

CHAPTER ONE



The unseen host

Now and then the western clouds after sunset assume a shape resembling that of a vast extended wing, as of a gigantic bird in full flight – the extreme tip nearly reaching the zenith, the body of the bird just below the horizon. The resemblance is sometimes so perfect that the layers of feathers are traceable by an imaginative eye. This, the old folk say, is the wing of the Archangel Michael, and it bodes no good to the evil ones among the nations, for he is on his way to execute a dread command.

Richard Jefferies, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, 1879¹

From the beginning of recorded history there are stories of spectral armies seen in the sky and of visions appearing before war leaders on the eve of battle. The idea of divine intervention at the Battle of Mons in 1914 is only the most recent and best-known example of a tradition of belief in supernatural intervention that has become a fundamental element in world mythology. These traditions have very deep roots indeed.

In the ancient world the gods had an intimate and often stormy relationship with the world of humans. For instance, in the myths and legends of ancient Greece, the vengeful gods frequently intervened in earthly battles to provide assistance to the warriors whom they favoured, or to send plague and storm against those who had offended them. In early Hebrew tradition, the God Yahveh behaves in a very similar manner. He appears, speaks directly to individuals, and sends storms and thunder to punish

THE UNSEEN HOST



both individuals and nations. Job, for instance, loses his sheep, his servants and ten of his children to storms and calls out, 'Why is there evil in the world?' The voice of Yahveh speaks to him from the midst of a whirlwind, explaining that he has ultimate control over nature, and that humans cannot understand the divine plan but should place their trust in his ultimate purpose.

These stories suggest that in the ancient world divine intervention occurred regularly, in a seemingly partisan manner that can appear arbitrary, cruel and even incomprehensible today. In the Old Testament, God exerts his power on the world by the use of the weather, sending storms, floods and earthquakes. The myth of a universal deluge is the most persistent and widespread of these early myths. In many early traditions, the flood marks the end of the age where gods directly interfered in human affairs and the beginning of a new era in which God became more distant and merciful.

The age of the angels

With the separation of the sacred from the profane, angels were necessary to act as messengers between humans and the distant God. The word 'angel' is derived from the Greek *aggelos* and is translated from the Hebrew *mal'akh*, which means 'messenger'. The role played by angels in the cosmic scheme has been the subject of dramatic changes in the transition from the ancient to the modern world.

Angels are closely associated with the monotheistic religions and first appear as supernatural entities in the early Zoroastrian cosmos, which exerted a heavy influence upon the evolution of Judaism. Zoroaster was born in Persia (Iran) around the beginning of the first millennium BC and the religion he founded was based around a cosmic battle between good and evil that was fought by angels and demons. Similar beliefs are found in Judaism, where the Old Testament God was portrayed as the 'Lord of Hosts'

THE ANGEL OF MONS



whose angel warriors fight against the forces of evil led by Satan. All these elements were eventually adopted and modified by Christianity and Islam, where angels are portrayed as benevolent and righteous. They are in effect the powers that oppose Satan, the 'fallen angel' and his demons, who symbolize the destructive power of the old gods. Judaism also adopted the Zoroastrian division of the universe into three realms, with heaven as the upper celestial region inhabited by Yahveh and his angels. Hell is the subterranean world of chaos and darkness that was the abode of Satan. The world inhabited by humans was positioned between the two, forming the battleground between the forces of good and evil.²

In the Old Testament, angels could be malevolent and murderous when they acted to enforce divine law or punish the wicked. In the early eighth century BC, Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, besieged and captured the fortified cities of Judah, demanding the payment of a huge tribute in gold and precious stones. As the Assyrian army rested overnight in their camp they were visited by an angel who killed 'every valiant warrior, leader and commander'.³ The Israelites were frequently assisted by angel hosts particularly when the odds were heavily stacked against them. The second book of Kings describes how the prophet Elisha was surrounded by the armies of Assyria at Dothan. During the siege Elisha turned to his terrified servant and said: 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them', and prayed that his eyes be opened. At that moment the servant saw 'the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha' protecting them from the enemy forces.⁴

