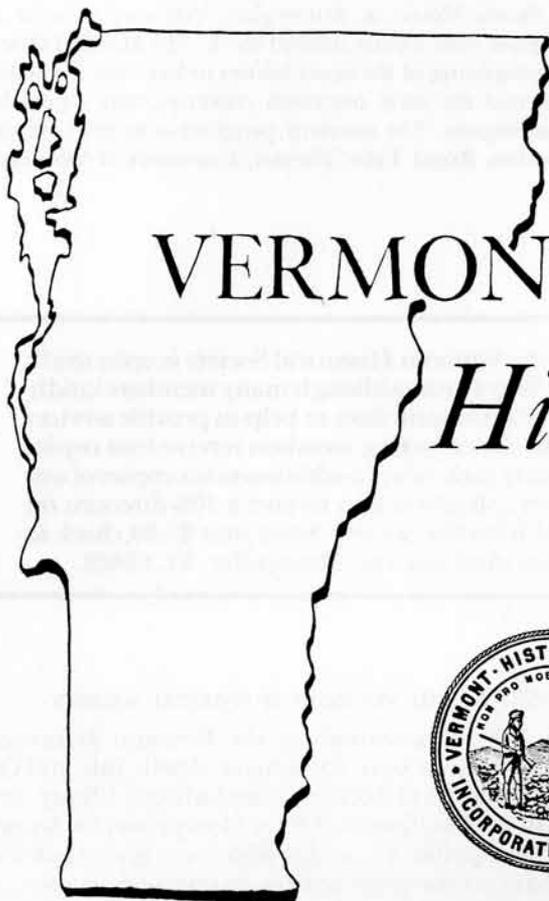


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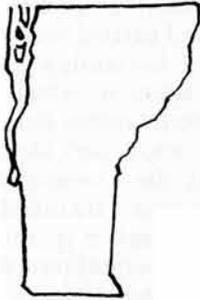


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“... my object in writing ‘The Whisperer in the Darkness’ was not just to be weird, but primarily to crystallise a powerful imaginative impression given me by a certain [Vermont] landscape.”

## Dark Mountain: H. P. Lovecraft and The ‘Vermont Horror’

By ALAN S. WHELOCK

The literary reputation of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) has vacillated between near-obscurity and uncritical adulation. Writing in 1945, Edmund Wilson stated that “Lovecraft was not a good writer. The fact that his verbose and undistinguished style has been compared to Poe’s is only one of the many sad signs that almost nobody any more pays any real attention to writing.”<sup>1</sup> Writing in 1975, Lovecraft’s most recent biographer, L. Sprague de Camp, wrote enthusiastically that “He has been hailed not only as the equal of Poe but even as one of the greatest writers of all time.”<sup>2</sup> Among the very few areas of agreement about Lovecraft’s stature as a writer, however, is “The Whisperer in Darkness,” a long short story of 26,000 words he wrote in 1930, and published in *Weird Tales Magazine* in August, 1931. The theme of the story is typical of Lovecraft’s fiction, but the setting is unique; “The Whisperer in Darkness” takes place in Windham County, Vermont.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, like his fellow New Englander, Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose work he admired greatly, Lovecraft knew that the bright, commercial day of coastal New England was over. He felt a strong attachment toward the venerable antiquity of his town — its narrow, crooked streets and crumbling wharves — made stronger still by the persistence of the family name in the neighborhood for many, many years. The long association with one place created, in Hawthorne’s words, “a kindred between the human being and the locality, quite independent of any charm in the scenery. . . . It is not love, but instinct.”<sup>3</sup> Sense of place and the spirit of the physical setting exerted a powerful influence on Lovecraft and on his writing.

