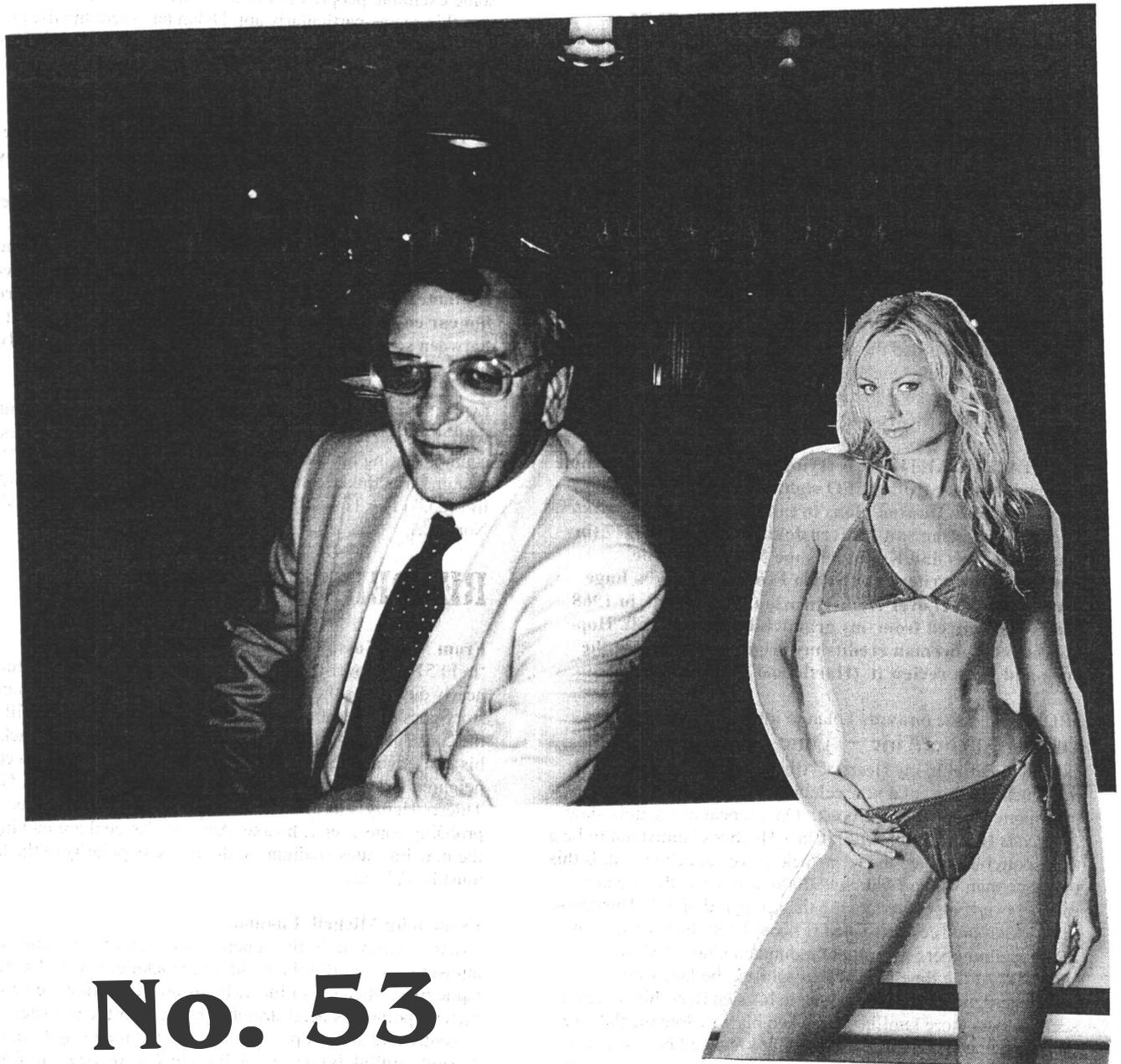




# FOLKLORE FRONTIERS



**No. 53**

# Folklore

# Frontiers

No. 53

August 2006

**Folklore Frontiers is an independent magazine covering various aspects of folklore, particularly contemporary legend, ancient and modern traditions, plus modern culture. It is edited and published by PAUL SCREETON. Address is 5 Egton Drive, Seaton Carew, Hartlepool, TS25 2AT. Subscription for three issues is £6 made payable to Paul Screeton only (NOT Folklore Frontiers). If your subscription expires with this issue an "X" will appear on the line below.**

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## THE DIARY ... THE DIARY ...

WHEN we met at Eaglescliffe's Blue Bell pub for Mike Amos' interview with me (see Page 13), I had read a review on the bus there about the Black Hole of Calcutta. In it there was a line about a 'Dutchman suckling hard like an outsize baby at his other sleeve', meaning drinking his sweat from the heat of so many bodies in so confined a space. I told Mike that it reminded me of his description many years previously of a statue in Gateshead which resembled 'Hilda Ogden breastfeeding a tortoise'. Brilliant stuff. Wish I was half as good at descriptive writing. Looking very dapper in a cram suit, there was a touch of Tom Wolfe about Mike's appearance. Maybe he'd smartened up since being awarded the M.B.E. for services to journalism in the North-East in the Queen's honours list. Again, Mike, congratulations. Mike is pictured on the front cover together with singer-songwriter Bob Dylan and 'wrestler' Stacey Keibler.

**A PUTATIVE AUTHOR is trying to track down two people I interviewed regarding UFO sightings almost 40 and 30 years ago. John Hanson plans to call his book *Haunted Skies*. Michael Dickinson saw a silver dome in a field in 1977 (my boozing pal, his dad Keith, tells me Michael will be contacting the writer) and Sylvia Frost witnessed a huge pyramidal object over High Throston, Hartlepool, in 1968 (she's just retired from my grandchildren's school). Hope the retired policeman credits my original research in the book and I can review it. (Hartlepool Mail, 3/6/06)**

FROM next issue onwards I plan to introduce a new feature, **Crossing the Line - Plus**, which will update and expand material in my Heart of Albion book. By way of introduction I present a new celebrity to add to the famous trainspotters quoted in the book. On a repeat of the quiz show *Eggheads* (B.B.C.2, 11/7/06), Chris Hughes claimed not to be a trainspotter and noted the term "pejorative" attached to it. Is this the same man who on March 9, 2006, arrived with wife at the railway overbridge overlooking the scrapyard of T.J. Thompson in Stockton-on-Tees and asked if I could help him identify the individual numbers of a row of redundant Class '08' diesel shunters? At the time I knew I recognised the face from somewhere, when he spoke to me in his rich Berkshire accent he seemed even more familiar, but when his wife told me they were on a weekend's holiday from Reading I realised he was not a local rail enthusiast. Only when recounting the encounter to my wife did the metaphorical penny drop. Tube train driver. British

Rail driver and stationmaster, International Mastermind winner and 68-year-old guy who showed me his printout from The\_Shunter\_Page website – it was Chris Hughes. Not a trainspotter? Chris, only the anorak was missing. Oops!

ONE ASPECT of *forteana* is the difficulty in getting a decent photographic image of phenomena, be it UFOs, Loch Ness Monster, ghost, yeti and so on. Similarly cameras often malfunction at the critical moment at such times. Other equipment to record *forteana* can also play silly buggers when something vital requires corroboration or for posterity. John Preston has written of a similar experience when he organised a telephone interview with singer Bob Dylan in 2004. He wrote: 'I was rigged up beforehand with supposedly state of the art recording gear. This, I was assured, would capture everything Dylan said with crystal clarity. Just to make sure, we tested the gear first and it all worked fine. I then had the strange experience of sitting in my flat waiting for Dylan to call. Twenty minutes later than arranged, the phone rang. I picked it up and a man said: "I have Bob Dylan for you." There was a click followed by an unmistakable smoky voice saying: "Hello Joe." By this stage I was so nervous that I didn't like to tell Dylan that he'd got my name wrong. I did, however, press the record button as instructed. At the same time, for reasons that I still cannot properly explain, I did something I'd never done before. I picked up a pen and scrawled down everything Dylan said. At the end of our conversation, I rewound the tape and pressed the play button – only to find there was nothing on the tape. Nothing at all. Or rather, just this indistinct whispering of the kind that some excitable people believe to be the voices of the dead. In a way this seems particularly apt. Dylan has spent his life putting up all manner of smokescreens between himself and the world. Here was just another – albeit pretty extreme - example of elusiveness.' (The Sunday Telegraph, 25/9/05)

**IT HURTS ME to agree with Mark Henderson, Science Editor of *The Times*, someone whose views are almost always diametrically opposed to mine, but here he mentions a contemporary legend and we're in agreement: 'Most petrol stations display signs ordering customers not to use a mobile. The fear is that a spark from a phone might ignite a huge explosion. Yet for all the urban myths about forecourt conflagrations, not one has ever happened. The risks from hot car engines – even from static generated by contact between seats and drivers' bottoms – are immeasurably higher.'** (The Times body&soul, 29/7/06)

IAN GIBSON, MP, has displeased his Norwich constituents with his observation about the prevalence of diabetes in the county. Putting his foot firmly in his mouth, he remarked: "I imagine it is linked to the fact that people in Norfolk are quite in-bred." (The Times, 12/8/06) And so to letters from or about Norfolk...

## READERS' LETTERS

**From Mick Goss, Fakenham, Norfolk**

'In FF51 you cover the story of a horse and cart in a viaduct. It nearly duplicates the legend of Arsenal's Highbury stadium. The story goes that local people were asked to contribute infill for the construction of the North Bank. A greengrocer (?) backed up his cart – which fell in – horse put down / buried. Its spectral neighing can be heard whenever Arsenal score at home. Given Thierry Henry's form this season, the phantom horse has probably gone... er... hoarse. Anyhow, Arsenal are moving to the new Emirates stadium, so the future popularity of the legend must be dubious.'

**From John Michell, London.**

'...And thankyou for the generous and perceptive – and very amusing review. But the width of the Icknield Way (former name of St Michael's Line)! It has no width, like the geometer's point. It's dead straight, passes over the key sites centre-to-centre and aligns upon the relics of the trackway from the Norfolk-Suffolk border. Look it up in *The Measure of Albion!*

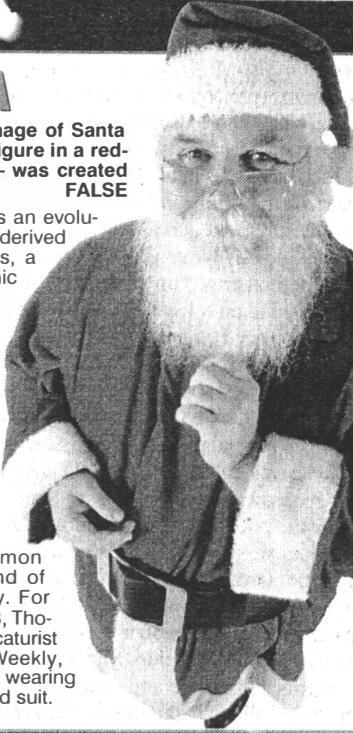
THE SUN, Friday, May 12, 2006

## SANTA

THE modern image of Santa Claus – a jolly figure in a red-and-white suit – was created by Coca-Cola **FALSE**

Santa Claus was an evolutionary creation derived from St Nicholas, a figure in Germanic folklore.

