

James E. McDonald

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James Edward McDonald (May 7, 1920 – June 13, 1971) was an American physicist. He is best known for his research regarding UFOs. McDonald was senior physicist at the Institute for Atmospheric Physics and professor in the Department of Meteorology, University of Arizona, Tucson.

McDonald campaigned in support of expanding UFO studies during the mid and late 1960s, arguing that UFOs represented an important unsolved mystery which had not been adequately studied by science. He was one of the more prominent figures of his time who argued in favor of the extraterrestrial hypothesis as a plausible, but not completely proved, model of UFO phenomena.

McDonald interviewed over 500 UFO witnesses, uncovered many important government UFO documents, and gave important presentations of UFO evidence. He testified before Congress during the UFO hearings of 1968.^[1] McDonald also gave a famous talk called "Science in Default" to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). It was a summary of the current UFO evidence and a critique of the 1969 Condon Report UFO study.^[2]

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Early life and career

McDonald was born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota. He served as a cryptographer in the United States Navy during World War II, and afterwards, married Betsy Hunt; they would have six children.

McDonald studied at the University of Omaha, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and earned his Ph.D. at Iowa State University. He taught at the University of Chicago for a year, then in 1953, he was invited to help

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Born	May 7, 1920 Duluth, Minnesota
Died	June 13, 1971 (aged 51) Tucson, Arizona
Education	PhD. Iowa State University
Occupation	Physicist Ufologist
Organization	Institute for Atmospheric Physics, American Association for the Advancement of Science, National Academy of Sciences, American Meteorological Society, NICAP, APRO

establish a meteorology and atmospheric program at the University of Arizona as a professor of meteorology. McDonald eventually became the head of the Institute of Atmospheric Physics, but resigned as its administrator after about a year because he preferred to teach and research rather than oversee the department. He taught courses from introductory to graduate levels, received good evaluations, and was fondly regarded by his students.^[3]

His specialty was cloud formation and physics, but his natural curiosity led him to read widely in many other scientific fields. McDonald was a widely recognized authority of atmospheric phenomena: he published many articles in peer reviewed journals, and contributed to several standard meteorology textbooks.^[3] He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Meteorological Society.

McDonald was one of many experts who testified before congress in the 1960s against the development of supersonic transport airplanes, for fear that they would damage the ozone layer.^[3]

Most of McDonald's life is known through the authorized biography *Firestorm: Dr. James E. McDonald's Fight For UFO Science* (2003) by Ann Druffel.

UFO studies

In 1954, while driving through the Arizona desert with two meteorologists, McDonald spotted an unidentified flying object none of the men could readily identify. Though a rather unspectacular sighting of a distant point of light, this sighting would spur McDonald's interest in UFOs. By the late 1950s he was quietly investigating UFO reports in Arizona, and he had also joined NICAP, then the largest and most prominent civilian UFO research group in the nation. Given his training in atmospheric physics, McDonald was able to examine UFO reports in greater detail than most other scientists, and was able to offer explanations for some previously unexplained reports. Using his security clearance with the US government, he also uncovered a number of well-documented UFO reports from the US Air Force's Project Blue Book, which he judged deeply puzzling even after stringent analysis.

By the mid-1960s, McDonald began speaking about UFOs more openly. McDonald's first detailed, public discussion of UFOs was in a lecture given before an American Meteorological Society assembly in Washington D.C. on October 5, 1966. Entitled "The Problem of UFOs", McDonald's speech was the first of many given to an overflow audience. McDonald declared that scientific scrutiny should be directed towards the small number of "unknowns", which he defined as a UFO reported by a "credible and trained observer as machine-like 'craft' which remained unidentified in spite of careful investigation." He noted that the vast majority of UFOs could become Identified flying objects, and, in his estimation, only about 1% of UFOs were true "unknowns". McDonald also lambasted the U.S. Air Force for what he saw as their inept handling of UFO studies.^[3]

In 1967 the Office of Naval Research granted McDonald a small budget in order to conduct his own UFO research, ostensibly to study the idea that some UFOs were misidentified clouds. He was able to peruse the files of Project Blue Book at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, and eventually concluded that the Air Force was mishandling UFO evidence. Following the Robertson Panel's recommendations in 1953, the Air Force was following a debunking directive towards UFO reports, and only discussing UFO cases which were considered solved by a mundane explanation. All unexplained UFO cases were classified "secret" and not released to the public (see Robertson Panel for further information).

