

—an enemy of unreason

Red Rag to a Bull (Collins Willow, £6.95).

"What we are and what we have become, our understanding of the universe, our ability to fly to the moon, to heal the sick, to see what is going on a thousand miles away — our scientific achievements — have all come from the use of reason.

"On the contrary, I believe that when we fall slave to unreason, that is to fallacy, we disgrace ourselves."

That said, he then flails

into a whole host of fallacies, some dangerous but others harmlessly daft, and proceeds to demolish them.

Astrology? Crash-Bang-Crunch! goes Dr. Pyke and the beliefs come tumbling down. The people who follow their horoscopes are, he reckons, "simple and misguided" — although he does own that a study of the sky for astrological purposes did help to improve man's scientific knowledge of the universe.

Crocodile tears? A load of rubbish, apparently. Crocs do not cry with remorse when they devour people. It's their saliva glands, bursting into chomping activity, that also cause their eyes to water.

Copper bangles to ward of rheumatism? Because there's no hard evidence that it's effective, declares Dr. Pyke, it's a fallacy.

Elephants possessing long memories? There's no evidence that they remember any more than other animals, is the Pyke verdict.

Well how about ostriches burying their heads in the sand under the belief that because they can't see, neither can they be seen? Nonsense! declares Dr. Pyke. Any species so daft and deluded wouldn't have survived as long as ostriches have survived.

Spoon-bending, rather predictably, is kicked into touch by the good doctor. So are UFOs, levitation, the powers of the pyramids, the Shroud of Turin, wart-charming and phrenology. Dr. Pyke dismisses them in no uncertain manner — although a slight note of doubt creeps into his

assessment of dowsing, which he declares to be a fallacy but says he is prepared to be proved wrong.

Magnus Pyke clobbers, in total, 64 fallacies — "some based on ignorance, others on trickery, and others again on self-deception and gullibility," he says.

Has he done mankind a favour? Some will think he has, by saving us from our superstitions.

Others, unable to cope with the idea of a purely rational universe, will resent the spirited way he has taken some of the magic out of life.

And yet, there is one fallacy that Dr. Pyke never touches upon — his own apparently-held belief that if you wave your arms around fast enough, you'll fly!

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