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Georgia Skeptics is a non-profit local group which shares a common philosophy with the national organization CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), and seeks to promote critical thinking and scientific inquiry as the most reliable means to gather knowledge of the world and universe. Like CSICOP, Georgia Skeptics encourages the investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and helps disseminate the results of such inquiries.

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Joining the Georgia Skeptics organization is encouraged because membership dues help us to disseminate the results of skeptical inquiries to the public and to hold educational events. Yearly dues are \$17.50 for individual memberships, \$21.00 for families, and \$12.50 for full time students.

BOOK REVIEW: Bare-Faced Messiah, The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard
Russell Miller, Penguin Books Ltd., London 1987

by Charles Shapiro

L. Ron Hubbard achieved fame and wealth as the founder of two large pseudoscientific movements: Dianetics and Scientology. He and his followers have written much about his life, little of which was true. This "unauthorized biography" tells the real story, which, as Russell Miller says in his introduction, "is much more bizarre, much more improbable, than any of the lies."

Miller is well qualified to write about Hubbard. He started reporting at twenty-one, and has been doing it for more than 30 years. Miller's other books include a biography of Hugh Hefner and a book about the millionaire J. Paul Getty. The book was written in spite of threats of libel suits and defamatory letters to his publisher from the church of Scientology.

Much of Bare-Faced Messiah was gathered from face-to-face interviews, and the eye-witness accounts make the book exciting reading. Quotes are footnoted, and the book also has a full bibliography and index. This care is needed, since Miller has a definite thesis--that L. Ron Hubbard was "one of the most successful and colourful confidence tricksters of the twentieth century."

Miller's book chronicles Hubbard's life from his "Navy Brat" childhood, through his undistinguished Navy career, his three wives and five children, and his pulp writing and messianic periods. It is truly an amazing story. One fascinating sidelight was the prodigious amount of work Hubbard invested in telling lies. Hubbard didn't just lie--he lied a lot, and all the time. The story also illustrates the down side of this lifestyle: Hubbard was desperately unhappy for much of his time as the guru of Scientology, convinced that a myriad of people and organizations were conspiring to kill him and take his power. He also apparently started to believe some of the things he said, with predictably disastrous results. The stories of the presentation of the first person to be made a superman by Dianetics, and of untrained landsmen trying to pilot a seagoing trawler in the Mediterranean are by turns harrowing and hilarious.

Bare-Faced Messiah has some weaknesses. Miller accepts at face value a story about a "cruel, post-hypnotic trick" which Hubbard was said to have played early in his career. The trick, which involved hypnotizing someone to believe that he was unable to let go of a red-hot railing, "only later came to light ..." in a session with a "professional hypnotist". Given the extreme suggestibility of hypnotized people, the entire incident may well have been fabricated under hypnosis. This is an interesting lapse, because a hypnotic process called "auditing" lies at the heart of much of Scientology's doctrine. I would also have liked to hear more about the neologisms and ideas that Scientologists use, which seem to have grown up in response to the extremely confused and improbable doctrine expounded by Hubbard.

Bare-Faced Messiah is an entertaining and frightening tale. The book makes a good gift to anyone who has contact with Scientology. The church of Scientology has a large office in Atlanta near Buckhead, so that might include one of your friends.

DEPARTMENT OF "WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE?" - MARIE CELESTE: MYSTERY SOLVED?

by Hugh Trotti

In early December of the year 1872, a ship was sighted that puzzled the crew of another ship--for no one answered hails or signals. The hailed ship seemed in tolerably good shape, though carrying a limited amount of sail and, when boarded, was found to be suffering water damage as though in a past storm. But the chief question in everyone's mind was, and became for later times: "What happened to the crew?" For no one was aboard.

The windows of what appeared to be the captain's cabin were covered with boards and canvas, but a skylight was open and there was water in the cabin. Evidently the ship had passed through a storm in the fairly recent past. But where were the people?

Ships have been found through the ages that sail or float in good shape without a crew. The Roman general Galba took one such event as a good omen for his assuming the purple and becoming emperor. A ship bearing a cargo of arms but having no crew drifted into the Spanish harbor of Dertosa. Somewhere between Alexandria in Egypt and the port in Sardinia the crew had vanished--perhaps, it was contended (according to Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*; New York: Penguin Books paperback, 1987. p. 253), the gods sent the ship to make easy the path of Nero's successor. That ancient puzzle was not solved--if the ship was raided and the crew taken into slavery, why were not the arms (of some value in the ancient world), taken as well? In any event, the finding of a ship without a crew, while rare, has been known throughout the ages.

