

Charles Fort

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*For the British hotelier and
restauranteur see Charles Forte.*



Charles Fort, 1920

Charles Hoy Fort (6 August 1874 – 3 May 1932) was an American writer and researcher into anomalous phenomena. (According to some sources he was born on 9 August.)

Jerome Clark writes that Fort was "Essentially a satirist hugely skeptical of human beings' — especially scientists' claims to ultimate knowledge". (Clark 2000, 123) (see Pyrrhonism for a type of skepticism strongly reminiscent of Fort's). Clark describes Fort's writing style as a "distinctive blend of mocking humor, penetrating insight, and calculated outrageousness". (Clark 1998, 200)

Writer Colin Wilson describes Fort as "a kind of patron saint of cranks" (Wilson, 199), and also argues that running through Fort's work is "the feeling that no matter

how honest scientists *think* they are, they are still influenced by various *unconscious* assumptions that prevent them from attaining true objectivity. Expressed in a sentence, Fort's principle goes something like this: People with a psychological need to *believe* in marvels are no more prejudiced and gullible than people with a psychological need *not* to believe in marvels." (Wilson, 201; emphases his)

Fort's books sold well, and remain in print. Today, the term *Fortean* or *Fortean* is used to describe various anomalous phenomena.

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Biography

Charles Hoy Fort was born in 1874 in Albany, New York, of Dutch ancestry. Charles was the eldest of three siblings (he had two younger brothers, Clarence and Raymond). His grocer father was something of an authoritarian: *Many Parts*, Fort's unpublished autobiography, relates several instances of harsh treatment — including physical abuse — by his father. Some observers (such as Fort's biographer

Damon Knight) have suggested that Fort's distrust of authority has its roots in his father's treatment. In any case, Fort developed a strong sense of independence in his youth.

While still rather young, Fort was a budding naturalist who would collect sea shells, minerals, and birds. Curious and intelligent, the young Fort did not excel at school, though he was quite a wit and full of knowledge about the world — yet this was only a world he had read of.

So, at the age of 18, Fort left New York on a world tour to "put some capital in the bank of experience". He travelled through the western United States, Scotland, and England, until finally falling ill in South Africa. Returning home, he was nursed by Anna Filing, a girl he had known from his childhood. They were later married on 26 October 1896. Anna was four years younger than Charles, and was non-literary,

a lover of films and of parakeets. She later moved with her husband to London for two years where they would go to the cinema when Charles wasn't busy with his research. His success as a short story writer was intermittent between periods of terrible poverty and depression.

In 1916, an inheritance from an uncle gave Fort enough money to quit his various day jobs and to write full time. In 1917, Fort's brother Clarence died; his portion of the same inheritance was divided between Charles and Raymond.

Fort wrote ten novels, though only one, *The Outcast Manufacturers* (1906), was published — critics said it was ahead of its time but it was commercially unsuccessful. In 1915, Fort began to write two books, entitled *X* and *Y*, the first dealing with the idea that beings on Mars were controlling events on Earth, and the second with the postulation of a sinister civilization extant

at the South Pole. These books caught the attention of writer Theodore Dreiser, who attempted to get them published, but to no avail. Disheartened by this failure, Fort burnt the manuscripts, but was soon renewed to begin work on the book that would change the course of his life, *The Book of the Damned* (1919) which Dreiser helped to get into print. The title referred to "damned data" that Fort collected, phenomena for which science could not account and was thus rejected or ignored.

Fort's experience as a journalist coupled with a contrarian nature prepared him for his real-life work, mocking the pretensions of scientific positivism and the tendency of journalists and editors of newspapers and scientific journals to rationalise the scientifically incorrect.

