The background of the cover features a repeating pattern of stylized, light green leaf motifs. Each motif consists of a stem with two leaves, arranged in a slightly curved, upward-pointing fashion. These motifs are scattered across the entire page, creating a subtle, textured effect.

Haunted Ground

Darryl V. Caterine

 **Greenwood**
PUBLISHING GROUP

Haunted Ground

Haunted Ground

Journeys through a Paranormal America

Darryl V. Caterine



AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

Copyright 2011 by Darryl V. Caterine

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Caterine, Darryl V.

Haunted ground : journeys through a paranormal America / Darryl V. Caterine.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-313-39277-1 (hard copy : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-313-39278-8 (ebook)

1. Parapsychology—United States. I. Title.

BF1031.C444 2011

130.973—dc22 2011015116

ISBN: 978-0-313-39277-1

EISBN: 978-0-313-39278-8

15 14 13 12 11 1 2 3 4 5

This book is also available on the World Wide Web as an eBook.

Visit www.abc-clio.com for details.

Praeger

An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC-CLIO, LLC

130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911

Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

This book is printed on acid-free paper 

Manufactured in the United States of America

Copyright Acknowledgments

All photos courtesy of Darryl V. Caterine.

For Jana, Hilary, and Spencer

Contents

Prologue	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction: Afoot and Lighthearted	xvii
1 Lily Dale: To Wonder Is to Wander	1
2 Lily Dale (Cont'd): Inner Wandering	27
3 Roswell: Cast Adrift	49
4 Roswell (Cont'd): Behemoth	75
5 The Dowers's Convention: In Arcadia	99
6 The Dowers's Convention (Cont'd): <i>Et in Arcadia Ego</i>	123
Epilogue: The Damned Facts	151
Notes	155
Bibliography	181
Index	189

Prologue

The traveler along America's highways will search in vain for the equivalent of a Jerusalem, a Mecca, or a Bodh Gaya—some *axis mundi* where the national community as a whole connects to the power and mysteries of a sacred world.¹ There are, of course, the great monuments to the country's so-called civil religion: places like the Lincoln Memorial, the Gettysburg Battlefield, or Mount Rushmore commemorating the larger-than-life figures and events in United States history. Here Americans may reflect on the providential moments in the making of their nation, but even in their most pious light, memorials to magnificent feats of human achievement fall short of gateways to the invisible realms recounted in religious myths.

This book is a record of my experiences and reflections at Lily Dale, a Spiritualist camp in New York; the Roswell UFO Festival in New Mexico; and the American Society of Dowsers (ASD) conventions in Vermont. It is the result of repeated visits to places and immersion in movements often brushed aside as tangential to the more serious issues in American religion. Compared, for example, to the role of faith in national politics, the topic of the paranormal might seem just a tad bit quirky. As a scholar of American religions and after more than two years of research, however, I have come to see the “paranormal hot spots” along the American roadside as the nearest analog our nation has to the pilgrimage centers of more traditional religions, sites where we stop to wonder if there is not something really akin to the miraculous afoot, right here in our modern midst.

I say the “closest we come” to sacred centers and “akin to” the miraculous because these places are not, in fact, oriented to the supernatural. They are rather designed to draw our attention to Nature, something that is both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. At Lily Dale,

Roswell, and the ASD conventions, visitors ponder the sublime—though not transcendent—ground beneath their feet and the amazing galactic expanses above their heads. The sites I have visited, taken together, reveal themselves as shrines to Nature, which I write with an uppercase “n” to denote its association in the paranormal context with ineffability, ultimacy, and mystery. Spiritualists, ufologists, and dowsers alike push the edges of a broader American quest to fathom this cosmic enigma, although they each explore it from their own distinctive perspectives. I have organized my own accounts of their gatherings according to some particular aspect of this *je ne sais quoi* that both motivates and is illuminated by their investigations.

Lily Dale, Roswell, and the ASD conventions are but nodes in a much vaster network of preternatural places memorializing the wonder that is American Nature. These extend throughout the United States. Every state has dozens of its haunted groves, one-time UFO landing sites, chupacabra lairs, and the like. Only a few have become, like Roswell, the modern-day equivalents of destinations along the medieval pilgrimage routes of Christendom, mandatory stops along a tour through America’s popular culture. But the hundreds of other locales are lesser known, listed in collections of roadside attractions, often bearing the word “weird” in their titles—*Weird New England*, *Weird Carolinas*, *Weird Texas*, and so on—and subtitled “your local guide to [enter your state’s, or even America’s] local legends and best kept secrets.”²

The terminology of the “weird,” like that of the “paranormal,” is misleading. These labels suggest something that is beyond our “normal” experience, marginal to our everyday lives as modern Americans. And yet nothing could be further from the truth. I am hard pressed to think of another subject that can so easily stir up controversy, fascination, or uneasiness in virtually every nook and cranny of American society. Almost everyone, it seems, has a paranormal story to share or at least has taken the time to formulate an opinion about the matter. UFOs are as familiar to Americans as the Gettysburg Address, maybe even more so: the paranormal is a public discourse. The real question is, why?

