

Volume II, No. 5

September/October 1988

The British & Irish  
**SKEPTIC**

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

*Is there antibody there?*

*Dowsing in the country*

*The saints and martyrs of parapsychology*

*UFO hunt*

*Astrology and Gauquelin*

*Book reviews*

£1.50

## The Skeptical Tape Library

This is a collection of audio and video cassettes of material relating to the paranormal and its investigation, available for free loan to *British & Irish Skeptic* subscribers. If you would like to borrow a tape, contact the Manchester Skeptics, at the address below. Belated thanks to all those who have contributed tapes for their enthusiasm and generosity: Wendy Grossman, Michael Hutchinson, Alan Ings, Phil McKerracher, Paul Quincey, Denys Parsons, Alan Remfrey and Karl Sabbagh. Any further donations will be most gratefully received. \*=**new acquisitions**—*Toby Howard*.

### Audio Cassettes

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

\*A11-14 Forbidden knowledge, Bob Couttie (8 programmes).

### VHS Video Cassettes

V1 Wogan: Uri Geller. V2 Late Late Show: Uri Geller. Viewpoint 87: Thy Will be Done, documentary on US fundamentalism. Panorama: documentary on Scientology, BBC1. V3 Is there anybody there? Karl Sabbagh's documentary on the paranormal, C4. Right to Reply: Sabbagh replies to critics, C4. 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, Domsday Prophecies, Ley Lines. Arthur C. Clarke: Precognitive Visions. \*V11 After Dark, C4, Discussion on homeopathy with James Randi, Jaques Benveniste, Jonathan Miller.

#### Irish Skeptics

P.O. Box 20, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland.  
Chairman: Peter O'Hara; Members: Frank Chambers, Michael Farragher, Jacqueline Helme, Johanne Powell.

#### Manchester Skeptics

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Treasurer: David Martin; Committee: Frank Koval, Jack Steel, Dr Anthony Garrett, Dr Robin Allen, Jon Schofield, Alan Ings, Dr Dave Love.

#### Electronic mail

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#### Prometheus Books

UK Distributor: Michael Hutchinson, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.

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# Hits and Misses

## Toby Howard

### The British & Irish Skeptic

As from the next issue, the editorship of the *British & Irish Skeptic* will be taken over by Toby Howard and Steve Donnelly of the Manchester Skeptics. We're sure all our readers will join us in expressing sincere thanks to Wendy Grossman for the extraordinary efforts she has put into starting and nursing this magazine. We only hope we'll be able to meet the high standards she's set.—  
*Toby Howard and Steve Donnelly.*

### Randi in the UK

James Randi, arch-skeptic and chief investigator for CSICOP, will be visiting the UK as part of his European tour. In London on **Thursday 20 October** there will be a dinner held for him in the **Tudor Room, First Floor, The Imperial Hotel, Russell Square** (nearest tube is Russell Square). The cash bar will open at 7.30 p.m., with dinner at 8 p.m. Tickets are £11 (in advance only) from Michael Hutchinson (address on p. 2).

On **Friday 21 October** in Manchester, Randi will be appearing on the 'This Morning' TV programme, starting at 10.40 a.m. on ITV. In the evening there will be a public meeting organised by the Manchester Skeptics at which Randi will speak. The meeting is at 8 p.m., in **Theatre A of the University of Manchester's Roscoe Building, Brunswick Street, off Oxford Road, Manchester.**

### Irish Lectures

*Should we believe in the supernatural?* This is the question addressed by a ten-week lecture series to be held at Trinity College, Dublin. The course starts on 13 October, and will be conducted by David Berman, Peter Skrabanek, W. Lyons and D. Forrest. For details, please contact the Department of Philosophy, Trinity College, Dublin. The total fee for the course is £25.

### Frustrated Ghostbuster

*She* magazine of 26 July told of the exploits of Tony Cornell—Ghostbuster. 'He goes fully equipped with a

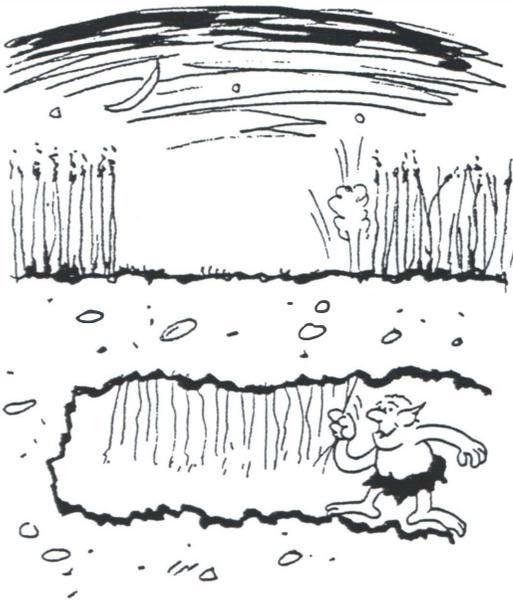
state-of-the-art black box' built by Nottingham University's electronics department, and worth £5000. Although he believes in the reality of the supernatural, Mr Cornell believes he will easily be able to expose fraudulent practices with his black box. 'It can record all physical movement, and the slightest temperature changes, from four different parts of a room, and these will be printed out on computer tape.' There is also a video recorder activated by ultrasonic and infra-red detectors, an electrostatic flux gauge and a camera with a motorised drive to take rapid bursts of pictures. Although his equipment has been ready and waiting for the last eighteen months, Mr Cornell has yet to find a case worthy of investigation, and *She* magazine invites its readers to help.