Another story describes how in the second century BC more divine horsemen appeared as Judas Maccabaeus led his army in an uprising against Roman oppression. The army of Judas fought on against overwhelming odds and at the height of the battle the Romans saw 'five magnificent figures' in the sky, riding horses with golden bridles. The divine horsemen placed themselves at the head of the Jews and formed a protective circle around their leader. According to the Hebrew account, 'they launched arrows

THE UNSEEN HOST



and thunderbolts at the enemy, who, confused and blinded, broke up in complete disorder.’ Later in the same campaign and in the midst of a bitter siege of Jerusalem, a horseman appeared among them, ‘arrayed in white, brandishing his golden weapons’, and led them to victory.⁵

These Old Testament stories have become familiar precisely because of their biblical source, which has ensured their survival. What is less well known is that pagan nations had their own traditions of supernatural intervention in battle, which are less likely to have been preserved by the Christian scribes. The Romans had a tradition that attributed the outcome of the battle of Lake Regillus in 496 BC to appearance of the divine twins, Castor and Pollux, in the guise of phantom horsemen. In the *Lays of Ancient Rome* Lord Macaulay portrays the gods as armed and mounted on magnificent white steeds riding at the head of the legions. After the victory the twins carry the news of the victory with supernatural speed to Rome. A mark resembling a horse’s hoof was later identified in the volcanic rock of the lake and it was believed this had been left by one of the celestial chargers.⁶

The angel hierarchy grew ever more complex in the first four centuries of the Christian era and on occasions the church had to move to end the worship of angels by some early sects. During this period angelology – the study of angels – was influenced by older pagan traditions and by the teachings of a sect known as the Gnostics, whose name means ‘the knowing ones’. The Gnostics shared the old view of the universe as a battleground between good and evil forces and believed that angels controlled the movements of the stars and the four elements. A hierarchy of angels had emerged who were able to assume human form and, by their actions as God’s messengers, bridge the boundary between heaven and earth.

The Bible identifies the three most important archangels as Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. St Michael is the warrior angel who leads the heavenly hosts in their war with Satan. He is often depicted in Christian art wearing elaborate armour and wielding a sword as he stamps on the defeated armies of evil. Beneath the

THE ANGEL OF MONS



archangels were lesser orders of angels, including the cherubim and the seraphim who surrounded the divine throne. The cherubim were described by the prophet Ezekiel as bizarre creatures with four wings and four faces (lion, ox, eagle and man) that travelled on fiery wheels surrounded by eyes. In the twentieth century, Ezekiel's vision of angels has been portrayed by some as a description of extraterrestrial beings visiting the earth in a fleet of flying saucers.⁷

This modern interpretation is the latest example of the way depictions of angels have reflected the culture and beliefs of the society that portrays them. Originally angels were depicted as androgynous youths or children, as it was believed they were created directly by God and could not reproduce. However, Renaissance art represented them as adolescent males and indeed the original Greek word *aggelos* is a masculine noun. By the late Gothic period a further change had occurred, with increasing emphasis being placed in Christian art upon the beauty and compassion of angels. This led to the development of the familiar image of the female guardian angel wearing white robes and bathed in radiant light that became very popular during the Victorian era in England. Out of this complex cultural background a concept emerged that portrayed angels as God's messengers and ministers. They ministered and guided Christians towards salvation, and adopted the older role of guardian spirits to the individual.

Supernatural intervention in wars continued to occur as the ancient world gave way to the modern. In early Christian times, stories of vengeful pagan gods were still widely believed, but were slowly integrated into the new religion. Across Europe, the saints and angels adopted the role in battle formerly occupied by the gods of war. In Irish tradition, saints were able to summon magical reinforcements or send magic mists to conceal Christian armies from their enemies. Newly Christianized kings and emperors were encouraged to forsake the war gods that had once been called upon by their ancestors, for the protection of patron saints. During the Middle Ages, this tradition continued

THE UNSEEN HOST



with victories against pagans and heretics attributed by the church to the direct intervention of God via his agents on earth. Meanwhile newly Christianized warriors inherited some of the roles of the angels as supernatural protectors of territory and the patrons of kings and soldiers.

