

Hidden Realms, Lost Civilizations, and Beings from Other Worlds

by Jerome Clark. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2010. 352 pp. \$24.95 (paperback). ISBN 1578591759.

This volume is the latest in a series of valuable reference works by Jerome Clark. A central figure in the UFO community since the 1970s, his objectivity and concern for verifiable facts has gained him respect from all sides of this contentious topic. His major work, *The UFO Encyclopedia* (Clark 1990–1998), pulls together widely scattered ephemeral data about the most significant incidents, investigators, and theories involved in this complex phenomenon. Since then, Clark has produced similar compendia, dealing with material that, arguably, is not as central to understanding the physical nature of UFOs themselves, but still deserves attention.

Hidden Realms, Lost Civilizations, and Beings from Other Worlds is such a work. A self-proclaimed “agnostic” of any theory that provides a simple explanation of UFOs, Clark insists that serious research needs to place highest value on verifiable physical evidence. This involves resisting the psychological pressure that would discount some reports in order to save a cherished hypothesis. This is true, he argues, whether the cherished hypothesis considers UFOs as natural phenomena or as evidence that extraterrestrials are contacting humans. Therefore, this volume is a challenging one for Clark to compile, as it collects and discusses the most dubious and physically impossible claims that have in some way impacted UFO research.

The book’s flashy title, unfortunately, obscures the actual content of this reference work. In fact, it is divided into three sections, none of which clearly lines up with the three elements of the title. The first, “Earth’s Secret Places,” handles traditions that derive from the American tradition of spiritualism. Since the 19th century, mediums have recorded alternative histories of world civilizations, via automatic writing or dictated messages from spirit guides. These often describe cultures that attained spiritual and technological heights unknown to the modern world, but then were destroyed in some global calamity. Clark surveys spiritualistic accounts of the world of Lemuria (a culture that occupied a continent now covered by the Pacific Ocean) as well as the distinctively American version of the ancient Greek realm of Atlantis, largely generated by the 20th-century Kentucky seer Edgar Cayce. Traditions deriving from the “hollow earth” theory generated by John Cleves Symmes, Jr., (and popularized by Edgar Allen Poe) are also included. An especially useful chapter sums up the career of Richard S. Shaver, a former mental patient whose writings told sensational tales of demonic deros and benevolent teros in subterranean passageways underneath the earth.

A second section, "The Alternate Solar System," focuses on the tradition of "contactee" lore, in which individuals claim to have met aliens from other planets in the solar system. These are, interestingly, placed in the context of early astronomical thinking, in which many respected scientists argued that complex life was indeed possible on all of these locations and even claimed to have detected physical evidence of intelligent life there. However, most of the section summarizes the stories of people like George Adamski who described long-term relationships with visitors from other planets and published complex accounts of extraterrestrial journeys with the aliens in their spacecraft. Some of the contactees' accounts may be, like Shaver's stories, complex personal delusions, but a number of them were no better than confidence men, using the strong cultural interest in UFOs generated in the 1950s to market their fictions to a credulous or at least intrigued audience.

The final section, "Between this World and the Otherworld," is the most miscellaneous, dealing with personal experience stories and news accounts of increasingly bizarre events. After a brief survey of encounters with fairies and elves, mostly (but not exclusively) drawn from historical documents, Clark adds chapters on more recent bizarre experiences. These include celestial visions of ghostly armies marching across the skies, airborne dragons and giant snakes, and a rash of news accounts of "airship" sightings from 1897, a time when no practical form of human-controlled flying machine yet existed. Clark quotes from a range of previously unexamined news stories from the late 19th and early 20th centuries to show that such events were widely reported in the American media as unusual but not incredible.

The book, however, is more suggestive than truly informative. In an Introduction, the agnostic Clark calls these phenomena "experience anomalies," that is, "something not quite wholly real and something not quite wholly dreamed up . . . experienced vividly in ways that resist both prosaic explanation and lazy categorization" (p. xiii). In this, he follows the radical skepticism of Charles Fort, whom he credits in his Acknowledgments, who compiled four influential books from [then] recent news accounts that presented as fact events that scientific minds of his day "damned" as unworthy of notice. Clark has indeed also been an important figure in the contemporary scene of "forteans," amateur observers and compilers of paranormal and extraordinary claims in the press and, when possible, among direct observers. However, many forteans work from very limited goals, finding the material itself intriguing but not wanting to delve deeply into possible explanations.

For it is clear that there is a wide diversity of explanations. Some, clearly, are clever hoaxes, intended to pull an audience's leg for a while. Some of the elaborate news stories from the 19th and early 20th centuries are told with a straight face but were intended as practical jokes. Their original audiences

would have read them as “windies,” reacting to contextual details that now are difficult or impossible to reconstruct. Others, as Clark frankly admits at times, were perpetrated dishonestly and with mercenary intent, hoping to increase a magazine’s circulation or even to swindle people wanting to gain proof of extraterrestrial realms. Still others seem likely to be, as debunkers would suspect, misidentifications of natural events. The stories of ghostly armies and twisting serpents in the night sky, for example, suggest the lights generated by an unusual and unfamiliar display of the aurora borealis during a geomagnetic storm, as seen through eyes undimmed by modern night-time light pollution.

