

THE MYTH AND MYSTERY OF UFOS – Thomas E. Bullard (2010)

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Reviewed by Luis R. González. April 2011.

Thomas Eddie Bullard (born 1949) is an American folklorist best known among us for his research into UFOs and the abduction phenomenon. His articles have been published in the *Journal of American Folklore* and the *Journal of UFO Studies*, among other journals. As this is his first book professionally published, it merits a somewhat detailed review.

His interest in UFOs began in childhood, when as he settled down one November morning in 1957 to read the latest news about Sputnik, an article caught his eye about an unidentified egg-shaped object that passed over a highway in Levelland (Texas) and caused car engines to stall. Bullard read books and magazines by the likes of Ray Palmer, Major Donald E. Keyhoe, and many NICAP publications, joining NICAP and APRO himself in the 1960s. He studied at the University of North Carolina, and earned his Ph.D. at Indiana University in 1982. His doctoral thesis was titled "Mysteries in the Eye of the Beholder: UFOs and Their Correlates as a Folkloric Theme Past and Present".

During his thesis investigations he studied a great number of newspapers and centered on the 1896-97 "airship wave", publishing one of the first scholarly efforts on this subject: "The Airship File".

In the 1980s, FUFOR asked him to make a study of abductions so Bullard began a large-scale comparative analysis of about 300 alleged cases of alien abduction, some of them dating to the mid-1950s. It was perhaps the first time an academic had examined the phenomena, and it remains a landmark effort. His findings: an intriguing coherence and a fairly consistent sequence and description of events.

My critique of these findings has been published elsewhere (1) but I consider that its role in the acceptance of the alien abduction phenomena as fact has been pivotal. Nowadays, the author seems to have somehow reconsidered them and do admits that:

p. 279: The abduction account chronology becomes, in this view, not the course of a real experience but the formal sequence of ascending action, dramatic climax, and resolution that characterizes a standard form of storytelling.

Even if he still considers that:

p. 280: An appeal to cultural learning explains many UFO-related ideas but not all striking parallels of UFOs with religion, mythology and folklore....

As a more scientifically sophisticated source for this principle of indirect influence, Bullard points out that the notions of innate content or processes common to all mankind (like Jung's archetypes) have fallen out of favor, and suggest the action of selective behavior guided by cognitive universals as a venue worth exploring.

Fascinated by the alien abduction phenomena, in the 1990s Bullard updated his findings and tried to tackle several of the objections made by skeptics such as the use of hypnosis or alleged investigator bias, and his present opus shows him to be a matured ufologist worth debating with.

Bullard now admits (even defends) that thinking about UFOs can be understood as myth creation and devotes the main part of the book to develop this thesis, but also from the beginning he tries not to pass judgment on the reality of the phenomenon. This ambivalence (could it be described as “cognitive dissonance”?) is evident through all the text. Let me mention some examples:

p. 120 – If so many witnesses could be wrong about airships, a shadow of doubt necessarily falls over all other UFOs. So many saucers after 1947 in contrast with so few before are embarrassing as well; so is the responsiveness of descriptions to the prevailing ideas of the time. These facts argue not for a coherent phenomenon that bridges the ages, but for a creation of the social imagination.

p. 197 – Whether these possibilities have not yet appealed to fantasy or the UFO experience offers them no opportunity to take root, their omission demonstrates that UFO narratives are not comprehensive copies of cultural models but maintain some degree of independence.

p. 200 – The likeness of UFO representations to cultural sources proves nothing for or against a UFO phenomenon, only that whether the theme is large or small, cultural models provide meanings for an experience and ways to communicate it to others.

p. 249 – One trend apparent in ufologists’ characterization of aliens is gravitation towards exemplary types like saviors, exploiters, or conspirators (...) Such fluidity of image suggests that UFO occupants as we understand them owe more to interpreters’ predispositions than to hard fact about aliens.

p. 270 – Equally hard to credit is sixty years of stagnation in UFO technology. The technology of the one civilization we know –our own- changes rapidly. Yet supposedly far-advanced UFO aliens have made few improvements or model changes in their craft since 1947.

p. 285 – PSH critics mistake these similarities for a verdict when they are only diagnostic tools. Whether all UFO reports describe a myth or some fraction distort a real phenomenon depends not on arguments and possibilities but on whatever evidence there might be for a genuine unconventional phenomenon.

p. 304 – In broader perspective, people also report seeing angels and ghosts as legitimate experiences (...) Processes of human error can just as well carry over from one type of experience to another. Either ufologists accept one anomalous encounter and reject another by arbitrary choice, or they must admit that blind faith in eyewitness testimony is unjustified even when the eyewitness is sincere and honest to a fault.

