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DR. JAMES E. McDONALD'S UFO FILES

by Ann Druffel

The voluminous UFO research files of a fearless scientist, Dr. James E. McDonald, have lain in a special "UFO room" at his home in Tucson, Arizona for twenty-five years, lovingly protected by members of his family. McDonald was a high-profile contributor to scientific UFO research, beginning in the Spring of 1966 and continuing until his tragic death in June 1971.

Jim McDonald was a top atmospheric physicist. His official title was "Senior Physicist" at the Institute of Atmospheric Physics (IAP) at the University of Arizona in Tucson (Figure One).



Figure 1. University of Arizona

He had originally been appointed Co-Director of IAP when he first helped found the Institute in the mid-fifties under the auspices of the University of Chicago. However, he found that administrative work was not to his liking, and voluntarily stepped down to a position where he could be free to do his research at will.

His voluminous contributions to Cloud Physics and Climate Modification were widely acclaimed, and his reputation was renowned worldwide. He was active on many government research commissions, and many of his projects were funded by grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Office of Naval Research (ONR), The National Academy of Sciences (NAS), NASA and other top agencies.

McDonald was unique. He had quietly studied UFO sightings in and around the Tucson area for eight full years before he decided to go public with his interest. He was fully aware that "going public" might bring controversy and scorn upon his head from scientific colleagues who had never studied the UFO phenomenon and who accepted the government's "explanation" of the problem as the final word. He forged ahead, adding UFO research to his already crowded research/teaching schedule. At first he managed to use partial ONR funding for his UFO research, but political maneuvering soon cut this off. He continued untroubled, speaking sometimes as often as two to three times a week before scientific conferences, symposia and colloquia,

giving hundreds of such talks between 1966-1971. He traveled incessantly around the U. S. and into foreign countries on this quest (Figure Two).



Figure 2. James E. McDonald, Ph.D, on the right, on left John Pearce on radio station 2GB in Australia.

The main thrust of his research was to convince other scientists of the necessity for Science to accept the UFO phenomenon as an appropriate, and even urgent, field of study. He wrote many papers on the subject, many of which were based on various classic and current sightings which he had studied in depth ([1](#)).

McDonald, if not a genius, was a near-genius, although he never admitted to anyone that he was anything else than a scientist who was seeking truth. He was also a remarkably sociable and charismatic man with a finely-honed sense of humor. He was friend to many researchers in the field, both scientists and non-scientists. He treated all objective investigators with respect. Many of these were not scientists or engineers, but professionals in other fields such as sociology, public relations, and numerous other fields of expertise. His unique contributions to UFO research were so voluminous that it is impossible to list them here, but much of it involved constant interaction with administrators and investigators of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP).

His contact with NICAP was mutually beneficial: he re-investigated classic cases which NICAP and other objective groups had studied and freely gave input into on-going investigations conducted by NICAP's nationwide network of Subcommittees. He was loved and respected by hundreds of NICAP people, including Donald E. Keyhoe, NICAP's Director, who was considered the "dean of ufology" by the majority of early UFO researchers. McDonald's frequent visits to NICAP Subcommittees in various states were occasions of great anticipation, resulting in a free exchange of information and fascinating interaction.

Shortly before McDonald died, he wrote a series of letters to his wife Betsy, stating his concern that his voluminous UFO files not be simply burned after his death, but archived in some form so that capable scientific researchers could use them in further studies of the UFO phenomenon. Of particular concern to him were a collection of hundreds of Blue Book radar-visual (R-V) sighting files, which he had acquired in 1970 at Maxwell AFB, a few months after Project Blue Book was officially ended by the Air Force. Dismayed by the possibility that the Air Force would simply destroy all Blue Book files (because the Condon Report had brushed off the entire subject as not being of scientific value) McDonald spent two weeks studying the R-V files archived there. These particular files had never before been available to him or any other civilian researcher, even though he had made four prior trips to Project Blue Book when it was housed in Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio.

