

Volume II, No. 4

July/August 1988

The British & Irish
SKEPTIC

A publication dedicated to the scientific examination of claims of the paranormal

A Thorn in Geller's Side
Regan, Reagan and the Stars
Dreams and Visions of Reality
SPRITE

£1.50

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Audio Cassettes

A1 Gay Byrne Show: Mark Plummer, 13/5/87. A2 LBC Nightline: Brian Inglis on Dreams, 29/9/87. A3 LBC Nightline: 'psychic' Christian Dion, 6/10/87. A4 LBC Nightline: Timothy Good & Jenny Randles on UFOs, 9/7/87. A5 Everyman: documentary on astrology, BBC1, 19/1/86. Newsnight: Spontaneous Human Combustion, BBC2, 13/1/86. A6 Jimmy Mack: dowsing debate with Denys Parsons, 1/4/87. A7 Martin Bridgstock: lecture on skepticism, Manchester Skeptics Meeting, 9/12/87. A8 Karl Sabbagh: at Dublin Skeptics meeting, 6/11/87. A9 The Medium is the Message, Radio 4, 7/4/88. A10 Bob Couttie on Woman's Hour.

VHS Video Cassettes

V1 Wogan: Uri Geller. V2 Late Late Show: Uri Geller, 13/2/87. Viewpoint 87: Thy Will be Done, documentary on US fundamentalism, 2/4/87. Panorama: documentary on Scientology, BBC1, 27/4/87. V3 Is there anybody there? Karl Sabbagh's documentary on the paranormal, C4, 31/10/87. Right to Reply: Sabbagh replies to critics, C4, 6/11/87. V4 Omnibus: documentary on Voodoo. Viewpoint 87: Thy Kingdom Come, documentary on US fundamentalism. 40 Minutes: documentary on the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain. V5 Whicker: Gladys Spearman-Cook, Patricia Shaw, Spiritualist Training, Psychic Healing, Witchcraft in England, Guatemala & Jamaica, Firewalking in Sri Lanka, Astrologers. Breakfast TV: Charles Berlitz on Atlantis. Hugh Burnett: Psychic Music (Rosemary Brown/John Lill/Clifford Entiknap). Newsnight: Spontaneous Human Combustion. BBC Nature Program: Yetis. Wogan: Rosemary Brown. Breakfast TV: Peter Underwood, President of The Ghost Club (also biographer of Danny LaRue). V6 Nazca Lines. QED: Firewalking, John Taylor & Carl Sargeant. V7 Arthur C. Clarke: Poltergeists. Arthur C. Clarke: Past Lives. Ray Gosling: Witchcraft and Magic. Everyman: Destiny. V8 QED: Metal Bending, Vanishing Hitchhiker. Horizon: A Case of ESP. V9 Hugh Burnett: The Ghost Hunters. Everyman: Indian Astrologers. Sky at Night: Constellations. Hugh Burnett: Flying Saucers. Forty Minutes: Doris Stokes. TV AM: Doris Collins. Lancashire Ghosts: Terence Whittaker. V10 Robert Symes: Glastonbury, Doomsday Prophecies, Ley Lines. Arthur C. Clarke: Precognitive Visions.

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More people than usual contributed to the production of this issue of *The British & Irish Skeptic*, and we are very grateful to Mrs Trudy Atherton and Ms Mary Murray for their invaluable typing help. Thanks also to Dave Love for proofreading, and to Nick Hill and Tony Arnold for technical assistance.

Hits and Misses

Irish Chairman wanted

Peter O'Hara, chairman of the Irish Committee, writes from Dublin that he would like to resign as chairman and that he is looking for someone to work with him to take over the committee and get things moving. Anyone who is interested, please contact Peter O'Hara at PO Box 20, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, or telephone him at Dublin area 806447.

Graphology

J. Alan Remfry writes from London in response to the recent announcement of the founding of the Graphology Centre, which charges up to £700 for an executive report on prospective employees, and enclosing a notice stating that graphology has no scientific backing. "Next time you send off a job application form, you can state your feelings about Graphologists who may be influencing your future by pinning one of these handy notices to your forms. Give them to interested friends. Remember to watch out for those adverts that ask for handwritten applications! Obtainable from: 201 Sumatra Road, West Hempstead, London NW6 1PF. Pack of 20 (inc p&p). Please make cheque for £1.00 payable to Mr J Remfry."

Fatima Cross investigated

The 4 *What It's Worth* fact sheet reported in February that the programme had investigated Patricia Rose, Ltd., a company which sells a number of miraculous trinkets. According to the fact sheet, they "were selling a 'Golden Cross of Fatima' by mail order for £20. With the cross you received a 'treasure chest bursting with jewels' as a free gift. The cross allegedly contained earth from the Catholic Shrine of Fatima and was guaranteed to produce a miracle.

"4 *What It's Worth* took the cross and treasure chest to Christies for valuation. The treasure chest contained four tiny fragments of precious stone and the cross was certainly not made of gold. Christies said that both items were commercially worthless."

Dissatisfied customers were promised refunds by Patricia Rose Ltd. It should be noted that many similar items are available from the same address, all promising miracles.

Moonies in Ireland

It was announced in the *Irish Times* at the beginning of June that the Moonies have bought a Georgian

House at 19, North Great Georges Street, Dublin. Purchaser David Hanna told the *Irish Times* that he had "come to Ireland primarily to work for the Unification Church." The house was sold to Mr Hanna by Harold Clarke, chairman of Eason's, a large chain of book stores.

Earthquakes

One of Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comic strip characters came up with an explanation of why the predicted LA earthquake failed to materialize: "There was an earthquake! We died and we're now living in a *future life!*"

Yeti

According to the *Mail on Sunday*, 12 June, arguments rage over Chris Bonington's claims to have seen the Yeti. Journalist Iain Walker reports that the Natural History Museum says that the carcasses of two wild mountain sheep were probably killed by a snow leopard. While zoologists argue about this, Bonington says, "There is far too much solid evidence which the Natural History Museum cannot scientifically explain." This evidence includes the disappearance of two ski-poles from a base camp at 19,000 feet. Stephen Pile commented on the matter in the *Sunday Times* on the same date: "If the yeti does exist then the animal is completely dull. It is just another ape that walks around screeching. And if it is merely a legend then we no longer require a monster to fill a gap in our psychological needs. We have monsters enough on the football terraces. Let's forget about it, shall we?" Pile also points out that Bonington's team "completed an astonishingly impressive mountaineering feat... [but] Judging from the newspapers, you would suppose that Bonington had been on a yeti hunt. In fact he wanted to lead a second attempt upon Menlungtse and needed sponsorship."

Now if the newspapers could only agree whether it's Bonington or Bonnington.

Life Forces and the *Guardian*

Jillie Collings continues to write promotional pieces for alternative medicine in the *Guardian* on occasional Thursdays. Recent pieces have included one on holistic dentistry, in which practitioner Paul Mendelsohn, she says, "believes that physical imbalance (disease) especially in sensitive patients may be caused by galvanic electrical activity between

teeth...though as yet this remains to be scientifically substantiated...Mendelsohn recommends the replacement of of abnormally high voltage fillings with other non-metal types, the suitability of which he will select/test for each patient. For testing he uses a fascinating little electro-acupuncture machine...Mendelsohn...says it all sprang from learning transcendental meditation as a student." Collings speculates that methods like Mendelsohn's, focussing as they do on preventive dentistry, will ultimately free people of fear of going to the dentist. Collings has also written favourably about "health centres which combine the best of orthodox and holistic medicine."

Ghosts

The *Sheffield Star*, 16 April, continues its series on haunted pubs, this time with a new pub, The Crofts, at Mosborough, where regulars have seen a horse pulling a farm cart to a nearby pond. The publicans are now filling in the pond in an attempt to end the hauntings. And the *Daily Mirror* reported on 14 April that a family was driven out of their council house by a music-playing "spook". Police and social workers witnessed some of the events. According to reporter Frank Palmer, the ghost "smashed windows, wrecked beds, levitated a guest off the sofa and pulled out plugs." A priest was called in, but "when he sprinkled holy water on the stairs, the ghost chucked it back." The local council ruled that the family's homelessness was their own fault, and "refused to house them." A High Court judge "granted them the right to fight the town hall decision." The *Guardian*, on the same day, reported the judgement: "Mr Justice Nolan said that he had some misgivings about allowing a review but the 'highly unusual' case warranted a fuller hearing." The family has not one but two teenage daughters.

Morphic resonance

Rupert Sheldrake's new book *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature*, published by Collins and reviewed elsewhere in this issue, was the occasion for a number of arguments in the *Guardian* in April. The correspondence began with an article by Sheldrake, in which he claimed that "The idea that memories depend on morphic resonance is only a theory. But so is the idea that they are stored as material traces inside the brain. At present the question is open." Steven Rose, Director of the Brain and Behaviour Research Group at the Open University, replied, criticising Sheldrake for making false claims and saying, "To even begin to justify inventing [morphic resonance], Sheldrake has to invent puzzles and mysteries where none exist." Rose then examines one of Sheldrake's claims in detail, and concludes, "Not merely... [are]... these claims false, but

Sheldrake knows it, because, as the credits in his book make clear, he has had ample access to the published experimental evidence." The correspondence continued further; one letter of note, from David P. Leader, on 20 April, commented that Rose "should have been more forthright: why does a serious newspaper insult his [sic] readers by giving free rein to an assortment of spiritualists, faith-healers, spoon-benders and the like... I am afraid that your repeated protestations at the Government's treatment of scientific research and education ring rather hollow when the main viewpoint promoted in your columns is metaphysics."

Crop circles

The *Southampton Reporter* reported on 19 July, 1985, on the "Curse of the Giant Circles." Four Hampshire farmers were "counting the cost after crops were swirled flat in perfect rings this month—literally overnight." The largest circles were said to be more than 40 feet across. The article speculated on the causes of the phenomenon: hoax, UFO, and so on. There were similar articles last summer. This year the *Observer* reported on 5 June that "Dr Terence Meaden, a British tornado expert, has discovered they are caused by rare meteorological events called stationary whirlwinds... Last year, Dr Meaden investigated more than 60 crop circles round Britain, but there are probably hundreds of stationary whirlwinds each year. Only those in June, July and August—when there are crops on the ground—have their imprints preserved for posterity and investigation by scientists. Others in winter fall on barren ground and go unnoticed."

UFOs

UFOs have had a good couple of months—perhaps they like the warmer weather. The *South Wales Echo* ran a series on UFOs, and their "links across the centuries." In Part One, author Dan O'Neill links UFO abductions and old stories of abductions by the fairies, bringing in material from Whitley Streiber's *Communion* and Jenny Randles' *Abduction*. In Part Two, he says "thousands of books now attribute practically every odd happening in history to UFOs." He discusses the Fatima apparition and various Biblical events according to this theory. In Part Three, O'Neill discusses the Aetherius Society at length, along with the story of Cedric Allingham's claims to have met aliens in Scotland. O'Neill claims that this story was invented by astronomer Patrick Moore, and says that "Long after Mr Moore is turned to dust or reincarnated on Venus the story of the Allingham contact will still be told. And, more significantly, accepted as 'gospel'. Which tells us something about the uncritical acceptance the saucer story inspires."

Near-death experiences

Dr Susan Blackmore, newly named a Fellow of CSICOP, has been in the public eye quite a bit recently, with the BBC documentary and articles in *Listener* and *New Scientist* among others. Much of the material will be familiar to those who have read her *Adventures of a Parapsychologist* (Prometheus). In her *New Scientist* article (5 May), she critiques the various theories advanced to explain Near Death Experiences and discusses the problems connected with them. "The weakest theory of all," she says, "must be the bald assertion that the experiences are 'just hallucinations'." She goes on to point out how many questions are raised by this answer, usually presented, she says, as "the most scientific." Blackmore goes on to examine these and other questions in detail, concluding with the comment that near death experiences "should not be dismissed as 'just hallucinations.' They are life-transforming and important hallucinations and ones we would do well to try to understand."

Gold flakes

The *Guardian* reported on 26 May that the Japanese "have developed a taste for gold—literally. They are eating tiny flakes of the stuff, called 'longevity noodles,' in \$30 platefuls." National consumption was estimated at 8 kilos last year.

The article appeared on the Financial pages.

Vitamins and minerals

The *Observer* ran a critical article on 22 May about the increased consumption of dietary supplements in Britain. Anyone who has been in a health food store can attest to the large supply of books pushing all kinds of vitamins and minerals. According to the *Observer*, alternative health practitioners sometimes recommend hair mineral analysis to their patients. The *Observer* decided to test the accuracy of these tests. The newspaper sent two identical hair samples to London's Larkhall Laboratories. The samples were labelled with two different names (Chris Wood and Jane Angela Smith). The results were completely different. "'Jane Smith' was found to be low in magnesium, sodium, potassium, manganese, and cobalt, but normal in all other minerals. 'Chris Wood' was found to be normal in all 13 minerals except zinc." Out of 18 minerals, only the reading for one (cadmium) came back the same for the two samples. The bulk of the article concentrated on the current alarm about zinc deficiencies, warns of the dangers of taking too much zinc, and comments on the financial costs of the supplements.

