

TOP TEN MOST FAMOUS HOAXES in HISTORY

One of the hallmarks of being human is the desire—and some may say the need—to try and fool ourselves and each other. We've even set aside a special day—April 1st—to celebrate this aberration in human nature, making the quest to offer fiction as fact a never ending roller coaster ride. Of course, sometimes these innocent attempts to fool the general public can cause some real problems, though usually they prove to be ultimately harmless (except for the occasional bruised ego.) So here, without further ado, is my top ten list of the all time greatest hoaxes ever perpetrated upon an unsuspecting public.



10. The Cardiff Giant: One of the earliest hoaxes of modern times, in 1869 workers digging a well near Cardiff, New York unearthed a massive 10-foot tall statue of a giant that many believed at the time was a “petrified man” and evidence that the biblical passage concerning the existence of giants once living on the earth (Genesis 6:4) was true. However, the “petrified man” actually turned out to be the brainchild of one George Hull, an atheist and tobacconist from New York City who was intent on besting a Christian fundamentalist with whom he had argued over the biblical passage. Hiring a stonemason to carve the image of a man out of a massive piece of gypsum and burying it on the farm of

his cousin, William Newell, it was “discovered” there a year later and served as a source of income for mister Newell—who charged people a quarter to see it—for the next few years. Hull turned out to come out ahead in the affair, however, by selling his interest in the statue to a syndicate of five men headed up by Newell for \$23,000—ten times the amount he had spent on the hoax. In the end, however, the scammers were scammed themselves when none other than the famous showman, P.T. Barnum, made his own copy of the Cardiff Giant and declared Newell’s a fake. The case ended up in court, with Hull admitting to the fake and both statues being declared a hoax by the courts.



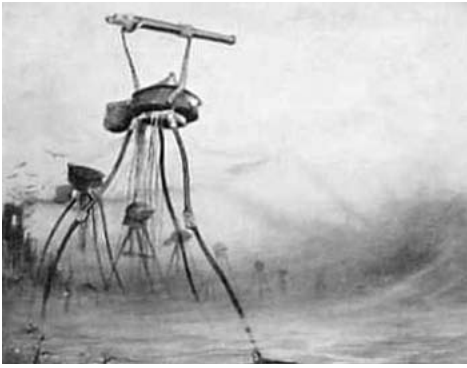
9. The Loch Ness Monster “Surgeon’s Photo”: It’s not so difficult to accept that the most famous photo of the Loch Ness Monster ever taken turned out to be a fake; what’s hard to understand is how it took sixty years to figure that out. Supposedly taken by a London surgeon named Robert Wilson—a man known as something of a practical joker himself, it turns out—the photo was the brainchild of a fellow named Marmaduke (yes, I said Marmaduke) Wetherell as payback for being humiliated years earlier when the supposed monster’s footprints he found were nothing but dried hippo’s footsteps. In collusion with Wilson and an apprentice named Christian Spurling (who was to confess the

hoax on his deathbed in 1994, thus solving the mystery) Wetherall attached a head and neck shape to a toy submarine and set it adrift, capturing the famous—if fuzzy—photo and immortalizing Nessie for ever more. The admission that the photo was a hoax didn’t hurt the beastie’s reputation however, and she (or he?) remains as popular, and illusive, as ever.



8. The Alien Autopsy Film: In one of the more brazen—and relatively successful—hoaxes ever, in 1995 London-based film producer Ray Santilli presented a few minutes of grainy black and white film footage that purported to show a dead alien (supposedly from the Roswell crash—but that’s another story) undergoing an autopsy. Though the footage was at first hailed by many in the UFO community as authentic, a number of discrepancies regarding the footage soon came to light (some of them pointed out by modern forensic experts knowledgeable about autopsy procedures) which, along with Santilli’s hesitancy to have the film tested and other evasions, made it appear increasingly dubious. Since then the film has been

thoroughly debunked, though Santilli came out of it well when he made a spoof of the hoax himself in a 2006 British comedy. Playing both sides off the middle, it sounds like to me.



