Ehrman stresses that historians cannot make judgements on spiritual matters – healings, miracles, the resurrection – which are outside their remit. He’s not talking about whether Jesus is God – that’s a matter of faith; he’s talking about how the first Christians came to believe that Jesus is God – and that’s history. In contrast, the Christian scholars emphasise their faith, as if that strengthens their arguments.

The big question of Ehrman’s book is how the early Christians came to believe that Jesus, a man who had lived and preached in Judea, was God. It’s easy enough to see how Pagans (in this context, non-Jews from a Greek culture in Roman-ruled lands) could come to believe this; but how did any Jew, with the strict monotheism of the religion, come to accept Jesus as God?

Ehrman first looks at “divine humans in ancient Greece and Rome”. Gods who temporarily become human, semi-divine beings born of a God and a mortal, and humans who become divine. It’s not that Alexander was equal to Zeus or a Roman emperor to Jupiter; there was “a spectrum of divinity” – but those at the bottom of the scale were still worshipped.

Controversially he argues that this same progression existed in Judaism too. Although there was One Creator God, below him were other figures with greater or lesser degrees of divinity, such as the “thrones, dominions, principalities or powers” of Colossians 1:16. The Old Testament has numerous examples of angels appearing to people, then speaking as God. There are angels who become men, and men who become angels. Ehrman’s point is that there’s no cleancut division between God and man, making it easier, for believers, for the man Jesus to become God.

Ehrman presents his case clearly and at length, with plenty of supporting evidence. He explores whether Jesus thought of himself as God (answer: no) before looking at how Jesus’s followers came to believe that he had risen from the dead. Not every reader will agree with his conclusions, but his arguments deserve serious consideration.

So when did Jesus become God? Ehrman shows that the process happened very quickly, within 20 years of the crucifixion – but that we shouldn’t assume that the first Christians had the same perception of Jesus as God that later developed. Even in the New Testament there’s a multiplicity of ideas. Some thought that the man Jesus was exalted into godhood either at his resurrection, his baptism or his birth/conception; others had an incarnational belief, that he had always existed through eternity as God, and became a man – the belief that became orthodox.

He covers in some detail the complex development of theology in the first few centuries of Christianity, both on the God-man nature of Christ and on the trinitarian view of God. It’s amusing to note that the leaders of the Early Church, including the apostles, the writers of the New Testament and the bishops of Rome (in retrospect, the first popes) were, by later definitions of orthodoxy, all heretics.

The whole point of creeds wasn’t to state what we believe; it was to state what was true belief as opposed to false belief – to pinpoint the heretics. A whole third of the creed that came out of the famous Council of Nicaea in 325 (not the Nicene Creed, which was at least 50 years later) thunders, “But as for those who say [four or five variant beliefs]... these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.” A creed was a weapon for the Church to smite the enemy.

Many Christians casually assume that people in the New Testament believed exactly what Christianity teaches today – and that everything that Christians believe today is stated clearly in the Bible. Five minutes with any of Ehrman’s books – or those of most other biblical scholars – would quickly show up both failacies.

Ehrman’s book took him several years to write; the Christian scholars knocked out their response in a few weeks – and it shows. Several of the writers resort to ad hominem attacks, and a number of their arguments misrepresent Ehrman.

The general editor and writer of several chapters, Michael F Bird, is by far the worst offender. He briefly cites some of Ehrman’s arguments, quotes some of his supporting examples, then blithely says that...
Shared beliefs
A paranthropologist outlines an evolutionary basis for the paranormal

Why People Believe in Spirits, God and Magic
(The Paranormal)
Jack Hunter

Jack Hunter is an anthropologist; he is also the founder and general editor of the peer-reviewed journal Paranthropology.

Why People Believe in Spirits, God and Magic attempts to answer this question from a social anthropological point of view. Hunter, a doctoral candidate whose scientific interests clearly fall within the field of the spiritual and paranormal, has quite a few publications under his belt. This ebook is a rather endearing and level-headed, objective (scientific) review of the anthropological basis for visions, spirituality and mysticism.

He provides an overview of supernatural traditions and practices around the world. The author also explores anthropological interpretations of supernaturals and spiritual experiences, including the paranormal experiences of anthropologists undertaking fieldwork.

