

# UFO 1947-1997: Fifty Years of Flying Saucers

Hilary Evans and Dennis Stacy

The UFO phenomenon poses the most baffling question of the 20th century: just what is going on? On the one hand we have 'abduction' researchers telling us that humanity is in regular contact with extraterrestrials, while on the other, debunkers reduce it all to a sideshow concatenation of psyche, culture and perception. Would that it were that simple! Following in the template set by FT's *UFOs 1947-1987* a decade ago, *UFO 1947-1997* offers 31 essayists the welcome chance to strut their ufological stuff. The names here represent the cream of the serious ufological crop and whether you choose to believe them or not, these people know what they are talking about.

Fittingly, Kenneth Arnold's ur-sighting is represented by his own account of that fateful day in 1947. People had been seeing unexplained aerial phenomena for centuries, but Arnold's sighting and newsman Bill Becquette's subsequent coining of the phrase 'flying saucer' served to focus the imagination of a waiting world. The portals were opened.

All the salient motifs of ufology are represented here, from car-stops to cattle mutilations, physical traces to saucer cults. Balls of light jostle with ghost rockets for your attention and as each chapter is devoured, a new slant on the phenomenon becomes apparent. For instance, any ufologists languishing under the belief that UFO flaps and hot spots are evidence of a physical phenomenon would do well to consider John Rimmer's overview of the Warminster phenomenon. In retrospect, what was once a mainstay of the British ufological scene now seems quaint, almost twee. What hope then for Gulf Breeze and Bonnybridge? Time will tell, but the signposts are here.

But just when you're ready to shout 'case closed, next mystery please', along comes a doozy. Like Ray Fowler's account of the Allegash abductions. Here, four men were 'taken' from their canoe while fishing in the wilderness, following the appearance of an 'intelligent' light. Their experience and subsequent narratives, admittedly retrieved mainly by hypnosis, make for puzzling reading. Puzzling that is, until you read Patrick Huyghe's razor-sharp analysis of the rise and rise of the Hopkinsonian abduction scene in New York in which he uses the alleged numbers of abducted Americans (one million!) to illustrate the sheer ludicrousness of the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH).

Whether believer or sceptic, the writers put their cases eloquently and with feeling. None more so than Jacques Vallee whose journal extracts give a very human snapshot of a life in ufology. Vallee's diaries show the building bricks of the subject being considered and manipulated before they became part of the canon. This is ufology at its best, alive and kicking, ripe for meaning to be distilled from mystery.

As the evidence is sifted and balanced by ufologists of many persuasions - and with more than one-third of the essays being penned by ufologists living outside the Americas, no one can accuse the book of having a cultural bias - the only conclusion you can reach is that the UFO mystery is of far greater magnitude than the join-the-dots ufologists would have us believe. Conversely, the 'truths' discovered so far teasingly point only to natural phenomenon, human perception and culture. This is exemplified by Maillot and Scornaux's gentle disassembly of the Trans-en-Provence case, long held by ufologists to be a bastion of the physical trace genre and one investigated and pronounced unexplained by the official French UFO research team, GEPAN. And on, until the valedictory chapters by Hilary Evans and Jenny Randles which spell out a few home truths. These might be unpalatable to the hard core ETHers, but to the Fortean ufologist they make perfect sense. Evans insists that we should not cling to any one UFO case or theory, as one by one they fall to explanation; Randles makes a case for getting out there and investigating, to "see that behind the illusion of ufology as it is popularly believed there is a phenomenon very worthy of study".

Most UFO books artlessly reduce the subject to entertainment, people's traumatic experiences being paraded for ego and profit until the next fashionable theory comes along. You won't find any of that in *UFO 1947-1997*; instead you'll find sincere thinkers of all hues offering insight and illumination into the dark corners of the UFO mystery. A mystery no less perplexing now than at any other time and one which should lead us all to share the view of *Saucer Smear* editor Jim Moseley when he says: "My fascination with the subject continues, and I only hope that I - or any one of us - live long enough to solve the mystery." We won't of course, but we'll have fun trying.

-- Andy Roberts