Fort and Anna lived in London from 1924 to 1926, having moved there so Charles could peruse the files of the British

Museum. Although born in Albany, Fort lived most of his life in the Bronx, one of New York City's five boroughs. He was, like his wife, fond of films, and would often take her from their Ryer Avenue apartment to the nearby movie theatre and would always stop at the adjacent newstand for an armful of various newspapers. Like most good Bronx residents, Fort would frequent the nearby parks where he would sift through piles of his clippings. He would often ride the subway down to the main New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue where he would spend many hours reading scientific journals along with newspapers and periodicals from around the world. Fort also had a small circle of literary friends and they would gather on occasion at various apartments, including his own, to drink and talk which was tolerated by Anna. Theodore Dreiser would lure him out to meetings with phony telegrams and notes and the resultant evening would be full of

good food, conversation and much hilarity. Charles Fort's wit was always in evidence, especially in his writing.

His books earned mostly positive reviews, and were popular enough to go through several printings, including an omnibus edition in 1941.

Suffering from poor health and failing eyesight, Fort was pleasantly surprised to find himself the subject of a cult following. There was talk of the formation of a formal organization to study the type of odd events related in his books. Clark writes, "Fort himself, who did nothing to encourage any of this, found the idea hilarious. Yet he faithfully corresponded with his readers, some of whom had taken to investigating reports of anomalous phenomena and sending their findings to Fort." (Clark 1998, 235)

Fort distrusted doctors, and did not seek

medical help for his worsening health. Rather, he focused his energies towards completing *Wild Talents*. After he collapsed on May 3, 1932, Fort was rushed to Royal Hospital in The Bronx. Later that same day, Fort's publisher visited him to show the advance copies of *Wild Talents*. Fort died only hours afterwards, probably of leukemia.^[1]

He was interred in the Fort family plot in Albany, New York. His more than 60,000 notes were donated to the New York Public Library.

Fort and the unexplained

Overview

Fort's relationship with the study of anomalous phenomena is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented. For over thirty years, Charles Fort sat in the

libraries of New York and London, assiduously reading scientific journals, newspapers, and magazines, collecting notes on phenomena that lay outside the accepted theories and beliefs of the time.

Fort in his lifetime must have taken tens of thousands of notes — he is said to have compiled as many as 40,000 notes, though there were no doubt many more than this. The notes were kept on cards in shoeboxes. They were taken on small squares of paper, in a cramped shorthand of Fort's own invention, and some of them survive today in the collections of the University of Pennsylvania. More than once, depressed and discouraged, Fort destroyed his work, but always began again. Some of the notes were published, little by little, by the Fortean Society until its dissolution.

From these researches Fort wrote seven books, though only four survive. These are: *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New*

Lands (1923), *Lo!* (1931) and *Wild Talents* (1932); one book was written between *New Lands* and *Lo!* but it was abandoned and absorbed into *Lo!*.

Fort's writing style

Understanding Fort's books takes time and effort: his style is complex, violent and poetic, satirical and subtle, profound and occasionally puzzling. Ideas are abandoned and then recalled a few pages on; examples and data are offered, compared and contrasted, conclusions made and broken, as Fort holds up the unorthodox to the scrutiny of the orthodoxy that continually fails to account for them. Pressing on his attacks, Fort shows what he sees as the ridiculousness of the conventional explanations and then interjects with his own theories. Wilson opines that Fort's writing style is "atrocious" (Wilson, 199) and "almost unreadable" (Wilson, 200), and

speculates that Fort's idiosyncratic prose might have kept him from greater popular success.

Fort suggests that there is, for example, a Super-Sargasso Sea into which all lost things go — and justifies his theories by noting that they fit the data as well as the conventional explanations. As to whether Fort *believes* this theory, or any of his other proposals, he gives us the answer: "I believe nothing of my own that I have ever written." (In other words, facts are underdetermined: for any given collection of facts, more than one theory will explain them adequately... this is widely accepted now, but was extremely controversial at the time Fort was writing.) Wilson suspects that Fort took few if any of his "explanations" seriously, and notes that Fort made "no attempt to present a coherent argument". (Wilson, 200)

Fortean Phenomena

Despite his objections to Fort's writing style, Wilson allows that "the facts are certainly astonishing enough." (Wilson, 200) Examples of the odd phenomena in Fort's books include many of what are variously referred to as occult, supernatural, and paranormal. Reported events include teleportation (a term Fort is generally credited with coining); poltergeist events; falls of frogs, fishes, inorganic materials of an amazing range; unaccountable noises and explosions; spontaneous fires; levitation; ball lightning (a term explicitly used by Fort); unidentified flying objects; mysterious appearances and disappearances; giant wheels of light in the oceans; and animals found outside their normal ranges (see phantom cat). He offered many reports of OOPArts, abbreviation for "out of place"

artifacts: strange items found in unlikely locations. He also is perhaps the first person to explain strange human appearances and disappearances by the hypothesis of alien abduction, and was an early proponent of the extraterrestrial hypothesis, specifically suggesting that strange lights or object sighted in the skies might be alien spacecraft.

