

The Aztec Incident: Recovery at Hart Canyon by Scott and Suzanne Ramsey, Dr. Frank Thayer, and Frank Warren. Mooresville, NC: Aztec 48 Productions, 2012. 217 pp. \$24.95 (paperback). ISBN 9780985004606.

One scarcely knows where to begin. Perhaps with this quote from a June 19, 1951, letter—reprinted in these pages (90–91)—written by *San Francisco Chronicle* editor Paul G. Smith to *Variety* entertainment columnist and author Frank Scully: “Frankly, I recall that when I first saw your book I thought you were merely having fun with your readers.” The book, the already scandalous *Behind the Flying Saucers*, which Henry Holt had issued the previous September, was a marketplace success but a disaster in every quarter that did not involve commerce. Even so prominent an early UFO proponent as Major Donald Keyhoe, the first outsider to investigate Scully’s claims of a 1948 saucer recovery near Aztec, New Mexico, rejected them as absurd and fanciful. When I read Scully’s book in junior high school, my impression—even as a naive adolescent—was the same.

In fact, though they circulated freely through the larger society, because of the Scully association, tales of UFO crashes were spurned by mainstream ufologists until the late 1970s. Around that time, a respected colleague, the late Leonard H. Stringfield, began collecting what he called “crash/retrieval reports” from mostly anonymous sources with whom he privately communicated.¹ In 1980 the first major book on the subject, *The Roswell Incident* by Charles Berlitz and William L. Moore, saw print. Other books, mostly though not exclusively focused on Roswell, followed (and an Air Force refutation followed them in the late 1990s, succeeded by refutations of the refutation, and so on in continuing loop to the present).

Inevitably, Scully’s narrative—at least in a cleaned-up version that did not incorporate the dead Venusians of the original—would get a second look. The first book-length treatment was William S. Steinman and Wendelle C. Stevens’s *UFO Crash at Aztec* [1987], a work notable only for its levels of paranoia (high) and coherence (low). The second is the new *The Aztec Incident*, based on what we are told is a \$500,000 investment in research expenses and more than two decades’ worth of inquiry.

First, so that future authorial references will be clear, the crowded byline is courtesy of a writing novice’s error that no experienced author would have committed. There is only one author—Scott Ramsey—who refers to himself in the first person throughout. The other three, who participated in one way or another in accumulating the material that made the book possible, ought to have been relegated to the credits, and not represented as co-authors. Thus, in what follows, I refer to the real author in the singular.

Since there is much panning and little praising in the comments that follow, let's start on the most positive note circumstances render available. *The Aztec Incident* reprints some of the private correspondence, never before seen as far as I know, of the principal figures in the episode. As one who has written at length on the history of the UFO controversy in all its dimensions, including its less lucid moments, I like that. The off-stage voices, I have found, are often illuminating.

Here, however, the revelations are modest. One never imagines for a moment that Scully *appreciated* the efforts of investigative reporter J. P. Cahn (who memorably uncovered the confidence swindle behind *Behind the Flying Saucers* in a couple of hard-hitting, entertainingly documented *True* articles),² but it is interesting to read this record of his grievances against Cahn's hard-charging approach. And who can blame Scully? Though as late as 1984 Cahn remarked that he had always liked Scully personally, clearly the affection was not destined to be reciprocal. At the end of the job, Cahn had exposed Scully as—in the most charitable interpretation—a fool.

Unfortunately, one thing *The Aztec Incident* does not address—cannot address by its very purpose, which is to turn dross into gold—is to what degree Scully was a party to the hoax. To his death in 1964, Scully professed his confidence in what his informants, whose probity he endorsed in the face of overwhelmingly contrary evidence, had reported about the crash in New Mexico along with others, less detailed, in Arizona, Maine, and elsewhere in the late 1940s.³ My supposition, for which I make no larger truth claim than I can glean from observation of his behavior over the years, is that Scully was initially gulled into acceptance of the yarns, then grew eventually to grasp that he'd been bamboozled. By that time, he was sufficiently invested in the bamboozlement that he felt he could not disown his book and the attendant controversy; if it took whopper-forging to sustain his otherwise untenable position, then smalltime grifter Leo A. GeBauer—top magnetic authority “Dr. Gee” in *Behind the Flying Saucers*—would become, years later, a composite figure representing not GeBauer but some of the leading magnetic scientists in America. (In reality, a waitress had given GeBauer the nickname “Dr. Gee,” according to GeBauer's widow, and Scully merely borrowed it for the book.) In other words, Scully was complicit in the hoax. The only remaining question is if that complicity happened sooner or later.