In 1921 Lovecraft met Mrs. Sonia Greene at an amateur writers' convention in Boston. They became great friends and carried on an extensive correspondence. The divorcee persuaded the author to come to New York City, where she was active in amateur literary circles. At thirty-one, he had never been farther from home than New York, where he made frequent and regular trips, and after marrying Mrs. Greene, moved in 1924. In the city the Lovecrafts joined the Kalem Club, a literary-discussion group which included some of the writers and journalists he had known earlier in the Boston convention days. Lovecraft also renewed his acquaintance with the Great Houdini, whose newspaper articles devoted to exposing mediums and clairvoyants Lovecraft often ghosted. In 1928 at a club meeting he met a young Vermonter from the staff of Mencken's *American Mercury* magazine, Vrest Orton.

The friendship between these two proved durable. Orton respected Lovecraft's editorial abilities, and when he moved later in the year to Brattleboro to found the Stephen Daye Press, he asked Lovecraft to accompany him to Vermont to become his editor.<sup>4</sup> Lovecraft refused on the grounds that the climate would surely kill him. He did, however, accept Orton's invitation in the summer of 1928 to motor to Windham County for a long weekend at the family home in Old Guilford. Lovecraft remembers the trip as a "marvelous pleasure & mental stimulation," that brought him "magically close to those basic & surviving wellsprings of early American life." Life in Vermont, he thought, had "gone on in the same way since before the Revolution — the same landscape, buildings, families, occupations & modes of thought & speech."<sup>5</sup>

The weekend at the Orton home in southern Vermont made a profound impression on Lovecraft's creative imagination. This was wild country to a man whose life had centered almost exclusively around Providence and New York. It presented an ideal setting for a fantastic tale, and when asked later by a fellow-writer about the genesis of "The Whisperer in Darkness," he replied that "it is certainly a substantial artistic feat to bring the unreal into the midst of the every day . . . crystallising certain natural sentiments connected with distant or rarely observed scenes or phenomena. To use a personal example, — my object in writing 'The Whisperer in Darkness' was not just to be weird, but primarily to crystallise a powerful imaginative impression given me by a certain landscape."<sup>6</sup> That "certain landscape" was the West River country of Windham County, Vermont.

The catalyst necessary to crystallize the impressions Vermont made on the author waited for nearly two years. It came in 1930, with the announcement by the scientific community of the discovery of a ninth planet in our solar system — Pluto was sighted by the American astronomer C. W. Tombaugh, largely as a result of

predictions made by Percival Lowell, as early as 1914.<sup>7</sup> As a young man of seventeen Lovecraft had been introduced to Lowell, whose belief in intelligent life on Mars had inspired the author to write articles in Providence newspapers on the subject. The dark planet on the very rim of the solar system became Lovecraft's "Yuggoth" — homeworld of the aliens his narrator in "The Whisperer in Darkness" would discover lurking in the wild and tenantless mountains of Windham County. Lovecraft now had the ingredients for one of his best brews.

"The whole matter began, as far as I am concerned, with the historic and unprecedented Vermont floods of November 3, 1927. I was then, as now, an instructor of literature at Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts, and an enthusiastic amateur student of New England folklore."<sup>8</sup> So begins the strange tale of the nameless things that infiltrated the Vermont wilderness. In his characteristic fashion Lovecraft mixes fact with make-believe, for the report of the floods of 1927 may be found in the annals of the state, but Miskatonic University in Arkham may be found nowhere.<sup>9</sup> The narrator, A. N. Wilmarth, goes on to relate how those floods washed down strange-looking creatures out of the high country, with reports of their being sighted in the Winooski River near Montpelier, the West River near Newfane, and the Passumpsic River near Lyndonville. "They were pinkish things about five feet long; with crustaceous bodies bearing vast pairs of dorsal fins or membranous wings and several sets of articulated limbs, and with a sort of convoluted ellipsoid, covered with multitudes of very short antennae, where a head would ordinarily be."<sup>10</sup> An oral report from a friend's "mother in Hardwick, Vermont," further substantiates the rumors. Shortly thereafter the newspapers get hold of the story and the *Rutland Herald* and *Brattleboro Reformer* publish accounts. Wilmarth writes to these papers and begins a lively debate concerning the credibility of the sightings, and by the spring of 1928 he becomes "almost a well-known figure in Vermont," notwithstanding the fact he "had never set foot in the state."<sup>11</sup>

