MYSTERIOUS SPHERES AND LIGHTS
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Fireballs

Thousands of meteorites enter our atmosphere daily, and for the most part are burnt up as they plummet towards earth. Given that a majority fall over the oceans; that of the balance, a high proportion fall over uninhabited regions; that of the balance a high proportion fall where they can be seen only by people too ignorant to take note of what they see, even if they should happen to see it; given that of the balance, most will fall where those who see them are not concerned to report them ...we are left with only a tiny fraction which are liable to be reported as anything, meteors, UFOs, fireballs or whatever.

But when such reports are received, it is generally considered scientifically sound to ascribe them as meteorites — which perhaps the majority are. Any aspect of their behavior which seems inconsistent with that of meteorites is ascribed to defective observation — again, doubtless correctly. And yet cases occur for which the blanket explanation seems inadequate:

1. Tucumcari, New Mexico, 13 December 1951. Several witnesses saw a fireball plunge to earth. It destroyed a water tank which caused four buildings to collapse and killed four people. A classic meteorite fall — except that meteor expert Lincoln La Paz found no evidence of a meteor at the site.[13]

2. St. Helens, Lancashire, 27 July 1938. A blinding ball of blue light fell on Bold Colliery, causing an explosion which killed one and injured two. Not very remarkable, except that two weeks later a similar ball of bluish light fell just two miles away. Given the random trajectories of meteorites, given the distance the earth had moved in those two weeks, this repeat fall is, to put it mildly, an astonishing coincidence.[13]

3. Canada, 1913. Of all aerial anomalies, few surpass the great Canadian Fireball Procession, wherein a line of lights majestically crossed the Canadian sky and disappeared over the Atlantic. The spectacle aroused wonder and alarm across the continent. It also posed some staggering questions.

In the first place, the course followed by the Procession was the only course which would enable it to traverse all five of the Great Lakes in a straight line. The map will show you that to do this accidentally would be an astonishing feat, for direction and alignment have to be exact to within a mile or so.

Secondly, while to do so once would be remarkable enough, in fact the feat had to be performed three times —for there were three sets of lights: one about 9 pm on 9 February, the second in the early hours of the next day, the third during the following afternoon. Yet all, despite the movement of the earth, despite the rotation of the earth, followed the same precise path. If they were indeed meteorites, it follows that each part of the Procession must have followed a different course through space, only to end up flying the same course on reaching the earth![14]

Although many observers at the time, impressed by the majestic Procession, took them to be airships, I don't propose to raise that possibility here. But the incident does show, once again, that a seemingly scientific explanation for an anomalous phenomenon may leave unexplained as much as it explains.

We should note, too, that the term 'fireball' is not a scientific description, but a convenient label for something whose nature is unknown. It tells us nothing about the object involved in this case:

4. Newfoundland, 12 November 1887. The crew of the steamer Siberian saw a huge ball of fire rise from the sea and soar into the air. It floated against the wind and headed towards the ship. Just when a collision seemed certain, it changed