Coca-Cola's famous drawings of Santa Claus dressed in a red suit appeared in the 1930s. But the jolly figure of Father Christmas dressed in scarlet had become common place by the end of the 19th century. For instance, in 1863, Thomas Nast, a caricaturist for Harper's Weekly, was drawing him wearing a red, fur-trimmed suit.



URBAN myths are the oh-so strange stories we have all heard.

But how true are they? CAROLINE IGGULDEN checked out the website – www.snopes.com – which has investigated many of the bizarre tales in an attempt to separate fact from fiction . . .

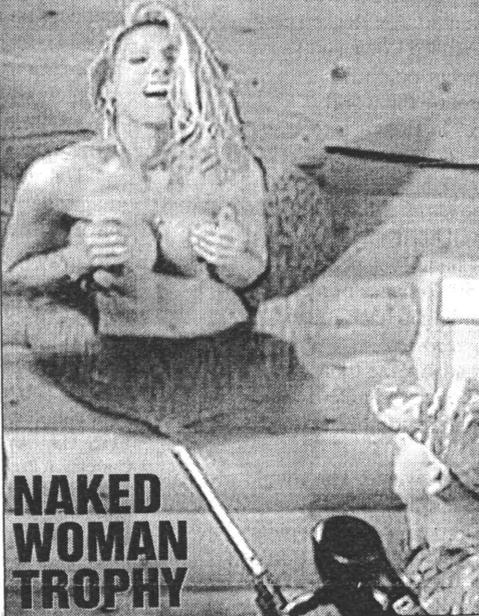


## LION KING

THE letters S-E-X are formed by a swirling cloud of dust in The Lion King **TRUE (MAYBE)**

ABOUT halfway through the Disney cartoon, the hero Simba is relaxing on a cliff edge when he flops to the ground, throwing up a cloud of dust.

As the dust settles, some claim the word SEX is visible. In slow motion, it takes persistence to make out the word, but it CAN be seen. But others say it was an attempt by techies to slip in S F X (special effects).



## NAKED WOMAN TROPHY

A LAS Vegas business has conducted "Bambi hunts" of naked women for customers who are armed with paintball guns. **FALSE**

The hunt, complete with a "booby" prize trophy, was a spoof designed by businessman Michael Burdick to promote a video featuring footage from a staged hunt.

He invited TV reporters to cover a hunt but it was a set-up. It created a storm of protest and Burdick was finally forced to admit it was all a hoax.

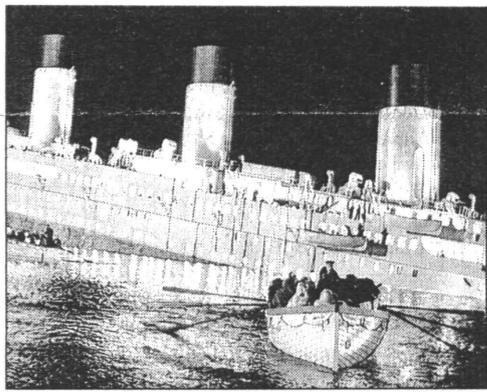


## BONOBO CHIMPS

BONOBO chimpanzees and dolphins are the only animals, other than humans, who engage in sex purely for pleasure. **TRUE**

These ARE the only other species where males and females willingly and regularly engage in sex with each other – even when there is no possibility that offspring will be produced.

The definition of sex for the purpose of this myth involves only male-female couplings.



## TITANIC MUSICIANS

AS the Titanic sank, the last piece played by the orchestra was Nearer My God To Thee. **NOT SURE**

The story goes that the musicians, who weren't part of the crew, bravely carried on playing until the ship went down to keep passengers' spirits up. The band leader had previously joked that if he was playing aboard a sinking ship he would close with O God, Our Help In Ages Past or Nearer My God to Thee. None of the band survived, so the truth will remain a mystery.

SECURITY staff at a sports shop arrested a pregnant woman on suspicion that she was trying to shoplift a basketball. **TRUE**

In February, 1985 a heavily pregnant woman was detained in a shop in the US state of Virginia. She was asked to shake her clothing to prove there was no ball under her dress. She later sued the store.

TRADITIONAL Chinese dish chop suey is actually American. **TRUE**

Chop suey, a bland mixture of cooked vegetables is purely an American invention. It originated in New York in the 1860s at the same time as Chinese immigrants started selling food to the Americans.

JOHN STEINBECK'S novel The Grapes of Wrath was published in a Japanese translation with the title The Angry Raisins. **FALSE**

An examination of the translated works of Steinbeck using Japan's National Institute of Informatics database shows that the title in Japanese has been correctly reproduced as Ikari No Budou.

LEMMINGS periodically commit suicide by marching over cliffs into the sea. **FALSE**

Lemming suicide is fiction. Explosions in population do occasionally induce lemmings to migrate to a less crowded area and sometimes they fall off cliffs or drown in lakes because the new territory is unfamiliar.

As competition for space is tough, they are more likely to kill each other than themselves.

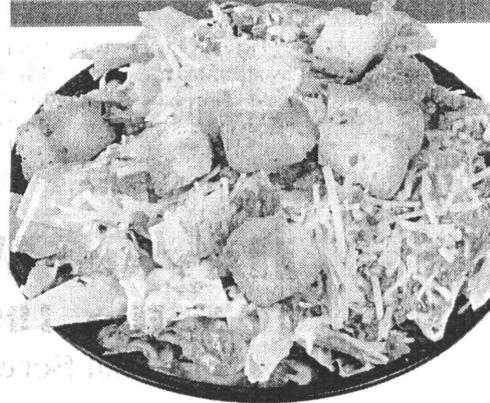
AFTER successfully robbing a bank, very polite Japanese thieves penned a thank you note to the financial institution. **TRUE**

Ten days after the biggest bank heist in Japan's history, the Kobe branch of Fukutoku Bank received a letter of gratitude, presumably from the robbers who had stolen £2.8million.

"Thank you very much for the bonus," the letter read. "We can live on this loot for life." Sadly for the police, it was unsigned.

A STUDY found that the London Underground was unspeakably filthy with traces of bodily fluids found on seats. **FALSE**

This circulated on the internet like wildfire in 2002. While no public place is entirely clean, this "study" certainly does not exist.

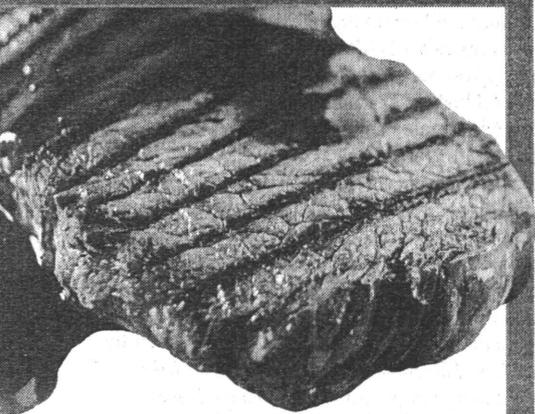


## CAESAR SALAD

CAESAR salad was invented for and named after famous Roman Emperor Julius Caesar. **FALSE**

Caesar salads have no connection whatsoever to Julius Caesar – or indeed to any of the Caesars who ruled Rome.

It is actually named in honour of the man who invented the dish, the famed restaurateur Caesar Cardini. He first produced the posh nosh in Tijuana, Mexico in 1924.



## SIRLOIN

A CHOICE beef steak taken from the upper hind-quarter is called sirloin because an English king was once so delighted with his meal, he knighted the meat, dubbing it "Sir Loin." **FALSE**

It was not until the eighteenth century that the word "sirloin" came to be commonly spelled with an "i" until then it was generally written as "surloin" indicating it came from the Middle French "surlonge" – sur means "over" and longe means "loin."



# Golden Oldies

**JOGGING THE MEMORY.** 'We all like to luxuriate in urban legends: everyone knows much the same ones. An urban legend ought to begin with the words "This really happened to a friend of a friend" and the stories generally include baby alligators grown giant in the New York sewers; Kentucky-fried rats; pythons in the plumbing; and the drunk who wakes up in a bath of ice minus a kidney. A gruesome touch is always popular: take the Doberman who comes to his owner choking on something. After some coughing, out pops a human finger. Upstairs in the bedroom is a tearful burglar with nine digits. Ghost hitch-hikers are also regularly featured, as are overgrown houses where madness lurks. Being a Bored Runner, I make up urban myths about humans and houses along my routes..... (Kate Muir, The Times Magazine, 1/7/06)

**STEAK-OUTS!** The world of football. 'Alex Mc-Leish takes the Rangers team out for dinner after another defeat. The waiter asks him what he'd like. McLeish says, "I'll have the prawn cocktail, followed by the 16oz steak." The waiter says, "And the vegetables?" McLeish says, "Oh, they'll have the same."' (Zoo, 24 Feb - 2 March, 2006) The Scurra column commented upon Lee Bowyer's table manners when his chairman took the demented footballer for dinner at an upmarket restaurant. Bowyer was baffled by the words on the menu so he decided to play safe. When the waiter came over he copied his boss's order. All well and good until the halibut steak arrived. Bowyer munched quietly before grumbling: "Don't know about yours, Mr Chairman, but this steak don't half taste fishy." (Daily Mirror, 25/4/02)

**ELECTROPOP (1)** A woman came home to find her husband in the kitchen, shaking frantically with what looked like a wire running from his waist towards the electric kettle. Intending to jolt him away from the deadly current, she whacked him with a handy plank of wood, breaking his arm in two places. A shame, really, as he had been merely listening and jiggling to his Walkman. (Sunday Sport, 2/4/06)

**'SNOW JOKE!** As David Rowan put it, not particularly clearly: 'There were the old urban legends gleefully reported as news, exemplified in the *Ananova* report in January, headlined *Man peed way out of avalanche*. If you are still wondering, no, a Slovak man trapped in his car under an avalanche did not free himself by drinking 60 bottles of beer and urinating on the snow to melt it.' (The Times, 31/12/05)

**FROSTY RECEPTION.** The resignation of Lib-Dem leader Charles Kennedy back in January resurrected the famous George Brown in Peru drinking anecdote. As Ben Macintyre told it: 'At a grand reception in that country in the 1960s, the Labour Foreign Secretary tottered up to a figure resplendent in a fetching purple frock, and slurringly asked her for a dance. She turned him down with the

response: "First, you are drunk. Second, this is not a waltz, it is the Peruvian national anthem. And third, I am not a woman. I am the Cardinal Archbishop of Lima".' Oops! (The Times, 7/1/06) Or as Bill Borrows recalls the glamorous figure telling Brown: "There are three reasons I will not dance with you. One, you are very drunk. Two, they are playing the national anthem and, three, I am the Archbishop of Lima." (Daily Mirror, 7/1/06)

**EXCITEMENT CAN HARDLY CONTAIN THEM.** As fine an example of *blason populaire* as you could imagine: 'By the garage in Barley lay Swires Well conjecturally St. Winefred's Well. A story relating to the spring tells how a Nelson man's wife was told by her doctor to drink plenty of barley water, so each week the poor man walked to Barley to the village well for water.' It's the way he tells 'em! (Clifford H. *Newchurch In Pendle: Folklore Byrne, Fact, Fancy, Legends, Traditions & Information*, Marsden Antiquarians, 1982) Of course, it gets better. Here's another gem of Lancashire wit: 'Newchurch has an amusing tradition of a famous toilet near to the inn, where seated inside on a clear night, the occupant could see, and ruminate on the lights of five towns below. (A loo with a view).' I can't leave Mr Byrne's *magnum opus* without a last engaging item of folklore: 'A recent tradition tells how during the last war, a fisherman watched a German seaplane land on the lower reservoir, it taxied across to him and the pilot asked where he was. The man replied that he was on Pendle Hill, at which the pilot taxied away and took off again.'