His chief antagonist during the newspaper polemic is Henry Wentworth Akeley, a one-time brilliant student of "mathematics, biology, anthropology, astronomy, and folklore" at the University of Vermont. He is also "the last representative on his home soil of a long, locally distinguished line of jurists, administrators, and gentlemen-agriculturists. In him, however, the family mentality veered away from practical affairs to pure scholarship."<sup>12</sup> Writing from his study in the "old Akeley place south of Townshend Village, on the side of Dark Mountain," Wentworth Akeley chides Wilmarth for his outsider's skepticism and assures him of substantial evidence "that monstrous things do indeed live in the woods of the high hills which nobody visits." Soon a private correspondence ensues be-

tween the two, for Akeley views the newspaper debate as too public a forum for what he has to reveal. He also forwards a series of photographs for Wilmarth's perusal. Taken in the Newfane-Townshend area, the photographs purport to show odd "claw-prints" along dusty roads, a strange cave on the slope of Round Hill, and a "druid-like circle of standing stones on the summit of a wild hill." They also include a snapshot of a hewn black monolith, one of Akeley himself, and one of his home, "a trim white house of two storeys and attic, about a century and a quarter old, and with a well-kept lawn and stone-bordered path leading up to a tastefully carved Georgian doorway."<sup>13</sup>

In his letters, Akeley labels the other worldly things a vanguard of off-world explorers from an undiscovered planet beyond the orbit of Neptune, a place called Yuggoth (Pluto), who also have a base somewhere in the Himalayas — a good example of the staggering effect the Green Mountains had on Lovecraft's fertile imagination. The things, Akeley explains, operate an extensive mining operation, with tunnels well into some Green Mountain peaks, where they busily extract some unspecified metallic ores. Dangerous only if distracted from this primary mission, the things, according to oral tradition of stories of strange buzzing sounds heard among the mountains, go as far back as the time of the Indians. Akeley claims to have heard these sounds and has even recorded them on a dictaphone cylinder. His attempt to substantiate his bizarre story by sending Wilmarth a piece of the black stone via railway express is thwarted when an unidentified person removes the package from a Boston and Maine baggage car at Keene, New Hampshire.

Akeley fears the creatures and warns prophetically that they must be left alone. "With promoters and real estate flooding Vermont with herds of summer people to overrun the wild places and cover the hills with cheap bungalows, "the state is "in peril enough anyway" without arousing the things.<sup>14</sup> His letters become increasingly desperate as he thinks that the things are closing in on him because he knows too much about their operations in Windham County. Guard dogs purchased from kennels in Bellows Falls and Brattleboro are frequently killed during moonless nights, and he engages in exchanges of rifle fire with the crablike creatures. And, always, the hideous buzzing noises.

In his answers Wilmarth suggests the obvious: Why not leave? Stalwart Vermonter to the last, Akeley maintains he can not easily "leave the only spot one could really think of as home," and hopes to fight off *all* alien intruders, regardless of origins. But he hints at darker reasons too: perhaps the creatures do not intend to allow him to leave at all and instead have some special, ghastly fate already prepared. On this supposition Wilmarth volunteers to come to Vermont and enlist in the battle against the off-worlders but is advised by telegram to stay put and await further word. Sent from

Bellows Falls and signed "AKELY," an apparent misspelling, the telegram only perplexes Wilmarth and increases his anxiety.

