

## A Book That Begg for a Science Open to Speak Outside its Customary Lines

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Volume 5, numéro 1-2, 1983

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081215ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081215ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

### ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

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### Citer cette note

Mealing, F. (1983). A Book That Begg for a Science Open to Speak Outside its Customary Lines. *Ethnologies*, 5(1-2), 86–92. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081215ar>

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# A Book That Begg for a Science Open to Speak Outside its Customary Lines

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*Manlike Monsters on Trial*. Edited by Marjorie Halpin & Michael M. Ames. (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1980. pp. xiv + 336, illus.)

Looking at a plaster cast of a Sasquatch footprint, I must confess to total bafflement.

— so one of Marjorie Halpin's concluding meditations from her leading chapter. This superficially negative statement is not uttered flippantly or in despair, but ends a long and thoughtful discussion, that tells us not so much about Sasquatch or Halpin as of some fundamental problems for which our sort of knowledge is by no means fully equipped. Insofar as the book presents itself as a trial, we must resort to the careful old Scottish verdict : Not Proven.

*Manlike Monsters on Trial* (MMOT henceforth) presents a wide range of means : short surveys of historical accounts, from both early and recent sources including folk narratives and aboriginal art objects, and of objective fragments — images, foot-prints, hair samples and vocalizations reported from Sasquatch sightings. The central theme is subtle : the objective scientist is confronted with a lively myth and with the demand for a pronouncement upon it. The book's method, a challenging intellectual exercise of the Outward Bound variety, is to illuminate the apples-and-oranges sorts of knowledge involved. Text illustrations and charts are provided, though one might hope for a few more wide-ranging examples of early images. The bibliography is excellent and all items but one in the scholarly tool-chest are perfect. If I have one overwhelming complaint, it is one I have had to make in another review within the month : why, O why, ye gods of Scholary Apparatus, it there no

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NOTE : Page references are to MMOT or the periodicals immediately noted unless otherwise identified.

Index ? The richness of the topic and also of the discussion cry out for an Index. If editors, authors and publishers are not going to provide an index, let them at least provide an explanation for their malfeasance.

MMOT raises some issues I recalled from my youth, so I rooted in the bookshelf and pulled down C.G. Jung's *A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, which dealt with another modern intrusion from the Other World. Jung finds the problem of evidence primary ; while his psychoanalytic bias is clear, he has most relevant comments (Jung p. 114) :

Menzel has not succeeded... in offering a satisfactory scientific explanation of even one authentic UFO report. It boils down to nothing less than this : either psychic projections throw back a radar echo, or else the appearance of real objects affords an opportunity for mythological projections.

Even if the (UFO's)... are physically real, the corresponding psychic projections are not actually caused, but are only occasioned, by them.

Ames quotes Halpin (p. 305) as suggesting that there are, indeed, two problems raised by the Sasquatch. One is presumably zoological : what is actually seen ? The interim answer to this is easy : a hitherto unknown large beast, perhaps a hominid ; a familiar but mistaken creature ; a chimerical hallucination. The second question is not so quickly done with : what causes a sighting to be interpreted in the relatively specific way that produces the Sasquatch story ? Halpin, especially in her introduction (pp. 17-20) and her quotation of Preston (p. 6), and Preston himself (pp. 117-118) outline a further difficulty : we are confronted by not only data assimilated between cultures, but between cultures conserving fundamentally different styles of knowledge. Sasquatch performs as the subject of a dialogue between a mathematical, closed system of thought and a logically open-ended mythopoeia. The structuralist Graburn wisely comments (p. 206) :

... if we are honest with the totality of our data, we cannot construct neat rules of deep structure unless we do it many times in different ways.

We can glimpse one approach to the problem of diverser styles of knowledge after reflection upon Halpin's provocative citation from Turner, partially summarized (pp. 19 ff.) :

... Turner locates this potential for freedom or creativity in what he calls liminality... the "between" is the liminal, outside of normal time and space... where the sacred is revealed and its power acquired... where the normal rules of thought and life do not obtain...

... the deconstruction of the "uninteresting" constructions of common sense, the "meaningfulness of ordinary life"... into cultural units which may then be reconstructed in novel ways...

We are here introduced to an image of boundaries that stand much more clearly in the mind than upon graph paper : instead of the neat, narrow lines that separate pigeon holes, we perceive a coherent matrix bound to itself at all points, in which float — like bubbles — the categories we know. The cunning paradox of *Mother Holle* (Grimm 24) suddenly haunts me : the Good Sister, having passed down to the bottom of a well, down into the Underworld, must shake Mother Holle's bedding, for only when the feathers fly will it snow upon the earth. But snow falls down upon us from above, from high in the sky. So the Underworld — better, the Other World — is shown to be not simply down there or up there : it is everywhere, continuously around us, and our kind of direction has little to do with that. In the same way, liminally, foot upon eternal threshold, the mind is at the edge of everything outside our rational understanding. And a matrix is a womb, a fertile source, in this case of images.

