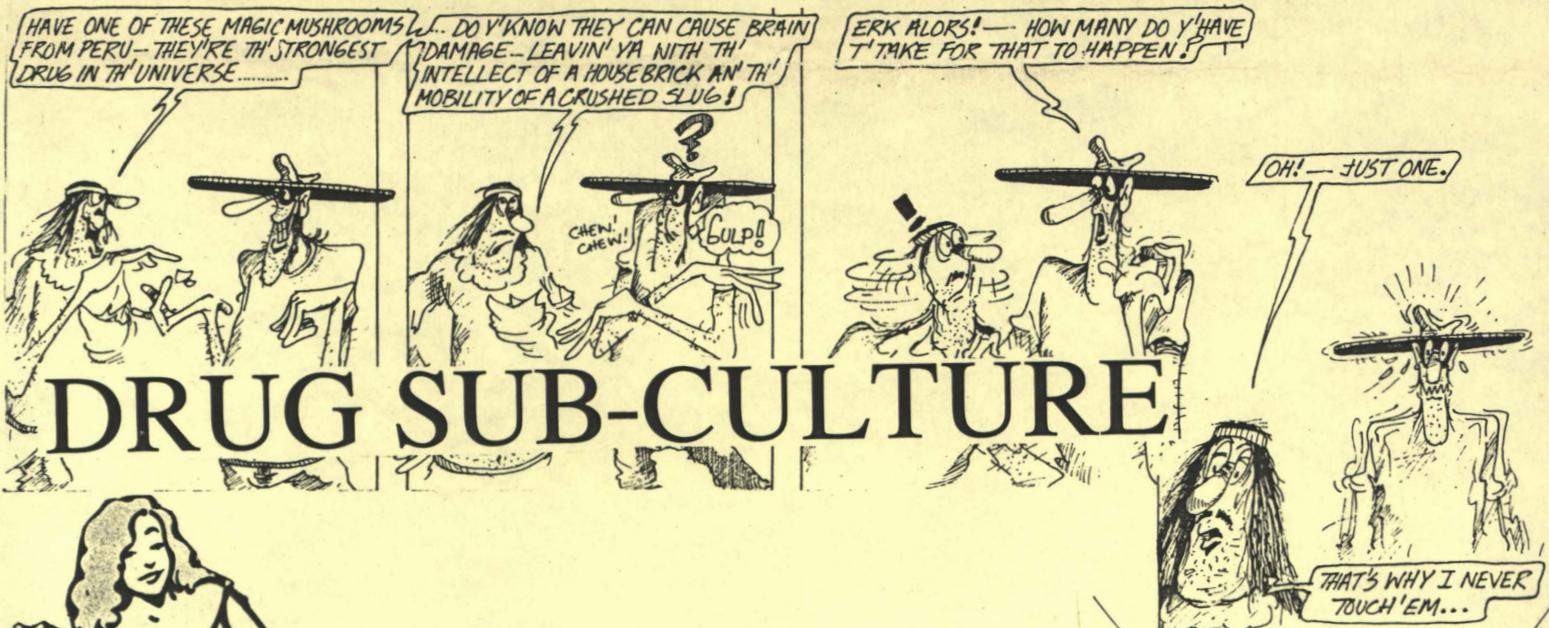


FOLKLORE FRONTIERS

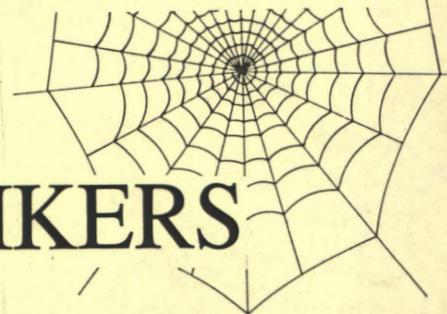
(The Magazine of Urban Belief Tales)

SCARGILL AND PIT STRIKE



SPIDERS AND YUCCAS

PHANTOM HITCH-HIKERS



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Subscriptions from a previous magazine, The Shaman, are in some cases still valid, but if a subscription expires with this issue a cross will appear on the line below.

LEAD-IN.

Welcome to Folklore Frontiers. We are here to collect and comment upon modern legends. We wonder if as "The Magazine of Urban Belief Tales" we are the only such journal. Certainly we hope to become a journal of record and your news clippings will help us achieve some greater degree of completeness. Especially welcome will be items from local regional newspapers, which usually have fresher and more detailed stories. For instance yesterday the front page lead of The Mail, Hartlepool (county edition), was about a spoof letter sent to residents warning of penalties for over-use of toilet flushing. Hence we are in the market for a wider spectrum of lore than simply urban legends, covering the range of lore detailed in the review of Paul Smith's book. Besides cuttings, we will also be interested to receive oral tales; particularly those of a topical nature. Currently the fashion is for "crying boy" conflagrations and effects of Halley's Comet. Credit will be given by a name-check in print as a matter of course wherever possible.

The number of books on urban legends published during the past few years has prepared the public for a magazine along these lines. Our readership, I assume, will be a mixture of open-minded inquiring minds (many of whom have been subscribing through my editorships of The Ley Hunter, Ancient Skills & Wisdom Review, and The Shaman), folklore researchers, and others in search of a topic which is still developing and which exercises the mind.

It will suit the armchair philosophers who can seek the subious and exotic in their reading literature or do "field research" for tales in the pub, office or among their particular interest group. For instance any gathering of ferroequinologists (train-spotters, if you must), will get steamed up about all manner of apocryphal platform end rumour.

Cross-fertilization between themes is a fascinating pursuit for collectors and most categories will be found to be arbitrary. The ubiquity of ufos in urban belief tales is a particularly rewarding area of study. Hence any attempt to impose opinions will be fraught with the ultimate backlash of creating a new belief itself for ready transmission.

Finally, it is hoped the response to this first issue will allow us to become even stronger and better. Your clippings, articles, anecdotes, comments, readers' letters, and so on, are needed. Hopefully the magazine will continue to expand.

Eventually I would like to see Folklore Frontiers modelled upon Fortean Times, whose philosophy and spirit I so admire, and whose format and production I so envy. Whether this can be achieved depends upon readers' response and financial considerations.

