



ALSO RECEIVED

WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTEAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS...

Occult Paris

The Lost Magic of the Belle Époque

Tobias Churton

Inner Traditions 2016

Hb, 493pp, \$29.95, illus, colour plates, notes, bib, ind, ISBN 978162055453

Tobias Churton, a scholar of the Western Occult tradition, paints a vivid and detailed portrait of Paris during the Belle Époque (1871–1914), when it was the fertile medium for many cultural, artistic and esoteric movements that had considerable influence upon the greater world.

Here is all the background you could wish for about the prime characters – from Blavatsky and Levi, Érik Satie and the Peladians, to Papus and d’Aveydre; priests and painters; musicians and magicians; alchemists and artists; Gnostics, Theosophists and Masons; Surrealists and Decadents – their lives, works, interactions and scandals.

It is dense in detail, but the writing conveys the excitement of an author who savours every aspect of his topic. Reading this almost makes you want to re-read Pauwels and Bergier’s *Morning of the Magicians*, this time with greater understanding.

Flesh Falls & Blood Rains

John Hairr

Coachwhip Publications 2016

Pb, 159pp, illus, bib, ind, \$13.95, ISBN 9781616464028

John Hairr, a Carolina historian, presents a tightly focused study of falls of flesh-like and blood-like materials. He begins with essays on the subject as it is recorded in ancient and more modern documents. The next four cases studied occurred in America, from the most famous of all in Tennessee, 1841, to the celebrated Kentucky ‘meat shower’ of 1876. From the late 19th century, he accumulates considerable local news reportage and notes that, despite the increasing intrusion of ‘scientific explanations’ from ‘experts’ up to the most recent incident chronicled here (in Spain in 2014), the mystery remains.

Hairr’s level of local and contemporary detail is impressive; the only element missing (as far as we can see) are the theories of Prof Chandra Wickramasinghe on primitive extraterrestrial life. Four appendices present facsimiles, including a historical record from 1679; an attempted chronology from 1577 BC to 1849; another from AD 472 to 1847, and Hairr’s own chronological summary of news accounts from 1806 to 2005. An essential reference for the fortean meteorologist.

Legend Tripping

The Ultimate Family Experience

Robert C Robinson

Adventures Unlimited Press 2016

Pb, 309pp, illus, \$14.95, ISBN 9781939149640

What Robinson calls ‘legend tripping’ is a challenge to his readers to get out there and investigate or follow the trails of other investigators. Twenty chapters cover pretty much the whole American gazetteer, from Bigfoot, sites associated with UFOs or hauntings, ‘Ghost lights’, buried treasure and lake monsters (with Nessie thrown in). The author is not entirely credulous, providing advice sections on preparing and kitting out for such expeditions, and the importance of critical thinking. His enthusiasm, though, might well inspire a new generation to set off into the wilderness with their smartphone’s GPS (instead of a compass).

Trackbed Tales

It’s Winter on a Preserved Railway...

NM Scott

Book Guild Publishing 2015

Pb, 64pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781910508862

This slender volume hosts 10 narrated stories of some strange and extraordinary incidents or discoveries made in the supposedly serene world of preserved or restored English railways. Human remains, dangerous creatures, Satanic societies, haunted rolling stock, and the like. Scott is a published writer of Sherlock Holmes pastiches, so his little stories go at a cracking pace;

but don’t expect these to be true as no sources are given. A good loo book.

Sea Creatures

Ponsonby’s Curious Compendium

Dr David Ponsonby & Professor Georges Dussart

Ivy Press 2015

Hb, 286pp, illus, ind, £12.99, ISBN 9781782402459

The (removable) sticker on this book proclaims that the publishers are ‘Makers of beautiful books’. This one certainly is, as is the companion volume on insects and spiders. The line engravings, some up to 200 years old, obviously cause some issues, as the authors acknowledge: they have corrected names, where necessary, and explain that the taxonomy might have changed since the illustration was published. They usefully explain Linnæan classification for those non-biologists among us. The text is edited to the bone to cram in the maximum of information, but the book does not aim to be a field guide. It is, though, very handsome and (more relevantly for this review) picks up on some decent strange facts about the creatures pictured. Some crabs, for instance, snip poisonous sea anemones off the rocks and attach them to their shells to repel predators; others clutch them in their claws as a brightly coloured deterrent. The hermaphroditic barnacle fertilises its neighbours “by means of a disproportionately long penis” when not “kicking food into its mouth”. Lobsters sometimes shake their claws off on hearing a sudden noise, according to a Victorian naturalist. A wonderful engraving shows a cuttlefish clinging to a Mr Beale (“a sensation of horror pervaded his whole frame”) after throwing itself at him. The starfish’s powers of regeneration mean that a single arm can regenerate an entire body. And sea cucumbers (a south-east Asian delicacy) entangle predators in a slime; if that doesn’t work, they expel their internal organs. A useful hint: don’t swim where you see black lugworm casts, which can often

indicate sewage discharge.

The Suppressed History of American Banking

How Big Banks Fought Jackson, Killed Lincoln, and Caused the Civil War

Xaviant Haze

Bear & Co 2016

Pb, \$16.99, 231pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, ISBN 9781591432333

Xaviant Haze investigates the historical origins of the first banks in the newly constituted USA and explains how they “fought Andrew Jackson, killed Abraham Lincoln and caused the Civil War”. Jackson was the only president who paid off the national debt. You might assume this was wacky conspiracy theory-mongering, but this story is very interesting; it is also well told and very well researched.

WTF?!

An Economic Tour of the Weird

Peter T Leeson

Stanford Economics and Finance 2017

Pb, 264pp, illus, notes, ind, \$27.95, ISBN 9781503600911

This book is what happens when a professor of economics and law with a love of the curious examines what looks like irrational behaviour. (Spoiler alert: it isn’t.) Take, for instance, the apparently misogynistic public auctions of pre-owned wives in 19th century England. The women had a veto, and the evidence suggests they traded up financially. One welcomed the transaction as “the happiest moment of her life”, and her husband escaped the legal requirement to provide bed and board. A snappy discussion on indirect Coasean bargaining ensues, expanded in the Notes for Nerds appendix. The sales ended only when they stopped being useful – basically, when married women gained property and child custody rights. Like the other examples, this is an ingenious, incentive-driven solution to a contemporary problem. And so on to Gypsy superstition, cursing monks, judicial combat and the rest... Excellent.