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Nua Blather: Surviving the UnCon: Lesson II

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NUA BLATHER NUA BLATHER NUA BLATHER
Weekly free email of Dogma Destruction,
Fortean and High Weirdness

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SURVIVING THE UNCON: LESSON II

Once more into the breach we stumble, to give a run down of the second day of the Fortean Times UnConvention 98 (with a brief hark back to Saturday. This week Blather is joined by not only by Barry 'Dacianos' Kavanagh and Mark 'Firestarter' Pilkington, but also Paul Holloway, giving his dissertations on MIBs.

EMIBEES
Jenny Randle's talk on Men In Black
[25-04-98 1300 ROOM 101]
Randles spoke seriously but entertainingly. I didn't start drowsing or eyeing the exit, as I have a tendency to do when most people talk UFOlogy for more than about ten minutes. In fact I thoroughly enjoyed her talk.

She told of the number UFO witnesses who are happy to discuss their experiences at first -- but then suddenly clam up, refusing to talk at all. She argued that this happens too often to be entirely explained by fear of ridicule, or publicity.

Her case histories of men, mostly not in black, intimidating witnesses, were all that authentic combination of the mundane, the fantastic and the ludicrous. These cases always seem to be teasing and inconclusive to the point of irritation; leads fizzle out, the clinching piece of evidence is lost.

Each case appears to have a slightly implausible element. Two mysterious men interview a witness and seem not to recognise an electric fire, or they refer to each other by number, not by name. There is always that feeling that something isn't quite right.

Randles concluded that there is a covert intelligence unit which checks witnesses' credibility, finds out what they know, and encourages them to keep quiet. They often behave in a slightly bizarre way, which adds that characteristic air of implausibility should the witness decide to talk. She hasn't seen a classic MIB case

since the early nineties, and suggested it was a Cold War phenomenon, and that intelligence agents are posing as journalists these days.

It occurred to me that a UFO investigator would be an ideal cover for a covert intelligence agent. And so I headed for the bar, my head spinning with double agent scenarios. I eyed my fellow Forteanes with suspicion, wondering which, if any, were covert government intelligence agents. That was when I spotted Nick Pope... (<http://www.ufomind.com/people/p/pope/>) [PH]

[Having heard Randles speak on this topic twice in the past, this time round she seems to have leaned towards less credible explanations -- I wonder why? - Blather]

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SUNDAY, DEAD TIRED
[26-04-98]

SKINNER AND SHAVER
[1100 ROOM 101]

Doug Skinner was back on the podium, to talk about 'Richard Shaver and the Shaver Mystery - The Life of Richard Shaver, father of Hollow Earth Mythology'. Shaver, after an unstable life, and a long itinerary of jails and mental homes, came to the fore with his rants to Ray Palmer's *Amazing Stories* magazine. Shaver claimed that a race of beings called 'Deros' were living underneath the earth. Palmer raised the circulation of the magazine by printing it as fiction in March 1945, titled 'I Remember Lemuria', unwittingly sparking off the beginnings of discarnate cult concerned with hollow earth belief, abductions and amazonian feminist role models. Before long, *Amazing Stories* was little more than a megaphone for the deluded rantings of Shaver, and the letters page was chock-full of 'true' accounts by people claiming that they too had encountered the subterranean 'Deros'.

Again, Skinner was utterly charming in his delivery.

This is not the place to go into the entire 'Shaver Mystery' - for more, read 'The Man Who Invented Flying Saucers' by John A. Keel (http://www.nwlink.com/~park/ufo/skeptic/keel_article.html) and 'The Shaver Mystery by Richard Toronto (<http://www.parascope.com/nb/articles/shaverMystery.htm>). [DW]

BIG NELLIE

[1200 ROOM 101]

Skinner was supplanted in Room 101 by Colonel John Blashford-Snell of the Scientific Exploration Society (<http://freespace.virgin.net/sci.explore/>), to talk about his 'Mammoth Hunt' - A search of the giant elephants of Nepal, as documented in his book of the same name, co-written with Rula Lenska (ISBN:0-00-638741-1 (<http://freespace.virgin.net/sci.explore/pubs/mammoth.html>)).

