

# AIRSHIPS OVER TEXAS

*A contribution to the study of the 1896-1897 wave*

*by Donald B. Hanlon and Jacques Vallée*

CONSIDERABLE attention has recently been devoted to the 1896-97 American wave<sup>1, 2</sup>. This phase of UFO activity had first been recognised by Fort<sup>3</sup> and has been discussed in books by Keyhoe<sup>4</sup>, Ruppelt<sup>5</sup> as well as in more recent publications<sup>6</sup>. But it is only in the last few months that it began to be really clarified. Although Dr. J. Allen Hynek had called attention to the dramatic Leroy episode<sup>7</sup> as early as 1960, it was not until the publication of the story in 1965 by one of the authors<sup>8</sup> that a full-scale study of the wave was undertaken. This long-needed investigation has produced an unprecedented amount of data. At the same time, most researchers interested in this aspect of the mystery have found themselves in complete agreement regarding the very high significance of the new data so suddenly brought to light.

An important remark that has been presented in the pages of the REVIEW by Clark<sup>1</sup> is that "the 1897 wave indicates the futility of any attempt to divorce flying objects from the general situation in which they operate." It is quite clear that the similarities which had been noted between the behaviour of the 1897 airships and modern observations must now be regarded with caution.

The fact remains, of course, that many features of the 1897 sightings closely parallel UFO behaviour during the major waves of the post-war period. It is striking to read in Clark's article that an object seen on April 10, 1897 "dropped what looked like a parachute with a light attached to it", an observation we have come to regard as typical in the French sightings of 1954 and which is also found time and again in the American files—for instance in the recent Exeter case<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the high proportion of "occupant" cases and the pattern observed in Type I reports (not to mention such obvious features as the reported size of the objects, or the relationship between light frequency and acceleration), tend actually to support earlier claims that we are dealing precisely with the same type of objects—that the airships are UFOs in the modern sense. What is entirely disturbing is the reported behaviour of the operators and the appearance (which Clark with reason calls "almost ludicrous") of the vehicles themselves.

Accordingly, the purpose of the present article is twofold :

- (i) To further document the analysis of that period by presenting a series of thirty sightings, most of them unpublished.
- (ii) To show how the patterns already observed by Clark<sup>1</sup> and Hanlon<sup>2</sup> are further substantiated as the acquisition of new evidence progresses.

## Observational material

For convenience, we give in table form the dates and sources for the accounts which we describe in detail below in chronological order. All these sightings were made **in a twelve day period** and within two hundred miles of Fort Worth, Texas (see map).

1. 'That Denton is not behind the other towns and cities in North Texas is shown by the fact that the mysterious airship of which so much has been said and written in the last few days, has been seen here by at least two credible persons, one a gentleman and the other a lady, whose reputation for truthfulness cannot be assailed.' The airship is described as cigar-shaped with a light, moving slowly. Then it accelerated "at a terrific rate." There was a row of windows along the side. One witness observed it through a marine telescope and said "I do not doubt that it was an airship." It was said to be about fifty feet long.

2. Weatherford: "Last night at 9 o'clock the airship that has been mentioned in *The News* from Oklahoma and other points, was seen here. It passed over the city in a south-westerly direction and lights were thrown out from the front, resembling the headlight of an engine. The machine was seen here by many people."

3. "Various and truthful citizens of Corsicana today declared that the airship, which has received not a little mention in the press this week, passed over the city last night. It was described by one, who is emphatic in the statement that he saw it, as being a bright light a long distance from the earth and was moving at rather a fast speed across the firmament."

4. A man from Ennis said that he saw the airship the previous night from Fort Worth.

5. Paris: several persons saw the airship, including J. A. Black, a nightwatchman. He got a good look at it and described it as cigar-shaped, 200 feet long, with sails or wings outstretched on either side. A dog howled until the airship passed from sight.