But much of the material is not as easy to explain away, and, by the same token, equally challenging to explain. This in fact points to the key limitation of Clark’s work: While he stops short of denouncing the topics of his book in their entirety as unscientific nonsense, he also does not suggest any constructive way of viewing what they actually represent. His Introduction suggests some paths: He concedes that these experiences are subjective, present only in the memories and imaginations of tellers and audiences. And the fact that they are *shared* experience, rather than hallucinations unique to solitary deviants, suggests that they are “supernatural and recognizable” (p. xiv). That is, the narratives represent realities that other people can accept as plausibly real. And this in turn signifies that the stories, however impossible as science and fact, nevertheless connect up with culturally constructed beliefs and myths that a significant portion of American culture would be predisposed to accept as human experience.

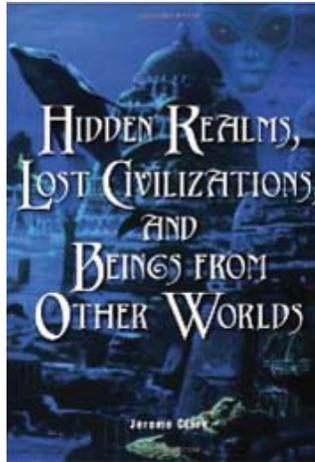
The stories Clark summarizes may contribute nothing to the scientific examination of what UFOs actually are in the mundane world, but they do, as Fort intuited decades ago, challenge the official scientific conception of consensus reality, as allegedly sane people construct it with the help of their senses and the belief language that culture provides them. Clark is especially hard on the contactees, because their incredible stories, backed by equally unconvincing photographs of spacecraft, have tended to stereotype genuine investigators of “close encounters” as soft-minded mystics. He summarizes George Adamski’s complex dealings with benevolent aliens from the planet Venus, but with obvious reluctance, calling one tour of the solar system in alien spacecraft “remarkably tedious” and noting that some researchers (himself presumably included) saw him as “a shameless con man” (p. 118). But Adamski and other prophets of otherworldly saviors could instead be seen as proponents of an emergent American mythology that aims to replace the primitive Mesopotamian cosmology of *Genesis* with one that takes full advantage of recent scientific and technological perspectives on the universe.

So it is disappointing that the book has relatively little to say about possible theories of the actual dynamics of anomalous experience. One

wishes that at least one section could survey some of the academic research, especially in folkloristics, that might bear on the issue of how and why ordinary people could find themselves experiencing alternative realities, or entertaining those reported by others. He notes that in a recent book on the topic, “two prominent academic folklorists remark with no small hint of exasperation, ‘It should be possible to believe one’s informants without believing their explanations’” (p. 195). However, Clark does not identify or cite the two academics in question,¹ so the reader is unable to follow up on the remark or its larger intellectual context. To gain this, readers could consult the important work of folklorist Thomas E. Bullard, who has suggested an academic way of seeing experiential anomalies in terms of cultural myth-making. Bullard’s recent book, *The Myth and Mystery of UFOs* (2011) covers many of the topics Clark summarizes in a much more analytic and insightful way. In so doing, he picks up a number of threads that were initially started by Brenda Denzler in her pioneering work, *The Lure of the Edge: Scientific Passions, Religious Beliefs, and the Pursuit of UFOs* (2001). And in noting the overlap between fairylore and encounters with space aliens, Clark might well have noted the provocative work of folklorist Peter Rojcewicz on the topic.² And overall he would profit from the important theoretical work of Jeffrey J. Kripal, who in works such as *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (2010) argues that participation in anomalous experience is a fundamental element in human consciousness and a cornerstone of religious activity.

The book is a good value, given that it is printed on glossy paper and has been produced carefully, with no visible typos or misspellings. While quotes are not cited or footnoted, each section is given a brief bibliography, and the Index, happily, is comprehensive. A number of production features are annoying, though. There are frequent illustrations, but many of them derive from clip art and show generic images that are, at best, tangentially related to the text. The most interesting are covers of science fiction journals from the Mary Evans Picture Library, a vast and intriguing compilation of paranormal art.

Overall, this book makes a good addition for a researcher who is interested in delving into the complex world of the spiritualist/contactee/folkloristic tangents of the UFO world. Still, one wishes the material had been presented for the sake of what it teaches us about the mythological possibilities of the human mind and the American experience, and not just for its own funky content.



Notes

- ¹ They are Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, in *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton, U.K.: Tuckwell Press, 2001), p. 12. Henderson and Cowan continue,

The stance taken in this study is that it is irrelevant whether or not fairies existed; what matters is that people believed in the reality of the phenomenon. The folklorist is thus interested, as should be the historian, in the “reality of the supranormal experience and not in the reality of paranormal phenomena.”

In the last sentence, Henderson and Cowan are quoting UCLA folklorist Donald Ward (“The Little Man Who Wasn’t There: Encounters with the Supranormal,” *Fabula*, 18 (1977): 216).

- ² Notably his articles “Between One Eye Blink and the Next: Fairies, UFOs, and Problems of Knowledge,” in *The Good People: New Fairy Lore Essays*, edited by Peter Narvaez (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 479–514, and “Fairies, UFOs, and Problems of Knowledge,” *Mythos Journal*, 5 (Fall 1995):69–80. Rojcewicz began his folkloristic career in 1980 when he was contacted by a sinister Man in Black in the library of his graduate school and told that “Flying saucers are the most important fact of the century.” Far from a crank, he has enjoyed a distinguished academic career and currently serves as Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty at Antioch University Seattle.

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