Obligingly, Ramsey devotes an eye-glazing chapter (Chapter 4: Dr. Gee and the Mystery Men) to profiles of eight leading magnetism-studying scientists of mid-century America. “Without a doubt,” he insists (p. 51), “they possibly knew or worked with Silas Newton, a man of science himself.” Only a book as rhetorically hapless as *The Aztec Incident* could cram “without a doubt” and “possibly” into the same pronouncement

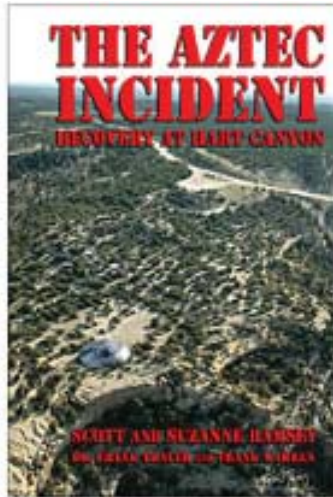
without betraying the faintest cognitive dissonance, and then proceed from there to characterize lifelong swindler Newton not only as a “man of science” but as a major one at that, sharing his purported colleagues’ access to the U.S. Government’s classified extraterrestrial technology. Having pronounced as much, Ramsey feels no obligation to provide a fragment of actual evidence that links these eminent scientists to Newton. For that matter, he fails even to document his repeated assertion that Newton was a significant figure in the oil industry.

It is Newton who was the intellectual author, if that’s the phrase, of the Aztec legend. His stories would almost certainly have been forgotten months after their concoction if not for Scully. In the consensus-reality version, here highly condensed and necessarily incomplete, is how *Behind the Flying Saucers* came to be:

The print record—no prior press references to the described event, said to have taken place on March 25, 1948, have ever been located and are almost certainly nonexistent—begins with Scully’s *Variety* column of October 12, 1949, where he reports having learned from unnamed “scientists” of two saucer retrievals, one in the Mohave Desert, the other in the Sahara. The latter vanishes from the story hereafter, but in Scully’s account the scientists examined the American ship (intact but for a small hole in a port window), presumed to be from Venus and housing 16 human-like midgets—all dead and “charred black”—clad in 1890s-style clothing. The ship, it turned out, flew along “magnetic waves.” All of its dimensions are evenly divisible by nine.

Behind the Flying Saucers, published 11 months later, mentions two Arizona crashes but provides few details beyond the allegation that the bodies were identical to those found at Aztec and that the alien mathematics appeared nine-based.

It developed that Newton and GeBauer had imparted these tales to Scully in August 1949. GeBauer had shown Scully parts from the saucer, among them a tubeless “magnetic radio.” It is generally assumed that the location for the story has its origins in a trip GeBauer took early that same month to Hart Canyon near Aztec—a small town in the northwestern Four Corners part of New Mexico—to demonstrate his alleged oil-detection



device (the sort of thing known derisively in the industry as a “doodlebug”) to locals. Hart Canyon would evolve into the location where the ship came down and was recovered.

As Cahn and—much later and in considerably more detail—William L. Moore⁴ would determine, Newton and GeBauer had devoted their lives (the smart and polished Newton more lucratively than the relatively slow-witted GeBauer) to various confidence operations, many involving oil-finding schemes. Characterized wryly by Moore as “the type of character best avoided by anyone with money in his pocket,” Newton got into trouble in the 1930s in New York, Kansas, and California for assorted shady dealings. “Newton’s tactic in every case was to suck in additional investors,” Moore wrote, “and pay off the complaining party with the money raised—in exchange, of course, for the dropping of charges against him.” When he died in Los Angeles in 1972, Newton had 40 legal claims filed against him based primarily in fraudulent oil and mining schemes. Two years earlier, he had been indicted for grand theft.

The saucer story was intended to draw the interest of the well-heeled, who would soon learn that GeBauer’s doodlebug (the “magnetic radio”), in reality made up of ordinary mechanical parts, was a product of extraterrestrial technology. In other words, if not for Scully’s broadcasting the story to a national and international audience, it would have been no more than another of Newton/GeBauer’s ephemeral efforts to separate fools from their hard-earned.

In attempting to rehabilitate the Aztec “case,” Ramsey falls into the fatal error of defending the indefensible, namely Scully, Newton, and GeBauer, rather than conceding their manifest deficiencies and drawing up an Aztec episode that is not so fundamentally dependent upon their being who they clearly weren’t. From one way of viewing it, Ramsey’s approach is ill-considered. From another, his book wouldn’t exist without *Behind the Flying Saucers* and all it brought into the world. There’s little else outside Scully’s pages, and even there, there isn’t much. One thinks of Woody Guthrie’s famous crack: “That stew was so thin even a politician could have seen through it.”

