

MARCHMONT

ASSOCIATION

Charles Hoy Fort (August 6, 1874 – May 3, 1932) - American writer, thinker, humourist and investigator, who gave his name to the term for inexplicable phenomena, **Fortean**, and who sought to promote scientific investigation of the paranormal.



Charles Hoy Fort

Charles Fort and his wife Anna lived at 39 Marchmont Street from 1921 to 1928, having moved there so that Charles could have frequent access to the collections of books and documents held by the British Museum. An unofficial brushed stainless steel commemorative plaque was installed at 39 by an anonymous 'fan' of Fort's, since when the site has been a place of pilgrimage for followers of Forteanism, due to Fort having achieved a degree of cult status long after his untimely death in his fifty-eighth year. The Marchmont Association is intending to replace the unofficial plaque with one of its own official plaques, to be positioned centrally on the brick wall of the first floor flat in which he lived for 8 years.

Fort's life:

Fort was born on 6 August, 1874, in Albany, New York. His family were Dutch, owners of a grocery business and fairly prosperous. Charles was the eldest of three brothers and therefore stood to inherit the family business; Fort had no particular love for his family. His father, a man characterised as 'tyrannical', handed out beatings to the young Charles and helped his son turn very thoroughly against both establishment and dogma.

Charles escaped the family house at 18, working in New York City as a reporter. Aged 22, however, he hitch-hiked his way across Europe in order to see a little of the world. By 1896 he had seen as far as South Africa, where he fell victim to malaria and was forced to return home.

On his return, Fort courted and married Anna Filan. She was a servant in his father's house and Fort was reportedly utterly devoted to her, as she was to him. The couple did not have an easy life. Fort sold stories to newspapers and magazines, but they were never wealthy and moved regularly, living in the Bronx and Hell's Kitchen areas of New York.

The Forts moved to London in 1921, taking up residence at 39 Marchmont Street, near the British Museum, where Charles would spend the majority of his time chasing down interesting data. This habit, which led Fort to become a virtual recluse, was the foundation of his eventual fame. He particularly loved the kind of thing that scientists could not or would not explain, and collected these incidents, which he referred to as 'data', in an almost obsessive fashion. The results of this work could be found stored in a mountain of shoe boxes, along with Fort's collection of objects said to have fallen from the skies.

Despite Fort's reclusive lifestyle - he had few friends and seemed to lack the desire to make many more - his writing reveals a playful and lively intellect at work. He enjoyed challenging the prejudices of the scientific community and engaging in speculation of a sort that might then have been considered Science Fiction. During his stay in England, Fort became convinced that space travel was not only possible but inevitable and made this view public, probably at Speaker's Corner.

Fort returned to New York in 1929, where he continued to work on his notes. He also struck up friendships with the novelist Tiffany Thayer and Aaron Sussman, who in 1931 formed The Fortean Society in honour of their friend. Fort's health began to decline around this time. His eyesight became worse and in 1932 he died of 'an unspecified weakness' which was probably leukaemia. He was interred in the Fort family plot in Albany, New York. His more than 60,000 notes were donated to the New York Public Library.

Fort's Legacy

After Fort's death Anna Fort described an incident which took place after a visit from an Aunt that ended in an argument about money. Distressed, she took to bed and...

... in the night I thought he was sitting on a little bench or couch [...] He said: 'Hello, Momma,' and I was never so glad to see anybody in my whole life.

The works of Charles Fort are still available through *The Fortean Times*/John Brown Publishing, in new editions produced in the 1990s and are recommended reading for anyone with even a passing interest in the paranormal.

- *The Book of the Damned* (1919)
- *New Lands* (1923)
- *Lo!* (1931)
- *Wild Talents* (1932)

Reading Fort's books provides a fascinating insight into his restless mind. Although often seen as antisocial in life, we can see his delight in the subject matter he found so fascinating. For example, Fort notes that although the power of steam had been observed and understood by the Romans (among others), the steam engine wasn't invented until centuries later. He speculated that inventions are only possible when the time is right, noting simply that 'it's steam engines when it is steam-engining time'.

Another maxim of Fort's (written initially to bring a manuscript up to the required line count) was, 'One measures a circle starting anywhere'. This seems to neatly encapsulate his belief that all strange phenomena are related and that if only mainstream science would stop ignoring them there might be a rational explanation for everything, including the possibility that some events or phenomena are truly inexplicable.

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; unexplained disappearances; giant wheels of light in the oceans; and animals found outside their normal ranges. He offered many reports of out-of-place artifacts (OOPArts), 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. Fort also wrote about the interconnectedness of nature and synchronicity. His books seem to center around the idea that everything is connected and that strange coincidences happen for a reason.

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, reports of UFOs in ufology and unconfirmed animals (cryptids) in cryptozoology. Perhaps the word 'Fortean' itself, often used to describe happenings that seemingly defy explanation, is the greatest legacy he could have left. Fort's writings, the activities of The Fortean Society and the publication of *The Fortean Times* all serve to continue the work he began. Independent researchers collating and collecting data from events around the globe continue to build a picture of our world's weirdness, despite these 'new disciplines' not being recognized by most scientists or academics.

ENDS