6. Sherman: 'The mysterious aerial navigator that has caused so much newspaper comment recently has been sighted by W. S. Hellier of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas railroad at this place. This is what Mr. Hellier says about it: "I was standing on the pavement on the north side of the public square last night about 10 o'clock when I noticed a dark object begin to pass between the

TABLE

Case identification						Source	
remarks	No.	Date	Time	Place	Witness	Dallas Morning News	Houston Post
meteor ?	1	About 13		Denton		15 April, 1897	
	2	14 April	2100	Weatherford		16 April	
	3	night 14-15		Corsicana		16 April	
	4	night 14-15		Fort Worth		17 April	
	5	night 15-16		Paris	Black Hellier	17 April	
	6	15 April	2200	Sherman		17 April	18 April
	7	16 April		Farmersville		18 April	
	8	16 April	2130	Granbury	Gresham	19 April	
	9	17 April	0116	Childress	Smith		22 April
	10	17 April		Texarkana		18 April	
misquote	11	17 April		Garland		18 April	
	12	17 April		Bonham		18 April	
	13	17 April		Cleburne		18 April	
	14	17 April		Tioga		18 April	
	15	17 April		Mansfield		18 April	
	16	17 April		Ladonia		18 April	
	17	17 April		Forney		18 April	
	18	17 April		Stephenville		19 April	
	19	17 April		Waxahachie		19 April	
	20	17 April		Greenville		19 April	
accident	21	17 April	0600	Aurora	Weems	19 April	
	22	night 17-18		Bryan			20 April
	23	night 18-19	0010	Atlanta	Nelson		22 April
landing	24	19 April	2130	Longview			22 April
	25	19 April	2330	Belton			22 April
	26	19 April		Groesbeck	Johnson		22 April
	27	22 April	2330	Rockland	Barclay		22 April
	28	night 22-23	2400	Josserand	Nicholas		26 April
	29	night 25-26		Pine Valley			28 April
	30	night 25-26		Merkel			28 April

earth and the moon. At first I thought it was a cloud, but I noticed at the same time that it was perfectly shaped. The object was going eastward and not apparently at any great rate of speed. It was an elongated oval, perhaps six times its diameter in length. After it passed by the moon I saw no more of it."

7. Farmersville: Several persons saw the airship. Two said they saw men on board. One said he could clearly hear them singing 'Nearer My God to Thee'. He said they were distributing temperance tracts.

8. Granbury: Newt Gresham at 9.30 p.m. was drilling the Riddle Rifles when the airship approached. He ordered the company to fire on the object. It later disappeared.

9. Childress: 'The much-talked-of airship was seen here last night about 1:16 o'clock. Rev. J. W. Smith was the first to discover the curious aerial monster. He thought at first that it was a star shooting, but after watching it a moment or two, saw that it was not. He then called to his mother-in-law, Mr. Charley Norris, and also called to Mr. Bates and wife, near neighbours, who were up at the time. Charles Norris ran over to his mother's and called out several members of the family, who saw the ship. It soon disappeared, travelling in a westerly direction. Rev. Smith thinks it must have been 2,000 feet high and travelling very fast.'

10. Texarkana: A telegraph operator at Hope, Ark., said he saw the airship. It is not clear whether he saw it from Hope or from Texarkana.

