

# THE *British* & *Irish* SKEPTIC

A Publication Dedicated to Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

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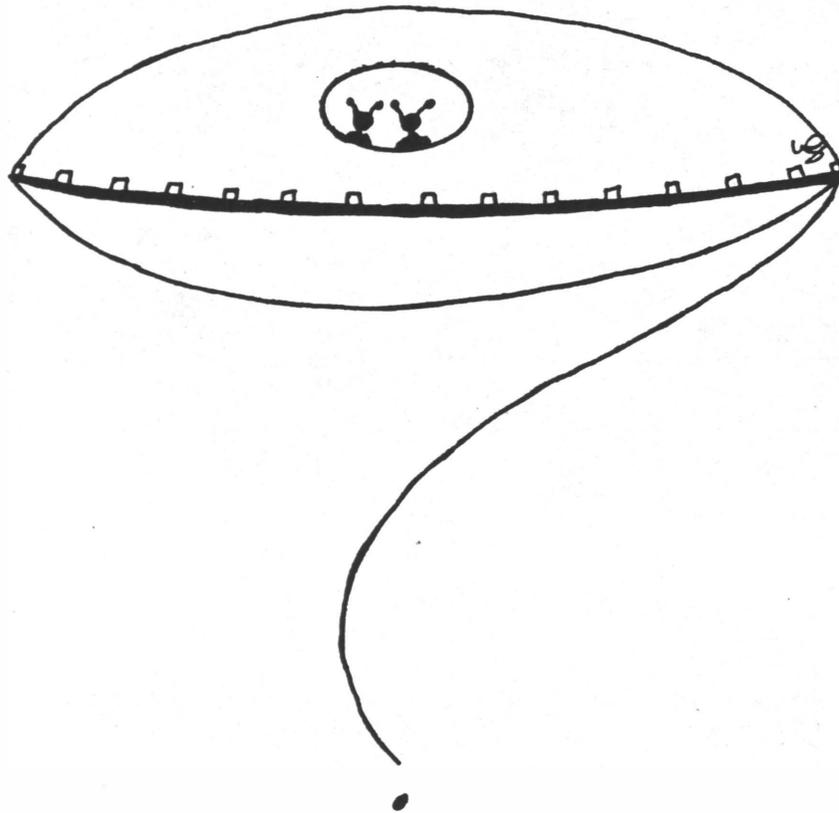
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Peter O'Hara and Mark Plummer at the Irish Skeptics meeting, May 12. Photo by Leslie Shepard.

### PLUMMER IN IRELAND

The first-ever public meeting of the Irish Skeptics was held on May 12, at Buswell's Hotel in Dublin, with Mark Plummer, CSICOP's Executive Director, as guest speaker, and Peter O'Hara, Convenor of the Irish Skeptics, as host. The meeting was attended by a small but attentive group of about twenty.

Plummer gave a short talk about the development of CSICOP worldwide over the eleven years since its foundation, and about his six years of experience as the Australian Skeptics' founding President. He discussed methods of testing dowsing claims, and the Australian Skeptics' investigation of an American woman who claimed to be able to detect, through dowsing, the shape of buildings that had been torn down, and another woman's claim to be receiving posthumous works from famous composers.

A large part of the meeting, however, was devoted to answering the audience's questions. Of particular interest was the question of what claims can or should be tested, and which should be left alone. In Ireland, as one questioner pointed out, there are many religious claims, and CSICOP tries to avoid religious issues. Plummer and O'Hara agreed that it is appropriate for the Irish Skeptics to investigate claims that can be tested now, but that it would be inappropriate to challenge personal beliefs that cannot be tested.

After the meeting, everyone adjourned to the bar, where discussions continued until nearly midnight.

### PLUMMER IN UK

Mark Plummer's talk in London on May 8 followed somewhat the same pattern as the one in Dublin. The audience of about forty included subscribers to the British & Irish Skeptic, members of the British Committee, and others who came after hearing his interview on LBC that afternoon.

Plummer began his talk with a discussion of irrational beliefs, went on to give an overview of CSICOP's development, and continued with descriptions of investigations carried out by the Australian Skeptics. He also did a demonstration of "telepathy" and cold reading. His talk was well received, and afterwards there were a number of questions. The meeting ended early to allow people to catch their trains.

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### MEDIUM LIVES

After Mark Plummer's radio interview on the Gay Byrne show (we have a tape, which will be available on loan soon), we received nearly forty enquiries about the Irish Skeptics. One of these, one D.C. Craddock, wrote from Co. Kildare: "I'd like to broach one question, the reply to which would give to me a definite answer whether or not so-called spirit mediums be genuine...There is a book in our local library here, the autobiography of one "Marjorie Staves"...and in its final chapter she states no fear of Death as she already knows the day and hour and gives the particulars..." Mr Craddock followed up his letter with a photocopy of the page in question from the book, One Sense Ahead: Story of a Clairvoyant by Marjorie Staves. On page 156, she says, "I'm not afraid of dying. I know that I shall die on Wednesday, 17 April, 1974..." She goes on to tell the story of how this knowledge came to her. Mr. Craddock asked if, as this "deadline" was over a decade ago, she was still alive or not?

Fortunately, we have been able to answer Mr. Craddock's question: Marjorie Staves is alive and well--in 1987--and advertising in Prediction Magazine. Thanks to Leslie Shepard for supplying the information.

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### PA CONFERENCE

The Parapsychology Association will be holding their annual Conference at Edinburgh University, August 7-9. We hope to be able to run a report on it in our next issue.

## VIDEO LIBRARY

Toby Howard has begun collecting VHS videotapes of relevant programmes, and is willing to loan them out to paid subscribers. Presently available: Omnibus documentary on voodoo; Beyond Belief: the electronic church; Forty Minutes: the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain; Viewpoint 87: Thy Kingdom Come. Anyone interested in borrowing one of these tapes, or in contributing tapes (video or audio) for circulation should contact Toby directly at 49, Whitegate Park, Flixton, Manchester, M31 3LN.

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## COMPUTER NETWORKS

Toby Howard in Manchester is investigating the use of computer networks for electronic communication between skeptics in the UK and possibly overseas. Interested parties are invited to send comments to Toby at the following electronic mail addresses:

JANET: THOWARD @ UK.AC.MAN.CS.CGU  
UUCP: THOWARD @ MUCGU.

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## CARTOONIST WANTED

We would be delighted to hear from anyone who can draw or has training in graphic design and might be able to supply cartoons or even cover artwork for the British & Irish Skeptic.

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## NO SKEPTICS NEED APPLY

We note that a number of places are asking people to write in--but only if they have had paranormal experiences. The Mirror, during its "Trick or Truth" series about Doris Stokes, asked people to write in with their opinions--and they only printed pro-Stokes letters. The Mirror also asks people to write in if they've had experiences with ghosts. An advertisement clipped from the Guardian in May reads, "T.V. documentary researcher would like to hear from anybody who has serious evidence that their house/office is haunted or affected by poltergeists. All calls treated in strictest confidence. Tel. 01-794-3793." Dare we suggest these will be biased samples?

## TELEVISION SKEPTICISM

Karl Sabbagh, writer, independent producer, and member of the British Committee, is producing a 90-minute documentary on the paranormal for Channel 4, to be transmitted November 1. Among other things, they hope to investigate Ireland's Knock legend (see pp 11-14 of this issue, BIS I.1, pp 6-8, and BIS I.2, p 16 for some possible explanations). More about the programme in our next issue.

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## NAME THIS NEWSLETTER CONTEST

Suggestions have almost stopped coming in, so this seems a good time to sum up. The title with the most votes so far is unquestionably The British & Irish Skeptic--uninspired, but descriptive. The plan was to change not only the title but the format and design for the next issue, in which case, a serious possibility would be The New Skeptic (or Sceptic--three or four people have asked if we couldn't be "sceptics" rather than "skeptics"; the answer is yes, if that's what people have their hearts set on, it's just that "skeptical" looked better in the Letraset). Ideas and reactions are still welcome until August 15. There is a free two-year subscription for the person who sends in the winning title (first).

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## MIRROR CRITICIZES PSYCHIC

In an astonishing turnabout, the Sunday Mirror ended an article about a psychic on a skeptical note. In an article headlined "Psychic 'Cashing in' on Tragedy", reporters Bill Munnings and Deborah Sherwood retailed criticisms of self-professed clairvoyant Daphne Possee. Friends and relatives of Zeebrugge ferry disaster victims had been paying her £7 a sitting to contact loved ones; she had given up her accounting job to handle the flood of business, and had a two-month waiting list.

Possee was said in the article to have made two further claims: one, that she had predicted the disaster three years before, but told no one, and two, that she had accurately predicted the condition in which a crew member would be found. The reporters contacted the Kent police, who told them, "No victim was found in the circumstances she described."

On July 10-12, the Fourth International UFO Congress is being held at the London Business School. Speakers include Jenny Randles (of current UFO Conspiracy fame), and others from the UK, the Netherlands, the US, Canada, Sweden, Norway, and Italy. Topics range from "UFO's Can Seriously Damage Your Health" (Jenny Randles) to "Rendlesham Forest--New Evidence" (H. Harris/M. Sacks) and "UFO's Exist!" (Bertil Kuhleman).

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### BERGLAS VS DION--UPDATE

Woman magazine, in the person of Bev Gilligan, Deputy Features Editor, have written back to our query to say that: "We have had an enormous response to the Psychic Challenge of the Century and it will take some time to sift through all the letters and organize a method of testing that will be acceptable to everyone involved, as I'm sure you'll understand. So please be patient..."

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### MARKS RESIGNS

David Marks has resigned as Chairman of the UK Skeptics, still in the formative stages.

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### NESSIE TALKS

Well...sort of. The 25-26 July, the International Society of Cryptozoology is co-sponsoring a Conference at the Royal Museum of Scotland. One whole day of the Conference is being devoted to the Loch Ness Monster (replicas wearing tam o'shanter are available in tourist and gift shops all over Scotland, price £4.99), including talks on the history of the Loch Ness Monster, the biology of the Loch Ness Monster...

There is now even a "The Official Loch Ness Monster Exhibition Centre", with a hotel, a restaurant, pictures, films, and a "lochan" with a floating, "life-size realistic model of Nessie." The Centre's brochure encourages you to "Take unique holiday photos of the family with 'Nessie' right there!"

The Centre is on the A82 at Drumnadrochit. We understand they will be carrying copies of Stuart Campbell's skeptical book, The Loch Ness Monster--The Evidence.

Wendy M. Grossman, Editor of the British & Irish Skeptic, will be away in the US from July 21 to September 30. Correspondance sent to Queens Court will be forwarded; please allow for delays in answering. Urgent correspondance can be sent directly to: Wendy M. Grossman, 308 E. Marshall Street, Ithaca, NY, 14850.

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### TRACKING THE YETI

A pair of Chinese Golden Monkeys are visiting Dublin Zoo from June 3. After hearing reports that Golden Monkeys may have given rise to some reports of the Yeti, Peter O'Hara decided to investigate the possibility. He reports that the Golden Monkey has been found to live at altitudes (six to twelve thousand feet) that were previously thought uninhabitable for mammals, and that the animals are extremely rare (there are only about 10,000 of them in total) and have been little studied. Though they are not large (the male at Dublin Zoo weights 37 1/2 pounds and measures 46 inches from the top of his head to the tip of his tail), distances in snow can be difficult to judge.

