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## The Brown Mountain Lights: Solved! (Again!)

So-called “ghost lights” are reported at various sites worldwide, the term being applied to luminous phenomena that, many claim, defy explanation. However, Rosemary Ellen Guiley in her *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (2000, 156), cautions: “Many reports of ghost lights can be explained naturally, such as car headlights or phosphorescences known as *ignis fatuus*” (literally “foolish fire,” e.g., combustion of marsh gas).<sup>1</sup>

Among the most famous ghost lights are the Marfa Lights, after a town in Texas, reported first by a settler in 1883 (Lindee 1992; Guiley 2000, 156); the Hornet or Ozark Spooklight, south of Joplin, Missouri; and the Brown Mountain Lights, near Morganton, North Carolina, reported since 1913 (Guiley 2000, 156–157; Corliss 1995, 71–72).

There are also ghost lights at sea—for example the Bay Chaleur Fireship, seen off the coast of New Brunswick, Canada, and attributed to the phenomenon of St. Elmo’s fire (Corliss 1995, 72–73).<sup>2</sup> In 1999 at Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, I investigated the Teazer Light, another reputed phantom ship in flames. Although the rare light did not appear to me during a vigil, my research turned up an instance when the

phenomenon proved to have been the moon, just coming over the horizon and being viewed through a bank of fog (Nickell 2001, 188–189).

Here is my report on the Brown Mountain mystery, based on lengthy research and two visits my wife, Diana, and I made to Brown Mountain in 2014 (the first, however, becoming a fiasco when the area was shrouded in fog!). (See figure 1.)

### Evolution of the Lights

In investigating the Brown Mountain Lights, I discovered that the phenomena—plural—have evolved over time, along with explanations for it. I consider that there are three main historic periods or phases:

1. *Before 1913: Myths and Superstitions.* A number of legends are associated with Brown Mountain. A sign at the Brown Mountain overlook (on highway 181, at mile marker 20, north of Morganton) claims that “For hundreds of years, people have seen mysterious lights floating above Brown Mountain.” Although no historical record is cited or, indeed, appears to exist, the text nevertheless asserts: “According to Cherokee legend, in 1200 the Cherokee fought a great bat-

tle near Brown Mountain against the Catawba Indians and many warriors died. The lights are said to be the spirits of Cherokee maidens who search in vain for their loved ones.” The sign’s text continues:

A more recent legend says the lights are caused by the spirit of a heartbroken woman searching the mountain at night by torch light looking for her fiancé who failed to come for her on their wedding day. Another legend tells the story of a young mother-to-be, murdered by her wicked husband. The lights materialized to help neighbors find the young woman’s body, and still appear today reminding evildoers that their crimes will be revealed.

This latter tale is elaborated into an entire chapter in *Dixie Spirits* (Coleman 2011, 173–179), a book with many laughable errors and a complete absence of references. (However, see Walser 1980, 44–45, for earlier sources.) Somehow the author—ghost ballyhooer Christopher K. Coleman—has discovered a wealth of detail about “Belinda” and “Jim” (as he calls the supposed ghosts). Not only are no sources cited, but elsewhere in his book (2011, 280) he actually disparages such “scholarly trappings”—just what could help us decide whether he was relating folklore or mostly writing fakelore.

Still another legend of the Brown Mountain Lights was told to me by a young man visiting the overlook. Supposedly, an old slave had become lost and wandered with a lantern, trying to find his way back to his master's home but failing, a pursuit that he now perpetually continues as a ghost. This is a *variant* (as folklorists say) of a legend related by Joshua P. Warren (2014, 8):

Brown Mountain was named after a plantation owner who lived in the area in the 1800s. He was kind to his slaves. One night he ventured onto the mountain to hunt. When he did not return, one of his slaves took a lantern and scoured the ridge for him. He, too, was never seen again. Today you can still see the "faithful old slave's" lantern burning as his spirit still searches for his lost master.

As I note, however, this tale is, in turn, quite similar to a narrative from West Virginia about the Cole Mountain Light (near Moorefield), attributed to the mid-1800s. An important difference is that the hunter at Cole Mountain was not a man named Brown but a landowner named Charles Jones (Musick 1977, 65–67, 184). It is evident that the legend of the slave searching with a lantern is what folklorists term a *migratory* legend—one known in widely different locales but able to become attached to particular places, whereupon "they are said to be *localized*, or *local legends*" (Brunvand 1978, 106). Finally, the Brown Mountain Lights have been claimed by some mountain folk as a form of divine warning (Norman and Scott 1995, 266–267).

2. 1913–1960: *Records and Theories*. The first known reference to the lights in print was in the September 13, 1913, *Charlotte Daily Observer*.<sup>3</sup> In 1913 a U.S. Geological Survey geologist concluded the lights were those of locomotives, while a U.S. Weather Bureau report of 1919 explained the phenomenon as an electrical discharge compared to South America's "Andes Light," although the writer had not actually visited the site.