11. Garland: A man said he saw wings on sides and back of cigar-shaped object.

12. Bonham: Several saw ship pass and heard motors.

13. Cleburne: Sighting of the airship. No details given.

14. Tioga: Sighting, no details.

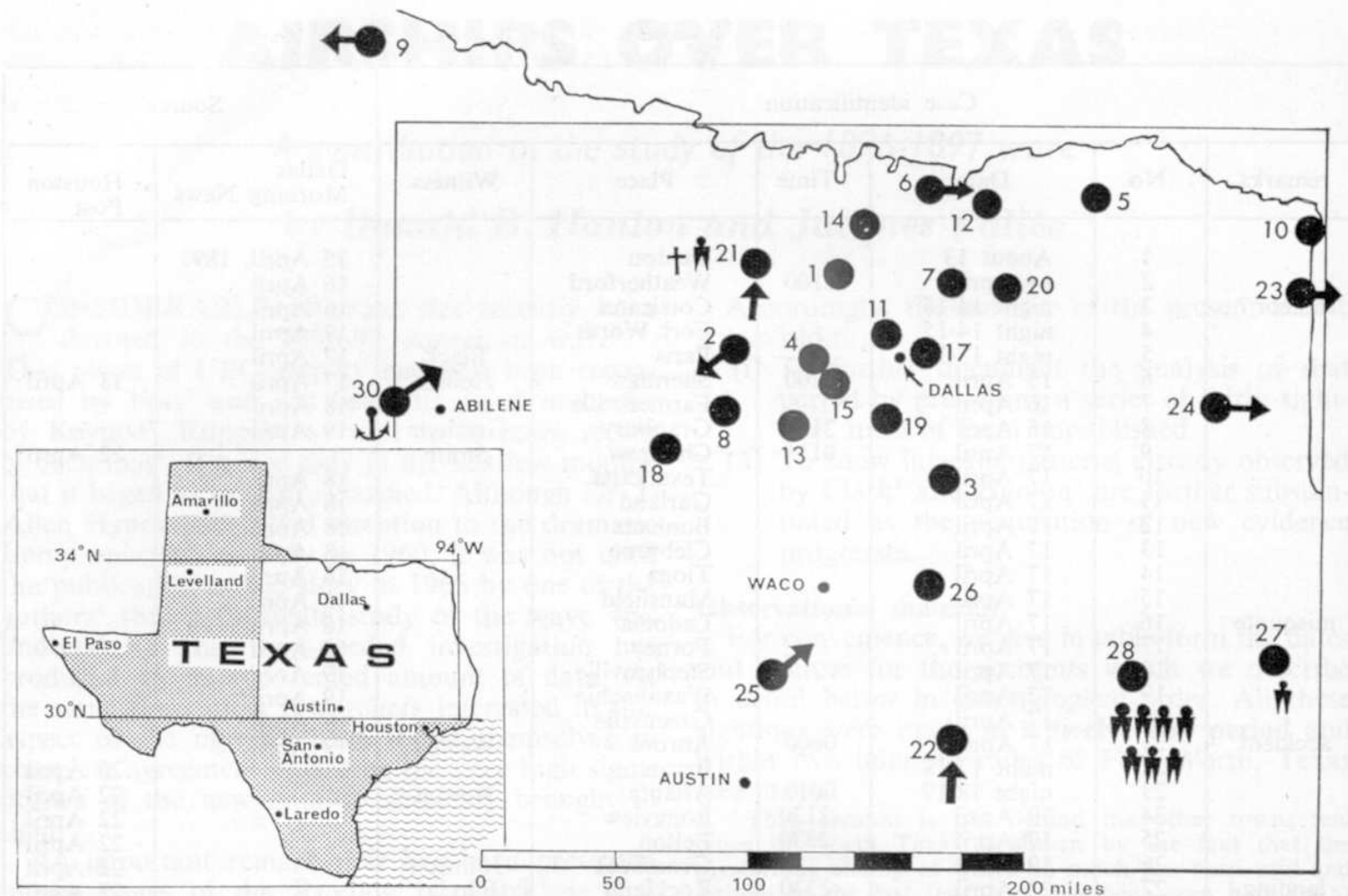
15. Mansfield: Airship was said to be cigar-shaped with wings on either side. Had a front end headlight. Side lights were green with bright red light in rear.

16. Ladonia: A sighting was mentioned, but the News several days later ran a correction which said that the man had been misquoted, that he had not seen the airship.

17. Forney: Sighting of the airship. No details given.

18, 19, 20. Stories from Stephenville, Waxahachie and Greenville say that people have talked to crewmen of the airship.

21. Aurora: 'About 6 o'clock this morning the early risers of Aurora were astonished at the sudden appearance of the airship which has been sailing throughout the country. It was travelling due north, and much nearer the earth than before. Evidently some of the machinery was out of order, for it was making a speed of only ten or twelve miles an hour, and gradually settling toward the earth. It sailed over the public square and when it reached the north part of town collided with the tower of Judge Proctor's windmill and went to pieces with a terrific explosion, scattering debris over several acres of ground, wrecking the windmill and water tank and destroying the judge's flower garden. The



pilot of the ship is supposed to have been the only one aboard, and while his remains are badly disfigured, enough of the original has been picked up to show that he was not an inhabitant of this world. Mr. T. J. Weems, the U.S. Signal Service officer at this place and an authority on astronomy, gives it as his opinion that he was a native of the planet Mars. Papers found on his person—evidently the records of his travels—are written in some unknown hieroglyphics, and cannot be deciphered. This ship was too badly wrecked to form any conclusion as to its construction or motive power. It was built of an unknown metal, resembling somewhat a mixture of aluminium and silver, and it must have weighed several tons. The town today is full of people who are viewing the wreckage and gather specimens of strange metal from the debris. The pilot's funeral will take place at noon tomorrow. Signed: E. E. Haydon.' (see note 10).