St George

Many nations and peoples have traditions of supernatural protectors that emerge at times of great danger and national emergency. The foundation for a British tradition of divine intervention emerged during the early medieval period. At that time the Christian church preferred magic to be worked in the name of the one true God via the saints. In early medieval England, armies relied upon a variety of competing patron saints for supernatural protection, but by the time of the Crusades the church was keen to promote a single supernatural personage as protector of soldiers preparing for campaigns in the Holy Land.

These qualities were all found in St George, whose cult is similar if not identical to that of St Michael. Both the saint and the angel are depicted by artists as warriors who overcome the forces of evil, which are depicted symbolically in the form of a dragon. St George's elevation as patron saint and supernatural protector of English armies can be traced to the eleventh century at the time of the First Crusade. Although the warrior saint is one of the most famous Christian icons, little is known of his life, and contemporary evidence is so poor that some historians doubt that a real historical person of that name ever existed. Early hagiographers claimed that George was a soldier martyred in what is present-day Syria during the reign of Diocletian in late third or early fourth century AD. One version claims he held the rank of tribune in the Roman army and was beheaded by the emperor for protesting against the persecution of Christians. His bravery in defending the poor and defenceless quickly led to

THE ANGEL OF MONS



reverence, and by the sixth century his cult had spread to western Europe, with churches and convents dedicated to him across Christendom, including several in England.

St George's connection with England was popularized in the early histories of the saints that appeared during the eighth century AD. The apocryphal *Acts of St George* describes his visits to the Roman city of Caerleon and to Glastonbury, and these stories were translated into Anglo-Saxon. Later, the *Legenda Aurea* (*The Golden Legend*) popularized the story of 'St George and the Dragon', which had a particular appeal to the Anglo-Saxons who had their own traditions of struggles between warriors and monsters. While it is unlikely that the real St George – if he did indeed exist – ever visited the British Isles, these legends were encouraged by the church as they cemented his role as a patron and protector of the English in battle. The seal was placed upon this role by the Crusades, which gave impetus to the veneration of St George by Christian armies, and by the English in particular.

The enthusiasm of the Crusaders for the soldier-martyr continued to grow and eventually became a military cult. The invocation of his name as a rallying cry in battle raised the popularity of St George among the nobility in England, Aragon (part of Spain) and Portugal who adopted him as their patron. When in 1095 Pope Urban II announced a crusade to reconquer the Holy Land from the Muslims, he declared that God alone would lead the Christian army to victory. But feuds between the Crusaders split the army into two forces and they entered Asia Minor with little knowledge of the terrain or the enemy they faced. Despite the famine and hardships endured by the Crusaders, they initially enjoyed success against the Muslims who were also divided by their own internal rivalries.

Christian chroniclers such as William of Malmesbury were quick to attribute the early success of the Crusaders to divine intervention. In his account, it was during the Battle of Antioch in 1098 that the visions of saints George and Demetrios appeared in the nick of time to save the besieged Crusader army, which had become trapped by hordes of advancing Saracens. He claimed

THE UNSEEN HOST



they saw a mighty host charging down the hillside to their aid, 'with banner flying and horse hoofs thundering', the sight of which rallied the Crusaders and led them to overcome the fearsome odds and achieve victory. He also claimed that a phantom horseman, presumably St George, appeared to rally the Crusaders who captured Jerusalem from the Muslim forces on 15 July 1099.⁸ This story was probably influenced by the biblical story of the angel horsemen who appeared at Jerusalem during the Maccabean wars. From that point the legend of St George and the stories of warrior angels described in the Old Testament became interchangeable in the medieval mind.

Knights and troubadours returned from campaigns in the Holy Land and began to spread stories of these miracles across western Europe. They were so influential that in 1191–92, during the Third Crusade, when King Richard I of England was campaigning in Palestine, he placed his entire army under the protection of St George. When his rearguard force was attacked by Saracens during his march along the coast road to Acre in 1191 one of the knights called out to the warrior saint for help. Although St George did not appear on this occasion, the mere mention of his name helped to rally the defenders who were able to mount two charges against the Saracens and drive them off. The invocation of the warrior saint at a moment of great peril became a lasting tradition among Christian soldiers. It was also during the reign of King Richard I that the banner of St George – the red cross on a white background – was adopted for the uniform of English soldiers, and later became the flag of England and the white ensign of the Royal Navy.⁹