Many of these phenomena are now collectively and conveniently referred to as 'Fortean' phenomena (or 'Forteana'), whilst others have developed into their own schools of thought, for example, UFOs into ufology, or the reports of unconfirmed animals classified as cryptozoology. These new disciplines *per se* are generally not recognized by most scientists or academics, however.

Forteana and mainstream science

Some skeptics and critics have frequently called Fort credulous and naïve, a charge his supporters deny strongly. Over and over again in his writing, Fort rams home a few basic points that were decades ahead of mainstream scientific acceptance, and that are frequently forgotten in discussions of the history and philosophy of science:

- Fort often notes that the boundaries between science and pseudoscience are 'fuzzy': the boundary lines are not very well defined, and they might change over time.
- Fort also points out that whereas facts are objective, how facts are *interpreted* depends on who is doing the interpreting and in what context.
- Fort insisted that there is a strong sociological influence on what is considered 'acceptable' or 'damned' (see strong program in the sociology of scientific knowledge).
- Though he never used the term

"magical thinking", Fort offered many arguments and observations that are similar to the concept: he argued that most (if not all) people are at least occasionally guilty of irrational and "non scientific" thinking.

- Fort points out the problem of underdetermination: that the same data can sometimes be explained by more than one theory.
- Similarly, writer John Michell notes that "Fort gave several humorous instances of the same experiment yielding two different results, each one gratifying the experimenter."^[2] Fort noted that if controlled experiments — a pillar of the scientific method — could produce such widely varying results depending on who conducted them, then the scientific method itself might be open to doubt, or at least to a degree scrutiny rarely brought to bear. Since Fort's death, scientists

have recognized the "Experimenter effect" — the tendency for experiments to tend to validate given preconceptions. Robert Rosenthal has done pioneering research on this and related subjects.

There are many phenomena in Fort's works which have now been partially or entirely "recuperated" by mainstream science — ball lightning, for example, was largely rejected as impossible by the scientific consensus of Fort's day, but is now generally recognized as a genuine phenomenon. However, many of Fort's ideas remain on the very borderlines of "mainstream science", or beyond, in the fields of paranormalism and the bizarre. This is unsurprising, as Fort resolutely refused to abandon the territory beyond "acceptable" science. Nonetheless, later research has demonstrated that Fort's claims are at least as reliable as his sources. In the 1960s, American writer William R.

Corliss began his own documentation of scientific anomalies. Partly inspired by Fort, Corliss checked some of Fort's sources and concluded that Fort's research was "accurate, but rather narrow" -- there were many anomalies which Fort did not include in his books.^[3]

Many consider it odd that Fort, a man so skeptical and so willing to question the pronouncements of the scientific mainstream, would be so eager to take old stories — for example, stories about rains of fish falling from the sky — at face value. It is debatable whether Fort did in fact accept evidence at face value: many instances in his books, Fort notes that he regarded certain data and assertions as unlikely, and he additionally remarked, "I offer the data. Suit yourself." In Fort's books, it's often difficult to determine if he took his proposals and "theories" seriously; however, as noted on the extraterrestrial hypothesis page, Fort did seem to hold a

genuine belief in the presence of extraterrestrial visitations to the Earth.

