

Ufologists have become increasingly aware of the need to study the attitudes and beliefs - on a micro and macro level - which might have an influence on UFO experiences and our perception of them. In my article in Magonia No. 3 (Spring 1980) 'Airships and Invaders; Background to a Social Panic' I attempted to depict how the British 1909 and 1913 mystery airship waves had a relationship with rumours of German spying activities. The threat of a potential German invasion was very real to many people in Britain at that time, and this view is reinforced by an article 'About German Spies' by Charles Lowe in Contemporary Review, Jan 1910 (pp 42-56), which I discovered recently. I contended that politicians and journalists were equally guilty of enhancing the public fears. Lowe attributed the blame to 'unscrupulous writers' who produced anti-German fictional books, and journalists; 'Thus the pernicious publications referred to, as well as the vamped-up and unscrupulous spy-sensations of our Yellow Press, constitute acts of criminal levity against the peace of two kindred nations - a poisoning of the wells of public truth - and that, too, at a time when each country is only too ready to believe the worst of the other. Such conduct is none the less a public crime for its being beyond the reach of the public prosecutor' he concluded. The wider context of this kind of national panic is studied in Roger Sandell's article 'From Conspirators...To Contactees' in Magonia No. 5 (1980) - a second part to this should appear shortly - in which he notes how in pre-1914 Britain; 'Mounting international tension, and the revolt of labour, women, and Ireland challenged the fabric of society'. This theme is dealt with in more detail in Sandell's 'The Airship and Other Panics' in MUFOB Ns 12 (Autumn 1978).

The threat of German expansionism was the worry of British citizens which took on a new dimension when sightings of mysterious aerial phenomena were associated with the ubiquitous Germans. The activities of Count Zeppelin, and of countless aeronauts threatened the supremacy of British sea power. No longer could Britain rule in splendid isolation. The sea frontier guarded by our 'invincible' Navy afforded a physical and psychological barrier against foreign intrusion in our affairs. The significance of this barrier can be seen in Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach' which was published in 1867 and displayed insecurity caused by the dread of the social changes beyond our shores, and their implications for Britain. The onslaught of aerial technology meant the elimination of our island position, the airship and aeroplane were seen as horrifying new military innovations which could compromise our fleet. This was compounded by our failure to keep pace with the advances made by Zeppelin and his contemporaries.

The British situation in the period before 1914, contrasts with the background to the American airship panic of 1897. Commentators on this wave have noted how the American airship sightings signify the power of the industrial and scientific revolution in the popular consciousness - fueled by the new and influential mass-circulation newspapers. David Fideler in part 3 of his article 'Gateways to Mystery' in Fortean Times No 33 (Autumn 1980) claimed that: 'In this context, the airships make perfect symbolic sense. They neatly embody the idea of the soaring industrial dream, where man is lifted above all worldly concerns, not by religion for once, but by the machine. The frequent breakdowns of the airships are significant, too, pointing towards the failure of technology as the ultimate problem solver'. (Parts 1 & 2 of his work in FT 31, & FT 32.) John Fletcher in 'Lo! He Comes In Clouds Descending' Magonia No 1 (Autumn 1979) takes this hypothesis further, and shows how the 'social, political and economic turmoil' in the Ohio of 1897 was significant. As a result of economic depression, a 'non-conformist religious revival' emerged in the Mid-West, and airships appeared in the heavens because: 'In a secularised, industrialised materialistic society, their God was symbolised by scientific and technological wonders rather than the cumbersome imagery of the Book of Revelation'. Was, therefore, the American airship a symbol of millennial salvation expressed in 19th Century terms? I'm sceptical of such a simplistic solution, but it is fascinating to see a variety of differing factors combine to initiate a wave of mystery aerial object sightings - the impact and perception of which having different consequences for the local or national community. Equally such factors could initiate different forms of public expression as Charles Bowen should learn, human behaviour is complex, consequently his article in FSR Vol 26 No 5 (Jan 1981) 'Important Lesson?' is naive. Send all responses to: Nigel Watson. Westfield Cottage, Crowle Bank Rd, Althorpe, South Humberside, DNI7 3HZ, England.