

ANIMADVERSIONS ON A BOOK

REVIEW

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PHENOMENA by John Michell and Robert J.M. Rickard, published by Thames and Hudson, 30 Bloomsbury St., London. £3.95; paperback £1.95 (U.K.)

THE impish iconoclasm of this "Book of Wonders" is in the tradition of Charles Fort, to whom it pays frequent tribute. Many of the odd happenings would be incredible were they not grouped, with hundreds of lesser degree, into 58 categories with 119 illustrations. One of the most impossible, the conversion of American Indians by a Spanish nun who never left her convent, is one of the best documented.

An odd characteristic of oddities and one acknowledged in the book, is that one tends to find what one desires. Our interest is in flying saucers (not one of the categories, but UFOs figure in several) and it is natural that the Editor should be inundated with reports, but it is odd that I should overhear a good sighting by the man who cut my hair, in our village.† Mr. Bance convincingly refuted my suggestion that it might have been a balloon. It was Mrs. Bance who insisted that they independently sketch what they saw, on returning home, and who reported to the police. Afterwards, a man from the Royal Air Force telephoned to ask routine questions and Mrs. Bance told me he regretted he would be unable to tell them what they saw. Mr. Bance has since complained that people will ask him: "Did you *really* see...?" and I have explained that they merely express themselves badly, what they mean being: "Do you think what you saw is real?" The *Kent Messenger* of September 23rd carried an article: "Are those UFOs really out of this world?" on the centre pages, reporting several more sightings of orange-coloured objects in the country recently; it also reproduced a daylight photograph of a large saucer above a tree and houses, under the caption: "UFO or fake? Either way this photograph by Cranbrook merchant seaman, Robin Dowsing, taken in December 1974, joins an already vast file of reports of UFO sightings. It was taken in Cranbrook High Street at 2.30 p.m."

It is odd that our review, in Vol.23, No.2, of *The Fire Came By* under the heading "More about the Siberian 'Meteorite'" should coincide with a column in *The Observer*, referring to a paper in *Nature* claiming that the last objections to the cometary theory had now been removed. Upon my enquiring why the book was not mentioned, the reply was in part that it was not convincing (interviews with eye-witnesses unconvincing!) and the writer followed the scientific principle that if two theories explain a phenomenon, the less unlikely is to be preferred. This principle is known as Occam's Razor and the authors of *Phenomena* say this about it in the section on freak plagues and mass panics: "It may seem that with this we abandon Occam's Razor — the rule that the simplest explanation should always be preferred

— for unbridled chaos, but simplicity is relative and is often judged by partial and incomplete information. Any explanation is simple and obvious if one is conditioned to believe it in the first place."

We are conditioned by education to believe many things later found to be erroneous. Fifty years ago, in Physics, we burned a small substance under controlled conditions, weighing the ingredients before and after the experiment: that there was no loss of weight was stated to be proof of the indestructibility of matter. This assurance, which seemed comforting at the time, has since been shattered by nuclear fission. Again, in Divinity we used a textbook which dealt with the shipwreck of St. Paul on the island of Malta. As Paul gathered a bundle of wood to put on the fire, he was bitten by a viper; however, he shook it off and suffered no harm. Our textbook asserted that vipers or adders bite and let go, but that the snake was a Smooth Snake, found also locally in the south of England and often mistaken for an adder. It is non-poisonous, but hangs on when it bites. We were impressed by this natural history explanation of the miracle and no one thought to ask why the natives expected Paul to experience fatal consequences. *Phenomena* makes the explanation seem unnecessary.

In Fire-immunity and the fire-walk, the authors quote from "The Miracle Hunters" by George Sandwith, a government surveyor on the island of Suva, Fiji. After one fire-walk he returned to his hotel with another spectator, a banker, who was obviously deeply disturbed by the experience: "Very grudgingly he admitted the fire-walking was genuine for he had thrown something on the pit and it caught fire at once, but he was strongly of the opinion that the Government ought to stop it! When asked why, he became very annoyed, replying that it does not conform with modern scientific discoveries. When I suggested that something of value might be learned from the fire-walkers, he was so furious he turned on his heels and left me." *Phenomena* continues: "This turning on the heel and leaving is a reaction commonly found among people confronted with the types of phenomena described in this book."

Viewers of the recent ITV serial "The Christians" will remember Bamber Gascoigne's account of Galileo's popularity with the burghers of Venice, who used his telescope to identify approaching vessels and so profit in the market. They were not interested when he discovered two moons of Jupiter and speculated that the earth itself was not the centre of the universe, but the Church was, and the Inquisition forced him to recant his heresy. It took a few hundred years for the Church to accept astronomical

facts known to classical Greece, but today the Vatican observatory plays an active part in astronomy.

