Book Reviews

The Hynek UFO Report. By J. Allen Hynek. Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1977. Paper, $1.95.

Reviewed by Robert Sheaffer

In the wake of the tremendous success of Columbia Pictures' blockbuster *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, UFOs have become hot commercial property, and there is no name in the realm of UFOs with a higher recognition factor than that of J. Allen Hynek. As the longtime astronomical consultant to the Air Force's Project Blue Book, director of the much-ballyhooed Center for UFO Studies, and "technical advisor" for the film *Close Encounters*, Hynek is clearly light-years ahead of the pack when the media goes looking for a spokesman to represent "serious" UFO research. Thus when a new book comes out under the authorship of this man, who styles himself the "Galileo of UFO Studies," it is bound to attract a lot of notice; and to many people Hynek is the embodiment of what they term the "future science" of UFOlogy.

The book is primarily a condensation and summary of UFO sightings from the Project Blue Book files, as selected by Hynek. Daylight disks, radar UFOs, close encounters of each of the three kinds (it was Hynek, in his first UFO book, who coined that now-immortal phrase)—each category of UFOs is described, followed by selected examples.

In the chapter on radar UFOs, we find "The Radar Case Condon Couldn't Crack"—the Bentwaters-Lakenheath incident of 1956 in England. What Hynek conveniently manages to avoid mentioning is that Philip J. Klass did indeed "crack" the case in his book *UFOs Explained*, devoting an entire chapter to it. Hynek has presumably read *UFOs Explained*, since he reviewed the book for *Fate* magazine. So why does he represent the incident as totally without explanation? In *real* scientific disciplines, it is not considered intellectually honest to discourse at length on a supposed anomaly without even mentioning that another leading researcher, with whom one disagrees, has published a proposed solution for it. But in the "science" of UFOs, such scruples seem not to apply. Hynek makes no attempt to refute Klass.

In the chapter on "close encounters of the second kind," describing UFOs that reportedly cause tangible physical effects, we encounter a case in which a

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UFO reportedly hovered four feet above a field alongside a major intersection during the morning rush hour. It reportedly caused cars to stall. Yet we learn of this extraordinary incident through the testimony of only a single witness. Hynek remarks: "One might wonder why there weren't more witnesses to the event; but as we have already noted, one of the chief characteristics of UFO sightings seems to be their isolation in time and space. This is, of course, a highly puzzling feature . . ." (p. 178). It should likewise be noted that pink elephants, which are sometimes sighted by individuals lying beneath barstools, constitute another phenomenon that is isolated in time and space. Such peculiar behavior is the earmark of fantasy and hallucination, not of some Profound Unknown. Occam's Razor, the cutting edge of scientific decision making ("entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity"), dictates that when dealing with a phenomenon, one of whose "chief characteristics" is selective visibility, a la hallucination, one must opt for the *simplest* hypothesis: the phenomenon *is*, in large part, hallucination. It is surprising that a man with Hynek's training in astronomy would ignore, and even contradict, such a fundamental scientific concept in formulating a new hypothesis.

In the chapter on nocturnal lights, Hynek makes an assertion that prompted UFO researcher David A. Schroth to point out the following minor inconsistency in Hynek's public statements:

> 1977: "When I was in charge of the United States Optical Satellite Tracking Program during the International Geophysical Year (1957-58), we received many reports from our Moonwatch stations concerning the strange lights that certainly weren't satellites." (p. 78)
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> 1959: "I can quite safely say that we have no record of ever having received from our Moonwatch teams any reports of sightings of unidentified objects which had any characteristics different from those of an orbiting satellite, a slow meteor, or a supposed plane mistaken for a satellite." (Quoted by Ruppelt, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, p. 271, revised edition.)

Which of these two Hyneks are we to believe? Other individuals associated with Moonwatch suggest that Hynek's earlier statement is to be given greater credence.

It is Project Blue Book that is the raison d'etre of this book, and in the next to last chapter, we are given a copious, though not quite thorough, statistical analysis of the Air Force's Blue Book records. Hynek has consistently criticized the Air Force's UFO investigations as being far too skeptical, implying that the Air Force displayed little more than a knee-jerk debunking reflex whenever the term *UFO* was mentioned: "Once the decision was made that UFOs had to be figments of the imagination, the Air Force policy on UFOs never changed direction. 'It can't be, therefore it isn't' became the guiding principle, and anyone associated with Blue Book, from Director on down, learned to follow suit or else" (p. 33). The Air Force was excessively skeptical about UFOs, says Hynek.

