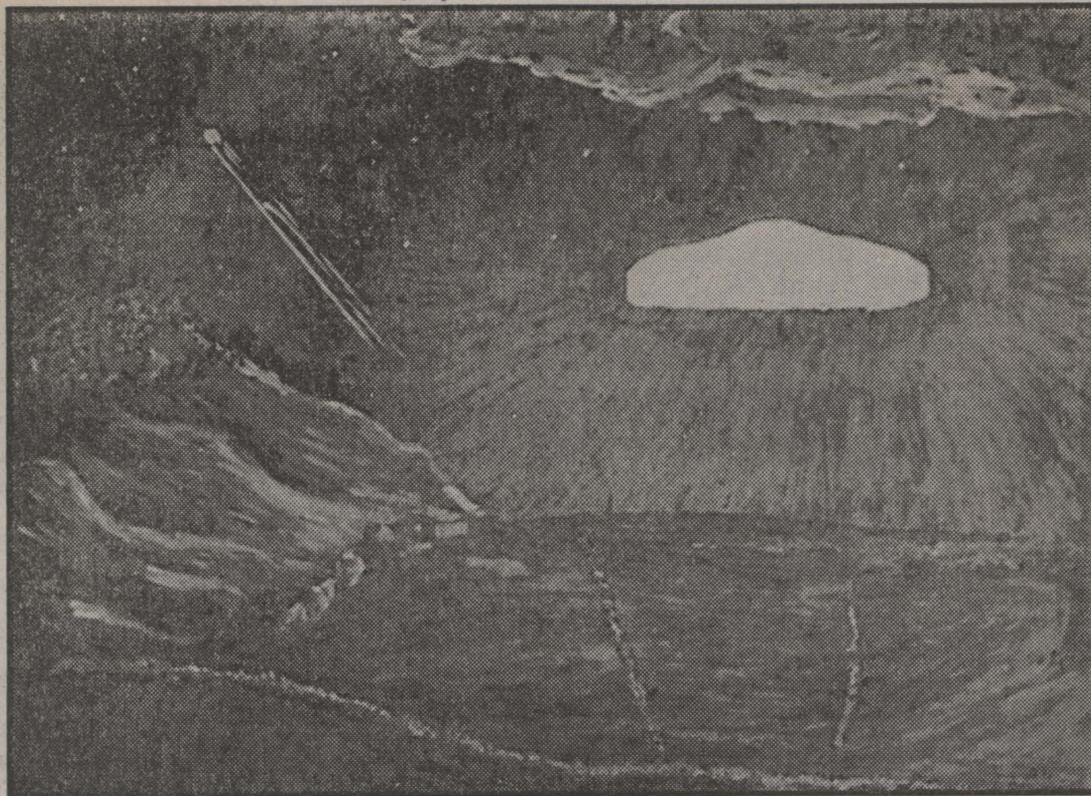


Wales on Sunday 23/9/90  
P R Thomas

Books,



AN ARTIST'S impression of an object seen off Wales in 1967.

# Tales of cracked saucers

By PHIL WILLIAMS

## CONFRONTATIONS

by Jacques Vallee,  
Souvenir Press, £14.95.

## JOURNEY TO THE STARS

by Robert Jastrow,  
Bantam Books, £14.95.

WE HUMANS are lonely animals. Is that why we are keen to find life elsewhere in the universe?

There are two ways to make contact. Creatures from another world might visit; or human beings might set out to explore the universe.

Judging by the literature, it is easier to wait for the visitors! Thousands of people have reported strange vehicles in the sky. Some have landed and humanoid creatures have been seen. How strange that none of these observations have ever been made by trained astronomers, who spend hours studying the sky!

The 'conspiracy' theory will insist that astronomers have

thick files on UFOs, but are forbidden to publish. The truth is that astronomers are free to publish anything they wish, and if a trained astronomer saw a real UFO you can bet the paper would be submitted to *Nature* by the next post.

When my old colleagues at Cambridge picked up the first signals from pulsars they did consider that they might be coded messages from another civilisation; only half in joke were they called LGM1 and 2 (LGM — Little Green Men). However, they thought a bit before publishing and settled for white dwarfs or neutron stars — which turned out to be right.

As it happens the overwhelming majority of UFOs have a simple natural explanation; aircraft lights, meteorological balloons, meteorites, Venus, all reported via faulty memory and impressionable imagination.

But what about those people who have reported a physical encounter, those remarkable people who have faced the double ordeal of an attack by

aliens and an interview by Jacques Vallee? Vallee is described as a scientist — indeed as the model for the French scientist in the film *Close Encounters*...

Unfortunately, despite his attempt to classify human contact with UFOs and despite the estimates of power emission, chemical composition etc. his book *Confrontations* is not science.

Vallee is far too trusting. Often he judges that witnesses are reliable — even those who have failed to report their UFO until someone else has hit the headlines. 'Me-too' is a very contagious disease.

Another infallible sign of an unreliable observer is when people quote the size, distance and speed of a light seen in the sky; but how do they know? A small object moving nearby at low speed looks identical to a large object far away moving at great speed.

You can only judge distance if you already know the size and light-output of the source — and if the Flying Object is Unidentified this is impossible.

Jacques Vallee discusses this point but still accepts evidence from witnesses who confidently report the size and speed and distance of objects seen against the sky. What actually happens is that untrained individuals see a light in the sky and impose on it their preconceived ideas — and hence the overwhelming majority of UFOs.

*Journey to the Stars* by Robert Jastrow appears to be in a different league. One of the pioneers of NASA and director of the Goddard Institute he played a key part in the American Space Programme. For him the mission to the moon was just a first step.

He discusses the SETI programme, which transmits coded signals into space and sweeps a range of frequencies in search of signals from other civilisations. He makes the impossible sound feasible, talking of future cosmonauts travelling in a deep-frozen state of suspended animation. In the days, before Challenger and the Hubble fiasco, it used to be called 'Can-Do'.