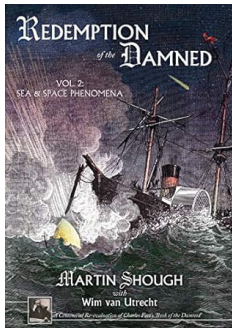


**BOOK AND  
MULTIMEDIA  
REVIEW**

## Redemption of the Damned, Vol 2: Sea & Space Phenomena

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Vol. 2: Sea & Space Phenome-  
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As one slogs through this exhaustively researched work, one begins to wonder to whom it is addressed, if not a hypothetical reader who will put it down with a sigh of amazement and a shocked realization that *Charles Fort was not a scientist after all*. Does such a soul exist?

If one does, then *Redemption of the Damned Vol. 2*, the follow-up volume refuting Fort's *The Book of the Damned* (1919), will enable that nervous individual to relax. Martin Shough and Wim Van Utrecht have explained all, or nearly all (on infrequent occasions, a concession of failure emerges, softened by the reassurance that "we have found no single case where an exotic explanation is inescapable").

*Redemption 2* is concerned mostly with phenomena that have disappeared from UFO literature, along with dependence on Fort as a primary source. My observation, not the authors', by the way. For ufology, Fort's significance is that in July 1947, American newspapers began citing his and Fortean's attestation that reports of aerial anomalies had not entered the world just weeks earlier; decades ago, somebody had culled reports of such from printed sources and incorporated them into books that remained popular with a tiny, enthralled audience. Thus, Fort played a crucial (albeit hardly immediate) role in the creation of what would eventually be called the extraterrestrial hypothesis, for which many have never forgiven him.

In the late 1940s, Fort was deemed *the* authority on pre-Arnold weirdness for the simple reason that no competition existed. (Well, that and the reality that if one had an off-kilter sense of humor, Fort could be a great comic writer. Lots of people, on the other hand, either didn't get the jokes or were put off by them.) Even so, citations tended to be unspecific. Of the first-generation UFO authors, only one leaned heavily in Fort's direction, M. K. Jessup (d. 1959), whose *The Case for the UFO* (1955) and *The Expanding Case for the UFO* (1957) are based significantly in Fort's cases. It should be noted here that Jessup (mentioned only in passing on pages 52-53 of R2) borrowed Fort's coverage of apparent anomalies in space to argue that long ago, earthly pygmies developed a super-civilization, set up shop between the earth and the moon, and ever since have kept an eye on us. Jessup believed that evidence of this could be discerned, for one instance, in reports of humanoid UFO occupants.

Such ideas died with Jessup, though even in what remained of his life, they caught no traction. Most UFO literature of the time was already focused on atmospheric phenomena, whatever their ultimate origin and nature, on the eminently sensible grounds that things in the sky or nearer were easier to draw conclusions about ("easier" being relative, of course). Curiosities in space were left, with the occasional exception (usually perceived luminosities on the surface of the moon or Mars), solely to astronomers. Sadly, all but a handful of the latter who couldn't resist the temptation to speak out on



UFOs followed Harvard's arch-debunker Donald H. Menzel into the far reaches of the disbelief tradition, from which dead-end science may only now be emerging, if reluctantly.

So, once more, whom is *R2* for, if not ufologists? Perhaps historians of astronomy engaged in the study of arcane, largely forgotten controversies in the discipline. That, obviously, is a perfectly valid topic for intellectual scrutiny. It is unfortunate that Shough and Van Utrecht got sidetracked into an assault on Fort, an effort that would have made more sense in the middle of the last century when he was seen less as a literary figure and philosophical jokester than as a credible chronicler of cosmic mysteries. Or, one might observe, before UFO historians had done their own probing into primary historical accounts and drawing their own, more sophisticated conclusions. Ironically, Shough is co-author (with Chris Aubeck) of *Return to Magonia: Investigating UFOs in History* (2015), which is far and away the finest treatment of the subject. Beyond that, there are the late William R. Corliss's many compilations of source materials from the scientific literature. As a chronicler of the long-ago unexplained, in other words, Fort has long been superseded.

Where *R2* is concerned, anyone who is not an anomalyphobe (as Van Utrecht, a prominent Belgian debunker, appears to be) will enjoy chapters such as the one detailing the search for the non-planet Vulcan, a cogent example of the fallibility of scientists, a subject in which

Fort (fairly and unfairly) delighted and which led to the writing of four iconoclastic volumes between 1919 and 1932. On the other hand, anyone who thinks or suspects that by poking his less-than-qualified head into scientific enigmas and disputes, Fort betrayed his limitations will find ample confirmation for that proposition in these pages.

Still, Fort gets the last laugh. The acceleration of scientific knowledge over the past century has done nothing to slow or disturb the persistence of anomalies. To the contrary, all that acceleration has done is to provide us with new tools to investigate them. It's also made them more impenetrable, all the while reminding those who've heard of Fort to reflect on how weird this world can be if one dares to look. These days, there are suggestions, from respectable academics no less, that understanding is more likely to be gleaned not from relatively ordinary anomalies but from those most radically in defiance of prosaic accounting [see, for example, Jack Hunter's (2023) impressive collection of scholarly papers, *Deep Weird: The Varieties of High Strangeness Experience*].

To paraphrase the famous opening words of *Book of the Damned*, a procession of the damned continues to march. In common with the pioneering scientists he lampooned, Fort may have gotten many of the details wrong (and *R2* is a useful compendium of those), but in the end, he got the essential point right.