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Fortean Times - No. 114 - Editorial

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Editorial
by
Bob Rickard & Paul Sieveking

War Of The Words

This July saw a strained war of words erupt between the two leading academic groups of scientists who take an interest in 'paranormal' and fortean phenomena. On 29 July 1998, the Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE) -- founded in 1982 by 14 professors -- published their journal ('JSE') and drew the media's attention to its leading article. Called 'Physical Evidence Related To UFO Reports' it declared some classes of UFO reports worthy of scientific investigation.

The report -- the first independent scientific review of UFO data since the Condon Committee 28 years ago -- is available on the SSE website (www.jse.com). It developed from a special six-day workshop at which a team of eight respected ufologists were invited to present their best cases involving physical evidence to a panel of nine senior scientists, themselves overseen by the SSE's scientific steering committee.

The report -- presented by Peter Sturrock, a physicist at Stanford and president of SSE -- concluded that "there was no convincing evidence pointing to unknown physical processes or to the involvement of extraterrestrial intelligence." Nevertheless, it argued that scientists owed it to themselves and to the public not to dismiss UFO reports out of hand because there was always the possibility of learning something new.

So far so good, but this was too much for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), founded in 1976 by an equally impressive array of academics and scientists (www.csicop.org). They responded with a press release of their own, described in the media as "deriding the report as a publicity stunt by UFO believers to promote fringe research at the expense of mainstream science."

It is our belief, having read the material, that the SSE report makes a serious and honest (if heavy-going at times) attempt to evaluate some tangible data, but CSICOP's top spokesmen attacked the integrity of the SSE panel. Philip J. Klass -- CSICOP fellow and senior editor of Aviation Week and Space Technology magazine

-- complained: "it is unfortunate that the SSE did not assemble a more balanced roster of UFO investigators to present evidence to the panel of scientists." Surely the point was to investigate what specialists thought to be the most credible evidence and, in any case, the evaluation was done, not by the investigator-presenters as Klass suggests, but by the panel.

Kendrick Frazier -- CSICOP fellow and editor of their magazine Skeptikal Inquirer -- even accused the SSE of having "a hidden agenda". "While presented as neutral and objective... they seem to be interested in promoting fringe topics as real mysteries and they tend to ignore most evidence to the contrary." This is rich coming from CSICOP, whose name is a byword for narrow vision. An astonishingly ignorant editorial appeared in the New York Post (1 July 1998), branding the SSE a "superficially respectable organisation" full of 'credulous academics'. It described ufology as "little green men havinng unusual sex with hicks in the farm belt" and then dismissed it as "ridiculous". This insults everyone who labours for a better understanding of the UFO phenomenon, whatever it is.

In a reply to these rather puerile jibes -- also posted on the SSE site -- Bernard Haisch, editor of the 'JSE' asks reasonably: "How can anyone rationally object to a call for scientific examination of evidence?"

This is proper procedure, even if it results in a mystery explained. We can see this happening in this issue as Karl Pflock discovers no knowledge of crashed UFOs in early secret reports; and again when Robert Schoch ponders the ambiguity of the 10,000-year-old Yonaguni rock structure. Like the Cydonian Face, many people want it to be an ancient artifact. But as William Corliss once said, "Nature is a geometer." You only have to look at the hexagonal pillars of the Giant's Causeway, the 'paving slabs' of Bimini's underwater 'roads' and even the Kaimanawa 'wall' (FT92:12) to realise that we forget this at our peril.

By way of contrast, in this issue, Niklas Rasche demonstrates how much you can get out of a subject by considering its cultural context -- an approach that has no place on the agendas of either the CSICOP or the SSE, but which forteans find illuminating.

Finally, the time has come to begin planning for UnConvention '99 and to issue a call for papers. If you'd like to make a presentation on any subject of interest to forteans or would like to make suggestions for topics, please contact the editors at the usual address.

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