to their collection.

Illobrand von Ludwiger. *Best UFO Cases Europe*, National Institute for Discovery Science, 1998. £18.50. This illustrated A4 document presents a number of UFO cases both old and new from Europe, but one cannot say that they are the 'best' cases; most are simply reports of lights in the night. It is possible that some of these may be poorly understood atmospheric phenomena, but my gut feeling is that most if not all would resolve into very conventional IFOs if subjected to detailed, critical investigation. Of course the Belgian triangles and Trans-en-Provence get the obligatory look in.

There is a physical evidence case, a mysterious lump of metal found after an alleged UFO sighting, in Sweden in 1956, first actually investigated, it would appear, some 22 years after the event, though this is difficult to work out. The results of analysis showed that it was made from pulverised tungsten carbide and cobalt, and had nothing special about its manufacture. It comes as no surprise that ufologist von Ludwiger takes the line that until the exact manufacturer and use of the block can be found, it must be assumed to have come from a flying saucer. In other words, assume everything is paranormal until you can prove otherwise. There is one more interesting case, a CEIII from Lake Constance in 1977, but even there I suspect that the main UFO sighting would turn out to be an IFO, and the occupant report a fantasy.

The report also features introductions from representatives of the American UFO establishment, Messrs Maccabee, Schuessler and Haines, the last devoting the space to his own quarrel with the Sturrock committee rather than discussing the work in hand.

Compared with UFO research in the English- and French-speaking worlds, UFO research in Germany has a distinctly cultic character, being largely staffed by disciples of the maverick physicist Burkhardt Heim, and von Ludwiger is no exception. It is unclear whether Heim has any influence outside the ranks of ufologists and paranormals.

Von Ludwiger's own explanation of the UFO phenomenon is that it is time travellers, though why time travellers would want to draw attention to themselves is anyone's guess.

This work is yet another example of how ufologists are their own worst enemies. The summaries do not give actual reports, merely the ufologists' interpretations of what is happening; basic details are missing; there is little evidence of genuine open-minded inquiry; there is the credulity and the resort to out-of-date and fringe science, and frank science fiction speculation. It is clear that ufologists as a class have no idea at all as to what constitutes scientific evidence, or scientific inquiry, or even basic public relations.



LETTERS

Having had time to digest Nigel Watson's disgraceful smear published as part of your *Magonia Supplement* No.36 it is obvious that you owe me the right to reply.

Watson has deliberately and rather callously misrepresented what I said at the recent Weird Weekend in Exeter to the extent that four people who were there, and who have read his comments, cannot believe they were in the same room.

Watson wrote:

"The new US Star Wars project is being created to fight the secret war against the aliens. That's the reason given by controversial ufologist, Tim Matthews, at a recent and rare public appearance."

Not true. I did not say this and could not have done, because I have no

information on a Star Wars system to “fight a secret war against aliens”. (My understanding is that lasers could not be properly focused in space, or certainly not until recently.) What I did say in my talk was that the General had told his wife that efforts to create a defensive shield were being made and that he had devoted much time to developing Star Wars type systems. In any case, he was working on this in the early 1980s when the Reagan administration thought that Star Wars was viable. This is hardly a “new...project”.

“Matthews didn’t give much credit to ufologists as they are mainly fixated on the ET hypothesis. As for ufological sceptics, armchair theorists and *Fortean Times* readers they are worse than Martian swamp scum.”

This is pure fantasy. It is true that the *Fortean Times* editorial team has allowed Joe McNally to carry out a smear campaign against me (The Hierophant column) and has promoted and advertised libellous and defamatory material from Larry O’Hara’s *At War With The Universe* in their magazine. But this wasn’t mentioned in my talk.

“He thinks that ufology focuses too much on individuals rather than on the evidence itself...”

Watson’s own misleading report is an excellent example of his and others’ debunking tactics of investigating the investigators.

“He never said much about it except that he had been to a remote village where all the graves had been opened up. He said that on his death he wanted to be buried 12 feet deep. Is this a case of grave robbing aliens? Do they feast on our dead bodies? Is someone’s imagination working at warp speed?”

