



Moa Sightings volumes 1,2 and 3 by Bruce Spittle

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A review by Dr Beachcombing in Beachcombing's Bizarre History Blog.htm on 22

December 2010. Available from: <https://beachcombing.wordpress.com/>

Review: Moa Sightings December 22, 2010

When Beachcombing was just a wee sprog, he used to read books and be transported to other worlds. Those were the times when three hundred pages written by John Buchan, Evelyn Waugh or Enid Blyton could set off fire balls in his head. But then Beachcombing lost his innocence – schooling and Cambridge to blame – and the thrill of reading disappeared, like Wordsworth’s vanishing sense of wonder at nature.

Certainly, it is only very rarely that Beachcombing now reads a book that brings him back to the ten-year-old biting his lip, curled up under the duvet: one that connects the intellect with the emotions and then drills into his subconscious. And most recent example, after a couple of quiet years in reading terms, has been Bruce Spittle’s Moa Sightings.

Now the Moa for the unlucky ones who don’t know is the giant flightless bird that used to dwell in New Zealand – Beachcombing recently wrote a post on an alleged nineteenth-century sighting. The debate about the Moa is not whether or not it existed. It did – there is no question. Its bones can be found through much of New Zealand. But rather when the Moa died out.

Scholarly opinion is constantly evolving here, but most would pick a date about 1400 AD for the last Moa death. Others suggest that in some hidden corners of the island the bird survived until 1800 and the first European settlements. Then there is too a tiny minority that believe that even today, down some darkened creeks...

Bruce Spittle has clearly, and in the nicest possible way, lost his head over the question. His work is an epic publishing endeavour. Three exquisitely-produced volumes with the most luscious colour illustrations and stitched spines.

Damn it, Beachcombing’s hands began perspiring as soon as he saw them unpacked on his study desk!

In the three volumes, the author has gathered one hundred and fifty sightings from modern times, 1500 (!) to 1993 (!!). He has then brought every possible source to bear on these individual sightings to assess whether or not they can be trusted.

Each chapter or sighting follows the same rigid structure: ‘introduction’, ‘claim’ and ‘discussion’ with maps and, when relevant, photographs. If the subject was less inherently interesting then this structure would be deadening. But, instead, the combination of Moas, proud Maori and colonial sorts is adventuring crack for the sensation-greedy armchair traveller.

So how do we explain all the various sightings of the Moa, particularly, in the last two hundred

years given that these birds were supposed to have disappeared long before Columbus sailed the ocean blue?

Beachcombing is now half way through the three volumes and – with the exception of a handful of cases where jokes and dishonesty were perhaps at play – would formulate three explanations: (i) Survival, (ii) Maori identity and (iii) Colonial angst.

(i) ‘Survival’: the bird actually made it through the Maori settlement of New Zealand and, indeed, squawked for several centuries more. This is the one that Beachcombing wants to believe, but that he can’t quite bring himself to sign up to – particularly not the idea that the Moa still lives today.

Dry-as-dust cowardice?

Perhaps.

(ii) ‘Maori identity’: the Moa was appropriated by nineteenth-century Maoris as a symbol of their undoing at the hands of European arriviste. The Moa symbolised New Zealand and the Maori certainly came across its skeleton. It became a matter of pride for different groups to recall the last Moa hunt and, as is typical of oral (and not a few literate) societies, this last Moa hunt was constantly updated to ‘grandfather’s time’ to keep it in touch with the present. These Moa hunts were possibly distorted echoes of real but distant events.

(iii) Colonial angst: the Moa haunted the nineteenth-century Europeans in the islands. The Moa too for them was the symbol of New Zealand, but of a land that they had not yet appropriated. Moa encounters then were an occasional imagined occurrence out in the most obscure corners of the New Zealand wilderness where this angst was naturally heightened. Such imagined encounters might be compared to the modern sightings of ‘Alien Big Cats’ in the UK where members of the public report seeing escaped circus animals (tigers, jaguars etc) in the not so wild British wilds: circus animals these that are never reported missing and circus animals that are seen with such frequency that they are difficult to explain in physical terms.

What Beachcombing finds fascinating about the Moa is that (ii) and particularly (iii) are, in many ways, more remarkable than (i).