The case of the ship of 1872 became famous. The name of the ship was *Mary Celeste* (*Marie Celeste* was apparently a mistake in a British record of this event). *Mary Celeste* was found in excess of five hundred miles from the mainland of Europe, between the Azores Islands and Portugal's coast. She was boarded and taken for salvage, but was impounded by British investigators when she safely made port. A lengthy scrutiny resulted in much suspicion of her rescuers, and a wine stain on deck was mistaken for blood. Blood was said to have been found on a sword of the captain's, but this was later found to be false.

Mary Celeste had carried ten persons: a crew of seven, the captain, his wife, and his baby daughter. The ship was engaged in commercial trade, and had carried a cargo of approximately 1,700 barrels of crude alcohol.

Theories of the crew's disappearance included piracy and mutiny. Though the British remained suspicious of the circumstances, no one was ever tried for a crime, and no proof ever emerged to clarify the

events of this strange happening. If we discount various fictional tales and hoaxes, the mystery remains to our time as one of peculiar interest and evident strangeness.

An amusing little story of recent vintage describes a disappearance of a different nature. In an aquarium it was found that a collection of sea creatures was gradually vanishing. A tank holding samples of sea creatures would have inhabitants at the end of the day, but be empty the next morning. A careful watch discovered that an octopus was in the habit of climbing out of its tank, working its way to the tanks of other "specimens", eating them, and returning to its own tank before morning. It "held its breath" or "held its water" if you prefer, on those peculiar expeditions. Now, since we recall the story of the "giant" octopus that was found washed up on a Florida beach (as featured, for instance, at the end of a Scientific American magazine some years ago), we ask: "Could a giant octopus have done the deed of disposing of ten people on the Mary Celeste?" Probably not. If such a thing began to take place, at least some of the crew would survive in hiding places. One person would provide an adequate meal at any one time. Therefore, we will discount this theory as unlikely. (Unfortunately I do not have the reference to the tale of the octopus in the aquarium at hand, whose interesting expeditions excite our interest, if not our applause.)

The more modern theory of UFO abduction may be left aside as well, for we may have in our possession the real key to the mystery. Perhaps the cargo contains the answer--not the answer of crew drunkenness, madness and murder that surfaced at the time, but another and perhaps simpler and more mundane answer. An answer that "lets us down" so that we turn away murmuring: "Oh. Is that all it was?" Reality can be much less interesting and certainly less exciting than bizarre and astounding possibilities.

The answer to our puzzle may well be found in a book by John Harris (Without a Trace, New York: Atheneum, 1981, hardback, Chapter 2, pp. 42-79). His solution (giving credit to a Sir William Crocker for the answer), points to the alcohol carried as cargo. Such barrels had been known to leak and create fumes which could explode if sufficient amounts were involved and a flame or spark caused ignition. The "Mary Celeste" had a hole in the galley floor which gave access for gas to enter the room and find the kitchen stove. An amount of fumes may have caused a small explosion, runs the explanation, and (pp. 78-79) such an explosion would not leave burn marks or carbon evidence of what happened for others to find later. The evidence for this view is that when the ship was boarded, the hatches were found thrown open: exactly what would be done if it was decided to "air out" the below-deck cargo area. Further, evidence was found that a single small boat had been carried on the main hatch, and a lifted rail showed that it had been launched (harris, p. 48). The view presented by Harris, then, is that on a possible warning from a small explosion, the captain and crew, suddenly alerted to their danger, threw open the hatches to allow any fumes to escape. To make certain that there would be no follow-up great explosion, they launched the small boat and left the ship to wait out the airing of the cargo spaces in the

hold. In that way they would be away from the ship in the event of a large explosion, and could go back aboard after the wind cleared the ship of alcohol fumes. (The "industrial alcohol" was intended to be sent to Italy to "fortify" wines, but was not good to be drunk by itself. This type of cargo, according to Harris, had been known to explode, and it was likely that the captain of "Mary Celeste" was worried that he was riding a sort of bomb.)

The view presented by Harris is simple, but does seem adequate to explain the mystery ship. In fact, a small quantity of fumes of alcohol could have been smelled by the cook even without any explosion. He could have notified the captain, who then could have ordered the hatches thrown open and the ship's boat lowered to take the ten people aboard away from the immediate neighborhood of Mary Celeste. Did they go too far to be roped to the ship, or forget to rope the small boat to "Mary Celeste" in the event that the wind might pick up and carry the ship that they had left away from them? Even worse, did they tie to the ship with a faulty knot that slipped and left them at the mercy of the ocean as a freshened wind carried Mary Celeste away from them more quickly than they could row?