He was astonished and excited by the unexpected wealth of data in the Blue Book R-V files and photocopied about 580 of them. He brought his treasure trove back to Tucson and spent another two weeks of his 1970 vacation time arranging them in apple-pie order. He planned to take a sabbatical and write a book on the UFO subject the following year; he expected to glean the data from the R-V files and include them as part of his book. His book was to be a full rebuttal of the Condon Report, as well as a general text outlining the extreme urgency that UFO phenomena be accepted by the scientific community as a legitimate subject for interdisciplinary study. He regarded the UFO problem as one of the most serious scientific problems of our times.

McDonald died before he had a chance to write his book, but he had taken the time to arrange all of his UFO materials into three file cabinets, which he kept in his IAP office. He marked these cabinets "UFO," hoping that his family would save them. Even in their grief, his family fully realized the importance he had placed on his UFO research. His two sons, Lee and Kirk, went directly to his office at the Institute and retrieved the three file cabinets, his UFO library, and other UFO materials. They were placed in a small bedroom at the back of the family's rambling Tucson home; this became known as "the UFO room." There they stayed, accessed in the early 1970s only by three or four carefully-screened researchers.

McDonald died by his own hand in June 1971, the result of a deep depression brought on by personal problems and other difficult events which seemed to tumble upon him, one after another, during the last few months of his life. Chief among these was direct ridicule he sustained at a public Congressional hearing on the SST controversy. McDonald had carefully researched the [SST] subject. He had gathered substantial data that fleets of supersonic transports, overflying the American continent, would damage earth's fragile ozone layer beyond recovery and was among the very first scientists to sound the clarion call that the ozone layer must be protected at all costs. Even though his testimony was scientifically sound in all respects, McDonald was deliberately ridiculed by a certain Congressman who, oddly, sought to discredit his testimony by ridiculing his interest in UFOs.

NICAP personnel, and the UFO field in general, never recovered from the loss of this great man. All that was left of their remarkable colleague were his files. At first, Betsy McDonald permitted a few UFO researchers limited access to them. The first was Richard Greenwell, who was associated with the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO). Greenwell assisted her in arranging the files and books into more convenient form. Paul McCarthy then accessed some of the files for a doctoral thesis, and shortly afterwards David Jacobs used some of the files while writing his book, *The UFO Controversy in America*.

During this period, a scientist from Australia came to Tucson and inquired specifically about the Blue Book R-V files about which McDonald had been so excited. Betsy, herself a highly educated person, required proof from this scientist that he possessed the necessary expertise in atmospheric physics, astronomy, and radar systems which McDonald had felt was necessary to extract the data effectively. The scientist demonstrated his expertise in these fields, and Betsy McDonald allowed him to copy the R-V files. The scientist took them back to Australia and at first it seemed he was actually going to go ahead, study the files, and attempt to extract the data which McDonald felt could provide a type of "physical evidence" so badly needed in the field. Suddenly, however, the scientist was offered a large grant, apparently from the Australian government, to pursue an entirely different project, and he dropped his interest in UFOs.

By this time, Betsy McDonald had become engrossed in her own work pursuits, which took her to various out-of-state cities for years at a time. She could no longer screen the numerous persons who requested access. NICAP had essentially been destroyed by 1970 by government agents who had wormed their way into top administrative positions; she had no one she could trust to help her. By the mid-1970s, she cut off access even to scientifically-oriented researchers who approached her, because the changes which were occurring in the UFO field disturbed her. She felt that the field had become chaotic, that too much attention was being paid to "abduction" reports which could not be verified, and that the strictly objective approach which McDonald had employed was no longer dominant in the field.

The members of the McDonald family who remained in the home continued to receive many requests for access, for McDonald's work in the UFO field was widely recognized by researchers, even those who had never had an opportunity of knowing him personally. Some of the requests came from cultists and other non-objective persons, including various old-style "contactees," the claims of which McDonald himself had always considered completely unverifiable. Now engaged in her own career pursuits, which took her away from her Tucson home sometimes for years at a time, she could not take the time to determine which researchers seeking to access the files would use them with the same scientific care her late husband had employed. They lay unused for over fifteen years.