Sperber in his elegant homage to and criticism of Lévi-Strauss, *Rethinking Symbolism*, challenges the breadth of meaning to which structural analysis can aspire. He notes that knowledge of categories is not knowledge of the natural world (Sperber p. 91). He suggests that by its very nature, being prior to rational thought, the symbolizing process is not subject entirely to rational discourse (Sperber pp. 140–142). Too briefly, his argument is as follows : raw data are perceived, and what is perceived is associated arbitrarily with a symbolic “given” ; this given becomes a place-holder for factual knowledge till it can be tested. If it passes appropriate tests, it is a fact ; if not, it may be either discarded or conserved for a different use. Like Schrödinger's cat, though, till the test is applied the symbol *is* everything it might be, and no neat categories apply to it, it is prior to all of them. In passing, Sperber also notes that the selective mechanism he calls “focalisation” is universal ; but the field from which evocations into symbol are drawn is culturally defined, and the selective evocation itself is a private matter whose execution depends upon the individual. We are thus confronted by symbols that are not only inchoate, but rise from sources and motivations that are perhaps too atomistic and subjective to be scrutable.

But the business of symbols is to be the foundations of knowledge, they evoke further sorts of understanding. The very emotional force they wield attracts us to deeper knowledge : one certainly might not wish the closer acquaintance of a shit-daubed Witiko (p. 126), but sometimes knowing how to deal with the fact of a Witiko has been essential. Those who do not wish to meet Sasquatch in dark woods still wish to know what Sasquatch means, and here the lore, while still

variable and cryptic, leads us in a common direction. (I should note that the literature of manlike monsters extends even further than *MMOT* suggests, certainly from the late Classical *Physiologus* to Robert Crumb's bawdily sensitive treatment in the underground *HomeGrown Funnies*, with a general tendency not only to describe but also to propose some personally-impacting meaning). The European tradition, from classical to pre-Modern times, finds the Wild Man to be humanoid and destructive; Jeffrey demonstrates (esp. pp. 58-59) an overshadowing in time of the archaic mediterranean ambivalence of the creature by a convergence of nordic dualistic values — the known is good, the unknown therefore evil — and a narrow-minded Christian dogma — the unknown comes under God's curse rather than His blessing. To such thought, the only categories that are of import are Good and Evil; what is not clearly good, being ambivalent, must be unambivalently bad. The tendency of the cases from Newfoundland cited by Taft (pp. 83-96) is again reductionist: the offending monster is either a large animal or an Indian, surprising but knowable.

The North American aboriginal accounts, particularly those from the West, treat the ambivalence of the image much more productively. Halpin convincingly proposes that the Sasquatch phenomenon is understood in ways that conserve cultural categories (pp. 221-224): encounter with manlike monsters is successful or disastrous depending upon the motives and behaviour of the human involved. The monster, however active, is the touchstone in a situation in which the human is *responsible*. For scientists, Sasquatch is real or imaginary; for aborigines, Sasquatch sustains or destroys as surely as the rules of the society it confronts. It is a delight to encounter a similar role at a few obscure fringes of Western tradition: the Wild Man Enkidu, without whom Gilgamesh is incapable of subduing chaotic Tiamat, and whose death is the clue to his own mortality. Or the glad old song of *Valentine and Orson*, the latter a feral youth, raised by bears, of more than human strength and skill. But Lord Valentine subdues him, is served and then saved by him, and at last finds him to be his very own brother: better raised a beast than lost for ever. Or Crumb's *Whiteman Meets Bigfoot* (in *HomeGrown Funnies*), in which a female Sasquatch is imaged as a vulnerable redeemer from corrupt American bourgeois society: her urbane lover, abducted into the wilderness and homesick as the Beast's Beauty, returns with her to a life with no room for either, then happily escapes back to the wilderness again. Since *Valentine and Orson*, the wilderness has become a place of refuge rather than of fear; perhaps it is so with many of Western culture's monsters. Sasquatch, King Kong, Godzilla,

even E.T. : none of them is so threatening as the Machine City and its denizens.

Halpin points out (p. 226) that :

Since, however, there is no category in Western culture for creatures that mediate between the animal/human realms, scientists have no category for the Sasquatch to exist in.