What are the reasons why Bullard doesn't take the last step and become a PSH defender? The popular ETH receives a good pounding throughout the text, including one of the best explanations about the mythical stance represented by the Roswell case. Some examples and poignant insights:

p. 125 – Since the early 1950s the ETH has held much the same position in ufology as evolution theory in biology. It is the indispensable connecting thread that makes sense of everything.

p. 163 – The ETH cosmology is unimaginative and staid. It accommodates rather than innovates.

pp. 220 to 225 – Without a compelling reason such as the panic argument had lent the 1950s suspicions, in the 70s the secrecy lacked a motive equal to its imagined magnitude. The 1980s began with the unification of scattered beliefs and a spectacular rewriting of UFO history under the influence of a new rationale, a conspiracist's messiah that ushered in two feverish decades of creative paranoia.... Roswell handed the faithful a secret as big as they had always wanted.... Ufology stays wedded to its conspiracies, with claims milder only by degree.

p. 230 – Extraterrestrials succeed today like distance and the supernatural in bygone times, as a blank page of possibilities, a premise to excuse any amount of strangeness, any defiance of natural law or logical contradiction...

p. 245 & 246 – Though the alien classroom is gentle in one case (Space Brothers) and rough in the other (Abductions), both images oppose the secular view of an impersonal universe with what is, ultimately, a religious outlook... The broader message behind these accounts of ET intervention fulfills the hope that Earth is not isolated, accidental or inconsequential in the vastness of space.

p. 262 – Popular ufologists typically welcome claims that confirm a chosen belief and reject or ignore even the strongest negative evidence... Tendentious selection of data allows the construction of a desired image of reality, just not a very likely one.... The ETH applies one and the same solution to every problem, so for all questions, from the statues of Easter Island to gaps in human memory, aliens, aliens, and more aliens are the answer.

p. 282 – The day-to-day business of the (ET) UFO myth is essentially a maintenance chore. Proponents build and preserve the communal understanding, spread it to the uninformed, defend it against attacks from nonbelievers, and enforce orthodoxy within the ranks.... A consequence is that UFO thinking has little need for experience, only the illusion of it.... With the necessary answers already in place, questioning becomes selective, not a matter of asking whether alleged events are real but how they fit into the accepted framework.

Bullard's way out is to defend the existence of a real phenomenon (the experiences) without admitting the logical inferences derived from its mere existence, especially the unavoidable question of its apparent intelligence. Speaking about consistency in UFO reports, he considers (taking into account the example of urban legends) that the imaginations of those who report UFOs from all over the world should not be so restricted, should not display inhibitions lacking a factual anchor (p. 299 - *abduction reports repeat one another to the point of monotony....*) On

the other hand, neither should people describing their experiences sometimes see more than expectations prepare them to see, unless some other ingredient enters in the mix.

Bullard avoids a central problem (pointed out many years ago by Allan Hendry): the class of UFOs and the class of IFOs are really statistically indistinguishable, so it seems that there certainly are some unavoidable restrictions over human imagination. Besides, it could be argued that each UFO/IFO case always includes a peculiar item marking its individuality (the scarf worn by one of the Hill's abductors, the "Star Wars" figures seen in the Spanish Turis landing case, etc.), so maybe not fulfilling expectations is a way to reintroduce human imagination into the play. Another point to consider is the role of conscious or unconscious censorship by the witnesses themselves, but also by the investigators.

Bullard claims there are strong UFO cases that pass the following tests:

- 1.- The alleged event fulfills basic authenticity requirements.
- 2.- Quality testimonial and instrumental evidence supports it.
- 3.- The strange quality of the alleged event lies not in the vagueness of inadequate description but in the unusual character of well-specified incidents.
- 4.- A coherent account emerges from reports of independent witnesses.
- 5.- The alleged event bears some similarities to other accounts.
- 6.- The alleged event differs in some respects from expectations.
- 7.- The report of an alleged event has undergone strenuous critical examination but survives alternative explanations.

But none of the examples he mentions fulfills all the criteria. We are still waiting.

In his Introduction, Bullard differentiates between "skeptics/debunkers" and "critics", but cannot avoid mixing them up again in his critical comments about the PSH. I would like to mention a couple of examples:

p. 257 – Little of the appeal to abnormal psychology survives head-on collision with the facts. Actual studies counter armchair theories with findings that UFO observers and abductees are free of psychopathology or temporal lobe disturbance, neither are they marginal, maladjusted, or inclined to reject mainstream culture (...) How important hypnosis is to the recovery of abduction memories became doubtful when considering an experiment with eleven abductees that uncovered new episodes in only two subjects, while two others remembered nothing new under hypnosis and seven simply elaborated on episodes consciously remembered (Duncan, John A.D. "Psychological Correlates of the UFO Abduction Experience").