By the time of the Hundred Years War, St George was widely accepted as the sole protector of English soldiers in battle. In 1348 King Edward III founded St George's Chapel at Windsor and with it the Order of the Garter, the oldest ancient order of chivalry, with the saint as its principal patron. According to Thomas of Walsingham, when in the following year the king laid siege to Calais he was moved to draw his sword and cry: 'Ha! Saint Edward! Ha! Saint George!'¹⁰ The words inspired his soldiers to

THE ANGEL OF MONS



attack and they routed the French armies. Thereafter, the cult of St George was skilfully exploited by English kings to provide both protection and justification for their military adventures abroad. By the fifteenth century, St George interceded on the side of the English not only in campaigns against the Saracens but also against the armies of other Christian nations, further cementing his identification as a supernatural protector of English troops. When Richard II invaded Scotland in 1385 his men were ordered to wear a 'a signe of the arms of St George' on their uniforms. Folklorist Christina Hole wrote that:

in many medieval battles, from the days of Richard I onwards, his aid was invoked, and his name shouted by English men-at-arms and their leaders as the attack was launched, or in moments of special peril ... Tales of victory or last-minute deliverance told by returning soldiers carried the saint's fame into townships and villages all over the country and, for some simple folk at least, it seemed that so close a friend must be not only for England but of it.¹¹

The most famous invocation of St George in battle was that by Henry V at Agincourt in 1415. Henry was a pious warrior who believed it was his destiny to assert his divine right over French territory. The *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, written after his campaign by a member of his private chapel, emphasized the message that Henry and his army were protected throughout by divine power and compared the English people with the Israelites in the Old Testament. During Henry's campaign in France, appeals were made to the Virgin Mary, St George and other patron saints for direct assistance in time of need. The banner of St George, as England's military patron and favourite symbol, was carried alongside those of the Virgin and the royal standard onto the field at Agincourt. The Middle English *Brut* account of the battle, which dates from 1377 to 1419, describes how the king addressed his men with these words:

'Now is a good time for all England is praying for us. Therefore be of good cheer, let us go into battle.' Then he

THE UNSEEN HOST



said in a high voice 'In the name of almighty God and St George, advance banner. St George, give us this day your help.'

As the enemy knights advanced into a wall of arrows from the longbows of the English archers, the chronicle tells how the Frenchmen:

saw St George in the air over the host of the English fighting against the Frenchmen ... thus almighty God and St George brought our enemy to the ground and gave us victory that day.¹²

At Agincourt, Henry's army consisted of a mere 2,500 men-at-arms and 8,000 archers. This small army faced a heavily armoured French host that is thought to have been 50 000 strong. Yet a combination of luck, skilful tactics and the advantages of geography and weather resulted in victory for Henry, and disaster for the French who suffered 11 000 killed and many more taken prisoner.¹³ At the time tactics and weapons were believed to be of little advantage if God was fighting on the side of the righteous, and thus the English victory was attributed to divine intervention. Five centuries later another heavily outnumbered British army faced overwhelming forces in a confrontation that took place on French soil in a new world ruled not by miracles, but by scientific progress. How prophetic the words attributed to Henry V must have sounded to those who came to believe that St George and his angel bowmen would answer the call for help one more time.

Something in the air

Historians tend to regard 'divine intervention' in history as a device used by church and state to justify wars, and to provide legitimacy for campaigns against other nations and peoples.

THE ANGEL OF MONS



Certainly, medieval adventurers who set out to make their fortunes in the Holy Land, and to impose their religion upon the inhabitants of the New World, attempted to justify their actions by attributing their apparent success to the saints who they believed fought on their side. By doing so they established a deep well of tradition of belief that could be drawn upon in the event of future crisis.

There is another form of divine intervention that can be traced from the very earliest period. It took the form of visions of phantom armies and signs in the sky that have appeared both to individuals and, on occasions to large groups of people. Mystical visions such as those experienced by biblical figures such as Ezekiel and St Paul were frequent in the ancient world and often took the form of blinding lights from the sky. In more recent times, visions that were once described as miraculous have been reinterpreted as celestial phenomena such as comets and eclipses of the sun and moon, when they have coincided with significant events on Earth.