The fact sheet distributed for the visit says, "The golden monkey has long limbs and sometimes walks upright. Its call sounds like the wail of a human infant, and its footprint resembles that of a human child. It is no wonder, then, that local villagers have occasionally mistaken the golden monkey for the Yeti-like 'hairy wildman' of Chinese lore..." Peter O'Hara is investigating further.

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The bizarre, brilliant mind of Douglas Adams has been at work again: "The Electric Monk was a labour-saving device, like a dishwasher or a video recorder. Dishwashers washed tedious dishes for you, thus saving you the bother or washing them yourself, video recorders watched tedious television for you, thus saving you the bother of looking at it yourself; Electric Monks believed things for you, thus saving you what was becoming an increasingly onerous task, that of believing all the things the world expected you to believe."

--from Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency, published 1987 by Heinemann.

## Proper Criticism

Ray Hyman

Since the founding of CSICOP in 1976, and with the growing numbers of localized skeptical groups, the skeptic finds more ways to state his or her case. The broadcast and print media, along with other forums, provide more opportunities for us to be heard. For some of these occasions, we have the luxury of carefully planning and crafting our response. But most of the time we have to formulate our response on the spot. But, regardless of the circumstance, the critic's task, if it is to be carried out properly, is both challenging and loaded with unanticipated hazards.

Many well-intentioned critics have jumped into the fray without carefully thinking through the various implications of their statements. They have sometimes displayed more emotion than logic, made sweeping charges beyond what they reasonably support, failed to adequately document their assertions, and, in general, have failed to do the homework necessary to make their challenges credible.

Such ill-considered criticism can be counterproductive for the cause of serious skepticism. The author of such criticism may fail to achieve the desired effect, may lose credibility, and may even become vulnerable to lawsuits. But the unfavorable effects have consequences beyond the individual critic, and the entire cause of skepticism suffers as a result. Even when the individual critic takes pains to assert that he or she is expressing his or her own personal opinion, the public associates the assertions with all critics.

During CSICOP's first decade of existence, members of the Executive Council often found themselves devoting most of their available time to damage control—precipitated by the careless remarks of a fellow skeptic—instead of toward the common cause of explaining the skeptical agenda.

Unfortunately, at this time, there are no courses on the proper way to criticize paranormal claims. So far as I know, no manuals or books of rules are currently available to guide us. Until such courses and guide books come into being, what can we do to ensure that our criticisms are both effective and responsible?

I would be irresponsible if I told you I had an easy solution. The problem is complicated and there are no quick fixes. But I do believe we all could improve our contributions to responsible criticism by keeping a few principles always in mind.

We can make enormous improvements in our collective and individual efforts by simply trying to adhere to those standards that we profess to admire and that we believe that many peddlers of the paranormal violate. If we envision ourselves as the champions of rationality, science, and objectivity, then we ought to display these very same qualities in our criticism. Just by trying to speak and write in the spirit of precision, science, logic, and rationality—those attributes we supposedly admire—we would raise the quality of our critiques by at least one order of magnitude.

The failure to consistently live up to these standards exposes us to a number of hazards. We can find ourselves going beyond the facts at hand. We may fail to communicate exactly what we intended. We can confuse the public as to what skeptics are trying to achieve. We can unwittingly put the paranormal proponents in the position of the underdogs and create sympathy for them. And, as I already mentioned, we can make the task much more difficult for the other skeptics.

**W**hat, then, can skeptics do to upgrade the quality of their criticism? What follows are just a few suggestions. Hopefully, they will stimulate further thought and discussion.

1. *Be prepared.* Good criticism is a skill that requires practice, work, and level-headedness. Your response to a sudden challenge is much more likely to be appropriate if you have already anticipated similar challenges. Try to prepare in advance effective and short answers to those questions you are most likely to be asked. Be ready to answer why skeptical activity is important, why people should listen to your views, why false beliefs can be harmful, and the many similar questions that invariably are raised. A useful project would be to compile a list of the most frequently occurring questions along with possible answers.

Whenever possible try your ideas out on friends and "enemies" before offering them in the public arena. An effective exercise is to rehearse your arguments with fellow skeptics. Some of you can take the role of the psychic claimants while others play the role of critics. And, for more general preparation, read books on critical thinking, effective writing, and argumentation.

2. *Clarify your objectives.* Before you try to cope with a paranormal claim, ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish. Are you trying to release pent-up resentment? Are you trying to belittle your opponent? Are you trying to gain publicity for your viewpoint? Do you want to demonstrate that the claim lacks reasonable justification? Do you hope to educate the public about what constitutes adequate evidence? Often our objectives, upon examination, turn out to be mixed. And, especially when we act impulsively, some of our objectives conflict with one another.

The difference between short-term and long-term objectives can be especially important. Most skeptics, I believe, would agree that our long-term goal is to educate the public so that it can more effectively cope with various claims. Sometimes this long-range goal is sacrificed because of the desire to expose or debunk a current claim.

Part of clarifying our objectives is to decide who our audience is. Hard-nosed, strident attacks on paranormal claims rarely change opinions, but they do stroke the egos of those who are already skeptics.

Arguments that may persuade the readers of the *National Enquirer* may offend academics and important opinion-makers.

Try to make it clear that you are attacking the claim and not the claimant. Avoid, at all costs, creating the impression that you are trying to interfere with someone's civil liberties. Do not try to get someone fired from his or her job. Do not try to have courses dropped or otherwise be put in the position of advocating censorship. Being for rationality and reason should not force us into the position of seeming to be against academic freedom and civil liberties.

3. *Do your homework.* Again, this goes hand in hand with the advice about being prepared. Whenever possible, you should not try to counter a specific paranormal claim without getting as many of the relevant facts as possible. Along the way, you should carefully document your sources. Do not depend upon a report in the media either for what is being claimed or for facts relevant to that claim. Try to get the specifics of the claim directly from the claimant.

4. *Do not go beyond your level of competence.* No one, especially in our times, can credibly claim to be an expert on all subjects. Whenever possible, you should consult appropriate experts. We, understandably, are highly critical of paranormal claimants who make assertions that are obviously beyond their competence. We should be just as demanding on ourselves. A critic's worst sin is to go beyond the facts and the available evidence.

In this regard, always ask yourself if you really have something to say. Sometimes it is better to remain silent than to jump into an argument that involves aspects that are beyond your present competence. When it is appropriate, do not be afraid to say, "I don't know."

5. *Let the facts speak for themselves.* If you have done your homework and have collected an adequate supply of facts, the audience rarely will need your help in reaching an appropriate conclusion. Indeed, your case is made much stronger if the audience is allowed to draw its own conclusions from the facts. Say that Madame X claims to have psychically located Mrs. A's missing daughter and you have obtained a statement from the police to the effect that her contributions did not help. Under these circumstances it can be counterproductive to assert that Madame X lied about her contribution or that her claim was "fraudulent." For one thing, Madame X may sincerely, if mistakenly, believe that her contributions did in fact help. In addition, some listeners may be offended by the tone of the criticism and become sympathetic to Madame X. However, if you simply report what Madame X claimed along with the response of the police, you not only are sticking to the facts, but your listeners will more likely come to the appropriate conclusion.

6. *Be precise.* Good criticism requires precision and care in the use of language. Because, in challenging psychic claims, we are appealing to objectivity and fairness, we have a special obligation to be as honest and accurate in our own statements as possible. We should take special pains to avoid making assertions

about paranormal claims that cannot be backed up with hard evidence. We should be especially careful, in this regard, when being interviewed by the media. Every effort should be made to ensure that the media understand precisely what we are and are not saying.

7. *Use the principle of charity.* I know that many of my fellow critics will find this principle to be unpalatable. To some, the paranormalists are the "enemy," and it seems inconsistent to lean over backward to give them the benefit of the doubt. But being charitable to paranormal claims is simply the other side of being honest and fair. The principle of charity implies that, whenever there is doubt or ambiguity about a paranormal claim, we should try to resolve the ambiguity in favor of the claimant until we acquire strong reasons for not doing so. In this respect, we should carefully distinguish between being wrong and being dishonest. We often can challenge the accuracy or the validity of a given paranormal claim. But rarely are we in a position to know if the claimant is deliberately lying or is self-deceived. Furthermore, we often have a choice in how to interpret or represent an opponent's arguments. The principle tells us to convey the opponent's position in a fair, objective, and non-emotional manner.

8. *Avoid loaded words and sensationalism.* All these principles are interrelated. The ones previously stated imply that we should avoid using loaded and prejudicial words in our criticisms. We should also try to avoid sensationalism. If the proponents happen to resort to emotionally laden terms and sensationalism, we should avoid stooping to their level. We should not respond in kind.

This is not a matter of simply turning the other cheek. We want to gain credibility for our cause. In the short run, emotional charges and sensationalistic challenges might garner quick publicity. But, most of us see our mission as a long-run effort. We would like to persuade the media and the public that we have a serious and important message to get across. And we would like to earn their trust as a credible and reliable resource. Such a task requires always keeping in mind the scientific principles and standards of rationality and integrity that we would like to make universal.

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*Ray Hyman is a Fellow and member of the Executive Council with CSICOP, and professor of psychology at the University of Oregon.*

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This article is reprinted in its entirety from *Skeptical Briefs*, May, 1987.

## THE TELEPATHIC PHILODENDRON

James Lincoln Collier entered Backster's office, where a philodendron was enthroned, fortunately still in its pot, in company with a lie detector.

The experimenter, having attached the device to the philodendron, put several questions to the journalist.

"When were you born?"

"In 1931," he answered.

The needle quivered.

"The plant says you are lying," said Backster.

And it was true...

What you have just read is not an extract from a work of science fiction, but one from a supposedly serious article in a daily newspaper of wide circulation.

The "primary perception" of plants was discovered by Cleve Backster in 1966 and this changed his life, as Lyall Watson tells us, who describes for us many pages of experiments carried out on plants. This same author explains to us that since then the experiments were repeated numerous times and in numerous laboratories.

Backster carried out, for example, the "experiment" that consists of dropping live shrimp one by one into boiling water and observing the reactions of his cherished philodendron...

At the time of his discovery, Backster, an "interrogation specialist", had just left the CIA and had taken up work in a New York school where he initiated policemen in the techniques of using lie detectors. He was later promoted, under the pen of Serghei Ivanov, to "American investigator who worked to perfect the electronic detector of galvanic skin reactions, which serve as the index of changes in the affective domain." After which, this last author treats us to an entire chapter on the "emotions of the philodendron"!

But Robert Charroux, our national specialist, goes far past all the preceding authors when he tells us about the work of the "American psychologist Cleve Backster":

"...It was not yet a decisive proof, but already notions of vegetable biology were taking shape that would revolutionize the so-called scientific world...

"From that day on, a whole team of researchers set themselves to studying the Backster effect...

"It was an incontestable fact to which lie detectors in all laboratories testified, and it was attributed to an extrasensory faculty

analogous to instinct, to clairvoyance, or to premonition.

"Because experimentally it was true: the dracena, the onion, and the lemon tree expertly divined human thoughts."

