

Unnatural Phenomena: A Guide to the Bizarre Wonders of North America by Jerome Clark. ABC-CLIO, 2005. 350 pp. \$85.00 (hardcover). ISBN 1-5760-7430-7.

The study of historical unusual phenomena in its various forms, cryptozoology, UFOlogy, ghost sightings, etc., have had one thing in common. The collection of information on these topics has been performed in a largely haphazard fashion. Reports would be mined from whatever sources were available, be it verbal first, second, or third, and more, hand. A daily or weekly newspaper would run an account. It would be clipped and circulated through a grapevine of interested persons. Sometimes journals and periodicals would run features with long lists of reports. There was no real way to tell if the reports were reliable or not, but they would pass through the same grapevine and continue on through the years in much as the same way as they were originally covered. In modern times, radio, television, and the Internet have added to the multitude of ways that the curiosities of nature have become known to more than just a select few.

Harder still was an assessment of such phenomena before the study of anomalies became formalized, or at least the topics being given titles as mentioned above. With the exception of several individuals like Charles Fort and Rupert Gould, and organizations like the Fortean Society and the Society for Psychical Research, knowledge of the strange and unusual was not very comprehensive. One of the main problems was access. Newspapers and journals were scattered about in many hundreds of archives, newspaper morgues, and libraries around the world. Visits to a few such institutes for limited times could glean a representation of what existed in the public record. But much more would remain "lost" in the sense that unless a bridge for the retelling of obscure reports were created through modern means, i.e., publishing through periodicals, books, or the Internet, knowledge of these early reports would be elusive if not unobtainable.

A marvelous tool has now become available for doing "mega research," the sifting of large amounts of previously out-of-reach sources from one location. The location is the home computer. Sophisticated OCR (optical character recognition) technology has advanced far enough so that actual images of old newspapers and journals can be digitized by the millions of pages and be accessible to users sitting at home any time of the day and night for a modest subscription fee. Restrictive library hours no longer apply. Once difficult to assemble newspaper clipping collections can be built with relative speed and ease, if used with knowledge and skill. Jerome Clark has done this with his new book *Unnatural Phenomena: A Guide to the Bizarre Wonders of North America*.

Though described as a guide to North America, the book is arranged only by U.S. states and then chronologically under each state. The vast majority of reports listed are from the nineteenth century with a scattering of twentieth century, and most of those before 1920. The reports themselves are quite an eclectic collection of anomalies. Falls of a variety of odd materials from the sky, bizarre animals and people, sea and lake monsters, and strange noises and UFO-

like phenomena are among the hundreds of items unearthed by Clark. Other researchers are acknowledged as well. The majority of the sources are old newspapers that are posted on several online subscription services, something about which the author could claim as being one of the first to use this technology for creating a book length catalog of these tales. I would say that it could have been a nostalgic look at fantastic stories of the past except that they are so old that no one is left to recall them. But experienced anomaly researchers will notice that many of the reports are still recounted even today. Frog showers, rain from a cloudless sky, ball lightning, and lake and sea monsters continue to make it into the press. Others are not so well known. I was particularly amused by the stories involving giant spectral goats that lurked in the evening hours at New Albany, Mississippi, around 1896, scaring the daylights out of riders attempting to cross a small bridge. Needless to say, no one was head butted and horses and riders were not otherwise molested by the mist-like creatures. As interesting as the marvelous events described are, they also emphasize the downside of such a volume. In the era of liar's clubs and newsmen engaging in a game of "can-you-top-this?" there is every chance that a great many of these things never happened. "Yellow journalism" has been coined to describe newspaper excesses during the 1890s, but that chronological boundary can be extended in either direction to other decades, particularly when it comes to tales of the "bizarre and unnatural," as Clark characterizes the contents of the book. For example, airships of the 1896–1897 period are cited from a number of news sources in the book. There are literally thousands of press stories on them if one would take the time to look for old volumes and microfilm of city and town dailies and weeklies. Yet, Clark has acknowledged that "Any effort to uncover truth about the late-nineteenth-century airship scare comes up against some unhappy realities; no independent investigators ('airshipologists') spoke directly with alleged witnesses or attempted to verify or debunk their testimony; and with a single unsatisfactory exception, no eyewitness was ever interviewed even in the 1950s, when some presumably were still living" (Clark, 1998, Vol. 1, pg. 61). Clark does draw a distinction between an "event" that leaves a physical mark on the world and an "experience" that is perceived in the individual consciousness. In other words, a meteorite fall would be an event, a ghost sighting would be an experience. Meteorites were at one time an anomaly, dismissed as fanciful tales. How could rocks fall from the sky to a population unknowledgeable about space debris? With time and evidence, meteorites were established as fact. Ghost experiences have not crossed into the realm of events, at least not yet. Someday this reviewer will be able to test that theory, hopefully thirty to forty years hence!