One of the most detailed stories of a vision pre-empting the outcome of an important battle occurred in the fourth century AD and led a Roman emperor to abandon pagan gods and convert to Christianity. The new religion was forbidden by law across the Roman Empire when Constantine was proclaimed caesar at York in 306 AD. At that time it was ruled by two emperors known as Augustus of the West and Augustus of the East and two junior caesars, with Constantine holding sway over much of Gaul and Britain. By all accounts Constantine was a cruel and superstitious man and his decision to unite the whole empire under his sole rule was entirely in keeping with politics in pagan Rome. That Constantine emerged victorious against the odds stacked against him would have far-reaching effects for the future of western Europe and Christianity.

His army moved into Italy to unseat his rival Maxentius in October 312 and the two forces met ten miles outside Rome at a place called Milvian Bridge. Constantine's army was heavily outnumbered and militarily it appeared that Maxentius had the

THE UNSEEN HOST



advantage. But as the armies prepared themselves for battle, Constantine saw a vision of a cross in the sky as he looked toward the sun. The cross was accompanied by the Greek letters 'Chi-Ro' (Christ), and an inscription which read: 'By this sign, you will conquer.' Constantine, a pagan, had the symbol of the cross placed on the shields of his soldiers and the next day they went into battle under the protection of the Christian god. In the slaughter that followed, Constantine's army was victorious and Maxentius was killed. The medieval historian R.H.C. Davis writes that although the traditional account of the events is suspect, the victory had great symbolic significance. Constantine was proclaimed sole ruler of the western half of the empire and he was later to become sole ruler of the entire empire:

Late in his life he even became convinced that the only reason why he had won the battle of the Milvian Bridge ... was the effect of divine intervention. He thought that he had been commanded by Christ to make a banner modelled on the Christian monogram which he had seen in the sky; and he was convinced that this banner, the *labarum*, had given him victory.¹⁴

Constantine came to believe his vision was a sign from heaven, but at the time it occurred he was a pagan and his actual baptism into the Christian faith came later in his life. At the time of Milvian Bridge, the appearance of visions and spectral armies in the sky at a critical moment in battle was fully in keeping with pagan mythology. In the British Isles, the Irish and the Anglo-Saxon records frequently mention signs and prodigies appearing in the sky before battles and depredations of the Vikings. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in a famous entry dated 793 AD, tells how:

terrible portents appeared in Northumbria, and miserably inflicted the inhabitants; these were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air, and soon followed a great famine, and after that in the

THE ANGEL OF MONS



same year the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter.¹⁵

Similarly in April 1066, the arrival of Halley's Comet, known at that time as the 'long-eared star', was widely believed to be an evil portent. Again, the connection of signs in the heaven with a momentous event on earth was confirmed when on 14 October that year King Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings and Anglo-Saxon England was swept away by the Norman invaders led by William the Conqueror.

Fairy cavalcades and phantom armies

Elsewhere in the folklore of northern Europe the appearance of the Wild Hunt and the fairy cavalcade was widely seen as a portent of war. In Germany and Scandinavia, the Wild Hunt was led by the war god Odin, seated upon his eight-legged horse Sleipnir. In Devonshire, the leader of the spectral host was believed to be the Elizabethan hero Francis Drake. Historian Jennifer Westwood links the numerous early modern stories of 'spectral armies' seen in the sky directly with the older tradition of the Wild Hunt.¹⁶ One of the earliest written accounts is an entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from 1127, which portrays the apparition as an evil portent of the arrival in England of an unpopular abbot, Henry of Anjou, who set about the systematic plunder of the monastery at Peterborough. The *Chronicle* notes how:

it was general knowledge throughout the whole country that immediately after his arrival ... many men both saw and heard a great number of huntsmen hunting. The huntsmen were black, huge, and hideous, and rode on black horses and on black he-goats, and their hounds were jet black, with eyes like saucers, and horrible. This was seen in the very deer park of the town of Peterborough, and in all

THE UNSEEN HOST



the woods that stretch from that same town to Stamford,
and in the night the monks heard them sounding and
winding their horns.¹⁷

Unearthly battles in the sky and visions of spectral armies were frequently reported during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The chronicles and histories of the time frequently refer to them as portents of battles to come, or as signs of God's displeasure at wars and social upheaval. For instance, the outbreak of the conflict between King Charles I and his parliament was accompanied by a host of signs and portents both on earth and in the skies. Stories and rumours of prodigies were popularized by seers and millenarian preachers and news could now spread more quickly and effectively than in past centuries with the invention of the printing press. The most popular were the sensational pamphlets and broadsheets that both sides lost no time in employing for propaganda purposes.

