

BOOK REVIEW

Return to Magonia: Investigating UFOs in History by Chris Aubeck and Martin Shough, Foreword by Jacques Vallee. San Antonio, TX, and Charlottesville, VA: Anomalist Books, 2015. 367 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 978-1-938398-54-4.

In 2009 Jacques Vallee and Chris Aubeck gave us *Wonders in the Sky*, a chronological collection of 500 anomalous aerial events from antiquity until 1879. The purpose of this book was to introduce readers to the breadth of UFO-like accounts contained in historical documents through the ages. In this present book, Aubeck joins with Martin Shough to explore a selection of these reports in depth, undertaking cold-case investigations in an attempt to discover the causes behind each of these unusual observations.

One strength of *Wonders in the Sky* lay in the authenticity of its sources. The cases came not from the UFO literature, where incomplete, distorted, and sometimes fabricated accounts have circulated for years, to be told, borrowed, and retold over and over even after creditable research discredited them. Rather, the authors of *Wonders* drew their materials directly from the ancient and medieval chronicles, the Reformation-era broadsides and prodigy collections, the scientific journals and newspaper pages where the reports first appeared. These items from original sources provide the firmest possible foundation for the study of historical anomalies, and *Return to Magonia* builds on this base.

Chris Aubeck has legitimate claim to expertise on the subject of historical anomalies. He is the mastermind behind the Magonia Exchange, an Internet-based group of researchers that carries on the researches of Charles Fort. The participants search out anomalous phenomena, primarily UFO-related events, in old newspapers, journals, and books dated prior to the advent of flying saucers on June 24, 1947. These shared findings continue to grow and they provide the authors of *Return to Magonia* with an abundance of cases to choose from, much of it unfamiliar and some of it impressive, even startling.

Aubeck's co-author is Martin Shough, an engineer who serves as a research associate for the National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena (NARCAP). The high technical standards of this organization are esteemed by everyone familiar with its work. Shough has issued research papers through NARCAP and on his "Aerial Phenomena

Studies” website (<http://www.martinshough.com/aerialphenomena>), which include an extensive analysis of the “first” flying saucer sighting, “The Singular Adventure of Mr. Kenneth Arnold,” and refutation of a claim that a KC-97 refueling tanker was responsible for a famous 1965 UFO incident, “Exeunt Exeter?”. The care of his research and the precision of his technical analyses have made me an admirer, and assure a rare level of expertise for studies in the present book.

So how feasible is a study that reopens cases a hundred or two hundred years old? At first glance the prospects look pretty dim. All the witnesses are dead, so no chance to ask them questions, no hope of filling in missing facts. The written sources are all we have and they are often woefully inadequate—brief, second-hand or third-hand, sometimes unclear and confusing, never ideal even at their best and usually several steps short of best. Even good descriptions employ the language and eyes of a bygone era, which dim and distort our already narrow view. At worst we cannot even trust our sources because the story we read may have served to promote a religious or political cause, to fool or entertain the readership, but not to record a historical event. A long-ago prankster may enjoy a posthumous triumph beyond his fondest imaginings when he gulls the learned members of a future civilization that has walked on the moon and flies across country in a few hours.

Undaunted by these problems, the authors see in this seemingly unpromising historical data an opportunity to pursue not just one, but four significant research tasks:

- Attempt to find a conventional solution for a series of informative reports.
- Cultivate a methodology for the investigation of historical cases.
- Compare each subject case with other historical reports and more recent UFOs, both to provide context and to search for cultural or phenomenological consistencies.
- Trace the evolution of anomaly reports and ideas about anomalies to identify how these representations have changed over time.

The authors begin with an Introduction that makes clear their determination to pursue a rigorous methodology. A useful case for study includes date, location, and witness names. This essential information provides factual anchors that the researcher can actually check out, using modern Internet tools like an online planetarium that recreates the sky as it appeared on the date of the sighting, or genealogy and local-history resources that can confirm the existence of the alleged witnesses. If the factual leads hold up under examination, they confirm that the report is at

least more than a whole-cloth fabrication, and at best may point directly to an explanation. In each chapter the authors sleuth out the witnesses, map out the site, look for sightings elsewhere on the same date, and, where appropriate or possible, check the visible planets and weather conditions. When online and printed references prove inadequate to answer questions about, for example, flocking birds or luminous insects, they contact outside experts for the needed answers. Such a broad and systematic methodology applied to each case assures circumspect consideration of the validity of the evidence as reported, and of multiple potential solutions. Even if the book had nothing interesting to say about what the authors found out, it would still stand tall on the merits of how they found out.