And all the rest were in keeping! In fact, these wild imaginings, of which I have here reported only a small sample, have one unique source: the appearance of Backster's report (because it is not a case of scientific work). This account was published in a journal of which the least one can say is that it is not especially known for its scientific criteria: The International Journal of...Parapsychology!

In revenge, a study published by the magazine Science, carried out in a serious manner, in the same experimental conditions as Backster's, has not found evidence of primary perception in plants.

To sum up: the "incontestable fact to which lie detectors in all laboratories testify..." is the fruit of the interested imagination of certain authors and no work underlies Backster's data...other than that of policeman Backster, certainly!

The story of the telepathic philodendron illustrates well enough a part of the proposition that I wish to develop here.

It makes us, for example, touch upon the danger of what one might call "the snowball effect" in which each "reporter" adds an entirely personal embellishment to the "fact" which serves as the point of departure.

But this is already the concern of the analysis which I hope to share with the reader; in this introduction, I would like simply to give a few preliminary elements for thought.

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This piece is excerpted from the Introduction to Dr. Henri Broch's book, Le Paranormal, which is published in French by Seuil, 1975. It has recently been translated into Spanish. Dr. Broch teaches physics at the Université de Nice, is a member of the French Committee for the Study of Paranormal Phenomena, and is the originator of the French Minitel service, 'ZET'.

## MARK PLUMMER ON THE GAY BYRNE SHOW

The following is a transcription of most of Mark Plummer's interview with Gay Byrne, broadcast on RTE on Wednesday, 13 May.

GB: Well, now, this international organization of skeptics, is it just an organization of people who want to kill the joy, just killjoys, or are you protecting people from something?

MP: No, I think we're actually increasing joy, because we find that people are fascinated by mysteries, fascinated by that--but when you read so many mysteries, you can run out of mysteries, if you like, but we take it a step further, we look for the explanation behind them, and I find it's fascinating to find out an explanation behind a mystery that's something that's fascinated me for ages. You suddenly find out that there's a perfectly good explanation for it.

GB: Well, give me an example of that kind of thing, now, something that fascinated you, and you were kind of teetering on the edge of maybe, maybe, yeah, maybe there's something in this, and then you found...

MP: Well, firewalking's a hot topic...

GB: Firewalking, yeah, talk to me about firewalking.

MP: We've had firewalking in Ireland, and the idea of firewalking is that you can walk over hot coals without burning your feet, and I hope that one day you'll be able to take the Irish group across...

GB: By power of the mind.

MP: Yes.

GB: Am I right in saying that very fashionable people are paying huge sums of money in America to learn this from gurus and so on?

MP: Yes. You have firewalking courses. In America you can sell anything. People were going along, listening to a pep talk, and then going out to this hot, glowing fire and walking over the hot coals. Well, terribly interesting, the fact that feet aren't being burnt, the fact that people don't experience pain. So we had a couple of physicists down in Southern California, and they very carefully measured the heat being given off by the top of the coals, the top of the embers, if you like, and found there was insufficient heat being transferred across to the soles of the people's feet if they walked across quickly. That coals and like that are very poor transferers of heat, and to prove this, they themselves walked across a fire, and took the local skeptics' group, the Southern California skeptics, across the hot coals, to see whether or not they'd get their feet burned. So they

first worked out the claims, the theory, and put it into practice, and found they didn't get their feet burned.

GB: And what are you saying to me? That all the heat in these red-hot coals is below the surface?

MP: Yes. In fact, it's a bit like an oven. If you have an oven with a cake in it, and you touch the air in the oven, you put your hands in the oven, you won't burn your hands, because although the air is heated, there's insufficient heat there to carry across to your hands. But if you put your hands on the cake lightly, they won't burn. But if you put them on the metal grille, or the hot cake tin, they will burn, and if in fact you ask people to walk across hot steel at the same temperature as the coals, they'll burn very quickly, because hot metal, hot steel has a very high transferent quality, whereas the coals don't.

GB: But you still have to convince people, you still have to get it into their mind that it's possible to do this, because your entire mind tells you, I will put the sole of my foot on that hot coal, and I will be scorched up to my kneecaps.

MP: That's very true. Well, you can test it another way. You can put a bandaid on the sole of your foot, and you'll note that it doesn't burn. Now, the bandaid doesn't need the power of the mind, it's just an inanimate object, so...when you see other people walk across the hot coals, then you yourself will follow.

GB: So, is the purpose of the skeptics, your organization, then, to prevent people being ripped off by charlatans, and quacks?

MP: Well, that's true. We often find that people who have belief in the paranormal are open prey for people who say, well, I'm a psychic, I'm a clairvoyant, hand over your funds and I will save you, or I will give you advice, and people often turn over large sums of money to these clairvoyants. In America, for example, people are going up to the northwest of the United State, because a psychic chaneller has claimed that the rest of America is doomed, and only the northwest will be saved. So people are selling up their houses, giving up their jobs, and moving to the northwest of the US!

GB: There is no truth in these rumours whatsoever.

MP: Well, there have been thousands of claims the world was about to end, or certain parts of it were about to end, but, you know, someone's going to be right some day.

GB: Sure. All right, I have some more questions for you. You're skeptical about all these paranormal things. You don't believe in horoscopes either, no?

MP: I'm afraid not. But then I'm a Virgo, and Virgos are skeptical.

GB: Why don't you believe in horoscopes?

MP: Well, we've had a careful look at them, and found there's a real formula for writing them. They just tend to be full of platitudes about good things will happen to you. They never say that today you'll fall off a dark train, or that you'll be run over by a bus. They follow positive-type thoughts.

GB: They do warn you about, you know, negative influence, I mean, the moon is passing through whatever it's passing through, and it's a full moon at the moment, and so on. They do make you filled with trepidation about certain things--this week.

MP: That's so, yes. But we have been able to test horoscopes. We've been able to compare them, one paper to another, and find inconsistencies. We've been able to get the astrologers to do people's charts, their natal charts, to switch them around when we hand them back to the people, and even though people are given someone else's chart, they say, this is true for me! Or we give a number of astrologers the same birth date, the same place of birth, time of birth, and they all come up with different predictions, different charts, so there's this massive inconsistency, so either only one is right, or they're all wrong.

GB: You knew Doris Stokes, I presume. You'd heard of Doris Stokes. You saw her on television...

MP: Yes, I have. I see she's gone over to the other side.

GB: She's gone over to the other side, yes. Just the other day. Sixty-eight years of age. Now, presumably, Doris has found out the truth or otherwise of what she stood for.

MP: We'll wait for the messages to come back.

GB: Yeah, well that's what I said, you see, I think I'm tempting fate now, asking her twice to come back to us, because if anybody's going to come back now, Doris will get the return trip.

MP: That's true.

GB: You don't think very much of Doris.

MP: No, well, there's a whole race of Dorises over in England. You've got Doris Stokes, and Doris Collins, and other Dorises doing these spiritualism acts. And what they do is take a large audience, and they say I have a Bill or a John, and someone in the audience will say yes...

GB: There's got to be a Bill or John somewhere, right?

MP: Right. And then they will come through with the most inane platitudes. The messages are so banal that...we're all doing fine up here, we hope you're well, and we hope that, you know, everything will go well. There are never any great, profound statements as to what life is like on the other side, it's as if all these people have died and left their minds behind, that all they can do is come out with these banal statements. And that's what worries me...

GB: That's true. Nothing ever comes out of moment, and I mean, presumably the people, by definition, if they've passed over, have found the great truth of the ages.

MP: Yes, and we'd love to hear it.

GB: And the opportunity is there, and we'd love to hear it, and they're using up all this time to say, wonderful, the sun is shining, hope everybody is well, yes. OK, what about Uri Geller? Let's get on to it, then, Uri Geller.

MP: Oh, look, we could write books on Uri Geller.

GB: No, Uri Geller was on the Late Show recently, and you're going to say he's a charlatan.

MP: I'd say he's a clever magician.

GB: Clever magician. OK. The watch trick.

MP: Oh, OK. What he does is, he asks people to get out their old watches, and hold them in their hands.

GB: Right.

MP: He talks about the watches being broken. Now, he's never yet started a broken watch. What he starts is stopped watches.

GB: Oh, yes he did! Yes he did. There was a woman in the audience--they phoned in from all over the country, to say that their broken watches had started, and a woman in the audience had a watch, a wristwatch, her grandfather's or whatever, hadn't gone for thirty years, or thereabouts, and it started!

MP: Right. That's a stopped watch. You see, we'd like a watchmaker--

GB: A stopped watch, yes.

MP: --well, there's a difference between a broken watch, that is one that the spring is broken or the parts are broken, and a watch that's stopped. Now, the secret is this, and I'll tell your listeners, provided they don't tell more than a million of their closest friends, how it's done. What happens is that watches over a period of time get clogged up with dust and dirt, and eventually they just stop. Now, a watchmaker can clean them and restart them. But, if you hold them in your hand, you heat the lubricants in the watch, you make it easier

for the little bit that's left in the spring to get the watch going again. So what you're doing is, you're actually heating the watch with the heat of your hand, up to about 80 degrees, and that's sufficient to improve the oils, and to get the little watch going again, and that's how it works! And you can test it. Do you know how we tested it?

GB: No, I don't go for that. No, I don't go for that.

MP: That's how it's done.

GB: No, Uri is more persuasive than that. No, I don't go for that. I mean, the woman in the audience just took out the watch, and it started going, and that was it. No, I don't go--you'll have to be stronger than that. What about Mary O'Sullivan's ring?

MP: Oh, I haven't heard about that one. Do tell me.

GB: Mary O'Sullivan, secretly, my researcher on the show, put her wedding ring into a matchbox with ten or twelve other matchboxes, all plain matchboxes, and they were laid out on the table, and he was able to look at these twelve matchboxes, only one of which had Mary O'Sullivan's ring, sellotaped into it, and he was able to say--there.

MP: It's funny, you know Uri has done this quite a few times on television shows, but he can never do it when there's a magician around who sets up the experiment, who knows some of the ways of marking things, knows some of the ways of arranging things. When there's a magician, Uri suddenly gets all very shy, and all his psychic forces leave him. We had a magician on with him in Boston recently. Now, Uri has this amazing ability, he claims, to start compasses moving.

GB: That's right, yes.

MP: Now what happens is that, we believe he has a secret magnet, hidden on him, and a magnetic force. So what happens is, our magician came into the studio with a very large magnet strapped to his leg--yes, the local skeptic, and our chap held the magnet, his leg, very close to the compass, and the compass wouldn't move, and Uri got very upset, and turned to our magician and said, you've got a magnet on you, and our magician said, mine's bigger than yours!

GB: But we checked in his pockets, and he was only wearing a shirt and a belt, and he took the belt off his pants and threw it away, and there was nothing on him.

MP: What we'd like to do is get a magnetometer on him, you see there's an instrument that will measure, and if we'd thought of that, to have given you one, and you could have run it quickly over him, you see, he's...

GB: Aw, shucks, and I thought Uri was really, I thought he was really doing all this, really psychic. So the whole thing, then, all of it, everything, paranormal, Doris Stokes, things that go bump in the night, Uri Geller, all rubbish.

MP: Well, their claims haven't been proven. We would love to find someone who's psychic. Possibly somewhere out there, perhaps in Ireland, there is someone who has that sort of power. I must tell you about a psychic musician. And this is a lady called Rosemary Brown...