**ELECTROPOP (2)** Pop band the Pet Shop Boys say they were disgusted when they heard the rumours surrounding their name. Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe, who've had four No. 1s in their 20-year career, were at the centre of an urban myth that they were named after a homosexual sex act that involves putting gerbils up a partner's bottom. But Tennant, 51, fumed: "The name comes from friends at the time that worked in a pet shop in Ealing. It made us sound like a weird English rap group. There is no subtext. And nothing to do with gerbils. When people started to ask about sticking gerbils up your arse, I was really revolted!" (Sunday Sport, 2/4/06)

**REFLECTIONS.** Percy Shaw, the inventor of the catseye reflecting road stud, claimed in 1968 he came upon the idea when his car headlamps reflected back off a reflective road sign on Hollins Hill. In an obituary by John A. Hargreaves wrote: 'or the more apocryphal story of a cat's eyes transfixed in a beam of light, which his brother Cecil maintained in 1984.' (Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society, Vol. 4, 1996; monitored by Peter Christie)

**RETURN TO SENDER.** Iraqi terrorist Khay Pahnajet didn't pay enough postage on a letter bomb. It came back with 'return to sender' stamped on it. You've guessed ... he opened it and said a final farewell to his face! (Sunday Sport, 2/4/06)

# Proto-legends

Reviewing David McKie's *Great British Bus Journeys: Travels Through Unfamous Places* (Atlantic), Bob Stanley writes: Margaret Thatcher once allegedly said that any man over 26 who still takes buses has failed in life. David McKie has not been able to source this quote but, urban myth or not, car and plane travel continue to grow while use of the humble bus has fallen nationally by a third since deregulation.' (The Times Books, 11/3/06)

**FOX ME!** A dozy taxidermist was allegedly ticked off by police after accidentally blowing up a fox. The DIY animal-stuffer used a garage air-line in a bid to pump compressed air between the fur and skin of the dead creature. When he stuck the powerful hose up the fox's rectum the corpse exploded, showering the area with flesh and skin. He fled from the forecourt of the garage in Aspatria, Cumbria, but was later traced by police and warned about the dangers of trying to inflate dead animals. (Daily Sport, 13/7/00)

**BEER ON TAP.** It seemed almost a miracle for Haldis Gundersen when beer flowed from her kitchen tap. Meanwhile, water was being served at the Big Tower Bar downstairs after a plumber hooked up its beer hoses to the water pipes in the flat in Oslo, western Norway. (The Times, 14/3/06)

**RUDE AWAKENING.** Also in Norway, a dozy guy slept on a commuter flight taking him home from Namsos and he awoke when it landed in Trondheim – where he had boarded. (The Sun, 26/11/05)

**KY-LIE.** Contemplating the composition of book blurbs, Ben Macintyre claimed: 'With careful pruning, even the worst review can be made to sound enthusiastic. The most famous, and perhaps apocryphal example, was the review of a book about Kylie Minogue in *The Sun*, which was described as "a steaming pile of crap". On the paperback, however, the review was reduced to: "Steaming!"' (The Times, 12/11/05)

**STREETWISE OWL.** A couple in Sarasota, California, bought a Christmas tree and after having had it in the house for five days decided to decorate it. To their surprise they found a tiny screech owl. Animal control officers from a bird sanctuary arrive to collect it and it was noticed that its feathers smelled strongly of marijuana. Looking into its eyes it was obvious that 'the owl was, in the vernacular, stoned'. Blood tests confirmed the bird was flying high. It was named Cheech the Screech and released into trees along Bradenton Beach. (NBC2 News, 15/1/05; Fortean Times, No. 207, 2006)

**INVISIBLE MAN.** Police in the Chinese province of Henan claimed they could not photograph Ye Xiangting when he went to get a new ID card. He

sat for the camera, but when the mugshot came out – no Ye Xiangting. The equipment was checked, but still no result. An examination of his clothes to see if he was carrying anything which might interfere with the camera drew a blank. Then they photographed him with others, who showed up, but he didn't. There have been two similar cases in the past. (Independent on Sunday, 22/1/06)

**MOBILE NUDES.** Six nude paintings of large-breasted women on show in Milan were being moved daily from room to room. And the reason? There were so many men flocking to see the nudes that the paintings had to be moved regularly to even out the wear on the carpets. (?)

**'BITTY'.** More breasts. As Nicholas Blincoe admits, the story may be of dubious provenance: 'A friend tells a story about a social worker who visits a woman and finds her breast-feeding her five-year-old son. When the social worker nervously suggests that she think about putting the breast away, the boy lifts his head, fixes her with an angry stare and tells her to "fuck off". The story may be apocryphal, but most respected child experts (OK, my sister) say that if they are old enough to ask for it, they are too old to get it.' (The Daily Telegraph, 20/5/06) My wife says there have been recent TV programmes with children as old as eight breast-feeding.

**NUN TOO BRIGHT.** Last issue (page 2, column 2), I pointed out the peril of printed satire being taken at face value. I think this fits the category perfectly: ' "The word "mother" confused her." 'A friend of Paris Hilton explains the hotel heiress's request to meet Mother Teresa's **children** in preparation for playing the nun in a new film.' (The Observer, 16/4/06)

**CULTURE CLASH.** 'A man of Sikh descent was escorted off a flight after the taxi driver who had taken him to the airport reported him to police for listening to The Clash's *London Calling*, which includes a lyric about "war" being "declared". Stand by for a ban.' (The Observer, 9/4/06)

**NAKED FLAME.** A 56-year-old nudist who set fire to what he thought was the nest of a deadly funnel web spider was left with 18% burns. He poured petrol down the hole, lit a match and there was an explosion. Lack of clothes made matters worse. (Metro, 4/4/06)

**UNRECOGNISABLE.** This sounds more like a joke, but it appeared in a column entitled 'Stories you might have missed': 'John O'Connor, 65, a farmer, appeared in Killorglin District Court on a charge of being drunk and disorderly. When asked to plead, he responded that he did not recognise the court. When the presiding magistrate asked him why, O'Connor responded: "Because it has been painted since I was last here." After a few minutes laughter, O'Connor was sentenced to two months for contempt'. (Now&Then, No. 36, 2005 – Teesside glossy mag)

# Update

**TATTOO BLUNDER (FF33:15, passim)** Headlined **'GOTCHA BACK!'** (a reference to the notorious Belgrano sinking front page), Tom Newton Dunn had an 'exclusive' on how British sailor Marine Engineer David Luxton, 28, visited a tattoo parlour in Stanley, capital of the Falkland Islands. He swapped soccer jokes, including Diego Maradona's 'Hand of God', with Leonildo De La Cruz Bruna Aguila, 54, as the word 'England' was etched on his back. According to The Sun, the tattooist inscribed 'Argentina Forever' instead, Luxton only found out about it upon returning to HMS Southampton and looked in the mirror, the letters were permanent blue ink, when his ship-mates tried to scrub it away the skin came off and unnamed expert claimed he would be marked for life (plus the vessel is a warship not a 'battleship'). However, a trip to the Internet. Revealed that after writing 'England', the tattooist retracted the needle from his handiwork and added 'and Argentina forever' with ink in his client's back. Luxton's friends saw it happen, but assured him the writing was done in biro. The event occurred on December 10, 2005, but Chilean Aguilar was charged with assault and magistrate Clare Faulds fined him £75 with £70 costs. (The Sun, 1/4/06) Meanwhile, Zhou Jingzhi, 44, was sentenced to death in China for using a sewing needle dipped in ink to tattoo insults such as 'prostitute' and 'seduced seven men' on his girlfriend. (The Sun, The Times, 24/6/06) Not tattoos but similar blunders to see, Coventry council workmen became a laughing stock by creating a parking space marked 'DISABLEB'. (The Times, 15/7/06) ... and the same day it was reported that council gardeners spelled the name of their town wrongly in a spectacular floral display on a road into Weymouth, Dorset. (Daily Mirror)

**NEW CRAZES (FF47:5)** Yobs were reported trying to lure pigeons into the path of buses in a sick craze. Bird lovers claimed youngsters in Bristol tossed seed on to the road – then more as buses approached, hoping to see the birds crushed. Pigeon Control Advisory Service director Peter Merchant said: "It is very dangerous. Drivers may swerve to avoid the birds, risking an accident." (Daily Mirror, 22/4/06) But is all as it seems? An RSPCA spokesman seemed to adopt a level of disbelief or caution: "We have heard rumours of this happening." (The Sun, 22/4/06) # Season 5 of 24 ended on Sky One in July. Its star, Kiefer Sutherland, who plays counter-terrorism agent Jack Bauer, heard that U.S. college students use the show as a drinking game, downing a shot every time Bauer says "damn it". So he changed the script in one episode to have Jack say "damn it" 14 times in one hour. Another frat-house game is to monitor Jack's flouting of the Geneva Conventions. In season 2 he shot a key suspect under interrogation in the heart before beheading him. In season 3, he executed a colleague on the president's orders. (The Observer, 2/7/06) # Similarly, Mike McKinnon observed that: 'In America enterprising geeks

have even gone so far as to count the uses of the f-word and *Deadwood* residents' other favoured term "cocksucker" in each episode. Tonight you can expect 102 of the former and a rare eight of the latter. The earthy cursing is an essential ingredient of some of the finest scripts written in television drama.' It neglects to say whether students must drink a shot each time "fuck" or "cocksucker" is uttered. (The Observer Television, 2 - 8 July, 2006)

**HURRICANE KATRINA (FF51:7-8)** The rumours of child rape and people firing guns at rescue helicopters do not seem to have gone away. Mark Kermode, on Simon Mayo's Radio 5 Live show, found fellow guest film-maker Spike Lee in conspiracy mode. Lee revealed his documentary *When the Levees Broke* will include testimony from people who don't believe that what happened was entirely accidental. "Speaking to the black citizens of New Orleans," he said, "many of them told me that they will swear on a stack of Bibles that they heard explosions and they think the levees were blown up." Kermode commented: 'Although he stopped short of endorsing the suggestion that the poverty-stricken Ninth Ward was deliberately flooded to spare the French Quarter, Lee insisted: "As a documentary filmmaker, I think it is my duty to let these people voice their opinions. All these things are in the air and people do not put it past the government to do some crazy stuff." How much worse to accept that the citizens of New Orleans were simply abandoned by the authorities and left to fend for themselves.' (The Observer, 9/4/06)

**SHOE TREES (FF27:10-11)** A round-up by Paul Sieveking on footwear hanging from trees and utility wires found the most popular speculation involved drug dealers and gang territory, but other propositions included fertility rite, witchcraft, last-day-of-school or end of exams tradition and trophy collection of shoes from mugging victims. Miami folklorist Moira Smith said: "People do it because they see other people do it. And then people like us start thinking that there has to be a reason for it." The practice featured in the 1997 film *Wag the Dog*, where Americans mounted a campaign to bring home a soldier held captive. (Fortean Times, No. 211, 2006)