### Swaggart swaggers back

*The Times* of 30 July reported that disgraced evangelist Jimmy Swaggart found a new flock during a ten-day visit to Israel. Swaggart, you will recall, was defrocked as a minister by the Assemblies of God when he refused to quit preaching for a year as punishment for alleged involvement with a prostitute. His reaction was to ask his congregations to judge themselves before judging him, before tearfully confessing his sins on-camera. His sermons in Israel were recorded for his daily US television show.

### Shrouded in mystery, still

Amid the current 'is it—isn't it?' question of the Turin Shroud, the *Guardian* of 20 June carried a letter from George Smith who recounted an unusual incident that befell his father in 1918, then governor of Australia's Paramatta Gaol: 'Convict-built soon after Australia was founded, [the jail] interested historians. Several times I went with father as he explained points of interest to them. In the prison morgue the outline of a human face could be seen clearly on a glass window pane. It first appeared during a violent electrical storm in the last century. The body of a prisoner was lying on the slab. The extremely small morgue is said to have been clouded with fumes from powerful preservative drenching the corpse. A flash of lightning blazed through the window and fumes coated the window like photographic emulsion. Thus the impression of the face near the window-pane was fixed to the glass.' Mr Smith wonders whether a similar phenomenon could account for the markings of the Turin Shroud.



## More crop circles

Crop circles are still in the news, and the number of 'experts' seems to increase every time the story is covered. The *Observer* of 14 August interviewed one such expert (christened thus by the *Marlborough Times*), electrical engineer Colin Andrews, who runs the 'Circles Phenomenon Research group'. His group has fifteen members, including Archie Roy, professor of Astronomy at the University of Glasgow. Mr Andrews reports new variations on the well-known circles: 'we're getting single circles, doubles, triples, straight lines, equilateral triangles, quintuplet sets. The anticlockwise swirls, the clockwise swirls, the radial bursts ...' However, the Circles Phenomenon Research Group does not meet with the approval of Dr Terence Meaden, an academic meteorologist who runs the Bradford-on-Avon based 'Tornado and Storm Research Organisation' (see B&IS II.4). 'They're looking for something extraordinary,' says Dr Meaden of the rival group, 'possibly extraterrestrial. They hope that by looking at the data they will see the hand of some intelligence at work ... the wind can do more things than it has been given credit for.'

But there may be other explanations—we are very grateful to T.G. Pearce of Ilford for sending us his original ideas on the nature of crop circles (see above!).

## Flying tonight

The Maharishi Golden Dome of the Age of Enlightenment—Skelmersdale—was the venue for the Third Annual Yogic Flying Competition, according to *The Times* of 30 July.



## Jesus Christ in Nairobi

The *Guardian* of 23 June reported that Robert Maxwell's *Kenya Times* carried the story of Christ's sudden appearance in Nairobi on 11 June. The paper carried a photograph of a tall thin man in a turban, believed by many in one of Nairobi's poorer districts to be Jesus Christ. According to the editor of the newspaper's Swahili edition 'he had a light around his head and sparks came from his bare feet.' The materialisation occurred at a meeting addressed by the faith healer Mary Akatsa, who claims to have died some years ago and met Jesus in heaven, having subsequently returned to earth by aeroplane to cast out devils. Thousands of Kenyans believe Mary Akatsa regularly performs miracles.

## Electronic mail explained

I have had several queries from people wanting to know what the 'skeptics e-mail service' advertised in this magazine is all about, and I realised that this is a very fair question! Over the last decade, the idea of connecting geographically remote computers together via dedicated land lines or over the phone system has become increasingly popular. In the UK, every major academic institution is now connected to the Joint Academic Network (JANET to its friends), a sort of 'computer switchboard' which enables people who use the computers in these institutions to exchange information almost instantaneously right across the country. Much of the data is so-called 'electronic mail'—a user on a particular computer has a unique 'address', like a telephone number, that other users can use to send private messages. Most countries have similar systems, and there are 'gateways', often via satellite, which connect the various national networks together.

