

The iridium connection

Dinosaurs struck out?

Was an asteroid the foul ball that knocked the dinosaurs out of the game of life?

Browsing heads jerked upright at the bursts of light and sound over the horizon. Fright compounded into terror as waves of heat and wind stampeded the giant lizards through the forests. No sooner had calm returned than gloom surrounded them — mid-day becoming night as vast clouds of dust forming in the upper air obscured the sun. Darkness by dust, unlike the cooling of true night, trapped heat and produced a rain of grit. The irritant strangled forest leaves and stifled the dinosaurs while the oceans bore a carpet of dead fish. Soaring temperatures and lack of fodder toppled the huge vegetarian saurians while the meat-eaters rejoiced and gorged. Then the “terrible lizards” followed their victims into extinction. For a time quiet reigned as the few remaining plants and small animals surviving the holocaust struggled to create new generations.

A century of investigation has failed to account for the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. From the latter part of the 19th century, when an ice age seemed the probable culprit, paleontologists have sought to identify what world-wide conditions could have extinguished three-quarters of existing life. Besides the great reptiles, a wide spectrum of plant life, including oceanic plankton, were victims. Universal extinction requires stupendous forces — forces never detected in the adagio of the geologic record. Almost in desperation, some paleontologists have turned outward — seeking other forces and allying with other disciplines for explanations. Turning away from the rocks, science has sought a solution among the stars.

North American and European researchers gathered last May in Ottawa for the second extinction symposium co-sponsored by the National Museum of Natural Sciences and NRC's Herz-



Was Alberta's *Stenonychosaurus* a victim of an invader from outer space? (John Bianchi)

La disparition du *Stenonychosaurus* de l'Alberta est-elle due à un phénomène extraterrestre? (John Bianchi)