The entire scenario makes pretty good sense. The condition of the ship as found showed that it had passed through some rough weather successfully, but was boarded by those who discovered it in fine weather (Harris, p.48). The "alcohol fumes" explanation seems reasonable enough. If the bad weather was still in force as the ship was abandoned, it might be that the storm in some fashion prevented the waiting people from re-boarding the ship, or perhaps somehow caused a problem with a possible tow-line. In any case, Mr. Harris is to be congratulated on his presentation of this solution. The book Without A Trace also contains good evidence for explanations of other sea mysteries, and is well worth the reader's attention.

Since no trace of the ten people on Mary-Celeste was ever found, writers still exploit the interest inherent in this case, but John Harris seems to have brought forward a simple and possibly true explanation: Evidently, if his view is sound, then the sea must have overwhelmed the small boat, and all in it were lost.

BOOK REVIEW: DAVID M. RAUP, THE NEMESIS AFFAIR (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986, paper, 220pp)

by Keith M. Parsons

How do new and challenging scientific theories come to be accepted? Does evidence for a new theory slowly accumulate until everyone is finally convinced? Does a crucial experiment normally decide the issue? Does acceptance of a new theory involve gestalt switches or semi-religious conversions to radical new perspectives? In short, do scientists accept (or reject) a new theory on the basis of logic and evidence, or because of less rational emotional or sociological

factors?

Both sorts of factors play an integral role according to David M. Raup in his book *The Nemesis Affair*. Raup, called the world's most brilliant paleontologist by Stephen Jay Gould, was, along with H. John Sepkoski, one of the formulators of the so-called "Nemesis" hypothesis. This hypothesis holds that every 26 million years or so mass extinctions occur around the globe. The periodicity of these extinctions is explained by the postulation of a dark companion star of the sun with a highly eccentric orbit that brings it into the Oort cloud--the cloud of comets and debris thought to surround our solar system--every 26 million years. According to the hypothesis, when this occurs millions of comets are sent cascading into the inner solar system. Some are almost sure to strike earth, with devastating consequences. Perhaps the dinosaurs became extinct in the aftermath of such a collision.

Now this is clearly a striking and dramatic hypothesis. In his book, Raup tells us how he moved from a position of skepticism to one of active participation in the formulation of this view. Hence, Raup's book is very fascinating at two levels: First, he gives a very readable description of the surprising discoveries that prompted the Nemesis theory and of the accumulating, though still far from conclusive, evidence in its favor. Second, he gives insight into the workings of a creative scientific mind caught in the clash between new ideas and longstanding presuppositions.

In the Nemesis case the clash is largely between new discoveries suggestive of cometary impact and the uniformitarian presuppositions that have guided geology for the past 150 years. Ever since Lyell, geologists have been loath to invoke extraordinary, catastrophic processes or entities to explain puzzling data. Explication of geological phenomena in terms of the gradual, uniform operation of mundane processes has long been the only accepted norm. Hardly any hypothesis could be more upsetting to uniformitarianism than the catastrophic collisions proposed by Nemesis.

Raup attributes his early resistance to the impact hypotheses to his uniformitarian biases. That is, Raup sees his initial resistance as a function of prejudice that led him to undervalue the evidence for the impact hypothesis and to overestimate the difficulties facing it. The lesson that Raup ostensibly draws from this is that he and other scientists should be more open to new ideas and less inclined to skepticism on the basis of methodological presuppositions.

I think this view is somewhat simplistic. Guiding assumptions, such as Lyellian uniformitarianism, are essential to science. The human imagination is so fecund, that without some such prior constraints on the types of allowable theories, science would be in a state of perpetual chaos. With no ruling paradigms or presuppositions, concerted action would be impossible and would dissipate in myriad directions. Further, such guiding presuppositions are not imposed arbitrarily; they are frequently the result of extensive, often bitter experience of what works and what doesn't. Hence, a large degree of

methodological and epistemological conservatism is justified in science, even if it sometimes serves to obscure ideas that deserve a fairer hearing. In short, scientists should be slow to abandon presuppositions that have guided such fruitful inquiry, and purveyors of radical new ideas have no grounds for complaint if the scientific community regards those ideas as guilty until proven innocent.

Starting with Watson and Crick's The Double Helix, scientists have written a number of outstanding books for the general public that attempt, with unflinching candor, to portray the workings of science "warts and all". The Nemesis Affair is another fine book in that tradition. My only concern is that the public will misconstrue "warts and all" to mean "nothing but warts."

THE END