McDonald was particularly disturbed that astronomer J. Allen Hynek, had not alerted the scientific community to the fact that Project Blue Book was withholding some of the most anomalous and compelling UFO reports.^[3] Hynek argued that if he had exposed this, the Air Force would have dumped him as Blue Book's consultant;^[3]

Hynek was the only scientist formally studying UFOs for the government. This was the beginning of a rift between the two men that would never be entirely reconciled.

From the mid-1960s, McDonald devoted much of his time to trying to persuade journalists, politicians and his colleagues that UFOs were the most pressing issue facing American science. He gave dozens of lectures, and wrote volumes of letters to newspapers, to his peers (especially at scientific journals) and to politicians. McDonald wrote to the Air Force Office of Scientific Research, arguing that they needed to radically shift what he saw as their superficial perspective towards UFOs. In response, the Air Force determined that they needed to "fireproof" themselves against McDonald's statements because of his unquestionable qualifications and credibility.^[3]

He managed to secure limited support from a few prominent figures, such as United Nations Secretary General U Thant, who arranged for McDonald to speak to the UN's Outer Space Affairs Group on June 7, 1967. Additionally in 1967, McDonald noted, "There is no sensible alternative to the utterly shocking hypothesis that UFOs are extraterrestrial probes".^[4]

In his Statement on Unidentified Objects to the House Committee on Science and Astronautics, McDonald made the following remarks regarding types of UFO accounts.

The scope of the present statement precludes anything approaching an exhaustive listing of categories of UFO phenomena: much of what might be made clear at great length will have to be compressed into my remark that the scientific world at large is in for a shock when it becomes aware of the astonishing nature of the UFO phenomenon and its bewildering complexity. I make that terse comment well aware that it invites easy ridicule; but intellectual honesty demands that I make clear that my two years' study convinces me that in the UFO problem lie scientific and technological questions that will challenge the ability of the world's outstanding scientists to explain - as soon as they start examining the facts.^[5]

In the same statement, he said he had "become convinced that the scientific community ... has been casually ignoring as nonsense a matter of extraordinary scientific importance."

McDonald often used guarded wording in his discussions of the extraterrestrial hypothesis, such as once describing the extraterrestrial hypothesis as the "least unsatisfactory" explanation for UFOs. He seemed to regard the extraterrestrial hypothesis not as unimpeachable fact, but as a working model. McDonald's acquaintance George Early, a prominent engineer with the United Aircraft Association and also a NICAP member, said, "I don't think Jim was 100% sold on the UFOs being extraterrestrial spacecraft with beings in them ... His essential thrust was that here is a topic worthy of scientific study which has not been studied scientifically, and we should find out what the answer is. He had a definite commitment to the truth, and if the truth turned out to be something else [other than the extraterrestrial hypothesis], he wouldn't have backed away from it".^[3]

The Condon Committee Controversy

Following a widely publicized series of mass UFO sightings in southern Michigan in 1966, McDonald became one of several scientists to urge various authorities in the federal government and scientific community to undertake a formal study of UFOs. This public pressure, combined with pressure from some members of Congress (such as then-Congressman Gerald Ford), led the federal government to create the Condon Committee in late 1966. Based at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and named after Committee Chairman Dr. Edward Condon, a prominent physicist, the committee was advertised as an unbiased, objective, and thorough investigation into the UFO phenomenon.

