

**In Alien Heat: The Warminster Mystery Revisited** by Steve Dewey and John Ries. New York: Anomalist Books, 2006. 328 pp. \$17.95/£ 11 (paper). ISBN: 1933665025.

### Amid the Alien Corn

It is always a pleasure to come across writers who have read some of the now half-forgotten volumes whose memories one would like to keep alive. Dewey and Ries make good use of the likes of Christopher Booker's *The Neophiliacs*, John Sladek's *The New Apocrypha*, and R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, to name but three. With the possible exception of Sladek's very funny book, these are not the kinds of titles one routinely finds cited in UFO books, but then Dewey and Ries are not routine ufologists. It may be that they are not—or are no longer—ufologists at all, except insofar as they have written this book. That does them no harm and the book a lot of good. Many ufologists who call themselves "serious researchers" would also come to no harm and do their subject some good if they read and thought rather more about the social and historical backgrounds against which the UFO phenomenon has developed.

This is the approach Dewey and Ries take, while giving us a pretty rounded and very detailed history of the Warminster phenomenon. Like these authors, one has to distinguish here between the UFO(s) (or "Thing" as it was called) that haunted the environs of this small West-Country English market town and "the Warminster phenomenon", which means the UFOs, their alleged occupants, the crowds they attracted, and the attention the whole drawn-out spectacle received from all quarters. For all their erudition Dewey and Ries manage it all in an admirably limpid, non-academic style. And, for those who want to dismiss their kind of sidelong, contextual look at the subject, they have a species of Mills bomb that mostly they keep behind their backs, but bring out occasionally for all to contemplate. They were there, on Cradle Hill in the 1970s, among the hippies and the mystics and the serious researchers and the would-be contactees, and this experience gives the book an unusual authority.

Warminster, a small town on the edge of the military training area on Salisbury Plain in the west of England, became famous in the summer of 1965. For months prior to that, the "Thing" had been heard and seen by local people, and Arthur Shuttlewood, a local journalist, fed stories about it to the national press; later, he was to write a string of books about the Thing, most of them privately published. Local dignitaries called a town meeting in August 1965 to discuss the events; the national press and TV reported it, and the town was promptly flooded with tourists seeking UFOs. Not long after this, a tabloid newspaper published a photo of a UFO allegedly seen flying near the town. Thus Warminster was established as the "UFO capital of England". In the months and years following, "skywatching", usually informally led by Shuttlewood on nearby Cradle Hill, became something of a social event for many people. That is the Warminster story in brief.

It is a curious and intriguing tale in several ways and for at least three reasons. In the first place, the Thing itself first manifested as a frightening aural visitation, a horrible clattering from some invisible source on high, that scared peaceable citizens from their beds. It was only after one of the UK's foremost ufologists (Gordon Creighton, even then largely unhinged) and a local prankster—or private social experimenter—began to make loud noises about extraterrestrials that the Thing became visible, and silent, and multiplied. Second, the Thing attracted unprecedented numbers of people to Warminster, and continued to draw skywatchers for the best part of a decade. And third, the whole circus is now largely forgotten, consciously or unconsciously airbrushed out of ufological history.

### Raising the Dead

Dewey and Ries have done a public service in dragging both the Warminster Thing and the Warminster phenomenon back into view—although the existence of their study, let alone its implications, will no doubt peeve those in the ufological establishment who, like Meg Ryan in the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, want their history with the mayonnaise strictly on the side. The disappearance of embarrassing truths from the ufological consciousness, and the gentle restructuring of ufological history by quiet omission, deserve a study in themselves. It has long been a matter of fascination to me, for instance, that the leading abduction researchers are careful to distinguish their findings and their subjects from the contactees of the 1950s, all the while affecting not to notice that the Greys, who snatch abductees, and the Space Brothers who met the contactees, are offering much the same alien corn to a benighted if largely indifferent humanity. Of course, one can see both how this has come about, and why it's passed over in silence. But one would warm just a little toward abductologists if they would admit the fact and address it honestly, or at least openly.