In my travels throughout paranormal America at every turn, I came upon unexpected numbers of images, stories, and allusions to Native Americans. There are Indian spirit guides at Lily Dale. There are modern-day versions of the Indian captivity narrative at Roswell. There are haunted Native American grounds in Vermont—as there are throughout the rest of the nation—that have transformed dowsing from a search for water to a search for a pre-Columbian past. These lingering traces of the Native Americans provide a clue to understanding the nation’s collective obsession with and derision of the paranormal. For a moment, let us block off all the familiar

exits and refuse to brush the subject off as someone else's trivial concern. Let us consider the possibility raised by Renee Bergman: that modern America is collectively haunted, unnerved by some aspect of the past that gives shape to the present before and even as we name it.³

There is a second, related clue: the uncanny similarity between the typical paranormal narrative and the earliest descriptions of America as recounted by early voyagers to and colonizers of the New World. In both cases, there are claims of a wondrous natural world on the one hand and accounts of a preternatural Native American presence on the other. Consider just one of the typical portrayals of the newfound continent recorded and published by Spain's Peter Martyr d'Anghiera in the early 1500s:

Every creature in the sublunary world . . . that gives birth to something, either immediately afterwards closes the womb or rests a period. The new continent, however, is not governed by this rule, for each day it creates without ceasing and brings forth new products, which continues to furnish men gifted with power and an enthusiasm for novelties, sufficient material to satisfy their curiosity.⁴

As for the Native American inhabitants, they were positively out of this world, alternating between sublime and savage. In Martyr again, we read,

They go naked, they know neither weights nor measures, nor that source of all misfortunes, money; living in a golden age, without laws, without lying judges, without books, satisfied with their life, and in no wise solicitous for the future. Nevertheless ambition and the desire to rule trouble even them, and they fight amongst themselves, so that even in the golden age there is never a moment without war.⁵

The "discovery of America" was indeed for Europeans a preternatural event, an unprecedented encounter with radical alterity.⁶ They did not know where they were and so called the place Eden. They did not know whom they had encountered and so named the Others Indians. In the terminology of religious studies, the narrative of America was a new myth, an authoritative and paradigmatic reckoning of the modern West's origins and orientation to the world.

In time, this New World metaphysics⁷ came to vie with and in many instances replace the inherited cosmology of Europe's and America's dominant Christian culture. Starting in the 1700s, during the rise of the Enlightenment, it became increasingly common to speak of ourselves as living in and originating from Nature. The myth became institutionalized in the language of modern nation-states and the emerging discourse of science. The trope of nature is so ubiquitous that it is easy to forget its

historic emergence as a metaphor. It is even easier to forget that it is a symbol that perennially erases the violent subjugation of non-Europeans on the “other side” of Western discovery.

Five hundred years after Columbus, the myths and tales of America’s wondrous and haunted ground are alive and well in our collective obsession with the paranormal. In this modern-day discourse, Nature remains what it was to the original discoverers: a marvel for all to behold, satisfying those with an “enthusiasm for novelties, sufficient material to satisfy their curiosity.” By now the Indians have been displaced to the geographic and historical sidelines of Euro-American mythology, but new kinds of fantastic beings have come to stand alongside and sometimes to replace them. In the paranormal variant of the Columbian myth, the spirits, extra-terrestrials, and ghosts metamorphose into Native Americans and back again, trading places and sharing masks. Together, they take turns unnerving the inhabitants of Nature’s nation.

These vital clues to understanding the cultural significance of our collective fascination with the paranormal are completely absent from the more rarefied, second-order debates over the “scientific reality”—or lack thereof—of so-called paranormal phenomena. All three of the topics encompassed by this book began—and today continue—as homegrown American cultural movements. It is only by traveling to the gatherings of Spiritualists, ufologists, and dowsers on their own haunted ground that one sees and hears and participates in the rich symbolic milieu in which accounts of preternatural beings, Indian or otherwise, take shape and thrive.

But in all this talk of metaphors, symbols, and tropes, I do not want to leave the reader with the impression that this book is simply an excursus into linguistics. The myth that the New World voyagers unwittingly bequeathed to their modern descendants leaves us all with a problem that cannot be so easily analyzed away. The gap between ourselves and the Other is real enough and grows only greater as the New World becomes a global one, displacing those who stand in Nature’s way. In venturing into the paranormal, we come face-to-face with this disconnection from the Others-as-yet-to-be-understood, which is simultaneously a confrontation with our own homelessness and exile. This is an experience by turns exhilarating, disorienting, and deeply disturbing.