Essentially, the theory goes, we are the children of evolution and it has been a significant advantage for our ancestors to develop acute senses that can recognize danger, threat and predators lurking in the bushes. It is not much of a leap to understand that these same ancestors were better off seeing a threat one time too often than not seeing the predator that was there on one occasion.

This bias towards a slight over-sensitivity and the general lack of negative evolutionary consequences caused by false positive response (such as seeing imagined threats) makes us what we are today. We see simulacra in trees and on rocks and when the sun shines in a certain way, shadows catch out attention; we take note very quickly of anything that is unusual or different from our concept of normal. None of this is helped by the plethora of natural (and latterly synthetic) agents that can “broaden the mind”. As Voltaire said, “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him.” In one sense it could be hypothesised that rituals lead to religion because questions such as “Why do we bury the dead?” will lead inevitably to answers relying on current interpretation of the world and the afterlife.

Jack Hunter’s work takes us neatly through the development of the study of the paranormal as an anthropological discipline. More importantly, the development of shared beliefs leads to social cohesion and from there no doubt the seeds of inter-societal animosity.

This is not to say that the supernatural or paranormal is not real, merely that there is a serious point to be made that once we started to control the environment around us and communicate on a higher level, it became inevitable that we began to consider and find answers to questions that lay beyond the normal pattern of daily life.

Paul Little

Continued from page 59
these don’t mean what Ehrman says they mean – but with little explanation. He makes his case by assertion, not by argument.

He mocks Ehrman for saying that the New Testament is full of copying errors, deletions and additions and then using this corrupted text to explore the life of the historical Jesus. How can he possibly do this? he asks with sham amazement, saying it’s “methodologically impossible”. “Sham”, because Bird is sneering at Ehrman for doing exactly what biblical scholars have been doing for the last century: pointing out the problems with the text, then trying to work out which parts of the gospels are most likely to be original. Ehrman spends pages explaining his methodology (which is the methodology of most biblical scholars) very clearly; Bird’s attack is fundamentally dishonest.

Some of the other chapters are better argued, but still misrepresent what Ehrman says and belittle him personally – hardly sound scholarly tactics. The Christian scholars almost seem unaware that academics by definition disagree with each others’ interpretations – even more so, perhaps, when dealing with scanty and disputed data from 2,000 years ago.

They attack and demean Ehrman for coming to different conclusions from their own. They also largely ignore the fact that much of what Ehrman says isn’t unique to him; his great skill is in popularising what New Testament scholars have been teaching for decades. So why attack him in such a personal way? It can only be because non-academics – ordinary people – read Ehrman when they don’t read other scholars. And that scares the writers of this book which at times is an offence to the concept of scholarship.

Of course Ehrman’s work can be challenged – but for God’s sake do it honestly.

David V Barrett

Fortean Times Verdict
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PARANORMAL EXPERIENCE
8

EHRMAN: CONTROVERSIAL BUT WELL-SUPPORTED SCHOLARSHIP
BIRD ET AL: SHAM/INSINCERE AND SLOPPY SCHOLARLY RESPONSE
9 2

Fortean Times Verdict
initially thought Cumbrian Alchemy was a catalogue to accompany Robert Williams and Bryan McGovern Wilson’s project, but it is integral to the project. Cumbrian Alchemy draws together apparently disparate strands; the energy coast, the historic landscape and the storytelling of Cumbria.

Dr Paul Abraitis presents radioactivity in Cumbria as natural history, tying together power stations, processing and natural occurring phosphates into a fascinating exploration of this little understood subject. David Barracough sets the landscape in an archaeological context, and explains how human communities in the area are tied to the ebb and flow of natural events, particularly glacial activity. He elegantly presents Braudel’s three different scales of time, and weaves this into the context of the project.

Folklore occurs throughout, with Alan Cleaver talking about it as Genius Loci, embodying the spirit of the place. For me, the most powerful piece is John Disney’s narrative of the Heysham Hogback stone. Rarely have I read a modern transcript that so perfectly captures the ebb and flow of oral storytelling.