Equally striking is the way British contactee claims and even reports of close encounters from Britain and Europe have been ignored, and so have been disappeared from received wisdom, and not just in the United States. In one's more jaded moments one wonders if this is because neither the reports nor those analysing them fit terribly well into the pattern-making (and -presuming), thesis-propounding style of much of mainstream ufology. To be fair, messy and puzzling American treatments of such experiences tend to get rinsed out of the system, too—who, for instance, talks about Edith Fiore's abductees these days? Dewey and Ries implicitly recognise and accept the disorderly nature of their raw material, and shake it in various sieves in order to see what kind of gold may come out. This reviewer regards this as a virtue.

The reasonable puzzle remains as to why the Warminster phenomenon in particular has slipped from collective memory. The town had its share of contactee claims, and that and the crowds that the town attracted may represent something of an embarrassment to those who want ufology to be taken

"seriously"—that is, as a nascent science, not as a sub-culture sensitive to larger social tides, storms, and doldrums. In part, too, the Warminster story has been conveniently forgotten because it makes so clear, and in so many ways, the navel-gazing tendency in ufology. Very large claims were made on the flimsiest of evidence. These things, too, are embarrassing. Worse, the regularity, frequency, and sheer quantity of skywatching at Warminster made the place a perfect laboratory for hoaxers' experiments. On more than one occasion experimenters were able to compare known phenomena (which they had created) with reports thereof, with rather depressing results for those clinging to any faith in eye-witness testimony. In one instance a pre-prepared set of photographs of several apparently moving objects and its accompanying "narrative" were more than somewhat at odds with the actual stimulus—a single, stationary, flashing purple light—that people were given. False memories, consistent with the photographs, were duly created. This is very embarrassing indeed.

And then there was the matter of Arthur Shuttlewood, who did so much to publicise the goings-on around the town. Despite the intervention early in the proceedings of Flying Saucer Review's Gordon Creighton, the British ufological establishment was not uniformly impressed with what happened at Warminster—a truth that seems not to have been very deeply impressed on Dewey and Ries. In the early 1980s I tried to commission Charles Bowen, then editor of FSR, to write—for good money, yet—an account of the Warminster events, which by then had become history. "No. I don't think so. Too much to do with Arthur Shuttlewood", he answered gloomily. This was interesting, partly because it revealed how much of a catalyst Shuttlewood was seen, or known, to be at Warminster, and partly (for Charles was not to be moved) because, whatever he thought privately, the editor of FSR was not going to break ranks and expose a fellow enthusiast to criticism.

### **The Brits Are Already Here**

Even as Dewey and Ries recognise and analyse Shuttlewood's central, near-shamanic role at Warminster, they don't opt for the simplistic line that he was either the instigator of the phenomenon or its sole sustainer. One of the most illuminating passages in the book, in the chapter "The British Context", discusses the Americanization of British culture between about 1930 and 1960. The authors point out that this really meant the modernization of British popular culture, for which the United States, in matters of material goods and style, was inevitably a global model. (Incidentally, they wrongly include Teddy Boys in this emulation: that cult actually began as a deliberate and ironic revival by otherwise untamed working-class lads of Edwardian—hence "Teddy"—English gentlemen's dress codes. Today they would be called chavs.) It was a brief honeymoon, reaching its height in the decade after World War II. By the early 1960s, the Brits had developed their own idiosyncratic style of popular culture,

heavily influenced by Europe. And then there were the Beatles, and there was no longer any excuse for feeling inferior.

Dewey and Ries observe that although the British adopted American presumptions about UFOs and extraterrestrials, British ufology was actually more deeply rooted in a concept of "Deep England", an amalgam of long historical awareness shading into myth, a mystical (at least Wordsworthian) sense of landscape, a sense of abiding and untouchable values, and the social order. That order has always been generally tolerated and fairly porous, and became more so in the 1960s. When John Michell published his *The Flying Saucer Vision* in 1967, no one minded that its mildly hippy author was also a product of Eton, Cambridge and the Guards; this was also the era when aristocrats and celebrities were pleased to be seen in the company of gangsters like the Kray brothers. It was out of this peculiar soil, largely conditioned by self-regarding English myth and folklore that instinctively resisted Americanization, that the Warminster phenomenon sprouted. It was a very English—not even British—phenomenon, and Warminster itself is set in a region thick with mythical and legendary associations. It's also thick with military activity, which indubitably contributed to the wealth of sightings from Cradle Hill. In any case one hopes the chapter will help American ufologists understand why their transatlantic colleagues so often seem intransigently skeptical and non-literalist in their approach to UFOs and related outgrowths like abductions. The British, like the Europeans, have always related "flying saucers" to a folklore of one kind or another, albeit not always self-consciously.