**SAINT GEORGE TOPIARY (FF49:15)** Patriotic Englishwomen footy fans turned their backs – or fronts – on Brazilian pubic waxes to support their team in the World Cup. Allegedly, thousands of girls cancelled appointments for the popular underbeard treatment. Sylvia Cami, who runs the Tyrone and Company salon in central London, said: "We have had so many women ringing us to cancel. Quite a few said it was because they wanted to be loyal to England. One of the most popular replacements has been the flag of Saint George." (Daily Sport, 1/7/06)

**WRONG ANIMAL RIGHTS (FF33:3-5, passim)** Two animal rights supporters were protesting at the cruelty of sending pigs to a slaughterhouse in Bonn, Germany. Suddenly the pigs, all 2,000 of them, escaped through a broken fence and stampeded, trampling the two hapless protesters to death. (Sunday Sport 2/4/06)

GLOBAL WARMING (FF46:3) Don't panic? Even if Sir David King, the government's scientific advisor, says "It is likely, though, that the natural oscillating pattern of ice age and warm periods is now being disturbed" and even Gaia hypothesis guru James Lovelock thinks it is too late to reverse climate change. The Observer's wretched Robin McKie reports: 'Lovelock simply falls off the spectrum when it comes to predicting doom and gloom.' (The Observer, 11/6/06) This former darling of the Greens has now offered his land for the storage of high-level nuclear waste. (The Daily Telegraph, 8/6/08) I believe that our planet can adjust. However, the wise Matthew Parris notes, some data is beyond refutation, but he observes: 'Buttonhole a passionate eco-apocalypticist and tell him a way has been found for us to cut carbon emissions perfectly painlessly, and carry on living as we do. Observe the involuntary anger cross his face.' (The Times, 1/4/06) Ghastly McKie got to review Elizabeth Kolbert's *Field Notes From a Catastrophe* (Bloomsbury), agreed evolution and natural selection must be reshaping *Wyeomyia smithii*, 'so next time some fathead tells you evolution is just a theory, tell them about pitcher-plant mosquitoes.' (The Observer, 25/5/06)

**BOX TUNNEL (FF33:6-11, passim) Both the legend of the sunrise shining through the bore at dawn on I.K. Brunel's birthday and Box Tunnel's association with an alleged strategic steam reserve are dealt with in a lengthy tribute article. The late Keith Hill comments on the latter: 'I think this myth can be dispelled without further ado.' As for the former, there is a splendid colour picture of the 'shine through' taken on April 9, 1981, the great engineer's birthday. (The Brilliance of Brunel, Backtrack, June, 2006)**

MANDELSON'S MUSHY PEAS (FF36:3-8, passim) Described as the 'muesli offensive' because the charities, pressure groups and informers Tory leader David Cameron woos are supposedly the muesli-eating classes, one newspaper went on to list other examples of political fayre. P.M. Tony Blair had his 'prawn cocktail circuit' of business tycoons, Harold Wilson's 'beer and sandwiches' to solve union disputers and Peter Hain's description of 'chardonay-quaffing socialists' updating (derating?) 'champagne socialists'. Lastly came: 'Guacamole: what Peter Mandelson allegedly asked for after mushy peas in a fish and chip shop. He denies it.' Actually the tale is that he mistook mushy peas, saying "oh, and I'll have some of that delicious-looking avocado mousse." (The Observer, 2/7/06)

**BOGUS SOCIAL WORKERS (FF8:3-4, passim) It's years since BSWs made the news but a mother has told how a gang of**

**three of these 'thoughtforms', as John Michell has identified them (and I concur, as even the police chief leading the hunt during the mass outbreak in 1990 conceded), barged into her home and tried to run off with her baby. Judy Hickie, 18, said a woman, who was with two men, snatched nine-month-old Jason from her arms and then stripped him. Shocked Judy said she grabbed Jason as they walked out with him. She rang police and the threesome, all in the in 20s, fled. Judy said that they called at her home in Wellington, Shropshire, the previous day to accuse her of hitting the child and she believed they were genuine. (The Sun, 12/5/06)**

ANOMALOUS BIG CATS (FF4:19-25, passim) There was an interesting sighting by a columnist's wife recently. Richard Hammond, of TV's *Top Gear*, wrote: 'Teaching British bobbies how to shoot a rhino, as reported on Wednesday, is not as daft as you may think. Sure, the biggest thing they may come across in their working life is a cat up a tree, but you never know. We had a panther in the garden recently. My wife heard it and said afterwards that her hair stood on end and that when it growled it wasn't that she thought that it sounded like a big cat, it was more like something primal, deep down in her brain knew it was a panther without doubt. Apparently there are quite a few lurking around the border of Wales where we live; the countryside is perfect, there's lots of cover and plenty of chickens and lambs to pick off. Funny how people tend to stick together when they visit us these days.' Pity the page designer trivialised this interesting item by adding a picture of a black panther wearing a Max Boyce Fan Club badge. (Daily Mirror, 22/4/06) Meanwhile a tiger was reported near Church Fenton, N. Yorks. A woman in her 30s called police to say she had seen the big cat while driving to work. No sign of the tiger was found by an R.A.F. spotter plane or police. (Daily Mirror, 24/6/06)

**DRINKING URINE (FF45:11, passim) In a rundown of the 50 greatest rock books, the following diary entry for 26 August 1995 by Brian Eno goes: 'Pissed into an empty wine bottle so I could continue watching *Monty Python*, and suddenly thought, "I've never tasted my own piss" so I drank a little. It looked just like Orvieto Classico and tasted of nearly nothing.' (From *A Year With Swollen Appendices*, Faber, 1996), via *The Observer Music Monthly*, June, 2006, where he was asked if the subject was still raised. After admitting infrequently, Eno offered the comment: "And I've tried it again since" without his interrogator asking him to elucidate fully. It only goes to show how utterly fascinating our bodily functions are. Delete this category?**

# Newslines

**FEVER!** In a classic case of xenophobic rumour, the tide turned against the refugee flood on Tenerife. Residents of the town of Arona attacked immigration holding centres with petrol bombs after rumours spread that the arrivals were infected with yellow fever. Antonio Morales, the head of the unit of the local police, said: "In six months people have gone from feeling sympathetic towards them to being angry. (The Times, 20/5/06)

**WELL-BUILT.** Men's favourite boob size has been revealed as 32F – apparently the exact shape of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral (long-time readers may recall that in FF10:3 I reported that an Oxford academic calculated the breasts of Page 3 girl Maria Whittaker to be at an angle of 53 74 . For each and every expert there is an opposing one, with Cambridge student C A Filby challenging with a measurement of her mammaries at 53 13 . Purely in the interests of science, I ask readers to make their own measurement – see picture) . Researchers quizzed 500 British men up



and down the country on their size preferences and compared them to regional landmarks. Scousers went for 36DD, like the Dome of the Port of Liverpool building, while Londoners preferred a pert 32B like the Millenium Dome in Greenwich. And Midlanders –

particularly those in Birmingham – plumped for 34C like the canopy over holiday spot Center Parcs. (The Sun, 1/4/06) So now I know what draws me to the conical Freeborough Hill.

**VANTASTIC.** Another survey claimed that the top quip scrawled on filthy white vans is "If only my wife was this dirty." Asda carried out a poll as it offered better insurance deals. Gev Lynott, from Asda Motor Insurance, said: "Britain's van drivers are the foot soldiers of our economy, and as much a part of our culture as Barbara Windsor and Coronation Street." Top 10 others: 2. Also available in white; 3. White with hint of M42; 4. I'm a Porsche underneath; 5. Test dirt, do not wash; 6. Meant to roam, no time for foam; 7. The older you get, the dirtier you are; 8. Dirty but fun; 9. For sale: mop and bucket – never used; 10. And your mother said I was dirty. (The Sun, 9/5/06)

# Ostensions

**NOT** the easiest term for definitions, but when last issue a long-suffering wife sold her husband's pride and joy sports car for a snip she was enacting in real life what had previously only existed as an urban legend. A nebulous term at the best of times, folklorically it has also been used in wider sense, but always basically representing real events patterned on a contemporary legend; fact mirroring 'fiction'. Pseudo-ostension is a hoax re-enacting legend ('faux rituals', 'legend trips'). Proto-ostension being 'it happened to me'. Quasi-ostension is a natural event misinterpreted as first-hand account of legend. If I understand these categories correctly, then what I have previously dubbed a 'dubious transmission', where it is claimed dental amalgam picks up Radio 1 or a church organ picks up a taxi office's instructions to a driver form quasi-ostensions. So is this next tale real or not?: 'A "freak" signal from a faulty digital TV box sent a helicopter on a non-existent rescue mission, the RAF said. The set-top Freeview box in Portsmouth transmitted the same signal as ones sent by emergency distress beacons at sea. The helicopter flew over Portsmouth harbour looking for stricken sailors before the signal was traced to dry land on January 5.' (Metro, 16/1/06)



**YOU** know the old joke – What's Nine inches and has an arrow through it? **Custer's last stand!** Apparently in 1876, his star waning, General George Armstrong Custer needed a battlefield victory and saw his chance at Little Bighorn. After a series of blunders he was overcome by mighty Red Indian odds, and as Murray Davies tells it: 'His body, naked apart from his socks, was found lying across three dead soldiers while unpublished letters speak of Custer's thighs being slashed to the bone, his ears slit and his groin shot full of arrows.' So he did literally have an arrow through his penis. 'Out of respect for his widow Libby, the

(Continued in Page 4)

# Did You Miss

**CHIRAC RUMOUR.** This issue cannot pass without some *The Da Vinci Code* folklore. Peter Conrad notes the book's hero is 'unlike the droning geeks with whom I keep company in Oxford' and being hunky and delivering in a sexy voice, Tom Hanks that is, while 'most of the dons I know are gnome-grotesque and when lecturing they emit a flow of aural castor oil.' So to the nub. Conrad writes: 'Before shooting began in Paris, President Chirac summoned Ron Howard and Tom Hanks to the Elysee Palace to negotiate an international treaty. Chirac wanted Audrey Tautou – given the role of a nubile cryptologist – to be replaced by his daughter's friend Sophie Marceau. He also patriotically requested a higher fee for Jean Reno, cast as a bumbling cop. In return, Chirac promised to ease access to The Louvre, where Howard was to film the murder of a curator. Howard ignored Chirac's pleas, but the intervention confirmed the novel's hints – made in its account of papal politics – about skulduggery and string-pulling in high places.' (The Observer, 7/5/06) Martyn Palmer put in his penny-worth, or francsworth: 'As the cameras have turned, the film has started to generate a web of myth and intrigue to rival its storyline. There was the report that the President of France was lobbying Howard for a relative tie to be given the role of Sophie Neveu and, at the same time, expressing his hope that Jean Reno, who plays the French detective Bezu Fache, was being paid enough. Howard, so the story went, ignored Jacques Chirac's advice and cast Audrey Tautou (Amelie) instead. When I mention this story to Tautou, she snorts in disbelief: "As if the President of France would have the time to get involved with the casting and renegotiating Jean Reno's contract! It was a joke! The person who translated the article made it come across as something serious. How can people possibly believe that?" Quite so. (The Knowledge, The Times, May 6, 2006)

