

# A Note on Fireballs

READERS of Dr. Menzel's latest book, *The World of Flying Saucers* will recall \*that the author attempted to explain one mystery (UFOs) in terms of another (fireballs). It would seem that the latter subject has attracted as little scientific attention as the former. Indeed, if one takes a close look at the history of fireballs one is almost persuaded that their behaviour resembles that of the Foo Fighters of the 1939-1945 war. Even Dr. Menzel had to admit that scientists knew very little about fireballs, though he was prepared to invoke them as conventionalisations for flying saucers. The saucer student could equally well reverse the process and claim that what was known as a fireball in the past was in fact the flying saucer of today.

## A 19th Century Report

In Arthur Constance's *The Inexplicable Sky*, first published in 1956, there is a whole chapter devoted to these aerial mysteries. Among the incidents quoted, one of the most notable was recounted by Camille Flammarion, founder of the French Astronomical Society in 1887. Here is the story as related by Arthur Constance: "In October 1898, at Marseilles, a fireball made its appearance in a room and advanced towards a young girl, who was seated at a table, her feet hanging down without touching the floor. The luminous globe moved along the floor in the girl's direction, began to rise when near her, and then moved round and round her above the table, finally darting away towards a hole in a chimney made for a stovepipe, closed up with glued paper. It tore its way through the paper, travelled up the chimney, and emerged into the open air, exploding with a crash that shook the building. M. Flammarion commented: 'It was a case of coming in like a lamb and going out like a lion.' That sense of direction shown by the fireball in moving towards the girl, circling her, and choosing an obvious yet restricted exit to the open air is a characteristic of numbers of fireballs. Flammarion gives another case in which a globe of fire suddenly appeared at the top of a poplar tree, and, according to one spectator, descended branch by branch, then moved across the courtyard of the farm very slowly. This eyewitness said: 'The ball seemed almost to pick its way between pools of water. It came up to the door of a stable, where stood two children, and one of them was bold enough to touch it with his foot. At once there was a terrible crash which shook the entire farm to its foundations.' Amazingly, the two children were

uninjured, but eleven animals in the stable were killed." Arthur Constance goes on to remark that he has noticed that in incident after incident of this kind the human beings involved have miraculously escaped.

Another amazing incident is quoted by the author of *The Inexplicable Sky* on page 141: "Mr. Butti, marine painter to the Empress of Austria, wrote to Arago the celebrated French scientist who made a study of this phenomenon) to tell him of a sensational occurrence in Milan in June 1841. Butti was then staying at the Hotel del Agnello, in a room on the second floor overlooking the Corsia dei Servi. About six in the afternoon thunder began, rain fell in torrents, and flashes of lightning lighted the room repeatedly. Butti was smoking a cigar and watched the scene through the open window when he heard the sound of running feet and the voices of people shouting, 'Guarda! Guarda!' Butti wrote: 'Turning my head to the right the first thing that met my view was a globe of fire at the level of my window moving in the middle of the street, not horizontally, but sensibly slanting upwards. Eight or ten persons still calling out "Guarda! Guarda!" with their eyes fixed on the meteor, kept up with it. . . . The ball of fire passed quietly in front of my window, so that I was obliged to turn my head to look after it. . . . I hastened down the stairs and into the street, which I reached in time to see the meteor and to join with the rest of the curious spectators who were following it. It moved still with the same slowness, but in its oblique, upward march had already risen considerably, and in three minutes more it struck the cross of the steeple of the Church dei Servi and disappeared. Its disappearance was accompanied by a sound like the discharge of a 36-pounder gun, heard at a distance of 13 or 14 miles with a favourable wind. I can only give an idea of the dimensions and colour of this fiery ball by comparing it to the moon as one sees it rise over the Alps in clear winter nights, as I remember sometimes having seen it at Innsbruck in the Tyrol, of a reddish yellow, with some parts more red than the rest. The difference was that I could not see the precise outline of the meteor as one does that of the moon; it seemed enveloped in an atmosphere of light of which one could not define the limits'."

On another occasion, on May 17, 1852, at 5 p.m. a luminous ball appeared near Beuzeville Railway Station. The Stationmaster was one of many who witnessed the phenomenon and according to his testimony the globe stopped suddenly in

its flight about 60 feet away from him and then completely vanished.

Arthur Constance comments that he could easily fill a book with other and similar accounts of fireballs. The contemporary explanation offered for the mystery was "electrical phenomena", electricity then being an almost magical world to the layman who, no doubt like his modern counterpart, accepted anything issuing from a scientific source or an official authority. Dr. Menzel,

perhaps unconsciously, offers the fireball as a scientific explanation for the flying saucer without realising that he is leaving the mystery as deep as ever and the explanation as far to seek. In fact, in exploiting the fireball he is back to the "electrical phenomenon" explanation, though at one remove. And that explains nothing at all.

\*See "The World of Dr. Menzel", article in FLYING SAUCER REVIEW, May-June, 1964 issue.

## NICAP'S REPORT

### *The UFO evidence surveyed . . .*

THE long awaited report,\* compiled by the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena of Washington, D.C., was released on July 5. The reactions of American public opinion are hard to assess at the moment. In England, the television news service referred to the matter in more than one bulletin, but among the national newspapers only *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* gave it any serious attention: *The Times* devoted half a column of reasonable comment, but failed to mention the report in which criticisms of both the United States Air Force and the British Air Ministry had appeared.

#### **The Purpose of the Report**

Before making any specific comments on the report itself it is necessary to mention that the volume of evidence not unnaturally specialises, not wholly but largely, in those incidents occurring over America. The purpose behind the compilation was to alert the American public, via Congress and the newspapers, to the fact that the subject of UFOs was to be taken seriously and to expose the censorship that undoubtedly exists on both sides of the Atlantic. To the saucer student who is internationalist in approach and who reads the volume without realising its primary purpose it will appear much too limited in its range. This is not intended as a criticism—it would be manifestly unfair to mention the point except as a warning. While a small section is devoted to foreign reports (i.e. foreign to the United States), inevitably a general impression is conveyed that the phenomenon is in some way predominantly American. To this extent the report suffers from a handicap because, contrary to general American belief, the sightings over that country have not been unduly high nor in the context of happenings

elsewhere have they been particularly remarkable. England has had more than her fair share (based on geographical considerations) of sightings when compared with the U.S.A.: France, Brazil, Italy and the Argentine have each of them contributed more sensational and persistent evidence. In this context the report quotes from a statement made by Dr. J. Allen Hynek, Chief scientific consultant to the American Air Force on UFOs. He wrote in the April 1963 issue of the *Yale Scientific Magazine* as follows: "Although we tend to think of flying saucers as peculiarly American, they are international in scope. England has had more reported sightings, per square mile of territory, than has the United States. France has had its share, not only sporadically, but also in one apparently major wave in the fall of 1954. Brazil, Spain, Italy, Australia, Canada and even several Iron Curtain countries have also been the sources of reports." Dr. Hynek here betrays a considerable knowledge of the subject. That knowledge must perforce be shared with the United States Air Force.

Having said that, the NICAP report can be most warmly welcomed and it is hoped that its reception and its effect on Congress, and the United States Air Force and ultimately on world public opinion will justify the immense amount of work and care that has been devoted to its compilation. The report was issued at a propitious moment for flying saucers have been gaining in acceptability for some time now: the cat has been seen to be emerging from the bag for well over a year. Orthodoxy, however, yields by inches and while the impact of *The UFO Evidence* will always be recognised as a turning point in the struggle for the truth, we may have to go on fighting for quite a while yet before the final triumph. As one UFO