One last letter arrives from Townshend, dated Thursday, September 6, 1928. In it, Akeley does a complete about-face and invites the scholar from Miskatonic to Vermont in the most cordial fashion. The letter also reveals that Akeley has made visible contact with the enemy and that they have arranged a truce of sorts. It concluded by reiterating the invitation to come to Townshend and by requesting that Wilmarth bring with him all the correspondence (and the pictures) he has received since the spring. Utterly baffled now, but determined to meet Akeley, he boards the train from Boston and enters "an altogether older-fashioned and more primitive New England than the mechanised, urbanised coastal and southern areas" where he had spent all his life. He thinks of Vermont as "an unspoiled, ancestral New England . . . [where] the continuous native life keeps alive strange ancient memories . . . and seldom-mentioned beliefs."<sup>15</sup> When the train crosses the Connecticut beyond Northfield, the conductor instructs Wilmarth to set his watch back one hour, as Vermont refuses to acknowledge Daylight Savings Time. "As I did so it seemed to me that I was likewise turning the calendar back a century."

A Mr. Noyes, who claims to have been sent by Akeley to fetch the traveller, meets Wilmarth at the Brattleboro station. The host, he explains, suffering from a severe attack of asthma, is temporarily indisposed. The two motor out of Brattleboro and up along the West River Valley (Vermont Route 30), where in that stream, Wilmarth shudders to recall, "one of the morbid crablike beings had been seen floating after the floods." At this point in the story Lovecraft indulges in a *tour-de-force* of the picturesque, that well-worn constant in romantic-gothic fiction from Ann Radcliffe to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and a lovely Vermont landscape is transformed into something strange and menacing.

Gradually the country around us grew wilder and more deserted. Archaic covered bridges lingered fearsomely out of the past in pockets of the hills, and the half-abandoned railway track paralleling the river seemed to exhale a nebulously visible air of desolation. There were awesome sweeps of vivid valley where great cliffs rose, New England's virgin granite showing grey and austere through the verdure that scaled the crests. There were gorges where untamed streams leaped, bearing down toward the river the unimagined secrets of a thousand pathless peaks. Branching away now and then were narrow, half-concealed roads that bored their way through solid, luxuriant masses of forest among whose primal trees whole armies of elemental spirits might well lurk.<sup>16</sup>

Wilmarth soon reaches "the quaint, slightly village of Newfane," his "last link with that world which man can definitely call his own by virtue of conquest and complete occupancy. After that we cast off all allegiance to immediate, tangible, and time-touched things, and entered a fantastic world of hushed unreality in which the narrow, ribbon-like road rose and fell and curved with almost sentient and purposeful caprice amidst the tenantless green peaks and half-deserted valleys."<sup>17</sup> The car rounds one final bend and halts in front of a house Wilmarth recognizes from a photograph — the old Akeley place half way up the summit of Dark Mountain. Nothing stirs — no barnyard noises or bird sounds; none of Akeley's guard dogs can be seen. "There was something menacing and uncomfortable in the funereal stilness, in the muffled, subtle trickle of distant brooks, and in the crowding green peaks and black-wooded precipices that choked the narrow horizon."<sup>18</sup> Looking downward, Wilmarth sees with horror a myriad of strange claw marks in the powdery dust of the road.

Wilmarth enters the house and discovers his host in the shuttered darkness of his study. In a hacking, buzzing whisper Akeley introduces himself and explains that sensitivity to light is his chief complaint in this stage of his malady. He sits in a chair draped in a dressing gown, with only his strained, white face and rigid hands visible. A lunch is laid for the traveller, and a thermos of hot coffee. Wilmarth eats hungrily, though he can not swallow the coffee, which has a chalky aftertaste. He then settles down to hear the fantastic story of Akeley and his ex-enemies.

The Windham County contingent of the inter-planetary crabs is preparing to suspend its mining operation and return to the home-world. Formidable surgeons, they have devised a method of extracting human brains and of carrying them back to Yuggoth in metallic cylinders. Akeley points to a row of such cylinders standing on his fireplace mantel. He had decided to make the trip himself and assures Wilmarth that the procedure is both harmless and temporary. He asks Wilmarth to accompany him on this grand tour and insists that the scenery would make even spectacular Vermont pale by comparison. He then invites Wilmarth to retire for the night and consider an answer to the request by morning. Having ingested just enough of the drugged coffee to upset his stomach, but not enough to stupify him, Wilmarth spends a sleepless night, during which he overhears loud voices and buzzings in the study below. One voice in particular terrifies him in its tinny despair, like the voice of a man heard on a cheap portable radio: "brought it on myself . . . sent back the letters and the record . . . end on it . . . taken in . . . seeing and hearing . . . damn you . . . impersonal force, after all . . . fresh and shiny cylinder . . . great God!" Wilmarth flees the house, commandeers the car that brought him there,