A serious investigation was carried out in 1922 by geologist George Rog-



Figure 1. The author at Brown Mountain, NC (the plateau-like ridge to the right). [Author's photo by Diana Harris.]

### He called attention to the unstable atmospheric conditions in the basin-like area that is almost surrounded by mountains.

ers Mansfield (1922, 18), who spent two weeks in the area. His report concluded that the lights were "clearly not of unusual nature or origin" consisting of automobile headlights (about 47 percent), locomotive headlights (33 percent), and stationary lights and brush fires (10 percent each). While others have postulated swamp gas, luminous electrical discharge, mirages, and still other possibilities (Warren 2014, 11, 20), Mansfield discredits such phenomena.

Mansfield perhaps too quickly

dismissed the suggestion that some lights were mirages. Yet he called attention to the unstable atmospheric conditions in the basin-like area that is almost surrounded by mountains. With dense air comes an increase in refractiveness (the bending of light waves). Fine particles like dust and mist can obscure and scatter the refracted light, as well as impart to it the yellowish and reddish tints that are often reported. Therefore the light is especially active during a clearing spell following a rain, as many observers have noted. When the mist becomes quite dense, the light is obscured. The effect of the variations in atmospheric density is to sometimes increase and at other times diminish the lights' intensity. Thus a light may suddenly appear then effectively disappear, as frequently observed (Mansfield 1922, 7–15). In his conclusions Mansfield (1922, 16) reasoned:

As the basin and its atmospheric conditions antedate the earliest settlement of the region, it is possible that even among the first settlers some favorably situated light may have attracted attention by seeming to flare and then diminish or go out. As the country became more thickly settled the number

of chances for such observations would increase. Before the advent of electric lights, however, it is doubtful whether such observations could have been sufficiently numerous to cause much comment, though some persons may have noted and remarked upon them.

3. *After 1960: UFOs and Other Paranormalities.* Although legends mostly interpret the Brown Mountain Lights as ghosts, since about 1960 tales of UFOs, alien contact, and “interdimensional beings” have proliferated there, as well as of “little people, fairies and such” (Warren 2014, 8). For example, a local man named Ralph Lael claimed to be in telepathic communication with the lights, which

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he said directed him to a secret crystal-filled cave. From there, he said, alien humanoids from a planet called Pewam took him on space trips as they advised him how to save Earth. Lael operated the Outer Space Rock Shop Museum, where he exhibited an “alien mummy.” A grainy photo shows it looking for all the world like a carnival sideshow fake. However, since Lael died, the whereabouts of the “creature” have become unknown (Warren 2014, 5, 15).

In 1990, a book by “Commander X” identified Brown Mountain as one of several other “underground alien bases” (Warren 2014, 15). Thus Brown Mountain is counted among

such extraterrestrial conspiracies as the MJ-12 crashed-saucer reports, animal mutilations, Men in Black, and claims of secret bases on the moon.

Meanwhile, the lights’ early folkloric identity as ghost lights resurfaced as part of the ghosthunting craze of modern times. Thus amateur enthusiasts are drawn to the mountain as to an old house, graveyard, or other “haunted” site.

We see not only that the Brown Mountain Lights have evolved but that they have done so as cultural beliefs and expectations changed. It appears that as the lights were adapted first to the isolated local lore, they later began to be influenced by various encroachments—migrating folktales, visits by outside scientists and others—and finally they attracted fringe notions from America’s burgeoning UFO and ghost-hunting mythologies.

### Investigating on Site

Various sites offer views of Brown Mountain, which is a flat-topped or “plateaulike” formation with a maximum elevation of approximately 2,600 feet. However, we chose the overlook on highway 181, which is described as “by far the best spot to see Brown Mountain” (Warren 2014, 18). (Again, see figure 1.)

Following a picnic dinner at the site in the early evening, I was sitting in the car when I saw an extremely bright flash on the mountainside. Startled, I got out and immediately realized that I had seen a firefly! I was later amused to learn that “some have even attributed the lights to giant fireflies” (Warren 2014, 16) or, more reasonably, on rare instances, to fireflies flying near a person “yet appearing unduly large because his eyes were focused on the distant hillside” (Mansfield 1922, 6).

As dark set in, I interacted with several people there, mostly from a family who looked for the lights with me. We saw, in addition to airplanes, lights that we attributed to automobiles and to Morganton town lights,

as well as to a distant tower’s red flashing light. Ghost light promoters will be quick to say that we did not see the “true” Brown Mountain Lights, but which are they?

The lights are reported in widely varying descriptions. One source (Loven et al. 1908) encountered a light “like a toy fire balloon, a distant ball . . . much smaller than the full moon, much larger than any star and very red.” Another (Perry 1919) stated he saw a “glowing ball of light, slightly yellow and lasting half a minute.” Again, a witness (Gregory n.d.) described a light “like a ball of incandescent gas, in which a seething motion could be observed.” Still another (Harris 1921) reported “a pale white light, as one seen through a ground glass globe,” having a halo around it.