Blashford-Snell was certainly a highlight of the UnCon, even though his discussion was mostly anecdotal chat concerning the expedition itself, the search for the 'Beast of Bardia'; a reported Mammoth running loose in the woodlands of Nepal. What Blashford-Snell and his fellow explorers actually discovered was a new kind of elephant of marked difference to the Indian elephant - much larger, and with a sloping back and protuberant forehead, hinting at some strange throwback to the mammoth. As soon as I get round to reading his book, I'll review it in Blather. [DW]

PRODIGIES

[1300 ROOM 101]

Without a break, I stayed to watch Jan Bondeson talk about 'The Fish Boy & the Cat Woman - Monsters & marvels in maternal impressions', curious practice of blaming prodigious births or physical deformities on impressions received by the mother during pregnancy - as documented by the likes of the Journal of Scientific Exploration, 'A Case of Severe Birth Defects Possibly Due to Cursing' by Ian Stevenson (<http://www.jse.com/v3n2.html>):

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'For centuries it was widely believed that a strong unpleasant shock to a pregnant woman could cause birth defects in her baby. Medical books and journals published numerous cases of this type up to the early decades of the present century. The idea of "maternal impression" gradually lost ground during the 18th and 19th centuries, mainly because it seemed to conflict with the facts of physiology. In cases of "maternal impression," the pregnant mother was usually reported to have viewed someone with a shocking deformity that her baby was said to reproduce. It has also been thought that cursing, verbally inflicted and without a visual stimulus, could produce birth defects. Three cases of this type, one published by a pediatrician in 1960, are briefly reviewed, and then a new case is reported. In both of the modern cases, the commonly recognized etiological factors in birth defects could not be identified'.

See also 'Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine' by George M. Gould and Walter L. Pyle, 1896.
<http://trace.waisman.wisc.edu/tcel/tow/WWW/GUTENB/aacom10.txt>

'Maternal Impressions.--Another curious fact associated with pregnancy is the apparent influence of the emotions of the mother on the child in utero. Every one knows of the popular explanation of many birth-marks, their supposed resemblance to some animal or object seen by the mother during pregnancy, etc. The truth of maternal impressions, however, seems to be more firmly established by facts of a substantial nature. There is a natural desire to explain any abnormality or anomaly of the child as due to some incident during the period of the mother's pregnancy, and the truth is often distorted and the imagination heavily drawn upon to furnish the satisfactory explanation. It is the customary speech of the dime-museum lecturer to attribute the existence of some "freak" to an episode in the mother's pregnancy. The poor "Elephant-man" firmly believed his peculiarity was due to the fact that his mother while carrying him in utero was knocked down at the circus by an elephant. In some countries the exhibition of monstrosities is forbidden because of the supposed danger of maternal impression. The celebrated "Siamese Twins" for this reason were forbidden to exhibit themselves for quite a period in France'.

Gould & Pyle also mention another topic covered by Bondeson:

'In 1726 Mary Toft, of Godalming, in Surrey, England, achieved considerable notoriety throughout Surrey, and even over all England, by her extensively circulated statements that she bore rabbits. Even at so late a day as this the credulity of the people was so great that many persons believed in her. The woman was closely watched, and being detected in her maneuvers confessed her fraud. To show the extent of discussion this case called forth, there are no less than nine pamphlets and books in the Surgeon-General's library at Washington devoted exclusively to this case of pretended rabbit-breeding. Hamilton in 1848, and Hard in 1884, both report the births in this country of fetal monstrosities with heads which showed marked resemblance to those of dogs. Doubtless many of the older cases of the supposed results of bestiality, if seen to-day, could be readily classified among some of our known forms of monsters. Modern investigation has shown us the sterile results of the connections between man and beast or between beasts of different species, and we can only wonder at the simple credulity and the imaginative minds of our ancestors. At one period certain phenomena of nature, such as an eclipse or comet, were thought to exercise their influence on monstrous births. Rueff mentions that in Sicily there happened a great eclipse of the sun, and that women immediately began to bring forth deformed and double-headed children'.

Bondeson's talk, whilst entertaining, offered nothing new, serving more as a meander through the topic for the uninitiated. However his book, *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (SBN: 0801434319) is certainly a recommended addition to the reference section of the fortean bookshelf. [DW]

"ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE
for strange phenomena"

[1300 HALL 2]

The question of witness perception was examined by FT publisher and Borderlands author Mike Dash. In an enlightening and thought provoking talk he demonstrated how the evidence for phenomena such as monsters, UFOs, physical mediumship and mince pie eating Martians will often vanish under the sceptical fortean's inquisitive gaze. Invoking such powerful concepts as witness expectation (e.g. at Loch Ness), fantasy prone personalities (4% of us, apparently), temporal lobe epilepsy and false memory syndrome (both important in the study of alien abduction reports), Dash reminded us that the greatest deceiver is nothing but the human mind itself. In an age where more people than ever "want to believe", messages such as these are increasingly important. [MP]

"CONSPIRACIES AND THE YEAR 2000"

[1400 UPPER HALL]