Quantum spies

It is fairly unusual for a play to be reviewed in *New Scientist*, but Tom Stoppard's latest play, *Hapgood*, is the exception. It is currently at the Aldwych Theatre, and stars Nigel Hawthorne, Felicity Kendal, and Roger Rees. Stoppard has constructed a spy thriller that illustrates quantum mechanics. As reviewer Patricia Lewis puts it, "In the first scene, there is a witty representation of the two-slit experiment. It opens in the changing rooms of a public bath. There is a door through which everyone has to pass; after that there are two doors and changing cubicles. The ensuing slapstick routine of secret agents (at least two of whom are twins) who deposit and retrieve tagged briefcases, manages to leave all observers in a state of ignorance." Lewis adds, later in the piece, "It is rare that artists show any knowledge, or even desire for knowledge, of matters scientific, and I applaud Stoppard." There is even a quotation from Richard P. Feynman in the programme.

Faith healing on the NHS?

The (Scottish) *Sunday Express* ran a three-part series in May, headed with just that question: "Should faith healing be on the National Health?" Reader Stephen Moreton, who sent in the clippings, points out in his accompanying letter, "It seems to be largely anecdotal, and I never trust such stories; they tend to fall apart upon investigation." Alan Bestic, who wrote the series of articles, says, "Clinical tests to measure the pain-killing powers of healers are being organised by the Confederation of Healing Organizations. Favourable results, they say, could lead to their 7,500 members being accepted into the National Health Service. Confidence is high, as some hospitals and GP's already use the faith healers as therapeutic allies."

Zodiac Game

J. Alan Remfry sent in an advertisement from the *Evening Standard* for "Russell Grant's Zodiac Game," available at such stores as The Covent Garden General Store and Harrods. The advertisement describes it as "the great family fun game of luck-intuition & strategy." Grant was slated to appear in person at Hamley's toy shop on 29th April. Perhaps it might come in handy at the end of the year for skeptics making their predictions for 1989.

Lost and found

The *Daily Mirror* reported on April 2 that twenty psychics had been called in to help find a lost cat. After paying out more than £200, the owner said, "I had an open mind about their abilities. Now I can't

print what I think." The owners were continuing their search.

TM in Skelmersdale

The *Guardian* reported on 21 April that there are 350 TMers in Skelmersdale, Lancs. The TMers claim that due to their efforts "the local economy is developing (correct), unemployment is down (correct, from 20 per cent to 13 per cent in the last two years), and crime is levelling off (correctish)." The *Observer* printed a picture of the dome built at the Ideal Village, for the community's practising TMers.

Career opportunities

The *Times* reported on 10 May on chiropractic and osteopathy as potential careers. The two professional associations approve training courses—there are three four-year courses in osteopathy, and one four-year course in chiropractic, for which approval as a degree course has been granted by the Council for National Academic Awards. The *Times* warns that "Alternative therapies are outside the NHS, so students may encounter difficulties in financing their training. Grants are at the discretion of local education authorities, whose policies vary." The *Times* concludes, "Ultimately, the prospects are good in both professions. There is no unemployment: rather, given the increasing interest from the general public, an actual shortage of practitioners, particularly if they are prepared to move from the South East where there is the largest concentration of practices."

Aetherius Society

The *People* reported on 8 May that the Aetherius Society claims to have "logged more than 500 calls and they're not from loonies" on their year-old UFO hotline. The Society says, "The only people who don't believe in UFOs are like the flat-earthers—they're living in the past." The number is 01-731-1094, and it operates from 10 am to 10 pm.

Spitting Image

Irish readers who get cable TV may have seen the re-showing on SuperChannel of an episode of *Spitting Image* in which Prince Charles consults Doris Stokes. In an excellent piece of satire, the Stokes doll managed to divine that Prince Charles was royal, and told him the spirits were telling her to tell him, "trust Doris, because even though she looks like she's making it up as she goes along, she's really quite genuine." Of course, you know it's only fictional, because the doll used a crystal ball...

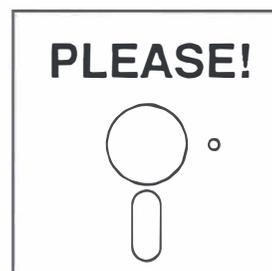
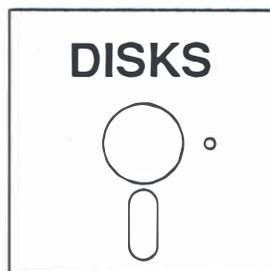
Robert Morris

The *University of Edinburgh Bulletin*, May 1988, ran a piece on Professor Robert Morris and his current research. Morris calls his research approach "Integrative Parapsychology," and says that communication is their "central concept." Morris explains that their first step was to "develop a model of what happens when someone decides that a psychic event takes place." Following this, Morris and his group have research projects in progress on 'anomalous interactions between humans and computers; the use of imagery in enhancing psychokinesis scores; evaluating reputed psychic development techniques in free response ESP tasks; generating descriptions of apparent psychic events within family units; and exploring the similarities between psychic development and sport psychology techniques." Morris hastens to add that these are all long-term projects. Morris' group are also offering lectures, interacting with the SPR and the Scottish SPR; last summer they hosted the annual Parapsychology Association Conference. Good luck to them.

Alternative prize

The *Guardian* reported on 9 May that at the 14th World Congress of Natural Medicines, it was decided to set up the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Complementary Medicine, the winners to be announced the day before the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Medicine.

Clippings contributed by J. Alan Remfrey, Gerald Fleming, Toby Howard, Steve Donnelly, Colin Wood, Andrew Tomlinson, Stephen Moreton, Peter O'Hara, Wendy Grossman, Michael Hutchinson, Redge Lewis, Chris Wright.



We'd be delighted if you could send your contributions on floppy disk. It would make our job much easier! The preferred format is IBM PC-compatible, but we can also handle BBC, Mac and almost anything else. File formats are important—we need files saved as straight ASCII (without any word-processor commands), split into lines of no more than 80 characters, each line terminated by CR/LF. Please mark disks clearly with their contents, and your name and address. All disks are returnable.

European Report

France

Dr. Henri Broch writes from Nice that the Minitel service [ZET] now offers more than 3500 pages on the paranormal, including dossiers on specific topics, messages, announcements, an index ... and a challenge of more than US\$87,000 for proof of a paranormal phenomenon. Major topics are: archeological mysteries; astrology (ZET will calculate your *real* astrological sign); parapsychology; the supernatural and other mysteries; fringe medicine; skepticism; and an extensive reference section.

The challenge is issued to those who claim to have special powers. Dr. Broch and illusionist Gérard Majax offer the chance to agree on a precise experimental protocol, with a view to testing claimants' powers. The results positive or negative are to be published in the magazine *Science et Vie*. The prize is being offered by a group formed by Jacques Theodor, a researcher at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. We will be watching for answers to the challenge with interest.

Germany

The German group GWUP has announced a conference to be held in Bonn on 1 and 2 October, 1988 (and conducted in German). The cost of registration is approximately £12 (£3 for students, unemployed, etc.), and they have arrangements for hotel accommodation. The list of speakers is quite long; topics covered include acupuncture, astrology, dowsing, New Age beliefs, and others in a tightly packed programme beginning Friday at 7pm and finishing the next night at midnight. Those wishing further information should write to: Dipl.-Ing A. Sarma, Geschäftsstelle GWUP, Postfach 1222, D-6101, Rossdorf, W. Germany.

GWUP begins the second year of publishing its newsletter *Der Skeptiker* with an issue of 47 pages. Lewis Jones summarizes the contents: News from Switzerland—(SKEPSIS, GWUP's Swiss offshoot, also uses *Der Skeptiker* as its official journal.) The Time-Life series "Mysteries of the Unknown" has just appeared there. SKEPSIS describes the publicity blurbs as "completely pro-paranormal," in spite of Time-Life's claims to deal with "the possibility of fraud and deception."—Proposals to cooperate with the Spanish skeptical group ARP (la Alternativa Racional a las Pseudociencias)—Reports on three loony articles in the German magazine *Bild*. (a) Is the earth at the centre of the universe? (b) Human catastrophes heralded by supernovas, and (c) Earth-rays that are causing accidents on motorways near Munich—Reviews of Erich von Däniken's book *We*

are all children of the Gods, and of a television program about "the mysterious lines of Nazca."—The GWUP's standing, and "what we can and should do"—picking up a theme that had previously appeared in *The Skeptical Inquirer*—An interview with the stage-magician Orsini, reprinted from a Swiss weekly—"Earth-rays: Phantasy or Reality?" from the medical point of view—"Parapsychology: between fraud and miracle"—a reprint from a Swiss newspaper.

Thanks to Lewis Jones for the translation and summary.

The Netherlands

J.W. Nienhuys, Jr., wrote from Waalre with translations of several of the articles from the Dutch group's second issue of their newsletter, *Skepter*. One of these concerned a UFO case which has received a lot of press attention in the Netherlands, and the other concerned a spiritualist evening which, according to the *Telegraaf* turned into a nightmare when evil spirits were summoned up by glass-turning. The ghosts refused to leave at the end of the séance, and the police were called. This case also received a lot of press attention. We will try to run a complete translation in a future issue.

Bulgaria

Dr. Dobri D. Genchev has written from Sofia enclosing a reprint of a skeptical article (in Bulgarian) published in the Bulgarian Journal 'Philosophical Thought' entitled 'Ignorance Is No Argument'. The article is a critical response to a previous article by L. Gregoriev in the magazine 'Contemporary Man' which dealt with Djuna, a faith healer from the Caucasus region of the USSR who has attracted a great deal of media attention in Bulgaria and the Soviet Union in recent years. Djuna has been healing people for many years and has been examined by the USSR academy of Sciences who concluded that she could cure people who couldn't be cured by conventional medicine. The article criticizes Gregoriev for his totally pseudoscientific approach to the subject and claims that his article shows considerable ignorance of medicine, science and philosophy. Genchev suggests that Djuna's healing involves only massage and psychotherapy and that her healing can be explained without recourse to paranormal powers.

Thanks to Ilya Katardjiev of Salford University for translation and background information.

A Thorn in Geller's Side

Michael Hutchinson

Uri Geller is caught in the act

On Tuesday the 24th May I received a telephone call from Martin Cassini, who was arranging a chat show to take place the following Saturday morning at an exhibition organized by the London magazine *Time Out*. Martin works on the production team of a London television programme called *01-for London* which previews London events. The *Time Out* exhibition was to be part of the national Telethon.

Martin wanted to know if I or any skeptic I knew would be willing to discuss the subject of ESP with Uri Geller and one or two other people in front of an audience of several hundred. I said that Professor David Marks, co-author of *The Psychology of the Psychic*, currently at Middlesex Polytechnic, would be an excellent participant in such a discussion, but I warned Martin that Geller would probably refuse to appear with David or any other informed skeptic.

My prediction proved to be correct. Geller gave Martin the option of choosing between him and David. Geller was also due to bend and auction a spoon for the Telethon, so Martin needed the fading spoonbender more than he needed David. He therefore arranged for another person I had suggested to appear. This was Dr. Susan Blackmore, a parapsychologist for many years, whose experiences changed her from being a believer to being highly critical of the claims made about the paranormal.

Even though David Marks was not an official participant in the event, he told me that he would try to attend as a spectator. I had been invited to attend by Martin Cassini, but I was in two minds as to whether it would be worth attending. Any thoughts that I may have had about the day being a non-event were to be dramatically proven wrong.

When I arrived at the exhibition, just after 11.00 am on Saturday 28th May, Martin told me that they didn't have an audience, and they didn't have Uri Geller. A colleague was trying to find out what had happened to Geller; it was thought that he had probably been held up by traffic. Being a convinced skeptic, I wondered why Geller hadn't predicted his late arrival. As it turned out, he should have predicted even more—his total non-appearance for the chat show. Fortunately, David Marks, too, was unable to attend. If David had been there and Geller had subsequently found out, he would have claimed that he 'knew' he had been deceived and therefore decided not to attend.

I later overheard that Geller claimed the last contact with him was the 'take me or leave me' option.

He had not been contacted since, and assumed that David Marks would be attending. (Martin Cassini had told me during one of our telephone conversations several days earlier that he had assured Geller that David would *not* be there.)

The chat show started without an audience. Taking part were Sue Blackmore, Douglas Ashby, an astrologer and psychic from the Foundation for Holistic Consciousness, and chairman Jerome Byrne, a former editor of *Time Out*. An audience was eventually coaxed into the temporary theatre by a public address announcement. By the end of the chat show at 11.45 am, there was an audience of fifty or sixty people. Jerome Byrne closed by asking the audience how many people thought Uri Geller was a fake. I and ten others put up our hands. To the question "How many people believe that Uri Geller has genuine psychic powers," only eight people put up their hands. An interesting and encouraging result.