Frontiersmen and women, we've arrived.

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List of back numbers and prices available of The Shaman, A.S. & W.R., and Terrestrial Zodiacs Newsletter. Also books by Paul Screeton, including The Lambton Worm. Some second-hand books, too. Please enclose stamped-addressed envelope. Also update of articles bibliography associated with The Linear Vision -- please enclose two second-class stamps towards cost of postage and photocopying.

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"THE BOOK OF NASTY LEGENDS" by PAUL SMITH
(Routledge & Kegan Paul, £3-95)

Modern folklore stories are fascinating to listeners and fundamentally the same as their predecessors over the centuries. They are usually cautionary tales, which are designed to teach and often also amuse. However, the narrative is so designed as not to let the "message" intrude directly. It has a timebomb mechanism. Hence taboos and anxieties and other components in society's rich tapestry are woven into harmless-seeming stories.

The main difference between the lore recorded in bucketfuls last century is that today oral transmission must compete with the media. Films, TV, radio and the Press -- particularly the national tabloids -- are vibrant with new legends.

Yorkshireman Paul Smith is a collector of these urban belief tales (as they are generally known in folklore circles), which are also known as modern myths, bar-room tales, whale tumour stories and foaflore_x (for they are told by a friend of a friend).-

Hundreds of such tales are forever circulating, often with real contemporaneous incidents triggering them into the mainstream of transmission. The Yorkshire Ripper hunt led to a revival of a very old story of a hairy-handed man disguised as a woman with weapon and associated with a vehicle. In fact, it can be traced back to the nurse and back again as Little Red (West) Riding Hood.

Often the oral tales swapped over a pint in the pub are taken seriously by the Press, where they are reported as "true". Their currency thus increases and they are regarded as beyond doubt, despite the adage that you should never believe what you read in newspapers. Just as print gives such tales some spurious bona fide claim to authenticity, so to make such tales more credible sounding there is usually an authority figure present in the narrative: doctor, policeman or vicar.

Current situations, events and fads are used to refuel old stories and in new guise they will have us worrying about microwaves or warning against AIDS. The main themes of rumour tales focus on key human activities: eating, transport, health, physical danger, occupation, sex, fertility, and religion.

What Smith's selection presents is a cross-section of the major themes written up concisely. He gives explanatory notes to some and there is a wealth of cartoons to add to the light relief. For it is certainly true that the transition from the convivial bonhomie of the ale house to cold print waters the potency of the tales.

Smith's preface discusses types of tale; their relevance, popularity and why we accept them as true; and where they are told and broadcast by organs of the media. As well as being a permanent part of our culture, Smith notes the strength and flexibility of tradition.

So here's a good example of the multifarious revenge variety.

"Reading through the newspaper one evening, Ray came across an advertisement for a two-year-old Jaguar car in fine condition for £10. Shocked into action he immediately phoned the number given and queried whether the price was actually £10. 'Oh yes! that's correct', said the lady who answered. 'Would you like to come round and see it?'

"Five minutes later Ray was standing in the lady's drive looking at his dream car -- a practically mint condition Jaguar and only £10. 'Well,' said Ray to the lady, 'what really is wrong with it?' 'Nothing at all', she replied, 'it's my way of getting my own back on my husband. You see, two months ago he ran off to Scotland with his secretary and last week he wrote to me to say he needed some money. As he didn't want to deprive me of anything, he suggested that the fairest thing would be to sell his Jaguar car and forward the money to him. So', she said, smiling sweetly, 'that's just what I'm doing.'"

Along similar lines was a story in the Sunday Express (18/11/84). I blushingly realized it had many points in common only after throwing away the paper, so names and places are missing. But as I recall, the couple involved had been married for 17 years and the wife found on that anniversary that after having worked her hands to the bone to help her husband's business he had been playing around and left with his bit on the side for some Caribbean retreat. Her pay-off was to sell the communal home cheapish, accepting a quick sale, and then placing an advertisement in a paper offering that sum for the return of her husband -- "DEAD OR ALIVE."

Now try this one from Smith.

"A friend of mine recently told me a story concerning a young lad who was taking his motorcycle driving test for the first time. He had gone through all the various sections of the test and was left with just the emergency stop to do. The examiner told him to drive round the block several times and said that he would step out into the road at one point and the boy would have to stop sharply -- the expectation was that he would have to keep the motorcycle in a straight line and upright.

"Well, off round the block went the boy. However, he was delayed for a while as a delivery lorry was blocking the road. As he turned the final corner to drive down to where the driving examiner had been, he was surprised to see an ambulance and the examiner being placed on a stretcher. What had happened was the examiner had made rather an error. He had stepped out in front of the wrong motorcycle and the driver, not expecting this, had knocked him down."

Now this one from the Peter Tory diary in The Star (25/10/85).

"My friend Wilson, a doting father, celebrated his daughter's 17th birthday by giving her a first professional driving lesson. She set off with the instructor in a scarlet Escort and juddered and shunted in the direction of who knows where. Minutes later a red Escort returned down the same road towards my proud chum who, joyfully marking the event, jumped in front of the vehicle and mimed great terror. The terror quickly became the real thing. Wrong Escort. Crazy driver. Wilson dived over the edge with only a milisecond between him and Eternity."

Tory's column is one of my happy hunting grounds for urban tales retold as if truth. I am sure Tory is not so stupid as not to generally recognise urban tales, but is just lazy, as one of his major rivals claims.

Lastly from Smith an appealing one of embarrassment.

"A young couple were parked in a Mini on the common one night doing a spot of courting when all of a sudden the young man, who thankfully happened to be underneath the girl at the time, let out a scream. Thinking it was a cry of passion, the girl increased her exertions only to be met with her boyfriend begging her to stop -- he had slipped a disc.

"Try as they would he could not sit upright so there he lay naked in the back of the Mini. In desperation the girl finally phoned the ambulance service. When they arrived they also attempted to ease his pain but nothing they could do would get him upright and out of the car. In a final attempt to free the poor man, the ambulancemen called the fire brigade which arrived with special cutting equipment. Before the panic-stricken girl could say or do anything, the firemen had cut the top off the car and freed her lover.