For some, the paranormal becomes a path that winds its way out of Eden altogether. As Stephen Greenblatt has observed, “[Wonder] erects an obstacle [to understanding the Other] that is at the same time an agent of arousal. For the blockage that constitutes a recognition of distance excites a desire to cross the threshold, break through the barrier, enter the space of the alien. . . .”⁸ Alongside the many instances of “playing

Indian”⁹ I have encountered in my travels, I have also met those with a genuine desire to “enter the space of the alien,” those for whom a curiosity about the interconnection between ourselves and the rest of the world was initially awakened by preternatural beings and Indian ghosts. They go to meet the living Others. America’s long obsession with the paranormal can and does lead into another chapter in the post-Columbian tale, which is the story of interreligious exchanges in a global society, most commonly between “the East and the West.”¹⁰

For others, the paranormal simply undercuts any sense of safety and security in the mythic world of Nature, leaving us haunted without reprieve. I have written this book somewhere in between these two extremes. While it could not have taken shape without referencing the misunderstood Other, ultimately my account is the record of a rendezvous with the gap between ourselves and the Other, an abyss that Nature can conceal only in part.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following people: Anthony Chiffolo, John Kavanagh, Richard Seager, Frederick Stecker, Alba Valeriani, and Judith Weisenfeld for their support from the very beginning; Christina Michaelson for introducing me to the Lily Dale community and for her constant encouragement; Martie Hughes and Frank and Shelley Takei of Lily Dale for their incredible hospitality and assistance as well as the many hours shared pondering the enigmas; Charles F. Emmons for his helpful and clarifying readings of the ufological chapters; Scot Foxx of the ASD Bookstore in Danville, Vermont, for his generous assistance in granting me access to early ASD newsletters; Maura Brady, David Gove, and Tony Lisi for the ongoing conversations about the paranormal in America; Jennifer Glancy for her ongoing advocacy and invaluable assistance in reading drafts of each chapter; Chip Callahan and Melissa Click, Geoff and Joan Rutkowski, and Rob Cohen and Christine Roth, once again and always, for their friendship on and off the road; Hilary, for almost never forgetting to leave me dessert; Spencer, for teaching me about the things that matter; and finally to Jana, without whom none of this would matter very much at all, for her guidance, patience, and faith throughout the project and for her support and companionship all along.