This is further evidence of Watson’s inability to report simple facts. A job with *The Sun* beckons. In fact, the information was that a UFO had been tracked and that the location of the object which had come down had been determined. What I actually said was that the General’s wife referred to the “aliens” in question as being most like the fictional “Predator” character. I cannot understand why, at a light-hearted Fortean event which most people enjoyed attending, Watson should have such a problem with my making such information known. Nobody, apart from Watson that is, has an “overactive” imagination. He, like other sceptics, has to belittle people and lie in order to supposedly “prove” his point. This is very childish and tells us how little credibility should be attached to his research, such as it is.

“Matthews, despite disliking ETH believers, does accept the ET hypothesis.”

Really? Where have I said this? Which “ETH believers” is he referring to? In fact, I get on with most people rather well and have rebuilt bridges with several noted researchers including Nick Redfern.

“He is equally contradictory about some poltergeist activity plaguing his home at the moment. Since a man died in the house years ago he thinks any psychic investigators would link it with his spirit. He thinks they, like ufologists, are closed minded. Of course he’s so open minded he’ll believe anything he tells himself.”

Where is the contradiction? I think Watson has a problem because I cannot be conveniently pigeon-holed. Just because I think there is a serious UFO/alien incident worthy of investigation - which may indeed prove people like him wrong - and because we have had some incidents of high strangeness in our house (and the houses either side) Watson finds “contradiction”.

A major problem, as I pointed out in Exeter, was the terminology used to describe such events. “Poltergeist” (I did not say that we were suffering from Poltergeist activity) and “Ghost” are terms that conjure up ideas and imagery of “the other side”, of “spirits”. I made it clear that the activity was focussed upon my daughter Alexandra.

I made it clear that I didn’t know what to make of it but my view is that these and similar events are more than likely on the edge of scientific understanding. Beyond that I have no idea what is going at our house! I asked whether anybody in the audience had experienced similar goings-on and several people approached me privately at the end.

It would appear that Nigel Watson has a problem with this. I cannot imagine why. All I will say is that had I been reporting upon his talk I would have stuck to the facts and offered little if any further comment.

I await his reply with interest.

Tim Matthews

It’s funny how people who think they have been, to quote Tim Matthews, “deliberately and callously misrepresented” find it easy to smear their detractors in a far more off-hand and libellous manner.

In this case Tim Matthews calls me a liar. Or, since he is so pedantic with terminology and the reporting of ‘facts’ he says I “...belittle people and lie in order to.....blah, blah...”

Having made such an outrageous and shocking slur on my good character he is unable to show what lies I am guilty of.

He quite rightly notes that I did not mention a few things (e.g. the reference to ‘Predator’ or that he didn’t use the word ‘poltergeist’) but that doesn’t make me a liar.

He did not refer to Joe McNally in his talk but he certainly left a clear impression that he did not like *Fortean Times* or armchair theorists, and that doesn’t make me a liar either.

Where are my damn lies? I can't find any!

Instead of lies I just see areas of disagreement and interpretation. It is he who is really the dispenser of smears, callous misrepresentation and character assassination, and he should jolly well apologise to me in the pages of this bulletin. I know he won't just as I know little green men will never land a flying saucer on the White House lawn.

Nigel Watson

In *Magonia Supplement* No. 36 Martin Kottmeyer discusses the 24 July 1948 UFO sighting by DC-3 pilots Chiles and Whitted.

Kottmeyer decides that a meteor explanation may be wrong because the radiant of the Delta Aquarids was off towards the south and sounds wrong for an object that appears ahead and [toward the East]. Although the Perseids radiant would be better, the 24 July date seems early.

Although there are many active, though mostly minor, showers during mid-summer, not just the two mentioned, the key to understanding the meteor hypothesis is that nearly all fireballs brighter than Venus are believed to be associated with asteroids, and are considered "sporadics", not part of meteor showers, which seem to be related to comets and their orbits.

This was first suggested more than a hundred years ago. By the mid-20th Century meteoritics was considered a scientific backwater to many astronomers, who may not have been aware of this relationship, Dr Menzel's opinion notwithstanding.

Few, if any, UFO commentators seem aware that the prevailing view of meteor researchers is that most bright fireballs are not part of showers. This of course does not include present-day space debris re-entries, which are all "sporadics" of another kind.

So, I don't think that the sporadic nature of this object can rule out a meteor.

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NOTES AND NEWS

from Nigel Watson



Murdering UFOs

If you watch TV you get an exaggerated view of the murderous intentions of aliens. Obvious culprits like *The X Files* are full of homicidal creatures but even mainstream drama series are often tempted to dip their toes into SF-related storylines.

