

**Cryptic - From Voynich to the Angel Diaries: The Story of the World's Mysterious Manuscripts.** Garry J. Shaw, Yale University Press, 2025, pp 333.

*Critique of an impressive survey work on (mainly cryptographic) aspects of mysterious manuscripts.*

Garry Shaw is described as an author and journalist, with special interests in Egyptology, archaeology, mythology and 'bizarre world heritage'. He has a BA in archaeology, and an MA and PhD in Egyptology from the University of Liverpool, and he has taught in his areas of expertise in various institutions.<sup>1</sup> His professional contribution to the now very extensive literature on historical and linguistic mysteries and controversies is most welcome.

In context, however, one might be concerned that Shaw does not actually identify as having expertise specifically in linguistics, or as being versed in the relevant languages, except (presumably) in Egyptian. And his bibliography omits some of the most important specifically skeptical linguistic works on these matters, such as Andrew Robinson's *Lost Languages: The Enigma of the World's Undeciphered Scripts* (2002), Cyrus Gordon's *Forgotten Scripts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1971), or indeed the relevant chapters of my own book *Strange Linguistics* (2013). One might also have liked to find, by way of background, some reference to more general scholarly works upon the history of writing systems. It is true that much (but by no means all) of this skeptical and background material deals with inscriptions (on tablets, etc.) rather than manuscripts. But it would not be unreasonable to expect Shaw to report, even if briefly, on consultation of the scholarly literature in this area by way of conferring more authority upon his own discussion. See further below.

So far there have been few comments upon Shaw's own book by scholars with specifically linguistic expertise. He cites some positive appraisals on his web-site; however, these derive from authors who are not themselves linguists (or cryptographers) but are trained in other disciplines, identifying in this context as 'independent researchers' or the like (although they do have keen and well-informed hobby interests in the material in question, e.g. in the Rohonc Codex and the Voynich Manuscript).

Another issue involves Shaw's title as it relates to his content. While the status of any given mysterious script or body of data may be uncertain in this respect, in principle there is a serious difference between, on the one hand, (a) a script designed to be unreadable for those not party to a covert enterprise (e.g. a code or cypher, to be solved later by scholars of cryptography with input from linguists) and, on the other, (b) a script of more specifically linguistic interest which was intended to be transparent to literate members of the language-community in question but is currently opaque to modern scholarship - and thus can be described as 'cryptic' only informally. The title *Cryptic* suggests the former, and in his Introduction and in much of the body of his text this is what Shaw emphasises. But in many cases (especially where multiple documents are in question) the latter situation (b) may very well obtain. It cannot be **assumed** at the outset that the Voynich Manuscript, still less John Dee's 'Enochian' (as in the 'Angel Diaries'), were very probably intended to conceal information from uninitiated persons.

Shaw, however, clearly has a stronger interest in codes and ciphers (a) than in mysterious writing systems proper (b). He repeatedly refers to the well-known medieval cryptographer (etc.) Roger Bacon (pp.19-20, 37, 41-42, in various contexts), includes impressive chapters on the cryptographers Giovanni Fontana, Johannes Trithemius (the inventor of stenography), Johannes van Heeck (aka Heckius), Michael Maier, etc. Some of these men had vested interests in concealing information (or 'information') of commercial significance and/or of a currently disfavoured nature (alchemical, etc.) or restricting it to members of certain groups. and were therefore driven to develop ciphers and codes. In consequence of this focus, Shaw may possibly be particularly inclined to view any newly-examined mysterious writing systems in a cryptographic light.

In this context, one might (again) have expected to find more reference to the extensive modern linguistically-informed literature on codes and ciphers specifically, for instance Simon Singh's books.

Shaw adroitly introduces a number of topics which are rather seldom discussed in the relevant linguistic literature, notably in his chapter on the work of the C16 writer Thomas Harriot towards an international phonetic alphabet – something which was not to be actually realised until C19 in the form of the International Phonetic Association Alphabet as developed by linguists. Shaw provides (especially on pp. 159-162) valuable insights into the subsequent quest for universal languages and scripts which became a major philosophical theme in C17 (of course, scientific linguistics *per se* had not yet emerged).

In something of a contrast, one issue with Shaw's book lies in his rather limited attention to matters falling squarely within the domain of linguistics, especially matters of linguistic detail. This may reflect his own apparently limited interest in linguistics *per se*. The most significant example of this problem involves his discussion in Chapter 5 of John Dee's 'Angelic Diaries', which involve two types of quasi-linguistic material, supposedly received by way of channelling. While Shaw's treatment of the background to Dee's work and of his intellectual life (pp. 102, 111-113, etc.), and of early post-Dee scholarly work on the material, is impressive, he devotes only two pages (pp. 106, 119) to the actual features of 'Enochian'. And he refers only in passing to what is clearly the most important work on the language itself: the book-length treatment titled *The Complete Enochian Dictionary* (London, 1978 and York Beach, Maine, 1994) by the still-lamented and amazingly talented Australian linguist Donald C. Laycock and his colleague Stephen Skinner. Laycock died - tragically young – in 1988, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition was completed by Skinner with two prefaces. Laycock's book is obviously indispensable to any serious comment on the Dee material.<sup>2</sup>

But Shaw does not draw adequately on Laycock; he refers only briefly to some (not all) of the specific features and issues which Laycock discusses, which are most important in the context of the putative origins of Enochian – either somehow invented by Dee, for whatever reason, in the absence of any tradition of linguistics, or genuinely deriving from some other, mysterious source.