22. Bryan: 'A number of Bryan people claim to have seen the mysterious airship pass over that town Saturday night. It was going north.'

23. Atlanta: 'There was considerable excitement here today, caused by a visitation last night by the mysterious airship. It was first seen by Jim Nelson, a farmer, living one and a half miles west of here. He had walked out into his yard just after midnight, when his attention was attracted by a peculiar noise and looking up he discovered the mysterious aerial traveller. It seemed to be descending straight to the earth with great rapidity and Mr. Nelson's hair stood out with fright, as he mistook it for a meteor and momentarily expected it to strike the earth, explode and blow himself, his family and earthly possessions into eternity. But when within two or three hundred feet of the earth it paused for an instant, coming to a sudden stop, almost like a heavy weight fall-

ing until it reached the end of a rope sustaining it, then it moved off at a rate of speed about equal to that of an ordinary passenger train, in the direction of this city. Having read in the papers of an airship appearing at different places, he decided this must be the mysterious stranger and having telephone connection with this city, he immediately rang up central and reported what he had seen.

'Mr. Boothe, the telephone manager, being in the office, looked out for the airship, which made its appearance on time. While passing over the city it was seen by many of the best citizens. Lee Wicks, night policeman, saw it distinctly and describes it as being about thirty feet long and the body or hull being about the proportions and shape of a skiff, and seemed to be propelled by revolving wheels and fitted with sails to guide its course. Both Mr. Wicks and Mr. Boothe agree in their description of the ship, and both believe the motor power to be electricity.

'Dr. Crossly, Jack Bangus, Dr. Connelly, Chess Mayes, Tom Swint, Dick Hogan, Paul Dunklin, R. T. Cope and Mr. Huffmaster, night operator, all are reported to have seen the ship, and verify the statement and description given by Boothe and Wicks. When first seen by Jim Nelson, there were only faint gleams of red, green and blue lights showing, but just after starting off horizontally it shot out a glaring gleam of white light, which was directed towards the earth in front of the airship at an angle of about 45 degrees and lighted a circle of about thirty feet diameter as bright or brighter than the noonday sun. This great light and its wonderful power is supposed to have been a searchlight. While passing over this city the speed of the airship was from five to fifteen miles an hour. It slowed up just before reaching the business part of the city and in passing over this portion

its speed was not above five miles an hour. It was traveling almost due east and the stream of light was shut off just after passing the city limits. The opinions regarding this mysterious ship are about as numerous as the population. Some who did not see it are inclined to brand the story as a fake, but the character of the men who saw it cannot be questioned. It is impossible to give all the opinions, but one that seems worthy of consideration is that the airship is the property of a gang of cracksmen, who by the aid of the searchlight and X-rays, under the management of scientific experts, sail over a town and look through the walls of the houses and bank vaults and locate the booty; that they return on a later date and secure it, and then disappear by the aid of their airship. Another solution offered is that it is an exploring party sent out by some other planet. The most plausible theory seems to be that some inventor has succeeded in solving the problem of aerial navigation and with a party of his friends is out on an aerial trip.'

24. Longview: 'Last night about 9.30, the *Post* correspondent and family on returning from church saw the so-called airship. A bright light, seemingly about the size of Venus, moved swiftly to the Northwest, disappearing beneath the horizon. In a few minutes it reappeared rising nearly to the zenith and rapidly traversed the heavens in an easterly direction. The light emitted a series of intermittent flashes of a steel colour. No car was seen.'

25. Belton: 'Last night quite a crowd of responsible people of this place assembled for the purpose of watching for that much-talked-of airship and at 11.30 o'clock it was seen coming from the southwest at an immense velocity. It dipped and but for the fact of bearing just a little to the left of the "New Surprise" show tent, directly in front of Peay's hotel, the tent would have suffered great injury, judging from the velocity of the ship. Missing the tent, it passed by the northwest corner of Peay's hotel and rising passed from view. The passengers on board their aerial wonder spoke as they passed, but could not be understood on account of the velocity. Belton people have been sceptical heretofore, but they now believe. The race was so swift that no proper estimate could be formed as to the dimensions; however, about ten persons were distinctly seen.'

