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*James McDonald in his office at the Institute of Atmospheric Physics, University of Arizona, sometime in the mid-1960s.
Photo courtesy of Betsy McDonald.*

REMEMBERING JAMES McDONALD

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BY ANN DRUFFEL

A recent article of tribute by Walter Webb to Dr. J. Allen Hynek (*IUR*, January/February 1993), prompts me to write a companion tribute to the late Dr. James E. McDonald. Most persons in the UFO research field know McDonald's name, but there are relatively few persons still left in the field who knew and worked with him personally. Due to his untimely death in June 1971, at the age of 51, the field was deprived prematurely of a fearless and gifted fighter.

For an unforgettable five years, between 1966 and 1971, McDonald sought the truth about UFOs with a boldness and perseverance which the field had never before—nor since—experienced. With his rare mastery of interdisciplinary scientific knowledge, his countless contributions to the field of atmospheric physics, his numerous high-placed contacts in government, the military, and academia, McDonald was able to sound a clarion call to those who might be able to make a difference. He investigated the best UFO reports on-site, was friend and colleague to many investigators, and spoke innumerable times before prestigious scientific and governmental groups. He was listened to with respect everywhere he went. His main purpose was to convince the scientific establishment that UFOs should be studied seriously.

If Jim McDonald had lived out a normal life span, ufology today would be very different from the chaos into which it has descended. At the very least, we would likely be much closer to understanding these enigmatic objects.

The recent publication of Jacques Vallee's *Forbidden Science: Journals 1957-1969* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1992) has reintroduced McDonald to the field; however, it presents him in rather negative terms. I wish merely to present the other side of the controversy, so that those readers who did not know McDonald personally but yet are curious about him and his many accomplishments in the field may have a chance to see him as he was, and as his numerous friends, associates, and colleagues knew him.

Vallee's unflattering portrayal of McDonald may have to do with Vallee's association with Hynek, his mentor and friend. Perhaps Vallee, whose work I otherwise admire, did not fully understand McDonald's intense nature—or his *modus operandi*, which even for a scientist was incredibly thorough. McDonald had, indeed, repeatedly challenged

Hynek on various issues, usually not in public, but mainly in conversation and correspondence. Hynek, from 1948 to 1969, had been the official astronomical consultant to Project Blue Book, and in this capacity had been instrumental in supporting government efforts to bury the UFO subject. McDonald visited the Blue Book offices for the first time in June 1966 and became aware of the stunning observations—hundreds of good UFO reports—which were being passed off as stars, meteors, and balloons.

McDonald saw how Hynek let absurd explanations of intriguing cases pass by without challenge or personal investigation. He therefore charged Hynek with contributing to what he himself called “the government foul-up” on the UFO problem and concealing the true extent of this serious scientific problem from the scientific community. The decades-long governmental neglect of UFOs and Hynek's role in this (through 1968 at least) thoroughly irritated him and offended his sense of honesty and fair play. The dispute between the two men lasted for the rest of McDonald's life, although in public the two men managed to act cordially toward each other from about 1969 on.

James E. McDonald was senior physicist at the Institute of Atmospheric Physics (IAP) at the University of Arizona in Tucson and a professor of meteorology at that university. He was noted for his brilliance as a teacher, for his pioneering contributions to cloud physics and weather modification, and for his deep knowledge of related fields of science. Endlessly inquisitive, he made adventurous forays into any subject that happened to capture his interest, such as the physics of baseball and tennis and the shape of raindrops. He also spoke out vigorously on more serious subjects, such as the insanity of ringing American cities with antiballistic missiles. His all-out attack on this problem in the early 1960s finally convinced the government that placing defensive missile silos *downwind* would at least prevent mass civilian deaths from radioactive fallout in the event of a nuclear war. He also spoke out boldly against the war in Vietnam and especially against the use of napalm and other chemical weapons.

McDonald's last contribution to the field of atmospheric physics, in March 1971, was his logical but impassioned argument at a public Congressional hearing against government funding for fleets of supersonic transports (SSTs), which at the time were being proposed to phase out conventional jet airliners. From his study of the problem he had concluded that fleets of SSTs flying over the American continent would damage the fragile ozone layer and cause

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thousands of additional cases of skin cancer each year. He was one of the very few scientists to speak out in the early 1970s about problems in the ozone layer, and his concern about the ecology of the atmosphere has proven prophetic.

