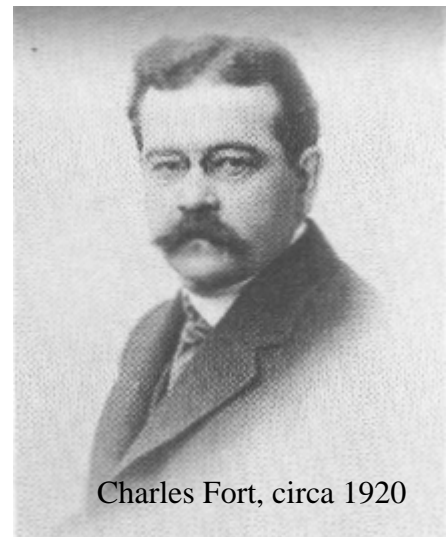


Charles Fort

Charles Fort (1874-1932) fancied himself a true Skeptic, one who opposes all forms of dogmatism, believes nothing, and does not take a position on anything. He claimed to be an "intermediatist," one who believes nothing is real and nothing is unreal, that "all phenomena are approximations one way or the other between realness and unrealness." Actually, he was an anti-dogmatist who collected weird and bizarre stories.

Fort spent a good part of his adult life in the New York City public library examining newspapers, magazines, and scientific journals. He was looking for accounts of anything weird or mysterious which didn't fit with current scientific theories. He collected accounts of frogs and other strange objects raining from the sky, UFOs, ghosts, spontaneous human combustion, the stigmata, psychic abilities, etc. He published four collections of weird tales and anomalies during his lifetime: *Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932). In these works, he does not seem interested in questioning the reliability of his sources, which is odd, given that he had worked as a news reporter for a number of years before embarking on his quest to collect stories of the weird and bizarre. He does reject one story about a talking dog who disappeared into a puff of green smoke. He expresses his doubt that the dog really went up in green smoke, though he doesn't question its ability to speak.



Although Fort did not seem particularly interested in making any sense out of his collection of weird stories, he seemed particularly uninterested in scientific testing, yet some of his devotees consider him to be the founding father of modern paranormal studies. His main interest in scientific hypotheses was to criticize and ridicule the very process of theorizing. His real purpose seems to have been to embarrass scientists by collecting stories on "the borderland between fact and fantasy" which science could not explain or explain away. Since he did not generally concern himself with the reliability or accuracy of his data, this borderland also blurs the distinction between open-mindedness and gullibility.

Fort was skeptical about scientific explanations because scientists sometimes argue "according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence" and they suppress or ignore inconvenient data. He seems to have understood that scientific theories are models, not pictures, of reality, but he considered them to be little more than superstitions and myths. He seems to have had a profound misunderstanding of the nature of scientific theories. For, he criticized them for not being able to accommodate anomalies and for requiring data to fit. He took particular delight when scientists made incorrect predictions and he attacked what he called the "priestcraft" of science. Fort seems to have been opposed to science as it really is: fallible, human and tentative, after probabilities rather than absolute certainties. He seems to have thought that since science is not infallible, any theory is as good as any other. This is the same kind of misunderstanding of science that we find with so-called "scientific creationists" and many other pseudo scientists.

Apparently, Fort was a prolific writer. He is said to have written ten novels, but only one was published: *The Outcast Manufacturers* (1906). At least twice in his life he is said to have burned

thousands of pages of notes and writings while severely depressed. Two early works of fiction, both burned, entitled *X* and *Y*, dealt with Martians controlling life on earth and an evil civilization existing at the South Pole. When he was only about 25 years old, Fort wrote his autobiography, *Many Parts*. Fragments of it have been preserved, but Fort himself came to recognize that there is little to recommend it and described it as "the work of an immature metaphysician, psychologist, sociologist, etc."

One of Fort's amusements as an adult seems to have been to speculate about such things as frogs falling from the sky. He postulated that there is a Super-Sargasso Sea above the Earth (which he called Genesistrine) where living things originate and periodically are dumped on Earth by intelligent beings who communicate with secret societies down below, perhaps using teleportation.

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.

Fort had very few friends, but one of them, Tiffany Thayer, created the Fortean Society to promote and encourage Fort-like attacks on science and scientists. When Fort died in 1937, he left over 30 boxes of notes, which the Fortean Society began publishing in the *Fortean Society Magazine* (later *Doubt* magazine). In 1959 Thayer died and the Fortean Society came to an end. Others, however, took up the torch. *The Fortean Times* is advertised as exploring "the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown" and features articles on topics such as the government's alleged suppression of evidence regarding crashed UFOs, synaesthesia, a mysterious undersea structure, and other things the editors think are strange or weird. The International Fortean Organization publishes *INFO Journal* several times a year. It features stories on such topics as anomalous astronomical phenomena, anomalies in the physical sciences, scientific hoaxes and cryptozoology. The Society for the Investigation of the Unexplained (SITU) collects data on unexplained events and publishes a magazine called *Pursuit*. The *Anomalist* magazine publishes articles on mysteries in science and nature. *Strange* magazine has articles, features and columns covering all aspects of the anomalous and unexplained. William R. Corliss founded the Sourcebook Project (a catalog of anomalies) and Science Frontiers, a newsletter which has been providing digests of reports that describe scientific anomalies since

1976. There are many other Fortean groups, as well, but it is worth noting that Fort opposed the idea of a Fortean Society. He thought that such a group would attract spiritualists and crackpots.

further reading

[reader comments](#)

- [Blather](#)
- [Fortean Slips](#) from ParaScope
- [INTERNATIONAL FORTEAN ORGANIZATION](#)
- [The Charles Fort Institute](#)
- [The Fortean Times](#)
- [The Outcast Manufacturers](#), a novel by Charles Hoy Fort
- [Charles Hoy Fort's Short Stories](#)

[Gardner, Martin. *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, \(New Hork: Dover Publications, 1957\).](#)

[Lippard, Jim. "Charles Fort," in *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal* edited by Gordon Stein \(Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1996\) pp. 277-280.](#)