At the end of the volume Williams and McGovern Wilson make the point that art can avoid a moral judgement, in this case particularly of nuclear power, so it doesn’t destroy the power of the metaphor.

Art also brings together the three strands. A central theme of the book is the transmission of knowledge across the longue durée to communities who do not share the same language as us. The figure of Oppenheimer, here silver faced and dressed in distinctive hat and suit, becomes a folkloric avatar for the alchemy of the nuclear industry. In the photos this silent man is almost monumental in his positioning in the landscape. (When I started reviewing this FT316 arrived, with
Embodied cognition lends itself to popular narrative, but this book’s lack of analysis and insight undermines academic cred

A fun read, obviously

Holding warm coffee makes you friendlier; you view morally suspect behaviour more leniently after taking a shower; and are more likely to cheat when you are wearing sunglasses. It’s only recently that research into what is now known as ‘embodied cognition’ has revealed how much physical sensations influence our thoughts. Thalma Lobel, a leading embodied cognition researcher, pulls together the threads and summarises the stimuli that are known to influence us and how.

Lobel outlines the experiments that reveal how temperature, texture, colour, size, taste and smell act on our psyche. We like people who say they enjoy sweet foods more than we do those who say they like bitter food; someone exposed to a bad smell immediately becomes more judgmental; and mental representations of body movement affect how we think. Saying ‘think outside the box’ helps people think more creatively, it seems.

Some discoveries seem incredibly obvious; we perceive powerful people as being taller than they are; women in red dresses are more sexually attractive than women in identical dresses of a different colour; and people whose personal space is invaded respond by wanting to assert their individuality. Not stunning revelations.

Being about our everyday behaviour, embodied cognition research lends itself to popular narrative, and Lobel emphasises this with personal anecdotes that throw light on the implications of the work. While each story Lobel tells is the product of solid academic research, all referenced back to the original papers (I wish more writers did this), it comes over as curiously insubstantial. Psychologists have discovered that given the choice between using hand sanitiser or mouthwash after delivering an unethical message, those who did it by email predominantly went for the sanitiser, while those who left a voicemail went for the mouthwash. They are subconsciously cleansing the body part involved in doing something they felt ashamed of. The analysis rarely goes much deeper than that; Lobel confines herself to summarising research, saying ‘Ooh, that’s interesting!’ then skips off to something else, often her skiing holidays, shopping trips, granddaughter or happy youth in the Israeli military. I know more than I need to about embodied cognition research with its origins and its implications for society, but there’s very little of that here.

I would like to have seen more on the background, explaining why researchers thought the various stimuli might have the effects they do, the reasons the experiments were designed the way they were and the implications for our lives. These are touched on, but not fully addressed. There is a sense that each of the psychological phenomena described here exist in isolation, creating the impression that we are largely helpless automata, easily manipulated by environmental cues, as there is no real attempt to create a synthesis and to integrate the findings of embodied cognition research with the wider functions of the human psyche. Nor is there any real critique of the experiments. Lobel goes out of her way to reassure us that the stories she relates are all the result of solid, peer reviewed academic research, published in the best journals, and leaves it at that, as if this were the gold-standard of unquestionable veracity, which it clearly isn’t. While this book is informative, it is superficial, never providing the insight you feel the author is capable of.

Ian Simmons
The wilds of Scotland

Scotland’s (Denmark’s?) carnivorous sheep, marmennil, noggle and sjödreygil meet dead sea serpents (and a lake monster)

The Northern Isles

Mystery Animals of the British Isles series

Glen Vaudrey

CFZ Press 2011

FT318

Hb, 196pp, illus, appx., bib., ind., £12.50, ISBN 9781905723744

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £9.99

Following his book on cryptids of the Western Isles in CFZ Presse’s ‘Mystery Animals of the British Isles’ series, Glen Vaudrey has produced another on cryptids of the Northern Isles, as well as one on Scottish sea monster carcasses.

Vaudrey has documented a diverse array of Northern Isles crypto-fauna, some of which are unheard-of beyond their homeland. Their names alone elicit curiosity: marmennil, noggle, sjödreygil, nuckelavee, the Quholm hound and the Scalloway floater.

