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GAMES AND RHYMES · BELIEFS  
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TALES AND LEGENDS

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Ghostly legend has been invoked to explain North Carolina's most advertised natural mystery, the Brown Mountain lights. These lights are the subject of nearly a dozen newspaper clippings from 1913 to 1940 or 1941, and they form the basis of a mystery novel, *Kill One, Kill Two*, by W. W. Anderson, published in 1940. As described by various witnesses they consist of a ball, or several balls of red or orange light about the size of a toy balloon. They appeared at irregular times over the top of Brown Mountain and moved erratically up and down or backwards and forwards, visible at a distance, but vanishing on near approach. At the prompting of North Carolina senators the lights were investigated by the U. S. Geological Survey in 1913 and 1921. In 1921 Senator Simmons also secured an investigation by the National Geographic Society, and an opinion was expressed by Dr. W. J. Humphries, of the U. S. Weather Bureau. The Geological Survey's explanation—automobile and train headlights—was scouted by local opinion. The lights were not beams, but balls, and they were observed during the 1916 floods when automobile traffic had been stopped. The

National Geographic Society concluded that the manifestations were electric, and Dr. Humphries of the Weather Bureau elaborated this explanation somewhat by comparison with Andes lightning and Castor and Pollux.

Local speculation was by no means satisfied. The Morganton *News Herald* for September 22, 1921, quoted some picturesque pre-Lavoisier scientific notes recorded in 1771 by Gerard William de Brahm, the German engineer who in 1756 built Fort Loudon on the Tennessee River. Though de Brahm mentions no specific lights at all, he does say that the mountains emit nitrous vapors which are borne by the winds, and that when laden winds meet each other "the niter inflames, sulfurates and deteriorates." A Mooresville correspondent of the same paper, Mr. E. C. Ivey, offered a more modern chemical solution—the lights were produced by spontaneous combustion of sulphuretted hydrogen gas, like a similar phenomenon on a farm near Dudley Shoals, in Caldwell county. But the investigators for the Geological Survey had already considered and rejected the chemical possibilities.

A rather plausible physical explanation was offered by Mr. H. C. Martin in the *Lenoir Topic* (as quoted by the *Morganton News Herald*, no date). To him the lights were probably a mirage reflection of the lights of Lenoir, Morganton, and Granite Falls, some twenty miles away. Heated currents of air moving up the Catawba valley met cooler currents from the mountains, forming a reflecting screen on which the distant lights were projected. The erratic movement of the lights was ascribed to changing points of contact in the air currents. This explanation receives interesting support from the independent investigations of Mr. Hobart A. Whitman, of Newland, as related in the *Charlotte Observer* (Aug. 10 or 11, 1940 or 1941). Mr. Whitman investigated from several positions with a telescope and surveyor's transit and concluded by triangulation that the principal lights only appeared to be above Brown Mountain, but were really centered over Hickory (forty miles away), Morganton (twelve miles away), and Valdese (an intermediate distance). While the apparent lights were wavering, the actual lights were stationary, and their color was explained by the hazy atmosphere through which they were seen from a higher elevation.

The last two theories would seem to gain support from the fact that there has been adduced no legend dealing with these lights prior to the twentieth century, and no evidence that the lights themselves had appeared before that time. The lights seem to have been noticed only after the neighboring towns had developed to a certain size with a certain amount of electric illumination.

The story of the Brown Mountain lights furnishes an interesting testimony to the innate love of mystery, and it exemplifies the

eternal conflict between science, pseudo science, and legend to explain the sensational and apparently inexplicable. Legend was not backward in asserting its ancient functions. An unidentified clipping that can be dated in August, 1940, refers to a legend that the lights were spirits of Cherokee and Catawba warriors slain in an ancient battle on the mountainside; and a variant (*Spruce Pine Tri-County News*, Aug. 1, 1940) makes them the spirits of Indian maidens seeking their lovers who have been slain in battle. The *Charlotte Observer* (Aug. 29, 1937) prints an interview at Banner Elk with Mr. Shepherd M. Duggar, author of two books on Western North Carolina, in which the lights are said to be attributed by some of the local inhabitants to the spirit of a woman supposedly murdered on Jonas Ridge about 1877 by her husband. There is no evidence of antiquity or general currency for any of these legends, and their general characteristics are suspiciously familiar. One wonders if they are not better examples of the *tendency* to legend than of genuine legends in themselves. Even so, many genuine legends may have originated similarly.

A similar conclusion is to be deduced from the whole body of newspaper reports cited in this essay. They offer no acceptable proof whatever for the actual truth of the marvels they describe. On the other hand their very existence is proof of popular interest, which implies a latent willingness to believe; and they offer abundant testimony to the actual belief which exists among the immediate spectators in many circumstances and communities. They should provide a thoughtful background for anyone inclined to read the following legends as mere idle chatter and tradition. Even though many of them have lost the immediate vitality which a folk-narrator would give them, their connection with the general habits of the human mind and with an intricate maze of tradition and belief reaching into antiquity and into all the corners of the earth are evident to anyone who will follow up Professor Thompson's annotations.