The most spectacular supernatural vision of the Civil War was the phantom army that was said to have appeared in the sky two months after the Battle of Edgehill in October 1642. The visions at Edgehill in present-day Warwickshire became such an enduring part of English folklore that three centuries later they were compared to the visions allegedly seen by British soldiers at the Battle of Mons. The Edgehill spectral army is described in a contemporary pamphlet entitled *A great Wonder in heaven, shewing the late Apparitions and Prodigious Noyse of War and Battels, seene on Edge-Hill, neere Keinton, in Northamptonshire, 1642*. It describes how:

between twelve and one o'clock of the morning was heard by some shepherds, and other countrey-men, and travellers, first the soyund of drummes afar off, and the noyse of soulders, as it were, giving out their last groanes; at which they were much amazed, and amazed stood still, till it seemed, by the neereness of the noyse, to approach them; at which too much affrighted, they sought to withdraw as

THE ANGEL OF MONS



fast as possibly they could; but then, on the sudden, wilest they were in these cogitations, appeared in the ayre the same incorporeall souldiers that made those clamours, and immediately, with Ensignes display'd, Drummes beating, Musquests going off, Cannons discharged, Horses neighing, which also to these men were visible, the alarum, or entrance to this game of death was stricke up, one Army, which gave the first charge, having the King's colours, and the other the Parliaments, in their head or front of the battells, and so pell mell to it they went ...¹⁸

The spectators were frozen in fear while the spectral battle ran its course over three hours, whereupon the king's soldiers fled and those of parliament 'stayed a good space triumphing, and expressing all the signes of joy and conquest, and then, with all their Drummes, Trumpets, Ordnance, and Souldiers, vanished'. Immediately the men went to Keinton where they awoke the incredulous Justice of the Peace and the minister and 'averred it upon their oaths to be true'. The following night, a Sunday which fell upon Christmas, they returned with a larger group of villagers to the spot where the phantoms had first appeared. Again the phantom re-enactment of the battle was seen and heard, leaving 'the Gentlemen and all the spectatours, much terrified with these visions of horroure, withdrew themselves to their houses, beseeching God to defend them from those hellish and prodigious enemies'. So disturbed were some that they moved out of their homes, but the minister stayed and witnessed further, increasingly noisy appearances. Eventually the story reached King Charles at Oxford, and he sent six of his most trusted officers to Keinton to investigate. They too saw the phantoms and recognized the faces of some of the soldiers that were slain.

Rumours of the events at Edgehill spread rapidly and appear to have inspired further reports of phantom armies seen at other places. The news from England caused great excitement in Scotland, where similar visions and prodigies were reported

THE UNSEEN HOST



early in 1643. Propaganda was widely circulated by both sides during the Civil War, which makes it a difficult task to determine if any of these stories were 'real' accounts of mystical visions or entirely fictional stories invented by those who wished to maintain the divine right of King Charles to rule England. The writer of the account of the Edgehill battle ended his story by asking 'what this doth portend, God only knoweth, and time perhaps will discover' and to many readers there would have been no doubt that it was a sign of God's displeasure. The phantom armies were a sign, many believed 'of his wrath against this Land, for these civill wars, which He in his good time finish, and send a sudden peace between his Majestie and Parliament'.

The age of the Enlightenment saw the end of the religious interpretations of visions and portents that had been automatic during the Middle Ages. After the religious wars, belief in signs from God was losing ground to rationalism, and across Europe there was growing scepticism of the supernatural among the educated classes. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a rise in the popularity of natural phenomena as a standard explanation for a range of apparitions that were seen as miraculous in what was now regarded as a more superstitious, credulous past. As a result, many early scientists decided that meteorological phenomena such as mirages and optical illusions could account for all reports of 'phantom armies'. Others could be explained as psychological projections, or the product of mass hysteria at times of tension and war. But while mirages could account for a range of static visions in the sky, it is more difficult to apply the same explanation to cases where movement and action was apparently observed over a long period of time.