**PARROT FASHION.** Why when I see the words 'science editor' do I fear the worst? As scientists announced in *Nature* that putty-nosed monkeys can string sounds together into 'sentences', Michael Hanlon starts a piece on animal intelligence with that old chestnut of gibberish about typewriters, monkeys and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I could write a lofty thesis on the territorial male blackbird whose garden at Folklore Towers I share and who learnt to perch on the edge of the pond to catch tadpoles swimming by. This, despite chicken wire to deter patrolling herons. Back with Hanlon, he wrote that in 2005 Dr Irene Pepperburg announced that an African grey parrot had learned the concept of 'no', how to apologise and also mastered the concept of 'zero' (I don't know if reincarnation or transubstantiation of the soul Druidwise was invoked by the learned doctor). Hanlon added: 'something which took human mathematicians until the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to come up with.' This reminded me of a 1968 article by John Michell in which he discussed birds' counting ability. He wrote: 'Birds' egg collectors know that all birds can count but some can count higher than others. For while some will notice the loss of one egg out of four, others will be undisturbed by the loss of one in two. All, however, can detect the theft of a solitary egg.' That must constitute a bird's concept of 'zero'. Michell continued by discussing mankind's learning curve of counting from one upwards and how the discovery of 'number 0' opened the way to 'a whole new field of logic and speculation.' Unfortunately, Michell does not date his '0' concept discovery. As Hanlon remarks of our feathered friends, birdbrains they are not. (Daily Mail, 19/5/06)

**EARL-Y DAYS.** Revived in the early 1970s, originally dating to 1607 and banned in 1837, probably due to drunkenness it encouraged, Hunting the Earl of Rone is a pageant held in the North Devon parish of Martinscombe. Taking place over the late spring bank holiday weekend, the custom features colourful parades led by a hobbyhorse and attendant, visits to many pubs and culminates in the Irish outlaw Earl of Tyrone being hurled into the sea, signalling more carousing (Best of British, July, 2006)

**IT'S SPORT JIM, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT.** Another pageant of sorts, begun in 1945 by Vincent Jess McMahon, is Worldwide Wrestling Entertainment. THE WWE's surreal athletic blend of

muscle, circus and soap opera is created by storylines that drive the show, with an incredible 19 writers introducing such everyday plots as a feud implicating burial by bulldozer, being blackmailed into lesbianism and the time 82-year-old Mae Young gave birth a a human hand after an affair with the world's strongest man, Mark Henry. I don't now need to tell you that each wrestler's fate in the ring is always decided by someone else. Now can anyone find a way of getting me in the square ring with leggy Stacey Keibler? (see front cover) (The Sun, 24/4/06)

**SIMONS SAYS (AGAIN).** Last issue I drew attention to meteorological columnist Paul Simons' occasional fortaen themes. Since then he has not disappointed, covering ice block falls and how a 20ft long chunk fell in Ross-shire in 1849. (The Times, 15/4/06)

**BADGERS INNOCENT.** I salute Simon Barnes for this piece of logical commonsense. He writes: 'Badgers are being slaughtered. They are blamed for spreading bovine TB, and killed for it. As a point of information, field voles and brown rats also carry the disease, but it's impossible to wipe them out, and not much fun, either. So blame the badgers. The plain fact of the matter is that the disease spreads because cattle are always being moved about the place. The strong likelihood is that the cattle infect the badgers, not vice versa. But farmers believe that badgers are to blame and badger culling is clear indication that Something is Being Done.' Barnes also notes: 'The Mammal Society says there is "insufficient evidence on which to base a bTB control policy". Any culling policy is based on bad science and bad farming.' Well said, sir. (The Times, 22/4/06)

**YANKS MISTAKEN.** BBC2 has taken up the *Mythbusters* series (previously on Discovery channel) and two excitable Americans attempted to replicate the supposed lethal effects of peeing on to an electrified railway third rail. Using a dummy, they finally got a circuit going by stronger than normal flow of urine which arced the dummy backwards, yet they still reckoned a human's flow would not be continual and hence concluded they had 'busted' this particular urban myth. The narrator said there had been no recorded deaths on the New York subway, and although obviously British and introducing a few U.K. facts to Anglicise the U.S. programme, it would have spoiled it had he researched my book *Crossing the Line: Trespassing on railway weirdness*, where he would have read on page 16 about the case of an asylum-seeker who died in London and whose only injuries to the body were burns, including a tiny mark on the end of his penis. A pathologist said this was consistent with urine hitting 600-plus volts of electricity. The coroner recorded a verdict of 'misadventure'. More details in the book and other cases. (BBC2, 17/8/06)

**TONGUE TWIST.** 'Brain scans of Pentecostal Christians who were "speaking in tongues" have produced controversial results. The Pennsylvania University study discovered that while the Christians were speaking incomprehensively but in a "coherent, language-like way", the language centres of their brains were switched off, says Mark Waldman, editor of *Transpersonal Review*. This could indicate that the Pentecostals' chatter is simple mindless babbling, but Waldman says that there may be another explanation: "For the believer this experience could be proof that another entity had spoken through them".' (The Times body&soul, 12/8/06)

**BRIDGET HOMER'S DIARY.** According to Dr Andrew Dalby, whose study *Rediscovering Homer* is published by W.W. Norton next month: 'It is possible, even probable, that this poet was a woman.' So the male heroics in war works *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* should now be seen as early examples of chick-lit. (The Times, 1/7/06)

**NO BACKBONE.** This 'filler' caught my attention because I thought all jellyfish were saltwater fauna: 'Thousands of Amazonian jellyfish have appeared in a British canal. The creatures, the size of a 10p, are thriving in the hot weather in Wigan. Experts believe they have descended from a pair accidentally introduced by Victorian explorers.' (Daily Mirror, 5/8/06)

# Book reviews

## CROSSING THE LINE: TRESPASSING ON RAILWAY WEIRDNESS

by PAUL SCREETON (Heart of Albion, to whom cheques should be made, 2 Cross Hill Close, Wymeswold, Loughborough, LE12 6UJ. £14.95 plus 80p postage)

"Although born rather casually, and by chance," wrote R.A.S. Hennessey, "nevertheless the railway was a massive agent of change." That being so – and not many of us want to dispute it – how come there are so few books on railway folklore? 'So few?' – offhand, I can think of just one and that's the book being reviewed here and now.

*Crossing the Line* deals with how Hennessey's "massive agent of change" has become the focus of folklore in the very widest sense of the term. The folklore of railways is, of course, the folklore of trains and tracks and stations, but also of the humans who use them. Which includes the too-easily mocked amongst us who find ambient beauty and fascination in them – trainspotters, that is.

There are some who feel that 'anoraknophobics' would be better off sentenced to long spells of community service or worse. For the world of the trainspotter seems perilously obsessive and pointless – forbiddingly arcane – to anyone who happens not to be a trainspotter. It has its own language and peculiar vocabulary (*gricers ... nonker ... shed-bashing ... thrash horses, my lords*). It has its observances, protocols, heroes and villains. Like any subculture, which is what the author pronounces it to be, this world has customs, beliefs and narratives which we need to study, particularly where they echo or possibly transpose motifs identified by earlier collectors in 'pre-locomotive' cultures and contexts. Calendar rites, topping-out ceremonies, taboos, blason populaires and foundation sacrifice all have their correspondence in our modern railway lore.

Just as importantly and maybe more so, it embraces folklore classifications which have become more prominent if harder for the non-folklorist to identify as folklore over the past 50 years or so. Paul gives us contemporary legend (Brunvand's *Baby Train*, the oft-sniggered-over Soiled Trousers fiasco), rumour legend and a gamut which usually gets assigned to the conveniently expansive drawer marked 'Fortean'. In truth, a distinction between 'early' and 'contemporary' folklore – and it is my distinction for the purposes of this review, not Paul Screepton's – is somewhat misleading. The thrust of this book is to show how 'contemporary' material may relate to older varieties. Case in point: recent scares over the putative health-hazards of mobile phones bear comparison with Victorian perceptions of the physiological risks imposed by rail travel: allegations which *The Lancet* felt obliged to refute in 1862. (And, as is not uncommon when

and where authoritative refutations are unleashed upon the general public, the august medical journal's efforts were not entirely successful. See Paul's 'brain-softening' anecdote on page 64)

Among the lesser-attended or less frequently acknowledged types of modern lore are popular fallacies – statements of fact (often historical fact) which upon close inspection are not facts at all. In present context we learn that the *Flying Scotsman* was not the first steam locomotive to break the 100mph record (and wasn't the first to travel non-stop London to Edinburgh) and that George Stephenson didn't design *Rocket* despite appearing to garner the credit on the 1990 £5 notes. (Incidentally, the Stephenson run Brunel a close second as foci for engineering lore). Why should these inaccuracies matter? Because they reveal a preference for bite-sized fictions over more complicated fact. We repeat them even when we've been told repeatedly that they are less than 100% reliable. Again, blunder legends (here, rail gauges and nonsensical timetabling) matter because they express our contempt for the bureaucrats who dictate our lives. Identity conspiracies – locomotives passed off, in humour at least, as more famous locomotives home in upon suspected frauds perpetrated at our expense. And so on.

Now, you can't have everything and you probably don't need it. I had half-hoped for some stuff about lines diverted to avoid plague pits (which, to be fair, Paul mentions in transit) and maybe the walled-up Underground carriage with its cargo of crinolined skeletons, though it's a dubious tale at best. I didn't miss the reduced complement of ghosts, however. And you'd expect ghost stories, wouldn't you, in a book whose subtitle promises 'railway weirdness'? Charles Dickens created the template with *The Signalman*; his contemporaries went on to develop railway ghosts into a kind of minor fine art. So we might expect ghost stories in quantity. Our author acknowledges this at the start of Chapter 2 but wisely (and I think mercifully) he doesn't pander to it: "the basic insubstantiality of ghosts themselves and the general paucity of detail in telling has," he says, "left me underwhelmed and the subject under-represented."

Besides their integral interest, the spectral trio he offers here – "a single old-fashioned station setting ghost story ... modern reminiscences of a spooky diesel loco and an author's fabrication of fiction into fact" – more than meet reasonable requirements. Too many phantoms would have bogged down a section which takes in prophecy, the jinxed 'Class 47', the Brahan Seer's quasi-predictive "chariot without horse or bridle", Mother Shipton, birds of ill omen and a nodding donkey, railway projects set to defy prehistoric stone circles and fairies and dragon lore. Fortean. Later you get crime, including the Kray Brothers, the Maniac on the Platform and the bizarre, occultishly-tinged death of Graham Bond. And weirder than most 19<sup>th</sup> Century tales of the supernatural aspired to be, the episode wherein a young man named Burgess fell asleep on a train to Shrewsbury and awoke in a siding next to two or three lines of

obsolete locomotives: perhaps part of the fabled Strategic Steam Reserve, a huge store of steam locos held back from destruction lest they should be needed despite the changeover to diesel. Paul Screeton aptly treats the SSR in terms of the legends of *Once & Future Kings* who are ready to emerge from their centuries-long sleep in times of national crisis. Don't you remember the much-publicised resurrection of the 'Green Goddesses' during the firemen's strike? Paul certainly does.