GB: I know her, I know her, we've had her, we've had her, yes, and she gets, she, Beethoven, and Mozart, and people, Chopin, speak to her.

MP: Yes. Their postmortem compositions.

GB: And she writes all the compositions down, yes, in the style of, yes. So what's that about? Have you cracked that?

MP: We suspect that she extemporizes. Now, you see, all these musicians have gone up there, and they haven't changed their style in the past four hundred years since they died. And the tunes that she comes out with seem very much just to be in the style of the great composers. And, in fact, good pianists, good musicians, do practice extemporizing in the style of the composers. And we suspect that's what's happening here. And also, the scores of that come down don't appear to be as meticulous as the scores of the great composers. So we suspect that she's extemporizing in their styles.

GB: Another wonderful dream gone up the chimney. OK, then, you're setting up a branch of the skeptics here...

MP: Yes, we have an Irish group, and it's led by some wonderful people--a gentleman called Peter O'Hara and I met a few of them last night. They already have a newsletter going, called The British & Irish Skeptic.

GB: I see, so all our dreams, and all our wonderful manifestations, all our wonderings, all gone.

MP: Well, perhaps not. Perhaps the Irish Skeptics will find something here in Ireland.

GB: OK, Mark, thank you very much indeed. You're merely confirming our worst suspicions down through the years, but there you are, it's nice to have it kind of official, as it were.

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Mark Plummer is CSICOP's Executive Director. Gay Byrne is Ireland's leading radio and television talk show host.

KNOCK: TWO ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

Leslie Shepard and Steuart Campbell reply to David Berman's article, which appeared in The British & Irish skeptic I.1.

Leslie Shepard:

David Berman argues persuasively for the magic lantern theory to explain the apparitions at Knock in 1879, but ignores the major objections to this theory which have been discussed extensively over the years. Moreover the claimed variations in depositions by fifteen witnesses are of minor significance. The general indication of the depositions is that the apparitions were first seen in daylight just before sunset and continued after dark. They were seen in daylight and after dusk.

The most important difficulties for the magic lantern theory, which are not stated by David Berman are as follows:

- 1) It was raining at the time, but this did not affect the apparitions.
- 2) Various witnesses saw the apparitions from different angles of approach, and some would surely have observed a characteristic beam of light proceeding from a magic lantern.
- 3) A reporter for the London Daily Telegraph in 1880 interviewed a policeman who saw only "a rosy sort of brightness, through which what seemed to be stars appeared. I saw no figures... but some women who were praying there, declared that they beheld the Blessed Virgin..." Asked "Did you look around to see where it came from?" the policeman replied "I did, but everything was dark. There was no light anywhere, except on the gable." The policeman also offered to produce a fellow policeman who had been with him to corroborate this account.
- 4) The Daily Telegraph reporter also made a detailed investigation of all possible sources for a magic lantern projection, as others had done earlier. His finding was as follows:

'The chapel stands in a rather extensive yard, which is bounded, opposite the gable, and distant from it some twenty-five paces, by a dilapidated wall about four feet high. Beyond this is a large field and the open country. Within the yard, a little to the north of a line drawn from the north angle of the gable to the low wall, stands a schoolhouse, its gable directly facing towards the east. Obviously, therefore, if the appearances alleged to have been seen on the chapel wall were due to a magic lantern, the operator, supposing he could have focussed his picture at such a distance, must have taken post behind the low wall; or, if stationed in the school, must have thrown the image on the "screen" at a very considerable angle. The wall theory may be dismissed, because over its tumbled stones the first witnesses passed to get a nearer view, and the glare of the lantern would at once have been detected by the observant policemen. There remains the notion of a manipulator stationed in the schoolhouse, I gave my best attention to the windowless gable of that building, and could find no signs of hole or crack from chimney to foundation. Going inside among the children, to look at the wall from that point of view, the plaster appeared untouched, and the roof too much open to admit of a man working between its apex and what there was of ceiling.'

- 5) One of the witnesses, Mrs. O'Connell, later recalled how the two church commissioners took her evidence in the school house and a fortnight

later twenty more priests arrived, some of whose names she remembered distinctly, and carried out elaborate tests with magic lantern slides. "They wanted to make out," she said, "that the pictures were like the ones we saw, but they were no more like them and no one could make them like the apparitions."

Although David Berman does not state these specific objections to the magic lantern theory, he does recognise that there are difficulties, which he discounts on the ground that 'the lantern hypothesis is far more credible than belief in its supernatural alternative.' This is hardly logical! If the lantern hypothesis is not supported by the facts of the situation, it must be either rejected or suspended.

Scores of miraculous cures were claimed for Knock Shrine, notably including cures of three archbishops. These could, of course, be explained away as 'auto-suggestion' or 'spontaneous remission', but this does not do justice to the wide variety of illnesses cured, and the individual circumstances of each case.

The Knock apparitions had features which appear unique, as other claimed apparitions of the Virgin Mary (still appearing in modern times as at Garabandhal and Medjugorje) are of a living, moving figure instead of immobile statue-like forms. But if the Knock apparitions are to be squeezed into a magic lantern theory which does not fit the facts, where does David Berman place these other apparitions? They could not possibly be projections from a motion picture camera, as distinct from the static images of a magic lantern, because they are seen only by the ecstasies, and under circumstances which preclude projection by apparatus.

David Berman argues that even if the magic lantern theory 'were highly improbable, it would still be more rational to believe it than its miraculous alternative.' This may be true to a freethinker with a preconceived rejection of religion and miracles, but not to an unprejudiced observer.

Leslie Shepard is editor of the Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology.

## SEEING THE LIGHT AT KNOCK

Steuart Campbell

Shortly after the reports of a vision at Knock on Thursday 21 August 1879 six alternative hypotheses were considered. These were that it was caused by:

- 1 a miracle
- 2 an effect of reflected light
- 3 some kind of magic-lantern show
- 4 an effect of phosphorous
- 5 electric or magnetic currents
- 6 natural 'miasmatic gustations' from the earth

Today the hypotheses appear to have reduced to four (Berman, 1987):

- a that the Virgin Mary actually appeared
- b that there was a mass hallucination
- c that there was collusion and conspiracy amongst the witnesses
- d that there was some kind of hoax

David Berman argues for hypothesis 'd', and in particular that the cause was a projection from a magic-lantern. Of course this might also involve hypotheses 'b' and 'c' to some extent. I see several defects in the magic-lantern hypothesis but it is not my purpose to argue them here. Instead I want to draw attention to a hypothesis that seems to have been overlooked. This hypothesis is that the witnesses saw an astronomical mirage, although interpreting it in terms of their cultural beliefs.

Any bright object near the horizon can create a mirage in the appropriate meteorological conditions, i.e. where a temperature inversion lies along the line of sight. The inversion causes a superior mirage, i.e. one raised above the stimulus, which can be considerably magnified. This magnification, caused by a lens effect in the inversion, produces a large bright image just like the lens of a telescope; more light is

gathered by the lens than would normally reach the eye.

Bright stars and planets form a class of stimuli for mirages, even in daylight! The images they produce can take various forms, but some relevant features should be noted. Refraction in the atmosphere causes spectral spread, breaking the white light into different colours.

Usually the violet light is seen at the top of the image, with red at the base (unless the image is inverted). Mirages contain both upright and inverted images, although sometimes only one may be visible. Because mirages only form near above the horizon on an azimuth of  $123^{\circ}$  (south-east). So if he saw Jupiter Ballinderris must lie to the north-west of the church.

Since Venus was much brighter than Jupiter it must be considered as a possible stimulus before 1942L. However, with the sun setting in the north-west, it must have been difficult to see. Since most of the reports are timed from about 1930L onwards it seems more likely that the planet responsible was Jupiter. Reports timed after 1942L must have been due to Jupiter. But there is another reason for identifying the source as Jupiter. Two witnesses described seeing 'golden stars, or small brilliant lights glittering like jets or glass balls, reflecting the light of some luminous body' (Mary Byrne) and 'a series of sparkles, or glittering crosses' (Patrick Hill). These small glittering objects can be explained as participation in the mirage of Jupiter's Galilean moons (the four large moons discovered by Galileo). Not all four are always visible but on that night at that time they were (see Fig. 2). They lie on a line either side of Jupiter, but at varying distances. Although usually invisible to the naked eye the magnification of the mirage can have made them visible. They can also be duplicated in the doubling of the mirage image. I conclude therefore that the mirage was of Jupiter and therefore that the witnesses were all standing on the road to the west of the church (see Fig. 1).

Two witnesses stated that the 'figure' moved when they moved. In her 1936 statement Mary Byrne told how when she went near the wall (of the church?) the 'figures seemed to go back to the wall'. Then, when she returned, the 'figures' also returned (Rynne, 1979). Patrick Hill noted that as he approached the 'figures' they 'seemed to go back

a little towards the gable'. He also stated that when an old woman approached the 'figures' they receded from her. It is a feature of very distant stationary objects that they will seem to move when the observer moves and that the movement will be in the same direction. In addition Rynne states that the 'figures' were seen to the west of the church's gable, 'standing out from it' (it is not clear what 'to the west of the gable' actually means). All this points to the conclusion that the vision did not appear on the gable of the church but in front of it as viewed from the side (the west side in fact, see Fig. 1). Of course an astronomical

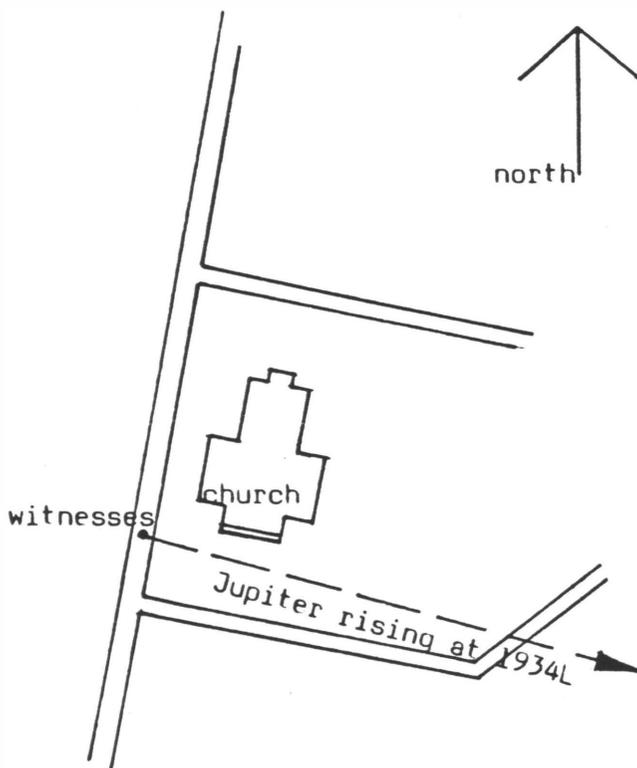


Fig. 1: Where the witnesses must have stood to see a mirage of Jupiter in front of the south gable of Knock Church.