Forget though for a moment explanations: the joy of this book is the joy of moving through the New Zealand badlands c. 1850 and hearing some rustling in the undergrowth. It is very rarely that Beachcombing dreams about a book and the fact that, as he is writing this, he can actually smell the pages – the book is sitting on a shelf three floors above him - says something about its staying power and the pleasing havoc that it has worked on Beachcombing’s brain.

As with many of the best modern works Moa Sightings is not available on Amazon. A copy can be tracked down, however, at www.renaissancebooks.co.nz/

Beachcombing is always on the look out for high-quality cryptozoology books (there are virtually none of this

A review by Bryan James in the Otago Daily Times, 27 March 2010.

Bookmarks: Reviews in brief

Sat, 27 Mar 2010

Books

This week we review *Moa Sightings*, *Voices from a Border War*, *Swift to the Sky*, *Towards a Promised Land* and *Doing Well, Doing Good*.

Inspired hunt for moa

Every so often a "moa sighting" is reported in the press; invariably a hoax is suspected, or at the very least a misapprehension fostered by wishful thinking.

But how long has this sort of thing been going on? A very long time, seems to be the answer, according to Dunedin writer and well-known anti-fluoride campaigner Bruce Spittle.

Inspired by an interest in the 1993 Craigieburn Forest moa "sighting", Dr Spittle set out to discover what he could about the history of such claims.

The result is striking for what was essentially a hobbyist's inquiry: an authoritative, three-volume, illustrated work *Moa Sightings*, published by his own Paua Press at \$70 a volume.

He discovered the reported claims began from the very earliest days of non-Maori settlement, and included alleged earlier sightings by Maori reported to settlers.

Many of the accounts are well-illustrated with the author's own photographs, accompanied by maps, and in several cases Dr Spittle has himself retraced the steps made by those believing they had sighted moa.

He concludes with a suitably scholarly "open verdict" on many of the claims.

Bryan James

Review by Brian Cowley, from The Press, 22 May 2010.

Books. Evidence of encounters with moa.

Moa sightings by Dr Bruce Spittle. Paua Press, three volumes, \$70 each. Reviewed by Brian Cowley.

According to the conventional view, the moa became extinct some 550-650 years ago.

But did it? On January 20, 1993, a moa was claimed to have been seen in the Craigieburn Forest Park, about an hour and a half's drive from Christchurch. It was that reported sighting which stirred doubts in the mind of Dr Bruce Spittle, from Dunedin.

Initially suspicious that the claim was little more than a publicity stunt by a local publican, Spittle delved deeper and what he learned persuaded him to spend more time in the area to investigate further.

He came to the conclusion that, improbable though it seemed, the veracity of the sighting claim could not be categorically dismissed.

His curiosity about the truth of orthodox opinion on the demise of the moa has led to this magnificent three-volume set, *Moa Sightings*, that questions the rapid “blitzkrieg” extinction in which all moa were gone by 1450, more than 300 years before the first Europeans landed with Captain Cook in 1769.

The books, published by Spittle’s own company, Paua Press Limited, provide many descriptions of encounters with moa during the last century and a half, relayed in an objective and dispassionate manner.

One of these researchers, Professor Atholl Anderson, had “considered the evidence from Maori recollections or traditions, apparently-recent remains of moa, and archaeological evidence and found no evidence that moa hunting continued later than 400 yr BP [AD 1600]. He found no evidence that any European saw a moa and proposed a complex psychological explanation, involving visual hallucinations in recently arrived settlers under cultural stress in a new land to account for the sighting claims.” Yet there are credible accounts that suggest some of New Zealand’s earliest European settlers certainly had encounters with a giant bird that, by description alone, entitled them to believe it was a moa.

When four English emigrants claimed they had seen a moa at Takaka Hill in 1857 or 1858, they were said to be “large, able-bodied but thorough country bumpkins and quite unable to invent such a story.” They claimed to have seen a large bird, about 2.4 m to 2.7 m, of a brown colour, with red around the eye.

An anonymous boy, later identified as William Scoble, claimed he and a party of boys, 12-16 years of age had been startled when “a big bird hurled itself across the track, breaking the file of boys into two groups.” The alleged encounter occurred as they made their way back from the Brunner coal mine in March, 1896. “It was a small moa as moas go, but too large to be any other New Zealand bird. Its body was as big as that of a fully-grown sheep, badly in need of the shears, while its powerful-looking legs, ash-grey and covered with scales, would be between 20 and 24 inches (50.8 cm-61 cm) from the knee to the ground,” the report states.

