

BELIEF

A Brief History of “Mass Hysteria” in Australia

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“Wherever we have strong emotions we are liable to fool ourselves.”

– Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*.

Abstract: A combination of pseudoscience, rumours of perceived importance, fervent wishful or apocalyptic thinking, and ignorance of the fallibility of human perception and memory, have fostered several instances of ‘mass hysteria’ in Australia. Examples include the persistence of mass sightings of the Tasmanian ‘Tiger’, the Adelaide ‘Earthquake Panic’ of 1975–76, the South Australian ‘End of the World’ scare of 1909, and both historical and contemporary sighting waves of unidentified flying objects.

There are numerous Australian examples of mass panics and ‘crazes’ that have been traditionally labelled as ‘mass hysteria’. Most books on social psychiatry and collective behaviour cite cases in other parts of the world, and typically label the behaviour as examples of ‘mass psychoses’ or ‘group irrationality’.

I would argue that such ‘hysterical’ episodes can potentially occur to any group, and that most participants are ‘normal’ people who see what they expect to see relative to their social and cultural expectations. History is replete with accounts. While Australians may consider themselves the exception – that it cannot happen to people in a modern, educated society – there is a rich history of such occurrences. By examining such episodes from the past, perhaps we will be better equipped to recognise and prevent repeat occurrences in the future.

The End of the World

On the night of September 25, 1909, without warning, an extraordinarily brilliant display of the Aurora Australis (Southern Lights) appeared over Adelaide. Thousands of people in the city and surrounding communities became panic-stricken, believing the end of the world was at hand. At Hog Bay on Kangaroo Island, many of those who filled the streets began to

kneel and pray. Many of the thousands who jammed Rundle Street in Adelaide were in near panic before realising the true nature of the display. Others believed that Mount Gambier had erupted. In Kadina, those believing the world was ending “rapidly sought their friends and the shelter of their homes”, as was the similar case in Yass, where many women became “near hysterical”. At Carcoar, several residents thought the phenomenon was a message from Mars. The telephone lines, flooded with calls, overloaded and ceased to function, further fuelling fears that something terrible was happening.

The following account is from *The Border Chronicle*

AT KEITH

Great excitement prevailed in our little town on Saturday night. When the Aurora lights became visible, many thought the end of the world had come, some refused to allow the ministers to retire to rest, others could be heard offering up their last petitions, where the moaning of distressed men and women made the scene a melancholy one. Some rushed over to the station master, thinking they might [find] comfort there, but he, with hands clasped and a sickly expression on his face exclaimed “We’re done man, the telephone won’t work”. However, towards morning things grew quieter, but on some faces the excitement of the previous evening was visible [the] next day.

The Invasion that Never Happened

Between July 10th and early September 1909, Australians reported seeing mysterious aerial contraptions which were generally believed to have been hostile German Zeppelins on a spy mission, as this rumour spread like wild-fire. Reaction to the rumour caused an Australia-wide panic as thousands began interpreting vague aerial stimuli (stars and planets at night) as Zeppelins. Even the everyday actions of some Australians of German descent were reinterpreted by

people with a spy ‘mind-set’.

A similar scare occurred in New Zealand during the same period.

Both ‘hysterias’ were prompted by heated war rhetoric between Britain and Germany. The Germans at the time were the recognised leaders in airship technology. That Germany neither possessed the desire nor the capability to invade Australia and New Zealand by Zeppelin was irrelevant. Of crucial significance was that people believed it was possible, and accordingly, the stage was set for people to begin seeing enemy craft dotting the skies.

Most sightings came from Australia’s east coast. The following account is typical, appearing in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 10, 1909, page 7:

A good deal of excitement was occasioned to-night by the appearance of a mysterious light or an illuminated body to the south-east of the town. Quite a number of people gathered in the main street, and speculation was rife as to the meaning of the strange illumination. Above the large light some large body was distinctly visible, as the rays of light were reflected upon its surface. The supposition generally held is that the mysterious floating light is either a large balloon or airship. That this object is not stationary has been proved by getting objects near at hand in line with the light, and in a few minutes it was found to move a considerable distance. Passengers on to-night’s Melbourne express were afforded a view of the mysterious night-light which has been observed floating above the southern highlands and coast between Mittagong and Wollongong during the last two nights. When the express reached Hilltop quite a score of passengers crowded onto the platform at each end of the corridor carriages on the lookout for the “airship”, as it was called. Their vigilance was soon rewarded, for as soon as the express hauled out from the deep cuttings, a large, bright light became visible a few miles away towards the coast. Apparently it was in motion, and could be plainly distinguished from the stars, but the distance was too great to detect the nature of the floating body. Its elevation appeared to be about 2000 ft

In some cases witnesses could even discern the pilot and vividly described the airship wings and/or propellers.