I was invited to have a drink and something to eat in the hospitality lounge with the chat show participants. We were told that Geller would now appear at 3.00 pm to bend the spoon for charity. Although I had no intention of staying that long, a friendly and interesting discussion with Douglas Ashby took the time to almost 2.30 pm. With only half an hour to wait, I decided to look around the exhibition before seeing what Mr. Geller would be up to.

Geller's appearance was to be at an exhibition stand occupied by *01-for London*. When I arrived at the stand, it was being used to raise money for the Telethon, with people paying to be interviewed by one of the programme's presenters.

Geller arrived late, making his way through the crowd to the exhibition stand. He was carrying six to eight spoons which he placed in a bunch on a chair. While talking with one of the people connected with *01-for London*, he picked up one of the spoons and put a black spot on it with a large marker. This spoon he placed at right angles on top of the others.

With Geller standing at the rear of the stand with Richard Jobson, a presenter of *01-for London*, the crew began to get ready for the great event. Another presenter, Nikki Grocock, had been given a spoon and was positioned forward of Geller, with the camera moved back among the crowd. I looked carefully at the spoon she was holding, suspecting that it might have been prepared to breaking point by Geller beforehand. Unfortunately, Nikki held it at just the point where the fracture would appear, cov-

ering it up (if there was one) with her fingers. It was a little embarrassing, staring at the spoon when she held it down by her side, for she was wearing a short skirt and it probably appeared that I was leching at her legs. On another occasion, maybe... In fact, I was misled. Nikki was used only to introduce Geller, standing to one side so that the camera could move in close to Uri. Geller and Jobson both held table-spoons. As Geller was holding the spoon vertically, with the bowl at the top and his fingers just below the bowl, I knew that this spoon would be broken in two and I said so to Martin Cassini, who was by my side; and that is what happened! I heard Geller pointing out to Richard Jobson—with much excitement—that the point of the break was ‘cold’. Well, it would be, wouldn’t it? (This event was presented the following day on the *Telethon* with Geller asking £1,000 for the broken spoon.)

I immediately explained to Martin Cassini how I believed Geller had achieved his success; how he had cheated by “preparing” the spoon beforehand. Martin insisted that the spoons were supplied by him and his colleagues, but I pointed out that Geller had them when he walked onto the stand. Again Martin insisted that they were “our spoons—we supplied them.” I stressed that having them beforehand had given Geller ample opportunity to prepare one to breaking point.

Nikki Grocock was standing in front of me listening to our conversation. She looked closely at her spoon and noticed that it had a mark across the back of the handle just below the bowl. This mark had nothing to do with preparing it, but was obviously part of the manufacturing process for that particular type of spoon. It did have a ‘tick’ on it, higher on the back of the handle, made with a black marker. This, Martin explained, had been put on by his colleagues. I took the spoon from Nikki and she moved away from us. Using their spoon, I replicated for Martin Cassini and other members of the audience what Geller had just done. Within seconds the spoon was in two pieces and I drew attention to the fact that it was their marked spoon.

I am surprised that Geller did not see what had been going on. I was doing ‘his thing’ just feet away, holding the spoon quite high while breaking it in two. But considering what happened next, he must have either missed my demonstration or thought he’d bluff his way through.

I heard him say, “I’ll bend a spoon for the audience,” as he took the first step towards us. He only needed three or four steps to reach us, during which I saw him physically bend the spoon. He held the whole of the handle in his closed left fist with his right thumb inside the bowl and fingers behind the bowl. In a fraction of a second, it was bent. He stopped a foot or so from me with his right side towards me. “You bent that as you walked over, Uri!” I said. No response from Uri. He held the spoon by the bowl with his

right hand, covering the already bent handle with his open left hand, fingers closed together. I bent down, and looked up under his hands, pointing to the handle. “That’s already bent,” I said. “You’re hiding the bend with your fingers.” This time, Geller responded to my accusation. “Shame on you!” he said. Then, almost appealingly, “This is for charity.” With his left hand he frantically rubbed the spoon just above the bowl, gradually revealing the already bent handle to the audience. Even though this was probably the fastest spoon bend of his life—he just wanted to get out of there—to me, as an amateur magician, his technique was still to be admired. The illusion is very convincing.

“How much will you give me for this bent spoon?” he asked the audience. It appeared to me that not only was he still in a hurry—he was embarrassed. The audience was silent, perhaps unconvinced by what they had seen. “Who will give me ten pounds?” Geller asked. Someone further back in the audience said that he would, and came forward to give the psychic superstar his money. Geller said he would autograph the spoon. While he did so I was busy explaining to the audience and to *01-for London*’s video camera just how Geller bent the spoon. Some appeared to be convinced, but one still thought that what Geller had done was against the laws of physics. Fortunately for me, this was mainly a non-committed audience. If it had been made up of believers I would probably have been given a hard time.

The audience quickly thinned. Uri Geller had left the exhibition stand, and was with two or three other people at the back of the area in which the audience had been standing. He summoned me over to speak to him. When the Master calls, the servant runs, or in this case, strolls, over to see why his presence is required.

Before I got to him, Geller asked angrily, “What are you trying to do?” “You cheated, Uri,” I said with a friendly smile, perfectly willing to be civil about the matter. An even angrier Uri then asked me, “Who are you? Who are you with?” “My name is Mike Hutchinson,” I told him, not expecting the name to mean a thing to him. I was temporarily taken aback by Uri’s next words. “Oh, yes. You’re the one who came to see me before, with John Dale,” Geller said.¹

¹Geller was recalling a memory of me from eleven months before when he had autographed a book for me and we were photographed together, smiling and with one arm around each other’s shoulder. It was not until later that I recalled that there was another—and real—reason for him to remember me from that day. Uri was doing a charity show in Reading, Berkshire. I visited two journalists at the local newspaper office, telling them the real story about Geller. I bent, and then broke, a spoon they had supplied, thereby changing their earlier belief that Geller had genuine paranormal powers [see B&IS I.5]. This change of opinion was reinforced when, after the show, I explained how Uri probably achieved all of the effects he presented. The following day, an article headlined “Uri branded fake at show” appeared in the newspaper, together with a photograph in which I was shown holding the broken spoon. Yes, Geller had every reason to remember me.

I noticed that standing behind Uri was his long time assistant and brother-in-law, Shipi Shtrang. "Hello, Shipi," I greeted him. I don't think he heard me because of Uri's next words, but judging by the slight smile on his face, he was as amused by the situation as I was. "Tell me something. Do you believe in God?" Uri asked. Uri's body quickly turned away to my right. He half looked back, and angrily said, "Then fuck you!" As he stormed off, I called after him, "But you're not God, Uri." With that, he and his party disappeared into the exhibition crowd.

Does this mean that it's all over between us, Uri?

Seeing Uri Geller on the Telethon asking viewers for £1,000 for the pieces of a broken spoon so incensed London businessman Gerald Fleming that he contacted the Telethon and put forward his own offer.

He would pay £250,000 (yes, two hundred and fifty thousand pounds) to charity if Uri Geller could bend a spoon under controlled conditions.

Gerald advised me of his offer the same day. As he had heard nothing from the Telethon by the following day (Monday), we separately contacted them to see if they took the offer seriously. Although they did, they had their doubts about Geller accepting it.

I contacted the Press Association to let them know about Gerald's offer in the hope that it would receive some press coverage. It didn't. And the offer has not been accepted by Geller.

Michael Hutchinson is the UK distributor for Prometheus Books and Secretary of the UK Skeptics.

Introducing SPRITE...

Dr. H.B. Gibson very kindly put us in touch with anarchist cartoonist Donald Room, who has generously offered to draw a comic strip for us. In this issue, therefore, we are pleased to present the beginning of the continuing saga of an elemental spirit, up against a cold, cruel world. Any apparent similarity between the SPRITE and the Editor of the B&IS is, of course, we're sure, either purely coincidental or evidence that Mr. Room is psychic. [—wg]



Skeptic at large...

Wendy M. Grossman

Regan, Reagan, and the stars

Now that I am turning the B&IS over to others to run, I feel free to write opinionated articles on a wider variety of subjects than I have been able to tackle in the past. "Skeptic at large..." will be a regular column. I welcome letters from readers who want to disagree with me on any subject. (You are also welcome to agree, of course.) I begin with Ronald Reagan because of the immense recent press coverage of his and his wife's reliance on astrology, and also because I am the B&IS' resident American. It seems only fair for me to criticize my own country first.

Donald T. Regan's *For the Record: from Wall Street to Washington* (Harcourt Brace, 1988)¹, now being published in the UK (Hutchinson, £16.95) after its enormous press reception both here and in the US, is, curiously enough *not* primarily about Nancy Reagan's astrologer. Regan clearly writes under the impression that his book is about the Reagan administration, the way it handled the Iran-Contra arms scandal, and the way the American government interacts with the media. Mrs. Reagan's dependence on astrology is presented as background information which helps to make sense of some presidential decisions. Regan focusses on his view of his own role in events. The press cuttings I have to hand all focus, however, on the idea that this book is Regan's "revenge", and all, without exception, mention astrology in the title (up to and including, "Doesn't astrology make Reagan one of the wise men?" (*Evening Standard*, May 12; the author's answer is yes). One article has it that science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein foresaw the whole thing in *Stranger in a Strange Land* (*Evening Press* (Irish), 13 May). It is worth noting that while the headline of each of the 17 press cuttings to hand² includes astrology or the stars, Regan's book has 279 pages of text, and astrology is mentioned on only 25 of them.

The UK release is already beginning to generate a new wave of articles; these are more thoughtful book reviews, in contrast to the earlier pieces which concentrated on Regan's revelations for their news value. However, the two reviews I have seen made me wonder if the writers (John Mortimer in the *Sunday Times* and Simon Hoggart in the *Observer*) had read the same book I had.

Regan explains his intentions as follows: "I... have aimed to provide footnotes, a glossary, and alternative explanations to the extensive but deeply flawed nar-

rative that already exists in the public press... those who know the truth have some obligation to prevent lies from entering unchallenged into history" (p xv). He adds that anyone else is equally free to tell their own, possibly conflicting, version of what happened.

The media reaction to Regan's book parallels a great deal of what he says about their reaction to Reagan and his administration and staff. Regan believes the press tends to latch on to a particular idea of the way things are—for example that he was autocratic as Reagan's Chief of Staff—and sticks to it no matter what. Similarly, it doesn't matter that Regan speaks of Reagan with genuine admiration and, for most of the book, affection, for the press it's revenge. I would argue that the book reads more like one in which the author is trying to convince himself that the President to whom he gave what he believes to have been his best efforts was in fact worthy of them.

It has apparently been known for some time that Reagan was sympathetic to astrology; according to biographer Garry Wills, in *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home*³, Reagan readjusted the time of his gubernatorial inauguration after astrologers' advice. Wills puts this in context with the rest of Hollywood. Had Reagan remained an actor, his peers would have included Shirley MacLaine, John Travolta (a supporter of Scientology), and many famous others. Wills quotes extensively from Reagan's 1965 memoir, the book he says was written to launch Reagan's career as a politician, including a small story about Reagan's friendship with astrologer Carroll Righter, in which Reagan confesses he read his horoscope every morning. Wills talks about the difficulties of performing, the need to be "up", and the performer's insecurity as explanations, and seems to think Reagan's sympathy unremarkable under the circumstances, even while he quotes the story of Reagan cutting out his horoscope. But sympathetic is not the same as dependent, and Reagan's motives in revealing his sympathy are unclear. Regan says it was uncertain whether the President was aware of the part astrology played in scheduling his appearances. No one, apparently, wanted to ask the President.

Regan talks about Nancy Reagan's involvement with astrology as follows, giving information he says came from former Reagan Aide Michael Deaver: "Mrs. Reagan's dependence on the occult went back at least as far as her husband's governorship, when she had depended on the advice of the famous

¹Thanks to Karl Sabbagh for "pigeoning" a copy from the US.

²Thanks to generous B&IS readers.

³Heinemann, 1988, £14.95

Jeane Dixon. Subsequently she had lost confidence in Dixon's powers. But the First Lady seemed to have absolute faith in the clairvoyant talents of the woman in San Francisco." And further: 'Humor her,' Deaver advised. 'At least this one is not as kooky as the last one.'" (p. 74). Regan's own views on astrology sound skeptical: "On one occasion the First Lady explained that there would be a longer delay than usual in choosing a date for some Presidential appearance or other. 'I can't reach my Friend,' Mrs. Reagan said. 'Her mother died suddenly.' I sympathized, but also wondered why this sad event should have come as a surprise to a clairvoyant" (p. 74).