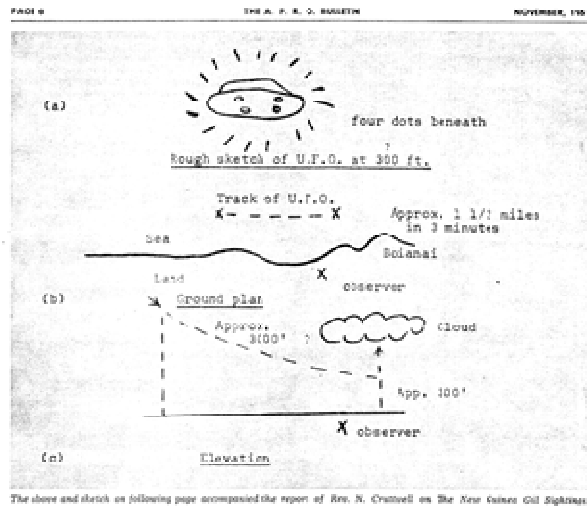
Considering the few studies made, their small and heterogeneous samples, the virtual absence of strict protocols, and the lack of replications, I would say that neither conclusion is proved. Besides, abnormal psychology proposals never pretended to be the only explanation, each worked (or could work) for a small subset of incidents/experiencers. But I agree with the

author that the general proposition that abductees have their experiences because they suffer from a deviant psychological profile seems to have been refuted.

p. 268 – *Not all the blame lies with UFO proponents since skeptics may be equally pseudoscientific (...) A barrage of implausible solutions aimed at the Mexican Air Force case of 2004 included a new type of stealth aircraft, a meteor procession, ball lightning, balloons, and equipment malfunction. In all fairness, some skeptics proposed the oil-field flares at an early date, but the overall course of response suggests a skeptics' board game with explanations chosen by a toss of the dice.*

Bullard's specific rebuttals to some skeptical solutions of cases are also very superficial.

Regarding Martin Kottmeyer's suggestion that the Father Gill sighting could have involved some kind of fishing boat viewed under distorting atmospheric conditions, he dismissed it because "*the mystery object was over land*" (p. 310). The following map shows the contrary:



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I stand corrected. In a posterior exchange with the author, Bullard explained:

Concerning the 1959 New Guinea case (...), the question of whether the "UFO" hovered over water or over land arose as an issue because there is ambiguity in the descriptions, maps, and illustrations related to the case. We could not resolve the problem from the published information at hand, but thanks to help from Bill Chalker, who had remained friends with Father Gill over the years, I was able to submit a question about the location of the UFO directly to the witness. Father Gill answered that the UFO hovered over land, and he also cleared up another question that had puzzled me—why did no one run toward the UFO while it was in sight? Given that it was only one or two hundred feet away, and given that there were multiple witnesses, and some of them children, it seems only natural that someone would have tried to stand underneath the object. He answered that the area was marshy and not easy to cross, but not a place where a boat could go.

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Bullard quotes Peter Rogerson: *“Let’s get this straight: a work of fiction had introduced the ‘enchantment’ or ‘Oz factor’, the supernatural cold, the doorway amnesia, the alien in disguise, the whole drama of disinterested scientists experimenting on us like guinea pigs”* (p. 254) but instead of replying in the main text, his curious retort is relegated to a footnote: *NOTE 8: In fact, Rogerson has the order of influence turned around –the book of fiction most likely borrows its abduction motifs from The Interrupted Journey. Not very likely, if only because the Hills did not describe any of those details (except if you consider that the initial Nazi uniforms and their Jimmy Durante noses were some kind of disguise). In a posterior exchange, Bullard clarified: In short, the Hill case included most of the key elements of the abduction story, though it did not necessarily call attention to them and only with future accounts did those elements recur enough to become stereotypical. So the question still remains—cultural influence, or an inherent part of the experience?*

There is one blunder I cannot resist mentioning. Arguing for the consistence of abductions, Bullard comments:

p. 299 – Hopkins raises the point that the often-seen alien illustration on the cover of Communion actually misrepresents the entities reported by Strieber –that, in fact, they had a much more bulbous head. Yet as misleading as this single most familiar image of a UFO alien ought to be, few abductees have copied its error. This prominent cultural icon has failed to alter the preference for big heads in actual reports.