McDonald, in Vallee's opinion, had seemed "to burst upon the UFO scene" in June 1966. Actually, his entrance into the field was far from sudden. Between 1958 and 1965, he had quietly made an eight-year private study of Arizona UFO reports, and had served as a scientific consultant to NICAP before he ever spoke out publicly on the subject. He was the first eminent scientist to work closely with civilian research organizations to persuade government and science of the urgent necessity to take the problem of UFOs seriously. He was a family man, with three children in universities and college and three more in high school. In spite of his personal responsibilities, however, after becoming convinced that UFOs did, indeed, present a serious scientific issue, he became a vigorous public advocate, disregarding the professional and financial risks involved.

McDonald was intense by nature. He spoke out bluntly whenever he felt the situation called for it, and he believed Hynek merited blunt criticism. But with his friends and family, McDonald was a charming and congenial man with a unique, sometimes impish sense of humor. During his eight years of studying Arizona reports he became known to the public as an eminently approachable, courteous professional who did not laugh at their UFO reports, but doggedly studied each report that came to his attention. This was done in his own spare time, and he found conventional answers to most reports, as all good researchers do. Those he could not explain puzzled him deeply.

McDonald was, above all, that type of rare scientist who was acutely sensitive to the public's right to know. He felt that a scientist's goal was to serve the public, not to live in an ivory tower. This philosophy prompted him to write prolifically on numerous scientific questions, not only in highly technical, refereed journals, but also in semitechnical articles that any educated person could read and understand. He also contributed clearly written articles—often tinged with humor—on scientific subjects in the popular press. No matter what medium he chose, his writing style was clear and fluid. His command of English language and grammar rivalled any writer's. His vocabulary was limited only by what was between the covers of the dictionary. He was truly a layman's scientist.

Numerous colleagues in physics and related branches of science, as well as nonacademic UFO researchers, appreciated McDonald's untiring efforts to break down military and governmental resistance to studying the UFO question seriously. It was during the McDonald years (1966-1971) that many scientists for the first time joined in the effort to make the subject of UFOs an "acceptable" field of study. But few could keep up with him. McDonald lived fast. His speech and movements were often hurried, as if his body was laboring to keep up with his remarkable, racing mind. He

had an encyclopedic memory and could recall the details of any one of the hundreds of cases he had worked on at a moment's notice.

I knew Jim McDonald personally because of my association with the Los Angeles NICAP Subcommittee (LANS), headed by Idabel Epperson. The Committee's lively meetings at the Epperson home included virtually every scientist in the Los Angeles area who dared show interest in the subject. McDonald visited Los Angeles now and then, stopping over whenever he could in his incessant travels, and a meeting was always planned at those times to allow ufologists and scientists in the area to exchange information and ideas with him.

He was a friend to many UFO investigators and scientists in the Los Angeles area. He showed a deep interest in many Southern California sightings, such as the 1965 Rex Heflin photo case (on which LANS conducted a six-year study) and in the 1968 Redlands case which was investigated by a team from the University of Redlands. He was interested in the 1967 Yorba Linda photograph and the 1966 China Lake sightings. He was also intrigued by the element of "missing time" experienced by a civilian who lived on the perimeter of the China Lake Naval Weapons Center, where the sightings repeatedly occurred. His interest in good cases from all over the United States and other countries was unlimited; his personal investigations were limited only by his time, energy, and funding.

During his brief five public years in the field, he seemed on the verge of convincing the scientific community that UFOs must be studied worldwide. Although from the beginning of the modern UFO era there were always a few scientists who spoke out publicly, none were as prominent or as accomplished as McDonald. Hundreds of colleagues flocked to his frequent talks in every section of the country. He presented numerous papers at prestigious scientific conferences where the subject of UFOs had formerly been a laughable or forbidden subject. He was quoted often in the media, TV, radio, and press. He traveled to various countries where he met the same intense interest from scientists and nonacademic researchers alike.

He was welcomed everywhere he went, ignoring admiration and awe, for these were not what he was seeking. What he sought was the truth, and he listened carefully to

McDonald bibliography

A 100-page bibliography of all known writings by James McDonald has been compiled and published by Valerie Vaughan, a librarian at the University of Massachusetts. The volume describes 231 articles, papers, and other materials, approximately 60 of which are UFO-related.

Copies may be ordered for \$17.00 postpaid from Valerie Vaughan, 51 Longmeadow Drive, Amherst, MA 01002-3225.

anyone with competence in any professional field who had the proper objectivity and the ability to research UFO reports competently. Many UFO investigators were among his friends. His regard for Major Donald E. Keyhoe (the real "dean of UFO research"), for Dick Hall, Idabel Epperson, Isabel Davis, Walter Webb, Gordon Lore, Ted Bloecher, and numerous others researchers was deep and sincere. He received from them much of the information he researched—good cases which had been competently investigated and which he reinvestigated so diligently—and he shared what he found with anyone who asked, whether layman or scientist, military or governmental.

