

Towards a Revisionist History of Ufology

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In general as valid today as 20 years ago. What was not foreseen was that a revival in ice freeze Cold War would occasion a return to old time ufology, But in the succeeding 20 years there have been fresh changes, which reflect the changing social concerns. The neat division into flying saucer and UFO belief systems has of course blurred round the edges, and now I would very hesitantly, and realising a lot of exceptions, suggest that we might think of a 'masculine' ufology centred on crashed saucers, conspiracies and the like, and a 'feminine' ufology centred around abductions.

P.R. 1999

One of the commonest cliches that has become associated with UFO beliefs is that the UFO phenomenon is of great antiquity. Reference is made to fairy beliefs, the airship waves, etc., in proving this point. Now there is no doubt that there are some parallels between the folklore of fairies and these other manifestations, but to ascribe them to a common UFO phenomenon is, I now believe, a gross oversimplification.

These parallels should not be pressed too far. It remains true that many traditional beliefs may be found in modern UFO lore, but the latter in no way comprises a true fairy faith which, according to Professor Reidar Christiansen, as quoted by Briggs (1) answered the questions of the untimely deaths of young people, of mysterious epidemics among cattle, of climatic disasters, wasting diseases and strokes, infantile paralysis, and the birth of mongol and otherwise deficient children . To which one may add the question of psychological collapse under the stress of intolerable living conditions; and in the case of changeling myths, a way of society coming to terms with child abuse.

Now, while individual strands of beliefs occur throughout the UFO literature, they do not do so as a coherent whole. The UFO beliefs may have elements of a folklore but, outside of small sub-cultures, they do not constitute a true mythology around which people structure their lives. However, occasional expectations may arise, especially in the so-called flap areas (i.e. areas of social panic). Such panics can spread outwards to cover relatively large areas as, for example, the cattle mutilations scare.

(2)

The exact origin of the flap situation is difficult to establish, despite works on Warminster, (3) Exeter, (4) Uiditah Basin, (5) Ann Arbor, (6,7) Point Pleasant (8) and Stoke-on-Trent. (9) Recently such a flap area existed in

Dyfed. Despite alleged investigations by ufologists, no really valuable sociological data have been gathered. Several suggestions can be made. For example, the flap may centre on a dominant individual percipient and/or investigator. John Rimmer and Roger Sandell have suggested that flap areas tend to be areas on the urban/rural fringe, or where urbanisation is progressing in hitherto rural areas. John Keel has suggested that the same areas repeatedly generate flaps; the explanation for which (if any) should be sought in sociological terms.

A further point that must be emphasised when dealing with historical UFO records is that we have no real justification in assuming that the airship sightings are nineteenth-century UFO waves, at least in the sense that they are occasioned by the same external common source. They are related in that they concern rumour, visions and social panic concerning aerial objects. And they possess such common features as any rumour in which misperception of celestial objects plays a part. However, the various airship panics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries arose separately, and must be evaluated in terms of the whole spectrum of belief systems of the period. For example, the 1909 airship scare coincided with, or was even an integral part of, a larger public hysteria about German spies in Britain. This information, uncovered by Nigel Watson in a study of airship reports in Lincolnshire local papers, (10) must have been available to the earlier researchers into 1909, but was presumably ignored as irrelevant. It is to much the same historical period that the modern set of religious miracles such as the appearances of the Virgin or the Welsh Revival can be traced. These phenomena are thought to be the product of social tensions between a conservative peasantry and a cosmopolitan, urban society. The psychological climate which generated Lourdes also led to the explosions of anti-Masonic and anti-Semitic hysteria in France. (11) The 1905 Welsh Revival, though less historically famous, has the advantage that it received contemporary sympathetic, non-polemical treatment. (12) The Revival was the culmination of a long struggle against cosmopolitan and Anglicising influences. It was a revival not just of Baptist fundamentalism, but of a deeper sense of Welshness. One feature of the glossoria of the period was that people ill-versed in the Welsh language were said to declaim in perfect, classical Welsh while the spirit moved them.