The events which led to their eventually being archived and accessible to researchers perhaps involves synchronicity. In early 1993, a movie-for-television producer contacted me for advice regarding experiences she'd had, which she felt involved possible "UFO abductions." During our interviews she learned that, besides being a UFO researcher and author, I had written several screenplays, some of which were based on UFO themes. She asked me to select one I thought she might like to read, and I sent her *The Red Hand of the O'Neill's*, a sci-fi treatment based loosely on the UFO landing in Socorro, New Mexico. She read the script, commended the writing, but explained that she was looking for scripts with strong female leads, which were at the time very saleable in the television production field. However, she was interested enough in the lead character of *Red Hand* to ask me who I had based it on. It had been loosely based upon McDonald. She became fascinated with McDonald's UFO research, about which she had previously known nothing, and asked me to write a docudrama on his involvement in the field.

Having known and worked with McDonald in conjunction with NICAP activities, I had adequate information about him but wished to research more deeply. I contacted Betsy McDonald. Coincidentally, it turned out, she was at the time working in the Los Angeles area and lived only a few miles from my Pasadena home. She knew me through my prior contacts and correspondence with McDonald, in conjunction with the Los Angeles NICAP Subcommittee (LANS). After several preliminary meetings, during which Betsy McDonald met the

producer, she came to the conclusion that my objective approach to the problem of UFOs was compatible with her late husband's. She granted me access to his files.

Because of the complexity of McDonald's research in the UFO field, the docudrama script, as first written, proved unsatisfactory. The producer suggested that a biographical account, incorporating all of the elements of McDonald's intense involvement in the field, be written first; the docudrama could then be based on the biography. Betsy McDonald was agreeable. She authorized a biography based on her husband's UFO research and granted me three years' exclusive access to the files (later extended to four).

In the course of my trips to Tucson to access the files, Betsy McDonald, who also journeyed home on these occasions, expressed the wish that the files could be archived and presented to a suitable source where they would be readily available to other qualified researchers. She had worried about the files for twenty years, knowing that her late husband had expressed the same wish. He had written a letter to Betsy shortly before his death, rather wistfully expressing his hope that the University of Arizona Library at Tucson might be their final repository. He wrote:

"... That UFO material remains of very real scientific significance. The batch of Xeroxes I spent a good many hundreds on at Maxwell AFB are extremely useful, to the right person... I don't really know just what to say about it all... My present best suggestion is that it be archived at the UA Library, though maybe they'll view that as presumptuous... That stuff is the one part... that really bothers me at this stage. Its scientific value is, I think, quite large... I'd sure hate to see that stuff burnt. Maybe you could store it till Lee and Kirk might sense its significance & dig into that mine (morass?) of material and write "my book." Think it over [\(2\)](#)."

McDonald was confident that his scientific work on cloud physics, climate modification, and other related scientific research would be carefully archived by the University. His conviction, of course, proved true. His major published works and accompanying research notes were tenderly placed in a special cabinet in a room at the IAP, which was dedicated to his memory and known for many years as "the McDonald room." Other thick files containing some of his other research were kept in the IAP library. His remaining unfinished research on various scientific subjects was archived in the James E. McDonald Special Collection University storage facility in South Tucson. A few items, such as his bio, were kept in the University Library's Personal Collections Section where hundreds of scientific collections are archived.

McDonald, however, was rightfully concerned about his UFO files. His University colleagues, with two or three exceptions, had displayed no real interest in the subject, even though many scientists to whom he had spoken at scientific conferences and symposia were very interested, indeed. Though most of his University colleagues listened when he spoke privately to them about specific cases he was investigating, many of them thought that he was wasting his time pursuing the subject so intensely, positioned as it was on "the fringes of science."

Betsy McDonald was reluctant to approach the University of Arizona Library to see if McDonald's wish might be carried out because of a general agreement among family members that the Library probably wouldn't be interested. However, in the course of my interviews with a dozen of his scientific colleagues for the McDonald biography, Dr. A. Richard Kassander, former Director of the IAP, made initial contact with the University of Arizona Library, suggesting that the UFO files be archived there as part of the James E. McDonald Personal Collection. Curator Roger Myers of that Section agreed that McDonald's UFO files could be housed in the Library on the campus grounds, instead of in the less-accessible satellite facility in South Tucson.