Some of the scientists who worked with him did so surreptitiously, fearing loss of governmental grants, or loss of their jobs in government-funded aerospace corporations should their interest become known. Others simply were fearful of peer ridicule or diminished credibility. There were exceptions, of course, like Dave Saunders and Norm Levine.

In contrast to experts like Donald E. Keyhoe, Richard Hall, and others in NICAP who, even in the early days of ufology, subscribed to the theory that the government was covering up data, McDonald preferred to explain the government's incredible neglect of the UFO question as a "grand foul-up" or bureaucratic bungling, even when he was officially denied access to dozens of classified radar-visual UFO cases in Blue Book files. He combed through Air Force files four times between 1966 and 1969. After Dr. Edward Condon finished his hatchet job and the Air Force disbanded Project Blue Book, the files were finally declassified and McDonald promptly copied them.

These radar-visual cases occupied a considerable amount of his time toward the end of his life. He was of the opinion that, if properly analyzed by competent experts, radar-visual cases could provide physical evidence—documented proof—that unidentified, metallic aeroforms of unknown origin were invading earth's atmosphere.

McDonald's death seemed a mystery to many ufologists. This intrepid and apparently tireless man died by his own hand on June 12, 1971, at the height of his career. Suspicions of governmental conspiracy abounded in the field; many were convinced, at first, that he had been silenced deliberately. Slowly reason prevailed, however, as the true causes—problems in his personal life—became known. His loss took a terrible toll. Besides the loss to his family and to science in general, ufology lost its most effective leader and champion. Gone were his numerous contacts in science, government, and the military. Gone was his persuasive voice and his unyielding search for empirical evidence and proof.

Although more scientists began to show an open interest in the UFO field after McDonald's death, it was never the same. We struggled on without him, never having a chance to properly mourn him, for none of us understood the reasons why he died.

Not many years afterward, missing-time and abduction reports were on the rise, overwhelming UFO investigators still shocked by his death. By 1973 the tenor of the field had

changed subtly. No longer were unexplained *physical* objects the main focus; now abduction cases became dominant, presenting themselves to a still-stunned field. We do not know why these events—eventually termed close encounters of the fourth kind—took over the field at that particular time; most researchers accepted them merely as "a new phase." It is impossible not to wonder what McDonald would have done about the plethora of such cases, which gradually increased until by the 1980s they were a virtual flood that could no longer be investigated adequately.

As a consequence, a situation similar to the 1950s—the age of the contactees that McDonald effectively confronted—faces us today. McDonald had succeeded in wresting media attention away from the contactees and focusing it on objective UFO research. Contactee stories, it is true, differed in content from present-day wild stories, but in the 1950s and 1960s they were a serious problem for the small number of objective, scientific researchers who were active at that time.

Fifties-style contactee stories are now nearly extinct, but claims of alien implants, hybridization and genetic experimentation, missing fetuses, underground alien bases, and secret cooperation of the U.S. military with aliens run rampant. No solid evidence has been found to substantiate any of these reports, just as no proof was ever found for the oldtime contactee ravings. But there is a terrible difference. Today, wild claims are accepted uncritically by many prominent UFO researchers. To my mind, the situation is even more serious than the contactee problem faced by McDonald and his colleagues.

The field has never been the same since McDonald left us. It lacks the piercing objectivity he brought to it, his demands for adequate investigation and *proof*. The search for proof drove McDonald. It constituted the main force behind his appeals for adequate governmental funding and proper attention to the subject by the scientific community. His hope was that someday science, government, and the public would participate together in a nationwide—or even international—tracking network similar to the National Weather Service. His hope was that, with science aroused and government convinced, such a project could be set up.

By such means, McDonald reasoned, the existence of UFOs as physical craft of unknown origin could be demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt. After their existence was established the theoretical problems of their nature and purpose could be explored by the full force of scientific deduction.

What might have happened if McDonald had lived out a normal lifespan? Would he have succeeded in breaking through the secrecy? Would the scientific community have continued the steps they were taking, calling for open discussion on UFOs at scientific conferences and symposia? Would the scientific community—hand-in-hand with objective UFO investigators—have been able to generate a public demand that *all* classified UFO information in gov-

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