Fig. 2: The shape of a double mirage of Jupiter with the Galilean moons (doubled) as they appeared at the time.

mirage would need to be seen clear of the gable but I propose that because the witnesses had no idea of the true nature of what they saw they assumed that it was located in the sacred ground where their life was centred. Without distance clues the human brain cannot determine the distance of an object. Instead it will make a guess based on an assumed size. Once the witnesses assumed that the light was a statue (later a live figure) they were bound to place it in the foreground.

I propose that there is sufficient evidence to support the astronomical mirage hypothesis and that it seems likely to offer the correct explanation for the Knock visions. Psychology can explain how such a mirage could have been described

(later) in religious terms, although I cannot rule out some other as yet unidentified features of such mirages being responsible for some characteristics.

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Steuart Campbell is a science writer living in Edinburgh.

## TWO SOVIET INTERCONTINENTAL MISSILES EXPLODED OVER "THE UNIQUE PROFESSIONAL SPANISH UFOLOGIST"

by Luis Alfonso Gamez Dominguez

According to information published by the Spanish newspaper El Pais on 14 June, 1987, a committee of Spanish Air Force investigators has come to the conclusion that the two UFO's seen by thousands of people on the Canarian archipelago on the evening of 5 March, 1979, were really two intercontinental missiles fired by a Soviet nuclear submarine from the Canary Islands to the Siberian desert.

The firing took place 200 miles off the southwest of the archipelago, and from the first the Spanish Air Force suspected that the UFO's were missiles. The United States authorities, when asked about the incident, answered that no US combat unit had fired the two missiles.

The Spanish Air Force investigators found out that the UFO's were directed to Siberia, and study of many photographs of the event confirms that the UFO's were missiles.

This was a controversial incident, because some Spanish UFOlogists thought that the UFO's were extraterrestrial ships, while others agreed that the photographs proved that the sighting was the firing of missiles from a submarine either from the US or the Soviet Union.

One of the most important defenders of the extraterrestrial explanation was Juan Jose Benitez, "the unique professional Spanish UFO investigator". He said in one of his books that the "UFO of the Canary Islands was not a

meteorological phenomenon, nor the aurora borealis, nor a meteorite, nor a sounding balloon, and much less a missile." He affirmed that an "extraterrestrial ship" was seen over the Canarian archipelago on the evening of 5 March 1979.

Photographic analyses made by the Ground Saucer Watch in 1979 came to the conclusion that the UFO was a US Navy Polaris missile. But on 14 October, 1984, the newspaper Diario-16 published an article about a Soviet submarine that had fired two nuclear missiles near the Canary Islands. However, Benitez has never considered the missile explanation, and has written many times ridiculing it.

Of course, this is not the first time that this UFOlogist has made mistakes, because he is the sensationalist UFOlogist par excellence. For example, he has taken toad songs for UFO sounds in a case in Bilbao, the Meier photographs for evidence of a lost civilization, Charles Berlitz for a serious investigator, and so on. But this time Soviet intercontinental missiles exploded over his head and revealed that Benitez has his head full only of extraterrestrial ships.

Luis Alfonso Gamez Dominguez is a member of the Spanish Committee, and is editor of their newsletter, La Alternativa Racional.

## EUROPEAN REPORT

### Austria

The Austrian group is quite small, and is still in the formative stages. The Convenor is Professor Wolfgang Gombocz, a philosopher at the University of Graz. Their first project will be to work to change the presentation of pseudoscience in Austrian state textbooks.

### France

One of CSICOP's older associate committees is the French Committee for the Study of Paranormal Phenomena, based in Paris. However, there is now a regional group based in Grenoble. The Convenor is Claude Benski, an expatriate Argentinian magician and teacher of computer science.

GREPPAG (Groupe de Recherches sur les Phenomenes Paranormaux a Grenoble) have just put out their first newsletter, which is called *La Lettre du Parano(rmal)*. In it, they describe Uri Geller's appearance in March with Michel Polac. No magician was allowed to be involved for almost the whole broadcast: however the magician Majax did manage to get on for five minutes at the end, and even in that short space of time was able to reproduce two of Geiler's effects. As all the other material presented, and all the other guests on the show were believers in Geller's powers, the impression left was favourable to Geller's claims--and the promotion of his book The Geller Effect, which has been translated into French and German.

### Germany

ASUPO (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Skeptiker zur Untersuchung von Pseudowissenschaften und Okkultem) sent out the first issue of their newsletter, *Der Skeptiker*, at the beginning of May. It contains two articles on the government-sponsored project to study dowsing and earth rays. (Dowsing and earth rays are important issues in all the German-speaking countries. In Austria, there is a government department that employs a dowser to check building sites for harmful concentrations of earth rays; there was also a case of a man who, at great personal expense, exchanged his bedroom and bathroom in his house after being told his bedroom had a dangerous concentration of earth rays.) In *Der Skeptiker* I.1 there are also articles on Occam's Razor, methods of scientific criticism, and a report on Carl Sagan's talk at the CSICOP LA Conference.

ASUPO have formed their first subcommittee, for the purpose of offering their help and advice to the BMFT project on dowsing and earth rays.

### Scandinavia

The Swedish group, *Vetenskap och Folkbildning* (this is apparently very difficult to translate) is quite large, with nearly 200 subscribers to their newsletter, *Folkvett*, which is issued four times a year. The Swedish group leader, Sven Ove Hansson, is a philosopher, writer, and jazz musician, with two published skeptical books on the paranormal to his credit. The more recent of these, *Forklarade Mysterier*, contains explanations of a wide variety of mysteries, from Uri Geller to UFO's, to sea-monsters, to live burials. Even without being able to read a word of Swedish, the book looks attractive and compelling.

The Finnish group have recently held their first board meeting and they are planning to work closely with the Swedish group.

### Spain

The Spanish group is small but extremely strong. Their journal, *La Alternativa Racional*, comes out four times a year, and contains original articles on Spanish issues and translations of articles from the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

On May 22, they held a small conference at the Ateneo in Madrid, at which the group's Chairman, Felix Ares de Blas spoke. The conference was attended by between sixty and seventy people who were all seriously interested in becoming acquainted with the skeptical point of view.

Since then, one of their committee members has been invited to appear on several radio programmes, and Luis Alfonso Gamez Dominguez, the editor of *La Alternativa Racional*, is pleased to report that the media are beginning to take an interest in their presentation of the skeptical point of view.

### Switzerland

The Zurich-based Swiss committee is only recently formed, but has an impressive list of consultants. They will be working closely with the West German and Austrian groups.

Early this spring, Geller appeared on Swiss television to promote Der Geller Effekt, and was presented uncritically.

## DORIS STOKES

As almost every newspaper reported, Doris Stokes died during the weekend of May 8/9 (coinciding (with no significance, we're sure) with Mark Plummer's visit to London). Psychic News caused a stir in a few places by running a large headline on the front page of their issue of May 9, "Doris Is On the Mend".

Since then, there have been numerous press articles: the Mirror ran a series, "Doris Stokes--Trick or Truth?"; the Lewisham & Catford Mercury reported that her adopted son Terry claimed to have received a message from her after her death; The Sun reported that Doris Collins claimed to have received a message from Stokes as she was dying; the News of the World reported on the journey to the "spirit world" Stokes claimed to have made during a previous illness.

In an interview published in the (Scottish) Sunday Express, 5 January, 1986, Stokes said she did not expect to act as a guide for other mediums after her death.

Doris Stokes was challenged a number of times to prove her powers were real. In addition to Randi's standing \$10,000 challenge, magician Paul Daniels offered a £10,000 challenge in the Sun, 9 November 1985, and Irish businessman Gerald Fleming, now living in London, offered first \$20,000 Australian in 1978 and then later £100,000 if she could demonstrate her powers under properly controlled conditions. She refused the challenges. In an article in the Irish Evening Herald of May 28, 1986, reporter P.J. Cunningham wrote, "Mrs. Stokes has countered Mr. Fleming's claims by saying he has a vendetta against her and dismissing him as an 'ignorant Irishman'." (Fleming has made the same offer to Doris Collins, who has also refused to be tested.)

Much of what appeared about Doris Stokes in print during her lifetime was uncritical. She published six books of claims with ghostwriter Linda Dearsley, she had a regular letters column in "Chat", and there were many newspaper articles about her claims to have received messages from Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy (she even claimed the latter two told her they were "just good friends").

However, there were dissenters. Magician and former British Committee Chairman David Berglas, in an interview with People, August 24, 1986, said, "There is absolutely nothing that Doris Stokes can do that I can't do myself...and I'm not psychic." Paul Daniels, in

discussing his £10,000 challenge, explained Stokes' methods: "It is a mixture of artful questioning and people hearing what they want to hear." Daniels also presented the skeptical viewpoint in the Mirror's "Trick or Truth" series, where he is quoted as saying, "I condemn those who make money callously from the sad, the lonely and the insecure." The Mirror added a brief article about Doris Stokes' involvement in the Lamplugh case; Diana Lamplugh is quoted as saying that she received telephone calls from sixty mediums, all with different stories about what had happened to her daughter. Of Doris Stokes, she is quoted as saying, "Mrs. Stokes sounded like a very nice person, but nothing was found. In the end, I'm very sorry to say, she didn't help us at all." The Mirror concluded the series with a selection of readers' letters, almost all of them in defending Stokes, and a few of them attacking Paul Daniels for taking a strong stand against her.

But the strongest, most detailed articles we've seen appeared in the Mail on Sunday on April 20 and 27, 1986, and were the work of journalists John Dale and Richard Holliday, the former of whom was also co-author of a three-part series on Uri Geller for the same newspaper.

Dale and Holliday investigated six of her most widely publicized cases. These were: the Yorkshire Ripper, the case of a boy found dead in the Bronx, two Lancashire murder cases, the New Zealand case of Mona Blades, the Baltimore disappearance of Jamie Griffin, and the Los Angeles investigation of the murder of Joe Weiss. In most of these cases, police officers told the reporters that Stokes gave them either no new information or information that was subsequently proved to be wrong. In the remaining cases, the Lancashire police disclaimed any knowledge of Doris Stokes' having been involved in any way in the investigation, and the LA police told the reporters that they had never spoken with her.

Reporters Dale and Holiday concluded the first of the articles: "This year her books will once again top the non-fiction lists. After examining the evidence, we have found many reasons why some stories, at least, should be reclassified as fiction."

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Thanks to all who sent in clippings and information, from which this brief composite was compiled.

# Skeptics in the News

Evening Herald, Wednesday, May 13, 1987 (IRELAND)

## Sceptics are looking for believers

NEXT TIME there is something weird in your neighbourhood, like moving statues, or UFOs, there's a group you can call — Irish Sceptics.

Sceptics is a world wide network of people who critically examine claims of the para normal and it has just set up in Ireland.

Already a huge organisation in the U.S., Sceptics has exposed a lot of con faith healers, and

explained many of the so-called phenomena.

And Ireland needs Sceptics, according to Mark Plummer, of the Australian branch.

"Moving statues have attracted a lot of people in Ireland in the same way that in California you might get hundreds of people going up a hill to wait for a UFO to land on a particular night," he told a public meeting in Dublin last night.

"Mysteries like that are

fun, but solving the mysteries is that little bit extra.

"Statues should not move, so perhaps it was the fact that when people stare at something for a long time, their heads move and they think it's the statue. It would have been a challenge to really investigate those statues," he said.

Mark Plummer was in Ireland to recruit members for the newly formed Irish Sceptics, which is affiliated to the

'twelve-year-old Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Para Normal (CSICOP).