Rational explanations are reduced to guesswork in cases such as the 'spectral horsemen' seen on a mountain called Souter Fell in Cumbria during the summer of 1744. Around 7 p.m. one evening Daniel Stricket, a servant at Wilton Hall, saw a troop of men on horseback riding briskly along the steep mountainside.

THE ANGEL OF MONS



After first doubting his senses, he fetched his master who also saw the vision, followed by the rest of his family. An account of 1854 describes how:

There were many troops, and they seemed to come from the lower part of the fell, becoming first visible at a place called Knott; they then moved in regular order in a curvilinear path along the side of the fell, until they came opposite to Blakehills, when they went over the mountain and disappeared. The last, or last but one, in every troop, galloped to the front, and then took the swift walking pace of the rest.¹⁹

The vision lasted for two and a half hours, and during the time was seen by 'every person at every cottage within a mile' of the place. Some 27 people saw the phantom soldiers and a number swore their testimony before a magistrate. Nevertheless, scientific commentators, such as Sir David Brewster, stated categorically that the vision *must* have been an optical illusion, possibly of British troops drilling in secrecy on the other side of the mountain in preparation for the Jacobite rebellion of the following year. The fact that no soldiers were present in the area at the time did not alter his opinion. Another writer in *Lonsdale Magazine* stated equally categorically that the phantom soldiers were 'rebels exercising on the western coast of Scotland', whose movements had been reflected by some fine transparent vapour similar to the *Fata Morgana*.²⁰

There are many other similar instances where groups of people have observed a vision of a phantom army simultaneously in circumstances which throw doubt upon straightforward rational explanations. As Charles Fort observed, 'There has never been an explanation that did not itself have to be explained.' This was the case with the phantom soldiers seen by one of Britain's most illustrious military legends, Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, during the Indian Mutiny. In *Forty-One Years in India* (1897), Lord Roberts describes a 'curious adventure' he had in the company of the future General

THE UNSEEN HOST



Sir John Watson, VC, during the movement of the English army to Mohan on 25 February 1858. During the march Roberts and Watson had left the main camp on horseback to pursue an antelope when:

all at once, we beheld moving towards us from our right front a body of the enemy's Cavalry. We were in an awkward position; our horses were very nearly dead beat, and we could hardly hope to get away if pursued. We pulled up, turned round, and trotted back, very quietly at first, that our horses might recover their breath before the enemy got to closer quarters and we should have to ride for our lives. Every now and then we looked back to see whether they were gaining on us, and at last we distinctly saw them open out and make as if to charge down upon us. We thought our last hour was come. We bade each other good-bye, agreeing that each must do his best to escape, and that neither was to wait for the other, when lo!, as suddenly as they had appeared, the horsemen vanished, as though the ground had opened up and swallowed them; there was nothing to be seen but the open plain, where a second before there had been a crowd of mounted men. We could hardly believe our eyes, or comprehend at first that what we had seen was simply a mirage, but so like reality that anyone must have been deceived.²¹

Lord Roberts described how relieved the two men were when it became apparent they had been scared by a phantom enemy, which he later came to believe was a protective force. The vision, he wrote, had

the good effect of making us realize the folly of having allowed ourselves to be tempted so far away from our camp without escort of any kind in an enemy's country, and we determined not to risk it again.

THE ANGEL OF MONS

**The eve of war and the mighty sword**

During the Franco-Prussian War there was a striking example of a miraculous vision that would become a precedent for apparitions in the approaching world war. The conflict of 1870–71 is viewed by military historians as the watershed between the Napoleonic wars and the widescale destruction of 1914–18. In 1870 the German nation-states were on the verge of unification under a belligerent Prussia when Napoleon III of France was drawn into a pre-emptive strike against his enemy. Within months the French army suffered humiliating defeat. Prussian troops bit deep into French territory then went on to lay siege to Paris. By January 1871 the French armies had suffered severe losses and morale was at its lowest ebb. Prussian troops were close to the town of Pontmain, near Laval and the German border, where it was claimed that a remarkable apparition appeared in the sky.