26. Groesbeck: 'Mr. B. F. Johnson saw the mysterious airship last night, as did several of his neighbours.'

27. Rockland: 'Mr. John M. Barclay, living near this place, reports that last night about 11 o'clock, after having retired, he heard his dog barking furiously, together with a whining noise. He went to the door to ascertain the trouble and saw something, he says, that made his eyes bulge out and but for the fact that he had been reading of an airship that was supposed to have been in or over Texas, he would have taken to the woods. It was a peculiar shaped body, with an oblong shape, with wings and side attachments of various sizes and shapes. There were brilliant lights, which appeared much brighter than electric lights. When he first saw it, it seemed perfectly stationary about five yards from the ground. It circled a few times and gradually descended to the ground in a pasture adjacent to his house. He took his Winchester and went down to investigate. As soon as the ship, or whatever it might be, alighted, the lights went out. The night was bright enough for a man to be distinguished several yards, and when within about thirty yards of the ship he was met by an ordinary mortal, who requested him to lay his gun aside as no harm was intended. Whereupon the following conversation ensued: Mr. Barclay enquired: 'Who are you and what do you want?'—'Never mind about my name, call it Smith. I want some lubricating oil and a couple

of cold chisels if you can get them, and some bluestone. I suppose the saw mill hard by has the two former articles and the telegraph operator has the bluestone. Here is a ten-dollar bill; take it and get us these articles and keep the change for your trouble.'

Mr. Barclay said: "What have you got down there? Let me go and see it." He who wanted to be called Smith said: "No, we cannot permit you to approach any nearer, but do as we request you and your kindness will be appreciated, and we will call you some future day and reciprocate your kindness by taking you on a trip."

Mr. Barclay went and procured the oil and cold chisels, but could not get the bluestone. They had no change and Mr. Barclay tendered him the ten-dollar bill, but same was refused. The man shook hands with him and thanked him cordially and asked that he not follow him to the vessel. As he left Mr. Barclay called him and asked him where he was from and where he was going. He replied "from anywhere, but we will be in Greece day after tomorrow." He got on board, when there was again the whirling noise, and the thing was gone, as Mr. Barclay expresses it, like a shot out of a gun. Mr. Barclay is perfectly reliable."

28. Jossierand: 'Considerable excitement prevails at this writing in this usually quiet village of Jossierand, caused by a visit of the noted airship, which has been at so many points of late. Mr. Frank Nichols, a prominent farmer living about two miles east of here, and a man of unquestioned veracity, was awakened night before last near the hour of twelve by a whirring noise similar to that made by machinery. Upon looking out he was startled upon beholding brilliant lights streaming from a ponderous vessel of strange proportions, which rested upon the ground in his cornfield.

'Having read the despatches published in the *Post* of the noted aerial navigators, the truth at once flashed over him that he was one of the fortunate ones and with all the bravery of Priam at the siege of Troy Mr. Nichols started out to investigate. Before reaching the strange midnight visitor he was accosted by two men with buckets who asked permission to draw water from his well. Thinking he might be entertaining heavenly visitors instead of earthly mortals, permission was readily granted. Mr. Nichols was kindly invited to accompany them to the ship. He conversed freely with the crew, composed of six or eight individuals about the ship. The machinery was so complicated that in his short interview he could gain no knowledge of its workings. However, one of the crew told him the problem of aerial navigation had been solved. The ship or car is built of a newly-discovered material that has the property of self-sustenance in the air, and the motive power is highly condensed electricity. He was informed that five of these ships were built at a small town in Iowa. Soon the invention will be given to the public. An immense stock company is now being formed and within the next year the machines will be in general use. Mr. Nichols lives at Jossierand, Trinity County, Texas, and will convince any incredulous one by showing the place where the ship rested.'

29. Pine Valley: 'The airship—the genuine, real live thing—was seen last night by several parties whose word is far beyond question and of whom some of the most responsible persons in the community. They were at church when it was seen from the inside through a window; considerable excitement prevailed. It appeared to be a long distance off, at an angle of about 45 degrees from where the crowd was standing, moving very slowly; was of cigar shape, as has so often been described; had two large wings on each

side; one set was just in front and slightly overlapped the rear set, but appeared to be a great deal larger. The colour of the object seemed to be of a yellowish brown, a bit different than other accounts. The propeller was at the bow and, as well as the crowd could distinguish it, was made of long paddles, even as long as the ship itself. The much-heard-of searchlight was on the stern of the ship and appeared to cover the entire stern. It seemed to be a very large light and it would go out and relight at regular intervals. This was explained by some to be a disinclination of its navigators to being perceived, that it merely turned on the light occasionally to discover their whereabouts. The light was a deep golden colour and some of the observing party declared they could see plainly enough to have picked up a fly on the floor had there been no other light in the house. At this juncture, the ship had almost gone out of sight from the window and the crowd decided to look at it, but when they got outside it was nowhere to be seen. Upon returning and making more careful observation they found it to be a lightning-bug or fire-fly crawling slowly across the window-pane.'