The theories and conclusions Fort presented often came from what he called "the orthodox conventionality of Science". Fort's works have — on nearly every page — reports of odd events which were originally printed in respected mainstream scientific journals or newspapers such as *Scientific American*, *The Times*, *Nature* and *Science*. Time and again, Fort noted, that while some phenomena related in these and other sources were enthusiastically accepted and promoted by scientists, just as often, inexplicable or unusual reports were ignored, or were effectively swept under the rug. And repeatedly, Fort reclaimed such data from under the rug, and brought them out, as he wrote, "for an airing". So long as *any* evidence is ignored — however bizarre or unlikely the evidence might seem — Fort insisted that scientists' claims to thoroughness and objectivity were

questionable.

It did not matter to Fort whether his data and theories were accurate: his point was that alternative conclusions and world views can be made from the same data "orthodox" conclusions are made, and that the conventional explanations of science are only one of a range of explanations, none necessarily more justified than another. In this respect, he was far ahead of his time. In *The Book of the Damned* he showed the influence of social values and what would now be called a "paradigm" on what scientists consider to be "true". This prefigured work by Thomas Kuhn decades later. In a similar way the anarchic "anything goes" approach to science of Paul Feyerabend is similar to Fort's.

Another of Fort's great contribution is to the humor of science. Although many of the phenomena which science rejected in his day have since been proven to be

objective phenomena, and although Fort was prescient in his collection and preservation of these data despite the scorn they received from his contemporaries, Fort was more of a parodist and a humorist than a scientist. He thought that far too often, scientists took themselves far too seriously, and were prone to arrogance and dogmatism. Fort used humor both for its own sake, and to point out what he regarded as the foibles of science and scientists.

Nonetheless, Fort is considered by many as the father of modern paranormalism, not only because of his interest in strange phenomena, but because of his "modern" attitude towards religion, 19th century spiritualism, and scientific dogma.

Followers and fans of Fort

Fort's work has inspired very many to

consider themselves as Forteans. The first of these was the screenwriter Ben Hecht, who in a review of *The Book of the Damned* declared "I am the first disciple of Charles Fort... henceforth, I am a Fortean". Among Fort's other notable fans were John Cowper Powys, Sherwood Anderson, Clarence Darrow, and Booth Tarkington, who wrote the foreword to *New Lands*.

Precisely what is encompassed by 'Fortean' is a matter of great debate; the term is widely applied from every position from a Fortean purists dedicated to Fort's methods and interests, to those with open and active acceptance of the actuality of paranormal phenomena, a position with which Fort may not have agreed. Most generally, Forteans have a wide interest in unexplained phenomena in wide-ranging fields, mostly concerned with the natural world, and have a developed 'agnostic scepticism' regarding the anomalies they note and discuss. For Mr. Hecht as an

example, being a Fortean meant hallowing a pronounced distrust of authority in all its forms, whether religious, scientific, political, philosophical or otherwise. It did not, of course, include an actual belief in the magical matters enumerated in Fort's works.

The Fortean Society was founded in Fort's lifetime by his friends, and led by fellow American writer Tiffany Thayer, half in earnest and half in jest, like the work of Fort himself. Fort, however, rejected the society and refused the presidency which went to his close friend writer Theodore Dreiser; he was lured to its inaugural meeting by false telegrams. As a strict non-authoritarian, Fort refused to establish himself as an authority, and further objected on the grounds that those who would be attracted by such a grouping would be spiritualists, zealots, and those opposed to a science that rejected them; it would attract those who *believed* in their

chosen phenomena: an attitude exactly contrary to Forteanism. Fort had a long history of getting together informally with many of NYC's literati such as Theodore Dreiser and Ben Hecht at their various apartments where they would talk, have a meal and then listen to short reports. Reports of these meetings mention lively discussions accompanied by great good humor and quantities of wine. Fort was not a joiner of established groups and, perhaps, it is ironic that many such Fortean groups have been established.