The function of the organisation, which has branches in 55 countries, is to challenge the para normal with scientific tests in order to show the public whether or not things are real. He cited one case which Sceptics tested. An American dentist claimed he could reverse decay in people's

teeth and the reversal would occur a month after he touched their cheek — by which time he was out of town with a very handsome fee.

Sceptics got 20 people with dental problems checked up by a real dentist and then sent them along to see the psychic dentist.

A month later they had the 20 re-checked to find there was no improvement and that the psychic dentist was a con man.

## Taking up the sceptics' burden

A sceptic's life is far from easy, as Ian Anderson reports

CARL SAGAN calls it "a little island of reason in an ocean of unreason". A detractor like Russell Targ, a laser physicist from California who dabbles in psychic research, says it is "a cranky group of nonscientists" (a questionable comment seeing that Isaac Asimov, Francis Crick, Stephen Jay Gould, Murray Gell-Mann and Sagan are among its fellows). The object of Sagan's praise and Targ's derision is the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP for short. The members call themselves "csicoppers". Their mission is to cast a sceptical eye on what others would see as supernatural.

CSICOP held its annual meeting in Pasadena in California earlier this month, at the convention centre, a labyrinth of buildings which someone with psychic powers may be able to navigate. The rest of us had trouble. The meeting was attended by 1200 people, by far the largest gathering so far. Most of those attending were from the 25 affiliate branches of the central organisation, which is based in Buffalo, New York.

But, as Carl Sagan noted in his keynote address, the debunking business does not attract the crowds compared with other meetings where fringe science is on offer. Sagan, recipient of an award that CSICOP grandly calls "In Praise of Reason", had great fun reading from the programme of the Whole Earth Expo being held this week in San Francisco. Among other things, the 20 000 people attending that meeting will hear how spiritual vibrations can be amplified for the attuned human, and how the violet flame heals. Sagan knows of such goings on because he was invited to be the keynote speaker at that affair, too.

"Some people don't do their homework," he said. (At one time he was asked to be chairman of an organisation to be called "Scholars for Reagan".)

Sagan's message to his fellow csicoppers was that scepticism carries a burden. "What is so clearly called for is an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs: sceptical scrutiny and great openness to new ideas. If you only have one, you are in deep trouble." The existence of meteorites

was once thought of as far-fetched because scientists could not accept that rocks would fall from the sky, Sagan reminded us.

CSICOP may be small, but it is growing. Its quarterly magazine, the *Skeptical Inquirer*, is sent to 30 000 subscribers in 52 countries. Mark Plummer, an Australian lawyer who was recently appointed as the committee's executive director, said that CSICOP had deliberately courted overseas affiliates and had found, much to its delight and surprise, that many others shared its concerns. "The more affiliates we have overseas, the easier it is for us to check out some of the claims of the paranormal," Plummer said. "The public fascination with the paranormal is worldwide."

Plummer is about to leave on a two-month trip to help to organise groups of sceptics in Italy, Switzerland, West Germany, Denmark and Portugal. Already there are groups in Sweden, Spain, Norway, France, Belgium, Finland and Holland. The first European conference of CSICOP should be held within a year. Despite a proud history of rationalist thought in Britain, the British group has been struggling. "It has suffered from the British disease," Plummer said. "It couldn't make decisions."

The US chapter has its problems too. During a quizzing of the executive board, a questioner pointed out that, if the annual meeting was any guide, sceptics in the US were slightly geriatric and were predominately white and male. The audience and the board agreed. Polls have shown consistently that a majority of American teenagers believe in pseudoscience. Fifty-five per cent believe in astrology, for example. But reaching young people means changing the education system and Sagan, in his talk, noted how hard that was going to be:

"If we teach schoolchildren the habit of being sceptical, they may start asking awkward questions about economic, social, political and religious institutions. Scepticism is regarded as dangerous. It is the business of scepticism to be dangerous. That is why there is a great reluctance to teach it in schools."

Scientists themselves were not spared. "It is the poor popularisation of science which

permits an ecological niche for pseudoscience," Sagan said. "If science were explained to the average person so it was accessible and exciting, there would be no room for pseudoscience."

CSICOP may be growing in size, but how much influence it has is another matter. Paul Kurtz, a philosopher and the organisation's chairman, said that, before CSICOP, it was not considered respectable for scientists to challenge the paranormal because it gave the believers too much credence. "That's changed," he said. "Our role is objective criticism."

The group claims to have exposed Phillipine faith healers. "You don't hear about them anymore," Plummer said. But its campaign last year against astrology was hardly a roaring success. Only 10 of the many hundreds of newspapers in the US that carry astrology columns agreed to a request from CSICOP that they label the column as nonscientific and for entertainment only. The anti-astrology campaign will be revived this month. "Astrology may seem harmless, but it can be dangerous if people start allowing it to rule their lives," Kurtz said.

Also, despite CSICOP's attempts to discredit Uri Geller, the spoon-bending psychic from Israel, Geller has earned up to \$250 000 a day telling mining companies where to look for oil and gold. Geller, whom CSICOP claims is no more than a magician with a limited repertoire, has amassed a fortune of \$40 million, according to James Randi, a magician and long-time supporter of CSICOP. "I'm rich and famous because of CSICOP," Geller said recently when challenged yet again to be tested by Randi. He routinely refuses the challenge, but CSICOP claims to have got his measure last week.

Geller appeared on a television programme in Boston called *People are Talking*. Normally, he dictates with whom ▶

▶ he will appear, but, last week in Boston, sitting alongside him was Henry Gordon, a magician from Ontario Sceptics and a fellow of CSICOP. When Geller tried to move a compass needle using the power of the mind, it would not budge. "My magnet was stronger than his," Gordon said last week. Gordon had a magnet strapped to his leg.

CSICOP's latest concern is "trance-channelling", a fad in which mediums enter trances to communicate with and act as "channels" for unseen "entities". The best known trance-channeller is J. Z. Knight, a housewife from Yelm, Washington, who claims that a 35 000-year-old man named "Ramtha" uses her body to speak words of wisdom—for a \$400 fee. Actress Shirley MacLaine is Knight's best known customer. Sagan said that he would like to ask Ramtha, who apparently talks impeccable English with an Indian accent, what life was like 35 000 years ago. It would not take long for an archaeologist to trip him up, Sagan said.

The recent meeting revealed another problem CSICOP faces—how to present both sides of an argument. Those under attack are often invited to meetings, but refuse to come. A session that disputed the idea that primates could be taught to use sign language was severely criticised at the meeting in Pasadena. Two debunkers—a linguist from Indiana and a philosopher from Germany—claimed that the animals were unwittingly given cues on how to act by the person doing the experiment, but no opposing view was on offer. It's all part of the csicoppers' burden. □

## Sceptics organise

APPARENTLY, plans are afoot to organise groups of sceptics in Italy, Switzerland, West Germany, Denmark and Portugal.

The man behind the scheme is Australian lawyer Mark Plummer, the executive director of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP).

"New Scientist" said last month that already the organisation has groups in Sweden, Spain, Norway, France, Belgium, Finland and Holland. The first European conference of CSICOP will probably be held within a year.

Some weeks ago, CSICOP held its annual meeting in Pasadena, California. It was attended by 1,200 people, "by far the largest gathering so far."

Carl Sagan, a laser physicist "who dabbles in psychic research" commented:

"What is so clearly called for is an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs: sceptical scrutiny and great openness to new ideas. If you only have one you are in deep trouble."

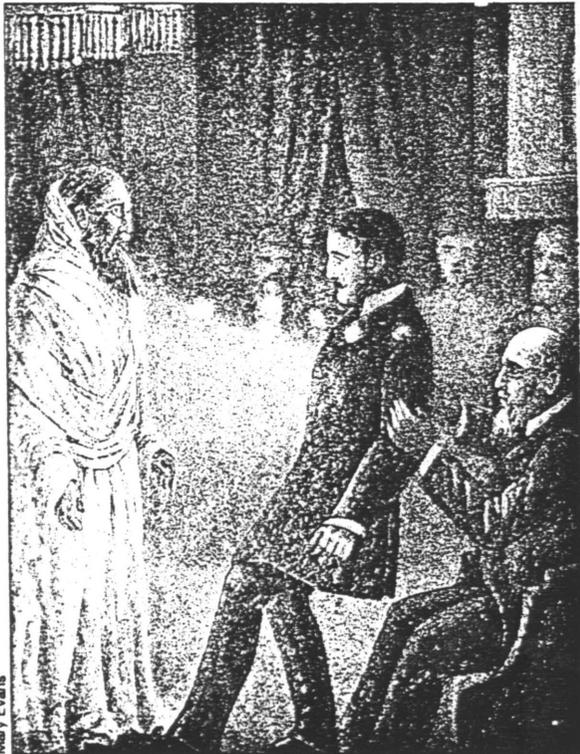
CSICOP's quarterly magazine, "The Skeptical Inquirer", is now sent to 30,000 Csicoppers in 52 countries.

"New Scientist" said that the annual meeting revealed another problem — how to present both sides of an argument. For those under attack were often invited to meetings, but refuse to accept such invitations.

Carl Sagan reminded attendees that the very notion of meteorites "was once thought of as far-fetched because scientists could not accept that rocks would fall from the sky."

It seems to me that another of the very great stumbling blocks between sceptics and believers is that doubters are sometimes so hidebound, rigid and irrational in their thinking that no matter what the evidence presented to them they still refuse to accept it.

The will not to believe is as feckless and foolhardy as the will to believe.



*It's got to be seen to be disbelieved*

Reprinted from *The New Scientist*,  
Thursday, 16 April, 1987.

Reprinted from *Psychic News*,  
Saturday, 9 May, 1987.

The Sun ran the results of a special poll on June 1. Nella Jones, described by the Sun as a "medium and psychic investigator," was reported to have asked a "handful of leaders on the other side" how they would vote in the then upcoming election. The results: Winston Churchill, Henry VIII, Disraeli, Boadicea, and Lord Nelson would all have voted Conservative, Stalin would have voted Labour, Keir Hardie would have voted Alliance, and Genghis Khan would have abstained.

The Sheffield Weekly Gazette has cancelled a new horoscope column incorporating Tarot predictions after complaints from a number of readers, most of whom identified themselves as committed Christians. They have gone back to running their "conventional" horoscope column. Apparently they are not offended by astrology, only by Tarot.

The Guardian, also on June 1, reviewed a new book, The Knot of Time, by Lindsay River and Sally Gillespie, published by the Woman's Press. The book alleges that astrology, used properly in a "feminine, intuitive interpretation" was forced underground, and, according to the Guardian, the authors "try to rescue it from the stunted, constricted approach which the Western emphasis on pedestrian masculine scholarship has imposed on the revived Western version."

UFO's are back in the news at the moment. The Sunday Mirror ran two articles (May 17 and 24) with the publication of Jenny Randles' new book, The UFO Conspiracy. The Mirror also asks readers who have seen a UFO to report it to them. The Sunday Times, on June 7, reports on a national symposium held in London. On May 20, the London Daily News and the Guardian both published interviews with Whitley Strieber, author of Communion, a best-selling book (in America; it was published in the UK on May 21) recounting his abduction by a group of aliens.

