



## History and High-Strangeness Speculation

ROBERT SHEAFFER

*Contactees: A History of Alien-Human Interaction.* By Nick Redfern, The Career Press, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-6016-3096-4. 248 pp. Softcover, \$15.99.

“We are not alone . . . and Nick Redfern can prove it.” Or so says the publisher’s blurb on the back cover of his new book *Contactees: A History of Alien-Human Interaction*. Sure, if “stories” were the same as “proof” or if wishes were fishes. But I’m wondering if the blurb writer actually read the book, since Redfern offers plenty of odd speculations, but nowhere does he claim to have actual “proof.”

Actually, this is a better book than it first appears. The first two-thirds of the book is a fairly sober historical account of UFOlogy’s once-glorious “contactees,” like George Adamski and George Van Tassel, who achieved great fame by claiming to have an ongoing friendship with wise and kind visitors from another world. This is in contrast with UFOlogy’s celebrated “abductees” of more recent times, who were dragged onto flying saucers against their wills and subjected to insensitive medical-like procedures by unfeeling, expressionless Little Gray Men. In both cases, however, the aliens typically end up dispensing “wisdom” about the terrible problems facing humanity and planet Earth, usually expressed in the form of amazingly simplistic platitudes. Another strange fact, noted by Redfern: the contactees were overwhelmingly male. But we also know that UFO abductees were, and are, overwhelmingly female. So

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what does this mean? Where is Dr. Freud when you need him?

Redfern tells the histories of all of the UFO contactees that I’d ever heard of, as well as several that I hadn’t. Daniel Fry, Truman Bethurum (who had a space

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lover named Captain Aura Rhanes of the planet Clarion), Orfeo Angelucci, George King of the U.K., Wayne Aho, Reinhold Schmidt, Herb Schirmer, Billy Meier of Switzerland—they’re all here. So far as I can tell, all of the contactee-related history he gives us is accurate. If you’re looking for a rollicking read of high-strangeness saucer claims, you’ll find it here.

But mixed into the historical narrative are the high-strangeness speculations of Redfern and some of his pals, suggesting that the contactee phenomenon involves something mysterious,

instead of the obvious conclusion: guys were seeking attention by making up wild stories. Redfern is sophisticated enough to realize that the absurd stories told by contactees cannot possibly be true in a literal sense, so he suggests that “like most of the contactees, Adam was fed an absolute barrage of pseudo-scientific nonsense.” This is about a mysterious contactee known only as “Adam,” written about by the well-known contactee Orfeo Angelucci. Adam is said to have “mysteriously vanished into the night” (pp. 66–67). Employing classic Saucer Logic, Redfern suggests that the strange visitors might exist but are habitual liars who keep feeding their human contacts obviously bogus infor-

mation for unknown reasons. My suggestion is much simpler: “Adam,” the Space People, and the barrage of pseudoscientific nonsense all sprung from the fertile imagination of Angelucci, without help from anyone on this planet or any other.

I am at a loss to understand Redfern’s obsession with the so-called Brown Mountain Lights (or “ghost lights”) of North Carolina. The phenomenon has been investigated many times, going back to at least 1913, and shown to be conventional lights such as automobile or locomotive headlamps. He repeats the

claim that “during the period in which the trains were out of action, the mysterious lights were still regularly seen.” He seems unaware that the 1923 Geological Survey investigation by George R. Mansfield states, “During the flood of 1916, when train service was temporarily discontinued. . . . Automobiles were then in use in the larger towns and on some of the intervening roads, and their headlights were doubtless visible from Loven’s [Hotel] over Brown Mountain.”

Redfern also notes, in my opinion correctly, the resemblances between the contactee phenomenon and religious claims of encounters with unworldly beings, such as those of Joseph Smith. Is

this evidence of some very strange phenomenon at work or instead an illustration of the curious mental processes of that very strange creature known as *Homo sapiens*?

Admittedly, some pretty strange facts do turn up along the way. The FBI took an interest in several contactees, including Adamski and Van Tassel. But in the context of 1950s Cold War fears of Communist propaganda and subversion, this is not surprising. We now know that there was an FBI file on the late UFO skeptic Philip J. Klass, as well as on many celebrities and political activists, so it seems that there was an FBI file on everyone who was anyone. The CIA like-

wise is seen to have been interested in claims of communications with extraterrestrials. But the CIA is also known to have sponsored research on “remote viewing” at SRI International and elsewhere, and we know that the attempt to create “psychic warriors” as depicted in *The Men Who Stare at Goats* is not entirely fiction. Do we conclude that some great mystery must exist since the CIA is investigating or that some CIA officials are excessively gullible concerning claims of this kind? Nick Redfern and I would probably reach different conclusions, but I enjoyed reading his book nonetheless. □



## Putting Public Panics in Perspective

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*Outbreak! The Encyclopedia of Extraordinary Social Behaviors.*  
By Hilary Evans and Robert Bartholomew.  
Anomalist Books, New York, 2010. ISBN: 1-933665-25-4.  
Softcover, \$39.95.

Incidences of mass hysteria and collective social delusion are of particular interest to skeptics, for they illustrate how groups of people can fervently believe in—and be affected by—things that don’t seem to exist outside of their

a phenomenon for which science can find no plausible cause, we must often look to sociology for an explanation.

The subject of mass delusions has received little academic attention compared to most other sociological phe-

(i.e., the Hula-hoop), wartime panics, UFO flaps, phantom attackers (such as the Phantom Gasser of Mattoon or India’s Monkey Man panic), witchcraft accusations, school outbreaks, suicide clusters, alien abductions, doomsday cults, satanic abuse panics, disease pandemics, and many more. Even longtime SKEPTICAL INQUIRER readers will be unfamiliar with many of the subjects. Each page reveals fascinating, little-known incidents of bizarre collective beliefs and behaviors, as well as new facts and twists on well-known cases.

The authors take a careful, objective look at each topic and approach the subject with the knowledge that whether or not a particular behavior represents a social delusion depends largely on the context and beliefs of the affected people. Not every incident in the encyclopedia is necessarily evidence of psychological disorder or mass hysteria, but all of them are in some way examples of extraordinary social behavior. The book avoids psychological and sociological jargon, making it accessible to the casual reader but scholarly enough for the serious researcher. Each section concludes with dozens (or hundreds) of sources and references, and most entries are cross-referenced. *Outbreak!* is the most comprehensive book of its kind, invaluable to any skeptic interested in mass hysteria and collective delusions. □

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collective imaginations. If one person reports an unusual experience (say, being abducted by aliens) without offering evidence for it, it might be chalked up to hoax or hallucination. However, if dozens or hundreds of people report experiencing

nomena, and thus the new encyclopedia *Outbreak!* by Hilary Evans and Robert Bartholomew fills a much-needed gap in the literature, following in the tradition of Charles Mackay’s classic 1841 text *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. The scope of this eight-hundred-page book is broad, covering nearly 350 entries on a wide variety of topics, including benign fads and crazes

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