

Is the scientific approach the best way to the truth?

by Alexander Merrow

Our contributor wrote on the subject of the saucers' greatest enemy, indifference, in the March/April issue of the "Review". Alexander Merrow now puts another controversial point of view of interest to all who are genuinely trying to solve the greatest enigma of modern times.

IF I am to say that I was less than enthusiastic about that hackneyed phrase "the scientific approach" I run the risk of being dubbed a member of the lunatic fringe. I must be prepared to run that risk, however, and to say that I doubt whether the truly scientific approach will ever get us anywhere in our quest: I will go further and assert that it can be a positive hindrance.

I can quote an instance to make my point. In the last issue of the FLYING SAUCER REVIEW there appeared an account of a close saucer sighting enjoyed by Mrs. Starr in 1957. She has no witnesses, so one must accept or reject her story on its face value. There are only two possibilities confronting us. We can either reject the story *in toto* or we can accept it with enthusiasm. No team of scientists, however learned, can help us to discredit the good lady's account: no group of enthusiasts, however credulous, can persuade those who do not wish to believe to change their views. All argument, just on the basis of the story and on that alone, is futile. Something, of course, in the future might crop up, more or less accidentally, and this could lead us to the truth. But the truth, or otherwise, would be revealed by an approach other than the scientific.

Proof after acceptance

May I say quite openly that I hope that the FLYING SAUCER REVIEW will never adopt the purely scientific approach so beloved of many saucer enthusiasts? If it were to, then I think that the whole subject would be in great danger of drying up altogether. Unless a sighting were to be accompanied by irrefragable proof it would never be printed. Every incident would have to be attested by a cloud of witnesses, photographs

would have to be produced to support the claims, and, to make everything perfect, the visiting saucer would have to re-appear at predicted times over a selected spot about twenty times before an assembly of doctors of science convened for the purpose. *In other words, we could prove the saucers to be facts after they had already been accepted as facts.*

At the moment, the saucers are usually seen by only a few or even by one person, and if their visits could be predicted the learned scientists, at the moment, would refuse to congregate. The trouble with the scientific approach is that you can never get started: for this some other sort of approach is needed.

I am not arguing in favour of the unscientific approach. I take it that this sort of approach would involve printing any nonsense that is offered: some discrimination is necessary. As human beings are fallible, however, it is clear that one must risk printing something which may subsequently turn out to be a hoax. The alternative would be to print nothing, and had this policy been adopted ever since 1947, there would be no subject at all today. Aimé Michel would never have been able to make his straight-line discovery and the saucers would have remained a matter for private marvelling—a sort of ghost story told round the fireside at a winter gathering. Michel's discovery—the beginnings of an attempt at co-ordination—is the very first book which a scientist can accept, but without the pioneers of the movement he could never have begun his systematic study. At some stage someone had to precede him and to say "I believe." That person was unscientific. We all owe him our deepest gratitude. The majority scoffed and

ridiculed. It was scientific. It was also wrong.

I have just found reinforcement for my views about the scientific approach and it comes, most surprisingly, in a letter printed in the *New Scientist* for March 17. Mr. Ian S. Menzies writes in support of science-fiction, and much of what he has to say is pertinent to our matter. He says: "One of the most important attributes which the adult reader of science-fiction seems to share with too few others these days is the possession of an *open mind*—the kind of thinking which enabled the gentlemen amateurs of the past to make fundamental discoveries and which still distinguishes the truly experimental scientists from today's mass of scientific civil servants. It is therefore far easier to imagine a professional scientist "falling for these things (i.e. reading prophecy into SF when it isn't there) than the most recent of SF aficionados."

Mr. Menzies, too, has noticed a recent trend, already commented on in the FLYING SAUCER REVIEW. His letter continues: "It does seem curious, however, that 'the erstwhile down-to-earthers in the Soviet Union' now indulge in a little original speculation. Only a little while ago we were told that the climate of opinion in Soviet Russia would preclude that sort of thing—but perhaps this is a reaction. Just let it be remembered that the 'Space Travel in Bilge' school laughed at the very thought of artificial satellites very, very few years ago: why should we not at least consider with a straight face the speculations of the scientists who had the last laugh in this matter?"

The correspondent to the *New Scientist* makes yet another telling point and explains how it is that science-fiction so often turns out to be accurate prophecy. At the time it was written, most science-fiction was not intended to be prophetic: it is merely that if one is well grounded in science *and* keeps an open mind as to future developments, then some of the guesses are bound to be proved correct. Jules Verne and H. G. Wells were not right every time: but we do remember the remarkable bull's-eyes that both these authors scored.

A new starting point

Mr. Menzies concludes his letter with a rebuke to those who scoff at science-fiction. Although the saucers are not fiction, this rebuke can apply equally to those who scoff at saucers. The scoffers "should remember that however many 'credulous people' may become convinced that whole worlds of fantasy will become reality, it will not include the regular readers of science-fiction. And the best remedy will be to join us

and develop the open mind so desperately needed these days.

I believe that it is the open mind, as much as anything, which has given the Soviet Union its commanding lead in space travel. If our minds would only remain wide open—and our eyes unblinded by 'science'—we might be able to read the riddle of the saucers within a surprisingly short time. As a start, we could then say: "Let us accept *all* we are told and see if the facts agree." Instead, even keen saucer researchers are sometimes inclined to say: "I cannot possibly accept that—it hasn't yet been proved." That approach is more likely to arrive at a blank wall than the truth.

Might I advise those who have become so keen on the new sport, baiting the contact claimants, to go back on their tracks and, just for an experiment, accept everything that has been claimed as gospel and see from that point how matters stand? The first question to ask in this new form of approach is: is it inherently improbable? It is not: there is no reason why people from other planets should not have visited us and made tentative contacts. So why not proceed from this not unreasonable starting point?

The legal approach

One answer to the "scientific approach" is therefore the search with the open mind. The other is the legal approach, which is a method of weighing the pros and cons of evidence. The judge must listen to both sides impartially. He will prefer direct evidence to any other, but he will take into account the character and the demeanour of the witnesses. He will reject hearsay evidence, but he will, if he is a wise judge, warn the jury that a story must not be rejected out of hand merely because it appears incredible at first blush. He will have a healthy distrust of much "expert" evidence, especially when it is, as so often happens, in conflict with other "expert" evidence from the other side.

An analogy suggests itself here. In any court of law in the western world the evidence of those who claim to have seen saucers, provided the witnesses were sane and sensible and had stood up to the most rigorous of cross-examination conducted by those skilled in the art of breaking them down, no judge could advise giving the slightest weight to the *opinions* of any "expert" who was, perhaps, hundreds of miles distant from the scene of the alleged happening. The object *might*, says the "expert," have been a weather-balloon: the witnesses say it wasn't. Which version do you prefer? Not, I think, what is so often referred to as the "scientific approach."