The concluding division of the book supports this point nicely : *all* the current evidence — of which there is exactly enough to make repudiation as ridiculous as credulous acceptance — violates our categories of the Known. Nor does Sasquatch lack vitality : in September's *Omni* (p. 100) we see a sour old Washingtonian who, displaying carved pine giant feet with which he perpetrated footprints in SW Washington in the 1920's, conceives he gave birth to the myth ; in *MacLeans'* of November 1 (p. 54), we hear reliable evidence of a sighting from SE Washington. Sasquatch is as lively in his and her between-the-lines way as another Northwestern myth, deceptive old Coyote : both, not content to remain aborigines, have woven their way into the newly arrived Europeans's worldview. Or perhaps we are at last growing more native ?

Ames ends his Epilogue with a citation (p. 315) from the UBC Conference that ultimately gave birth to the book :

"When dreams come true," Kenelm Burridge mused during the conference, "what happens to the truth ?" Indeed, but more important, what then will become of our dreams ?

I have a very strong suspicion that, should Sasquatch be "found" (as if the mythspeakers and folksayers have not already found what we *needed* to find) to be a hitherto unknown hominid, then the monsters will neither be found nor will they go away. The Wild Boy of Aveyron was not a sufficient example to dispel all tales of manlike monsters, though he indeed was found and nurtured (and, alas, ended less happily than Orson). Ishi emerged from the forest into civilization, but the woods are no less shadowed for his departure from them. When I first read Mandeville's *Travels*, I noticed an elegant structure. From Paris to, say, Constantinople, known territory, the routes and landscape, even some buildings, are still recognizable : because known and real. From the Mediterranean east toward India, whence come stories borne by men of more and less credit, we read a mixture of fact, distortion and pure legend, whether of the Bird Phoenix, the Great Chan of Cathay, or of mythic Prester John. But when the traveller's mind goes furthest East, beyond the bourne of any report, then it finds (Mandeville p. 197) "Many white elephants without number, and of unicorns and of lions of many manners",

hills of gold heaped up by ants, and at last “Paradise terrestrial.” We move across the map from fact to belief to mythic dreams. The extension of the bounds of knowledge only moves our monsters further out — from the East to Africa to the hidden valleys of the Coast Mountains, even to the far side of the moon and to other worlds — but it cannot do them in. Though their homes are remote, they are no further away than the fleeting glimpse from the corner of the eye.

So what mythic image does Sasquatch represent? Dealing with the work of objective science, our business is with what Sasquatch represents to us. Here the book achieves a brilliant ending with Ames’ decision to let a poet speak. His citation of Margaret Atwood’s dramaturgy (pp. 306–314) exhibits an “other man”, chthonic, preCultural, hallucinatory, obsessing, a God. Sasquatch is crisis-making; unlike Coyote, who engineers situations that resolve anomalies, Sasquatch, the great anomaly, raises paradoxes, challenges any certainty. That certainty that Sasquatch denies can be the certainty of the native who trusts his own ego and breaks the rules, yet is destroyed by the monster; the certainty of the native who obeys the rules yet meets the monster; the certainty of the scientist, committed to objectivity, yet forced to say neither yea nor nay. Atwood — and Ames, we must suppose — rightly also perceive our Sasquatch to be in danger of death, a God who will be killed. Nor do they toy with the truth: our national media, building upon the Washington sighting, have in the past two weeks dutifully reported the call of authorities for a Sasquatch, dead or alive.

The science for whom dead is as good as alive is a perilous reductionism indeed. If Sasquatch dies — as some benighted hominid, as a debunked myth — the Media will be the new God killers, their weapon their own peculiar kind of reduction: curious not for evidence or news, not for an objective datum or an evocative symbol, but for null information, something to obscure the abuse of power, to while away the time between commercials and advertisements. Our culture has often busied itself with the killing of Wild Men for fun and profit, whether Beothuks or Tasmanians or, today, the natives of the Matto Grosso.

But in the end, I have more faith in myth than in media. Underlying the ceaseless talk is an ancient desire, the desire to have something else to talk with than oneself, one’s own kind. The Sumerians, it is said, listened to the teachings of the fishlike monster Oannes; old Saint Patrick constrained his disciples to hearken to tales told by the ghost of Oisín of the Fianna; and even Elliott talked with E.T. This desire we have found within ourselves for a very long

time, we have made it essential to our stories. Of course we are not quite ready to speak with the Gods, or with monstrous beings, we are never quite ready for anything. But they have been speaking with us, they have been holding the mirror to our faces, as though they also yearned for our response. This honest and charming book begs for and reveals a science open to speak outside its customary lines, and in doing so limns the restoration of imagination to what has too long been only the business of reason.

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