Damian Thompson reminded us that his talk this time last year was further away in time from the new Millennium than we are now, so he expected less laughter from the audience this year about doomsday prophecies and the like. Fortean's proved yet again to have, in Thompson's words, "nerves of steel," because they laughed heartily through the grand Book of Daniel conspiracy and the ridiculous way in which barcodes are supposed to be "666." There was food for thought as well as comedy (I think), as our orator (who should have aimed his mouth at the microphone a little more - it was damned hard to hear him) insisted that the year 2000 could not be shrugged away as "just a number." He stressed the huge significance of numbers in the history of all human culture and our deepfelt urges to divide time by numbers. An interesting aside in all this was the fact that in the East, 1999 is a more significant date for "the end" than 2000 because Nostradamus, and not Christianity, is big in Japan. [BK]

I SAW IT, I TELL YE

[1500 ROOM 101]

The last lecture that this Blatherskite limped to was Mark Chorvinky's 'The Search for Thunderbird Photos' as documented in Strange 18&19 (<http://www.strangemag.com/thunderbirdphoto.html>).

This is a bit of a weird one. Many fortean researchers are *fully* sure that they have seen one of two *photographs* relating to the Thunderbird - one variation usually features about 30 men holding a huge bird, looking like a giant goose, with a wingspan of some 30 feet (9m), on the interior deck of a barn of some description. This photo has been incredibly well 'reproduced' a sketch by Larry G. Thomas -- the cynical may comment that it's *too* well reproduced. The other version shows, in contrast, just a few cowboys with a nothing less than a pterodactyl hanging on the side of a wooden building, as sketched by David T. St. Albans. The problem is, no one can remember *where* they saw either photo. An article in the Tombstone Epitaph of 1890 seems to have sparked it off (although earlier accounts have been uncovered), with a reported killing of a 162ft long (50m) flying lizard with *twelve* legs. Contrary to common belief, there was no photo with the article.

Chorvinsky meandered through the evidential debris and frustrations of many forteans, John E. Keel included, concluding that the phenomenon -- that of the mystery of the photo of another fortean phenomenon -- the Thunderbird is some bizarre form of 'false memory' which many researchers have fallen prey to -- or maybe unseen forces have wiped all evidence from our libraries? [DW]

"ASK THE FORTEAN"

PANEL

[1500 ROOM 101]

The panel were Ian Simmons ("chairing"), Paul Sieveking, Rob Irving, Peter Brookesmith, Bob Rickard and Mark Chorvinsky. Mr Simmons asked questions which the panel then tried to answer. These questions had been chosen by the public (or something) and written down for Ian. Sadly, the panel had to be asked if they believed the Santilli Autopsy Film to be genuine. This reminded me of two years ago at the UnConvention when the film had been screened and the diverse audience had unanimously voted that they thought it a fake. The panel said much the same things as people did back then and Ian Simmons even cracked the same joke! Things brightened up when the panel were asked about any paranormal experiences they may have had. Most of them admitted to living normal lives, except for Mark who had a strange lunch, once. Thoughts for the day were provided by Bob, who said that

more investigation should be done into religious phenomena (e.g. stigmata) and Rob, who remarked that weird things happen to crop circle makers and hoaxers but that no-one really takes any interest in that side of things. [BK]

ASSAP FEEDBACK

(results of experiments)
[1700 ROOM 101]

Over the weekend many UnConvention goers subjected themselves to a series of technical "PSI" tests, administered by The Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (<http://www.assap.org/assap>). The moment of truth now arrived! The results did not seem to diverge much from mathematical probability, although one subject guessed what was in a box in Bromley (an orange) and two others made scales move by psychokinesis. I did all the tests myself, the most fun being the telepathy test, in which an ASSAP member tried to "transmit" a picture to me and I had to draw whatever came into my mind. An award was given to the most psychic of us all (the orange guy) and everyone left with a nice feeling that they had helped ASSAP try out their tests, methods and equipment.

CHARLES FORT INSTITUTE

[1700 HALL 2]

For those of you that may not be aware, The Charles Fort Institute - which is intended to become the 'world's leading resource for scholarship and research in the understanding of strange experiences and anomalous phenomena' was inaugurated on Sunday 26th of April 1998, with founding member tally of 59 souls. More information, including contact details can be found at (<http://www.forteana.org>). [DW]

OH, THE EMBARRASSMENT

Last week Blather told of the antics of the world's leading fortean air musicians, *Alien Spawn*, and their performance during Peter Brookesmith's 'Martian Cat's talk at the UnConvention. The evidence can be perused at the Magonia website. . .
<http://www.magonia.demon.co.uk/uncon.html>

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May 8th 1998

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