Sandwiched between a brief introduction and an even briefer conclusion lies the meat of the book—21 chapters on 21 different cases. Two are Fortean “classics,” one an 1845 account of balls of fire rising from the Mediterranean and a double meteor seen hundreds of miles to the east at about the same time, the other from 1887 when a double meteor, one dark and one bright and accompanied by both heat and ice, fell near and caused damage to a ship at sea. A few others have appeared in the literature at one point or another—ships and armies in the air over Stralsund in 1665, a destructive cloud like an angry giant over Boston in 1765, a dark meteor like a rotating cask reported from Australia in 1862, and the “Aldeburgh Platform,” a thin, round disk with a group of men in military uniforms standing on top, flying at treetop level in broad daylight over Britain during World War I, but not lowered from a Zeppelin or possessed of any visible means of propulsion. The rest are recent findings, among them an 1831 British case wherein numerous witnesses along a path of many miles witnessed a fiery phenomenon “like a man running” race by and scorch the ground, another British case from 1852 involving a triangular cloud that exploded and dropped a red glowing nucleus into the sea, a U.S. account from 1872 of a fiery object descending to the ground and a human figure entering a literal horseless carriage and driving away from the site, a Minnesota doctor’s 1899 report of a brilliant disk-shaped light the size of an umbrella and three feet off the ground that stayed in sight for half an hour, and five egg-shaped objects the size of locomotives casting shadows as they flew over an Australian city five months before Kenneth Arnold saw his famous flying saucers.

The authors choose not necessarily the best cases but examples that combine both interest and illustrative value. Some of the choices exhibit conventional explanations that proper investigation uncovers: A conjunction of Venus and Jupiter in 1660 explains several reports of wonderful lights in the sky recorded in the contemporary prodigy literature, large twisting

flocks of birds fit the descriptive elements of the Stralsund aerial scenario, and the “rampaging giant” over Boston took out his wrath on the tax collector in a piece of political fiction protesting the Stamp Act in 1765. The 1845 Fortean case from the Mediterranean resolves into a meteor recorded over much of the Middle East conflated with the report of a ship’s encounter with possible undersea volcanic activity. In other instances, no firm conclusion emerges but a possible one presents itself: For example, the red nucleus of a cloud from 1852 might have been due to flashes from a French lighthouse from across the Channel.



Even the most diligent efforts to find solutions sometimes still leave the authors puzzled. The other Fortean story of a dark and a bright meteor at sea suggests ball lightning but contains much that does not readily fit even that mysterious phenomenon. The fiery “running man” account defies explanations both conventional and ufological, while the story of a crashing UFO and its humanoid with a handy horseless vehicle sounds like a newspaper hoax, yet no evidence hints at dishonesty among the reporter or the witnesses. Still others—like the Australian dark meteor, the doctor’s brilliant light, the Alderburgh Platform, and the 1947 formation of flying eggs—completely resist the authors’ attempts to explain them. Here then are cases that deserve the literal designation of unidentified flying objects.

A search for similarities widens the scope of the authors’ research from a specific case to whole classes of similar or related cases. The “fiery exhalations” that troubled Welsh farmers in 1694 returned in the form of globular lights in the 19th century and may have been due to some sort of natural gas, but Wales was also the scene of mysterious lights in 1905 during a wave of religious excitement, and the same areas have hosted more than their fair share of UFO activity in recent times. A case of mysterious balls of light, sometimes near the ground and sometimes flying up into the air in Malaysia leads to comparisons with ghost and fairy lights in Europe, where *ignis fatuus* and luminescent insects can explain some reports but not others, suggesting at a minimum an inadequacy in our knowledge of the natural world. Familiar UFO forms like the disk and the triangle have their historical antecedents, and even the term “flying saucer” was familiar to skeet shooters half a century before Kenneth Arnold.