"At this point the girl broke down in tears and a friendly fireman reassured her by saying, 'Well, look on the bright side, at least your boyfriend's now been released and is on his way to hospital.' 'Yes', she sobbed in reply, 'but how will I explain the state of the car to my husband?'"

Now from The Sun (12/11/85).

"Laughing firemen cut a teenager free from her boyfriend's car after her finger got stuck in the steering wheel.

"Caron (sic) Crew, 19, of Staple Hill, Bristol, jammed her finger in a spoke of the sports-type steering wheel after a night at the pub with Martyn Slew, of Downend, Bristol.

"Carson (sic) said: "I was so embarrassed when the fire brigade arrived with lights and sirens -- everyone was peeping from their curtains."

If this is genuine it is an innocent version and one where real life mimicks invention.

And so to pass beyond Smith's myths.

In addition to urban belief tales, I want Folklore Frontiers to chronicle a wider spectrum of folktales. A number of readers of The Shaman have asked what area of investigation will be involved. I would prefer not to set specific limits; the contents of this issue should give a rough idea of what I want to see examined.

Special areas include:

after the Operation Julie LSD raid a few years ago, this tale was frequently changed to include the name of the LSD chemist Kemp. The name of Owsley, the infamous U.S. LSD-maker is also often used in this tale.

2) Alternate Highs: Banana Skins.

"If you take a few pounds of bananas, skin them and then dry the white pith, you will be left with a substance which you can smoke and get legally and cheaply high."

This is probably the most well-known drug tale. It also has its roots in some reality as many people have tried it. It reflects the drug-user's interest in and search for a substance which will get them high legally, thereby getting one over on the system.

3) Cautionary Tales: The Witches' Coven.

"A friend of a friend who has been taking LSD and dabbling with the occult for a number of years is invited to a witches' coven. Thinking it will be a wild night he 'drops a couple of tabs' and goes. He is never seen again."

Variations on this tale include the date being on Hallowe'en and the event being a Satanic orgy. The message is clear --- don't mess with the occult, particularly whilst high. This tale first appeared according to an informant in the very early Seventies, at a time when the occult and mysticism were well linked. It could also have as its source (possibly true) some of the stories emanating from the Manson Family.

4) Bad Trips: Sun Staring.

"Six students from an American university were totally and permanently blinded by staring at the sun after taking LSD. They have since undergone rehabilitation treatment."

This story received vast media coverage and was later admitted as being a hoax created by a Dr Yoder who spread it due to his concern about the misuse of drugs. This admittance did not prevent it being told and it is still popular with the media whenever an LSD scare is on. Similar "horror" stories about chromosome and brain cell damage abound.

5) Chosen Generation: The Bomb and E.T.

"People who are stoned on LSD are resistant to radiation poisoning and will be the only ones to survive nuclear war."

"LSD was not invented by human beings but the formula was given to Hoffman by an extra-terrestrial he was in contact with."

Both these elitist or chosen generation tales imply there is something special about the drug in question which sets the users apart. The concern with nuclear war and extra-terrestrial forms of life have been two of the most potent symbols of the psychedelic generation. See Timothy Leary's recent Starseed nonsense for a good example.

6) Establishment on Our Side: Acapulco Gold.

"Many U.S. tobacco companies have the trade names Acapulco Gold and others patented in readiness for marijuana being legalised. They are also using their corporate muscle in Congress to achieve legalisation, funding medial research, etc."

A popular tale since the Sixties which has been the inspiration for at least one book and numerous magazine articles. The hope that one day a government will legalise marijuana is dear to a druggie's heart; this tale embodying that yearning.

7) Robin Hood: Drug Takers Have Scruples Too.

"A drug dealer in another town whom no one likes because he cuts his stuff, gives short deals, etc., has the tables turned on him by a friend of a friend. The dealer is followed home from the big connection and at a secluded spot he is accosted by the "friend", who tells him he is a plain clothes drug squad officer. The dealer is searched and relieved of the drugs."

In some variations the dealer is warned from dealing again or next time he might not be so lucky and in others the drugs are redistributed free or very cheaply. Other tales (possibly true) of people being stopped by poice who then let them go although they are in possession may be related to this tale. The similarities between taking from the "bad sherrif" and giving to the needy are obvious.

The above tales are just a small selection from the many I have collected. Many others exist and the variations on each theme are too numerous to detail.

Some current tales are very recent in origin. For instance, the psylocibe mushroom, which has enjoyed great popularity over the past ten years, has at least three belief tales attached to it. The first is that the potency of the mushroom is increased the higher and more remote the picking site. The second concerns the picking of the fungi at sacred sites and the resultant increase or difference in potency. And the third argues that the psylocibe mushroom has only recently begun to manifest its hallucinogenic qualities, as if the current wave of fungi fanciers were somehow chosen or honoured. These tales are blatantly untrue but make excellent retelling.

Variation on pre-existing non-drug tales exist too. It is rumoured that so much marijuana has been flushed into the sewers of New York as a result of police raids, that an all-white highly potent strain of pot is growing unchecked in the sewers. This is clearly an extension of the alligators in the sewers tale common a decade or two ago.

On the whole these tales are just a form of "occupational" folklore, gossip for the occasional bored stoned moment, reflecting the general hopes, humour, fears and anxieties of the drug culture, just as the more conventional "kentucky fried rat" stories do for the rest of society. On a deeper level, however, they serve to reinforce a culture which is denigrated from all sides; the law, the family, medical establishment, etc. By glamourising the drug effects and exaggerating other aspects of the culture, the tales all help to support an unspoken idea that in some special way drug users are apart from and possibly superior to the rest of society.

On a more personal level, the conferring of status is a probable reason for some of these tales being told. If you can convince someone, particularly a young and impressionable adherent to the drug scene, that you know of someone who has some vintage LSD or that you mix with the sort of person who attends witches' sabbats, then it is a pretty safe bet that you will be elevated in their estimation. Similarly the ability to tell a good tale is as valued in the drug culture as anywhere else.

Obviously this area of folklore is still developing and new areas are appearing all the time. What tales for instance will the ongoing heroin problem produce? Or the glue-sniffing craze? There is great scope here for the gathering of folklore in the making. Also with the establishment of long-term drug-using communities in Ireland, Scotland and West Wales, together with itinerant "tribes" such as the Peace Convoy, we may see the tales becoming more structured and longer.