It seems to me that whatever Regan's motives it is right that he divulged the astrology factor in the running of the Reagan White House. This information explains, for example, the reasoning behind Regan's seclusion for several months while the Iran-Contra scandal was in the news: Mrs. Reagan's "Friend" found the stars unfavourable for public appearances. Simon Hoggart favours Garry Wills' interpretation, that this was only an excuse Nancy Reagan used to keep Regan out of a situation he would handle badly; Regan thinks Nancy Reagan's belief in astrology genuine. This latter interpretation seems to me the more likely one. According to Regan, Joan Quigley gained Mrs. Reagan's confidence by predicting Hinckley's assassination attempt, i.e., that "something bad was going to happen" (Regan's words, p. 4). In any case, is it "vengeful" merely to divulge facts that the White House staff and, more particularly, Nancy Reagan would have preferred to keep secret?

Perhaps in Britain the book would have been banned, even though Nancy Reagan never stood for election and Regan did not draw on classified documents in writing it. But if the world's major political leaders are consulting astrologers, if they are, in the eyes of their senior Aides, "passive" or "waiting for the next act to be written" in between putting on a show signing tax reform bills and meeting other world leaders to discuss disarmament, isn't it better that we know about it? If it undermines our confidence in them, is that necessarily a bad thing? Do we have the right to expect that the authority of office will confer superhuman characteristics on any human being, just to justify our country's choice of leader? Isn't that in itself another form of pseudoscience (or magic)? Perhaps America, in electing an ex-actor, was being supremely honest about the nature of the job the world's leaders take on. Was/is Reagan a good president? Regan makes it plain that he thinks so. Was/is Reagan a good actor? Regan describes Reagan's Presidential performances, when thoroughly scripted, as "flawless". On the other hand, I've seen *Bedtime for Bonzo* and I have to say, if Reagan had been a good actor, would he have had to go into politics?

Wendy Grossman is founder and editor of *The British & Irish Skeptic*, and a writer and folksinger.

UFO days

Steve Donnelly

Over the spring bank holiday the Jodrell Bank Visitor Centre was the venue for two 'UFO Open Days' as part of the recent ITV telethon (although the events were not, in fact, televised). A telephone call to the manager of the Visitor Centre before the bank holiday expressing concern about the fact that holding the Open Days at Jodrell bank might give the impression that the scientific community was behind the event did not elicit a very sympathetic response. Eden Caruthers, the manager of the Centre, informed me that the scientific institution and the Centre were entirely separate, that the event was for a charitable cause and that she did not share my concern. When asked what the scientists at Jodrell Bank thought of the idea she replied that they may not approve but then most of them probably didn't even believe in astrology!

The event itself was fairly low key consisting of a 30 minute talk and slide presentation by Jenny Randles and Peter Hough squeezed in between two planetarium showings. Following the talk, a question and answer session took place in the cafeteria. There was also a stall, run by the Manchester UFO Research Association (MUFORA), selling MUFORA and BUFORA publications. The talk on the Sunday contained many old favourites including even George Adamski's lampshade (popular with the Aetherius Society) along with the suggestion that Adamski was a CIA plant to make the American UFO movement look foolish (I refrain from an obvious comment). It was in general skeptical and dealt with a number of sightings which had prosaic explanations although, predictably, it gave the overall impression that a small percentage of sightings were "genuine." During the question and answer session which followed it became clear that the three MUFORA/BUFORA people, Randles, Hough and another person (John?) whose name I didn't catch, did not believe that UFOs were intelligent visitors from other planets. Instead they preferred the explanation that UFOs were natural physical phenomena which were currently just beyond the grasp of science. They also agreed that the reports of UFO abductions and close encounters of the sexual kind were properly the province of psychology. Jenny Randles, however, felt that there was too much consistency amongst various close encounter reports for the phenomenon to be entirely explicable by individual fantasies.

I kept my eyes on the skies on the way home but other than a circling 747 over Manchester airport saw nothing of interest!

Steve Donnelly is physicist, a lecturer in electronic and electrical engineering, and secretary of the Manchester Skeptics.

Comparative Astrology

Stephen Moreton

What's in your stars? It all depends which paper you read...

In late December the *News of the World* and the *Sunday Express* conducted a TV advertising campaign offering their horoscopes for 1988 as an attraction. Accordingly I obtained these (they were published in their Sunday Magazines on the 27th December) with a view to comparing them in the hope of spotting contradictions. A copy of the 1988 horoscope in *Today* newspaper (Thursday 31 December 1987) was also given to me. The astrologers who compiled these horoscopes were Mystic Meg (*News of the World*), Marjorie Orr (*Sunday Express*) and Jonathan Cainer (*Today*). The horoscopes take each sign in turn and go through 1988 month by month describing one's likely fortunes—financial, sexual or otherwise, for each month. I had thought it would just be a simple matter of going through each horoscope sign by sign, month by month, comparing as I went, spotting where they agreed or disagreed. What I hoped for were things like this for Taurus in March: “lovelife is brill” (*News of the World*) “love drops out of sight... travel plans hit disruptions late month” (*Sunday Express*) “A marvellous month for romance, money, travel...” (*Today*) where one directly contradicts the other—is lovelife going to be good (*News of the World*, *Today*) or poor (*Sunday Express*)? Is it a good time for travel (*Today*) or bad (*Sunday Express*)? Alternatively for Capricorns in April: “Money matters fill your head” (*News of the World*), “you throw your temper into organising cash” (*Sunday Express*), “This month will bring a drain on your finances and may mean some fast talking to your bank manager” (*Today*). Here, each seems to agree quite well with the others. Rather than clear-cut hits and misses, what I found instead were things like this for Libra in October: *News of the World*: “The sun in your sign for the first three weeks zaps up your energy and a secret plan you'd almost abandoned can start to come true—and how. It's time to rewrite the rules of a relationship—in your favour! Watch it: don't ignore a health worry.” *Sunday Express*: “New beginnings in your daily routine. Buckle down to budget details later.” *Today*: “You should achieve great success, if you really try. You could be pulled in contradictory directions and you should wait until after October 6, preferably October 10, before taking major decisions.” Here, no forecasts contradict directly—by saying the exact reverse of the other—but rather they contradict in an indirect way—by talking about different subjects or emphasising different things. If the astrologers were really predicting what were going to be the important issues in a particular month one would expect them each to be giving the same

advice about the same things. Instead, one mentions some secret plan and advises on a relationship while another says there will be new beginnings without saying what they are and suggests leaving unspecified budget details for later. The other talks vaguely about being successful and being pulled in different directions. Each seems to have his or her own ideas as to what will be important and none of these ideas coincide.

Virtually all of each horoscope consisted of these hazy, unspecific trivialities. Almost always they were far too vague to either directly contradict or corroborate one another. I could find only a few clear misses and even fewer clear hits such as the following: while the *News of the World* assures Sagittarians that “Harmonious planets are here to spread peace and happiness” in February, *Today* moans about Saturn “plaguing you with anxiety, duty and hard work” and Uranus “subjecting you to constant upheaval”, these planets not being due to leave until the middle of the month. *Today* and the *Sunday Express* seemed to disagree on how well Sagittarians would fare financially in March with *Today* predicting “you will do exceedingly well on the financial front”, while the *Sunday Express* warned of “cash flow problems”. *News of the World* had no comment on money.

Sunday Express and *Today* clashed over February for Pisces with the former warning “your unconscious is playing tricks on you—old fears threaten to stick you to the spot”, while the latter said “Inventive ideas bubble up from your subconscious”. The *News of the World* and *Sunday Express* both agreed that January would bring exceptionally good financial luck for Pisceans but disagreed with *Today* which warned that “The year starts in a serious way”.

Such obvious clashes were rare for the reasons already explained. My main complaint is that the horoscopes were so vague and general that they could apply to anyone and almost any event could be made to fit the predictions. What was clear is that each astrologer had different views as to what was going to happen in each month—not exactly consistent of them. On those few occasions when by chance they happened to have the same ideas as to what were going to be the important issues in a particular month, they were about as likely to agree as to disagree about whether they would be good or bad.

Stephen Moreton is a postgraduate student living in Edinburgh, with training in chemistry and geology.

Dreams and Visions of Survival

Antony Flew

Are near-death experiences sufficient proof of life after death?

Since the seventies there has been a revival of interest in, and a considerable expansion of the study of, near death experiences (NDEs); especially those describable as out of the body experiences (OBEs). For instance, J.C. Hampe's *To Die is to Gain* (London: Darton, Langman and Todd, 1972) and R.A. Moody's *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam, 1977) have both sold well and attracted the attention of the electronic media. In *Immortality or Extinction* (London: Macmillan, 1982), Paul and Linda Badham round off their very creditably critical account of the research reports of these and other writers by asking: 'If we accept these "traveller's tales" from the dying as evidential, what conclusions follow? Their own cautious verdict about those NDEs which are also OBEs is: 'If no other plausible explanation can be put forward, then we have some grounds for accepting them as being what their percipients claim them to be—reports of what actually happens at the moment of death. And what appears to happen is that the soul leaves the body and begins to move on to another mode of existence' (p. 89).

Hold it, now! Is there any good reason to believe that these tales are evidence for anything other than the experiences which their tellers may or may not have had in the privacy of their own minds? Let us never forget how the incorrigible Thomas Hobbes responded to the claim that God spoke to some prophet in a dream: 'Certainly, I will allow that he dreamed that God spoke to him.'

What we can deal with here and perhaps settle, is the small question whether any OBEs either do or could support, as the Bradhams and so many others clearly believe, a Platonic-Cartesian view of the nature of man. Is it only if that is answered in the affirmative that there arises the question whether they do or could constitute evidence for survival. The prior question itself arises because many people have reported that, usually in the crisis period of a serious illness, it has seemed to them that they were seeing themselves from a point of view, other than that occupied by their own eyes, and probably while their eyes were in any case shut. They have seemed to see, and much more rarely in other modes to perceive, both themselves lying apparently unconscious in their beds and other objects not visible or otherwise sensible from the position of those beds. It is said too that sometimes the subjects of these OBEs produce information, which appears to them to have been sensibly acquired, about objects not normally

observable, even by the medical staff and fit visitors (Badham 1982, pp. 74-5).

Certainly these first are very odd and very remarkable experiences. Nor is there any reasonable doubt that they do occur; although whether any of their subjects can in fact produce information about objects not normally observable is open to question. If and in so far as it is established that they do, then these productions of information will have to be rated as ESP performances. But what is grossly uneconomic and gratuitous is to attribute such performances to incorporeal souls, postulated *ad hoc*, rather than to the flesh and blood persons who were the patients of the the OBEs in question. It is enough to have to hypothesise ESP, without also hypothesising immaterial souls to be its agents: "Agents," as Ockham is supposed to have said, "are not to be multiplied beyond necessity."

The fact that OBEs do occur, albeit rarely, is no more a reason for saying that the person having such experiences is at the time disembodied, than is the fact that we can all image (that is, form a mental image of) ongoing distant in either time or place a reason for saying that; when we are engaged in these imagings, we are actually then or there, rather than when and where we in fact are. And, if subjects do produce information about objects not normally observable by anyone, then, as in the séance room situation, these achievements can and should be most economically described in terms of the psi-powers of those subjects.

It is best to assimilate the case of OBEs to that of imagination (imaging). For what is in dispute is not really what (private) experiences are had or what mental images are formed, but how these experiences and these images are properly to be described. So, just as the correct answer to the question, 'Where and when is the woman imagining she is Helen of Troy, being seduced by Paris?' is 'Wherever she is when she is doing the imagining; maybe in boring Bootle on a wet Sunday afternoon!'; so the answer to the question 'Where was the patient when he was having the out of the body experiences?' is—just as dispiritingly—'In his bed, apparently unconscious.'

Professor Antony Flew is a philosopher and author. He is a fellow of CSICOP and a vice-president of the Rationalist Press Association.

Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

An evening of *clairvoyance* was announced at the end of May as part of the fund-raising efforts of the ITV Telethon. Notebooks secreted about our persons, fellow Manchester skeptic Steve Donnelly and I made our pilgrimage to *The Talk of the North* nightclub, Eccles, to investigate the “Medium Wavelengths using the Psychic Channels” of mediums Tabatha, Darran and Geoff. Tabatha was an experienced performer, a Doris lookalike who coped well with the unresponsiveness of the audience, a disappointing 34. More interesting was Paul, who was next on the stage. Looking more like a used-car salesman than someone in tune with the etheric world, we were told it was his first ever public performance, and it showed. Failing to get a reaction with “I see a scroll,” trying birth, death and marriage certificates, he spent far too long on what was obviously a no-hoper. But when the name of “Cook” didn’t register, he did have the initiative to try the profession of *chef*, but this was a dead end too. Some quite obvious clues escaped him: asked if she was having trouble with her hearing, a lady replied “I’m not having trouble with my ears...”—at which point Paul gave up, but an experienced performer would have immediately guessed that the man next to her was her husband and moved straight onto him. But while Paul was plodding away, Darren was beginning to act rather strangely. He appeared to be going into a trance, rocking gently in his chair at the rear of the stage. As the evening wore on, I felt a bit like that, too. Darren was much more confident, in fact irritatingly so. A nice trick cropped up in his performance: failing to get audience recognition for the spirit of “Jim,” he turned *Jim* into *gym*! He tried the same idea on *coach*, (coach=bus, coach=teach), and for *June*, failing on the name but (eventually) finding someone who recognised June 7th. He smoked like a chimney and paced across the stage relentlessly, raising his eyes to the ceiling for inspiration. I actually looked to see if he had cue cards sellotaped up there. Perhaps if he did we would have been spared an excruciatingly boring ten minutes while he tried desperately to find a connection with “wood.” When he finally gave up, Tabatha jumped to the rescue and linked to Canada (all those trees!), but there was still no luck there. For me, the evening was an interesting lesson in the art of cold reading. It showed me how not to do it.

1988 is the year of the Rowan Tree, according to the art of Dendron Pneumology. This is not an obscure surgical procedure, but “a reconstruction of Celtic tree foreshadowing.” Apparently, centuries ago, the Celts believed that every species of tree watched over its own particular fifteen day period of

the year, and that those born within a period would inherit the attributes of the associated tree. Also, there were seven *especially* holy species spanning the year, and five of these were also allocated a year in turn. So the nett effect is that for any particular birth-date there are three trees to take into consideration when constructing a character profile. Once the Celtic calendar is reconstructed, so it goes, the ancient art of tree divination can be given again to the world. Or sold—it’s £7.50 for a postal consultation.

I’m sad to report that another psychic surgeon has been in action. Stephen Turoff is an Essex man of the “plunging the hand in the body” school. His spirit guide (and you’ve got to have one if you want to get on) is Dr Kahn, but he also believes he has the deceased (and discredited) Brazilian psychic surgeon Arigo on his side. Having had several operations performed on his “etheric body,” S.N. Burley wrote to *Psychic News* describing a physical operation Turoff performed, and his report is horrifying: first, Turoff warned that the operation would cause some discomfort. Mr Burley says “This was quite true; at times it was almost unbearable, but some of the pain could have been due to fear as I realised what Dr Kahn was doing. After the incision, which was painless, his hand appeared to penetrate through my flesh and muscle. It seemed as though his hand was right in my stomach. He twisted and probed, and then poured plasma into the area, which he said would be cold—and it was... when I dismounted from the couch I felt weak and sore... several hours later when the anaesthetic had worn off, I really was in pain. The scar was very pronounced, and my flesh was red and bruised.” Mr Turoff continues to ply his trade.

From a wispy cloud, a hand reaches out, holding a telephone—“there could be a psychic message from beyond waiting for you...” I rang 0898-555167 and heard a recorded message about the personal consultation I could have with a medium if I rang again between 2pm and 7pm. To tempt me there was an excerpt of a recent session, where an unnamed “expert” gave an unbelievably vague rune reading for a man with marital problems. He chose three numbers (3, 15 and 25), and the reader revealed to him the hidden depths of his personality. The reading was advertised as ‘free,’ but at 25p per minute (38p peak) I would beg to differ.

Toby Howard is a lecturer in Computer Graphics, a member of the *British and Irish Skeptic* editorial board, and chairman of the Manchester Skeptics.

Reviews

Events

Things that go bump in the night

Neil L. Inglis

A skeptical séance at Silver Spring, Maryland, October 24th, 1987

"What exactly is the purpose of tonight's séance?" asked my companion.

What indeed! My friends and I were standing in the October air in front of a community centre on the District/Maryland border. The three of us were going to attend a Halloween séance entitled "Things That Go BUMP in the Night"; not a séance in the conventional mould, mind you, but one with a distinctly skeptical flavour. For our hosts that evening were not psychics, but *debunkers*; men and women who have chosen to dispute the mass of irresponsible and anti-scientific claims currently being made in defence of paranormal and fringe philosophies in general. My companions had agreed to join me as my guests, but they were understandably apprehensive as to what to expect. I was as much in the dark as they were, as details of the evening had been deliberately withheld to sharpen the surprise.

At the stroke of six, we were beckoned inside the building and invited to stand in line, crocodile-fashion. Skeptic though I am, my heart was pounding fiercely, and the tension mounted further when a dark-haired woman processed towards us down a corridor, and guided us towards the séance chamber, one pair at a time. Many of the guests expressed annoyance at this leisurely procedure—after all, why couldn't we all just pile into the chamber at once?—but I could see the reasoning behind the protocol. We were being stripped of our independence, our capacity to make decisions for ourselves; as we were shortly to discover, in paranormal extravaganzas the psychic is always in the driver's seat and the audience is never in control.

Anxious that our threesome not be disrupted, we pleaded with our guide to take us into the séance chamber together. The lady agreed to this, and at that point I thought I recognised her from a recent "skeptical" function I had attended in downtown Washington. "Are you Grace?" I enquired. A frosty stare and a lengthy pause, "Yes... I am Grace!" she replied. Like the man with the noisy bleeper watch in the theatre audience, I had spoiled the atmosphere and drawn attention to myself. Our hosts were not their usual selves that night: no—they were playing a *rôle*. The members of the audience were expected

to play along with them in turn.

Some thirty guests, including a handful of press representatives, were crammed into a dark and sweltering chamber dominated by a dramatic black backcloth. Much to our dismay, my friends and I were shown to separate seats. The sinister, ghostly music that greeted us was soon replaced by the decelerating melodies from a music box, and as the lights descended, a cackling usher left us in little doubt as to the unspeakable horrors that awaited us. There was a good deal of nervous tittering as the musical box juddered to a halt, and for a moment everything was quiet. The voices that shortly emerged from the darkness proved to belong to Washington conjurer Jamy Ian Swiss and statistician Chip Denman, who were to take us on an entertaining odyssey through the wonderland of psi. We saw demonstrations of techniques which psychics and mediums have used to dupe unsuspecting sitters out of large amounts of money. A consummate professional, Swiss did not reveal his methods; but he impressed upon us that mediumship has been and remains a squalid traffic in human misery, where cruel and unscrupulous tricksters have skillfully manipulated the anguish of grieving relatives unable to cope with the finality of death. His conjuring tricks were interspersed with dissertations on those notorious charlatans, the Fox sisters, as well as on the ghoulish mountebank of them all, Mr D.D. Home. No target was spared, and psi-practitioners from Uri Geller to Shirley MacLaine all came in for harsh and unrelenting scrutiny. Credit was reserved only for that legendary magician and psi-debunker Harry Houdini, who predictably, if sadly, failed to grace our assembly with his presence.

Half-way through the show, it occurred to me that many eyewitness accounts of paranormal phenomena could well be the product of simple hallucinations. The members of the audience were breathing one another's recycled air, and I for one was feeling rather queasy. We were being softened up for the grand finale, and by now we were utterly at the mercy of our hosts. Familiar objects take on unwonted shapes in semi-darkness, and when it's difficult to breathe, you'll do anything, see anything, hear anything you're told. Swiss and Denman invited us to join hands, the lights were cut, and the communion with the dead began in earnest. No skeptic is ever unequivocally convinced that psychic forces don't exist, and there was a pungent smell of terror in the air. Every debunker lives with the fear that his comfortable securities and prejudices might just one day be rudely shattered, and this was no less the case for members of our audience as clammy hand squeezed clammy hand.

It was pitch dark. A lady screamed, as cold and sticky fingers scampered sensually around her neck. A disembodied luminescent eyeball danced along the rows of chairs. There were strange rappings and a nauseating whooshing sound. Ghostly shapes and figures expanded and contracted along the walls; and to cap it all, we clearly and distinctly felt the flapping wings of vampire bats snapping against our foreheads. We all felt mightily relieved when the lights returned, and Swiss announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the séance is concluded... and we won't tell you how we did it!"

Swiss and Denman received a well-earned round of applause. They had taken us all on a daring, ingenious and hugely satisfying venture into the unknown; and how much we had all learned! *Things that go BUMP in the night* had convincingly established that séances are exercises in psychological domination. By being forced to view the proceedings in a gloomy and discomfiting confined space, the 'gulls' and deprived of their points of reference with the outside world. In addition, the requirement that sitters' hands be clutched together or pressed to tables prevents the participants from groping wildly into the darkness, and snatching at concealed wires of the grisly ectoplasmic forms that dance above their heads. The audience members' natural tendency to grant the 'psychic' the benefit of the doubt will be magnified severalfold: an underactive air conditioning system can be counted on to induce faintness, hallucinations and God knows what else!

After a question-and-answer session the audience disbanded, and my friends left the community center in a relective mood. The human urge to converse with the dead is as old as mankind itself. Swiss, Denman and the other members of the National Capital Area Skeptics can do nothing to suppress it. But for Washington debunkers at least, no séance will ever be quite the same again.

Neil Inglis is a British expatriate and translator living in Washington, D.C.

Media

Mind over Matter

Steuart Campbell

Mind over Matter BBC Radio 3, 10.40–10.50 p.m. 30 March 1980 (R).

This was a repeat of a short interview with Bob Morris, Professor of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh, conducted by Colin Tudge. I missed the first broadcast and so was glad of this opportunity to

learn what Morris is up to. Although we live in the same city our paths have not crossed.

Morris has instituted three research programmes. These are investigations of (1) telepathy, (2) claims that the physical world may be influenced by the exercise of will and (3) an attempt to distinguish between phenomena that purport to be psychic and those that are merely self-delusion or are tricks. Progress so far appears to be limited to collecting data on the tricks magicians use and anecdotes about alleged psychic incidents. He appears to be preoccupied with allegations that some computer operators cannot achieve the results that are easily achieved by others. The implication is that some people interact psychically with computers!

Morris's answers to Tudge's questions were often vague and rambling. Asked what would happen if his research failed to find any psychic effects Morris indicated that he would then engage in a 'sizeable follow-up.' This would involve following 'continued claimants,' particularly those who doubted his results. Instead of abandoning the research he would expand it. Parapsychology, he claimed, is the study of all human experience!

Books

Mysteries of the Unknown

Michael Hutchinson

Mystic Places, *Mysteries of the Unknown series*, Time-Life Books. £14.90 incl. p&p.

As most of the readers of the *The British & Irish Skeptic* are discerning people, you will probably subscribe to *The Skeptical Inquirer*, and will have seen the review of this book in the Spring 1988 edition. Why another review? you may be asking. Well, this review was written before I saw Charles J. Cazeau's one in *SI*, and it puts forward an entirely different opinion. In fact, I was surprised at Cazeau's review and his conclusion. We may have been writing about different books; or perhaps I am too pedantic or unrealistic about the quality I expect from a leading international publisher like Time/Life.

The massive advertising campaign by Time/Life Books for *Mysteries of the Unknown* can hardly have escaped your attention. Inserts have been dropping out of all sorts of magazines, including *New Scientist*.

Reading the advertising blurb, it was impossible to know whether the books were going to be good or not. Credulous statements might just be a tease, I thought. Get people interested, then hit them with the facts, perhaps! After all, they do claim that "Every volume has been meticulously researched to bring you the full facts about each bizarre case... Delight

in a narrative that reveals all sides to a story, treats each subject impartially—and leaves you to make up your own mind about the world's greatest mysteries." With promises like that, you can't go far wrong, can you?

So I sent off my order for one of the first books. I could choose between *Mystic Places* and *The UFO Phenomenon*, each of which had its own advertising campaign. I chose the former because I thought it had less scope for sensationalism. Surely Time/Life wouldn't be irresponsible in their portrayal of the Bermuda Triangle.

One of the advertising leaflets had included a photograph of the book, opened at pages covering Flight 19's disappearance in the Bermuda Triangle. It told the usual Berlitz-type story, ending in the sensational "...students of the occult blame the disaster on the malevolent powers said to flourish in the Bermuda Triangle." Not a good sign, I know, but perhaps the following pages would take a different line...

The main chapters of the books are: Atlantis; The Eternal Quest; Secrets of the Great Pyramid; The Meaning of the Megaliths; Pictures on the Earth; and An Interior World. In the books, the Triangle is covered by three short items. The first tells the story of the *Mary Celeste* (at least they got the name right!), with just a hint that the Triangle may have been responsible: "...the *Mary Celeste* is believed by many to have been doomed by the inexplicable evil that lurks in the Bermuda Triangle." The pre-publicity incorrectly stated that the "*Mary Celeste*... sailed through the heart of the Bermuda Triangle." Having sailed from New York and been found drifting between the Azores and Portugal, the ship is hardly likely to have been anywhere near the Triangle.

