Extraterrestrial Tales

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UFO Crash at Roswell. The Genesis of a Modern Myth. BENSON SALER, CHARLES A. ZIEGLER, and CHARLES B. MOORE. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1997. xii, 198 pp., illus. $24.95. ISBN 1-56098-751-0.

In 1947, a flying saucer from another world crashed near Roswell, New Mexico, and the members of its alien crew were killed. Government agents confiscated the wreckage of the craft and the tiny bodies of its crew, putting out a false story that the incident involved a stray weather balloon.

Or, perhaps, this is what happened: On 4 June 1947, a team from New York University released a train of balloons in a top-secret effort to detect distant nuclear weapons tests, and the balloons inadvertently fell onto a ranch near Roswell. Over the years, a combination of rumor and journalistic opportunism inflated this mundane event into the legend of a crashed spaceship. Fifty years later, Roswell celebrated the anniversary of this presumed alien contact, and popular fiction constantly retells the legend, such as in the popular movie *Independence Day*.

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Not a flying disc. Brigadeer General R. Ramey and Colonel T. Dubose identify metallic fragments found near Roswell, New Mexico, as a Raywin high-altitude sounding device used to determine wind velocity and direction.

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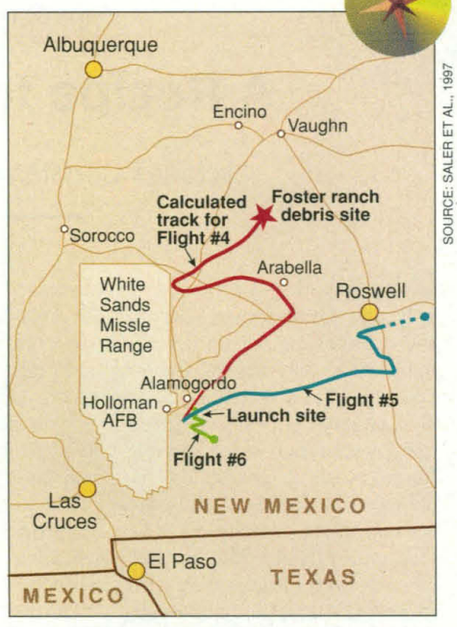
The middle chapter of *UFO Crash at Roswell*, an informative and stimulating book, is a careful reconstruction of the balloon flight by Charles Moore, who participated in the project and enjoyed a successful career in atmospheric physics over the half-century that followed. Moore's chapter provides a solid foundation for a fascinating analysis of how a complex myth developed.

Charles Ziegler defines myths as "folk narratives that deal with transcendental issues such as the relationship between humans and unearthly beings" (p. 34). By this definition, the Roswell incident is comparable to the historically influential myths of the great world religions. Although the legend was launched by a single book published in 1980, it really is a folk narrative because the story has been elaborated through retelling in many publications, interviews with real or alleged participants, and debates in the flourishing UFO community. Thus, the story is a proper subject for anthropological analysis, which Ziegler and Benson Saler provide in their separate essays.

Ziegler analyzes the content of six versions of the story, categorizing the elements by their veracity and origins. One category consists of historically documented facts about the real incident, such as the visit by military personnel of a ranch near Roswell to collect material that the ranch operator thought might be extraterrestrial in nature; another category covers distortions of historical fact. Ziegler's analysis is thus based on his own assumptions about what actually happened, taken largely from the account provided by Moore. The three other categories are ideas that appeared in previously published stories, ideas that were commonly accepted within the UFO subculture, and ideas introduced in the particular version of the myth under analysis. This categorization scheme provides the framework for careful analysis of the transmission and elaboration of the myth. For example, Ziegler notes that an idea introduced by a forged document can become an enduring element of the myth even if its original supporters eventually reject the document. This observation suggests that acceptance of a mythical element depends more on its harmony with other elements and the emotional functions it serves for believers than on its origins.



Fateful Flight #4. Actual flight tracks for balloon Flights 5 and 6 launched by a New York University research team in June of 1947, plus the calculated track of Flight 4, the wreckage of which is likely displayed in the photo at left.

Saler notes the similarity of the Roswell myth to the myths of contact with superhuman beings that are central to many religions. The boundaries of genuine religion are unclear, he reports, and have been debated by scholars for a century. He does not draw on the "New Paradigm" in the sociology of religion, a theoretical perspective to which many authors have contributed over the past two decades, and to do so would have strengthened his argument. The fundamental theoretical ideas of this New Paradigm are that religion is an inevitable feature of all human societies and that secularization merely weakens old religious movements to the advantage of new ones—rather than marking the triumph of science over religion.

Saler wrote before the mass suicides of Heaven's Gate. He does not consider the equally suicidal Solar Temple or the classical flying-saucer religions—Aetherius, Unarius, and the Raelian Movement—most prominent on the World Wide Web. The Raelians, who advocate abandonment of the traditional family in favor of human cloning, may be the largest of these groups and deserve ethnographic study. Saler suggests our society is undergoing "a transition in cultural interest from heaven to space" (p. 140), but only empirical research and the passage of time can test this hypothesis.