and embarks on a wild night ride along back roads that finally deposits him in the village of Townshend, where he blabbers an hysterical story to an incredulous sheriff. When a posse investigates the next day, Akeley is gone; only his dressing gown on the chair remains behind. The cylinders on the mantel are also missing.

"I stayed a week in Brattleboro after my escape, making inquiries among people of every kind who had known Akeley; and the results convince me that the matter is no figment of dream or delusion . . . When I left Brattleboro I resolved never to go back to Vermont . . . those wild hills are surely the outpost of a rightful cosmic race — as I doubt all the less since reading that a new ninth planet has been glimpsed beyond Neptune."<sup>20</sup> So ends the Vermont horror of Professor A. N. Wilmarth, Esq., of Miskatonic University, Arkham, Massachusetts.

Two years later, safely ensconced in his campus study, and far from the dark mountains of Windham County, he reveals to his readers why he fled the Akeley home on that terrible night. He did not tell the authorities at Townshend the whole story, he confesses, for later that night after hearing the strange voices in Akeley's study he investigated on his own. He explored the silent house with a flashlight, and when he cast its light on the chair where his host had sat and told of the marvels of the aliens, he saw *something* that shattered his courage and very nearly his reason as well. It was Wilmarth's recollection of that awful sight which kept him firm in his resolve never to enter the state again. He is convinced "that loathsome outside influences must be lurking there in the half-unknown hills — and that those influences have spies and emissaries in the world of men. To keep as far as possible from such influences is all that I ask of life in the future."<sup>21</sup> Lovecraft was not the first to see Vermont as an inviting habitat for pernicious influences from the outside that threatened the integrity of its natives and the notion of "unspoiled, ancestral New England," it evokes. Nor was he the first to stand in awe of unharnessed wilderness.

"The Whisperer in the Darkness" is considered by the critics to be one of the best stories in the Lovecraft canon. It is too much to suggest that the author's highly colorful exploitation of the Vermont landscape accounts in part for this success. Whatever the reasons, his reputation and stature have been growing steadily for more than a decade, and so has an appreciation for the story of the strange beings who prowled the wilder recesses of the Green Mountains. In reply to an inquiry in April of this year, Vrest Orton said, "There isn't a month goes by that I don't get requests for information about H. P. Lovecraft."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Edmund Wilson, *Classics and Commercials* (New York: Vintage Books, Inc., 1962), p. 286.

<sup>2</sup>L. Sprague de Camp, *Lovecraft: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975), jacket advertisement.

<sup>3</sup>*The Scarlet Letter* (New York: The Modern Library, 1947), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>In 1932 Orton sold the Stephen Daye Press and moved back to New York. Lovecraft did editorial work on a history of Dartmouth College for the press.

<sup>5</sup>de Camp, *Lovecraft*, p. 297.

<sup>6</sup>Howard Phillips Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in the Darkness" in *The Spawn of Cthulhu*, ed. Lin Carter (New York: Ballentine Books, 1971), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Percival Lowell (1855-1916), brother to Amy Lowell the poet, and A.L. Lowell, president of Harvard, founded the Lowell Observatory at Flagstaff, Arizona in 1894.

<sup>8</sup>"Whisperer," p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>"Arkham" is Lovecraft's mythologized Salem, Massachusetts.

<sup>10</sup>"Whisperer," pp. 10-11

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* Lovecraft's ardor for Eighteenth Century culture, for the Georgian, was profound. "I belong back with the Georgians in point of time," he once said. His editing of Vrest Orton's *History of Dartmouth College* disillusioned him about that world in America, by his own report.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.