If anyone has heard any drug tales or has any comment on the substance of this article, I would be only too pleased to hear from them. Oh, and by the way, if you do find the guy with the California Sunshine in his fridge, I'd love to know.

References and sources:

- The many drug users I have met.
- "Smokestanck El Ropo's Fireside Reader."
- "Playpower" by Richard Neville.
- "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" by Jan Harold Brunvand.
- Copies of Oz, IT, Rolling Stone, Fapto, Ink.

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MORE LOW DOWN-ON HIGHS

by PAUL SCREETON

These are basically a few observations to amplify Andy Roberts' round-up.

Firstly, observant readers may recall my comments recently on Sharon Cole claiming she could judge the expected effect of given mushrooms by the quality of the place they grew.(1) I then took this at face value, but expanding on psylocibe mushrooms, Andy tells me not only does quality depend on the "vibes" of the site, but this is also reflected in the price charged.

I recall disc-jockey Brian Matthew confessing to having tried smoking dried scrapings from the inside of banana skins (during if memory serves me right a "Your Top Ten" records show with guest Suzi Quatro, when playing Donovan's "Mellow Yellow" -- the song associated with this popular Sixties fad).

"Some experts believe that combustion converts some of the banana's chemistry into bufotenine (a DMT-like chemical)", but it takes several joints even to get a mild buzz.

The author here also mentions in similar vein Jackson illusion pepper as a hoax or dubiously effective legal high. (2)

Andy's point six has even been raised in that august bastion of the Establishment New Scientist. The article claimed cryptically: "Several tobacco companies plan to incorporate marijuana in their products if and when it is legalised. But, contrary to popular opinion, there are no trademark registrations on the choicest marijuana trade names, such as Acapulco Gold." New Musical Express added: "This is not for want of trying, it appears, but the British Trademarks Registry has flatly refused to consider any applications in advance until the law changes, when they will be issued on a first come first served basis." (3)

As for Andy's point four, John Sladek repeats this story and concludes: "Eventually it was traced to a university health official, who, after admitting it was untrue, committed himself to a mental hospital. One or two newspapers even bothered to retract the story." (4)

But did he really commit himself? Anyway, the Sunday Times, of January 21, 1968, gave great prominence to the original report. When it was revealed that it had been fabricated, Dr Yoder, of the Pennsylvania Institute for the Blind, said: "I invented this story because of my concern about the illegal use of LSD and other drugs." However, apart from one column inch in The Times, of January 25, the U.K. national Press chose to ignore this denial. Dr Yoder, who is himself blind, was described by the health authorities as being "sick" and "unwell."

Earlier this story in its lurid form had appeared with the sensational headline "LSD Boys Blinded" (4B) In response, it "furnished one concrete example that evokes fresh thoughts about the Aenstrian phone callers", wrote Warminster ex-newspaperman and author of ufo books Arthur Shuttlewood. Who, the reader may ask, are these Aenstrian it's-for-youhoops the hard-headed journalist is referring to. They were space visitors from a planet in outer space and they had telephoned him warning of the dangers of drug-taking and peddling, stressed by their queen, Traellison. (4C)

Sladek also mentions as rumour the "familiar I-can-Fly" story and that was resurrected recently by the infamous Peter Tory. Here it is in full, with paragraphs run on.

"A horrifying tale reaches this column from one of London's more raffish hotels -- it is in Notting Hill to be exact -- which is much favoured by pop persons. A friend of ours whose house is next to the hotel recalls the following. On hearing a fearful crashing around and a low moan she went outside to see a naked man, arms and legs hither and thither, caught up in the top branches of a sturdy holly tree. Both the tree and the man appeared to have suffered some considerable injury. The lady then heard an indignant voice. Looking up she saw yet another naked male figure on the hotel s. second floor balcony. He was shouting to his prostrate friend in a furious lisp: "See, I told you, you couldn't fly'." (5)

The previous day another lurid page lead was headlined "Junky (sic) Ivan Sells Boots for Heroin", where it was alleged Pakistani intelligence forces had found Soviet troops selling their boots to feed their drug habit. (6)

Another dubious tabloid scare story headlined "Peril of the LSD Cartoon Stamps" manages to create a heady brew of health peril, youth corruption/initiation, supernatural flight, extraterrestrials, hero worship, patriotism, mistaken identity, authority figure, and finance. Stamps with cartoon characters such as Superman, ET, or Union Jack or Stars and Stripes were being sold in London impregnated with LSD, according to a police chief, and "a youngster could throw himself under a bus or off a building after taking this drug." (7) With such a vivid and lurid typewriter, Joe Clancy could well end up usurping Tory's gig as Star diarist.

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- (1) Screeton, Paul, "The Wizard of Stanley" Part 2, The Shaman, No. 9, 1985.
- (2) Superweed, Mary Jane, "Herbal Highs", Unicorn, 1970.
- (3) N.M.E., July ?, 1980.
- (4) Sladek, John, "The New Apocrypha", Panther, 1978. (4B) The People, Jan. 14, 1968.
- (4C) Shuttlewood, Arthur, "UFO Magic in Motion", Sphere, 1979.
- (5) The Star, Oct. 23, 1985.
- (6) The Mirror, Oct. 22, 1985.
- (7) The Star, Nov. 15, 1985.



COKELOREby PAUL SCREETON

As demonologists well know, the Devil was behind the pit strike. It was straightforwardly a struggle between good and evil, and there's an authority figure in this arresting scenario.

Police Inspector Malcolm Biggin blamed Satan for violence on the miners' picket lines and said he "raised up Arthur Scargill to wreak havoc."

Insp. Biggin, based at Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, said he and other Christian policemen witnessed pickets who were "demons possessed." With evangelical fervour he added: "There may be a flesh and blood conflict at times but behind it lies a spiritual conflict rather than an industrial or even political one."

He said that when he was among 90 frightened policemen, trapped by 1,500 pickets at Orgreave colliery works, he walked away from the front line and prayed for God to intervene.

"After the prayers went up the mood changed," he said. (1)

But was King Arthur really a tool of the Prince of Darkness?