In a letter dated March 5, 1862, Julius Haast, writing to Dr James Hector, advises him to “look out for the moa. I am certain it exists there as two years ago the H(onora)ble Watts Russell when exploring with whale boats the coast killed a large Emu-like bird and ate it.” By far the largest single section is devoted to the sighting in the Craigieburn Range in January, 1993, by three trampers, Paddy Freaney, Sam Waby, and Rochelle Rafferty, who to support their claim produced a blurred (and much analysed) photograph of the bird. The widely reported incident is thoroughly examined and interviews conducted with all involved.

As the catalyst for this three-volume set, the Craigieburn conundrum and its inquest is a fitting climax to a programme of research that has produced a compelling and exhaustive study of moa

sightings. After examining in detail the 1993 claim, the author says he “found no evidence that the claimants were other than genuine.”

Furthermore, Spittle concludes by disagreeing with the rapid “blitzkrieg” theory of the moa’s demise, preferring instead a case for staggered survival in remote, less accessible areas after the commonly accepted extinction date.

Brian Cowley, a writer for The Press.

A review of *Moa Sightings* by Chris Chilton in the *Southland Times*, 26 March 2011, C3.

Moa sightings probed.

Moa Sightings by Bruce Spittle (Paua Press, RRP \$70 a volume, or \$210 for the set)

Did some moa exist for five centuries after they are thought to have been hunted from the face of the Earth? If Bruce Spittle thinks so he isn’t saying. Instead, he lets people who claim to have seen New Zealand’s mighty flightless bird tell it like they thought they saw it.

About 150 of them. From ground zero of European settlement, all the way to 1993.

It takes three 400-odd-page hard-covered volumes to consider all the sightings, so you’ve got to be prepared to settle in for the long haul here, or at least do it in bite-size chunks, but the premise is so tantalising it’s seductive.

Common sense and scepticism tells us the odds against a stray moa surviving into the 1800s, let alone 1993 (the Craigieburn sighting), are as long as *dinornis giganteus*’ neck, but maybe, just maybe, there’s a possibility.

After all, there is a certain romantic logic in thinking at least a few moa may have defied extinction a little longer than commonly believed in the vast, uninhabited wilderness that is Fiordland.

Some of the claimed sightings are quickly dismissed as hoaxes, or genuine mistakes. Spittle gets credit for expressing an opinion, based on the bleeding obvious, and quickly moving on. But some of the voluminous evidence here has the intoxicating whiff of credibility.

The cross-referencing is exhaustive—if not exhausting. Individual accounts of the same reported sightings are described at length, then cross-referenced and compared to test their validity.

Spittle routinely cross-refs historic letters, transcripts and publications from multiple sources, first to confirm they refer to the same event, then to weigh their accuracy and probability. He sifts through obvious typographic errors, searching for evidence of a different nuance.

Even the character of the people claiming to have seen moa is scrutinized. And some of them were characters, all right.

Despite the meticulous—some might say obsessive—attention to minutiae, the text is utterly compelling and thoroughly readable, well enhanced by colour maps, scene photos and illustrations.

A grim-chinned editor might well have amputated this monstrous triptych into a single weighty tome, but then a remarkable chunk of New Zealand social history would never have seen the light of day.

Southland and Fiordland being sparsely populated, there a fair bunch of claimed southern sightings recorded, and with them comes an informal history lesson.

Prominent Southland names such as Howell, Turnbull Thomson, Orbell, Hall-Jones and Gunn feature in the supporting cast. There are also vast tracts of fascinating Maori history, mostly verbal intergenerational hand-me-downs that might have been lost forever if Spittle hadn’t taken the time to collate them.

It’s fascinating. Valuable, even.

These three books represent a Herculean undertaking of investigative journalism and, as the late sceptic Denis Dutton says in the foreword, Spittle has done us all a great service. But did a single moa really make it into the 1800s or beyond? Do moose roam Fiordland? Do black panthers stalk the Maniototo veldt? If you're entertained and educated by reading Spittle's books, does it matter?