Point, set and match... or not? Consider the following little piece of information mentioned by Bill Chalker in his book *Hair of the alien* (2005):

p. 3 – But Strieber had suppressed one key detail of his alien encounter to see if it would be validated independently in subsequent witness descriptions of alien beings. That detail was the presence of hair (emphasis mine).

Even if the author fails to take the final step, or maybe for this reason, I strongly recommend this book for a serious analysis of the mythical component of the UFO phenomenon.

NOTES

- (1) Luis R. González, "El aprendiz de Procusto", *La Nave de los Locos* nº 13 (January 2002) pp. 19-33.

An example (translated into English):

Episode Order

From the 195 incidents that include two or more episodes, 165 present them in the same order, and even among those which did not, 27 present only ONE alteration in this order of apparition. The same happens with the phases Bullard identifies in the main episodes (capture & examination).

To support his conclusions, Bullard made several statistical considerations which prompted him to argue that if the order discovered by him was due to mere chance, there should be only 12 cases out of the 136 (with more than 3 episodes). It seems irrefutable.

In fact, no so much. Bullard follows a simplistic strategy considering the chances that a group of episodes should follow a concrete order. For instance, to combine 3 elements you have 6

possibilities (CER, CRE, ECR, ERC, REC, and RCE), but according to him, only ONE would be correct. But, let us substitute those 3 elements by 3 of the episodes selected by Bullard (Capture, Examination, and Return), how many of those hypothetical possibilities would really appear in the narrative of an abductee? One and only one (CER). In other words, from one possibilities in six (roughly 17%) according to Bullard, in reality we get the absolute certainty that all the stories with those only three episodes will follow the logical order.

Maybe this explains why Bullard included episodes with a very small incidence (like the Theophany) whose only usefulness would be to increase the alleged improbability of the order discovered.

The situation is really a little bit more complex. Let us see what would happen with 4 episodes (Capture, Examination, Discourse, and Return) (I use Discourse instead of Conference to get the proper initial):

There are 24 possible sequences (in brackets I point to the logical rule which invalidate them)

CEDR	ECDR (2)	DRCE (1)	RCED (1)
CERD (3)	ECRD (2)	DREC (1)	RCDE (1)
CDER	EDCR (2)	DCRE (2)	RECD (1)
CDRE (2)	EDRC (1)	DCER	REDC (1)
CRED (2)	ERCD (1)	DERC (1)	RDCE (1)
CRDE (2)	ERDC (1)	DECR (2)	RDEC (1)

But not all the sequences have the same chance (that would be Bullard's supposition). On the contrary! Establishing only three logical rules, the chances reduce drastically:

- 1) "Return" can never be before "Capture".
- 2) "Examination" can never happen before "Capture" or after "Return".
- 3) "Discourse" can never happen after "Return". We could admit it before "Capture", but Bullard himself discards this possibility (DCER).

After this logical pruning we get only TWO options: CEDR, the "correct" ordering; and CDER, with the conference before the exam. In other words, from the 24 theoretical orderings of 4 episodes, we come down to just two: the "correct" one and one with a minor alteration. A priori we could suppose both have the same chance of appearing, but now we should consider the dramatic effects. Evidently, it is much more dramatic to put the examination before the conference. And that is precisely what we find in the sample: of the 29 cases which include four episodes, 24 are in the "correct" order and only 5 in the alternative.

Being honest, Bullard adds another complication: considering the cases where the "correct" order is maintained, even though one of the episodes is missing. Let us consider all the possibilities again:

CER	EDR (2)	DRC (1)	REC (1)
CED	ECD (2)	DRE (2)	RCD (1)
CDE	ECR (2)	DCE (3)	REC (1)
CDR	ERC (1)	DCR (3)	RED (1)
CRE (2)	ERD (2)	DER (2)	RDC (1)
CRD (3)	EDC (2)	DEC (2)	RDE (1)

Following the same logical rules described before, we end up with just 4 alternatives: 3 "correct" (CER, CDR, CED) and 1 with one variation (CDE). In other words, now we have a 75% chance to find a "correct" sequence. In Bullard's sample, the percentages are:

"Correct"	CER (32/65)	CED (15/65)	CDR (16/65)
"Variant"	CDE (2/65)		

The majority of cases is above 75%, but once again we must remember the dramatic component. The preponderance of cases that mention only the examination (CER) over those that only mention the conference are a sample artifact, because Bullard did not include cases with a high conference component, like contactees.

We should extend this kind of analysis to the phases inside each episode (especially in the Capture: alien intrusion, missing time, and capture) but it is much more difficult to agree on the logic rules to follow. For instance, we could argue that missing time could not come first because in that case the witness would not remember anything strange... but the sample includes 18 cases of this kind!

APPENDIX 1 - BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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