Both the Daily Mirror and the Star reported in early May that climber Chris Bonington had found footprints of the Yeti during his recent expedition in the Himalayas. BBC Wildlife reports that a BBC producer was given a hair, supposed to be from a Yeti, in March in Kashmir. The BBC is having the hair analyzed.

1987 is a Marian year, and Ireland is resounding with "weeping statues". The Irish Times reported on June 24 that 18-inch pilgrim madonnas, imported from northern Italy and

used by the cult of Rosa Mystica, are weeping. An article printed the next day, newspaper unknown, adds: "A puzzled spokesman for the cult said this week that it was normally only the full-size 39-inch pilgrim madonna model which wept. But the statue's current owner goes further: during recitals of the Mysteries three sets of rosaries have turned to gold, scientifically proven, she says." According to the Irish Times, large numbers of worshippers are flocking to see the miracles at over a dozen locations throughout Ireland.

The Guardian and other newspapers reported on June 15 on the story from Izvestia of Mrs Yuliya Vorobyeva, who claims to have been jolted by a 380-volt electrical current, spent two days in a morgue pronounced dead, "stayed awake for six months" [?], "finally falling into a long sleep from which she emerged with new visual powers." In brief, Mrs Vorobyeva claims to be able to see through people, detect ultraviolet rays from the sun, and see through asphalt roads to the soil underneath.

The Voice published on June 9 the story of Mrs Lera Clarke who has come to believe she is being specially targeted to carry out God's work. The Voice published a photograph of Mrs Clarke holding a piece of toast imprinted with the sign of the Cross. This is the most recent in a series of signs, which include, Mrs Clarke believes, her having been resurrected twice.

Other odds and ends include the Sunday Express report, on June 14, on Graham James, a self-described witch who sells spell pouches, love potions, talismans, and so on, by mail order... two Times articles, one on the value of self-development programs such as TM, and the other an uncritical report on chiropractic in the UK.

Also in, skeptical though not paranormal: the Guardian reported on May 2 that MacDonald's recent campaign promoting the nutritional value of their food has been discredited. California, New York, and Texas have warned the company to discontinue the ads or face legal action.

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## WANTED

Newspaper clippings: anything related to paranormal claims or pseudoscience. From this issue on, this column will be a regular feature. In addition, we send copies of all clippings we receive to CSICOP for their library. Thanks to all who sent material. Keep it coming!

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# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

It's official! Skeptics exist in the spirit world! Well, in the pages of *Psychic News* anyway. The May 9th editorial reported the current efforts to organise European groups affiliated to CSICOP. Since the editor observed that a measure of skepticism was valuable, perhaps we should consider some recent stories in that light . . .

**"I saw channel ferry disaster in advance"**—Kent clairvoyant Daphne Possee claims to have foreseen the Zeebrugge ferry disaster over three years ago. Although she could sense the word *Enterprise*, could "see" someone drowning, and received the words *Maxstone Police Station*, she said there was no way of preventing the disaster and that it was "so frustrating". Daphne now says she is in contact with several spirits who passed during the tragedy.

**University runs paranormal course**—Loughborough University is to run a five-day course on the paranormal as part of its summer school programme. The tutor will be Arthur Ellison, Emeritus Professor of Electrical and Electronic Engineering at London's City University, and twice past president of the Society for Psychical Research. The course will cover such topics as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis and psychic healing.

**Dead surgeons operate**—Trance healer George Chapman, who receives spiritual guidance from the eminent (but deceased) eye surgeon William Lang, reports that he enjoyed support from conventional doctors at Marseilles, where "Dr Lang" saw about 100 patients. Mr Chapman lives in Aberystwyth and has three centres in France, one in West Germany and one in Switzerland. His son Michael is entranced by Dr Lang's son Basil.

**Seers compete**—Two Liverpool seers have submitted sealed predictions to the *Liverpool Echo* in a bid to discover who has the greater gift. The winner will be whoever scores the most number of correct predictions when they are revealed on August 1st. The two contestants are Ivy Lea Turner, who claims to have foreseen the Zeebrugge ferry and Manchester Air disasters, and Dorothy Wright, whose says her premonitions have resulted in saving the Queen from certain death, and averting an IRA kidnap of Prince Harry.

**Bad taste to try to contact Doris Stokes?**—Supporters, family and management of the late Doris Stokes have attacked an attempt by Lancashire medium James Byrne to contact her on the "Central TV Live" programme. Mr Byrne replied that he hadn't expected to be asked to try to make contact on the air, saying that "you can't just call up people on demand".

**Psychic on Government scheme**—Another psychic has obtained a grant from the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. Peter Froude of Bournemouth is blessed with the gift of automatic writing, which he is now putting to the somewhat mundane use of writing an occult thriller. For this Mr Froude is receiving £40 a week for a year in lieu of unemployment benefit. As well as being guided by those beyond our world, Mr Froude will now also be able to seek assistance from the Small Business Council.

**Firewalking in London**—Firewalking is alive and well in London E7. Three seminars were advertised for May and June, at which people would have the opportunity to "further develop their inner resources to take control of their lives, overcoming fear, removing limited beliefs, transcending apparent obstacles"—obstacles such as finding £35 to donate to the seminar leader, Mr Ian MacGregor.

**Trumpet voluntary**—Good old-fashioned séance accoutrements are obviously still in demand—G. Hood of Bournemouth has an interesting variety of such *objets* available, ranging from crystal balls, ouija boards and planchettes to the indispensable luminous aluminium trumpets (a snip at £9.38).

**Name that spirit**—An interesting point was raised in the *Psychic News* correspondence section some weeks ago. A reader wrote to ask why mediums (or is it media?) rarely give the full names of the entities with whom they interact. Why are contacts always of the "I'm getting Johnny, or Tommy, or it might be Jimmy . . ." variety? Once the great gulf between this world and the next has been bridged, one would imagine that a surname should be just as easy to get as a forename.

**Magicians condemn psychics**—Magician Paul Daniels has gone on record voicing his acute disapproval of the late Doris Stokes. Daniels stated in the *Daily Mirror* that "I most certainly don't go along with anything she did in any way. I just do not like the Doris Stokeses of this world, what they do or what they stand for. I condemn those who make money callously from the sad, the lonely and the insecure." Fellow Magic Circle member Ali Bongo has also voiced his disapproval: "There's no real proof of the psychic or the occult. As a magician, I thank God people are gullible, but when it becomes more than just entertainment, it's all wrong".

One of the weirder specialist publications is Rex Dutta's *Viewpoint Aquarius*, a monthly duplicated newsletter which presents a complicated blend of flying saucers, the theosophy of H.P. Blavatsky, yoga, meditation and healing. The basic premise might be familiar: flying saucers, which are the subject of a globally orchestrated cover-up, are not simply extra-terrestrial craft. Rather, they are the manifestation of our *space brothers*, with whom we are inextricably linked on the psychic planes. Also thrown into the philosophical pot are a strong anti-left wing feeling, and a definite dislike for anything Russian. Much of recent issues has been taken up with proving the existence of alien bases on the Moon and Mars, and in particular "Alternative III", the code name for an operation mounted jointly by the USA and the USSR, with the intention of planting earth colonies on Mars to escape the unstoppable "self-boiling" build-up of radiation on Earth. Quite what "self-boiling" entails is not terribly clear. *Viewpoint Aquarius* has also been associated with *UFO-Line*, the dial-a-flying-saucer-story operation discussed in *B & IS V1/9*.

The 10th Festival of Mind, Body and Spirit was held at London's Royal Horticultural Halls in May. Amongst the many fringe areas represented were Kirlian Photography, colour therapy, dowsing, aura healing, diagnosis by pendulum, Tarot, spinal energy flow, and the ubiquitous "healer" Matthew Manning. Flying Saucer devotees were well catered for by the presence of representatives from the Aetherius Society, who have in recent years placed an increasing emphasis on spiritual healing.

Looking into an advertisement for Aromatherapy, I was surprised when along with price lists and a strange-smelling sample, I received an invitation to participate in a pyramid selling chain letter scheme. The scheme, run by Edward L. Green, was featured in an investigation recently by the Channel 4 programme *What It's Worth*, and has been declared illegal by the Department of Trade and Industry. Do I smell a rat?

"Pulsors are semi-intelligent crystals literally able to change and amplify vibrations and auras of places and people." So says the publicity for "Pulsor—the miracle of 21st Century Aquarian Science". This is a gizmo that comes in a variety of shapes and sizes, and if worn about the person, will look after your body's "bioplasmic polarities", and generally make you feel better. You can get Pulsor crystals set into rings, as pendants, or in little shoe-polish sized tins, and they come in sets of three frequencies corresponding to different body centres. Why not buy a set to put in your pocket—for £275.

Finally, "Healer links up two-way radio-telephone with spirit world" gets my vote for silliest headline of recent months. According to the story in May's *Spiritualist Gazette*, an electronics enthusiast received instructions from deceased radio experts enabling him to communicate by wireless with departed spirits. Don't touch that dial!

**FORTUNE SECRETS** by Uri Geller (& John Lisners). Sphere, May, 1987, £2.50. 215 pp. Reviewed by Wendy M. Grossman.

The Daily Mail reported on April 29 that Geller was invited to Washington to tell politicians what Russian intentions were on arms talks. Then the News of the World reported on May 3 that Geller was involved in a "psychic peace mission"; he was alleged to have beamed peace messages at Gorbachev, supposedly resulting in Gorbachev's offer of nuclear missile reductions. The Star reported on May 21 that Geller claimed that his vegetarianism had reduced the time it took him to bend a spoon from five minutes to one minute. And the Evening Post, on June 13 reported that Uri Geller has been approached by a hospital in Israel to see if "his metal-bending skills will alter the make-up of cancer cells, rendering them harmless." Now, on the cover of his new, new book, we are told we can do it, too. "How to be rich and famous the Geller way!...Discover how to activate and harness the super-forces within us all to: lose weight; be more attractive; win at gambling; be a successful lover; think positively; outsmart your boss and bank manager; make money and become rich."

This is a logical extension of Geller's recent insistent claims to be a millionaire (as in, "if you're so psychic, why ain't you rich?") Ben Harris, author of Gellerism Revealed, in his review of The Geller Effect for The Australian Skeptic, made the perceptive observation, "The psychology is brilliant. If he is a millionaire, then we are subliminally forced to accept that he IS psychic." In Fortune Secrets, rich and psychic go hand in hand throughout. Despite his occasional use of the word "spiritual", the actual concept never enters his sphere of successes.

Geller's use of famous names to bolster his claims leaves you feeling he's a snob--or that he thinks his audience is. One of his examples of channelled PSI-force, therefore, should be no surprise: the British royal family. He spends almost ten pages on psi's "royal seal of approval" (p 20); Prince Charles, he says, "will use PSI power when he becomes king...many of his decisions will not be made without reference to his psychic self. He will try and use precognition, telepathy, and psychic projection..." (p 21).