A few years back, *Heartbeat*, set in 1960s Yorkshire, had a murder mystery that looked like it was inspired by the stories of Jenny Randles. A man is found dead on the moors with burn marks, and there are sightings of UFOs in the area. Had these UFOs murdered him? Of course not, the man had died and fallen onto a two-bar fire whilst carrying out an illicit affair. To avoid a scandal

his body was dumped on the moor and as for those pesky UFOs, they were RAF aircraft switching off their engines and gliding over the moors at night. Mystery solved.

The latest example literally cropped up in the Electric Vendetta episode of the *Midsomer Murders* broadcast on ITV1 on 2 September 2001. A dead naked man is found in a crop circle with burnt arms, a piece of hair shaved off and two puncture marks in his back. It mirrors perfectly a 'classic' UFO murder case according to the local ufologist. The murder allows the ufologist to pontificate about ETs and to whip-up interest in his crop-circle research. Another victim is found in similar circumstances, and someone else is electrocuted in his pick-up truck. The *Midsomer Murders* is rapidly turning into the war of the worlds!

Very surprisingly, and what I consider with great restraint, the show never alluded to there being a serial (cereal) killer on the loose. The prime suspect is the ufologist (shifty types aren't they) but he's rather mundanely killed by being pushed down some stairs.

Like every episode of *Scooby Doo* we know there is going to be a rational explanation for the spooky activity. That's where the *Midsomer Murders* is different; it staggers and snakes its way through the narrative like a gormless drunk. As a viewer you sink into a sleepy apathy until you wake up to watch the end credits rolling. As usual this episode was lovingly shot and had an excellent supporting cast; the downside is that it has the bland

John Nettles as DCI Tom Barnaby who fumbles his way through the investigation.

If you try unravelling this particular plot you find more holes in it than a packet of Polos. From what I could tell, the first victim was electrocuted trying to kill a bloke who has had a long-standing argument over a woman since his college days. The ufologist got the job of disposing of the body and decided to dress it up as an ET attack. The other murders were for a variety of different reasons or whatever. I doubt that anyone cared or cares.

I had thought that crop circles had disappeared from the media for good, but this summer I saw one reported on a breakfast TV show and on Radio 5 they discussed a 'square' crop circle (square crop doesn't sound right) that was supposed to contain a scientific message from the ETs. Perhaps the *Midsomer Murders* in its inept way will manage to kill off this remaining spark of interest in the matter? Whom am I kidding?

I Tawt I saw A Bunnie Rarebit

A University of Washington study has shown that our memories of past events are incredibly malleable and highly unreliable. At a presentation of the findings at Glasgow University it was noted that: "In some sense life is a continual memory alteration experiment where memories are shaped by new incoming information."

To prove this hypothesis Jacquie Pickrell, a doctoral candidate in psychology, and professor of psychology Elizabeth Loftus, presented a group with an advert showing Bugs Bunny shaking hands with visitors to Disney World. Later 30 per cent of the viewers also remembered meeting Bugs Bunny when they had visited Disney World when they were children. As anyone with any knowledge of animation knows Bugs Bunny is not a Disney character and has never appeared in a Disney theme park. From her research Pickrell concluded: "You can truly implant a memory for an entire event that never happened."

Loftus said she felt that this small study makes us question such factors as: "When will people take a detail and attach it to some other memory? How do we bind pieces of experience together? When will you take a piece of experience that kind of floats around in the mind and attach it to another experience? Why and when does that happen?"

This work shows that people can be convinced (some would say tricked) into believing they experienced something in childhood or the past that did not really happen. For advertisers and marketing companies this can be a very powerful tool. For example, Stewart's, a root beer manufacturer, highlighted how people can use new information to reshape their autobiographical memories, when they put 'old fashioned' and 'original' labels on their bottles. Adults then remembered drinking the product as children, yet this drink was not bottled until the 1990s.

In terms of ufology the implications of this work are profound. In the literature there are hundreds of accounts of people who remember UFO sightings and alien encounters in childhood, but never reported such experiences at the time. Also, the literature is full of accounts of 'flying saucers' seen before 1947 but not reported until many years later.

MAGONIA Readers' Meetings

First Sunday of each month at the Railway, Putney, opposite Putney station (South West Trains) and about 10 minutes' walk from East Putney station (District Line). Come along and help us to interpret contemporary vision and belief, and to promote pelican pride.



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