How can so many seemingly rational people begin observing nonexistent objects? The best explanation that modern psychology can offer is that once the Zeppelin invasion rumour began, people looked skyward with intense interest, and not knowing much about perceptual psychology or astronomy, were prone to misperceiving stars and planets. If one stares at these heavenly bodies for a lengthy period, they appear to move. This is known as the ‘autokinetic effect’.

Social psychologist Richard Beeson outlines the process: “A viewer in a completely dark room seeing one pinpoint of light experiences a visual stimulus without its normal attendant visual context. Up, down, back, forward, far and near exist in relation to other stimuli and when this frame of reference is missing, the light is free to roam in one’s perceptual field. It is for this reason that considerable random motion will be experienced by anyone viewing the light.”

The Adelaide Earthquake Panic of 1976

In November of 1975, New Zealand ‘psychic’ John Nash claimed to have received a vision in which Adelaide was to be destroyed by a massive tidal wave and earthquake at midday on January 19th 1976. As a result of his prediction, several people sold their homes. Others left to the hills for the day. While these actions may seem extreme or crazy to us today, it makes good sense when you examine the circumstances. Many of those who sold their homes and moved out, or just left for the day, were first generation Greeks and Italians. Both countries have a long history of devastating earthquakes. They are also highly superstitious populations, with the belief in ‘psychic’ powers and the supernatural typically more prevalent than in Australian society.

Media coverage

Mass media coverage of the predictions was intense, and despite a chiding of the claim by most reporters, for many, particularly recent migrants with an inadequate command of English, the high profile of the prediction only created more consternation.

Movie theatres also got into the act, playing the film “Earthquake” and making references to “the big day” in their ads, such as “Why wait until January 19th?”. Church crusades began featuring sermons solely devoted to what the Bible says about earthquakes, like the one by Leo Harris at the Adelaide Crusade Centre just two days before the predicted event.

Numerous establishments capitalised on the publicity by advertising “earthquake parties”. The Old Lion Hotel

in North Adelaide held a “pre-earthquake party” the night before, with an ad stating “Any rumbling felt on the 19th will only be a shock reaction from our crashing success the night before”. By far the biggest party was held on Glenelg Beach in the presence of South Australian Premier Don Dunstan, who believed that such a publicity move would help to alleviate any fears. In retrospect, the party of some fifteen hundred residents who appeared, and the accompanying local and international hoopla surrounding it, probably made the situation worse.

When January 19th finally arrived ... nothing happened, with the exception of numerous death threats on Mr Nash’s life by some disgruntled former Adelaide homeowners who had up and moved.

It is interesting to note that Nash claimed to have received his vision of doom as Adelaide was “a city of sin”, mainly because the State Government had recently passed a bill legalising homosexuality in private among consenting adults. The Reverend S.J. Harris of the Metropolitan Community Church, which had a large gay population, claimed that Nash was a former member who had tried to convert members to a ‘straight’ life. Nash also reportedly said that God had personally told him that Reverend Harris would be struck down by a severe illness in October 1975, and his church could collapse the following month. Harris later commented: “As it is now January 1976, I being in excellent health and the church growing steadily, it is apparently safe to assume that Mr Nash’s ‘hotline to God’ has run cold.”

Phantom Creatures

My favourite modern example of Australian ‘mass hysteria’ involves sightings of phantom creatures – cougars, Bigfoot, and the Tasmanian ‘Tiger’. A typical example can be found in the sightings of large hairy ape-like creatures (popularly referred to as Yowies or Yahoos) in South Australia which can be traced back to Aboriginal lore.

As of 1986, there were 267 known Tasmanian ‘Tiger’ or thylacine sightings that had been reported to the various Australian wildlife agencies on the mainland, with over 300 separate sightings on Tasmania. There are reports from all mainland cities, including Darwin and, believe it or not, Alice Springs!

A typical report appeared in the Adelaide *Advertiser* of January 26, 1966, describing a Mount Gambier man who claimed that a ‘tiger’ came within 15 yards of his car:

A mysterious animal “like a great, overgrown cat” was seen early today in the Upper South-East. Mr R.C. Barker, of Orr Street, Mount Gambier, was driving between Keith and Naracoorte when he saw the animal “bound across the road like a tiger”. Mr Barker said he saw the cat-like creature by his headlights 44 miles from Naracoorte. “It had black and white or gray and white vertical stripes and was about the same size as a sheep-dog,” he said. “The animal crossed the road and disappeared into some trees.”

All of these sightings have occurred despite the absence of any records of Europeans observing thylacines in continental Australia, as scientists believe they were extinct on the mainland by the time white settlers arrived. Despite 50 years of sightings (the last authenticated ‘Tiger’ died in 1936), no one has yet produced a body or clear photo. As in the case of phantom Zeppelins and hollow earthquake prophecies, the ability of humans to see what they expect, or in the case of the ‘Tiger’ hope to see, is well founded.

