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Think Free or Die

## Old McDonald had a UFO Problem

### (<https://yankeeskeptic.com/2013/09/02/old-mcdonald-had-a-ufo-problem/>)

September 2, 2013 (<https://yankeeskeptic.com/2013/09/02/old-mcdonald-had-a-ufo-problem/>) by kittynh

Dr. James McDonald ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_E.\\_McDonald](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_E._McDonald)) was a controversial UFO researcher, who is remembered today as much for his abrasive personality as his UFO claims.

McDonald was part of a now dying breed of UFO investigators and believers with advanced degrees. He earned his PhD at Iowa State University and is best known as a professor of meteorology at the University of Arizona, where he helped establish their meteorology and atmospheric physics program.



([https://yankeeskeptic.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/james\\_e-mcdonald\\_1.gif](https://yankeeskeptic.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/james_e-mcdonald_1.gif)).

Dr. McDonald

At one time, starting in the late 1950's, several men with impressive credentials joined the UFO as aliens movement. Dr. John Mack, Pulitzer Prize winner and professor at Harvard (1929-2004), Dr. J Allen Hynek (1910-1986), and the ever busy Dr. Stanton Friedman (nuclear physicist and best friend of UFOlogy today) are some of the better known examples. But the most curmudgeonly of all was Dr. James McDonald.

Dr. James McDonald had conflicts with many skeptics, scientists, the United States Congress, and other UFO believers. He also had a sad end, after a divorce he died as a result of his second suicide attempt.

My interest in Dr. McDonald comes from finding an exchange of letters between Barney Hill and Dr. McDonald in 1967.

The archives at Milne Special Collections, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, N.H are full of letters to and from the Hills about their abduction experience. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty\\_and\\_Barney\\_Hill\\_abduction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty_and_Barney_Hill_abduction)).

There is one letter from McDonald, dated October 6, 1967, in which he apologizes for not coming to New Hampshire to talk in person with Barney about his experience. McDonald was in Boston. The excuse he gives as to why he could not make the relatively short trip to Portsmouth NH where Barney and Betty Hill lived, was that he was busy talking to Dr. Simon and "a couple of Harvard astronomers".

Dr. Simon was the psychologist the Hills turned to for help after their abduction experience. It should be noted he did not treat the Hills immediately after their abduction. The Hills experience, whatever it was, occurred in 1961. Simon treated them in 1964. Simon had used hypnosis to treat war veterans, and used hypnosis on the Hills. Kathleen Marden, Betty Hill's niece has her own [article about hypnosis](http://www.kathleen-marden.com/a-primer-on-hypnosis.php) (<http://www.kathleen-marden.com/a-primer-on-hypnosis.php>), well worth visiting for the skeptic and believer. She herself points out the dangers of using hypnosis for UFO abduction claimants, while also

defending the Hills hypnosis. Hypnosis is still a controversial method of treatment, and should be used only with the utmost caution. Sadly, anyone can claim to use hypnosis to help recover memories, and the consequences can be dangerous.

McDonald's writes to Barney about his conversation with Dr.Simon:

*We spent a long evening going over various aspects of the UFO problem, and I did get a brief opportunity to hear some selected portions of the tapes that Dr.Simon played.*

(Dr.Simon made audio tapes of his sessions with the Hills)

*I tried to emphasize to Simon that he probably should be paying much more attention to the pre-amnesic parts of the total account. After hearing a bit of the tapes where you go back through the initial sighting out in the field, I am most impressed. So is Simon as far as I can tell.*

This would seem to indicate that Dr.Simon felt the Hill abduction was a real event. Still Simon seems to hedge.

*I asked Simon if, in his experience with battlefield trauma cases, he had ever encountered a degree of terror comparable to that which seems to come through in your part of the tapes. He indicated that he had not heard anything quite the same in battlefield cases. When I then asked him if he did not feel this implied that it was a real sighting, he said he felt that it probably was. I then pressed him on this, pointing out that the implications would be profound, and he retreated a bit from that position. I would not presume to state his precise viewpoint on this, but I hope that he and you go over this again sometime.*

McDonald then goes on to tell why he has decided not to invest anymore time in the Hill case, despite plans to return to the Boston area soon.

*I generally side step questions about your case because it is not, at present, the type of UFO observation which is most likely to win increased attention from scientists.*

McDonald, a scientist, wished to investigate cases that would excite the interest of his peers.

*There are several other cases that resemble yours in psychological complexity and in respect to UFO occupants. I have made essentially no attempt to dig into those for the same reason: they are not part of the problem that can be used to get leverage on the scientific community just now.*

While seeming to try to be kind to the Hills, McDonald is saying "thanks, but no thanks." His letters continues, and I think, he's implying there are perhaps cases too bizarre to be investigated.

*Then, on beyond those, are many extremely weird and bizarre cases which will have to wait a long time before they are likely to get careful scrutiny by science. The important problem for the moment, is to get any increase in serious scientific attention to the entire UFO problem.*

McDonald testified before Congress and even the UN about the need for more serious scientific UFO investigation. He felt that abduction experiences were not going to help him make the case for UFOs. While others, such as Dr.Mack, embraced the abduction stories, others felt the focus from "nuts and bolts" saucers to "abduction" with all it's psychological implications, would hurt the UFO movement.

