

Things That Go Bump in the Order : A Review Article

MARJORIE HALPIN

A review of John Green's *Sasquatch: The Apes Among Us*, published by Cheam Publishing Ltd. and Hancock House Publishers Ltd., Saanich-ton, B.C., 1978. Pp. 492; *illus.*; maps.

In a time of competing certainties, and increasing doubts about all of them, large numbers of people are turning to the investigation of anomalies, irregularities and oddities — things that go bump in the order — that challenge or defy rational explanation. These people are creating a curious and surreal world, an anti-nature, a universe become bizarre and fantastic, a place where the images of dreams manifest in the daylight, and at times on film. John Mitchell and Robert J. M. Rickard (1977) call this view of the world *phenomenalism*, and recognize Charles Fort (1874-1932) as its founder. Their position is more reflexive than that of most anomaly investigators, and has an avowedly and certainly radical political aim: "The only revolution we look forward to is that which will free the toiling masses of downtrodden phenomena, raise them from their condition of neglect, and allow them an equal say in governing our conception of reality" (*ibid.*: 7). They are fighting what they call "mental imperialism." Although absurd, their position has a certain dreadful aptness in a world in which great numbers of people are going mad:

As phenomenologists we recognize no certainties. Yet all around us there are certainties variously contrived, the certainties of tyrants, psychiatrists, high priests of science and religion, cranks and fanatics, each one consisting of different selections from the common source material, the world of sensory perception, and each one a rival to the others. There are wars between world-views for the status of dominant reality. Mental imperialism. We think these certainties are best avoided. They are maintained by studied ignorance and selective blindness. Finally they have the same irritating effect as the wearing of blinkers. . . . Ourselves, we take pleasure in all beliefs and theories; we are benign to all interpretations and schools of thought, and we look kindly on stern orthodoxies and passionate heresies alike. Each one reflects an aspect of human nature and each one has a positive contribution to make to the stock of human understanding (*loc. cit.*).

Sasquatch is one of the most "successful" and irritating anomalies currently under active investigation, and John Green is a major reason why. With this, his fourth book on the subject, he continues to develop the image of a large, bipedal primate, elusively manifesting as creature and as footprint throughout North America, although best known from the Pacific Northwest. In his first books, he introduced the Sasquatch in an essentially anecdotal fashion; in this one, he more systematically presents evidence from the 1,500-plus reported Sasquatch sightings in his files, collected over a twenty-year period of continued investigation. He is quite conscious that in compiling and presenting this material he is producing a science-challenging anomaly, although I doubt that he would align himself with the political and intellectual heresy advocated by Mitchell and Rickard, nor does he consider himself a phenomenalist so far as I know. Still, when discussing his own fascination with the Sasquatch he says that he is not interested in the monster *per se*: "The fascination of the subject, for me, involves the very thing that I am most inclined to complain about — that the scientific world ignores it" (p. 11).

Those scientists who have engaged in serious thought about the Sasquatch phenomenon find the challenge it presents difficult to resolve. The foremost of these, John Napier, a distinguished British primatologist, was unable to explain it in terms of "normal science," and concluded in his book *Bigfoot* (1974:207):

I am convinced that the Sasquatch exists, but whether it is all that it is cracked up to be is another matter altogether. There must be *something* in northwest America that needs explaining, and that something leaves manlike footprints. The evidence I have adduced in favour of the reality of the Sasquatch is not hard evidence; few physicists, biologists or chemists would accept it, but nevertheless it *is* evidence and cannot be ignored.

It's partly a matter of things having a proper and certified place in which to be classified as real. Since Sasquatch does not fit into the established zoological taxonomy based upon evolutionary theory, Napier locates it in what he calls the "Goblin Universe." His reasons for following Persephone into this dark region and abandoning the "real world" are in the very best scientific tradition. Considering Sir Peter Medawar's definition of science as the "art of the soluble" ("Good scientists study the most important problems they think they can solve. It is, after all, their professional business to solve problems, not merely to grapple with them," quoted in Napier, *ibid.*: 12), he asserts that such a "stultifying directive" is "dismally flat" as a "clarion call for the venturesome" (*loc. cit.*). "Solubility is surely not the principle by which great discoveries have been

made" (*loc. cit.*). His position is well worth attention, especially by those who refuse to even entertain thoughts about so "bumpy" a thing as the Sasquatch:

I can only see the 'art of the soluble' as a sad reflection of the conformity of many scientists for whom a secure future, or tenure, is recompense enough for the loss of intellectual initiative. The regimentation of scientists makes one long for the days when science was the hobby of the amateur, of the gentleman of leisure, when ethnology and ecology were called natural history and when physicists and chemists were uncommitted and unsalaried masters of their own adventurous minds (*loc. cit.*).

John Green, of course, is an amateur scientist (he is a professional journalist), and it is more than fitting that the book under review was published the same week that the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology was holding the world's first academic monster conference ("Sasquatch and Similar Phenomena") to inaugurate a conference series on the Anthropology of the Unknown.¹ Green was a keynote speaker at the conference and one of the two non-academic participants to present formal papers (the other was his colleague and sparring partner, Rene Dahinden). He was dubbed the Dean of Sasquatch Investigators by people at the conference, and the present book is evidence of his merit of the title.