Ground Markings

‘Strange’ ground markings which are occasionally found across Australia have often been interpreted within an extraterrestrial context. One hundred years ago, citizens would not have thought twice about the origin of such circles – these ‘fairy rings’ were the obvious result of supernatural spirits.

Prominent Australian UFO researcher Keith Basterfield has conducted an in-depth study of ‘mysterious’ circular ground markings, and found “no strong evidence” that they are caused by UFOs (defined here as an ET spacecraft). Yet this does not stop people from commonly assuming that they are ET-related. There is a variety of causes, from lightning strikes on the ground to the most common cause, fungus that grows in a circular pattern.

One of Basterfield’s most intriguing cases involved strange circular indentations in the middle of a wheat field near Wokurna, South Australia, in December 1973. The 2.4 metre circle was surrounded by flattened wheat in an anti-clockwise direction. After inquiring with experts at the South Australian State Museum, the RAAF and the police forensic squad, the CSIRO determined the probable cause: kangaroos. Animal droppings had been abundant within the circle, and according to CSIRO experts, when resting, kangaroos have been observed to pivot their bodies in a swirling

motion. Many people, however, were quick to label this case as the product of an alien technology.

Ted Philips of the Missouri State Highway Department in the US has made a hobby of collecting cases of alleged UFO landing sites worldwide, investigating 500 first hand. Of the 1000 total known cases from 57 countries, there is not one case to date in which residue left behind could not have been caused by natural processes or 1991 technology.

Recently, the origin and nature of mysterious crop circles have been highly publicised in England. This phenomenon has been occurring for centuries and is explainable via mother nature. Meteorologists may not fully understand the exact mechanism, but this does not mean ETs are responsible. By the same token, just because every detail of the Egyptian pyramids is not fully explained, it does not mean that extraterrestrials were responsible. While possible, it is highly improbable.

The answer to the English circle ‘mystery’ appears to be temporary wind vortices. Consider the following eye-witness account from *The Journal of Meteorology* (May-June) 1984, page 141:

One evening there were about 50 of us skywatching along the Salisbury Road. Suddenly, the grass began to sway before our eyes and laid itself flat in a clockwise spiral, just like the opening of a lady's fan. A perfect circle was completed in less than half a minute, all the time accompanied by a high-pitched humming sound. It was still there the next day.

Mass Hysteria

While ‘mass hysteria’ is a confusing term that has been used to identify a variety of behaviours – crazes, fads, panics, riots – it is important to note that contrary to popular and scholarly opinions, there is not a single shred of rigorous scientific evidence to support the view that any of those involved in mass ‘hysterical’ episodes are mentally disturbed or irrational. In fact, I would argue that is perfectly normal behaviour, and that those involved are typically conforming to group norms.

‘Mass hysteria’ is commonly believed to occur in ‘primitive’ or ‘backward’ societies. To most people, the term conjures up images of ignorant natives dancing frantically around a campfire while worshipping some stone idol. Yet, the history of the Western world clearly shows that ‘mass hysteria’ is not restricted to ‘primitive’, uncivilised societies. Human beings are

human beings whether they are in an Aboriginal tribe or working on Wall Street. We are tempted to laugh at Aboriginals fearful that a lunar eclipse may portend the end of the world, yet when Wall Street panics, it somehow seems different.

The modern Westerner is no more sophisticated than those living in ‘primitive’ or undeveloped countries. Aboriginals who join in an all-night dance frenzy while half naked and covered with ash can seem far removed from civilised life. Yet, many of the same people who find such behaviour unbecoming, will think nothing of visiting a night club and wearing Western attire: makeup, fingernail polish, wigs, false lashes, bra, shoulder and buttock enhancers, perfume, ear rings and lipstick. The rules have changed, but the same old game remains. It is relatively easy for modern Westerners to criticise the widespread belief in fairies during the last century and view it as a myth, wondering how such ignorant people could have been so gullible as to have been caught up in such actions. Yet, many of these same individuals are unable to see beyond witch crazes and flying saucer scares when they occur.

Whether examining the history of mass panics, fads or scares worldwide, the most appropriate question to ask is not if, but when another chapter in the history of human expressions will be added. Only through the widespread application of a quality educational system do we begin to stand a chance to break the cycle of ignorance that contributes to so many ‘mass hysterias’ and gullible beliefs. ■

A New Age for Croatia?

The Weekend Australian of December 14 – 15 reported from Croatia about Ms Mirjana Gracan who runs the Society for the Holistic Development of Mankind. Ms Gracan reckons that the New Age of peace and harmony is due to dawn any time now and set her HQ up in a village “because of its positive psychic energies”. Shortly thereafter the village suffered an air attack and came within artillery range of Serbian army units.

The Society teaches “women’s eco-awareness, holistic medicine, inner ecology and alternative folk dancing”. Alternative folk dancing, whatever that is, should give a lot of comfort to those caught in the middle of a tragic and vicious conflict. ■