There are also more familiar cryptids and creatures of legend, including sea serpents, merfolk, finfolk, selkies, water horses, late-surviving great auls, and sheep that have turned to savage carnivory to supplement their mineral-meagre diet on remote islands.

The depth of coverage of each case is impressive, as are the illustrations, many seldom seen elsewhere. Each entry in his spotter’s guide to the principal types of creature documented in the book has an identikit picture so you know what you have encountered should you be (un) fortunate enough to come upon it.

Vaudrey spreads his crypto-net some distance northward; he also includes some some captivating mystery beasts from the Faroes, which, when I last consulted an atlas, were part of Denmark. I have no qualms about his doing so, other than his failure to include any mention of their endemic and very enigmatic pied ravens, now seemingly lost, but among my all-time favourite mystery birds.

Not to worry: there are more than enough mysteries of many other kinds to satisfy the most jaded cryptozoological reader, let alone enthusiasts like myself. The same is true of Vaudrey’s foray into the carcase-strewn chronicles of Scotland’s sea serpents, though as the subtitle reveals, it also encompasses that nation’s most celebrated freshwater equivalent, a certain Loch Ness monster.

Arranged chronologically, the text is divided into sections devoted to a carcase-related location and time, beginning with Alba in AD 900 and ending with Bridge of Don in 2011. Other such locations include Benbecula, Loch Ness, Isle of Man, Orkney, Prestwick, Troon, Stronsa, Gourouc, Barra, Usan, and the North Sea.

Each case is accompanied by a map showing its location for those unfamiliar with some of the more obscure places where carcasses have turned up, and it was good to see so many rare archive photos and news reports.

All of the famous cases are here, such as the mysterious big-toothed Gourock carcase (generally, sea serpent remains are conspicuously lacking in teeth), the six-limbed Stronsa beast, the Orkney Islands’ so-called Scapasaurus, an assortment of globsters, and many more besides, as well as a few cases that were totally new to me. And fresh from its previous appearance in Vaudrey’s Northern Isles book, the Scalloway floater also receives coverage here.

I quibble at Nessie’s inclusion in this book, not only because this is by definition a freshwater aquatic cryptid, not a sea monster, but also because I feel that Vaudrey may have sold himself short here. Why not instead make Nessie the jewel in the crown of a separate, companion book devoted to the freshwater monsters of Scotland, of which the Loch Ness Monster is just one (albeit the most famous) of many?

But back to the present book. The usual (and unusual) suspects are paraded and pontificated over – oarfishes and plesiosaurs, basking sharks and conger eels, beaked whales, giant squids, gargantuan octopuses, stumpy marine worms, long-necked seals et al – and the result is a slim but fact-packed, invaluable resource for everyone interested in Scotland’s abundance of maritime crypto-mysteries.

We still may not know the identity of Gourouc’s mega-tooth or the four-flippered sea monster washed up dead yet tantalisingly undecomposed at Prestwick, for instance, but their remarkable histories and those of all of the others carcasses included in this fine book have been painstakingly researched by Vaudrey, and are preserved here now by him in meticulous detail for ready access by generations of future investigators. And that is no mean achievement. Dr Bernard Heuvelmans, the modern-day mystic, believes all animals once had a civil society with laws, before they were enslaved by humans. The last remnants could be found in the New World, where beavers still built villages, created constitutions, and held courts. This whimsical view was upheld as late as 1774 by Oliver Goldsmith in his History of Animated Nature.

Chapter two, on “tricksters”, deals with coyote, fox, jackal, rabbit and hare, while under “sages” we find bees and wasps, ravens and rooks, owls, carp and salmon. The “rough guys” are badgers, fleas, pigeons, and rats. Then there are chapters on musicians; mermaid’s companions; beasts of burden; lost souls; creatures underground and by the seashore; and noble adversaries.

Under “man’s best friends” we are reminded that our word ‘pussy’ comes from Pasht (Bastet), the Egyptian goddess with a cat’s head and a woman’s body.

This handsome book full of charming engravings is marred by a blizzard of typos: Jericho is not in Turkey; William Blake was not writing in the 1890s; Theseus wanders through the labyrinth, not the minotaur; and Mrs Twigwy-Winkle is presumably the anorexic twin of Beatrice Potter’s homely hedgehog.