7. Orson Wells's 1938 War of the Worlds Broadcast:

Orson Wells (no relation to the more famous H.G. Wells) was a virtual unknown 23-year old radio producer working out of New York City in 1938 when he directed the radio adaptation of H.G. Wells's famous novel *War of the Worlds* on Halloween eve, 1938. Unfortunately, and despite the fact that he inserted two disclaimers that the broadcast was fictional, thousands missed them and believed the story of Martian invasion was real. While reports of the extent of the ensuing panic has been traditionally overstated, what can't be overstated is that it made the young man an overnight celebrity and skyrocketed him to fame. He was to become

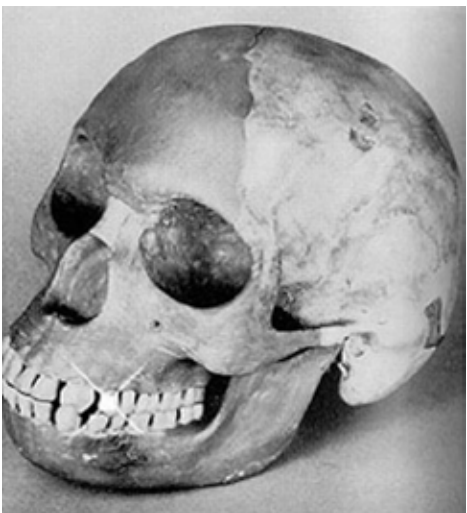
an acclaimed producer, director and actor until his death in 1985, but in all that time he never repeated the broadcast again (although recordings of it have been rebroadcast for years since). What's different about this hoax when compared to others is that Wells's was unintentional, making it the most successful inadvertent hoax of all time.



6. Cottingley Fairies:

It all began back in 1917 when two English girls, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, decided to have some fun by cutting pictures of faeries out of a popular children's book of the era and mounting them in pins, after which they took photos of them. Not surprisingly, they looked pretty flat, but they were apparently convincing enough that the photos—there were five in all—became quite a sensation in England at the time (which was probably looking for a distraction from all the depressing war news at the time). The pictures eventually came to the attention of famous writer Arthur Conan Doyle—and ardent spiritualist—who promptly proclaimed them authentic, setting off a firestorm of

debate and, in the end, badly tarnishing the brilliant man's post mortem reputation. The hoax was finally and utterly exposed in 1983 when in a magazine article the woman admitted to faking the photos, though curiously one of them insisted that at least one of the five photos was authentic. What's even more curious is how they managed to fool so many people for so many years, especially when a copy of the book the figures were cut from (Claude Arthur Shepperson's *Princess Mary's Gift Book*) was readily available for a comparison.



5. Piltown Man:

The never ending quest to locate the famous "missing link" that is supposed to conclusively tie man to the ape bit science in the butt back in 1912 when fragments of a skull and a jaw bone were discovered in a gravel pit near Piltown, England. Claimed to be the missing link by many otherwise quite knowledgeable scientists, in 1953 it was determined to be a cleverly aged human skull that had been attached to the jaw of a Sarawak orangutan and imbedded with the teeth of a chimpanzee. Who produced the forgery and why remains a mystery to this day, but that they managed to keep scientists on the run for over forty years has to be considered one of the great feats of the century—and possibly the reason scientists don't talk so much about finding missing links nowadays.



4. Hitler's Diary:

This one was truly a work of art. It seems that in 1983 a personal diary kept by Adolf Hitler himself came to light, only to be snatched up by the big German magazine *Der Stern* for a cool six million bucks and serialized in future editions. The only problem was they were quickly proven to be the work of a notorious Stuttgart forger known for his ability to mimic der Fuehrer's handwriting and for being most prolific (the diaries comprised no fewer than 60 small books that purportedly covered the years 1932 to 1945). The giveaway may have been the fact that the Fuehrer wannabe wrote it all on modern paper using modern ink, and included a number of historical inaccuracies as well.