There are few reliable contemporary accounts of what happened at Pontmain, but in a 1985 study Kevin McClure found the earliest was the testimony gathered by L'Abbé Richard in August, 1871.²² This described how, as the crisis escalated, two peasant children, Joseph and Eugene Barbadette, aged ten and 12, were working with their father in a barn at five-thirty on the afternoon of 17 January. Snow lay on the ground, and spirits were lifted when news arrived that the children's half-brother, who was serving in the French army, was safe. Eugene went to the door of the barn to look at the sky, and within minutes saw a vision of a woman 'of extraordinary beauty'. The figure was tall and young, with a golden crown, and she wore a dark blue dress decorated with stars. The vision hovered some 20 feet away above the roof of a nearby house. For some minutes Eugene said nothing but when the village undertaker approached he asked her if she could see anything. Neither she nor Eugene's father could see the vision, but Joseph said: 'Yes, I can see a beautiful lady.' From that point the excitement spread and a

THE UNSEEN HOST



crowd of villagers began to gather inside the barn. Two more youngsters, both girls, claimed they too could see the vision.

When one of the nuns who ran the village school exclaimed, 'The children can see the Blessed Virgin', the identity of the vision was cemented. As the village priest began to recite a Marian devotion the children said the figure seemed to increase in size and brilliant 'stars' began to arrange themselves beneath her feet. Writing appeared on a banner that appeared below the vision which read: 'But pray, my children' and 'God will soon answer your prayers.' A third and final message, 'My son allows himself to be moved', was spelled out before a red crucifix appeared, a white veil slowly rose and the figure disappeared.

News of the approach of Prussian troops arrived in the middle of the excitement but then, according to the legend, unexpectedly the German army halted its advance. One of the versions of the story claims the commander received his orders to pull back from Laval that very evening, and another attributes to him the statement: 'We cannot go farther. Yonder, in the direction of Brittany, there is an invisible Madonna barring the way.'²³

The vision at Pontmain is significant because of the time and place at which it occurred. Within ten days, the crisis ended with an armistice that imposed humiliating conditions on the French. The loss of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine in particular led to simmering resentment that would resurface before the outbreak of the First World War. By that time, the Blessed Virgin was replaced by Joan of Arc as the supernatural figurehead who would help the French gain deliverance from the German invader.

As war clouds gathered over Europe in the summer of 1914, people in all nations were dreaming dreams and seeing visions as they had in earlier ages as the cataclysm approached. Nurse Vera Brittain recalled seeing lurid sunsets over England before the outbreak of the First World War and how many religious people came to believe they had seen blood upon the sun and the moon.²⁴ In 1917 an artist, S. Ruth Canton, sent an account to the spiritualist magazine *Light* of 'an extraordinary sky' she saw in August 1914. The magazine felt her story was one John Ruskin

THE ANGEL OF MONS



would have enjoyed, 'for he was a seer who found marks of spiritual significance in the clouds.' Mrs Canton said it impressed her so strongly that she could paint it, even after three years, from memory. She explained:

I went to Falmouth three days after war was declared. One evening, when returning from a walk, I was greatly struck with the wonderful effect of a sunset. The sky was a greenish blue, and large masses of rounded clouds appeared just above the hills. Towards the north all was grey and amorphous. Out of this grey came more or less straight streaks of grey cloud across the sky; but one of these streaks was shaped exactly like a huge, straight sword-blade coming to a sharp point, which point was drenched in sunlight, and small spots of similarly sunlighted clouds dropped, as it were, from the point, just as would drops of blood from a sword-point. The sides of the 'blade' were as straight and unbroken as if they had been ruled. It was so striking that I received an instantaneous impression that it portended a war much greater than we at that time realised. The mighty sword swept right across the heavens.²⁵

By August 1914, two thousand years of stories and beliefs concerning visions, saints, the return of heroic leaders and the intervention of divine forces came to a head as the 'war to end all wars' began. With the world in crisis once more, it is no surprise that angels were once again about to appear on Earth.