Understanding these distinctions can explain the value of creating a volume of raw data, like the contents of this book, with the potential that in the future a percentage of the described reports may support new facts. Let's look at one example of potential value. In recent years, there has been serious discussion within the physics community on the possibilities of time travel. On August 20, 2007, news stories circulated on how it might be that members of future

generations could travel into the past with a new concept for a time machine. It would be a device that would have to be far beyond today's technology, calling for gravitational fields on the order of black holes that would bend space-time into closed loops. The means of travel would be via a doughnut-shaped hole formed by extreme gravity. Backward travel would be accomplished by whirling around inside the doughnut hole, going further back with each circuit of the loop. "Science fiction" fiction, one might say, but our knowledge of reality continues to advance to the point where once seemingly ridiculous ideas are discussed seriously. This time travel research is being published in the respected science journal *Physical Review D*.

How does a book like Clark's come into this? We are dealing with a lot of "ifs." If a future has already been created in our time flow, unbeknownst to us, if time travel is a reality, and if someone has traveled back into time, what would it/they look like as it happened? Would a person or machine suddenly pop into existence out of nowhere from somewhere else? Would there be a flash of light or a peculiar sound? Would a vortex appear in the sky, near the ground, or in the ground? Would a traveler burst into our time frame in space and be required to transport to the earth in a vehicle? Would the traveler appear solid or have a wraith-like appearance, able to view but not interact with the past? Such evidence could come in the form of reports of strange phenomena in our past, and be present in various media, such as newspapers, and assembled by Clark and other future researchers. Maybe something like this:

"PERSONS WHO TURN TO AIR—Nearly 200 people mysteriously disappeared from the city of Philadelphia during the year ending with the opening of the present month. This is a remarkable exhibit and one which reminds the writer of an article which appeared in a French scientific journal two or three years ago, wherein the author advances the theory that death is occasionally actual dissolution. It is a disease, the writer referred to maintains, but one from which there is no suffering; there is no illness or warning of approaching end; the patient suddenly ceases to exist and as suddenly fades from sight. He says he has actually witnessed this phenomenon and that he was at one time walking with a friend who suddenly vanished and has never reappeared. With such conclusive testimony he has little doubt that many persons searched for have actually melted into thin air. He further states that at the moment his friend disappeared a strong sulphurous odor pervaded that atmosphere." (Chillicothe, Missouri, *Morning Constitution*, April 24, 1890)

The problem of course would be in extracting what is credible from what lacks substance. That is a tall order for what are largely newspaper accounts. Yet, a phenomenon like ball lightning, numerous examples of which are cited by Clark in his press collection, was once regarded by scientists as, among other mundane explanations, retinal afterimages from bright lightning flashes. They are now a topic of scientific research and continue to endure as a baffling manifestation of nature. Whether or not others of the reports recounted by Clark go down the same path to respectability as did ball lightning remains to be seen. At a retail price of about \$85, depending on which bookseller is discounting, the book is stiffly priced. But if one imagines how long it would take to track down

each item in the book from a random, page-by-page search, you realize what a daunting task it would be, and what it must have been like for Clark to pursue. The price could be seen as a bargain in this light. And the potential returns are reports like this, gleaned from the results of my own searching:

"TWO METEORS COLLIDE — The captain's log of the schooner *Eva L. Ferris* says that when in latitude 37 deg. 81 min. and longitude 75 deg. 33 min. on the night of Dec. 7 at 9 o'clock he saw a meteor start from west southwest and pass directly over the vessel to east northeast. After passing the zenith it met another meteor in its transit, and swerving from a direct line the two came together. There was a report as of a heavy gun, and the reverberation lasted for many seconds. The first meteor struck the second on the northerly side and broke into fragments, some of which fell within sight of the vessel, and showed a bright light until they went under the water. The original meteor went on its course and disappeared behind a dark bank of clouds." (Renfrew, Ontario, Mercury, December 23, 1892)

If the observer did not see the unlikely event of two meteors colliding, then exactly what did he see off the east coast of the Atlantic? I look forward to more interesting puzzles like this.

BARRY GREENWOOD
uhrhistory@comcast.net

Reference

Clark, J. (1998). *The UFO Encyclopedia: The Phenomenon from the Beginning*. Omnigraphics.

Readers are encouraged to submit for possible inclusion here titles of articles in preferably peer reviewed journals (typically, which do not focus on topics about anomalies) that are relevant to issues addressed in JSE. A short commentary should accompany. The articles may be in any language, but the title should be translated into English and the commentary should be in English.