Flight 19 is 'explained' in only five paragraphs. In the Time/Life version, one of the last messages known to have been received from the flight is changed from "I suggest we fly due east until we run out of gas..." to "We'll fly west until we hit the beach or run out of gas." The former statements shows that the pilots were lost, because flying east would have taken them away from Florida and safety. Changing the direction is therefore to falsely indicate that the pilots knew where they were and that something other than pilot error was responsible for the disappearance. Of the Mariner flying boat which was sent in search of Flight 19, but which was seen to explode in mid-air, the Time/Life version states: "...before long a Mariner flying boat was in the air. But the Mariner was not heard of again." The strangest thing about Time/Life's version is that they include Larry Kusche's book *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved* in the bibliography. It is the only skeptical book in the list, and they have ignored its contents.

The final mystery of the Triangle is one which I have read before, but which I have not seen explained. It describes the experiences of a Beechcraft

Bonanza pilot who claims to have been the victim of a time warp, having made a flight from the Bahamas to Florida in forty-five minutes instead of the normal seventy-five. During the flight he experienced problems with his compass, navigation equipment, and radio. Furthermore, he claims to have flown through a mysterious cloud, flying out of it into a greenish-white haze, not the blue sky he had seen ahead. There's one for Larry Kusche.

This book certainly proves one thing: that Time/Life's hype for this series was totally dishonest.

Mystic Places does nothing to throw light on the infamous but non-existent Curse of Tutankhamen. Indeed, they make mistake after mistake in their publicity and the four paragraphs in the book devoted to King Tut. To understand these mistakes, a few technicalities must be explained. When I use the term 'tomb' I am referring to the complete area of Tutankhamen's burial place, which comprises a corridor, antechamber, annex, burial chamber, and treasury. Within the burial chamber, the stone sarcophagus containing Tut's body was surrounded by four shrines of gilded wood, one inside the other, the outer one almost entirely filling the burial chamber.

A photograph in Time/Life's publicity has the following caption: "A remarkable photograph that captures the precise moment in November 1922, then Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon entered the tomb of Tutankhamen [Error 1]. Within two months Carnarvon was dead [Error 2]. Was he the first victim of the pharaoh's curse?"

Error 1: According to *Tutankhamen* by Christian Desroches-Noblecourt (Penguin 1965), the photograph shows the excavators opening the doors of the second gilt shrine in the burial chamber. The names of those in the photograph are not mentioned in the book, but as the burial chamber was opened on the 17th February 1923 and the first coffin not until 10th October 1925, it is certain that the photograph must have been taken some time after February 1923. Indeed, it is more than likely that Carnarvon is not even in the photograph; that it was taken after he died. I haven't pursued the matter further—but Time/Life's "meticulous research" should have done.

Error 2: Only if the photograph was taken on or soon after 17th February 1923 could Carnarvon have died within two months. As this schedule doesn't seem to fit, Time/Life are very likely wrong. Meticulous research of this quality doesn't merit consolation points. (By using the 17th February date I am just looking for facts to fit the theory. If they had written that Carnarvon had died within four months, I suppose I could find a suitable date to fit. That's pseudoscience!)

The same photograph appears in *Mystic Places*, but with a different caption: "As his assistants look on, archaeologist Howard Carter carefully opens a set of nested doors leading to the long-hidden sar-

cophagus of Tutankhamen." Carnarvon isn't given a mention. Could it be that Time/Life have discovered what I believe: that he wasn't there?

The text tells us, "... the expeditioners spent the next year excavating before opening the chamber containing Tut's sarcophagus [Error 3]. But Lord Carnarvon did not live to see it. He had died of blood poisoning months earlier [Errors 4 & 5]—the victim, some said, of a pharaoh's curse.

Error 3: As mentioned above, the burial chamber was entered on the 17th February 1923, only four months after the archaeologists first entered the tomb. Time/Life can't be referring to the opening of the sarcophagus because, as we have seen, that didn't happen until nearly three years later.

Errors 4 & 5: Carnarvon was bitten by a mosquito in March 1923. The bite turned septic and the infection spread. Carnarvon decided to return to Cairo, where his family could look after him. The infection yielded to treatment, but Carnarvon died of pneumonia—not blood poisoning—in early April, about six weeks after the burial chamber was entered (see Desroches-Noblecourt).

Have you noticed from this episode that Time/Life have manufactured some material for *Phantom Encounters*, another book in their seemingly dreadful series? As their publicity claims to show a photograph of Carnarvon at an event which occurred months after he died, will this same photograph subsequently be produced as evidence for ghosts?

Although these are only the 'light' pieces of the book and take up only a small percentage of its space, I believe it is fair to be hyper-critical, because it is just these subjects which were highlighted in the advertising. The main body of the book appears to me to present an accurate picture of the facts, although I do not know enough about them to say so for sure. I recall the story of the astronomer and the archaeologist who were talking about Velikovsky's theories. "His archaeology was good, but his astronomy was lacking," said the astronomer. "That's funny," said the archaeologist, "I got just the reverse impression."

Michael Hutchinson is UK distributor for Prometheus Books, and secretary of the British Committee.

Aphrodisiac bid to catch moor 'beast'

BIOLOGIST Nigel Brierley is to make a new bid to capture the notorious killer 'Beast of Exmoor' - by using a cat aphrodisiac.

Mr Brierley has been on the trail of the mystery animal, said to be a large wild cat, for five years and

is painstakingly extracting the essence from home-grown catmint.

He will place "scent posts" on the moor in a bid to catch the elusive 'beast', which is blamed for the deaths of hundreds of sheep, in a secret £300 trap.

A Lack of Resonance

David J. Fisher

Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past*. 391pp, Collins, 1988, £15.

All the better for wreckers, they thank heaven for foul weather!" said a pretty woman, casting her adversary's queen ..."

— Ouida, *Strathmore* (1865)

Ouida (Marie-Louise de la Ramée) was the Barbara Cartland of her day and was famous for having confidently thrust her characters into situations without letting her (and therefore their) lack of specialist knowledge embarrass her in the least. I suggest that the currently obsolete eponymous adjective, 'Ouidesque', should now be dusted off and used anew. It is the most apposite term to describe Rupert Sheldrake's latest work.

Like his first book *A New Science of Life*, it promulgates his theory of 'morphic fields.' This can best be described as a sort of race memory cum collective consciousness principle which applies to sentient, non-sentient, and even inanimate entities. He suggests that all natural systems, from rabbits to crystals, inherit a collective memory of their kind. Rabbits (he says) are rabbit-shaped not only because of their DNA but also because nature has a rabbit-habit: a rabbit 'field' which shapes their growth and instinctive behaviour. Moreover, far from being stored within our own brains, our memories are supposed to result from 'tuning in to ourselves from the past.' According to this hypothesis of 'formative causation,' this inherent memory depends upon 'morphic resonance'—a process which involves communication across both time and space.

The main experimental manifestation of all this is predicted to be that once a skill is acquired by one member of a group it will spread like wildfire to other members of the group (e.g., blue-tits opening milk bottles). Because of the basic tenets of the theory (even the picking up of ideas from aliens in other galaxies is not ruled out), it is fundamentally untestable. An experimenter would first have to find control subjects who did not know something, without imparting to them the very information which they were required to know. Try this for yourself. Pick a stranger and try to find out if, say, he knows the Russian word for pencil. Remember that you must do this without letting him know what you are after, and you cannot assume that he is honest or cooperative. A further complication in the present case is that many people know this word, but do not know that they know it. They assume that "caran d'ache" (the name of the famous firm of pencil-makers) is a French word. This whole problem recalls Peter the Great's fabled club whose potential members had not to think of a white polar bear for half an hour.

Sheldrake's theory is almost beautiful in the way that it neatly evades the two experimental safeguards of a control sample and of reproducibility. Although the theory is clearly untestable (due to the presumed all-pervading nature of the morphic fields), an organisation has been set up to fund tests, and (unsuccessful) ones have already been carried out (see *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Spring 1988, p 298).

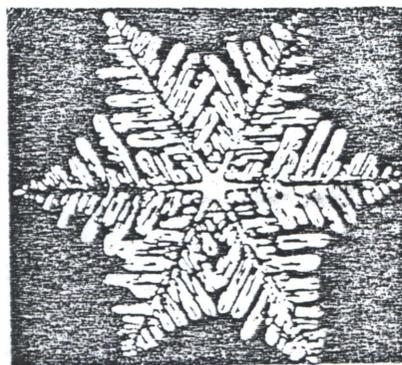
However, (if one is to keep an open mind) it is not necessarily the theory itself which is pseudoscientific. Generously assuming the theory to be viable but unprovable, can one apply Occam's razor and ask if there is any evidence that such a theory is needed?

Sheldrake appears to have evidence aplenty, but it is the contention of this reviewer that it is distorted, biased, inaccurate and . . . Ouida-esque. It is the manner in which current scientific understanding is misrepresented which makes of this book a particularly insidious example of the pseudoscientific genre.

In order to support his theory, Sheldrake flits expertly through a dazzling array of fields (physics, chemistry, biology, botany, politics, anthropology . . .), pointing out mysterious facts and suggesting that his theory explains them all. The reader is likely to be over-awed by the closely argued paragraphs peppered with references (à la Lyall Watson), and would probably be content to put his trust in Dr. Sheldrake's very impressive academic qualifications and CV.

Such trust would be sadly misplaced. A closer look at his appraisal of each field suggests that his flitting is decidedly Ouida-esque and that he is actually no expert in most of them. There is insufficient space here to describe all of his misconceptions. It is perhaps enough to point out a few all-pervading errors, plus one or two glaring distortions of current scientific understanding. For instance, one general theme of the book is that whenever a conventional theory, such as quantum mechanics, cannot predict something it should be dismissed. However, he here persistently confuses an *inability* to prove something mathematically with an *ignorance* of the phenomena or principles involved. As Dirac said in 1929, "The underlying physical laws necessary for the whole of chemistry are thus completely known, and the difficulty is only that the exact application of these laws leads to equations which are much too complicated to be soluble."

So that he can emphasise the communication and memory aspects of his theory, Sheldrake attacks the concept that patterns in nature are chosen, *ad hoc*, due to very localised effects. To a first (and good) approximation, modern theory contends that the observed structures of crystals (including DNA and viruses) are those which minimise interatomic forces. Sheldrake correctly states that calculations often predict a large number of possible stable structures (the multiple minimum problem). However, he confuses a mathematical minimum (which guarantees only 'temporary' stability) with an absolute minimum



Upper figure: typical photograph of snowflake, used by Rupert Sheldrake. Lower figure: computer simulated snowflake form, based upon simple diffusion field assumptions (Nittman & Stanley, *Journal of Physics A*, 1987, Volume 53, p 20). Sheldrake says that snowflake symmetry involves unknown phenomena, such as morphic resonance.

(which, as it were, cannot be bettered). A good analogy is that of water—it may get caught in any hollow for a while but, sufficiently disturbed, will always end up at the lowest point—just as a substance will end up with the most stable structure. Sheldrake also says that one cannot even prove that minimum energy is the correct criterion because the alternative structures are not available for testing to see if they really do have higher energies. It is relatively easy to obtain and study thermodynamically non-equilibrium structures.

Someone must also have told him that crystal symmetry is often incompatible with minimum energy. This is true. However, real crystals (even so-called perfect ones) are not really as they are drawn in elementary textbooks and are so full of defects (extra atoms, missing atoms, etc.) that the theoretical incompatibility is irrelevant. Some of the defects may even be "nature's way" of resolving the incompatibility.

Also, when pointing out (in order to reinforce his memory idea) that the same patterns are adopted

again and again, he is less than open about the alternatives available. Thus, when a crystal of a new substance forms, it is hardly surprising that it always has the same structure as a pre-existing one since it is well known that there are only 230 crystallographically distinct structures from which to choose; just as there are (surprisingly) only 17 possible types of Arabian mosque decoration!

In order to reinforce the communication aspect of his theory, Sheldrake often fails to mention less well-known but conventional means of signalling. He finds the group behaviour of certain fish and insects inexplicable (without his theory) precisely because he does not seem to be aware of the widespread role played by electric fields and chemical agents (to name but two) in communication between living things.

Sheldrake's Ouida-esque search for evidence becomes really frenzied when he attempts to explain the occurrence of communication where there is no conceivable need to assume it. According to him, a substance such as common salt 'knows' exactly how to crystallise because other brave forebears (old salts?) have already demonstrated the optimum structure. In the case of a newly synthesised substance, some molecular Einstein has first to hit upon the correct structure; but crystal growth of that substance then gets easier and easier because the information is communicated via morphic resonance. The suggestion that crystal-growers simply get better at growing the crystals is given short shrift. On the other hand, he more seriously considers their notorious habit of spreading crystal nuclei via their beards. This apocryphal fact was sarcastically pointed out by a letter-writer who was commenting on his first book. Here, Sheldrake cheekily uses the letter as a supporting reference but finally decides that the crystal structure goes walkabout even if the crystal grower does not. In true Ouida-esque fashion, he is completely oblivious of the fact that entirely foreign agents (animal fibres, bacteria, etc) are often more efficient promoters of crystal growth than are particles of the substance itself. In fact, this whole question of crystal nucleation is a red herring, but there is no room here to explain why.