At least those describe single, orb-like lights, despite the different colors. These are ever-changing; states Warren (2014, 2–3): “The lights frequently begin as a red glow, flaring into white. They can also appear as orange, blue, green or yellow.” A light can last from six seconds to over a minute, “especially when floating into the air over the ridge.” Also, rather unpredictably: “One orb can divide into several, the smaller ones eventually combining to form a large one again. They might seem to ‘ooze’ around the trees and drift over the ridge; dwindle and fade away, or simply wink and vanish.”

Yet again, according to a pair of writers who acknowledge that “Descriptions vary from one observer to another” (Norman and Scott 1995, 266): “A minister described the light as cone-shaped and larger than a star. When two more arose, he, and his sons who were with him, watched through field glasses. The lights rose high in the sky and terminated.”

Moreover, the lights are reported in a still more bewildering variety, for example as “red and white shooting lights” (Hauck 1996, 311), “the fey array of lights dancing before the slopes of Brown Mountain,” and “like flaming balls shooting from a roman candle,” as well as “multi-colored orbs

of light [that] appear to rise higher and higher in the air, sometimes darting about, sometimes zooming straight up the slopes” (Coleman 2011, 173). As well, they are “sometimes moving so fast and in such numbers that it is impossible to count them all. Some lights fade away as they rise; others, however, expand as they ascend and then burst in mid-air like silent fireworks” (Coleman 2011, 173–174).

### Mystery Still Solved

Apparently unaware or unconvinced of the powerful effect of the atmosphere on lights, one proponent of the mystery insists that “the paranormal lights . . . often move in strange ways and can change color before your eyes, unlike the stationary lights from normal sources, or car lights that always move on the same route” (Warren 2014, 18). It is easy to be mystified. Experts in the causes of nocturnal light UFOs know this well. Allan Hendry (1979, 26) notes that not only color change but motion effects can be created by atmospheric refraction, turning, for example, a celestial light into a flying saucer, and something as simple as a cloud can cause “dramatic ‘disappearance’ acts.”

In 1977, a visiting team of scientists from Oak Ridge National Laboratory aimed a distant arc light to a point west of Brown Mountain where observers waited. The blue-white beam appeared as an “orange-red orb apparently hovering several degrees above Brown Mountain’s crest.” The scientists concluded that most of the sightings were indeed refractions of lights in the distance (Clark 1993, 55). This supports Mansfield’s observations and deductions of 1922.

Several more recent researchers have also spent time studying the lights, only to conclude that they were produced by campfires, vehicle headlights, airplanes, and distant town lights. One researcher called attention to a few reports that could describe the rare phenomenon of ball lighting (Washburn 2012). Moreover, the lights are not limited to Brown Mountain but in fact have been reported throughout the entire area (Warren 2014, 2).

Proponents of the “mystery” are quick to challenge the scientific explanations. But as Rosemary Ellen Guiley (2000, 156) acknowledges, “Ghost lights have a power to fascinate, and some individuals who see them do not want the mystique spoiled by an explanation.” Neither do writers selling mystery. Whenever one explanation is offered, they describe other eyewitness reports (or alleged reports, since often no sources are given) that supposedly rule out that cause. They suggest, therefore, that no scientific explanation solves the “mystery” of Brown Mountain (Coleman 2011, 176; Floyd 1993, 57–58). We should refuse to fall for such tricks. The evidence is clear: *There is no single explanation because there is no single phenomenon*. Just as we know that not all UFOs are weather balloons, not all Brown Mountain lights have a single cause.

Certainly, automobiles, trains, and other mundane sources have been responsible for most of the lights. The response of locals, relying on folklore—that the phenomena occurred long before there were such vehicles—is based on “exceedingly slight” evidence (Clark 1993, 55). More recently have come various potential light sources, such as off-road vehicles (ORV) and campers that “are commonly mistaken for paranormal illuminations”—an ORV park having been installed in the mid-1980s (Warren 2014, 7, 14).

As with UFOs, some lights will remain unidentified—not because they are inherently mysterious but because they are just eyewitness reports or snapshots with so many variable factors. But to claim that something unknown (negative evidence) is therefore paranormal is to engage in the logical fallacy of arguing from ignorance: drawing a conclusion from a lack of knowledge. Consider this the next time Brown Mountain “researchers” engage in their mystifications. ■

### Notes

1. Such ghostly phenomena, often witnessed as dancing lights, are known variously as will-o'-the-wisp, jack-o'-lantern, etc. (Haining 1993, 126).

2. St. Elmo's fire is a luminous electrical dis-

charge, sometimes seen during stormy weather at prominent points of a ship or airplane.

3. A claim by the careless Coleman (2011, 174) that in 1771 William Gerard de Brahm, then British colonial surveyor general of the South District of North America, was “the first white man to view the lights” is untrue. He was simply trying to explain some loud noises in the mountains as spontaneous igniting of “nitrous vapors” (Warren 2014, 4).

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