This is still a problem for the UFO movement today. It's easy for the average person to look up in the sky, see something strange, and think it might be an alien craft. Abduction seems to be something the FBI should investigate. Kidnapping, floating through walls, beaming up like Star Trek and psychic conversations are less likely to be not only accepted by mainstream scientists, but also investigated.

Barney Hill's letter to Simon is rather interesting as it also mentions the time McDonald spent with Dr. Simon and the Harvard astronomers. An interesting name pops up.

*Dr. Simon told us he had met you at a home of a colleague (sic) and that Dr. Sagan was there. We feel that Dr. Simon vacillates (sic) between believing and non-believing in UFOs, unfortunately, and then this influences his interpretation of our experience. We believe the experience to be an actual one, including the hypnosis, in spite of Dr. Simon's opinions.*

I am wishing I had been at that meeting between McDonald, Simon and Dr. Carl Sagan. Barney Hill seems to be making a case in this letter that his experience would be of interest to scientists:

*In the past year we have had numerous contacts with scientists who tell us that they believe our experience completely, but they are working for scientific companies who request they write a paper on which they present their opinions. Also that their contacts with others they fear ridicule. They say that they really do not know about UFOs, but privately and personally they do, and they all want to be first to prove their existences. Most of the major companies have been in contact with us, just in case we should have another close contact. They have set up a contact person we can call anytime, to arrange a meeting, or to deliver a piece of hardware.*

Barney Hill seems to be saying that while scientists can't come out openly in support of UFOs, they also want to be the first to prove their existence.

Hill ends his letter with something that I find a bit hard to believe, as I live in New Hampshire where the Hill resided:

*It seems unbelievable that many people around this country still question the existence of UFOs. There are accepted in this area without question, no one reports them for they are commonplace, with the exception of the police who are under orders to do this.*

I can assure you that UFOs are not today "commonplace" enough in New Hampshire that only the police report them.

Science has actually shifted away from whatever support they had for aliens visiting Earth in spacecraft. Scientific advances in astronomy seem to indicate life capable of visit Earth is indeed very far away. Most scientist actually believe there is life "out there". Yes there is life on other planets somewhere, because the odds favor it. Science does not believe it has been proven that life from other planets is able to overcome the basic laws of physics to visit us on a regular basis.

Alien visitation as fact still awaits confirmation, and there are few scientists willing to risk their careers and time on such a possibility. Alien abduction is even trickier, falling more and more into the realm of something that can not be proven using the scientific method. There is a big step between "Well this was rather odd, explain that" and "This proves alien life is abducting people." It should be a big step!

Science demands more than a court case, so sadly eyewitness testimony and recovered memories aren't enough for proof positive.

McDonald in the end lost his battle to have government and science invest time and money in the study of UFOs. Today, other than hinted at secret government conspiracy cover up budgets, it appears taxpayers aren't paying to look for UFOs or aliens.

Still, at the archives there is one letter from a friend of the Hills that I 100% agree with:

*I really and truly hope and wish so very much that one would land right on Reagan's White House lawn. I would really celebrate if one did.*

I would really celebrate also!

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## 2 thoughts on “Old McDonald had a UFO Problem”

[Old McDonald had a UFO Problem \(http://www.supernaturalufo.com/old-mcdonald-had-a-ufo-problem/\)](http://www.supernaturalufo.com/old-mcdonald-had-a-ufo-problem/) says: September 4, 2013 at 4:58 am (<https://yankeeskeptic.com/2013/09/02/old-mcdonald-had-a-ufo-problem/#comment-1847>).

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[Martin S. Kottmeyer \(http://none\)](http://none) says:

September 8, 2013 at 6:28 pm (<https://yankeeskeptic.com/2013/09/02/old-mcdonald-had-a-ufo-problem/#comment-1872>).

The meeting you wish you had been present at is mentioned in William Poundstone's biography Carl Sagan: A Life in the Cosmos, 2000, pp. 130-2, 405. It took place at Lester Grinspoon's house. He was Simon's psychiatric colleague. Grinspoon tried to persuade Simon that the case was a folie à deux, but Simon denied this, preferring to say it had only been a dream. It is worth noting that Sagan preferred this as well. In Demon-Haunted World (1995) he concurred it was "a species of dream," in explicit agreement with Simon. (pp. 103-4, 109) Grinspoon remained fixated on his wild diagnosis and referred to Hill case [suitably cloaked in lawyerly anonymity] as a folie à deux in his paper for the 1969 AAAS symposium.

It is something of an irony that Simon would be falsely accused in believing the Hill case was a folie à deux by David Jacobs in Secret Life (1992, p. 41). This error was parroted by John Mack, Jenny Randles, and other believers. Skeptics, including academics, have sloppily spread the error, notably John Moffitt, Marina Benjamin, and Bridgett Brown. Sadly, even so widely respected a skeptic as Marcello Truzzi bought into this bogus consensus and resisted correction when I pointed this out to Indian Head Symposium participants. [Pflock & Brookesmith, Encounters at Indian Head, 2007, p. 87.] For a short argument why Simon was right, see the posted comment on the January 13, 2013 item "Betty and Barney shared false memories"

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