The most blatant and clear-cut case of spurious communication invented by Sheldrake again involves crystals. There are two old chestnuts concerning snowflakes. The better-known one asks why they are all different, and the other asks why each individual one is so symmetrical. The typical lay question in the second case is: "How does each arm of a snowflake know what the others are doing?" Sheldrake does not dwell upon the first problem—probably because the likelihood that snowflakes are all different is not particularly good news from the point of view of his theory.

The second problem is easily resolved using his theory of morphic resonance. Thus, according to him, the snowflake arms are in direct morphic com-

munication across the atomically vast void between them. One wonders, skeptically, why the morphic field does not reach as far as the other flakes, since he suggests elsewhere that the influence of such a field can span continents. No, here again Sheldrake is baffled by a simple fact: that macroscopic symmetry can be exhibited on a scale which is much larger than that explored by a randomly moving individual atom. Strangely, he does not refer to the large body of scientific knowledge concerning 'dissipative structures,' which are defined precisely by their possession of a large-scale symmetry that does not reflect the atomic structure or the external environment.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, the simple answer is that snowflake arms do not 'know' what the others are doing. They simply respond to the same environment in same way. This environment is a diffusion (rather than a morphic) field. A diffusion field is just another name for a distribution of myriads of randomly meandering atoms. The distribution obeys well-defined and well-known laws and equations and is not in the least mysterious. The meandering appears to be less random when a growing crystal is in the vicinity because the crystal continually removes atoms from the distribution. The building of atoms into the crystal reduces the number of free atoms close to the crystal and others naturally meander into the available space and replace. On the scale of one snowflake, the rate of replacement will usually be equal over the whole crystal surface but, because of geometrical factors, the atoms are not added evenly and this gives rise to the basic hexagonal shape. The environment and replacement rate will vary widely from snowflake to snowflake and leads to the wide variety of shapes. Incidentally, Sheldrake illustrates their beautiful symmetry by taking examples from the famous collection of 2453 snowflake photographs published by Dover Press. It is well known among crystal growers that snowflakes are not that symmetrical and that these pictures were doctored by the compilers to make them look 'nicer.'

All this indicates that Sheldrake's knowledge is obviously that of the interloper. Modern crystal growth theory revolves around diffusion fields, surface energy effects, and lattice defects. None of these are mentioned in his book. Of course, he may believe that all of current theory is wrong; but how can he prove it if he does not mention it—even negatively?

He cites three sources to prove his point about the 'failure' of conventional science to explain the symmetry of the snowflake. None of these reflect the current consensus of opinion. Indeed, far too many of Sheldrake's most telling references are from the letter and editorial pages of *Nature* or *Science*. Such publications are not subjected to the sobering effect of peer review. One 1985 article (*Nature*, 10th January, 1985) almost gleefully reports the failure of the latest computer model to simulate snowflake formation, and suggests that other phenomena (lattice vibrations)

should be included. The latter has not been seriously considered in this context for decades. The figure shown in this review was produced (1987) by improving the computer model but including new phenomena. The computer program used was almost moronic and mainly contented itself with causing atoms to meander in from random starting points at the edge of a circular screen (like the 'Asteroids' video game) until they stuck to a group of previously captured atoms (the crystal). Their motion was entirely random and the only 'design choice' exercised by the computer program concerning the calculation of the probability of an atom sticking at a given point. The randomly arriving atoms certainly could not 'sense' the overall shape of the crystal. The resultant pattern is as unexpectedly beautiful as a real snowflake.

Such simple and effective computer models are worth more than a million half-baked theories from those who always want a 'big new Lego set' and refuse to see what they might do with the few pieces to hand. Instead, there is a glut of sterile theories upon which it is impossible to build and which paralyse rational thought and intuition. This book peddles yet another one and is, in its overall philosophy and evidential details, a travesty of scientific imagination and academic research.

A respected scientist, like Sheldrake, who becomes a too enthusiastic and out-of-touch seeker after a 'theory of everything,' reminds one of the member of a Varsity rowing crew of whom Ouida wrote, "while all rowed fast, none rowed so fast as our hero."

Dr David Fisher is principal editor of the journal *Crystal Properties and Preparation*, co-author of a popular textbook (*Fundamentals of Solidification*), carries out theoretical research in the field of phase transformations, and is currently trying to organise a Skeptics group in Wales and the West Country.

Missing Intruders

Hilary Evans

Philip J. Klass, *UFO-Abductions, a Dangerous Game*. Prometheus, Buffalo, NY, 1988, cloth.

In the course of his book, Philip Klass quotes from Budd Hopkins' *Intruders*:

These fellow human beings who have endured such profoundly unsettling, unfathomable, truly alien experiences... are, in every sense of the word, victims.

"Indeed they are," Klass agrees, then adds, "but needlessly so." To put us in the picture, he takes us rapidly through the history of UFO-abduction reports, start-

ing with Barney and Betty Hill back in 1961 and escalating via the Pascagoula and Walton cases. In regard to each of these cases Klass has elsewhere demonstrated effectively that there exist serious grounds for not taking any of them at face value.

Most of his present book is therefore directed at the present outbreak, best known to the public through Strieber's *Communion* and Hopkins' *Missing Time* and *Intruders*. Strieber's story stands or falls by his personal credibility. Klass has little difficulty in showing—from Strieber's own words—how little credibility we can give to a man who by his own admission has not only told lies, but told them publicly, on many occasions in the past. This exhibitionistic compulsion both to lie and to admit lying in public would in itself be sufficient to make us question both his story and the cited testimony of an expert psychiatrist: "I see no evidence of an anxiety state, mind disorder or personality disorder." Klass provides many other instances which make it evident to him—as it must do to any open-minded reader of *Communion*—that Strieber is a confused and unstable person, whose story it would be absurd to take at face value.

What about Hopkins? After approving my assessment of the abductees at the 1987 Washington Conference as being subconsciously motivated by psychological need, Klass reasonably reproaches me for not going on to consider 'the possible "psychological needs" of abductionists like Hopkins and Jacobs, who seem to revel in the discovery of new "victims."' "

He has no difficulty in finding innumerable instances in Hopkins' spoken utterances and published writings of tendentious conduct, whether it be in the use he makes of his witnesses' testimony, or the way he interprets the results of his investigations, or the way he handles the witness him/herself—in particular, the 'buddy' system which Hopkins believes gives the witness much-needed emotional support, but which Klass sees are more likely to cause the witness to embroider and hype up his/her story. His conclusion is that Hopkins, Jacobs and their kind are themselves spreading the epidemic they profess to be treating: "In my opinion, that fear and uncertainty is the completely unnecessary product of Hopkins' own UFO fantasies, which he unwittingly implants in his subjects' minds."

Klass is concerned, too, about the uncritical reception given to Hopkins' work by the UFO community—notably by Jacobs, who from being a respected historian of the UFO phenomenon has become 'caught up in the excitement of his new, active role as an "abductionist."' In contrast, Klass chides American UFOlogists for dismissing contemptuously the work of Alvin Lawson, whose 'imaginary contactee' experiment he rightly sees as of the very greatest importance for our understanding of the abduction phenomenon.

Klass's ability to distinguish the underlying currents of personal behaviour is further displayed in the affectionate respect he accords to Leo Sprinkle, who hosts annual contactee conferences at his University

of Wyoming at Laramie. While he is far from sharing Sprinkle's views, he notes with amusement that

the UFO-nauts who allegedly abduct his subjects are a much more benign breed that doesn't engage in the sort of terrible physical indignities Hopkins reports ... Is it possible that two basically different types of UFO-nauts are visiting earth—a warm, gentle type whose victims later seek out Sprinkle, and a more cruel breed whose victims seek counsel from Hopkins...? Or is it possible that the character of the alleged experience... reflects not only the personal UFO beliefs of the abductionist... but also some elements of his personality as well?

Klass admits "this is pure speculation," but I personally haven't the slightest doubt that he is right. I have attended one of Sprinkle's Rocky Mountain Conferences, and found him a delightful and sympathetic person, whose support is evidently of great value to his abductee-delegates, whether or not they truly underwent the experiences they report. But then, if Sprinkle is a believer, he is also a professionally trained psychologist and counsellor...

Hopkins, too, professes a sincere concern for his subjects. But ironically it is Klass, not Hopkins, whose concern is the more realistically found. He quotes Hopkins as saying he has never found details in any abduction report to indicate that the UFO-nauts are malevolent, and comments: "I can conceive of no more malevolent act than removing a flesh sample from a young child that would leave a life-long scar, impregnating a 13 year old without her permission, or removing a woman's unborn child."

This is a concerned book, but it is at the same time a calmly reasoned study whose every conclusion is founded, not only any *a priori* ideas that Klass himself may hold, but on what the abductees and abductionists have actually said, written and done. Klass has a right to be angry at what Hopkins, Jacobs and co. are doing to their witnesses, but I found not a single instance of unfairness or exaggeration in his book, and I am happy both to endorse every word he writes and to recommend it as required reading—not only for everyone involved in trying to understand the UFO phenomenon, but for everyone—and this must surely include every reader of this magazine—who seeks to understand why people behave the way they do.

Hilary Evans is a writer and editor of a number of books on the paranormal, and co-founder of the Mary Evans Picture Library.

Encounter Theories

Peter O'Hara

Hilary Evans, *Gods*Spirits*Cosmic Guardians—A comparative study of the Encounter Experience*. The Aquarian Press.

The encounter experience of the title is a person's feeling that he or she has seen, heard or otherwise been in contact with (a) gods, saints, angels or devils, (b) spirits of dead humans, or (c) extraterrestrial beings (ETs). The book has a section on each of these three categories, preceded by an introduction and followed by three sections of analysis and finally a conclusion. The examples are well presented and give a clear picture. Although the preface advises readers familiar with the subject to judiciously skip some of the examples, I felt that 32 pages of ET contact encounters and 18 pages of ET abduction encounters were unnecessary even for a newcomer.

Analysis of encounter experiences begins in the introduction and is repeated throughout the sections (2, 3 & 4) on particular types of encounters, as well as in the sections (5, 6 & 7) specifically on analysis. Furthermore, the analytical sections give further examples of encounters, which add little to those already given in sections 2, 3 and 4. The main alternative analyses are: (1) everything happened as described by the witness, (2) the witness really believed that it happened but is unwittingly mistaken, and (3) the "witness" is consciously lying. These analyses are repeated throughout the book, with some extensions or developments. Although Evans does say that some "witnesses" are lying, fairly soon he stops considering this third possibility because he feels that most people reporting encounters are not deliberately lying, and that the important question is to differentiate between the first two analyses. He discusses psychological and sociological causes for mistaken beliefs and perceptions. I felt his sociological analysis was good but his consideration of psychology, both normal and abnormal, was poor. Chapter 7.2, "The encounter experience as objective event" concludes "In summary we see that the best reason for accepting the encounter experience as objective event is because that is what the witness says it is. He cannot prove that his entities exist... But we cannot prove the contrary." This contrasts with the preface (p. 16) where Evans says "every case cited here is dubious". Chapter 7.3, "The encounter experience seems to strongly favour the second (mistaken belief) hypothesis because it assumes no new entities, is the simplest form of explanation, and can account for for all encounters." At this point I thought I had reached the book's final conclusion. Instead, the end of that chapter criticises the subjective hypothesis, saying there is "something distastefully reductionist about an explanation which drags a revered mystic down to the same level as a mid-western housewife who claims she's been visited by

a cosmic brother on her back porch." The following chapter (7.4) considers as "plausible and attractive" an account of UFO contacts which sees them as ETs promoting self-development and cosmic awareness among earth people. Finally the conclusion is called "the reality of encounter" though what kind of reality is not clear.

Because of its analysis I would not recommend this book. I have three main criticisms. Firstly, as may already be clear, in spite of putting forward adequate evidence which overwhelmingly favours the mistaken belief hypothesis, Evans does not draw this conclusion—which suggests itself by half way through the book if not earlier. As Evans is clearly intelligent enough to draw this inference I suspect he may be keeping the other hypotheses open in order to remain acceptable to the many people who firmly believe that many encounters happen in fact as the witnesses describe them: the title of the conclusion supports this idea.

