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Introduction

It has become impossible to listen to the radio or watch television without being exposed to testimony about encounters with strange aerial objects and their alleged pilots. While many of these claims seem ludicrous, and some fit easily within the scope of psychopathology, a genuine sincerity shines through most of the stories. Unless one assumes that the world is forever restricted to the normal phenomena already known to science, it is difficult to deny that the witnesses have been exposed to a deep, unusual, and even terrifying event, and that it involves a form of intelligence we have not yet recognized.

The temptation is great, at this point, to jump to the first conclusions that come to mind. It is annoying to be confronted with something unexplainable, especially when it is threatening and questions everything we have been taught about the nature of the universe. So we grasp at straws. Perhaps, we fantasize, we are being visited by beings from another planet. Perhaps our government will soon reveal that some of our scientists know about "them" and can explain their motivation. Perhaps everything will be all right.

Those of us who have studied this phenomenon for a long time (in my case, since the intense waves of sighting of the fifties in Europe) have learned to resist the temptation to jump to premature conclusions. If there was ever a situation in science that called for the careful sifting and screening of data and for the questioning and testing of every hypothesis, it is the situation presented by the UFO phenomenon.

Readers of previous books know that for the past twentyfive years I have advocated a serious, long-term inquiry into the phenomenon. In consider the rich experiences presented by the witnesses as an opportunity to do some good science and, even more importantly, to combine the efforts of several sciences to explore an area of nature that is still a mystery. But I have carefully kept my distance from the very vocal groups of researchers who claim that UFOs are interplanetary visitors. Such a conclusion is not only premature but is contradicted by several basic facts that become apparent only when one takes a historical perspective of the field rather than studying a single case at a time and trying to generalize from isolated events.

Part One of this book establishes such a perspective for the reader who may have been exposed only to recent cases and is not aware that the phenomenon has been with us throughout recorded history-not only in the form of signs in the sky, but also with a rich array of reports of contact with strange beings on earth and even of outright abductions.

We are only beginning to relate modern observations of UFOs to some of the ideas that have shaped our folklore, our religions, and our philosophies. It will take many years to reconstruct the links in the chain of personal experiences and speculations that connect the vision of Ezekiel in biblical times with the puzzling moving, and often terrifying accounts of our contemporaries. But it is not too early to begin.