30. Merkel: 'Some parties returning from church last night noticed a heavy object dragging along with a large rope attached. They followed it until in crossing the railroad it caught on a rail. On looking up they saw what they supposed was the airship. It was not near enough to get an idea of the dimensions. A light could be seen protruding from several wings. One bright light in front like the headlight of a locomotive. After some 10 minutes a man was seen descending the rope: he came near enough to be plainly seen; he wore a light blue sailor suit, was small in size. He stopped when he discovered parties at the anchor and cut the rope below him and sailed off in a north-east direction. The anchor is now on exhibition at the blacksmith shop of Elliott & Miller and is attracting the attention of hundreds of people.'

## Discussion

On the basis of several detailed descriptions of the airships seen at close range, descriptions that use such terms as 'wings', 'wheels', 'carriage', etc., Clark makes the strong assumption that the phenomenon is "a kind of heavier than air construction built for limited flights through the immediate atmosphere. It was most decidedly **not** any sort of spacecraft." This statement is somewhat ambiguous. If it is meant that **in the appearance of the objects to the observers**, they could only be interpreted as airships, the point is certainly well taken; if it is meant, however, that the intrinsic features of the craft made them drastically different from the class of UFO phenomena observed today, then we disagree with the statement. In addition to the similarities noted in our introduction, there are, in our view, three characteristics of the airships that duplicate the performances observed today: (i) The very general description of the objects as 'cigar-shaped', (ii) the dramatic way of arrival ('descending straight to the earth with great rapidity' in case No. 23) and departure ('like a shot out of a gun' in case

No. 27) and (iii) the reported noise 'whnning' or 'whirling' in case No. 27, witness 'awakened by a whirring noise similar to that made by machinery' in case No. 28).

Not only were these performances beyond the technology of 1897, but it would still be impossible to duplicate them: the airships have the characteristics of a ten-passenger vertical take-off and landing aircraft creating little noise and no ground disturbance, and not propelled by rockets, capable of both extremely high horizontal speeds and remarkable hovering or stationary flight! They violate the laws of inertia and aerodynamics precisely in the same manner as our 'modern' UFOs (see note 11). Yet their outside appearance seems well-designed to convey the impression that they are nothing but advanced dirigibles, just within the grasp of an American farmer of 1897. As for the conversations with the crews, they are also disturbing to the highest point, if they are reliably reported. It should be remembered, however, that **not all occupants were described as humans**. Hamilton himself, in Leroy, spoke of 'six of the strangest beings I ever saw. They were jabbering together, but we could not understand a word they said.' Later he refers again to 'the cursed thing with its big lights and hideous people.' On the contrary, in most of the Texas encounters, there was communication of the most uncomplicated and mundane nature between the witness and the operators—this duality is indeed present in modern time: it constitutes one of the major mysteries of the French wave of 1954 (cf. also Carrouges book *Les Apparitions de Martiens* and the South American cases).

A great deal of research and discussion will undoubtedly be necessary before this duality can be understood. To appraise objectively the 1897 sightings, one must replace them within the entire history of the rumours of aerial visions—and, perhaps, the strange astronomical observations—that flourished during the second half of the last century and may have culminated in the Siberian catastrophe of 1908 and the New Zealand wave of the following year. What is remarkable in the American wave itself is the revelation of a much higher proportion of landings than was originally suspected, and the discovery of a pattern of contact so remarkable that it may open an entirely new avenue of approach to the UFO mystery.

## References:

- 1 Clark, J.: *The Strange Case of the 1897 Airship* FLYING SAUCER REVIEW XII, 4.
- 2 Hanlon, D. B.: FLYING SAUCER REVIEW XII, 5.
- 3 Fort, C.: *New Lands in Books of Charles Fort*, Holt ed. page 468.
- 4 Keyhoe, D.: *The Flying Saucers are Real*, Fawcett ed. 1950 page 60.