We are all mortals, and in times of crisis leaders come to the fore. Wars, political turbulence and economic crisis create situations which generate people who for a while take on the heroic mantle. People get jittery when there is inflation or rising unemployment and look for saviours. Such periods can produce an Amin or J.F. Kennedy, a Hitler or a Churchill. Equally, after the last war the electorate gave Churchill a different sort of V sign and J.F.K. got the bullet, literally.

As a leader Scargill saw himself as a saviour figure, but neither he nor his supporters could walk on water. Now even his own miners are creating a breakaway union to rival his defeated National Union of Mineworkers.

Politics aside, my interest in Scargill is as a folkloric figure. He and his strike generated a rich vein of folktales for the student of urban mythology. In fact, not since the period before Peter Sutcliffe was caught, tried and jailed, has contemporary folklore study received so much data to analyse. It really is an irony of life that Scargill comes from the Yorkshire Ripper's county.

During Scargill's dispute this writer was involved in a union/management showdown at his place of employment for three months. As a non-union journalist I worked while the majority of my colleagues withdrew their labour. In fact, this article is an adaptation of a piece I wrote during these disputes. (2)

The Mail, whose circulation area covered the communities of Horden and Easington with their working pits, had not been seen as a champion of the N.U.M. cause. In fact, one photographer had been pelted with missiles by pickets and the editor called something unprintable here. So it came as something of a surprise to hear of talk about miners joining striking journalists to create a massive picket outside the Mail offices on the first day of the National Union of Journalists' strike. No such comradely brotherliness manifested and, in fact, when rain began falling the hacks disappeared. "They only picketed once more anyway. Hardly the stuff of which heroes and martyrs are made or which would create myths along the lines of Russian troops marching with snow still on their boots or Germans of yesteryear with babies' heads impaled on bayonets. Such stories do circulate during a war. Where every boarding school has a spy signalling to the enemy at night. Like:

"At Wellesley preparatory school in Broadstairs it became obvious to the pupils that their Latin master was a German spy. He bore a peculiar resemblance to an obnoxious gauleiter depicted in The Hotspur, and a skin ailment had given his face the colour and texture of putty. It was therefore assumed that he was wearing a mask. Little Heathcote Williams, future poet and playwright, took on the task of exposing him. During Latin class he rose from his desk, ran up to the master and began scrabbling at his face. Even as he did so the absurdity of the whole thing became suddenly apparent to him, but it was too late to turn back. The rest of the class urged him on with cries of 'Spy!' until the master lost his nerve and bolted for the door. The headmaster was unable to make sense of what had happened so no one was punished." (15)

The spy mania of World War II was only one minor aspect of conspiracy theorising.

Naturally it appeared during the pits strike. A columnist mocked Mr Terry Banks, "loony Left" M.P. for Newham, for reporting that the National Coal Board was sending in cardboard cut-outs of miners to disheartened pickets. All very reminiscent of alleged cardboard tanks supposedly plated by the Soviet bloc along borders to worry NATO. But the tabloid scribe also brings the Iron Curtain down with: "Meanwhile, ventriloquists' dolls of Ian MacGregor (operated by Maggie Thatcher) and Arthur Scargill (with the strings pulled in the Kremlin) could get on" (3)

Less frivolous claims were that members of the Armed Forces were masquerading as police officers. Or that police officers had infiltrated the miners on picket duty.

A Labour M.P. apparently believed this was going on and tabled a Commons question. Martin Redmond, M.P. for Don Valley, had received a claim from one of his constituents that a photograph published in the Daily Mirror and Guardian showed a policeman at Cortonwood colliery who was a military person.

South Yorkshire Chief Constable Peter Wright invited P.C. Bob Yates to a meeting of South Yorkshire Police Committee in Barnsley to scotch rumours that military police were being used on picket lines.

Bemused Bob said: "I was staggered by it all. I have never been a soldier and never wanted to be. This was a case of mistaken identity."

P.C. Yates was pictured on November 23, 1984, carrying a crate of petrol bombs, and added: "I suppose this sort of thing can happen. I have never seen the man whom they claimed was in the picture."

So who was he supposed to be? Someone called Tony Allen, a lance corporal and military policeman stationed in Berlin, who had been best man at the wedding of Brian Walsh, tenants' liaison officer for Doncaster Council -- the complainant.

The chief constable had produced the officer to pour cold water on the "frustrating and damaging aspects which have circulated over the past nine months. I am happy to produce him so that members can see that the armed forces are not being used." (4)

The music magazine New Musical Express looked at the pits dispute in January and its oddly-named correspondent X. Moore revealed a total lack of balance, particularly when he stated: "More disturbing is evidence of troops being used to police the strike, contrary to Cabinet Ministers claiming otherwise." (5)

A man in Armthorpe, near Doncaster, had told journalists: "We've had police in the village during the riot addressing another officer as corporal ... A man saw his own son who was supposed to be in Northern Ireland, a bloke saw his brother who was supposed to be on duty in Germany" And so on. "It were like an S.A.S. operation." Well, why shouldn't the police be efficient?

Equally damning being the quote that: "You can always tell a picket's not a miner when he gets The Sun out of his pocket and starts to read it." Do all miners then read only newspapers which are ideologically pure?

Yet it is a sad fact of industrial disputes that such stories are believed and circulated. Reason flies out of the window. Any highly-charged situation is ripe for rumour and it become rife.

Misinformation is a key factor in spreading anxiety and modern technology has come to the aid of rumour transmission. A typical case is an alleged copy of a letter purporting to have been from the Doncaster N.C.B. headquarters to working miners warning them that the Board could not guarantee their safety when the strike ends. Labour Herald published it as genuine when the N.C.B. knew it was a forgery and by ignoring the first principle of journalism that newspaper had egg all over its typeface. (6)

Rumours come in all shapes and forms and The Mail, Hartlepool, noted on November 27, 1984, that Easington N.U.M. Lodge officials were claiming to be victims of a smear campaign. "Malicious rumours," said Alan Cummings, lodge secretary and also a member of Durham Miners' Area Executive, "were going around that lodge officials at Easington and other pits had received six months' wages in advance of the strike." (7)

And so to Arthur Scargill himself.