Initially, McDonald shared the early general enthusiasm towards the Condon Committee, and given his scientific credentials and interest in UFOs he offered to serve on the committee. When he was denied a position on the committee, McDonald still agreed to assist in other ways with the committee's work. However, McDonald and other UFO researchers soon became disillusioned with the committee, and in particular with its chairman, Dr. Condon, and his chief assistant, Dr. Robert Low. Condon's public comments to reporters ridiculing UFO eyewitnesses and his generally dismissive attitude towards the subject led many UFO researchers to doubt whether the investigation would be as neutral and unbiased as it proclaimed. McDonald formed alliances with those on the Condon Committee who disagreed with Condon's leadership and who wanted to undertake long-term UFO studies.

McDonald played a major role in the controversy regarding the Condon Committee when one of the committee's investigators - who disagreed with Condon's attitudes - privately gave him a copy of the so-called "Trick Memo". The memorandum, which was written by Condon's chief assistant Dr. Robert Low, outlined how the Committee could reach a predetermined conclusion that all UFO cases were explainable in mundane terms, while simultaneously appearing neutral during the actual investigation process. The "Trick Memo" seemed to confirm his worst fears about the Condon Committee's bias regarding the UFO phenomenon. Following McDonald's release to the public of the now-infamous "Trick Memo", Project Chair Edward Condon tried unsuccessfully to get McDonald fired from his tenured faculty position at the University of Arizona.

When the Condon Committee issued its final report in 1969, Dr. Condon wrote in the foreword to the report that, based on the committee's investigations, his conclusion was that there was nothing unusual about UFO reports; thus further scientific research into the UFO phenomenon was not worthwhile and should be discouraged. Condon's conclusions about UFOs were generally accepted by most scientists and the "mainstream" news media. McDonald, however, became one of a small number of scientists and researchers who wrote detailed critiques and rebuttals of Condon's conclusions regarding UFOs. McDonald was particularly disturbed by the fact that, while Condon in his foreword had claimed that all UFO reports could be explained as hoaxes or misidentifications of manmade or natural objects or phenomena, the Report itself actually listed over 30% of the cases it investigated as "unexplained".

Conflict with Philip Klass

McDonald engaged in an often adversarial relationship with aviation journalist and skeptic Philip J. Klass, who argued in his first book that nearly all UFOs can be explained by ball lightning.^[6] At first, the duo exchanged cordial letters on the subject. Klass was rather guarded in his application of the plasma theory at the time, and McDonald agreed that it might explain a small portion of UFO reports. However, Klass quickly expanded his hypothesis arguing that most if not all UFOs, and even cases of alleged alien abduction, could be explained as plasmas. McDonald thought this was absurd, and offered a detailed rebuttal against Klass's thesis.^[7]

In late 1967, McDonald secured a modest grant from the Office of Naval Research in order to study cloud formations in Australia. While in Australia, McDonald conducted some UFO research on his own time. Klass mounted an extended, concerted campaign against McDonald, arguing that he had squandered government funds. The ONR responded by announcing that they knew of McDonald's UFO interests and had no objections to his personal hobbies. The University of Arizona came to McDonald's defense, announcing that McDonald's UFO research was done on his own time, and had no adverse impact on his regular teaching and research duties at the university.

Klass then demonstrated that McDonald was spending at least small sums of government research funds on UFO research, and the ONR, apparently fearing controversy, decided to no longer fund McDonald's cloud research.

1968: Congressional UFO testimony

McDonald spoke before the United States Congress for a UFO hearing in 1968.^[1] In part, he stated his opinion that "UFOs are entirely real and we do not know what they are, because we have laughed them out of court. The possibility that these are extraterrestrial devices, that we are dealing with surveillance from some advanced technology, is a possibility I take very seriously".^[8] McDonald emphasized that he accepted the extraterrestrial hypothesis as a possibility not due to any specific evidence in its favor, but because he judged competing hypotheses as inadequate.