The three Moa Sightings volumes are available from www.pauapress.com

A review by Max Blake, 5 February 2011, at Nature Blog Network, The Centre for Fortean Zoology, www.cfz.org.uk. The review is available at:

<http://maxzoo.blogspot.com/2011/02/review-moa-sightings--by-bruce-spittle.html>

(The star rating was added by B Spittle based on his interpretation of the review.)

Saturday, 5 February 2011

Review: Moa Sightings by Bruce Spittle.

Hardcover: 448 pages

Publisher: Paua Press Limited; 1st edition (January 1, 2010)

Language: English

Vol1

ISBN-10: 0473153564

ISBN-13: 978-0473153564

Vol2

ISBN-10: 0473153572

ISBN-13: 978-0473153571

Vol3

ISBN-10: 0473153580

ISBN-13: 978-0473153588

<http://www.pauapress.com/>

Once in a while, I get my hands on a book which makes me think "why on earth don't more people write like this"? Most cryptozoological books are, basically, rubbish. Yes, there are a number of great books out there, but an awful lot just rehash previously covered stories, or dive into the paranormal and sensationalism to increase sales. This book is about as far removed as

one can get from these works of tripe.

Split across three volumes, "Moa Sightings" is a real behemoth which, due to its high price tag, will not sell many copies. But anyone with a great interest in moas or New Zealand's cryptozoology should sell a portion of the family silver and buy the whole set. In five words, the three books are incredible.

Hardback with full colour printing throughout, the books are very high quality indeed. The front cover, I feel, looks a little basic, but that really does not matter. Upon opening the book, you are greeted to a wonderful range of maps (there are probably hundreds of maps between the three volumes), portraits and biographies of most of the witnesses, drawings of skeletons and huge numbers of photographs of the areas in which the sightings occurred. This is a book which draws you into New Zealand. The maps and photographs help you picture the areas vividly in your mind; whilst the long and detailed discussions of each sighting help you assess the circumstances in which the sighting event occurred.

The analysis of the Freaney photograph for instance is 283 pages long. That is enough for a book alone on the photograph. Though the analysis is generally very thorough, and the photographs clear, I would have liked to have seen more photo measurement analysis, perhaps comparing the measurements and angles to a deer. This is a slight weak link in the book, and because of this it does not change my opinion that the photograph shows a young red deer, but in reality, this is pretty much the only negative point (and it did really make me consider my initial opinion). If Mr. Spittle published his analysis of the Freaney photograph as a separate, much smaller and more affordable book, I think he would do the world of cryptozoology a huge favour.

This book then is exactly how cryptozoology should be done. Has it changed my opinion on the Freaney photograph? No. Has it changed my opinion that there are no large (4ft tall+) species of moa still alive? No, I remain sure that they are extinct. Has it changed my opinion that there are no small species of moa still alive? Sort of I suppose; I think there is a high chance they lived until the 1800's, but I don't think there are any left alive.

To finish this review then, I am going to quote Mr. Spittle on why he formed Paua Press Limited in 2007: "Just as a paua [*Haliotis*, a species of New Zealand abalone] appears dull and nondescript on the outside but is of compelling interest when the surface druse is taken away, I am hopeful that the books my press publishes will have, at their centre, something of substance

for the reader.” He is absolutely correct, this is an incredible book, “On The Track...” for moa enthusiasts. For God’s sake ask for it as a birthday present...

MB.

Posted by Max Blake at 16:42

Labels: Bruce Spittle, max blake, Moa sightings, review

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A review of Moa Sightings by Richard Muirhead in Flying Snake: a journal of cryptozoology, folklore and Fortean, 2011;1(1):58-9. Flying Snake homepage: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/richmuirhead/cryptozoology>.

I knew next to nothing about the evidence for the survival of the moa in New Zealand from c. 1150 (chapter 110) up to the (in?) famous 1993 Craigieburn Forest Park sighting (chapter 151). However, I am now able to thoroughly recommend Bruce Spittle’s three volume “Moa Sightings.” But book a six month holiday on some remote unexplored island to fully absorb this thoroughly researched body of work. This is not a book for casual reading but a serious reference source.

