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UFOs and Science: The Collected Writings of Dr. James E. McDonald

Compiled and edited by Valerie Vaughan

These days you can pick up almost any best-selling book about UFOs and you won't find more than a bare mention of Dr. James E. McDonald. Yet, only thirty years ago, this man was so instrumental in awakening public interest in UFOs that he could be called one of the founding fathers of today's UFO movement. The fact that his name and his influence are absent from recent, popular accounts of UFOs is but one of the many curious omissions comprising the generally covered-up nature of most UFO phenomena.

When we look at the overwhelming number of popular books recently published on UFOs, alien contacts, abductions, and conspiracy theories, we might get the impression that much of what has been previously hidden has now been revealed and that we have a grasp of the history of the UFO movement. *UFOs and Science* is an attempt to rectify this mistaken assumption. Through the writings of one man who was both observer and participant, we find a clearly documented record of the development of awareness and suppression of UFO data, from 1947 through 1971. We also find the organized approach of one of the very few scientists who ever considered the UFO problem at all. Recognizing that UFOs defied the current understanding of physics, McDonald risked professional credibility in order to examine the sighting evidence in its scientific context, using the available data from radar, meteorology, electromagnetism, and credible witnesses.

McDonald was an atmospheric physicist who wrote highly technical papers for professional journals as well as general science articles "for the people." He was one of that rare breed of scientists who are knowledgeable and interested in many fields outside their own specialty. Among his numerous writings were articles on weather modification, the history of climate, the physics of baseball, the atmospheric effects of nuclear fallout, and the health problems of air pollution.

McDonald established himself as a respected authority and leader in the field of atmospheric physics, but the man also had a conscience. He observed the effects of inadvertent weather modification and warned against the problems. He was one of the first scientists to notice that certain types of emissions would soon affect the ozone layer and that UV-exposure might lead to skin cancer. An environmental activist long before the term was created, McDonald saw the dangers of nuclear reactors and the use of chemical mace by police against demonstrators, and he spoke out. No matter what his topic was, he was always the scientist, supporting his ideas with facts about the atmosphere.

McDonald's writings offer a view of the state of science during the 1950s and 60s. They give a perspective on how scientific ideas were handled or avoided by individuals within academia and the government. These two decades witnessed the growth of Big Science, experimentation with climate modification, the proliferation of nuclear weaponry and chemical warfare, the first serious questioning of atmospheric pollution, and the role that humans and their technology played in the deterioration of the atmosphere. McDonald wrote about all these issues from both a scientific and a conscientious standpoint. He discussed the related political and moral implications which scientists faced at that time -- and still do today.

It was McDonald's firm belief that the people's right to know what the scientific establishment was doing was vital in the functioning of a democracy, and that scientists had an important responsibility to be concerned about the consequences of their research and their role in educating the public. McDonald's idealistic view might have become a bit jaded, had he known that the FBI was developing quite a file on him (This file was only recently uncovered and is now available at www.cuton.org/cufon/fbimcdon.htm). As it turned out, his faith in American democratic institutions was shattered by another event, as the following story describes.

Through his study of weather modification, McDonald became interested in the effects of supersonic transport (SST) emissions on the ozone. In 1971, he appeared as a scientific witness for a Congressional committee investigating SSTs.

At these hearings, one Congressman attempted to discredit McDonald's statement by referring to his interest in UFOs. McDonald was totally taken by surprise, his scientific reputation had been called into question and it never recovered. A few months later, he committed suicide.

UFOs and Science provides a close look at the thought processes of a great scientist and the position he held in the history of the UFO movement. This document was compiled and edited by Valerie Vaughan, formerly a librarian at the University of Arizona, where McDonald spent most of his academic career.

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