

Comet Halley in 1910 in Franche-Comté: or Collective Memory at Fault

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When old people are questioned they often say that they vividly recall the appearance of Comet Halley in 1910. When, in 1985, we started to analyze that previous apparition, we fully expected to find remarkable accounts in the newspapers. But instead of dramatic stories of its appearance on the night of 1910 May 18–19, we find nothing was observed until May 28, because the sky over a large part of France (even Paris), was cloudy. Even then, it was described in terms such as "This wretched comet has a very over-inflated reputation, it appears more like a nebula than the object that we were led to expect." So why then the popular excitement?

For three reasons: first, the arrival of the comet was repeatedly mentioned in the newspapers following its recovery in 1909 September, together with tales of what might be expected in May when it brushed past the Earth; second, there was the unexpected appearance, in January, of the comet known as the Johannesburg Comet, or the Great Daylight Comet of 1910, which was very prominent indeed. Thirdly, at about the same time as that comet was visible, there were disastrous floods all over France, as is shown by the commemorative plaques that can still be found in many different places. There was considerable speculation in the press about a possible connection between the comet and the floods and even Flammarion wondered if there was a hidden link. Speculations (and fears) became rife in May as Comet Halley steadily approached the Earth.

When Comet Halley proved to be so insignificant, it is hardly surprising that it became confused in people's minds with the much more dramatic Daylight Comet. The association of the latter with the disastrous floods, and the idea that there might have been some connection, was enough to ensure that the mistake was perpetuated. This is probably how legends come to be born.

Newspapers and journals of the period consulted: *Le Petit Comtois*; *L'Eclair Comtois*; *Le Pays de Montbéliard*; *La Dépêche Républicaine*; *La Brigade de Fer*; *Les Nouvelles Comtois*; *Le Journal de Belfort*; *La Frontière*; *La Franche-Comté à Paris*; *L'Astronomie*

A complete account is given in: *L'Astronomie*, 100, July/August 1986.