

Professor Peter A. Sturrock has performed a signal service in creating the review panel and in preparing this book.

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The UFO Enigma: A New Review of the Physical Evidence by Peter A. Sturrock.

This valuable overview of the technical aspects of UFO investigation and debate (historically the two words are all but synonymous) grows out of a conference held at the Pocantico Conference Center in Tarrytown, New York, from September 29 to October 3, 1997, and a follow-up, smaller gathering between November 27 and 30 in San Francisco. In the first, scientifically trained UFO proponents presented their case to a panel of skeptical but curious scientists. An initially tense confrontation gave way to a degree of mutual understanding and, a month and a half later when the panel met without the ufologists, a cautiously worded public statement endorsing further scientific research and—perhaps most interestingly—explicitly (albeit briefly) criticizing Edward U. Condon (of the 1966–69 Air Force–sponsored University of Colorado UFO Project) and his infamous conclusion that “further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby.”

When the statement was released to news media, the result was a burst of surprisingly positive coverage (for example a front-page story in the *Washington Post*). Perhaps unprepared for the attendant publicity and controversy, those panel members who consented to interviews subtly or not so subtly hastened to distance themselves from the subject and effectively to deny that they had said anything of consequence. By the time the affair had run its course, UFOs remained where they were to start with: out in a wilderness toward which, as far as elite opinion is concerned, only fools would rush. It will be left to a later generation of scientists to do the collective head-shaking about how a question of such manifest interest and potential importance engaged so very few scientists of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Fortunately, this book, with its useful summaries of evidential cases and attendant evidence, will remain to enlighten those who will take up the finally unavoidable discipline of UFO science—no doubt, sad to say, long after all who participated in the two conferences are gone.

Neglect of the UFO phenomenon by science probably owes as much to the late Harvard astronomer Donald H. Menzel (1901–1976) as to any other single individual. Menzel became the first major American scientist not only to express a firm, consistent, relentlessly negative opinion of “flying saucers” but to devote a whole book (with the imprint of a major university press [Harvard]

yet) to them in the very early years. In *Flying Saucers* (1953), Menzel—who, it should be noted, conducted no field investigations, basing his speculations on what he gleaned from newspaper clippings and Air Force documents—declared that all sightings could be explained, mostly as meteorological phenomena compounded by naïve witness testimony. Though even Project Blue Book, hardly friendly to UFOs as extraordinary anomalies, took issue with this reading, it did not have the ear of Menzel’s colleagues or his considerable clout in the highest offices of science. Eventually, two other American scientists of note, astronomer and Blue Book advisor J. Allen Hynek and atmospheric physicist James E. McDonald, would take on Menzel and, though they may have won the argument on points, lost it in all other regards.

Thus, sympathetic UFO books by working scientists are rare. McDonald died before he could write his. Hynek produced the classic *The UFO Experience* (1972) and a critical retrospective on Blue Book, *The Hynek UFO Report* (1977). Jacques Vallee’s *Anatomy of a Phenomenon* (1965) and (with Janine Vallee) *Challenge to Science: The UFO Enigma* (1966) are worthy efforts to make scientific sense of an elusive phenomenon. Bruce Maccabee and Richard F. Haines have published well-researched books and monographs. Unfortunately, these came from small, specialty publishers, and few outside ufology are likely to be aware of them. Happily, Sturrock’s *The UFO Enigma* will not be so hard to find.

Most UFO literature is ephemeral, and most of it would try the patience even of the well-meaning, inquiring scientist. Still, it is discouraging to read, “The panel was intrigued to learn that ground traces appear to be associated with some UFO reports” (p. 96). If even the scientists assembled in Tarrytown did not know that such phenomena have been reported—and, with rare exception, ignored by all but helpless witnesses and resourceless ufologists—throughout the five decades of the UFO era, perhaps much of the behavior of mainstream science that seems otherwise inexplicable begins to make a kind of sense. To what, I am sure, what will be two or three generations of scientists’ everlasting embarrassment.

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