THE aforementioned dearth of rail-lore books may have much to do with the history of folklore as a distinct discipline. Early collectors tended to be ruralists who headed up-country by instinct and inclination. They were imbued with the notion that folklore was essentially about vestigial customs and beliefs, the survival of which was threatened by the all-pervasive, erosive industrialisation which railways helped to promote and indeed symbolised. Again, the more conservative folklorists have been perplexed (even offended) by the suspicion that some narrative possessing a 'folkloric' flavour are nothing of the kind. Medialore has always posed problems. Does it possess genuine currency? Will it pass into oral circulation (which for many of us, remains the key signature to what is or is not folklore)?

As a long-serving journalist and connoisseur of column fillers, Paul Screeton meets this head on: "Accumulation of modern true stories on a theme can stake a claim to be justifiably folklore as much as collections of ancient dragon slayings ... " he argues, adding that "amassed filler paragraphs on a popular topic" are valid in the same terms. Example: the much-mocked 'leaves on the line' or 'wrong type of snow' proffered to excuse seasonal disruptions of service are semi-serious condemnations of corporate ineptitude. No matter that they can be viewed sympathetically (though they rarely are) as *reasonable* excuses: Australian passengers would not have wanted to risk their safety on tracks rendered greasy by the crushed corpses of invading millipedes, for instance – and there's more instances of faunal disruptions at this point in the text. The media may transmit narratives which are 'real' in the sense they report what has truly happened; they may decorate or embellish events which have truly happened. They may even fabricate them. It is how we, the recipients, utilise and re-transmit those narratives that matters.

TRAINS – sorry, locomotives – take starring roles in many of the narratives, of course, but as I observed several paragraphs ago, this is not merely a book about trains/locomotives and the metal things they run upon. It's about people – call them passengers, call them commuters or something else – and what they do on or near trains. They fall asleep. They have sex. They see things they shouldn't and maybe didn't. They fart (too blatantly in the case of Rajvive Kumar of Madras, who was sacked for a fundamental performance of "the famous da-dad-da-daaa opening of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony in D Minor*. He had previously played the spoons over the public address system, organised belly-dancing in the ticket office and snake-charming in the toilets." As Paul Screeton remarks quite early on, folklore doesn't have to be po-faced).

And some of them have moments of creative genius. Paul Screeton gives us authors and artists whose inspirations visited them on train journeys and railway platforms. Baroness Orczy 'saw' her *Scarlet Pimpernel* on the platform of Temple Underground,

Paul Simon did or didn't compose *Homeward Bound* on or near Widnes station and Harry Potter was born somewhere between Manchester and London. Look elsewhere for celebs deflated – crossword compiler Adrian Bell and Billy Bragg, to mention just two.

CROSSING THE LINE is a very personally-written book: a book of railway lore written by an insider well-read in the specialist literature of the subject and with many thousand hours of field study to his credit. (And quite a lot of ale as well, which he cheerfully admits). Writing in Chapter 10 of 'Railway Enthusiasm', he projects the camaraderie of the 'spotters'; he tells us who they are and what they do. He traces the history of the pursuit and its sub-cultural language, its celebrities and its critics. But I don't anticipate that *FF* readers need me to remind of Paul Screeton's track-record as a ferreoquinologist – a prettier term, I think, than 'trainspotter', the pejorative associations of which he deals with in spiky fashion throughout the book and no less spicily than in his 'Anoraknophobia' section.

The writing displays a gift for venturing criticisms of sloppy journalism without that kind of superiority found among writers for whom contemporary legend is an excuse for deriding people who can't recognise an 'urban myth' when they hear one. It will engage in speculating on the credentials and/or literal credibility of a particular incident but avoids propagating any "doomed-to-failure unified theory of the paranormal".

A PERSONALLY-WRITTEN BOOK, then: personal in the way it draws upon the author's own reading and collection of lore, but also in feeling free to append a handful of peculiar neurological (or otherwise) experiences which have overtaken him as journalist, Fortean folklorist and train enthusiast. (See his *It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry* on pages 181-183 The Bob Dylan allusions sustained here, like the Vicky Pollard references elsewhere, reveal a confidence that the readers will share a certain pop-cultural heritage; earlier writers would have preferred Latin tags). So the track goes where Paul decides to take it. Which is just about the only way to plan a journey through our modern folklore: a journey which, like our modern railway networks, threatens to involve more travelling than a single person can manage in a lifetime.

THIS REVIEW has managed to restrict itself to a mere handful of railway metaphors. So having reached the end of the track it can indulge itself a little: **CROSSING THE LINE** – lively, wide-ranging, well-delivered and idiosyncratic in the most positive sense – is well worth the price of the ticket.

*Mick Goss*

**Mick Goss read English at Leeds University and received an M.Phil. from Birmingham University for his thesis on Victorian supernatural literature. He is the author of *The Evidence for Phantom Hitch-Hikers* (The Aquarian Press, 1984). He contributed a column entitled *Folkjokeopus to Folklore Frontiers* and currently runs a coffee shop cum secondhand bookshop with his wife Sheila in Norfolk.**

**Reprinted from Fortean Times No. 212:**

Paul Screeton is known to Forteans as an Earth Mysteries buff, but he's also a folklorist, journalist and train enthusiast. *Crossing the Line*, a charming reflection of this, covers the railway – urban legends, rituals, wonders and blunders, and the rest – with affection. Fortean Times verdict; a book for

people who didn't know they liked railway books. 8/10.

*William Darrag*

Reprinted from **Facts & Fiction No. 58:**

IN his celebration of steam travel, *Steaming through Britain* (Unwin Hyman, 1990), Miles Kington makes a typically wry comment on railway stories: "(they) are funny enough in the pub, and the later it is, the funnier. Like opera stories, they almost all concern accidents, disasters or bad mistakes committed by someone known to all present. Told well, they're a hoot. Written down, they're about as amusing as a slow description of a custard pie being thrown." Miles puts his finger on an essential condition of live storytelling: what counts is not just the quality of the story as sound narrative but also the teller's competence in winning the sympathy and support of the audience.

Paul Screeton's *Crossing the Line: Trespassing on railway weirdness* contains a wealth of reported incidents and anecdotes which, while plot-less and rather flat on the page, will provide the accomplished oral storyteller interested in trains and rail travel with a rich source of material. Most of the 600-plus events and tidbits reported and discussed by the author were plucked from newspapers and magazines – from *Daily Sport* through *The Railway Magazine* to *The Times*, and, it must be admitted, quite a few are hardly worth the re-reporting. Many of the "stories" were originally newspaper and magazine fillers rather than yarns for the telling, constituting what the author himself refers to, appropriately, as "medialore", and some will undoubtedly survive as members of this genre. However, the proficient storyteller, dipping into this pile of snippets, will find some of them to be nuggets – of value as stimuli, springboards and embellishments.

My personal favourites are the more complex items containing a supernatural element, which steer them towards the borders of fantasy. One of these, reported in Chapter 2 is of special interest as it connects two historic events separated in time by 170 years. The day before the massacre of the Scots at Culloden Moor on 16 April 1746 a huge harp-like bird with leathery, bat-like wings was seen hovering overhead. This creature, later called the Skree, wasn't sighted again until 1915, when a battalion of superstitious Royal Scots soldiers spotted it and refused to get on their train until ordered to do so at gunpoint. Soon after the troop train collided with a local train, and before any warning could be given, a double-headed express ploughed into the wreckage. There were at least 277 deaths and 246 people were injured – the highest number of fatalities of any rail accident in Britain. Incidentally, the soldiers on a second troop train did make it all the way to the Dardanelles, only to end up being massacred there.

Screeton (no connection with the Skree, one hopes!), concerned as he is with medialore, i.e. reported contemporary events which have the potential to become folklore, does not draw on fiction, though naturally some elements of powerful make-believe and fantasy, like the character of Sherlock Holmes, may assume the status of fact via legend or myth. In the rail context we have the mysterious Platform 9 1/2 at King's Cross station, from which the train for Hogwarts departs, and which some say has already entered folklore. Screeton admits to being "underwhelmed" by supernatural events in the rail department, but storytellers won't worry about this, because there exist plenty in fiction to draw upon, e.g. John Brooks' *Railway Ghosts* (Jarrett, 1993), which provides great storytelling material. Incidentally, while the metaphor of engine as dragon occurs, there is no mention of the greatest representative of this subgenre, Ray Bradbury's *The Dragon*, first published in the April 1955 edition of *Esquire*. And while the author Andrew Martin is mentioned, only disparagingly as it happens, as a "would-be humorist", his novels are not noted, since these, while brilliantly depicting the age of steam, do not, of course, qualify as medialore.

Storymakers find stimulus material in all the media. Earlier this year there was an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London entitled "Inner Worlds Outside". On the poster advertising it was a reproduction of a strange picture by Henry Darger showing a train approaching a group of young girls apparently playing on the lines. I can reveal that on the back of the original the artist put the words: "In fright they see a train coming sixty-five miles an

hour only ten seconds to save her." Perhaps not every picture tells a story, but this one certainly provides a ready-made setting for tellers. Filled with incidents, Paul Screeton's *Crossing the Line* likewise sets scenes that spark the imagination, and it will undoubtedly become a useful additional source book for many makers of rail yarns.

*Martin Murrell*

(\* Actually I have the Henry Darger picture on my wall. It was used to illustrate an article on 'Outsider' artists entitled 'Naive. Or simply off the rails?' in *The Observer* )

## **FOUR ELEMENTS: WATER, AIR, FIRE, EARTH** by **REBECCA RUPP** (Profile Books, £8.99)

WE now know there are 118 elements in the periodic table, nature's 92 plus 26 created in laboratories, but throughout most of history there were just four classical elements, known since Ancient Greece as water, fire, earth and air. Even as early as around 430BCE, Democritus proposed the existence of atoms, a landmark in science. Professor Rupp then leads us via the likes of Plato and Paracelsus, neither being their real names, to Mendeleev, who failed to win a Nobel Prize for his periodic table of elements (a scandal probably only comparable to the treatment of my new heroine, Candace Pert).

Yet despite modern technology and empirical science, in the place of their streamlined replacements, the primal four stubbornly remain. And for what reason? Surely tradition plays a large part. The term 'periodic table' sounds as exciting as 'menstrual furniture item'. No wonder at the book's title then. Would the band Earth, Wind and Fire not have bombed had they instead chosen the monicker Periodic Table?

Thus the four following chapters are named after and examine our relationships with the classical elements rather than manmade technetium or protoactinium. The first on water reminds me in its style of that superb wide-ranging book *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The swimmer as hero* by Charles Sprawson, covering as it does discourses on rainmaking rituals, rivers in mythology to the attractive anti-savannah hypothesis of an aquatic ape ancestry for humans with that particular favourite of mine, women's big breasts having a flotation function, and even H.L. Mencken's bathtub hoax to the scientifically- eccentric nature of water as it approached freezing point.

Similarly the chapter on air has much to fascinate folklorists, such as here taken at face value the indecipherability to Japanese of the Navajo Indians' World War II code, Shirley Eaton's demise in overall gold paint in *Goldfinger* and the 'much-touted legend that the bumblebee is aerodynamically impossible'. Air also has a reference to the high notes of *The Star Spangled Banner* so adeptly used by Jimi Hendrix; fire has the demise of Asbestos Man and perfunctory mention of spontaneous human combustion; while earth reintroduces the popular Gaia hypothesis, plate tectonics and burial customs.