The organization of the book is chronological, and the progression of cases from 1660 to 1947 leaves an unmistakable impression of how reports of anomalous aerial phenomena and our understanding of them have changed. In the 17th century they were signs and wonders recorded as events

of religious significance. From the 18th century onward these sights became anomalies of nature and worthy of recording in scientific publications, though a category like “meteor” became sorely stretched in efforts to contain multiple anomalies in one conventional package. Meanwhile, the common folk relied on traditional or popular ideas to understand these mysteries. As newspapers grew common in the 19th century, ordinary people gained another outlet for the strange sights they saw, and as aviation became a possibility and finally a fact, witnesses began to report lost balloons, phantom airships, and mystery aircraft. Yet despite identities ascribed to strange aerial sights that varied from religious to natural, traditional to technological, one fact emerges from this procession of oddities: They are not altogether different from modern reports. A kinship ties past to present, not in every case or every detail, but a degree of continuity characterizes the phenomenology of “UFOs” past and present.

Return to Magonia closes with a succinct and pithy conclusion that emphasizes that old and new reports are similar, historical cases do lend themselves to fruitful analysis, and UFOs old and new present a serious subject for study undeserving of their current stigma. These conclusions do not overreach with proclamations that the cases prove alien visitation, or even that the unknowns will always remain unknowns. The authors are well aware of the limits of their sources and uncertainties surrounding even the most rigorous analysis. The facts remain that these cases exude strangeness, and the authors have tried with due diligence and a practical, up-to-date methodology to find a conventional answer. If none applies, the report persists as an unknown in the meaningful sense of an incident even more mysterious than it appeared before.

This book is not a quick read for the casually curious. No ancient aliens, government conspiracies, or even UFOs labeled as spaceships spells disappointment for UFO enthusiasts. They will nod off during searches for where a witness lived, resent discursive comparisons of a mystery light with folklore or entomological evidence, and grow dyspeptic over cases that end with a mundane solution. This book is not intellectual candy to feed favorite beliefs or a sounding board for speculative theories. What this book is, is a work of serious scholarship. Seldom are such deep research, careful analysis, and stringent arguments found in the UFO literature, and *Return to Magonia* is exemplary both in the four research goals it undertakes and its success in carrying them out. For the serious anomalist, this is a book to treasure, one to ponder and enjoy by the fire on a frosty night or under the shade on a summer afternoon.

If I have any advice to offer, it is that the authors take care with newspaper sources. American newspapers printed hoaxes as a form of

popular entertainment, and the practice was so common that editorials spoke knowingly of “nature faking” and “snake editors” within the journalistic ranks. Nor is it enough that the source of a wild story be a solid citizen to guarantee its validity. Alexander Hamilton, the farmer who told the tale of an airship stealing his cow in 1897, was once a member of the state legislature and boon companion of all the other distinguished men of his county. They all signed an affidavit testifying that Hamilton was an upright and honest man, yet the cow abduction story was a hoax and they all knew it. In those earlier days his neighbors knew he was honest about things that mattered and a tall tale made him an admired storyteller, not a liar. News writers would even drop the names of prominent citizens as witnesses to an airship only to have that citizen deny that he saw anything or said anything about it to a reporter. Even those who didn’t like it seemed to accept that they might find their names in a newspaper yarn and showed little concern. No evidence of hoax beclouds the cases in the book, but given the prevailing culture, let the modern reader beware.

Readers may not agree with every analysis. I have to wonder if the lighthouse across the English Channel, though poet Matthew Arnold saw it from Dover Beach in fine weather, would be sufficiently visible when conditions were foul to create the appearance of a luminous nucleus. What matters more than any particular quibbles, though, is the depth of research and reasoning behind each analysis that makes it a formidable challenge for any doubter to refute. This is fine work through and through, and exemplary of UFO research at its best.

The book itself is well-provisioned with useful illustrations and abundantly annotated. The text provides a lucid read. An index would have been helpful, though a list of cases and a glossary are included. Though the authors do not reveal the fabled answer to the mystery of UFOs, they give us what Tiffany Thayer, the leader of the Fortean Society, liked to call “grist for the mill.” And wonderful grist it is, fascinating in its own right and evidence to reckon with for understanding both UFOs and anomalies in general. We can hope that Aubeck, Shough, and Vallee, kindred spirits in the exploration of historical ufology, will continue the fine work they have begun and treat readers to more of the trove of remarkable cases now being uncovered.

Any serious ufologist can rejoice in this important addition to quality UFO literature, and thank the authors for their outstanding work and Anomalist Books for publishing it.

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