If we widen our study of the origins of UFO beliefs to consider the full range of folklore and social panics in the 1920s and 1930s, we see how the UFO folklore began to emerge. We can also solve one of the problems which confronted the historians of ufology when they supposed that UFO phenomena vanished between 1913 and 1943. For, of course, if rumours of machines in the sky are part of the whole spectrum of popular rumours and social panics, then one rumour is interchangeable with another. To take this to its logical conclusion, we should question whether the UFO

experience of the last thirty years is related to a single belief system. Rather we should perhaps think of separate social panics, rumours, folklore and contemporary mythologies, all organised around a common structure of the flying saucer.

This implies that, beneath the surface, the various UFO waves are really quite separate social panics, generated by very disparate circumstances. The internal content of the reports has varied considerably over the thirty-year time period. The material acquired by Keyhoe in 1950 (13) can be contrasted with that gathered by Keel in 1967. (14) In the early period of the UFO epoch, the typical UFO report concerned airline pilots encountering strange machines in the sky; the reports of the modern era centre around close encounters and abductions. It is true that elements of much of the later UFO beliefs can be detected as early as 1947, when little men (15) and MIB (16) occur. However, the first report of any sort of abduction case comes in 1954, backdated to 1921. (25)

The 1954 French wave marks, in my view, a new kind of UFO belief system, only semantically connected with the American material. It is in this wave that folklore, fairy-tale elements first seize the centre of the UFO stage. It is significant that this development took place in a rural society where the wave reached a stage of near-panic in places. Hoaxes and real events coincided, and the wave occurred at a time of national defeat and government crisis. It also marks a radical departure from a military to a domestic context.

The evidence suggests that, once set up, the UFO rumours evolved gradually from a secular military rumour (as were the 1909 and 1913 airships) to a more supernatural set of rumours. As the rumour shifted from an urban to a rural base, strands from traditional belief began to play an increasing role. The situation is rendered even more complicated than indicated above by virtue of the fact that several belief systems having little in common met under the title of flying saucers in the mid-1950s. One might argue for the existence of almost totally separate UFO and flying saucer rumours. The former would be exemplified by Ruppelt (17) and chronicled by Jacobs, (18) being wholly secular in content and gaining wide public appeal. The latter might be exemplified by Adamski (19) and chronicled by Flammonde, (20) almost wholly religious and supernatural. The current paradoxical state of the UFO in popular imagination may to some extent be influenced by the fact that the UFO folklore regarded the UFOs as hostile whereas the flying saucer folklore (with a few exceptions like Bender [21]) regarded them as superhuman benevolent forces, almost god-like figures. An aspect of the subject briefly touched upon above was the wave phenomenon. Superficially, the existence of UFO waves might indicate the presence of some sporadic physical phenomenon generating the reports. However, a closer examination suggests that temporal cycles are probably generated by social factors. One must always remember that

the contents of such major catalogues as UFOCAT or INTCAT are UFO records, (22) many of them reports of very low strangeness value. Dr Johnson (23) has suggested that a type-A UFO wave, (24) that is, a wave that builds slowly and falls suddenly, may be an indication of a novel phenomenon. However, if we are to envisage a signal of an inexplicable phenomenon boosting a noise of misidentification, the cut-off of the signal should not lead to a rapid drop of reports. Rather, the rush of noise would be expected to subside slowly. A study showing a drop in the strangeness of reports preceding a drop in the total of reports might be interesting, though not very conclusive.

The sudden drop in reports which has been noted suggests a social panic which has been defused by some reassuring statement. Perhaps it is worth noting that such a panic is likely to be generated by the press. It would be an interesting study to see if other press panics, such as stories about muggers, for example, follow a similar pattern. Of course we cannot exclude more exotic possibilities, such as some periodical physical phenomenon causing people to have hallucinatory experiences or to misperceive conventional stimuli.

It should be noted that hypotheses involving magical extramundane intelligence cannot be usefully discussed in scientific terms. If such an intelligence were indeed surveying the Earth, it could rest assured that no conclusive evidence could be determined to prove its existence and that extramundane intelligences are not, nor are ever likely to be, socially acceptable interpretations of puzzling experiences. Supporters of the ETH must accept the fact that there is no way that their views can be regarded as anything other than a leap of faith, unless the suspected ETs themselves determine otherwise; and suspend their activities in favour of those who are trying to determine whether UFO experiences are at root a psychological or a physical phenomenon.

There are no easy solutions to the UFO experience in sight, and we must resign ourselves to a long, slow process of trial-and-error studies of possibly related social, psychological and physical phenomena. In this process many popular beliefs about ufology will have to go to the wall.

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