

In the last edition of this bulletin we discussed some of the elements which might be responsible for causing UFO waves. In human society there are always some psychological tensions present, but they become apparent in many different ways for different reasons. So tensions that might create a UFO wave in one instance might create a different kind of panic in other instances. This kind of mechanism is illustrated by Peter Rogerson in his article 'Interpretation of UFO Type Data in Terms of Contemporary Panics' in MUFOB Vol 6 No 2. As Peter wrote, 'One of the most terrifying things that people can be confronted with is the random, disturbing event. Faced with one or many such events, there is a general tendency among people to try to fit them into a convenient pattern. Any pattern, however irrational and capricious is better than no pattern at all. Therefore there is a great impetus to see "meanings" behind world events, to hold, for example, that disturbing social change is generated by malevolent conspiracies, or to see portents and archetypes in random lights in the sky.' As critics are quick to point out, this kind of hypothesis doesn't explain why there are invariant factors involved in different UFO waves and panics created by anomalous aerial activities. As Carl Grove has pointed out, there might have been different social stimuli at work in the U.S. in 1897 and in the U.K. in 1909 and 1913, (but) the appearance of the phenomena was much the same (except for the fewer Type I events in G.B.). And similar sightings were made in New Zealand and elsewhere, where different social environments would obtain. We could explain this by claiming that the stimuli for these waves were not that radically different, and that the worries and fears of the people in these countries were so similar as to provoke the same reactions. For instance, it can be seen that all the countries involved were scientifically and technologically advanced, and were worried about the threat of war (New Zealand being a part of the British Empire was therefore worried about the arrival of such a war). However, this impression might be due to the fact that their means of written communication were more efficient, and records of other waves for different reasons etc., might have occurred but were not recorded. Even if we ignore the bias of our material, we still have to explain such invariant factors as the appearance of 'rapid acceleration, right-angle turns, zig-zag descents, extremely bright lights, etc.', we could also add the puzzling appearance of Men In Black who turn up during UFO waves, vehicle stoppage incidents, and a multitude of other factors which seem to crop up time and again in sighting reports and waves before and after 1947. The social panic type hypothesis can blind us to the actual constituents of the reported happenings and their significance can easily be over looked. One of the fascinating aspects of historical research is that we can try to determine if these 'invariant factors' can be substantiated or whether we are giving emphasis to data which isn't representative, and we can also explore the (hypothetical) stimuli for these observations. The outcome of such studies can have an important bearing on contemporary incidents and our understanding of them.

To change the subject of discussion to a less intricate area of study we might like to consider the short novel 'The Variable Man' by Philip K. Dick (Sphere pbk., London, 1969, 2nd ed. 1977, orig. pub. 1953). Thomas Cole, the hero of the story, has the ability to fix all manner of mechanical contraptions and makes a living as a freelance knife sharpener and repairman. In the Spring of 1913 he is going about his normal business in Nebraska, U.S.A., when he is suddenly assaulted by a tornado: 'All at once it was there, completely around him. Nothing but grayness. He and the cart and horses seemed to be in a calm spot in the centre of the tornado. They were moving in a great silence, gray mist everywhere' (p20). In reality this tornado is a time bubble device which deposits Cole into the future; 6th October, 2128 to be precise. Eventually he aids the people in the future in the creation of a faster than light space propulsion system, thus opening up the Universe to our inspection and eliminating the necessity to continue fighting the Proxima Centauran Empire which had traditionally inhibited Terran expansion by conventional spacecraft. A fairly dull story, but the choice of Spring 1913 as a date for Cole's disappearance is relatively interesting. I wonder if the author had any particular reason for picking that season, year, location, etc. The use of a tornado-type device has its antecedents in other sf-type stories, and we might look at them in a future bulletin.

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