Most notable of these are the magazine, *Fortean Times* (first published in November 1973), which is a proponent of Fortean journalism, combining humour, scepticism, and serious research into subjects which scientists and other respectable authorities often disdain and The International Fortean Organization (INFO). INFO was formed in the early 1960s (incorporated in 1965) by brothers,

the writers Ron and Paul Willis, who acquired much of the material of the original Fortean Society which had begun in 1932 in the spirit of Charles Fort but which had grown silent by 1959 with the death of Tiffany Thayer. The International Fortean Organization has a long history of disseminating information which includes the 35-year publishing history of the highly respected "INFO Journal: Science and the Unknown" and the legendary FortFest, the world's first and often called, most prestigious, conference on anomalous phenomena dedicated to the spirit of Charles Fort. A "living magazine" of tapes and cds/dvds/mp3s has been created from ground-breaking authors (Colin Wilson, John Michell, Graham Hancock, John Anthony West, William Corliss, John Keel, Joscelyn Godwin among many other luminaries) on the forefront of phenomena research who have given presentations at their conferences such as FortFest, FortNite

and FortScape. Other Fortean societies are also active, notably in Edinburgh and the Isle of Wight.

Several modern authors who have written about the influence of Fort are sincere followers of Fort. Jerome Clark has described himself as a "sceptical Fortean"^[4] Mike Dash is another capable Fortean, bringing his historian's training to bear on all manner of odd reports, while being careful to avoid uncritically accepting *any* orthodoxy, be it that of fringe devotees or mainstream science.

Fort's work, of compilation and commentary on anomalous phenomena reported in scientific journals and press, has been carried on very creditably by William R. Corliss, whose self-published books and notes bring Fort's collections up to date with a Fortean combination of humor, seriousness and open-mindedness. Mr. Corliss' notes rival those of Fort in volume,

while being significantly less cryptic and abbreviated.

Ivan T. Sanderson, Scottish naturalist and writer, was a devotee of Fort's work, and referenced it heavily in several of his own books on unexplained phenomena -- notable "Things" (1967), and "More Things" (1969).

Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier's *The Morning of the Magicians* was also heavily influenced by Fort's work and mentions it often.

The noted UK paranormalist, Fortean and ordained priest Lionel Fanthorpe presented the *Fortean TV* series on Channel 4.

In popular culture

Fort's influence can be felt in various areas of popular culture.

Although an unlikely hero Fort has starred in a number comic-based adventures: *The Searchers* (Caliber Comics, 1996-1997), [5] *Necronauts* (2000 AD, 2001) and *Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained* (Dark Horse, 2002). He is also the narrator of *The Big Book of The Unexplained* part of a comics anthology series from DC Comics imprint Paradox Press.

In the special edition of the *Hellboy* DVD the biography of Trevor Bruttonholm states "Trevor's grandfather met Charles Fort in Hyde Park, 1922, while the 'Hermit of The Bronx' lived in London. Throughout his youth, young Trevor was privileged to correspond with Fort and became privy to many of his secret files of strange occurrences."

Good Omens, a collaborative novel by Pratchett and Gaiman, depicts Adam Young and the Them playing 'Charles Fort

Discovering Things' and 'Charles Fort and the Atlanteans versus the Ancient Masters of Tibet' following Adam Young's discovery of New Aquarian Magazine. (Pages 159 and 166, Corgi UK Edition, published 1991)

Robert Anton Wilson's work is heavily influenced by Fort, especially *The New Inquisition* (1986). More recently, dark-fantasy author and paleontologist Caitlin R. Kiernan has often included Fortean elements and quotations in her novels and short stories; her most recent short fiction collection was titled *To Charles Fort, With Love* (Subterranean Press, 2005). She has also published a chapbook titled *The Little Damned Book of Days* (Subterranean Press, 2005) that chronicles some of her own Fortean experiences.

The 2003 children's book *Chasing Vermeer* by Blue Balliett makes heavy reference to Fort's work Lo! as the main characters

struggle to make sense out of coincidences in their lives having to do with an art theft.

Paul Thomas Anderson, the director and writer of the critically acclaimed film *Magnolia* is a fan of Fort and many aspects of the film were inspired by his books.

Quotations

- "Now there are so many scientists who believe in dowsing, that the suspicion comes to me that it may be only a myth after all".
- "One measures a circle, beginning anywhere".
- "My own notion is that it is very unsportsmanlike to ever mention fraud. Accept anything. Then explain it your way".
- "But my liveliest interest is not so much in things, as in relations of things. I have spent much time thinking about the alleged pseudo-

relations that are called coincidences. What if some of them should not be coincidence?"