The official Blue Book records show that 94.44 percent of the cases had prosaic explanations; only 5.56 percent are carried as "unidentified." (Hynek presents a great many Blue Book statistics, but avoids a clear summation; we'll

see why in a moment.) But how realistic were the Air Force's classifications? Were there many "unexplainable" cases hidden in the 94 percent which were simply *debunked*, as Hynek ceaselessly claims, and never really identified? Working with an unnamed associate from the Center for UFO Studies staff, Hynek has "comprehensively re-evaluated all the cases which comprise the ninety-four reels of microfilmed Project Blue Book records," some 13,000 cases. What is the result of this most commendable Herculean effort? Hynek and his partner found that, after eliminating all cases for which insufficient information was available, 94.2 percent of the cases had prosaic explanations; only 5.8 percent were considered "unidentified." In other words, *Hynek's reevaluation of the Blue Book record resulted in virtually the same percentage of "unknown" cases as the Air Force concluded:* 5.8 percent versus 5.56 percent. Thus Hynek's own figures do not substantiate his oft-repeated charges that the Air Force set out to debunk UFOs regardless of the merits of the sighting. We now see why he is careful to give the Air Force "unknowns" only by the month, or for a single year: the reader has no opportunity to see the embarrassing fact that Hynek and the Air Force are in substantial agreement.

In fact, if one examines the two analyses of the Blue Book cases very carefully, a startling fact emerges. Hynek's percentage of "unknowns" is enlarged because he does not include the "insufficient information" cases in his total, as did the Air Force. The official Blue Book records show 701 "unidentified" cases (a number not found, of course, in Hynek's book). *Looking at the same cases in the same files, Hynek finds only 640 that supposedly are without explanation. In actuality, Hynek now finds fewer "unexplained" cases in the Blue Book files than did the Air Force!* (Although he doesn't admit it.) This finding totally invalidates the book's central thesis of Air Force pig-headedness. Yet Hynek continues to travel around the country, appearing before audiences and TV cameras, to accuse the Air Force of having practiced "it can't be, therefore it isn't." Any lingering suspicions the reader may have that UFOlogy might be a legitimate protoscience should be safely dispelled by the unscientific behavior of the leading UFOlogist of our day.

Do the "unknowns" in the Blue Book files signify the existence of some significant and genuinely unknown phenomenon? Hynek's recent reevaluation has reduced the number of "hard-core unknowns" from 701 to 640. Concentrating on the "classic" supposed unknowns remaining, we find that many of the most celebrated ones—Bentwaters-Lakenheath, Father Gill, Socorro, Newhouse, McMinnville, Trindade, Mariana, to name a few—have been challenged by skeptics, and prosaic explanations have been offered. (Hynek *never* gives the reader the facts about these proposed solutions, and only obliquely indicates in a few places that solutions have ever been proposed, never specifying by whom.)

The approach of those claiming significance for the "unexplained" cases is to substitute quantity for quality: no *one* case will stand up to careful scrutiny; but given enough of them, it is presumed that at least a few cases must be valid, even though it is impossible to say which ones. Why is there no such thing as a "make or break" critical observation in UFOlogy, one on which the "UFO evidence" will stand or fall, since we recognize the importance of critical observa-

tions in real scientific disciplines (i.e., the displacement of light in the sun's gravitational field, crucial to Einstein's theories)? Simply stated, it is because the supposed UFO evidence rests entirely on the weight of uncorroborated human testimony. We often hear it said that pilots and other skilled persons are such solid citizens that their testimony cannot conceivably be called into question. Yet there is another finding from Hynek's reevaluation of the Blue Book file that also seems to undermine the overall message of the book: "Surprisingly, commercial and military pilots appear to make relatively poor witnesses (though they do slightly better in groups)" (p. 271). In short, there is *no* category of observer so overwhelmingly reliable that his UFO report can be taken at face value.

Hynek fancies himself the "Galileo" of the new science of UFOlogy. Yet if the science of the orginal Galileo amounted to nothing more substantial than this, it is a safe bet that his name would have faded into oblivion long ago. ●

Correction

In "An Empirical Test of Popular Astrology," by Ralph bastedo (Fall 1978), the last sentence of footnote 14, page 35, should read: "With 1.0 degree of freedom and a chi-square of *0.006*, the probability value was .91."

The phrase "random choice" in the fourth line of the fourth paragraph on page 31 should read "random *chance*."

Knowledge or certainty

There is no absolute knowledge. And those who claim it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy. All information is imperfect. We have to treat it with humility.

—*J. Bronowski, in* The Ascent of Man