The very specific cultural context of the Warminster saga may also have contributed to its fading into obscurity. Apart from the hilarious phone calls from, and one appearance of, the alien Aenstrians—over which the authors maintain enviably stiff upper lips—the key "extraterrestrial" elements in Warminster centred on the skywatches. The interrelations, overlappings, and exchanges between the underground (alias the hippy movement) and ufology in the UK have been little noted, although British researcher Andy Roberts is working hard to correct that omission. Dewey and Ries, in my view, don't give this aspect of Warminster full weight. On the other hand, they had an ambitious enough project on their hands already. The point I would add to the book's analysis is simply that Warminster may have disappeared from public view just because—for all Shuttlewood's stout middle-class, Christian values—it was so much a manifestation and product of the hippy era in England, and therefore seems *passe*, no longer relevant, and definitely not cool.

### **Warminster as Template**

In my view, all these dismissals of the Warminster phenomenon do the whole affair a massive injustice. The lessons of Warminster are lessons for all UFO investigators. For that reason this book is a gem, not just for having resurrected the "case", but for the relentless dissections the authors put it through. Put

bluntly, more UFO flaps should be subjected to the many-pronged analyses that Dewey and Ries offer. I say that not because I so notoriously doubt that anything in ufology has anything to do with extraterrestrials (although I admit an interest). Without taking account of all the factors, and perhaps more, that Dewey and Ries examine, it is approaching impossible to extract from such very noisy data any genuinely mysterious or truly anomalous elements.

Accordingly, and apart from their discussion of the cultural context, Dewey and Ries run Warminster through the filters of Shuttlewood's position and influence and his increasingly religious interpretation of the phenomenon; the role of hoaxers; problems of hallucination, misperception, and self-deception; the dynamics of skywatching in groups; and the extent to which enthusiasm for UFOs intrinsically answers a religious dilemma. Finally, they place Warminster in the context of ufology as currently practiced. What emerges from all this is that the Warminster phenomenon was and is essentially a story—a "narrative", in modern parlance—nested within a network of truths, half-truths, imaginings, and assumptions both conscious and unconscious. As they remark wryly, without the story, all you have is some lights in the sky. The story of the Warminster phenomenon as Dewey and Ries tell it is at once singular and weird—not least in its initial manifestation as a still-unattributed series of alarming noises—and archetypal. This book should be read with care, patience, and reflection, but most of all it should be read.

PETER BROOKESMITH  
Herefordshire, England  
horsernan@onetel.com

**Grass Roots UFOs: Case Reports from the Timmerman Files** by Michael D. Swords. Lima, OH: Fund for UFO Research, 2005. 251 pp. \$22.00 postpaid (paper). ISBN 0-78-80216-56.

At one time books about UFOs were collections of facts and figures on sighting details, altitudes, azimuths, and all of the nuts and bolts visual specifics. These were relayed with the intent of convincing the reader that the reports were evidence of at least a new area for scientific inquiry, or at most proof of aliens from another planet, visiting the earth in flying saucers. Now UFO books are largely about highly sensational stories about crashed saucers, alien contacts, conspiracy theories, or alien philosophies, full of wild claims and speculations.

This new book by Dr. Michael Swords, a newly retired educator from Western Michigan University, harkens back to the days of UFOs far removed from the confusing complexity that presently dominates UFO research. This complexity seems to be the result of the ever-increasing one-upsmanship of radical claims that has tired the reading public and virtually knocked the subject from bookshelves and newsstands, according to semi-interested readers with whom this reviewer has spoken.