James McDonald did not accept the conclusions of the Condon Report because 30% of the cases studied in the report remained unexplained. The evidence provided in the final report could have substantiated the opposite conclusion (that UFOs warranted much more scientific study) rather than the official conclusion, which was to recommend no further study. *Firestorm*, a biography of McDonald by UFO researcher Ann Druffel, gives a detailed account of McDonald's tireless efforts promoting scientific UFO research.

1969: "Science in Default"

In 1969, McDonald was a speaker at an American Association for the Advancement of Science UFO symposium. There he delivered a lecture, "Science in Default",^[2] which Jerome Clark calls "one of the most powerful scientific defenses of UFO reality ever mounted".^[8] McDonald discussed in detail a handful of well documented UFO cases which seemed, he thought, to defy interpretation by conventional science.

Late life and death

McDonald's UFO efforts were exacting a toll: he was becoming professionally isolated, and his marriage was faltering. Beyond Klass and Condon, McDonald butted heads with many other prominent figures, including Donald H. Menzel of Harvard University. McDonald's personality may have been a factor in these confrontations; even his friends described him as sometimes forceful and impatient, while others, less charitably, called him blunt and abrasive. Additionally, McDonald suffered a public humiliation when in 1970, he agreed to appear before a committee of the United States Congress to provide evidence against the development of the supersonic transport (SST) plane. Like many other atmospheric physicists who testified with him, McDonald was convinced that the plane could potentially harm the Earth's vital but fragile ozone layer. During his testimony Congressman Silvio O. Conte of Massachusetts — whose district contained factories that would help build the SST — tried to discredit McDonald's SST testimony by switching the hearing to a discussion of McDonald's UFO research. Although McDonald defended his UFO work and noted that his evidence regarding the SST had nothing to do with UFOs, Conte bluntly stated that anyone who "believes in little green men" was, in his opinion, not a credible witness. McDonald was deeply humiliated by Conte's mocking attitude, and by the open laughter of some committee members.

In March, 1971, McDonald's wife Betsy told him she wanted a divorce. McDonald seems to have started planning his suicide not long afterwards.^[3] He finished a few articles he was writing (UFO-related and otherwise), and made plans for the storage of his notes, papers, and research. In April 1971 he attempted suicide by shooting himself in the head. He survived, but was blinded and was wheelchair bound. For a short period, McDonald was committed to the psychiatric ward of a Tucson, Arizona hospital. He recovered a degree of peripheral vision, and made plans to return to his teaching position. However, on June 13, 1971, a family, walking along a creek close to the bridge spanning the Canada Del Oro Wash near Tucson, found a body that was later identified as McDonald's. A .38 caliber revolver was found close to him, as well as a suicide note.

Four of McDonald's peers from the University of Arizona wrote a reminiscence of their colleague, calling him "a man of great integrity and great courage. He was loved and admired by a great many people ... he made a lasting impact on many facets of atmospheric sciences ... and he will be missed much more than we now

realize".^[8]

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External links

- Statement on UFOs by James McDonald to the House Committee on Science and Astronautics, 1968 (PDF) (<http://www.ufoevidence.org/Newsite/Files/MacDonaldSubmissionUFOSymposium.pdf>)
- FBI FILE OF DR. JAMES E. McDONALD (<http://www.cufon.org/cufon/fbimcdon.htm>)
- An actual Project Blue Book Report from Dr. McDonald (<http://www.footnote.com/page/394/>)
- Publications of Dr. James McDonald in the field of meteorology (http://puhep1.princeton.edu/~mcdonald/JEMcDonald/bib_jem.pdf)
- MOST CREDIBLE UFOLOGISTS Dr. James E. McDonald (http://www.ufoera.com/articles/the-10-most-prominent-ufologists_1190310839.html)
- Historical Documents from the Phillip Klass collection of (<http://badufos.blogspot.com/2011/12/new-historical-ufo-documents-klass.html>) Robert Sheaffer concerning McDonald and Klass

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