Paul Sieveking

The Mythical Zoo

Animals in Myth, Legend, and Literature

Boria Sax

Overlook Duckworth 2014


FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £17.69

Boria Sax views the representation of animals as a means to explore human identity. His wide-ranging survey of the animal kingdom in terms of mythology, folklore, philosophy, art, literature and popular culture perforce lacks depth, but teems with curious links and allusions.

In chapter one – “Almost human”, covering primates, bears, beavers and pigs – we learn that Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, the 18th century naturalist, believed all animals once had a civil society with laws, before they were enslaved by humans. The last remnants could be found in the New World, where beavers still built villages, created constitutions, and held courts. This whimsical view was upheld as late as 1774 by Oliver Goldsmith in his History of Animated Nature.

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Paul Sieveking

Karl Shuker
The EU

The Truth about the Fourth Reich, How Hitler won the Second World War

Bruce G Hallenbeck

Stackpole Books 2014

Pb, 204pp, notes, refs, £6.99, ISBN 9780615932934

CrimeConfidentialPress 2014

Tom Wescott

Paul Hill

Paul R Hill

Hampton Roads 2014


forteanfiction

Elmer Crowley, A Katabasic Nekya

Tom Bradley, illus: David Aronson & Nick Patterson

Mandrake of Oxford

Pb, ISBN 1906958-55-8

In Elmer Crowley, Tom Bradley dismantles and re-welds biography, novel, creative non-fiction and metaphysical treatise into a bizarre satire. Aleister Crowley, alias ‘The Anti-Christ’, has bungled his karma and ended up the Looney Tune character Elmer Fudd. The whole outlandish premise plays out as a mockery of occultism’s darkest delusions. The subtitle means a descent into a ritual by which ghosts are invoked to divine the future. The narrator is the incarnated ghost of Bradley’s furcated katabasis.

Crowley, Fudd, Hitler, Buddha, Yeats, Heliopolitan hierarchists, the Goddess Baubo, assorted ‘Nilotic dream despot’, a carrot-eating Madame Blavatsky, Bugs Bunny, Dafty Duck and their Warner Brothers producer, Leon Schlesinger bounce and boing their way across human history. These are the launch points for Bradley’s inquiries into questions of meta-ethics and truth against a background of “Esoteric Hitlerts.”

Crowley’s tragic flaw is his fixed idea that “magick is done to the strains of incantatory monotony, not self-conscious art.” This translates into control of non-questioning followers to serve his ends, noting with admiration that the A-bomb is “the most magical blackjack to come swinging along since the sage Auna armed his king with the fire missile in the Vishnu Purana.”

Crowley and Fudd share a speech defect: the inability to pronounce the R sound (“that wascal wabbit”). “Many fine magi,” Crowley claims, “perhaps even a slim majority… are poorly spoken.” That would include (besides Buddha and Hitler’s doctor) Leon Schlesinger, the money producer, Leon Schlesinger bounce and boing their way across human history.

Crowley and Fudd meet at a Hollywood orgy over a shared pederastic interest in a youth who also has a speech impediment. Whether Elmer Fudd’s “babbling weakness” on screen is a gibe at Crowley’s lisp is something the reader will have to determine. Either way, reincarnation as a lisping Looney is not an inapt destiny for the Anti-Christ who infamously wrote in his Confessions, “direct injury [is] the proper conjuration to call up gratitude.”

Doing as one wills, central to Crowley’s philosophy of Thelema, easily leads to a perverted will to power. Crowley realises after it’s too late that his magick act stinks. “Is ‘wayward sorcery’ a damnation offense as [Madame Blavatsky] proclaimed?” “All you need is love, not will. As Bradley has stated elsewhere, “The universe runs on a Theosophical rather than a Thelemic dispensation.”

Elmer Crowley may confound those who want their words to move through books like soldiers in formation and come to a uniform halt at the end. But readers willing to navigate outside the usual throughways will find themselves in the higher vistas of this rich and complex tome, slim enough for the slow and multiple readings it deserves.

John-Ivan Palmer