



CORRESPONDENCE

Response to Review of Redemption of the Damned: Volume II

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We would like to thank Jerome Clark for his review of *Redemption of the Damned* Vol. 2, covering the sea- and space-related phenomena chronicled by Charles Fort in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), but we are puzzled by some of his comments. In particular, we are disappointed that whereas in 2019, in these very pages, he praised Vol. 1 as an admirable project (“staggering [research] . . . necessary . . . scientifically and informationally weighty” etc.), he now finds the “exhaustive” research in Vol. 2 no more than a “slog”, a redundant effort that belongs – if it belongs anywhere – back in 1950.

Clark can’t easily imagine who might want to read this passé stuff in 2024. Nowadays, he thinks, Fort is (or should be) seen as a “literary figure and philosophical jokester” rather than as a “credible chronicler”, and our book “would have made more sense in the middle of the last century” since which era Fort has “long been superseded” as a source of anomalistic material by the “more sophisticated conclusions” of “UFO historians,” the implication being that our job has long ago been done. Others can judge whether Vol. 1 of this project – the first granular dissection of its kind, well received in the centenary year of *The Book of the Damned* – had a part to play in any such late blossoming of sophistication; however we would insist that Clark’s premise is patently false: items from Fort’s books are still being cited – or re-echoed in garbled paraphrase – in publications around the world, and across the internet, in most instances without any attempt at historical verification, perpetuating a situation that has existed for a century. It is a little galling now to be told, in essence, “Oh, we’ve known Fort’s books were irrelevant and unreliable for decades. Nobody is interested.”

Clark’s remark that Vol. 2 deals mainly with phenomena that have disappeared from the modern literature appears to be phrased as an objection, again aimed at questioning the book’s relevance. “My observation,” says Clark, “not the authors.” Not so, we did make comments on this (e.g., pages 149, 210 and 212) and actually find it a most intriguing question: what does it say about the nature of modern anomalies when vanished historical tales of remarkable bolides impacting ships at sea unexpectedly resist interpretation as vaporous yarns? Why did very circumstantial and credible accounts of luminous oceanic wheels virtually disappear during the 20th century, still without satisfactory explanation? This is one mystery that in our opinion remains to be solved. There are others.

Even as he exaggerates the degree to which the modern mystery industry has outgrown and discarded Charles Fort, at the same time Clark undersells both Fort and our critique of his treasures. “Martin Shough and Wim Van Utrecht have explained all, or nearly all,” he says. But that’s simply not true. In fact, there’s a lot in this volume that we haven’t been able to explain.

Attentive readers of the book will find in Chapter 3 an anomalous object report-



ed from different locations which we concede is “hard to understand” in conventional terms. Chapter 4 ends with us “honestly puzzled”. Our last word on the matter of Chapter 5: “we’re stumped.” In Chapter 6 we argue that Fort’s efforts may have helped keep the fringe astronomical topic of Transient Lunar Phenomena visible during the early 20th century, and we continue in Chapters 7 and 8 to show that he may have collected records suggesting that lunar eclipse brightness and anomalous Martian clouds correlate with solar activity. In Chapter 9 we decline to dismiss evidence that, whilst it is anecdotal, is impressive enough that it might yet be “a first-hand eyewitness account of an extraordinary phenomenon.” After an examination of oceanic phenomena in Chapter 11 we conclude that “a completely convincing explanation” is still elusive, and lament that we can do little more than “perpetuate Fort’s role” in a data-gathering project that future marine scientists may still wish to puzzle over. In the closing Chapters we acknowledge “cases that not only fail to dissolve under the light of inquiry but even seem to harden” and concede that a few cases are “simultaneously so remarkable and so circumstantial that . . . we cannot rule out the possibility of an exotic event,” even as we cannot by any means prove that one occurred.

History being what it is, we were unable to go beyond this judicious balance of uncertainties. Clark’s wry comment that “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’” suggests that he sees this as ineffectual or even verging on debunkery, with which ailment he explicitly diagnoses at least one of us. Anyway, he disparages our patience with these “relatively ordinary” claims approachable by the traditional means of investigation and analysis, perhaps because of our (modest) success with them. He looks rather to stories of “high strangeness experience” that are more “radically in defiance of prosaic accounting” and serve to remind us “how weird this world can be if one dares to look.” It is indeed a fact, appreciated eventually by all students of the marvelous, that the true

weirdness is never where you look for it, it is always over there, around the corner, on the next page, on the horizon. An anomalistic “god of the gaps.” Our limited purpose in *Redemption* was to survey with modern tools a familiar fortean foreground that has remained poorly mapped for a hundred years. If that territory is now, despite our “concessions of failure”, too well charted for some who prefer to explore elsewhere in pursuit of an ever-receding anomalistic rainbow, that is of course their business.

Clark also criticizes us for “getting sidetracked into an assault on Fort”, a charge which is frankly incomprehensible. We are sure that we have written nothing that even the most sensitive fortean, no matter how determined to be offended, could construe as an assault on Fort. On the contrary, we have followed the method of Vol. 1 in being respectful of his chronicle of “damned data” down to the smallest reported detail, whilst having virtually nothing to say about the man, his ideas, and his motivations – not because these are unworthy of attention but because they are largely irrelevant. Fort’s level of scientific (in)eptitude is of no interest to us in itself, nor need it be to the reader – Clark’s histrionic amazement on the latter’s behalf notwithstanding. If someone feels we have misunderstood what Fort means – or ought to mean – to the 21st century as a stylist or a philosopher or a comedian, we can only say that these issues lie outwith the advertised scope of the project, which was to examine the reports collected by Fort, not Fort’s reactions to them.

Jerome Clark sounds bored by all this. People of good sense, he tells us, never did look to Fort as a source of forteana anyway, at least not for three quarters of a century, and now here are these Johnnies-come-lately belaboring the obvious. And yet, do we perhaps detect behind this pose of jaded insouciance a private disappointment that we didn’t find more probative strangeness? That would fit with his accusing one of us of anomalyphobia. On the contrary, both of us are drawn to anomalies, but we do see them as challenges inviting, in the first instance, explanation, not as fuel for a belief that the unexplained should remain unexplained.