My second criticism is to do with the use and meaning of four words: "real", "reality" "genuine" and "experience". Most readers are used to different authors using words with slightly or greatly different meanings, provided it is clear which particular meaning the author intends. Unfortunately, Evans makes it clear that he knows of at least two meanings for each of these four words but at times leaves it entirely ambiguous which meaning is intended. Thus an "experience" of meeting a non-human being may mean either (1) actually meeting a being or (2) mistakenly thinking you have met such a being (but not consciously fabricating a story). On p. 129 Evans says "We may ... entertain the possibility that ... he had a "genuine" "experience" (whatever interpretation we choose to put on either of these words)..." So which possibility is being entertained? I feel that the problem may be that Evans is not aware that abstract words belong to several levels, with the first or lowest level being next to concrete words. "Reality" is an abstract word and at its first level of abstraction from concrete words means approximately "the sum of all concrete objects" (thus excluding all imaginary things). Thus horses are parts of reality whereas unicorns are not. Nevertheless there exist pictures and written accounts of unicorns and so "reality" with a second level abstract meaning may include unicorns. Evans fails to note the difference between "reality" (including peoples' thoughts) and the "reality" which includes only concrete objects. Thus "the entity... possessing some kind of reality (p. 56-57) is a tautology, for there is always some level of abstraction of "reality" where anything, no matter how imaginary, even a possible thought which has never occurred to any human, is included. On p.183-184, "a fake Vermeer is just as "real" as the genuine article..." confuses a "genuine Vermeer painting" (i.e. actually painted by Vermeer) with "a genuine painting" (i.e. definitely canvas painted by hand and not a print or a mirage).

My third criticism is of Evan's account of psychology. He received little of "the benefit of the findings which 150 years of psychology has given us (p.198)." He takes a lot of trouble to show that hallucinations do not imply malfunction or mental illness, yet a standard psychiatric text would have shown him that hallucinations are normal during grief and when going to sleep and waking up (hypnogogic and hypnopompic). But even apart from mental illness, Evans believes that every part of our bodies was "put there for a purpose," therefore hallucinations are not malfunctions and "we are intended ... to have ... (encounter) experiences ..." (p.195). This is contrary to the theory of evolution, and surely the nipple in the male is a part without a purpose? Although some people undergo hysterical dissociation (loss of memory; multiple personality) or hysterical conversion (usually loss of sensation or power) for reasons which are understandable in their difficult circumstances (they get a reduction in their anxiety), Evans mistakes these and other pathological anxiety-reducing mechanisms for actions which would be admirable and useful for everyone. He seems to forget that amnesia and loss of sensation are disabilities, and that mistaken belief in non-human beings (like many other false beliefs) can reduce a person's general ability to separate fact from fiction.

Finally, although peripheral to the purpose of the book, I note that Evans espouses some other paranormal ideas: that the moon's phases influence human behaviour (p. 199 & 201); that alleged spirit communication involves something paranormal (p.94 & 104); and that chance coincidence can reasonably be ignored in a case of hallucinating an old friend close to the time of the friend's death a long distance away (p.82).

Peter O'Hara is a clinical psychiatrist, Chairman of the Irish Skeptics and a member of the B&IS Editorial Board.

Seeing is believing

ASTROLOGER and clairvoyant Michael Carro is inviting other seers to join in Clairvoyant Relief to raise money for the African third world.

Michael, based in Wigan, hopes they will donate all consultation fees on September 21 and suggests that they work in public places such as clubs, restaurants or hotels where they can attract maximum interest on the day.

Letters

Sloppy Thinking

I was interested to read the extract from the *Oldham Evening Chronicle* (Nov 30, 1987) reproduced in *The British & Irish Skeptic* II.1. A classic case of “the fallacy of the Golden Mean,” where, faced with two opposing views, many people assume that a compromise between the two is the best option.

Superficially this is attractive, but would this journalist, faced with one person suggesting that nuns should be raped and murdered and another suggesting that they shouldn't, simply decide that just rape without the murder would be best? I don't think so.

We must be alert to this widespread form of sloppy thinking, and point out that we are not extremists, but seekers after the truth.

Andrew Bloomfield

The case against ESP

Perhaps as a result of its transformation from the *Australian Skeptic* into the *British & Irish Skeptic*, something went badly wrong in Anthony Garrett's “The Case Against ESP.” For, after pointing to the problems of assessing the similarities between “a sketch drawn by one individual...to a scene set by a second individual,” Garrett comments: “Believe it or not, this retreat into statistical obscurantism is the latest parapsychological craze, called ‘ganzfeld.’”

But, whatever statistical skulduggery may or may not have characterized all the actual *ganzfeld* work in parapsychology, it is not essential to it. In a typical *ganzfeld*/psi experiment—*ganzfeld* is German for ‘total field’—the percipient has halved ping-pong balls taped over his or her eyes, and sits or lies comfortably. A bright light is shone on the halved ping-pong balls, while ‘white noise’ is fed into the percipient's ears through headphones. The object of the exercise is to show psi influence on what appears in the visual field of the percipient. So there is nothing in these *ganzfeld* conditions, as such, which requires any ambiguity or indeterminacy. The experimenters could simply give the agent Zener cards to ‘transmit’, and then the percipient's performances would be just as straightforwardly right or wrong as the guesses in traditional card-guessing experiments. If and insofar as experimenters choose to introduce unnecessary complications and uncertainties, that says something about them.

Antony Flew

Divine Creationism

I seek the opportunity to reply to the ‘hysterics’ offered by Stephen Moreton (B&IS II.2) on the subject of ‘Divine Creationism’.

As stated in my letter (B&IS II.1), ‘Divine Creationism’ is based upon two principal components. The first is research into the origins and original meaning of the early texts of Genesis (hence my ‘creationist’ identity). Interestingly, it would appear that the first two narratives are in the wrong order...so much for ‘the Bible’ being infallible. Research into the source material that evolved into the ‘Adam and Eve’ narrative shows that initially it related to human sexuality and specifically the uniquely human trait of being the only species on Earth that has the ability to reject or refrain from sexual participation. As a result of my theological research, I am, as a ‘Divine Creationist’, as distinct from the ‘Biblical Creationist’ cause, with their non-scientific belief of an original couple living in Eden some six thousand years ago, as they are from the ‘Evolutionary’ lobby, as supported by the *British & Irish Skeptic* committee and CSICOP.¹ The contest is indeed three-sided. ‘Divine Creationism’ is a new concept that does relate to science and not faith.

Interestingly, Stephen Moreton makes absolutely no comment upon this element of my letter.

As for the fossil record. According to Stephen Moreton's own words, after millions of pounds have been spent in numerous palaeontological ‘digs’, worldwide less than 1% of the fossils that should be found to support the idea of our evolution have to date been found. To put it another way, more than 99% of the supposed evidence to support the theory of evolution is missing.

Stephen Moreton's total argument against ‘Divine Creationism’ is a ‘no comment’ on its central issue, and an offer of less than 1% of the evidence that should be found to substantiate the idea of our evolution (as a viable alternative). A poor case, surely, to present to any intelligent being.

Mistakenly, Stephen Moreton refers to our old friend *Archaeopteryx* as an intermediate form between reptile and bird. In actual fact, *Archaeopteryx* is no intermediate at all. It was a true bird. It had wings, it was completely feathered, and it probably flew. It was not a half-way bird. It was a bird. The alleged

¹Mr. Wood makes a mistake here; it is not that the B&IS Board or CSICOP specifically support evolution evidence or no evidence, come hell or high water. The point is that the individuals who make up CSICOP and the B&IS Board support scientific methodology and rational argument. If the evidence supports the theory of evolution, then the B&IS and CSICOP will support evolution; as at present—Ed.

reptile-like features of *Archaeopterix* consist of the claw-like appendages on the leading edges of its wings, the possession of teeth and vertebrae that extend out along the tail. It is believed to have been a poor flyer with a small keel or sternum. There is a bird today in South America—the *Hoatzin*—which, in the juvenile stages, possesses two claws. Furthermore, it is a poor flyer with an astonishingly small keel. This bird is unquestionably 100% bird, yet it possesses two of the characteristics which are used to impute a reptilian ancestry to *Archaeopterix*. The same applies to the young of the *Touraco* (bird) of Africa. Fish, amphibians, reptiles, (ancient) birds, and mammals have all been found with and without teeth. Unfortunately for Stephen Moreton, the fossil record shows evidence of true birds existing millions of years before the supposedly intermediary stages of *Archaeopterix*. Question: how can a true 'vertebrate sub-phylum' exist before its intermediary (evolving) stages of development? Mr Moreton, to use your term... please explain. For his interest, flight is supposed to have evolved four times, separately and independently, in insects, birds, mammals (bats), and in reptiles (the pterosaur, now extinct). In each case the origin of flight is supposed to have required many millions of years, and almost innumerable transitional forms would have been involved. Yet not in a single case can anything even approaching a transitional series be produced. The earliest fossil bat was, as bats are today, complete with delicate sonar (observed in the skull).

As for Stephen Moreton's final point in his letter, well, I'll reply by saying that apparently Man is the only primate that does not possess a penile bone. According to Mr Moreton's own argument, this is evidence that man is not related to the primates. Question: what is he then related to? Dr. Jeremy Cherfas seems to suggest that it could be Ungulates (the horse family). It is the only other mammal family, he thinks, that does not, equally, have a penile bone.

All that the fossil record offers is, I agree, a development of life complexity in stages, much like the layers of a cake, with distinct beginnings and endings...culminating in the appearance of 'modern man' (with mind), suddenly, on the geological time scale, worldwide. Please observe the graph of hominids in time and space offered by Dr. Chris Stringer...curator of fossil hominids at the British Museum (Natural History).

'Modern man' with distinct anatomical and physiological features and 'mind' is the equivalent to the Natural World as the AIDS virus is to the human body...alien and highly dangerous. We are not far from the terminal condition.

Rapidly expanding human populations living off rapidly diminishing finite resources can only lead to a rapid social degeneration and ultimate collapse.

If dinosaurs can appear suddenly on Earth with

nothing being found transitional to their earliest forms, then the same 'agency' can certainly place the AIDS virus (the figurative 'lethal' injection) on Earth, to bring about our virtually sudden demise (possibly by the end of the century)...once we've created such a terminal condition for ourselves as now exists.

Colin Wood

Unidentified flying oranges . .

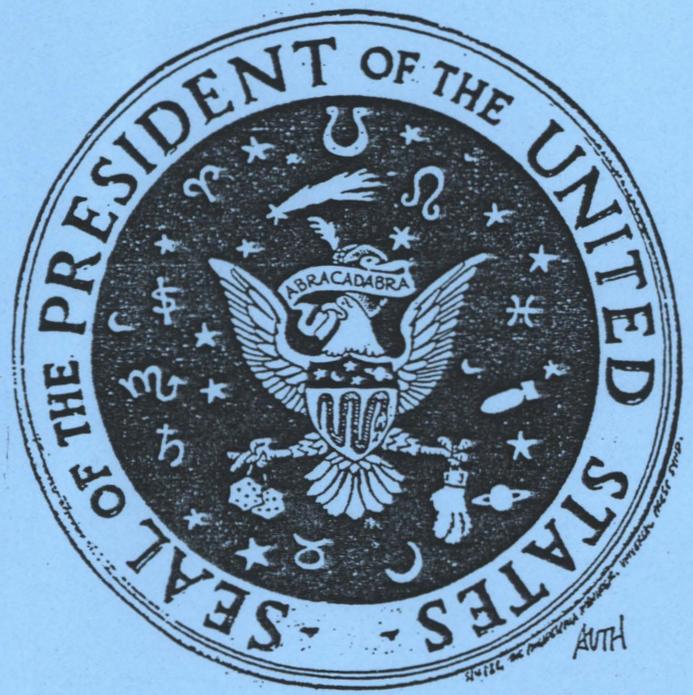
A FLEET of giant ORANGES has been sighted flying over the Midlands.

Witnesses claim the oversize Outsparcs give off an orange glow that has left some people with sunburn.

A woman from Beeston, Nottingham, said the oranges were about the size of a house. They hovered just above the ground and gave off a humming noise.

The UFO Investigation Society said: "We have had dozens of reports about these oranges."

Daily Mirror 13/4/88



International Herald Tribune, May 12

Guardian 13/5/88

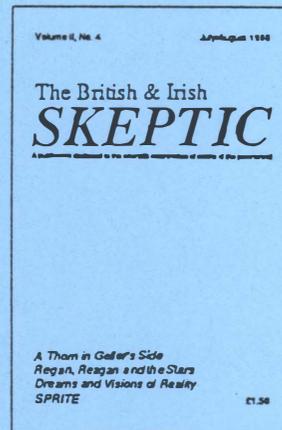
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Volume II (1988)

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No. 2 Doris Collins and *The Sun* (Wendy M. Grossman); Paul Kurtz Interview-1 (Wendy M. Grossman); State of the Art (Frank Chambers); S.G. Soal: Master of Deception (Chris Scott); Reviews: *Psychic Festival* (Redge Lewis); *Near-Death Experiences* (Steuart Campbell); *TV and Faith* (Wendy M. Grossman); *Anti-Creationist Ammunition* (Stephen Moreton); *Forty Years of UFO Reports* (Steuart Campbell).

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