The Fund for UFO Research graciously extended a \$2,400 grant (later extended to \$3,500) to archive the files. The Special Collections Section required acid-free file folders, plastic Mylar sleeves for photos, and special storage boxes for other materials in order to assure their preservation. When the archiving first began, I estimated that two five-day trips to Tucson would give me sufficient time to archive the "UFO room-full" of materials, at the same time accessing them to write my biography [\(3\)](#). However, the complexity of McDonald's contributions to UFO research proved even more conglomerate than researchers at the time realized. All together, there were about 1,200 files, each on a different subject, the alphabetization of which was incomplete, even considering Richard Greenwell's initial assistance. It quickly became apparent that considerable re-assembling of the files was needed before they could be placed in the special archival receptacles.

In addition to this problem, Betsy McDonald and McDonald's former secretary, Margaret Sanderson-Rae, who still works as a publications editor at IAP, found many other UFO-related items which were added to the original collection, including four handwritten journals dated 1958 through 1971. Some of his scientific colleagues who are still at IAP, such as Drs. Benjamin Herman and William Sellers, searched out other items in IAP storage which were added to McDonald's UFO files. Due to the complexity of the work, the archiving process required five trips to Tucson instead of two.

Added to the above exigencies, an arson fire occurred in June 1995 at the McDonald home, which also severely delayed the work, since most of the materials in the UFO room" were smoke-damaged to varying degrees. The entire collection had to be transferred to other sites, first to be professionally ozoned, at the insurance company's cost, to prevent rapid deterioration. Most of the inside of the house was burned or severely damaged, and Betsy McDonald had to move into an apartment for a year while her home was being re-constructed. Fortunately, the walls of the home are made of perlite, a lava-type rock, and remained intact.

As a result of the delays, the archiving took four years instead of the estimated two. As the complexity of the files became clearer, additional archival materials had to be obtained. The June 1955 fire destroyed some of these materials, which were stored in an adjacent room. The insurance company at first promised to reimburse their cost, but later reneged on their promise. The Fund for UFO Research generously extended the grant to cover these unexpected expenses.

The final archiving trip was in May 1996. As always, Betsy McDonald enthusiastically helped with many of the multiple tasks. By this time, she had been able to move back into her refurbished home, and the twenty-nine boxes which comprised the McDonald archives filled a big corner in her living room. My husband, Charles K. Druffel, paying all of his own expenses, accompanied me on this trip and helped with some of the final archiving duties. The Personal Collections Section personnel came a few days later to take the 29 boxes to the University's Library. In addition to the research materials, we provided computer catalogues of McDonald's UFO library and an itemized catalogue of the 1,200 file folders (Figure Three).



Figure 3. Mrs. Betsy McDonald on right and Charles Druffel, husband of the author, among the 29 boxes of archival material.

Beginning the collection, as delivered to the Personal Collections Section, are hundreds of files containing McDonald's research on UFO cases, classic and otherwise; correspondence and other materials connected with his numerous seminars and symposia talks before scientific groups such as the AIAA, AAAS, AMS, etc., arranged alphabetically from "A" to "Z." This section filled fifteen record storage boxes provided by the University. The file names, for the most part, are those originally selected by McDonald. The collection continues with approximately 580 Project Blue Book R-V files photocopied by McDonald at Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1970 after the termination of Project Blue Book. These comprised four boxes and are filed chronologically by date, as McDonald originally arranged them.

Although they follow immediately after the alphabetized files, these R-V sightings files constitute a distinct and separate section. As stated above, McDonald placed great emphasis and value on them. It was his opinion that the data in them, if properly retrieved, could constitute a type of "physical evidence" verifying UFO phenomena. The chronological dates on these R-V files begin with "June 1947, Hamburg, NY" and end with "July 11, 1968, Nielson AFB, Alaska."