The Daily Star recognised the dubiousness with "so the legend goes" before stating that in 1972 Scargill laid siege to the Peterborough gasworks. After ten days Arthur

Web of suspicion

A FRIEND of a friend bought a potted yucca plant to decorate her living-room.

When she watered it the plant made hissing and squeaking noises. She assumed it was simply the air escaping through the porous dried earth in the pot.

Six days later, when she watered it again, not only did she hear renewed squeaking, but the earth around the roots began to heave.

In alarm she called the florist where she had purchased the plant and demanded that a member of staff come and take it back. The florist arrived, summed up the situation, and called the local zoo.

Experts arrived and removed the suspicious plant. At the zoo staff removed a large female tarantula spider, and her nest of 50 young, from among the roots.

They gave the opinion that the spider must have been in the pot when the plant was imported from a hotter climate.

If you have heard this story before then be rest assured someone has been unwittingly spinning you a yarn. The nest of tarantulas tale is a modern legend with a sting in the tail — to folklorists an urban belief tale.

There have been plenty of variations going the rounds this year. It would seem our Indian summer has revived the rumour even.

The story has been circulating throughout Britain all year. The details are always vague with the storyteller insisting it is all true and happened to a friend of a friend of theirs.

Media interest has been keen and the earliest retelling would seem to have been in the Sunday Express, where a Cologne resident, Mrs Suzanne Zangler, had the unpleasant occupants in her potted palm.



The Guardian attempted to defuse the story on April 19, citing Marks and Spencer stores as the vendors of yuccas with deadly extras. People had bombarded newspapers with complaints and Marks and Spencer stores with demands for action. Each time the story is the same and a St Michael Samaritan dashes around in a van to pick up the offending greenery.

Each time M. & S. checked out the story it drew a blank. Not surprisingly really as the yuccas are imported from Africa via Holland, where they are replanted and potted.

Why folklorists will remember 1985 as 'Year of The Spider'

When I checked on the Hartlepool branch of M. & S. two yuccas were to be found for sale. They are hardly a particularly decorative species and far prettier foliage and blooms were also on display. As a junior reporter on Teesside I recall covering a spate of stories about yucca plants which had remained dormant for decades then suddenly bursting into exotic blossom.

But back at the spiders, someone with the sense to realize the rumour required demystifying had a memo sent to managers explaining that if they heard the story to disregard it or allay the fears of anyone complaining.

The manager of the Hartlepool branch recalled receiving a notice on the rumour but had not personally come into contact with the modern day fairytale.

A spokeswoman at the M. & S. headquarters in Baker Street, London, told me: "It's complete nonsense. We have not found any evidence of it actually happening to anyone or identified where the story comes from. It seems to have travelled the whole country and we have had a lot of calls regarding it."

"We did send out a note to our managers to say it is widespread but a complete rumour. We told them what to do if contacted."

"We have not heard the story for some time. It seems to have died a death," she concluded.

Well, not quite. The story is alive and well and was last located in High Wycombe.

In the last week of September the Bucks Free Press Midweek was fooled. It claimed it "actually happened" to a shopper who bought a yucca in the Church Street branch. The newspaper did not name the woman or check out the story with the store manager. Rivals the Wycombe and South Bucks Star contacted the manager, Tony Turner, who said: "Oh no, not that one again. There is no foundation in the story. It is just one of those tales that gets spread around."

Manager of the plant department of the M. & S. Oxford Circus branch, Tony Kelly, said: "It's getting beyond a joke. Now we've got an official complaint from the Irish Ministry of Agriculture because someone in Dublin called one of our people offered a woman £100 to keep it quiet." Which actually sounds suspicious itself.

Often Kew Gardens — and not a zoo — is quoted as the scene for the revelation of the

'Angel hair'

FLYING SAUCER lore has a component nicknamed "angel hair" which is a mysterious, wispy substance reported falling from UFOs on many occasions. Theories have been advanced that it may be a waste product, microscopic particles held together by an ionized or electrostatic field, or simply a device of extraterrestrial occupants to mislead us.

More probably, however, it is simply fibrous deposit from spiders' webs.

tarantula nest. Jim Keesing, the plant inspector there, said: "One of our gardeners said it had happened to a friend of his son's. He asked me if it was possible. I told him it was, but a bit unlikely."

So, if you have a yucca from Marksies fear not, it won't have come with a tarantula bonus.

It seems that an almost universal dislike of spiders is responsible for the dissemination of a multitude of urban belief tales relating to the arachnid family. Spiders are not insects, their anatomy is vastly different. Also the persistent energy of insects seems in spiders to be replaced by patience (though a scientist would no doubt less poetically and anthropomorphically term it periods of inertia between immediate responses to external stimuli).

Numerous species lie in wait for their victims by their webs while others maraud in search of prey. They are praised for being active insect destroyers, but fail to discriminate conveniently between the allies and enemies of man. They are basically neutral though the silkworm could be cited as benefiting man and cobweb creators as irritating woman.

Autumn is generally a brief season for spiders when they rapidly disappear. However, our extended warm spell has lengthened their activity. Have you not noticed the amount of airborne webbing floating around and money spiders landing in your hair?

THE HUMBLE spider has been a focus of attention this year. Spiders have been around longer than usual with the Indian summer, one called Maurice may make the Guinness Book of Records, and another bit a shopper. Certainly folklorists 1985 has been "The Year of the Spider". PAUL SCRETON brushes away the cobwebs and spins the yarns.

Dating back to the Sixties and the popularity of the "beehive" hairstyle is another spine-chilling myth of insects or spiders making a home in these tall lacquered hair-dos. According to the story the girl continues to spray the bouffant style, never bothering to wash it again. She keeps passing out in class and is finally taken to hospital. There a nurse spots a spider scuttling in her hair on an examination finds a whole nest of black widow spiders. The fashion had been hospitable to them as it had not been combed for a year. In some stories she recovers from the coma and in others the spiders had eaten through her brain and she dies.

The moral seems to be wash your hair or risk death.