Geller redefines all extraordinary human achievement in terms of psi: "...sports writers wax eloquent about the 'magical' qualities of ball players. What they are really describing is the player's highly developed PSI-FORCE--

practically combined with physical prowess" (p 10). In his chapter on show business, he explains that Stephen Spielberg, Joan Collins, and even Johnny Carson all owe their success to their use of psi powers. Of Johnny Carson he says, "He resists the supernatural, yet I believe he has a great power there which, without him admitting to it, has helped him become successful as a TV interviewer and multi-millionaire. He is a very hard but clever man...deep inside, he knows he is a complex man with many minuses to his character. That is why his facade is so cold. I think I am right in believing that he was once an amateur magician..." (p 169). Question: how could Geller avoid knowing that Carson was a magician, considering his failure on Carson's show in 1974 for just that reason?

Geller is also constructing a biased sample: "...when you have finished this book and realised the benefits...let me know. Don't keep it to yourself, share it with your friends...Send a short letter to my publishers..." (p 7). Because so much of this book is standard advice ("think positive", "look your best", "exercise", "give up smoking and alcohol", "avoid stress") there are likely to be few people unhappy with their lives who follow this advice who won't report at least some improvement. And obviously, if they're happier, that's PSI. If they're not, they're blocking themselves.

This book cheapens the wonders that humans can and do achieve by pushing nature's gifts to the limit. And even taking into account that Geller may indeed be revealing his methods of promoting his interests, it leaves unanswered the real mystery of Geller: how did someone bending a spoon capture the interest of so many people?

Fortune Secrets reads as though someone took a copy of How To Win Friends and Influence People, crossed it with a copy of The Power of Positive Thinking, added in a few standard health tips and a measure of How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying, and then sprinkled the mixture liberally with the phrase, "PSI-FORCE". (Half-bake; serves millions.)

But let Geller have the last word: "...one of the ways to enjoy your success is to sleep with an easy conscience. Don't do anything illegal, or anything that may bring you into disrepute or damage your reputation" (p 152).

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Wendy M. Grossman is a folksinger and writer, and edits the British & Irish Skeptic.

**TIME HEALERS**, by Laura Walsh and Brian Whittle. Two-part series on hypnotic regression, which appeared in the (Scottish) Sunday Express, May 31 and June 7, 1987. This review is by Stephen Moreton, and was originally intended for the Sunday Express "Letters to the Editor"; however, they have so far chosen not to publish it.

I was disappointed by the two-part series "Time Healers" about hypnotic regression. I had hoped that a high-quality newspaper such as The Sunday Express would have given a more balanced account rather than the one-sided propaganda piece that actually appeared. It is clear that reporters Laura Walsh and Brian Whittle made little attempt to find out the rational, sceptical viewpoint.

It is just not true that "There's absolutely no explanation--medical or otherwise--for it," as alleged expert Dr. Tom Barlow is quoted as saying. The explanation--cryptomnesia--has been known for years. The subconscious mind contains a staggering amount of detailed information. Every book, lecture, film, lesson, documentary, conversation, etc., in the person's past leaves its mark. Normally the person is unaware of this knowledge and may have no conscious recollection of it or its sources. In all cases of "past lives" the person is simply concocting an elaborate fantasy, drawing upon their subconscious library for information.

This has been decisively demonstrated in many famous cases, such as that of Jane Evans, whose past life as a Roman woman was based entirely on the historical novel The Living Wood by Louis de Wohl. The lady with the past relationship with De Coverley could easily have read some historical novel about the man (he sounds like good story material) and has now forgotten about it but it still resides in her subconscious. It is usually possible to trace the original source simply by hypnotising the subject again and just asking him or her to go back to a time and place where he or she could have gained the knowledge. Dr. Kampman of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Oulu, Finland, does this routinely and has been able to debunk a great many "past lives". Believers never seem to bother to take this obvious course of action.

As for past life languages, these have been described by American linguist Sarah Grey Thomason (University of Pittsburgh) as "fluent gibberish". Subjects under hypnosis are quite able to produce convincing-sounding languages, and the lady who supposedly spoke French

could easily have been remembering it. She would have far more French locked up in her brain than she would be consciously aware of. Even a linguist might be fooled. If the speech sounds familiar but not quite perfect it might well be labelled a dialect or an archaic form when it is simply an imperfectly remembered version--enough to convince but not enough to be perfect.

Perhaps the most damning indictment against past lives in general and Dr. Barlow in particular are the glaring historical inaccuracies they contain. I read once of a woman being regressed to Roman times and describing her life in a castle, but Dr. Barlow's case of the cleaner becoming an Aztec left me not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Not only was it factually wrong, it was so clearly wrong and so thoroughly wrong that I am left wondering what excuse Dr. Barlow can possibly have for his exceptionally sloppy scholarship. He tells us that the lady was once an Aztec and she described Aztec temples and that a stunned South American university lecturer had said that she had described "the oldest Aztec civilization ever recorded--a place called Machu Piccu in South America" (Dr. Barlow's words). Now I can forgive the omission of the "h" in "Picchu", but the other errors are unpardonable. I will only describe one of them "(I'm saving the others so that I can shoot the story down again in case Dr. Barlow tries to resurrect it in corrected form". As any South American lecturer would be well aware the Aztecs were a Mexican civilization separated by thousands of miles from the Incas of Peru who were the real builders of Machu Picchu, NOT the Aztecs. These two peoples were totally isolated from each other and from the outside world. They had absolutely no knowledge of each other's existence, had completely different languages, religions--and temples. For a woman under hypnosis to call herself an Aztec while describing an Inca town would be as absurd as claiming to be a Pharaoh and describing Stonehenge. An ordinary working lady could be forgiven such a blunder. A man with a PhD and supposedly an expert researcher into past lives cannot. If a man makes a gigantic mistake that could have been prevented just by looking up a children's encyclopaedia, what reliance should we put upon anything else he says?

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Stephen Moreton lives in Edinburgh, and is qualified in chemistry with some training in geology.

Dear Wendy,

Until I read Toby Howard's transcript of extracts from UFO-Line (0898-300-346) I was not aware of its existence. Nor have I ever heard of Derek C. Sampson; he is not known in the British UFO movement and he is certainly not a serious UFO investigator. He speaks the most appalling drivel, a mixture of many myths and uncorroborated tales, and something should be done to remove him from the telephone system.

You are not right in thinking that his allegations can be investigated. He does not give the details necessary to check his stories which, in any case, seem to have been lifted from the published UFO literature. I have not listened to all his scripts (I could not afford to) but some may cover cases that have already been explained. The one I did hear related to an incident which is not taken seriously by UFO investigators.

It is not true that 'strange flying machines have been observed in our skies for thousands of years'; it is true that for thousands of years mankind has not been able to explain everything he sees in the skies. But the unidentified is not necessarily a 'machine', although today it might be a man-made craft. All UFO reports can be explained in mundane terms and there is no need to invoke exotic hypotheses.

The fact that some authors have described travel in the sky is irrelevant. Of course men want to fly, but that has no bearing on the interpretation of UFO reports. Nor has Gulliver's Travels (GT), which is a satirical allegory. I would not trust a literal reading of GT, although it is possible that the Laputan's fears were a reflection of contemporary fears. Certainly the fears alleged to be expressed by aliens (in UFOs) are those of modern humanity (that we shall either destroy ourselves or the universe).

No, 'flying saucers' do not commonly have castles 'on board', showing again that there is no connection between Swift's story and modern UFO reports.

yours sincerely

  
Stuart Campbell

Dear Editor,

I was interested to read the article about the voyage to Laputa from Gulliver's Travels.

Mr. Sampson seems to be typical of so many UFOlogists in that he cannot bring himself to believe that someone can imagine something which he has not seen.

I think that this attitude demeans the human spirit far more than the oft-despised "closed, narrow-minded approach" of the sceptic.

I presume Mr. Sampson also believes that Swift met a race of men four inches high, a race of giants and a race of talking horses, but perhaps I'm being cynical.

The voyage to Laputa, like the rest of the adventures in Gulliver's Travels, is a satire on various aspects of Swift's world. In this case Swift is mocking Mr. Sampson's spiritual forebears, the fringe-scientists of Swift's own day.

"Natural Philosophy" (science) was extremely trendy: important discoveries had been made in maths, physics, astronomy and chemistry, but science, though a lusty child, was barely out of its cradle, much was unknown and there was a great deal of work being done in areas which proved fruitless, and indeed may seem foolish to us, who have the benefit of hindsight. As well as many honest but misguided men, there were also large numbers of cranks and, inevitably, charlatans eager to part gullible enthusiasts from their money. "Natural Philosophy" was all the rage, and anyone with any pretensions to sophistication would try to take at least some interest in it.

Swift, a fierce sceptic, satirises the fringe-science world of his day with a savage wit and in placing the Natural Philosophers up in the clouds he is following the example of that other scourge of pseudo-intellectual pretensions Aristophanes, who in the fifth century BC put the philosophers of his day in "cloud-cuckoo land".

--A. Bloomfield, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex.

## THE BRITISH COMMITTEE

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(These are not necessarily experts, just skeptics who would like to be in touch with other skeptics.)

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## INSERT FOR B&IS I.4

Due to a paste-up error, a whole column of Steuart Campbell's "Seeing the Light at Knock" (B&IS I.4, pp 12-14) got left out. We apologize to Steuart and to our readers. The missing section picks up after line 15, column 1, page 13:

...Because mirages only form near the horizon, the light has to penetrate a long way through the atmosphere. This causes a distinct reddening through scattering of shorter wavelengths, and sometimes also through absorption by dust.

If there is any merit in this hypothesis, it must be shown that one or more bright astronomical bodies lay near the horizon at the time. But what was the time?

Greenwich Mean Time was not introduced into Great Britain until the following year, when Ireland adopted Dublin Time, 25 minutes ahead of GMT. Therefore the times stated by the witnesses at Knock must be in local time (L), based on the sun being directly south at noon. Because Knock is about nine degrees west of Greenwich, its local time must have been about 36 minutes in advance of GMT. In that case, it can be calculated that on 21 August 1879 the sun set at 19:52 GMT (or 19:16 L). This agrees with a statement by one of the witnesses that 'the sun had set that evening at a quarter past seven o'clock'. Consequently, we can use this as a basis for astronomical calculations.

Most of the witnesses report the vision to have been seen between 7:30 PM and 9:30 PM. Calculations show that in these two hours three bright planets rose or set! Jupiter, at its brightest at magnitude -2.7, rose in the east at 20:10 GMT (19:34 L); Venus, also at its brightest at magnitude -4.6, set in the west at 20:18 GMT (19:42 L); and Saturn, at magnitude 0.5, rose in the east at 21:13 GMT (20:37 L). Evidently one or more of these planets could have caused a mirage. From its position on the Plains of Mayo, Knock probably has good views to the horizon in all directions, weather permitting. All we know of the weather that day was that it had been dry. It is reported that, at the time of the vision, it was raining, but without the ground getting wet! For sight of horizontal mirages it is only necessary that the horizontal sky be clear; it could even be cloudy overhead, and even raining!

Testing this hypothesis against the testimony of the witnesses is frustrated

somewhat by uncertainty. The hypothesis requires that we know the direction in which each witness was looking, but this information has not been given. The direction in which Patrick Walsh was looking could be determined if we knew the location of Ballinderris (not on any map). However, what he described ('a very bright light...high up in the air above and around the chapel gable') most resembles that of an astronomical object. At the time he gives (9:00 PM), Jupiter was 11 degrees above the horizon on an azimuth of 123 degrees (southeast)...



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