Also in the McDonald archives are four handwritten journals detailing McDonald's activities in the UFO field from 1958 to 1971. There is also a collection of sixteen large vinyl binders. Binder #6 of this collection may be of special interest, as its contents seem to be a preliminary outline of the book McDonald planned to write. The other binders contain lists of Projects Sign, Grudge, and Blue Book sightings and a variety of materials, ranging from USAF regulations concerning UFO sightings to alphabetized "Case Notes" handwritten or typed by McDonald. Box #21 contained eight thick magazine holders, in which McDonald had placed miscellaneous information ranging from propulsion theories to various Australian and NICAP materials.

The remaining materials were put into a very large cardboard box, #29. These include a professional record of a Canadian radio documentary on UFOs in which McDonald participated and his Sony tape recorder/case on which many of his own reel-to-reel tapes were recorded. These tapes include numerous witness interviews, talks at scientific conferences and symposia, Q & A sessions following his talks, private conversations with colleagues, and other recordings. McDonald's tapes were plainly audible when I played some of them on his small, portable recorder at his Tucson home, and this recorder was also archived.

During a search for recorders which would play three McDonald tapes I brought home for further study, it was discovered by MUFON State Director Vince Uhlenkott that these three, at least, were recorded in four-track mode, at a speed of less than 3 1/2 inches per second. It is possible that many more, if not all of his tapes, were recorded at this low speed.

Sixty-one of McDonald's reel-to-reel tapes are in a Steelmaster File, which McDonald had labeled "No. 1." Most of these are interviews with UFO witnesses, although the last ten are undated and/or the subject unidentified. A second Steelmaster File Drawer labeled "No. 2" contains a few dozen more, with subjects ranging from radio/TV appearances, conference/symposia talks, taped letters, suspected "UFO sounds" and data relating to specific sightings. These are alphabetized "A" to "V," although the subject matter is not alphabetical. Some are dated and identified; others are identified but undated, others are neither identified nor dated. Several of McDonald's tapes are in the possession of a Tucson transcriber, who will use a portion of FUFOR's grant money to transcribe them; the transcriptions will then be added to the archives. McDonald's tape list is included in the archives, and those in the transcriber's and my possession are noted on this list. For the time being, however, Curator Roger Myers has determined that, since these 25-year old reel-to-reel tapes are fragile, they will not be available to the public at this point. Most of McDonald's papers are now ready to be accessed, however, including his correspondence and the R-V files. They are listed on-line at the Library and will eventually be available on the Internet.

The McDonald UFO archives will be carefully monitored by the Personal Collections Section staff. A special "Reading room" is provided for persons wishing to study them. Each item will be carefully checked in and out by the Curator's staff.

It has been a privilege and a joy to archive the precious UFO materials which our friend Jim McDonald left behind. Special thanks go to all at FUFOR, who granted the monies necessary to complete the work. The gratitude of the entire UFO field is due Betsy McDonald for her constant interest, cooperation, and help in the archiving process. We are also indebted to all the members of McDonald's family who protected these irreplaceable items until they could be made accessible to all who treasure them.

REFERENCES

[Back to Top](#)

(1) Among these were four articles in the British Journal, FLYING SAUCER REVIEW (FSR). See FSR: FLYING SAUCER REVIEW 1955-1994: AN INDEX, Compiled by Edward G. Stewart, Sacramento, 1995. Most of McDonald's other UFO writings were published privately and distributed widely in the UFO [and scientific] field[s].

[Back to Top](#)

(2) Letter from James E. McDonald to Betsy McDonald, March 22, 1971.

[Back to Top](#)

(3) The biography, tentatively titled SCIENTIST VS. THE SYSTEM: JAMES E. McDONALD'S FIGHT FOR UFO SCIENCE, is now finished and will probably be published in 1997. [The authorized biography of McDonald's UFO Research, by Ann Druffel, was eventually titled FIRESTORM!: DR. JAMES E. McDONALD'S FIGHT FOR UFO SCIENCE, published by Wildflower Press in July 2003.]