

Review: *Search for the Unknown: Canada's UFO files and the Rise of Conspiracy*

Theory

by Matthew Hayes

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This is a readable academic summary of the highlights of the little-known Canadian government UFO archive that includes some unique insights into the origins of UFO-related conspiracy theories. Matthew Hayes was inspired to write this book after visiting a virtual exhibition titled 'Search for the Unknown' that was curated by Library and Archives Canada in 2005. This online resource appeared three years before the UK National Archives first began to make its own large collection of MoD UFO documents available online. It was one of the first that took advantage of what were at that time pioneering web-based technologies that allow remote users access and download original archive documents. The Canadian UFO files include thousands of documents created by government agencies between 1950 and 1995. During those four decades, responsibility for logging sighting reports was passed backwards and forwards among largely disinterested officials in the Department of National Defence and Transport, National Research Council and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. In total, the archive contains 4,500 sighting reports and more than 15,000 pages of related documents covering the four decades. These figures are roughly half the number collected by the UK MoD for the same period, but Canada is a huge country and the geographical spread of reports reflect the fact that its population is concentrated in the large cities.

Much like the UK, the Canadians deferred to the United States who were investigating UFO reports via Project Blue Book. During the early part of the Cold War, Canada launched two overlapping UFO investigations, Project Magnet (1950-54) and

Project Second Storey (1952-54). Few if any of the sightings examined by these projects appear to have been made by military sources and the vast majority originated from members of the public.

This book includes 21 examples of black and white UFO drawings from the files that Hayes compares unfavourably with those I curated in 2017 for my book, *UFO Drawings from the National Archives*. He says the UK drawings are 'colourful, full of life and energy' and powerfully communicate contrasting feelings, such as fear and hope. But their North American counterparts are simply 'interesting [and] serve more as accompaniments to the sighting reports'. That is not to say the Canadian UFO files are dull compared to their UK collection. Indeed, one chapter includes accounts of three 'high strangeness' cases reported during 1967 when the number of sightings tripled from 55 in the previous year to 169. This flap coincided with the country's centennial year that saw the launch of a UFO landing pad in St Paul, a small town in Alberta. It was opened by the former Canadian Defence Minister, Paul Hellyer, who in retirement joined the UK's Lord Hill Norton in the elite group of high profile advocates for 'disclosure' of what governments know about the UFO phenomenon. As defence minister, Hellyer should have been aware his government was as clueless as to the nature of the elusive phenomenon as any other. Nevertheless, the Canadian government had its own modest cast of believers in extra-terrestrial visitations. The best known of these was Wilbert Smith, an electrical engineer employed by the Department of Transport who, for a short period in the 1950s, managed to purloin funds for Project Magnet complete with a rudimentary observatory designed to track objects in the near atmosphere. Smith's personal belief in an ET origin for UFOs aroused alarm and suspicion among his superiors who eventually shut down Magnet in 1954. But Smith's most notable achievement was his contact with Dr Robert Sarbacher, a US physicist and defence consultant whom he met at a radio conference in 1950. Sarbacher allegedly told him that UFOs were real and that 'the matter is the most highly classified subject in the [US] Government, rating higher even than the H-bomb', a comment that became author and UFO advocate Timothy Good's favourite quote. But as Hayes points out, details of the meeting are unclear and the 'document' used

as evidence is actually a recollection of Smith's interview with Sarbacher and therefore just an anecdote.

In summary, the Canadian UFO files are much like others that have been gradually opened to public scrutiny as a result of open government and FOI initiatives across the world. They contain many examples of low quality 'lights in the sky' and convoluted correspondence between persistent UFO enthusiasts, who believed the authorities were hiding something, and exasperated officials who tried their best to ignore and debunk claims as either hoaxes or misinterpretations of natural and man-made phenomena. When officials failed to provide satisfying answers, this created an attitude of mutual distrust that created fertile conditions for anti-authoritarian attitudes and the creation of conspiracy theories.

Some readers may find this book plodding in places as the author (who teaches English and Philosophy at a Canadian college) tries his best to negotiate the fine line between a popular subject and academic credibility. But those who stick with it will find much of interest in the chapter on close encounter cases. These include the baffling Falcon Lake incident from 1967 in which a metal prospector, Steven Michalak, suffered what may have been burns to his stomach after he approached a landed cigar-shaped UFO near a remote lake in Manitoba. That year also saw Canada's first recorded examples of crop circles, a decade before they arrived in the UK, when a series of four appeared in a cattle pasture in Alberta. The third equally bizarre case is the Shag Harbour incident from Nova Scotia of 4 October 1967 that is often called Canada's Roswell. This differs from most of the others as it was corroborated by members of the local Mounthy detachment. They were inundated with reports of a lighted object that fell into the harbour near the small fishing community and, on reaching the site, saw a 'dark object' floating in the water. Searches were carried out by boat and helicopter but as no hard evidence was found, the case remains unsolved. As in the UK and US, the authorities, presented with physical evidence of something unknown, were left with no option but to investigate as best they could. But far from providing any smoking gun, the surviving papers reveal inertia and a failure to analyse hard evidence, such as potential radiation traces left at the Falcon Lake UFO encounter. To his credit, Hayes makes a serious

effort to move the spotlight away from those who see and believe in UFOs to examine the motivations and reactions such experiences generated among the public and the officials whose job it was to respond to their concerns. One striking outcome of these interactions is the emergence of a conspiracy-theory driven mindset that has become stereotypical of the modern UFO phenomenon.