Objections to flying saucers as interplanetary ships do not come from the Church but from modern science. They may not be interplanetary and, after reading this book we may doubt that the universe fits patterns anyone has been educated to see in it. The fashion among ufologists is to regard those of the "nuts and bolts" persuasion as beginners who are likely to graduate to the parapsychological, as able to account for otherwise inexplicable associations. In lake monsters and sea-serpents our authors refer to: "...the futile question of whether or not such things exist physically... Throughout this book we suggest that such polarization of opinion is unnecessary. Between the hard and the psychological there is an intermediate reality, the reality of phantoms. In earlier times, before the doctrine of materialism was given precedence over people's experience, this world of intermediate reality was recognized as a product of the reaction between thought and form and thus susceptible to magic."

However magical her journeys appear, The Venerable Mary of Jesus of Agreda left with the Jumano Indians crosses, rosaries and "a chalice which they used for celebrating Mass. This chalice was afterwards found to have come from Mary's convent at Agreda." Without hardware, flying saucers cannot become fully real. It can be argued that there will be no hardware until their existence is more generally accepted, but they represent no single faith or philosophy and what is one to accept among the many types of craft, creatures and experiences? I for one have no desire to encounter freaks and horrors; instead, I hope to get acquainted with beings who reflect more of the divine wisdom than we see generally expressed by mankind. I should like these to become realities for our world.

There is a tide running towards wider and more accurate views of the universe, well-grounded

assumptions are coming adrift and waves lap forgotten shores.

Note

† Extract from *Sevenoaks Chronicle*, September 10, 1977: "Boredom led a young Borough Green couple to an eerie experience late last Saturday night when, as they drove home, they saw a huge fluorescent object in the sky.

Mr. David Bance, aged 27, and his wife Pamela (24), of 48 Sevenoaks Road, could not believe their eyes and gave chase. They watched the unidentified flying object for some time before it suddenly seemed to deflate to the size of a pinhead and disappeared.

Mrs. Bance said: "If we hadn't left the club where we'd been for the evening when we did because we were getting bored, we would never have seen it! We were driving back through Ightham to Borough Green when my husband suddenly said: "My God, what is that?" We saw a big object, about the size of a terraced house. It was the shape of a bridge roll and had no definite outline. It was a pinky-orange colour and had two great big black holes in the front. The holes stood out clearly — like the headlamps of a car with no lights in. It started to move off towards Borough Green, so Dave said watch it and put his foot down to follow it. We came into Borough Green and it was hovering over the top of the railway line. We went over the bridge, then thought we had lost it, but as we came back over the bridge again we saw it again. It was at a 35 to 40 degree angle in the sky and going Maidstone way. We pulled into the school car park and stopped and watched it — and it was really big, and bright. Then it started to come down as if it were losing power and the bright light lessened. It shrank to the size of a pinhead and was gone. I don't know if it was shrinking on the spot or going away from us."

The couple dashed home and Mr. Bance went in to the kitchen and his wife stayed in the lounge and both, independently, drew pictures of what they had seen. The drawings were identical."

WHEN AN EPSOM JOCKEY SAW A HUMANOID ON THE FAMOUS RACETRACK

This incident, which is said to have taken place in September 1973, on Epsom Downs, involved a jockey, Mr. Peter Leather. The report has been investigated by Derek James for UFOIN and *Flying Saucer Review*. Derek James became involved because Peter Leather's parents live in Cheshire.

Peter was walking between the road and the Derby starting post on Epsom Downs when, he says, he was startled by a strange noise. Turning, he saw an object that seemed to be shaped like a disc, engulfed in a blue haze. Shocked, he stood still, watching this thing which hung some 20 feet above the ground, between two clumps of trees.

As the object hovered he said that

on the upper part there appeared to be a "flash of yellow sparks" like, he said, that on a burnt-out electric hand drill. This flash appeared at intervals of about five seconds.

Suddenly the disc was seen to descend and as it did so the frequency of the flash increased. The blue haze may not have been constant in its luminosity; certainly the yellow flash seemed to become brighter every few seconds. The UFO took an estimated five minutes from the time of first being seen until it actually "landed."

While he was wondering what to do he says he saw an orange-coloured light coming from the blue haze close to the ground. Slowly he became aware that

it was a light held by a human-shaped figure. While the noise from the object remained constant, Peter observed that the entity was moving towards him: he turned tail and fled from the race-course, back on to the road. Glancing back as he ran he was surprised to see no sign of humanoid or light: only the UFO remained. When he reached the road he again looked back; now the UFO was gone as well.

This interview was conducted by telephone: it has been virtually impossible to contact this witness because his work takes him all over the country, while in the close season he is invariably abroad on riding engagements.