The caption on the back cover of each volume explains:

“Hunting pressure, habitat destruction, and introduced predators led to moa extinction by A.D. 1650 according to the previously held serial overkill model. In the currently accepted rapid “blitzkrieg” model, all the moas were gone by A.D. 1450, over 300 years before the first Europeans landed with Captain Cook in 1769. However, a number of moa sighting claims have been made since 1769 and the author offers for consideration a staggered survival model in which moas lingered on until a later date in some remote, isolated areas. The available circumstantial evidence for a few moas remaining after 1769 is presented including reports suggesting survival in circa 1810 by Kawana Paipai, 1845 by Burr Osborn, 1863 by Patrick Caples, circa 1825–1875 by HJ Cuttance, and 1878 by Sir George Grey.

The author, Bruce Spittle, is of part-Maori descent and lives in Dunedin.”

The volumes are divided into chapters giving name(s) of the witnessing and the “claimed time and place” for the moa being alive. Taking volume 1, chapter 1, as an example:

John Boulton 1826, Milford Haven (Milford Sound)

Introduction, The Claim, Discussion.

The chapter is well illustrated with a map and photos, as are all the chapters of the volumes. Each volume is comprehensively indexed. One criticism I do have is that perhaps the chapters could have been arranged chronologically. However at NZ\$70 a volume with free shipping these are expensive but very worthwhile.

A BioFortean Review Book Review by Chad Arment on 28 August 2010 on StrangeArk.com. Available from: <http://www.strangeark.com/bfr/reviews/moa-sightings.html>.

Moa Sightings, Volumes 1-3

Bruce Spittle

Paua Press (Dunedin, NZ), 2010

PauaPress.com

Reviewed by Chad Arment (7/28/10)

Given the growing number of cryptozoology books recently published that give brief overviews of regional sightings, it was a surprise to come across a set of books that focuses on one specific cryptid in a relatively small area (New Zealand). I was a little leery of paying for the set, which is not cheap, even though each volume has almost 450 pages in it. After all, how much can you

really say about moa sightings? And, I'll admit, the author's website (he set up Paua Press) did not fill me with confidence.

Having received the volumes, my primary question is: Is it better to call this the most important cryptozoology book of the year, or the last decade? Without a doubt, it is the most extensive. The author has packed three volumes with data from historical records, witness interviews, maps, and photos (in full color wherever possible) regarding the possible survival of the supposed extinct moas. He presents the evidence (both pro and con) without pushing his own interpretation, though noting that he favors a staggered extinction model, with the possibility of some late survivors in remote areas.

This set belongs in the library of every serious cryptozoology researcher. Unfortunately, the high cost (NZ\$70 + shipping per volume) will probably limit its distribution. The pricing is certainly reasonable, given it is from a small press (probably small print run), and is casebound with jackets, in full color. At the very least, I'd like to see several sets placed in North American and European university libraries for enthusiasts able to access them. I don't know how likely that is to happen, however.

There are some minor quirks with the books (e.g., pagination is a bit odd), but overall it is easy to see that this is a well-presented set that should be an example for every cryptozoology researcher (particularly those of us who publish our own works). I don't know Mr. Spittle's background, so I don't know if he has an interest in other New Zealand cryptids. If so, I would love to see similar volumes on other mystery animals from that region. This sort of work is so much more valuable to cryptozoology than the often opinion-based texts we see too often.

For those who would consider ordering this set, my suggestion would be to look for it on AbeBooks.com, as there is a New Zealand bookseller who carries it, and may offer a better deal on shipping. I ordered my set through him, and received it very quickly.

Chad Arment

Review by Karl Shuker, Dec 2, 2011. Review by Karl Shuker of: Moa Sightings (Volumes 1-3) by Bruce Spittle., December 2, 2011. Available from:
<http://karlshuker.blogspot.com/2011/12/moa-for-your-money-best-book-on.html>

MOA FOR YOUR MONEY - REVIEWING THE BEST BOOK ON THE CRYPTOZOOLOGY OF NEW ZEALAND'S AVIAN GIANTS

Paua Press (www.pauapress.com), Dunedin, 2010; ISBN 978-0-473-15356-4 (Vol. 1), 978-0-473-15357-1 (Vol. 2), 978-0-473-15358-8 (Vol. 3); £101.97 for the 3-volume set. Hb with dustjacket, 415 pp (Vol. 1), 422 pp (Vol. 2), 416 pp (Vol. 3), colour and b/w illus., colour maps, footnote refs, index.