- "If any spiritualistic medium can do stunts, there is no more need for special conditions than there is for a chemist to turn down lights, start operations with a hymn, and ask whether there's any chemical present that has affinity with something named Hydrogen".
- "The Earth is a farm. We are someone else's property".
- We will pick up existence by its frogs

Often attributed to Fort, but not found in his books or letters, is:

- "If there is a universal mind, must it be sane?"

Partial bibliography

All of Fort's works are available on-line.
See "External links."

- *The Outcast Manufacturers* (novel), 1906
- *Many Parts* (autobiography, unpublished)
- *The Book of the Damned*, Prometheus Books, 1999, paperback, 310 pages, ISBN 1-57392-683-3, first published in 1919.
- *New Lands*, Ace Books, 1941 and later editions, mass market paperback, first published in 1923. ISBN 0-7221-3627-7
- *Lo!*, Ace Books, 1941 and later printings, mass market paperback, first published in 1931. ISBN 1-870870-89-1
- *Wild Talents*, Ace Books, 1932 and later printings, mass market paperback, first published in 1932. ISBN 1-870870-29-8
- *Complete Books of Charles Fort*,

Dover Publications, New York,
1998, hardcover, ISBN 0-486-23094-
5

See also

- Anomalous phenomenon
- William R. Corliss
- Fortean Society
- International Fortean Organisation
- Inoue Enryo
- Fortean Times
- Haunting
- List of magazines of anomalous phenomena
- The Structure of Scientific Revolutions

References

There are very few books written about Fort. His life and work has been almost completely overlooked by mainstream academia and the books written are mainly

biographical expositions relating Fort's life and ideas.

- Gardner, Martin has a chapter on Charles Fort in his *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* 1957; Dover; ISBN 0-486-20394-8.
- Knight, Damon, *Charles Fort: Prophet of the Unexplained* is a dated but valuable biographical resource, detailing Fort's early life, his pre-'Fortean' period and also provides chapters on the Fortean society and brief studies of Fort's work in relation to Immanuel Velikovsky.
- Magin, Ulrich, *Der Ritt auf dem Kometen. Über Charles Fort* is similar to Knight's book, in German language, and contains more detailed chapters on Fort's philosophy.

There has been more recent interest in Fort:

- Clark, Jerome. "The Extraterrestrial Hypothesis in the Early UFO

Age" (pp. 122-140 in *UFOs and Abductions: Challenging the Borders of Knowledge*, David M. Jacobs, editor; University Press of Kansas, 2000; ISBN 0-7006-1032-4)

- Clark, Jerome. *The UFO Book*, 1998, Visible Ink
- Colin, Bennett (2002). *Politics of the Imagination: The Life, Work and Ideas of Charles Fort* (paperback), Head Press, 206. ISBN 1-900486-20-2.
- Kidd, Ian James. "Who Was Charles Fort?" in *Fortean Times* no. 216 (Dec 2006), pp.54-5.
- Kidd, Ian James. "Holding the Fort: how science fiction preserved the name of Charles Fort" in *Matrix* no. 180 (Aug/Sept 2006), pp.24-5.
- Wilson, Colin. *Mysteries*, Putnam, ISBN 0-399-12246-X

Footnotes

1. ^ "Charles Fort: His Life and Times" by Bob Rickard; 1995, revised 1997; URL accessed March 09, 2007
2. ^ Common Ground.
3. ^ Scientific Exploration.
4. ^ Confessions.
5. ^ War of the Worlds site profile

External links

- The Charles Fort Institute
- The Sourcebook Project homepage
- *The Skeptic's Dictionary*: Charles Fort
- A Wild Talent: Charles Hoy Fort, Ian James Kidd's pages on Fort
- Charles Fort's House at 39A Marchmont Street, London

The following online editions are on Resologist.net, the site of a Fortean named Mr. X. Each has been edited and annotated by Mr. X.

- *Book of the Damned*
- *New Lands*
- *Lo!*
- *Wild Talents*
- *Many Parts* (surviving fragments)
- *The Outcast Manufacturers*

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