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Roger W. Wescott. *Predicting the Past: An Exploration of Myth, Science, and Prehistory*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Roger W. Wescott. *Predicting the Past: An Exploration of Myth, Science, and Prehistory*. Kronos Press, 2000.

This provocative book is what one would expect from Roger Wescott, a dear colleague in the ISCSA for so many years, who died shortly after publication of this work. I still unconsciously look around for him and his wife at our annual conferences; he was always certain to challenge everyone's ideas about reality and history.

Wescott was one of a handful of scholars who disagreed with the predominant view that the present condition of the world is the result of gradual and peaceful evolution. In Roger's belief, which strengthened over time, the Earth has been shaped and reshaped by wrenching catastrophes, some of which traumatized human beings to this very day.

The scholars with whom Wescott allied himself included Ignatius Donnelly (late 19th century) and Immanuel Velikovsky (mid-20th century), who found evidence that catastrophe myths are found in nearly every cultural group around the world. Both of these writers also interpreted the mythic tales of battles in the sky accompanied by earthquakes, floods, and fires, as reflections of real events. Both writers were enormously popular, which did not endear them to mainstream scholars.

Since the scientific acceptance that dinosaurs were rendered extinct by the collision of Earth with a comet or asteroid 60 million years ago, the catastrophist scholars feel vindicated. According to Richard Heinberg, who wrote the Foreword to this book, "Among the neocatastrophists and paradisalists, Roger Wescott stands out as perhaps the most radical of all. An unabashed Velikovskian throughout several decades, he has had time fully to absorb the intellectual and existential shock that accompanies the realization that we live on an accident-prone globe. And he has had the courage and imagination to extend Velikovsky's method beyond the discussion of celestial catastrophes to the real of the pre-catastrophic world."

There is no doubt that Wescott was fearless; he was also an erudite anthropologist and linguist, and apparently also an ethologist, a specialist in animal behavior. The resulting work includes Wescott's thoughts on mythology, human prehistory, and catastrophism. It is indeed incendiary and thought provoking, and I confess that I read it with great interest, often stopping to shout an objection at the (not present) author, abashed at my own reaction. He provoked—and fascinated—me.

Wescott proposes that “during the past 10,000 years, our environment has undergone drastic changes, not only terrestrially but celestially as well.” He believed that the Earth was once a satellite, not of the Sun, but of a large star-like planet orbiting between Mars and Jupiter. With this belief, he takes on all conventional scholarship, including mainstream astronomy. While I do not profess to understand astronomy, my imagination boggles at the notion that our planet was in orbit of another planet, that something collided with that mother planet, and that human beings were not only alive at that time, but survived the cataclysm. The catastrophists believe just that!

Uniformism and Catastrophism.

Wescott defines the positions of the Uniformists and Catastrophists. Uniformism is the geological theory that the natural process which shape our planet’s topography today, such as sedimentation and erosion, are those which shaped it in prehistory, and that the reason why these reshapings often seem so drastic is that they occurred gradually but steadily over vast periods of time.

Catastrophism, by contrast, is the view that only vast physical upheavals of global extent suffice to account for the extinctions of such imposing animals as dinosaurs and mammoths and for such vertical discontinuities as permanently snow-capped mountain ranges and deep undersea canyons. Wescott notes that before the Victorians, scholars took seriously the Biblical traditions in such catastrophes as Noah’s Flood, the destruction of Sodom, and the parting of the Red Sea. The Victorians tended to dismiss this as religious myth and accepted instead uniformism as a scientific explanation. It appears to me that there is growing evidence of catastrophic events, but also plenty of evidence of uniformism too.

Wescott, however, leans heavily toward the catastrophic. He rolls up his sleeves for battle, and takes on many accepted scholarly beliefs. First is Eonism, which talks about the age of the universe in terms of billions of years. Wescott places the big catastrophe at only 10,000 years ago, which would certainly affect how we look at things.

He also criticizes the isolationism—or what I might call the narrow specialization—which keeps many scholars from exploring the findings of other disciplines. In this he shares with Aldous Huxley, who always complained that some generalists were essential if we were to understand anything! But isolationism also means to Wescott the belief that the planets in our solar system are so remote from one another and

orbitally so exclusive that they have never had any appreciable effect on one another. He, like Velikovsky, absolutely rejects this view.

Wescott also criticizes something that I thought was gospel—standard radiometric dating. He believes that a great catastrophic event can foul up the clocks, and he offers some interest defense of this theory. There is the case of a well-frozen corpse of a Siberian mammoth, its hide yielded a radio-carbon age of about 40,000 years, whereas the buttercups and other non-Arctic plant foods in its stomach yielded an age of about 6,000 years. I have read this before and cannot account for it. The beast appears fast-frozen too.

In the remainder of the book, Wescott defends his thesis through his awesome knowledge of linguistics, mythology—in which he thoroughly explores Golden Age myths, the Fall, the World Axis, the World Mountain, the Noble Savage, the Matriarchal tradition, and many other elements of universal mythology.

Most interesting to me—yet least provable—is Wescott’s attention to psychological issues. He begins with the syndrome of amnesia that follows a horrifying experience—and the memories that come back through dreams and “flashbacks.” We know this material from contemporary work with people who have been tortured or who experienced the horrors of war. But Wescott takes this back to a catastrophe 10,000 years ago that is still, he says, traumatizing not only human beings but animals as well. I don’t know how one can prove this, but it is certainly stimulating reading.

What can I say—other than reading this book is like having a spirited discussion with a brilliant, eccentric scholar—which is how I remember Roger? I don’t know if what he speculates will ever be validated, but some of it has been—and he certainly points the way to more research. I am still chewing on the idea of the frozen Mastodon with buttercups in its belly. This sounds like a recipe for something interesting.

——— Laina Farhat-Holzman