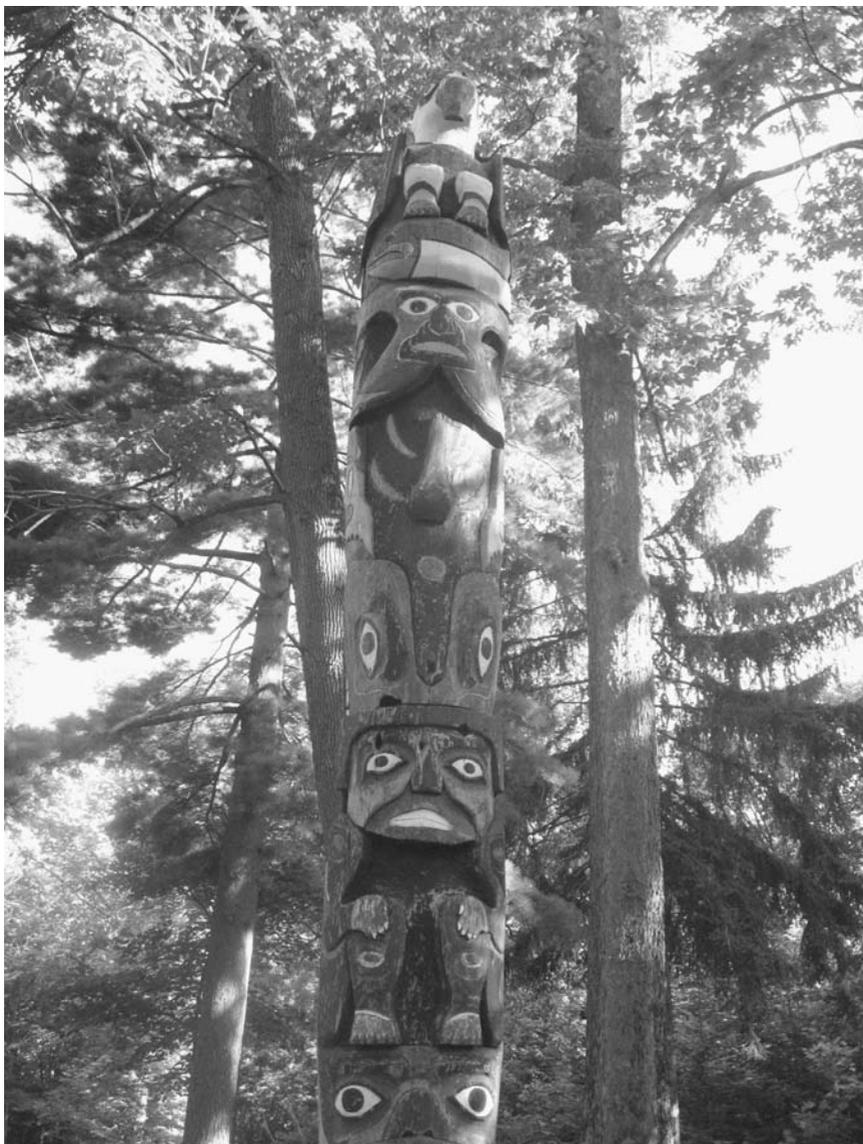
Introduction: Afoot and Lighthearted¹

I can see them in my mind's eye, shimmering like the reflections in a rear-view mirror.

There are great gatherings in the woods of upstate New York, crowds assembling to hear messages from beyond the veil of death, news of loved ones now passed on, guidance from the spirit world. There are assemblies convening in the deserts of New Mexico, sharing news of visits from beyond our sun, tales of beings from far away and long ago, forebodings of coming contact. There are odd alliances of farmers and urbanites in the Green Mountains of Vermont, searching with sticks and rods for water and wisdom and wealth. Together they dowse.

As I speed now east along modern interstate highways, I feel less certain of my bearings than when I set out two years ago, less confident in my certainties. I travel toward home but cannot say for sure it will still be there in the same way I left it. And I am not quite sure how to remember what I have heard, seen, and felt or what to call it all. It shimmered when I was there, and it slips through the space of language now, as I name it back into another kind of being, equally gossamer-like, evoking words.

I have been to Lily Dale, the Spiritualist camp in New York, several times now since 2007. I have twice attended the Roswell UFO Festival and have also made two trips to the American Society of Dowsters conventions in Vermont. For two years, I have immersed myself in a world where conventional boundaries slip and slide; the clear lines between religion, science, and technology grow thin; and one cannot even say with certainty which came first: the media or the mediums, the tales of such things or their widespread acceptance among the American public. Attempts to unravel this riddle or the many others surrounding the worlds of ephemera are themselves lures into the further Abyss.



Camp Chesterfield, Indiana.

Many have been seduced. Skeptics, demanding hard facts, have brushed these things into the dustbin of science gone awry. Religious thinkers, predisposed toward acceptance or denunciation, have debated where they fit—or if they fit—in the received theological schemes of things. Academics have seen them as continuations of older “metaphysical religions” in the

West, specimens of new religious movements, or residues of now stigmatized folklore in modern times.²

These and other observers have left behind an abundance of labels: “pseudoscience,” “the paranormal,” “the occult,” “magic,” “metaphysics,” and good old-fashioned madness, to domesticate the enigmas, unwittingly destroying in the process of naming the very things they are trying to name. Herein lies my uneasiness with words. If I identify an unidentified object—flying or otherwise—I am no longer faithful to the subject matter I am trying to describe.³

And so, despite my training as a scholar of religion, I have decided to jump off the solid platforms of observation altogether. I have become one of the many millions of rank-and-file Americans who are drawn like moths to the flame into the worlds of ephemera precisely *because* they are impossible to pin down. And I have tried to explain why it is I think that the inhabitants of these strange worlds—mediums and spirits, extraterrestrials and outer-world denizens, unusual energies, and “weird vibes”—are an integral part of what it means to be a modern American. Is it even possible to list all the books that have titillated, part bemused, and part enthralled readers for nearly two centuries with titles like *Confessions of a Medium*, *The Flying Saucers Are Real*, or *Stonehenge Decoded*? Or such recent films as *The Sixth Sense*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*? Or the rash of present-day television shows like *Ghost Hunters* and *Paranormal State*?

Is it sufficient to explain this all-pervasive interest by settling on a single word or explanation, say, for example, “interest in the occult”?

Every study begins with a methodology, a particular angle of approach. My own is based in the arts of night vision. To see in the dark, do not stare directly ahead. Look through the corners of your eyes. Or, if you prefer a less visual metaphor, listen to what Julia Kristeva called the semiotics of speech rather than the words themselves. Pay close attention to the undertones, rhythms, and innuendos in conversation.⁴ Let the ephemera be what they are and follow them into their own terrain to learn something unexpected.

I first realized this a few hundred miles west of Oklahoma City where the Trail of Tears comes to an end, and the things that had eluded my understanding suddenly came back in droves of memories. This, I imagined, was a reward from the wild things for promising not to domesticate them in intricately woven nets of words, at least of the analytical variety.

Before Oklahoma, I was still ensnared in thoughts about *heirophanies*. The great historian of religion Mircea Eliade described a hierophany as a sudden eruption of divine power into our ordinary world of space and time.⁵ They are perceived revelations of spiritual force in everyday things: