

## BOOK REVIEW

**Redemption of the Damned: Vol. 1: Aerial Phenomena, A Centennial Re-Evaluation of Charles Fort's 'Book of the Damned'** by Martin Shough with Wim van Utrecht. San Antonio, TX/Charlottesville, VA: Anomalist Books, 2019. 412 pp. \$39.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-949501-07-0.

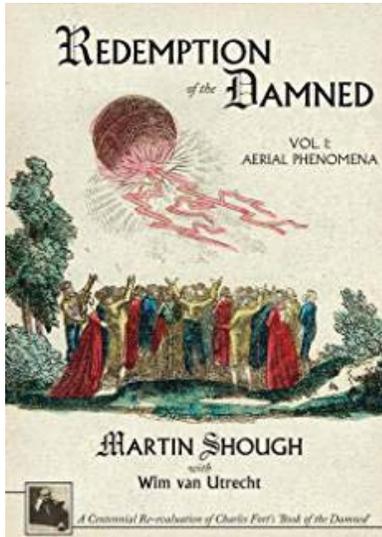
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Reading Charles Fort at an early age did my subsequent career and income no favor, but it did make my life more interesting. My admiration for Fort's cheeky attitude toward received wisdom has only expanded with time. I will always be, first and foremost, a Fortean.

The omnibus *The Books of Charles Fort* (1941) was what I read after consuming Edward Ruppelt's *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (1956). So I signed up as a ufologist; Fort, after all, was the first of the species. In *The Book of the Damned* (1919), he argued for the reality of interplanetary visitation, his serious purpose only thinly masked in jokey prose. In the summer of 1947, when flying saucers became an inescapable presence, it was Forteanism who alerted otherwise clueless journalists to the long history of intriguing aerial phenomena, thus introducing what would be called the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH) into popular culture and subsequent discourse.

On the occasion of *Damned's* first century, Scottish UFO scholar Martin Shough, assisted by Belgian colleague Wim van Utrecht, offers up a kind of revisionist answer to Fort. *Redemption of the Damned, Vol. 1: Aerial Phenomena* uses the Internet and other tools to examine Fort's sources and to analyze how they look through the lens of current scientific knowledge. Fort helpfully provided future anomalies chroniclers with source citations that let us know where his data came from. Overwhelmingly, they were from period journals and newspapers. Shough with Utrecht finds his way to those and reconsiders the cases at considerably greater length, which Fort had typically summarized, often with accompanying wisecracks, in no more than brief sentences and paragraphs.

*Redemption* seems an odd word to choose in the present circumstance, however, inasmuch as the results might be better characterized as Corlissean



rather than as Fortean. As *JSE* readers know, the late William R. Corliss collected reports of anomalies from the professional literature of various disciplines and compiled them into a series of books. With a handful of exceptions (most notably accounts of living amphibians entombed in rocks), the reported phenomena were unusual, unexpected, but not paradigm-shattering, likely to interest reasonably open-minded specialists more than radical anomalists, i.e. Forteans.

The research that has gone into *Redemption* is nothing short of staggering. Shough appears to know everything, only starting with the meteorology or astronomy or biology relevant to the circumstances but also embracing technology, transportation, and infrastructure as well as eyesight capacity, biography, culture, and political, social, and geographical contexts. Beyond that, Shough, already possessed of a considerable reputation within ufology for smarts *and* fairness (often enough not synonymous), inspires trust even when his argument sails well above the intellectual ground where the reader feels more at ease in traversing.

There is, one might say, an abundance of debunking going on, but not of the ideological sort that has given the practice a certain unpleasant odor over the years. As those who have read his deeply researched writings on UFOs (such as his and Chris Aubeck's *Return to Magonia: Investigating UFOs in History*, 2015) know, he has no problem with the notion that UFOs exist as a real and puzzling phenomenon. Moreover, he has proved himself, time and again, an articulate and effective critic of the effusions of professional skeptics.

Thus *Redemption* is a worthy and necessary addition to the small library of scientifically and informationally weighty UFO volumes. From this day forward, no naïve reader ought to plunge into Fort's *Book of the Damned* without Shough with Utrecht close at hand.

That said, one should be warned that read from cover to cover, *Redemption* is, to be charitable, heavy-going. One can imagine that someone trained in one or the other of the sometimes arcane disciplines on which the treatments draw might possibly read it for pleasure. For the rest

of us, though, it's best employed as a reference work to be taken off the shelf whenever we encounter a *Book of the Damned*-derived ostensible-UFO datum and seek a second opinion. We couldn't ask for a more credible one.

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