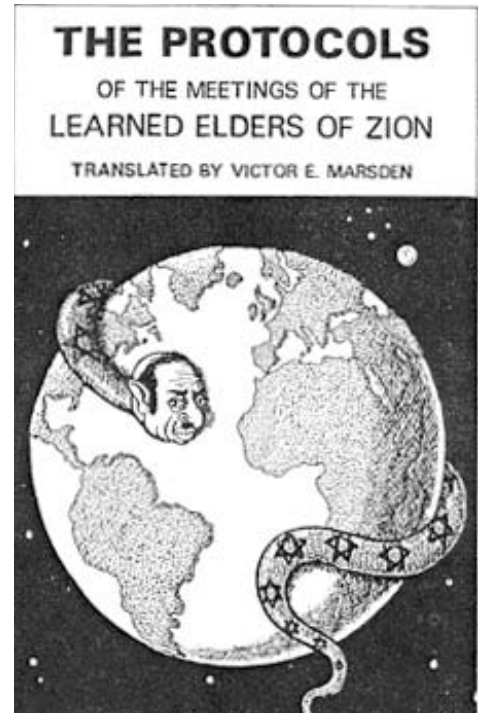
For that he got 42 months in the slammer and I'm sure some executive at *Der Stern* lost his much anticipated Christmas bonus.



3. Crop Circles: While there is evidence that at least a few crop circles—those mysterious little swirls of stomped wheat that appears with some regularity in English fields each summer—that do exhibit some true physiological anomalies, the fact is that most of them are hoaxes. This wasn't entirely clear until 1991, however, when British farmers Doug Bower and Dave Chorley, two men with obviously way too much time on their hands, came forward to not only admit that they had been making many of the circles themselves, but even demonstrated how they did it using ropes and wooden planks. Of course, there were far too many circles for too many years for them to have been responsible for more than a fraction

of them, but to the science community that was proof enough it was all a hoax. Since then, there are even clubs that have formed dedicated to besting other crop circle clubs in producing the most sophisticated and complex circles imaginable. It's become quite the art form, I'm told, though even the best of them pale in comparison to "true" circles. And who says extraterrestrials don't have a sense of humor?

2. Zionist Protocols: Ever wonder where Hitler and those Nazi's got their silly ideas about the Jews from? It might be in part due to a document that surfaced in Russia in 1905 entitled the Protocols of the Elders of Zion that outlined the "super secret" Jewish plan for world domination. Of course, it was a complete fake—as demonstrated in 1921 by a London Times reporter who demonstrated it to have been largely plagiarized from a 1864 satirical novel—but that matters little to those who enjoy hating. In fact, it became a major fuel for anti-Semitism throughout the twentieth century and was even used as justification by Hitler for his gas chambers. Despite that, it remains a popular book in much of the Middle East and can even be found on Amazon.com. The lesson to be learned here is that one must be careful about writing satirical literature for one never knows what morons will do with it in the future.



1. The Man Who Never Was (Operation Mincemeat): Who

says hoaxing can't be useful, especially in wartime? Not the British, who decided to confuse the Germans by taking the body of a deceased pneumonia victim, dressing him in a Royal Marine Uniform, handcuffing him to a briefcase full of "top secret" invasion plans, and setting him adrift off the coast of Sicily. The payoff? The Italians found the body and turned the briefcase over to their German allies, who learned from it that the allies planned to invade Greece and Sardinia rather than Sicily. The only problem was the allies had no such intention, making the landings in southern Sicily in July, 1943 a piece of cake thanks to the Germans thoughtfully leaving the coastline largely undefended—all because of a nameless hero and a bit of simple but clever hoaxing.

Dishonorable Mentions: **The Fox Sisters** (faked paranormal activity, thus jump starting the spiritist movement of the nineteenth century); **The Beatles "Paul is Dead" Hoax** (the belief that the Beatles hid secret messages regarding the death of Paul McCartney that can only be heard if certain records are played backwards.); **William Mumler** (the first man to make a living successfully hoaxing pictures of "ghosts"); **Douglas Corrigan** (an American pilot who claims he got lost over New York City and "accidentally" flew to Ireland, making him the second man to make a solo crossing of the Atlantic and earning him the lifetime moniker of "Wrong Way Corrigan"); and, of course, **Balloon Boy** (the Colorado dad who falsely reported his son was trapped in a flying-saucer shaped helium balloon in an effort to get his own reality TV show.) My hat's off to all you goofballs.