Ramsey’s defense is unlikely to sway any but guile-free readers. To any critics Ramsey responds with the self-serving words of Scully, Newton, and GeBauer, presented as the equivalent of divine revelation standing unshaken against the darkly driven contrary charges of Cahn, portrayed invariably as pursuing a “petty vendetta” motivated by pure “envy,” or else—and what else?—doing the dirty work of some sinister intelligence agency. To anyone immune from Aztec fever, Cahn emerges as an old-fashioned, aggressive shoe-leather reporter of a type sorely missed in this

era of celebrity journalism. If Moore is mentioned, it is so briefly that I missed it in the extensive notes I took during multiple readings of *The Aztec Incident*. The back pages that should have been devoted to an index are taken up with irrelevant photographs of historic Aztec.

Affirmation of unswerving faith in Scully's severely flawed sources is not quite all of Ramsey's book, however. After half a million dollars and more than two decades, he has his own evidence to put forward. That evidence, he boasts, makes the Aztec recovery "true beyond argument." Or maybe not.

First, however, it must be stressed that for as long as they have been asked about it, Aztec residents have with virtually one voice denied that anything like a UFO retrieval happened there on March 25, 1948, or on any other date. That includes the man who was newspaper editor during the period, the 1948 county sheriff, the son who succeeded him in that office (all of whom actively and fruitlessly sought out local informants), the family that owned the property, and other longtime residents.⁵ They first heard of an extraordinary UFO incident through the publicity surrounding Scully's claims or its revival in subsequent decades. This contrasts tellingly with Roswell residents, to whom an incident many tied to the crash of an unknown object—however conflictingly interpreted—was widely known. No one has to prove that *something* happened in the Roswell area in July 1947.

The book opens with Ramsey's two claimants to first-person experience at the site. Both contradict the original—Scully—account in notable ways. Newton's drawing of the craft, shown to a University of Denver class to whom he lectured notoriously on March 8, 1950, depicts, in researcher Joel Carpenter's words, "a bizarre contraption that . . . resembled a can on top of a [spinning] saucer."⁶ The alleged witnesses, by contrast, speak of a disc with a dome on top and a corresponding one on the bottom. In Scully's account as related by Dr. Gee, it took a team of scientists *two days* to break into the craft, whereas in Ramsey's version it took a few hours for locals to gain entry well before the arrival of official personnel. (In both stories a pole poked through a small porthole opening manages to push a door handle, exposing the craft's interior.)

There are two, and only two, named persons who speak from what is represented as first-hand experience. One, Doug Noland, was interviewed by Ramsey after a "series of strokes." The other, Ken Farley, since deceased, was "dying of a respiratory disease." Ramsey has their alleged experiences occurring on the Scully-approved date of March 25, 1948, without ever explaining how they remembered it with such precision decades after the alleged fact. One can only suspect an editorial insertion into the narrative, hardly the first one.

Even as these narratives would have us believe that dozens of civilians congregated at the site, independent testimony to that effect is hard to come by. Ramsey's rhetoric is slippery enough to mislead a careless reader, one who notices other names in the testimony and is lulled into thinking they amount to verification. A police officer said to be present has "since been identified as Manuel Sandoval"—even in the absence of any testimony from Sandoval (presumably dead or otherwise unavailable; clearly, he was never interviewed) pertaining to the event. Noland's friend Bill Ferguson "died long before we got involved in our research" (p. 5). Later (p. 201) Ramsey casually remarks that Ferguson "revealed his Aztec knowledge to very few people" while offering no reason to think, in the first instance but for Noland's testimony, that Ferguson possessed such "knowledge" and, in the second, that Ferguson told *anybody at all*.

Two other informants claim to have participated in aspects of the recovery operation. One is identified only as "George," for whom Ramsey vouches, which—all else considered—does not reassure. In any event, his story of a large operation run out of Roswell's Walker Air Force Base lacks any supporting evidence. Such supporting evidence, Ramsey notwithstanding, certainly does not come from Fred Reed.

Ramsey writes that in April 1948—take notice of the date—Reed's military "team was dispatched for a 'crash clean-up' as Fred would describe it to me years later [in 1999]." The clean-up, at the Hart Canyon site, was to be of anything left by the craft (which he later learned was a UFO) and by a subsequent military presence at the site. But this was not the story—as Ramsey does not inform his readers—that Reed provided in a strikingly different account just a few days before he faced questions, perhaps seriously leading ones, from the "investigator." Here are Reed's words as expressed in a March 27, 1999, letter to the Aztec newspaper:

Today, my wife and I . . . went out to the site of UFO crash in late 1948 [note: not exactly March 25] in Hart Canyon. . . . The aliens had built stone cairns marking the path from the oil field road to the crash site. These cairns are still in place today. The trees around the crash site open to the south, which is a typical distress signal for extraterrestrials.