Lastly, the elements were associated psychologically with four body fluids by the Ancient Greeks. Even the modern C.J. Jung retained four personality types and New Agers today claim that the four elements are still a natural part of our mental make-up.

Her style is light for a serious but popular scientific treatise – 'one of Adam's first acts upon hitting the turf of Eden...'. 'the string bikini owes its existence to the days when ancient hominids first hit the beach...' and 'literal-minded pragmatists, the sort of party-poopers who refuse to clap for Tinker Bell'.

The author wears her scholarship so lightly that the scientific medicine goes down silkily and the alchemical process transmutes the elements to a golden fleece of learning worn comfortably and with pride. A unique and passionate celebration of our relationship with the four elements.

## **MYSTERY BIG CATS** by **MERRILY HARPUR** (Heart of Albion Press (see earlier for address), £16.95 post free)

FORTEANS will relish this book, folklorists too. Perhaps the general reader will find the latter half hardgoing. As the first

# Northmen Blog

## Hoping to make railways sexy

**Y**OU know, of course, about the Strategic Steam Reserve. It's that secret subterranean engine shed, lugger-mugger beneath some hill, where dozens of muck and bullets locomotives await, once again the return of the firing squad.

It is, of course, a load of mothballs, about as plausible as the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, still awaiting the call to arms in the hour of England's need.

There are many, for all that, who not only swear that it's true but that they have a cousin who knows a bloke whose dad's mate's steam engine was mysteriously commandeered as it clattered off one morning on the milk train to Middleton-in-Teesdale.

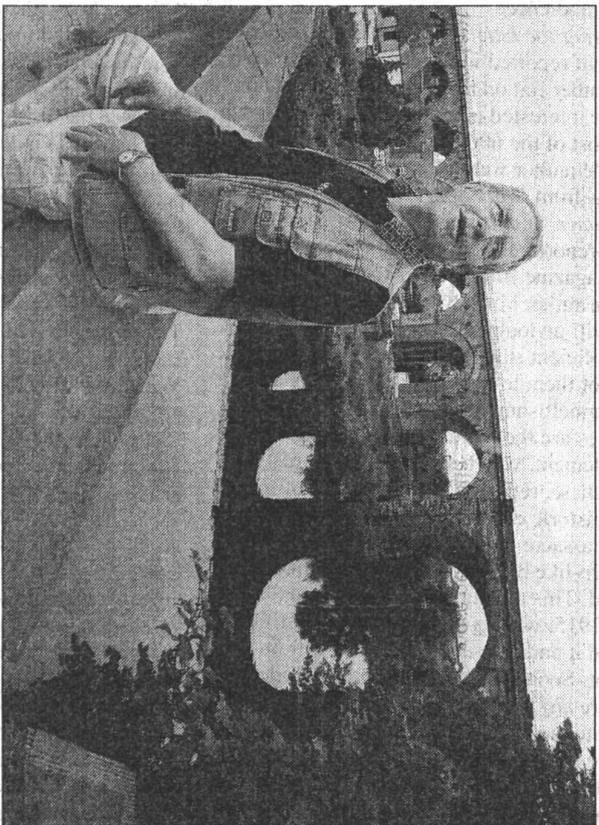
Locations vary, the Cotswolds a clandestine favourite. Paul Screeton, who has dug deep and found little, concedes slight circumstantial evidence: "It's a crock of ferrous metal at the end of the rail rumour rainbow," he says, "and, of course, it's not there."

The story so fascinated Screeton that he contemplated a book on it. Instead it's a chapter - "Rust never sleeps" - in his fascinating new book on railway folklore and urban legend, the real and the surreal, parallel lines and, sometimes, parallel universe.

"I'm hoping this will do for railways what Nick Hornby did for football - make it sexy," he says.

The story of the North Road station ghost is in there, him and his black Labrador; the legend of Thorpe Thewles viaduct (there wasn't really a horse and cart buried beneath it), the mystery of the Thornaby Class 37 and the football-related saga of how a B17 steam engine came to be called Darlington, and not Newcastle United.

There are fairy stories, too - it's said that George Stephenson's line digging in the Midderidge area was spellbound by



**Paul Screeton:** loves nothing better than a bit of loco spotting at Yarm viaduct

the little people - and even flying saucers. Urban legend, urban space-man. Interesting chap, Paul Screeton.

Lifelong railway enthusiast and long-time sub-editor on the Hartlepool Mail, his life changed in 1996 after an apparent vision - on a train from Paddington to Newton Abbot, second class - of the York martyr, St Margaret Clitheroe.

"Be yourself," the vision said. It meant the end of the Mail train, anyway. Still in Seaton Carew, he now has more time to write and research books, to edit a magazine called Folklore Frontiers and, unashamedly, to be a loco ("not train") spotter.

"When you get to 60, you don't worry if people think you're a bit weird," he supposes. When you get to 60 you also get a bus

pass - "It's transformed my life," says Paul - which is why three or four times a week he may be found somewhere beneath Yarm's handsome railway viaduct, said by his geography teacher to have been built upon wool.

"I'm not sure about that one," he says, generously, "but Yarm viaduct's better than a station. I like to see the wheels."

He arrives, like the happy wanderer, with a knapsack on his back. It holds his binoculars, his camera, the day's paper, some railway books. He wears a body warmer, not an anorak. The preferred vantage point is outside the Blue Bell - inside if wet - the ideal companion a pint of John Smith's Smooth.

Even at home, he can see the coastal line from the back bedroom window. "The eight o'clock cement train to Sea-

ham on a Friday usually has something good on it. I can see it and then go on the Internet to find out what the number was. It's a lazy man's train spotting."

Unusually for a soot-smeared child of the steam age, he prefers diesels. Incorrigibly, he remembers that his road to Damascus was on platform one at Penrith.

"It was 1957. A chap asked me when the Royal Scot was due and I didn't know. Then a diesel came along, 10203.

"It was only a green box-like diesel, but it made such an impression on me. It was a bit like that quote of Bruce Springsteen when he said he'd seen the future, he'd seen rock and roll.

"I call it my epiphany. I'd seen the future and it was bloody brilliant. I still get a thrill when I see a locomotive for the first time."

His next volume is likely to be a more detailed investigation of urban legends, his earlier books include an account of the Hartlepool Monkey and something, reprinted and again sold out, called 'The Man Who Ate a Domino'.

It was about this fellow in the Horden Hotel who, when the doms were going badly, would conjure a cough and swallow one. Nature, alas, failed to take its course on one occasion and he ended up on the operating table.

"What we didn't say in the paper was that nurses had a sweepstake on what domino it would be when they got it out," he insists, double blank.

It may be the stuff of eager exaggeration, it may even be legend. Paul Screeton could become a bit of a legend, too - a surprisingly good book, weird but rather wonderful!

● Crossing the line is available from Heart of Albion Books, 2 Cross Hill Close, Wymeswold, Loughborough LE12 6UJ, price £14.95 plus 80p postage. Further details on [www.hoap.co.uk](http://www.hoap.co.uk)

MIKE  
AMOS



JOHN NORTH

NORTH EAST JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR

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THURSDAY, JUNE 29, 2006

From Best of British, August 2006

A LIFELONG interest in both trains and folklore, a willingness to sit sharing a pint or three with fellow enthusiasts, plus the practised ear of a professional journalist, have given Paul Screeton the unique ability to collect and write about the wonderful web of weirdness and ever-evolving lore surrounding the railways.

Ghosts, faires, prophecies, the Kray twins' crimes, the mythical 'maniac on the platform', legendary locomotives, even trainspotters all form part of this eclectic and entertaining exploration. The book provides a wealth of tales to make even the delays on a train journey enjoyable.

in-depth book upon the ABC phenomenon in Britain since the 1980s, the author acknowledges that decades of data have made previous theories untenable. That the most likely answer lies in the direction of daimonic reality, I wholly endorse, and suspect so will fortune, though I fear Joe and Josephine Public may not yet be ready for the plethora of connections to the phenomenological world of liminality, shape-shifting, tulpas and even cat scratches seen in a stigmatic context and odd feline gait reflecting the clumsiness of men-in-black.

Merrily's starting point is based upon three mysteries: that these ABCs are never found dead or alive (although some foreign species of small size have been roadkills or shot, and one puma was caught, but its provenance caused controversy and raised more questions than answers); the releases/escapes explanation does not account for the preponderance of panthers (melanistic leopards); and complete absence of normal leopards with spots (truly extraordinary).

The melanism suggests another beast, the black dog of folklore fame, for which there are similarities and dissimilarities, with some suggestion that ignorant peasants of yore mistook real panthers for canids, while some folklorists have seen how the cultural context for phantom black dogs could have morphed into modern accounts of jet-black cats.

When using the handy acronym ABC, Merrily stresses the 'A' stands for anomalous, and not alien, as 'they are very much at home here'. As her files expanded, her correspondents and newspaper cuttings revealed compelling testimonies of witnesses of all ages and social spectrum from every corner of the UK. The consensus was that these people shared seeing un-expectedly an exotic beast and that it was some of big cat.

The author then records some of the failures of possessors of farmers and marksmen, police and military, to dispatch a single ABC; concluding that to record but a fraction of the cat-flaps and consequent large-scale hunts was sufficient and that such intense activity might anyway have been counterproductive to success. Scaled down to using lures as in big cats; native countries similarly failed spectacularly.

Then after examining and rejecting various explanations for the ABCs' origin, such as releases in response to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act of 1976 or previously by American G.I.s freeing pets or escapes from bombed zoos, adding to the 'strong whiff of urban legend which hung around the modern Releases Theory'. The Escapes Theory and Hide-out Theory being similarly weak.

As for physicality of ABC detailed are evidence of definite kills by large cats, as opposed to dogs or foxes, including sheep and deer, carcasses sometimes even found up trees; actual ABC roadkills, but which in true urban legend fashion are removed by an authority figure to hush up the evidence; pawprints and skulls; typically fortune fuzzy photographic evidence; mismatched colouring suggestive of hybridisation.

Despite all the physical evidence and the fact that she found, as I had, that ABCs are attracted to railway lines (see my *Crossing the Line*), there was so much ambiguity and the paradoxical that Merrily had to look elsewhere. Actually, no further than her brother's researches and the opinions in sibling Patrick's marvellous book *Daimonic Reality*. Entities of all kinds in this intermediate zone are contradictory, as material and immaterial, shifting from the benign to malevolent, inspiring or indifferent; a Trickster archetype.

When I learned of Merrily's book project, I donated my large file of ABC cuttings, having abandoned the plan to write a general book on feline oddities. She quotes from my account of a personal black panther sighting in Northumberland during 1983, correctly logging it under a mixture of subjective and objective elements (doubtless it was some liminal beast, but ever since I've been apprehensive whenever alone in the countryside; being a UFO repeater witness, might I encounter another ABC, without the comparative safety of being in a car?).

This book leaves the reader in no doubt that ABCs are real enough, but what is real? The scope of inquiry here is learned, exhaustive and entertaining, non-academic and easily digestible if

approached without entrenched preconceptions. Those close to the ABC phenomenon may have written knowledgeable on the topic, but it has taken an outsider to truly get to grips with the enormity and richness of the subject. Merrily Harpur has looked into the soul of big cats and made them a lot less of a mystery to those who have seen or read of them. Brilliantly evoked, enchantingly explained.