In some cases Shaw's omissions along these lines are (or may be) less damaging. But even one such case does give one pause.

Shaw's early chapters deal with the literature and the known facts regarding medieval artificial or possibly artificial languages and scripts, commencing with the purportedly divinely-inspired Hildegard of Bingen's C12 *Lingua Ignota* and *Litterae Ignotae* (details only on pp. 12, 14; discussion of possible inspiration and sources in known scripts and numeral systems on pp. 17-19) and moving on to the now celebrated, intriguingly illustrated Voynich Manuscript (for which Shaw accepts the controversial dating 1404-1438 approx.) (linguistic details appear on pp. 32-33, 43-45, 48-51). In a later chapter, Shaw returns to the Voynich Manuscript in a specifically cryptographic context, with a short further section (pp. 234-237) on the script.

As well as his chapter-by-chapter treatment of major cases/writers, Shaw deals more briefly with other cases such as that of the Rohonc Codex, a body of material in an unknown writing system somewhat analogous to the Voynich Manuscript. The Codex is of unknown date and may be a hoax/forgery or else a cipher; but there have been various amateur attempts at translations (into Hungarian, an unidentified form of early Romance, Hindi etc.). On p. 4 Shaw identifies it as 'now revealed to be an encoded manuscript', but even his own comments on pp. 45-47 do not suggest that this degree of confidence is warranted. The matter remains controversial. There is an extensive literature on the Codex, but much of it is in Hungarian, hindering access to it.

Some unfamiliar scripts and languages have proved, of course, to be inventions (hoaxes); others (e.g. in science fiction) have been openly presented as invented. Shaw has something to say about cases of

this kind, for instance an excursus (pp. 138-142) on the concoctions of George Psalmanazar and a chapter on the Turpiana Tower Parchment.

Shaw provides extensive end-notes, excellent illustrations and a 23-page bibliography. Overall the book is of a soundly scholarly nature and is clearly the outcome of extensive research. It will obviously be of more interest to scholars and enthusiasts in the domain of cryptography than to linguistic epigraphists but it is by no means without relevance in the latter domain. Despite my caveats as expressed above, I regard it as much to be recommended.

## NOTES & REFERENCES

1 See: <https://www.garryjshaw.com/about/>

<https://www.garryjshaw.com/books/cryptic/>

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/Cryptic-Voynich-Diaries-Mysterious-Manuscripts/dp/0300266510/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?adgrpid=1184175893375099&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.jUpD6r3C36CCWvYkopLF5miJ3FzrUAZ6m2lBarvnGF8.4AxSLsLteslm3nWFMc\\_8ESN09iLRN8OTWVOA6hrtGDs&dib\\_tag=s\\_e&hvadid=74011201842695&hvbmt=be&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=41011&hvnetw=o&hvqmt=e&hvtargid=kwd-74011417341810%3Aloc-188&hydadcr=24404\\_2219367&keywords=cryptic+garry+shaw&mcid=0f1a8578bdf235a4a2eb776228095bc9&qid=1751202381&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Cryptic-Voynich-Diaries-Mysterious-Manuscripts/dp/0300266510/ref=sr_1_1?adgrpid=1184175893375099&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.jUpD6r3C36CCWvYkopLF5miJ3FzrUAZ6m2lBarvnGF8.4AxSLsLteslm3nWFMc_8ESN09iLRN8OTWVOA6hrtGDs&dib_tag=s_e&hvadid=74011201842695&hvbmt=be&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=41011&hvnetw=o&hvqmt=e&hvtargid=kwd-74011417341810%3Aloc-188&hydadcr=24404_2219367&keywords=cryptic+garry+shaw&mcid=0f1a8578bdf235a4a2eb776228095bc9&qid=1751202381&sr=8-1)

2 It may be worthwhile to summarise Laycock's findings and observations here. His book is much more than a 'dictionary' – including, in particular, extensive discussion of Enochian grammar (see below). Laycock and Skinner discuss earlier interpretive works from 1662 and after (up to C20), each influenced by contemporary ideas. They are highly critical (Laycock was involved with the Australian Skeptics) but are also open minded despite the nature of the material; they are inclined to consider Enochian largely **non**-paranormal (although Skinner is obviously convinced of the reality of Dee's angels, at least). Laycock and Skinner concluded that 'Enochian', unusually in this context, patterns rather like a genuine but altogether unknown language, albeit with some most uncommon features. One such feature involves unprecedentedly heavy/wide-ranging 'suppletion' (unrelated stems in different tenses, etc.) in the verb paradigms. Furthermore, there are often several Enochian words in sequence corresponding with one English word, or less commonly the reverse, with no analysis offered. Most of the vocabulary is unfamiliar, though some words appear to have Latin, Greek or Hebrew etymologies. Some Enochian words are pronounceable as English, some as if from 'exotic' languages, some barely pronounceable at all. There is a highly suspicious one-to-one correspondence with the Roman Alphabet with English spelling rules. This issue arises again in the context of word-order within sentences. There are highly anomalous systems involving negation and numerals. Interpretation is difficult in places because of the high percentage of 'hapaxes' (words occurring only once in the corpus of data).