The book summarizes and presents selected examples of the reports in Green's file, most of them from newspapers, but some of them transcripts of interviews between Green himself and Sasquatch witnesses. The material is conveniently arranged by state (excluding only Hawaii and Rhode Island) and province (excluding Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland; Green did not know about the Sasquatch reports from Newfoundland which were described at the UBC conference by Michael Taft of Laval²). There is also a chapter called "The Giant's Portrait" which presents a composite description of the Sasquatch based on tabulated data from witness reports. While surprisingly consistent in time and space, this portrait is also surprisingly simple. Besides his physical appearance and unaggressive attitude toward humans, the record says little. Napier (*ibid.*: 15) also noted this meagreness of mythic detail in Sasquatch lore:

On the face of it, the Bigfoot tales do not qualify for a place in the triumvirate of legend, myth or folktale because they are not really tales at all.

¹ It is expected that the majority of the papers presented at the conference will be published in 1979 by UBC Press.

² Taft's paper will be included in the published proceedings of the conference.

There are no complicated constructions or sequences of events in the Bigfoot sagas, there is no social purpose, no fulfilment element, no fertility symbolism, no ingenuity or trickery. Bigfoot stories are rather static affairs, in which the narrative style of myth and legend is absent. . . . The poverty of these stories is in striking contrast to the richness of traditional tales from other parts of the world. . . .

Napier points out that Sherpa accounts of the Yeti are simple recitations of sights, with few elaborations. John Colarusso of McMaster University wrote a paper for the UBC conference about the Alma of the Caucasus region of the USSR, which is regarded by its believers as a totally mundane creature, and he reports that his principal informant was offended that he should consider it a mythological beast — he was proud of his culture's mythology and felt the Alma had no place in it. Green, too, insists that the Sasquatch is simply an ape, an ordinary animal, which is primarily remarkable in that it is unrecognized by the scientific establishment. He explicitly denies that it has any humanlike characteristics: "They are all animal. Magnificent animals, completely self-sufficient on their physical endowments alone, but no more than animals" (p. 461).

But it looks as if a Sasquatch myth is beginning to be created by the popular media, and the number of books and products it is inspiring are evidence that it is being accepted. The myth depends upon the Sasquatch being classified as what is being called a "manimal" rather than a mere animal. Manimals, being ambiguous, have much more mythic potential. Green argues against this tendency, considering it an expression of our "yearning for our own innocence, for the noble savage we never were" (p. 460). We have destroyed primitive humans, so we want to replace them with a Sasquatch living out there "in harmony with its environment, because it has looked us over and found us wanting" (p. 461).

The media-hucksters, however, are not selling lost innocence but sex and violence. In John Cotter and Judith Frankle's 1977 novel *Nights With Sasquatch* ("an explosive ordeal of rape and revenge beyond any woman's experience"), the heroine who has a sexual relationship with the Sasquatch is presented as the author Judith Frankle herself, who is said to have written a successful PhD dissertation based on her experience. She is also brutalized by it: "But no woman, or man, could control the primitive terror that stalked her. A half-human beast whose brutal lusts stripped every vestige of civilization from her soul. Lusts that transformed Judith Frankle into a shameless savage desperately battling to survive her shocking . . . Nights With Sasquatch." The other, more established, dimension of the popular Sasquatch myth has the Sasquatch colonizing the earth

from outer space, usually so that it can re-evolve after we destroy ourselves. This is much more mythic, since it allows people to believe that the creature is both material and other-worldly at the same time.

The scientific myth, to which Green subscribes, is that the Sasquatch is a relic fossil, probably a Gigantopithecus, which did not become extinct when it was supposed to. I am calling this a myth because there is absolutely no evidence to support it and because it locates the beast in a mythic before-time. I am also reminded that in the 1920s when the Gitksan Indians were trying to explain the Thunderbird to Marius Barbeau, they said it was an "extinct" bird that was no longer seen. It is an all too obvious and readily available category for the anomalous, especially for those who want to bring it out of the goblin universe and into the real world.

This does not mean that I am attempting here to explain away the materiality of the Sasquatch, the substantiation of which is the purpose of Green's book. Rather, I am attempting to draw attention to the mythic quality of the Sasquatch image in both the popular and scientific imaginations. I expect the popular myth to grow, and as it does Green's book will become increasingly important as the baseline against which the mythic elaboration develops. I am also suggesting that we look at the Sasquatch, and especially its association with UFOs, in the manner suggested by Carl Jung in his book *Flying Saucers* (1969:27): "We have here a golden opportunity to see how a legend is formed, and how in a difficult and dark time for humanity a miraculous tale grows up of an attempted intervention by extra-terrestrial 'heavenly' powers — and this at the very time when human fantasy is seriously considering the possibility of space travel and of visiting or even invading other planets." This is, says Jung, how *living myths* work.

But regardless of how we think about the Sasquatch and whether or not it achieves scientific respectability, John Green is its most hard-working, judicious and objective chronicler, and this book will become the primary source upon which subsequent books on the subject will be based.

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