## **THE CULT OF ALIEN GODS: H.P. LOVECRAFT AND EXTRATERRESTRIAL POP CULTURE** by **JASON COLVALITO** (Prometheus Books, \$19 [www.prometheusbooks.com](http://www.prometheusbooks.com))

THIS BOOK is based upon the gross nonsense that 'H.P. Lovecraft was the seminal figure in the world of alternative archaeology, and it was from his imagination that nearly all of the strange theories and alternative explanations were channelled'. It gets worse. 'All subsequent tales of extraterrestrial gods and lost civilisations' came from Lovecraft. 'This book, then, is the story of the alternative archaeology movement and the ancient-astronaut theory,' claims Colvalito.

I fear the author fails to satisfy this reviewer of the basic premise and certainly the two strands utilised by Erich von Daniken separated shortly after the 'faction' writer's star went into decline. To add to the preposterousness, of the prehistorical revisionists probably only Colin Wilson and the late Anthony Roberts have read – or been influenced by Lovecraft (I devoured an omnibus edition straight after the superior Arthur Machen).

By part three, Colvalito is claiming the 'little remembered now' *Dawn of Magic* by Louis Pauwles and Jacques Bergier was 'essentially an irrationalist, Romantic treatise'; well, I can tell him this was the book which turned me on more than any other in my life and I am appalled that he concludes by writing that it is 'largely (and deservedly) forgotten'. But what can you expect from a buffoon who claims Charles Fort 'was an uncertain author, and his words were hard to take seriously'.

Yet with part four, Colvalito introduces Robert K.G. Temple and an obscure small race in West Africa with a mythology of frog people from the star Sirius introducing civilisation to mankind. It actually at last gets interesting from page 185, but as the author harps on like scratched vinyl about circular logic he drags in Lovecraft and a horror story about an amphibious monster from an ancient civilisation. From hereon Colvalito takes one step forward, for instance finding fault with Robert Bauval and then blotting his copybook by failing to comprehend the vast difference between 'creation science' and 'intelligent design'. He does us some service by finding fault with many of the authors who embraced extraterrestrial genesis.

It is an easy step to Laurence Gardner, another believer of the Jesus wed Mary Magdalene and began a holy bloodline, in which Colvalito claims *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* was the first book to claim Jesus father children (as shown by Dan Brown's defence there were several earlier claims) and that the Sumerians drank the menstrual blood of their transdimensional benefactors, who just happen to resemble Yog-Sothoth in Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos.

Like all Prometheus Books' output this aims to stem what it sees as the tide of irrational beliefs and pseudoscience. Colvalito even suggests the idea of visitors from space or lost civilisations tutoring humanity is unintentionally racist, a vice of Lovecraft himself. Decadence, decline and doom. Dystopia beckons.

## **EXPLORE DRAGONS** by **RICHARD FREEMAN** (Heart of Albion Press, £12.95)

THE last two chapters provide the real meat of this crypto-zoological feast. The breadth and wealth of different possible explanations to answer the puzzle of what dragons constitute is the fullest I have come across, ranging from human involvement

in materialising tulpas in dragon form and their intruding upon us from a parallel reality to Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenic fields or blueprints for each species and spontaneous generation, to unknown species akin to dirigibles, exotic reptiles, earth energies and meteorological phenomena, while taking in occultists Aleister Crowley and Dion Fortune, shamans Tony Sheils and Paul Bennett, and Loch Ness Monster exorcist Donald Ormand. Lastly Freeman deals with modern British sightings, the range and number of which astonished me, from Aire Valley possible pterodactyl and Pembrokeshire marine saurian to Cornish sea serpent and Birmingham Canal eunuch eel. But the strangest tale comes from just up the coast from where I live at Marsden Bay, suggesting that a dragon worship cult was practising human sacrifice in England well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As the author of two regional dragonlore books (shamefully not mentioned in Freeman's bibliography), I found very little I did not know in the first four chapters, covering types of British dragons, their slayers, relics and weaponry, and a gazetteer, which boastfully claims to examine 'each and every one' of the surviving (U.K.) dragon legends. Not true. As the saying goes, extraordinary claims require extraordinary proofs; for instance, missing from Northumberland are the legends of the Wode Worm of Linton, Tynemouth and Dunstanburgh, in Yorkshire on Whorl Hill dragon bones were found within living memory; and off the Durham coast at Blackhall Rocks was seen a sea serpent attested by three witnesses in 1850.

Although primarily concerned with U.K. beasts, Freeman provides a 'taster' of dragons internationally, an area of dragonlore of which I have only superficial knowledge, so there was much to learn of interest. Asia provides the most spectacular modern dragon sightings, which have obviously been inspirational to the author, particularly a ten-minute lake sighting in 2002 witnessed by 500 people and which spawned a 40-minute documentary on a Chinese TV channel. Freeman is in his element with accounts of such cryptozoological fauna as the Congo's celebrated mokele-mbembe, which he believes to be not a relict sauropod dinosaur but a gigantic semiaquatic monitor lizard. This section also deals with the familiar foran topic of North American lake monsters such as 'Ogopogo' and 'Caddy'.

There are a few minor errors, such as slayer Scraw for Scaw at Handale, but my hackles really rose when the Lambton Worm tale was located at Peshaw Hill – this old chestnut is so tiresome, when the true location is Worm Hill, Fatfield, as I have so often had to correct geographically-challenged commentators. A few grammatical blunders such as 'horde of gold' also slipped through.

Quibbles aside, even as a knowledgeable and committed dragonlorist, I learned a lot. From several extraordinary theories to account for dragon sightings to the more mundane fact that St Paul is patron saint to newspaper editors (is it St Jude for small magazine editors?), how adders will deliberately impale themselves on hedgehog spikes and upon being eaten their venom kill the consumer (really?), and the realisation that 'there are no heroines in British dragonlore'.

As a cryptozoologist, Freeman notes that the Holy Grail for his profession would be the discovery of a dragon scale or piece of dragon hide; several of the latter having been display-ed in the U.K. in the past. I can only endorse his wish that at some point, somewhere, someone will find some biological evidence of this most supreme of zoological conundrums.

Curiously, Freeman published another book on this subject last year, *Dragons: More than a Myth?* Isn't this risk-ing splitting sales? There again, if both books are as readable, original and entertaining as *Explore Dragons* maybe two are justified.

## SHROOM: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE MAGIC MUSHROOM by ANDY LETCHER (Faber and Faber, £12.99)

THIS is a timely review of how magic mushrooms have become a popular recreational pursuit over the past 50 years. Timely because a report from a House of Commons committee has called for radical recommendations about how drugs should be classified and highlighting how magic mushrooms and ecstasy should be downgraded from the most serious Class A, which probably correctly also includes heroin. Anyway, our bodies produce psychoactive chemicals aplenty and we have receptors for almost all drugs but alcohol (shame! Why?), so how can you legislate for what is natural within us?

Andy Letcher begins with a prologue, telling how an experienced mycologist misidentified a U.S. mushroom species in 1916 with alarming consequences. Similarly, I trusted an

identification I made from Richard Mabey's book *Food for Free* and went on an involuntary 'trip' with bizarre 'flashbacks' some 20 years ago. (see appendix in my *Crossing the Line*. More recently, 21/9/05, on four occasions that day I found myself dreaming while awake – even moving – and these instances, source unknown, brought on severe anxiety) He points out that magic mushroom 'trips' are usually short in duration, whereas my experience was around 24 hours, but then it was not liberty cap, and as he writes 'knowledge of the causality between a drug and its action can never be assumed' and alcohol may have reactivated the psychoactive agents.

Letcher, discussing the subjective effects of eating magic mushrooms, discusses several aspects which can alter the experience, including the 'environment in which the mushrooms are taken', which reminded me of a comment by a gypsy-shaman user who told me the environment of where the fungus grew gave a distinct clue to like effects: rural sacred site, good; inner-city bomb-site, bad.

This book is basically about the psilocybin-containing liberty cap, but for completeness fly-agaric warrants its own chapter and again its notoriety demystified, with only a few deaths attributed to it, despite its far greater ubiquity. *Folklore Frontiers* being a magazine of contemporary legend, I must quote this testimony: 'One of the most tenacious in a long line of academic hypotheses and urban myths is that Jesus was an amanita-eater, breaking fly-agaric toaststools rather than the more usually accepted bread and wine at the Last Supper.' Far greater than liberty caps is the folklore of *amanita muscaria*: shamans drinking reindeer piss, Santa Claus a memory of this and Viking berserkers high on mushrooms in battle. He also challenges the widespread view of a single, and indeed static, Siberian shamanism; indeed the term is so widely applied and overused nowadays as to be virtually useless.

The tale moves on to soma, mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, and its various identifications; psychoactives' possible role in mental health treatment; Timothy Leary's invocation 'to turn on, tune in, drop out' and drugs' ability to induce mystical experience; Michael Harner's genuine shamanic apprenticeship and Carlos Castaneda's imaginary anthropology thesis (Richard de Mille, who has so brilliantly exposed Castaneda, read my review of his book and said I was spot on); Operation Julie and the judge's savage sentences (I sent magazines to Mr Solomon in jail); poet Robert Graves and U.K. countercultural festival movement. Terence McKenna is justifiably given the full treatment and a doubting one as to his true worth, suggesting the 'machine elves of hyperspace' he contacted were an aspect of himself. McKenna's belief that the 'mushroom' would not grant us the keys to intergalactic citizenship because we had not achieved the required level of cultural development reminded me of the ufo-nauts' similar withholding such a dispensation as told to early contactees.

Some points made in the book will appear contentious. I particularly doubt that 'if the desire to alter consciousness through drugs is a primal urge, as insistent as the drive to have sex, then we seem to have it very much under control', but then as an avid alcohol consumer, I would, wouldn't I? Why so many cigarette smokers when the packets clearly point out that tobacco kills? Even more to the point, surely that wide spectrum of body receptors for drugs are not there solely as a mobile A&E department anaesthetic cupboard.

Letcher also pours scorn upon enthusiasts who 'imagine' an unbroken tradition going back to the Palaeolithic, citing my good friend Paul Devereux and his 'long trip' argument with the Western World's 'war on drugs' as an aberration. Yet Paul comes off lightly compared with the uncompromising contempt he feels for pioneering mycologist R. Gordon Wasson, a rich Wall Street banker who is made to look a poor Grub Street wanker. A deceitful, hypocritical post-colonialist, Wasson appears to have regarded his mushroom cult as a form of proto-Christian mysticism; an anthropological heresy, but one which was embraced by a generation of young American pilgrims, desperate for spiritual satisfaction. Letcher does allow comment from those who still hold Wasson's reputation in high regard, indeed anthropologist Joan Halifax calls him 'a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Darwin', although Letcher condemns the 'social Darwinism' or cultural evolution which can now be seen as pure fascism.

Letcher believes 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerners see in shrooming a craving for meaning and specifically for enchantment. The desirability of the peculiar effects of magic mushrooms allow us access to that portal. But you don't have to take drugs, or even have an interest in them, to enjoy this romp through psychedelia. One rule for a good non-fiction book is to have people in it and Letcher has characters aplenty. My highest endorsement is to acknowledge this as an even better book on countercultural consumption that Sadie Plant's *Writing on Drugs*. Illuminating and erudite; magic meets science. It takes a lot to impress me – Letcher does just that.