The area looked basically as it had in 1948 when the OSS [Office of Strategic Services, which disbanded in 1945] sent our group there. . . . We had heard rumors that a UFO had crashed there. But it did not look like a crash site. And we had heard that army personnel had rushed in there and cleaned up the site. But it did not look like a clean-up site either. . . .

So what it boiled down to was this: No UFO crash. Instead, the UFO landed there for some specific intent to place (bury?) some instrument or thing there. Then they got into their saucer and flew away.

While failing to mention that his “witness” (whose eccentric beliefs about aliens and their ways also go missing) had flagrantly contradicted the testimony he solicited from him, Ramsey effects his own (unacknowledged) clean-up. Knowing, one infers, the OSS reference to be unsupportable, he revises Reed’s resume so that “he had worked for the OSS . . . back in the early 1940s, [and] was now working for the military.” In *The Aztec Incident* everything that fails to serve the narrative either undergoes revision or gets dropped into the memory hole.

Among other reported witnesses is a pastor, Solon Brown. Brown allegedly confided to a church officer and the officer’s young son (the latter is the source of the story) that Brown had seen dead aliens and a saucer at Hart Canyon on—Ramsey would have it, again without justification—March 25, 1948. Ramsey located the minister’s son, also a pastor, who said he had never heard his father talk about such an experience, though he had expressed interest in press accounts of the Roswell event in the same general period. An Air Force man who supposedly participated in the Aztec coverup in 1948 confided as much to a fellow Air Force member, an Aztec native, in England in the 1960s. The informant, Donald “Sam” Bass, cannot be found. Experienced investigator Kevin D. Randle learned that the claim related here that Bass was killed in an accident while serving in Vietnam cannot be verified in military records.

In Ramsey’s judgment of his own work, he has established that an Aztec recovery occurred and nobody can any longer argue otherwise—unless, I suppose, on the payroll of a sinister intelligence agency. Ramsey’s credulity is awesome and bottomless. In a passing aside (p. 203), he outs himself as a member of that small army of far-right cranks who discern a conspiracy to conceal President Obama’s birth certificate, apparently to protect his true identity as a Kenya-born socialist Islamic jihadist. In fairness, Ramsey is not *always* impossible to take seriously. Earlier in the book (p. 31) he acknowledges that in high school he “was never a superior student” and that he has always been “disappointed in how history is taught.” To those assertions, if to no others, *The Aztec Incident* offers compelling testimony.

Notes

- ¹ Stringfield died without ever revealing their identities. To the extent that subsequent investigations were possible, none seemed to lead anywhere, leaving only speculation about the informants’ motives.
- ² “The Flying Saucers and the Mysterious Little Men” and “Flying Saucer Swindlers,” September 1952 and August 1956 issues of *True*, respectively.
- ³ A secret confessional diary/memoir allegedly composed by Silas Newton professes uncertainty about Scully’s true attitude. The late ufologist Karl

T. Pflock claimed to have examined it under peculiar circumstances, though no one else has seen it or been able to verify its existence. See Pflock's "What's Really Behind the Flying Saucers? A New Twist on Aztec," *The Anomalist* 8 (Spring 2000), 137–161.

- ⁴ See Moore's "Crashed Saucers: Evidence in Search of Proof," especially pp. 133–154, in Walter H. Andrus Jr. and Richard H. Hall, Editors (1985), *MUFON 1985 UFO Symposium Proceedings*, Seguin, TX: Mutual UFO Network.
- ⁵ See Moore (1985:147–148). Also Mike McClellan, "The UFO Crash of 1948 Is a Hoax," *Official UFO*, October 1975, pp. 36–37, 60–64, and William E. Jones and Rebecca D. Minshall, "Aztec, New Mexico—A Crash Story Reexamined," *International UFO Reporter*, September/October 1991, pp. 11–15, 23. Ramsey says that the son of the owners of the Hart Canyon property in 1948 refused to speak with him (p. 199), but in 1991 that man, Jack Dunning, told Jones and Minshall that, in their paraphrase, "his father [the now-deceased Harold] knows nothing about such a crash, though they are both aware of the rumors, having met [Aztec crash advocate William] Steinman when he came to Aztec" (p. 15).
- ⁶ See Cahn (1952:19) for the similar drawing Newton later provided for the *True* writer.

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