An earlier moral put Godliness before cleanliness. Here a 13th Century tale relates to how an Oxfordshire woman would spend so much time tittivating her hair that she would arrive just in time for Mass. One day "the Devil descended upon her head in the form of a spider, gripping with its legs" until she almost died of fright. Prayer, exorcism, holy water all failed, until the local abbot displayed the holy sacrament before her.

Which just goes to show how old some belief tales can be.

The vanity versus cleanliness warning continued into the hippie era with transference of the fatal biting to long frizzy-haired young men.

There are other second cousins among oral tradition. Most common is the one which sometimes occurs when discussing holidays abroad when a friend will tell how a friend returned with some strange lumps on arms or face. Upon scratching one it bursts and a spider scuttles out. The other lumps harboured spiders too.

I was told this one as true concerning a woman who returned from Spain. She had developed a very large matted spot on her arm. Lying in the bath she decided to squeeze it and two large spiders emerged. The explanation for veracity was that while sunbathing asleep on a beach, a sand spider had injected its eggs into her arm.

The moral seems to be don't go abroad, while there are no doubted sexual overtones.

Apart from the yucca roots story, spiders have been in the news recently in other contexts. Last month librarian Paula Lewis (83), was selecting some bananas in the Finchley branch of Tesco when a hairy black tarantula ran up her arm and bit her elbow.

"It felt as if a knife was going through my arm. It was a nightmare," said Mrs Lewis.

Then this month Lindsey Jarrett had a good scream in her 400-year-old home in Marston Maysey, near Swindon, Wilts, when she found a big spider stalking her bedroom. Husband Evan trapped it in a jar and dispatched it with insect spray. She posthumously christened it Maurice.

"He has helped my phobia because all other spiders now seem small by comparison," said Lindsey; not surprisingly as this one was a spectacular 5 1/2 in. across.

But the Jarretts ignored an old saying at their peril:

"If you wish to live and thrive, Let the spider run alive."

DID Robert the Bruce have his flagging spirits lifted by a spider?

There are two versions of a tale where the Scots monarch was hiding in a cave.

In one he watched a spider laboriously making its web and having many mishaps in its construction work. A variety of "if at first you don't succeed try, try again" hope was inspired and he emerged to lead his people to victory.

Or while hiding there a spider wove a web across the entrance which caused his pursuers to assume that nobody could be in the cave and went away. Similarly the king emerged and was victorious.

"THE EVIDENCE FOR PHANTOM HITCH-HIKERS" by MICHAEL GOSS"THE EVIDENCE FOR THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE" by DAVID GROUP(Both Aquarian Press and ASSAP, £2-95 each)

Don Weatherall was driving the last United bus from Peterlee to Durham City. It was empty when an attractive young girl flagged him down. She asked to be taken to Sherburn Hill and admitted she had no money for her fare. Don gallantly agreed to take the damsel in distress to her destination, suspecting she had been put out of a car.

But when he arrived at his destination he found the bus empty again.

He searched the bus in vain, despite knowing she could not have got off while the bus was moving. He concluded he had picked up a ghost.

Don told his workmates about his experience and more stories came to light of the spook of Sherburn Hill. One tale had a youth on a motor-cycle giving her a lift only to stop and find the pillion seat empty. Another stopped his car to give the hitch-hiker a lift only to find the car empty.

The bus driver was told the girl had been killed several years earlier in a road accident.

The girl was described to a reporter as having spoken with no pronounced accent and worn "old-fashioned" clothes. The police knew nothing of an accident or other reports of a ghost on that part of the road. (Northern Echo, August 13, 1979).

And so inevitably Goss comes to the conclusion that "the main difficulty in discussing the evidence" that the Phantom Hitch-hiker "ever ventures out into the objectively-experienced world of humanity lies in the ease with which it commutes between fact and fiction." He concedes there is weighty evidence that the tale is told as truth as part of narrative convention, and as such is a classic fabrication, or alternatively is a classic urban belief tale and obviously not true. However, evidence points to certain apparitional encounters being seemingly genuine, vague and inexplicit, but also that these can be the core from which elaboration follows.

The Phantom Hitch-hiker is a firmly-established folk-ghost and Goss surmises that the "motif may be available under rare, altered-sensory-state conditions to individuals" whose encounters for them have all the characteristics of reality. In other words, the Phantom Hitch-hiker may be a semi-archetype of mankind's collective imagination. He speculates on the spontaneous dissociation / "highway hypnosis" effect and puts forward a hallucination hypothesis where there is a merging of the outer and inner experiences. Here the Phantom Hitch-hiker image would be validated as "real" for "being a purely psychological phenomenon."

Thus the enigma can occur and be considered at different points of its structure. Fragmentary encounters are more believable because they conform more with known factors of the coherence and duration of hallucinatory experiences. Warnings of dangerous road conditions given by the passenger can be the driver's own subconscious fear manifested, prophetic utterances be deep-seated fears for the future, and it is usually the case that the passenger is of the opposite sex which may be stimulated by sexual motive. Even the "crash victim passenger" role is open to such possibilities of a "real" apparition, though more likely this aspect comes from an unconscious knowledge of a past road accident or even super-ESP of the event. The phantom identified by giving an address and subsequent corroboration is not well supported by evidence.

It is where a disappearance -- and nothing more -- occurs as cut-off point which adds credibility to the incredible stories. Here seems to lie the nearest to "reality" for the experience of the Phantom Hitch-hiker.

Goss has isolated and treated in depth some accounts which carry a reasonable degree of conviction. Where Maurice Goodenough seemingly struck a girl at Blue Bell Hill and its many other accounts, and the Nunney case which involved village vigilantes. The credibility here occurred by not conforming to the established folk canon. Also here were named witnesses; not a friend of the brother's niece's third uncle's milkman's son. Shaken witnesses have made bona fide reports to their local constabularies.

So this is not make-believe only. It is evident that the stories represent "a specific kind of paranormal event". Consequently the Phantom Hitch-hiker would seem to be more than a denizen of folklore but also a subject for scrutiny by parapsychologists in

authenticated cases.

Goss has tackled the subject in masterly fashion and the writing style is witty and clear.