With such terms used so frequently yet all-too-often so undeservedly nowadays, it is rare indeed today for a book to warrant being referred to as 'the standard work' or 'the definitive treatment'. Both of these superlatives, and many others of a similar nature too, however, are fully-justified when considering Bruce Spittle's monumental three-volume treatise on putative sightings of living moas – if only because I simply cannot conceive how anyone could ever produce a more comprehensive account of this subject.

The giant, and not-so-giant, moas constituted a diverse family of flightless birds unique to New Zealand, but according to mainstream scientific belief most if not all of the eleven currently-recognised species had become extinct at least 300 years prior to the landing here of the first Europeans with Captain Cook in 1769. And even if a few stragglers had somehow lingered on in remote localities up to and even for a time beyond this initial European influx, these had still died out long ago – or had they?

In his vast, exhaustively-researched trilogy of tomes, Spittle painstakingly documents and assesses every known eyewitness report alluding to possible moa survival since the early 1400s, devoting an entire chapter to each such report, and including 151 reports in total. Each chapter follows the same format – a headline giving the eyewitness, the year, and the location of the alleged sighting, which is then followed by an introduction, a detailed account of the sighting, and a thorough discussion. Each report is also accompanied by one or more full-page colour maps of the location, plus various relevant colour or b/w illustrations, including many previously obscure images that were new to me. The same, exceedingly detailed index is included at the back of all three volumes, which is very handy.

The degree of scholarship evident in the sightings' discussions is breathtaking – Spittle gives the impression of having consulted everyone ever involved in and everything ever written on the subject of moas (and if he hasn't, it clearly isn't from want of trying!) - and his examination of each sighting is both incisive and commendably objective. Nowhere is this more apparent than when Spittle surveys the two most famous (and contentious) putative moa sightings of all - one (Sighting Report #22) by Alice MacKenzie at Martins Bay in 1880, to which he devotes 98 pages; and the other (Sighting Report #151) by Paddy Freaney and two companions in 1993 within Craigieburn Forest Park, to which he devotes no fewer than 283 pages (taking up most of Volume 3, in fact), and which include several detailed maps and even full-colour reconstructions based upon the enigmatic, famously-fuzzy photo snapped by Freaney. In each case, Spittle produces a review so meticulous and fascinating that it would stand alone very well as an entire

book in its own right.

Every report is also liberally annotated with footnotes supplying key references (there is no collective bibliography – perhaps this work's only failing in my view) and additional information where required.

I dare not even begin to guess how long it took Spittle to produce his magnum opus, which *Moa Sightings* assuredly is, but when preparing any work as extensive as this, errors of typography and of fact are inevitable, however earnestly one seeks to eradicate all such gremlins from the final version, and I did spot certain instances of this in *Moa Sightings*. Needless to say, I do not wish to overshadow or diminish the magnificent overall contribution to the field of moa study and beyond that this work has made, so two such examples of errors, one from each of the above-noted categories, will suffice here.

In all three volumes, the outer edge of each page contains three figures – the top one indicates the volume number, the middle one the chapter number, and the bottom one the page number within that chapter (this is also repeated in expanded version at the bottom of each page). Unfortunately, however, in Volume 2, Chapter 35 is incorrectly labelled as being in Volume 1. Ditto for Chapter 137 in Volume 3. These could easily be rectified in future reprints. As for factual blips: I noticed on p. 189 of Chapter 151, dealing with the Freaney sighting case, that Spittle claimed a letter by him sent to the British magazine *Fortean Times* updating that case was never published. In fact it was – twice! It first appeared on p. 54 of the Letters section in FT No. 98 (May 1997), and then it was summarised by me on p. 16 of my *Alien Zoo* column in FT No. 221 (April 2007).

Never mind. Such slips as these pale into insignificance against the greater backdrop of a truly extraordinary publication that is unquestionably one of the finest additions to the canon of cryptozoological literature in modern times. The price might seem steep, and may limit the numbers sold, especially to private individuals, but I do feel that it is fully justified with respect to what it purchases.

As a final thought, I just hope that there isn't someone else out there still working away on their own in-depth coverage of reputed sightings and encounters of living moas – because, now that Spittle's *Moa Sightings* is in print, I'm afraid you're too late!

A shortened version of this review of mine appears in *Fortean Times*, No. 283 (January 2012).