Group's book is for those who want to know if this amorphous area of the Atlantic in Bermuda's vicinity has really swallowed countless ships and aircraft and more than 1,000 people over the past few decades. It has been a lucrative theory but there are two sides to the triangle. Despite showing so much rationality as explaining disappearances, Group still sticks to a belief in certain earth forces which can distort or supersede man's current conception of reality as we perceive it. Suddenly the tide turns and the mystery -- at least partially -- is perpetuated.

"SACRED WATERS" by JANET AND COLIN BORD

(Granada, £9-95)

The stone circle I most associate with water is that in Yorkshire at Yockenthwaite. On my first visit I could only look at it across a swiftly flowing river, close by which it had obviously been constructed purposively. I then had one leg in plaster, having broken the limb tripping beside yet another stream.

More personally, sacred waters for me are associated with the ritual of going to the pub or the bath I take each day religiously (so hot that it resembles a suburban shaman's sweat lodge).

My ablutions aside, the Bords seek the origin of a more purposeful derivation of the water cult. This could well have formulated during the late Bronze Age. We certainly know that during Roman times gifts or offerings were thrown into wells. In fact, artifacts in dew ponds suggest to me that the cult could be older than the Bords surmise and could date to the Neolithic.

They follow on historically to the Celtic head cult remembered in well lore and to healing springs and their properties; effect of Christianity on water cults; well-visiting day pilgrimages and making wishes; prophetic waters, colouration and named person identification; their creation often by an act associated with a saint; water divinities, ghosts and earth lights; and the present festivals and care or neglect of sacred sources.

There is an informed and wide-embracing account of how and why sacred waters have importance for mankind. Here the earth spirit is probably more at home than the prehistoric sites visited and monitored by most earth mysteries supporters. When considered, it is perhaps surprising that investigators have not laid more emphasis on such factors as dragonlore being so attuned to wells and rivers.

More than one-quarter of the book forms a gazateer of 200 surviving ancient and holy wells in the British Isles.

The book is splendidly illustrated with a great many black and white photographs, mostly by the authors. It is a pleasure to read and a timely arrival with a resurgence of interest in wells under way. Buy a copy for yourself and another as a gift for a loved one.

"WEB OF SUSPICION"

By PAUL SCREETON (THE MAIL, HARTLEPOOL, OCTOBER 18, 1985)

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- Daily Express, Sept. 25, 1985. The Sun, Oct. 10, 1985.

READERS' LETTERS

From Jimmy Goddard (25 Albert Road, Addlestone, Weybridge, Surrey):
A number of the reviews of the small book "Skyways and Landmarks Revisited" (which I

co-authored with Philip Heselton and Paul Baines) have disturbed me somewhat, for it seems some people have misunderstood the purpose of the book. So, to set the record straight, I am sending this letter to all publications in associated fields. I cannot speak for my colleagues, but my purpose in taking part in the project was not merely historical, and certainly it was not just to confirm a handful of alignments in Kent. Both these things are covered in the book, but they are to illustrate a basic fact: the re-emergence of leys and the subsequent earth mysteries movement were directly caused by communications from space people. As mentioned in the book, the evidence for this is in the fact that while some of Tony Wedd's points were some way off beam, yet the system in Kent seems to be real. This seems to show that he had not simply found some leys and engineered them to fit his beliefs -- the space people had indicated the lines and he simply made some mistake regarding the points.

The 1954 "orthotenic" flap in France and the subsequent publication of "Flying Saucers and the Straight-Line Mystery" and "Skyways and Landmarks" were, in my opinion, parts of a deliberate plan by benign extraterrestrials to educate us into knowledge of the Earth's energy system and its physical markers. (No subsequent flap proved orthotenic -- seeming to show that this one had this particular purpose). Yes, we have built upon the knowledge, but it is little short of churlish to deny their part in the matter. The evidence in "Skyways and Landmarks Revisted" was published to restate this case.

If anyone would be interested in re-forming Tony Wedd's organisation, the STAR Fellowship, according to its original principles of welcoming our extraterrestrial friends, I would be very pleased to hear from them, at the above address.

From Ralph Whitlock (Winterslow, Wilts.):

I think your white animal (see The Shanan No. 11, page 8) must have been a stoat, though weasels do turn white in the North in winter. However, it would be very early for a white weasel -- and early even for a stoat, unless, as sometimes happens, the animal turned white through injury and not because of cold weather. When northern animals do turn white in winter the change is triggered off by a sudden fall in temperature and so is due to current or past weather, not what is to come.

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ANCIENT SKILLS AND WISDOM REVIEW SECTION

"STONEHENGE: ITS DRUIDS, CUSTODIANS, FESTIVAL AND FUTURE" by JOHN MICHELL (£3, inc. post and packing. From John Michell, c/o 2 Blenheim Crescent, London W11).

It takes the subtlest authority on Stonehenge, John Michell, to see most clearly the true perspective of Stonehenge's current plight. Here he looks at its past, its embattled present, a balanced possible immediate future, and even a long-range speculation:

"It could well be that the imprint of the festival will be of as much interest to future anthropologists as any other evidence of what Stonehenge has meant to the people."

Central to this essay and thesis is the Free Festival, an ancient solstice gathering spontaneously reinstated early in the Seventies. These events panicked the uncomprehending authorities and in 1978 Stonehenge was fenced off, and the public excluded. So the monument, which had been presented to the nation with a condition of free access in 1918, was illegally and arbitrarily violated. In 1985 the Druids were banned and a bloody confrontation provoked with the festivalgoers.

What makes this site so important that thousands make an annual pilgrimage and face charges by police armed with clubs and shields behaving like latterday Berserkers? It is because, as Michell explains, Stonehenge is unique. It is a cosmic temple dedicated not to a single god or goddess, but all 12 gods of the zodiac. "It represents the ideal cosmology, the perfect and complete image of the universe." And: "One of the reasons for identifying Stonehenge as the cosmic temple and true image of the universe is that whatever ideas are brought to it find a positive response."

All well and good if the ideas are positive. What of the negativeness? This may allow the plausible excuse that by charging more than a shilling one is rightfully worshipping Mammon at Stonehenge or that by attacking the "peace convoy" (sic) a sacrifice is being made to Mars. In this context it may also be worth noting as a parallel cautionary tale the happenings at the Golden Temple of Amritsar and the eclipse of Indira Gandhi.