One of the values of the system is that you can set up lists of addresses of people interested in a particular topic (skepticism in this case) and people can send messages which are automatically circulated to the people on the list, which often spans several countries. (There is even electronic 'junk' mail—I often come to work in the morning to find 30 or more messages to wade through!) The skeptical mailing list, operated by myself and Jim Lippard in the USA, has contributors from eight countries. It is possible for private citizens to access the networks, but it costs real money to do this via BT; however it is easier and cheaper to do this in the USA, and CSICOP has set up a subcommittee to look at the possibilities of electronic mail.

## Rael life?

According to Dr Marcus Wenner, it would probably be best if we were to build an embassy for extraterrestrial visitors somewhere near Jerusalem. Interviewed in *Midweek* magazine (28 July), Dr Wenner, whose first degree was in experimental psychology and neurobiology, holds a Ph.D. in psychology, and is the British representative for the Raelian Movement, a UFO-New Age-Planetary Enlightenment-Cosmic Masters-you-name-it-cult originating in France. Wenner himself works in Bristol as a self-employed psychotherapist. 'You've got to get used to people thinking of you as a weirdo', he says. The Raelian Movement began in 1973 when Claude Vorilhon, a young French motor-racing journalist, was out walking in the Claremont-Ferrand region and was surprised to see a flying saucer land in front of him which produced a four-feet tall humanoid. After several days tuition from this highly-enlightened space visitor, Vorilhon was instructed to change his name to 'Rael', and to publish worldwide the messages he had received. According to Rael, the human race is the product of experiments by the aliens conducted on Earth 25,000 years ago, who now wish to guide us through our troubled times. If we quickly construct the embassy, they may land and guide us directly. Dr Wenner says there are now more than 15,000 Raelians worldwide, and a mailing list of 500 in the UK.

## Pop goes the truth!

The *Observer* of 26 June notes with incredulity some recent headlines from the *Sunday Sport*: 'Spacecraft takes photos of heaven', 'Space alien turned our son into an olive', 'woman pregnant for 35 years gives birth to a pensioner', 'Werewolf gobbles up British tourists'. The *Observer* notes that the *Sport* had 'hit upon the breathtakingly brilliant idea of making up its stories. The great thing about a made-up story, of course, is that it's always an exclusive!'

## Dangerous Radio

The *Observer* reports (31 July) that popular LBC disc jockeys Pete Murray and Mike Allen have irked both the Church of England and the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The trouble is that both DJs have regular occult and psychic spots on their radio shows, featuring phone-ins on the subject, visits by spiritualists, witches, and well-known professional performers such as 'psychic' Christian Dion and 'fortune-teller' Sasha Fenton. The IBA is concerned that radio presenters must not personally endorse belief in the occult, and that people may find 'communicating with the dead' offensive. Nevertheless, it's a fact that broadcasting this kind of thing brings in the listeners; it's what people want. As Pete Murray says 'I would testify in the courts to the authenticity of Christian Dion. He is fantastic.'

## Complain!

Some months ago the Manchester Skeptics submitted several complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority about 'good-luck' charm and other adverts that they felt clearly violated the published Code of Advertising Practice. Disappointingly, the ASA decided not to pursue the complaints, on the basis that what was at stake was 'personal belief' rather than matters of fact. The Manchester Skeptics appealed against their decision, but no effect. Perhaps if more people were to complain about such adverts the ASA might be persuaded to take a different attitude.

## The Doctor with the X-Ray eyes

The *Guardian* (3 August) reported on the current explosion of Chinese interest in the paranormal. Many believe that paranormal powers can be harnessed through 'qigong', the traditional system of deep breathing exercises. (Courses are now being run in Manchester.) One of China's leading psychics is Ms Zheng Xiangling, a 24-year old doctor at the People's Liberation Army general staff headquarters. She claims to possess three-dimensional X-ray vision in full colour, and diagnoses her patients as they stand fully clothed in a darkened room, seeing their veins, bones and internal organs glowing before her eyes. She says she inherited the power from her grandfather, a doctor in a poor village in Shaanxi province. Unfortunately he came to a sad end—at 40 he was hung from a tree and beaten to death by an ungrateful patient.

## An old chestnut

Channel 4's *Network 7* is a fast and furious programme aimed at 'young people' and often features 'New Age' topics. The 4 September edition featured John Perrot demonstrating a black box called 'Hemi Sync' which supposedly helps the user attain new levels of consciousness by concentrating the powers of mind. To demonstrate the effect, four people attempted to lift a seated man off his chair with only their forefingers extended, placed under his shoulders and knees. Before the hemi-sync 'treatment', they failed; afterwards... hey presto! Unfortunately, it is unlikely that hemi-sync was the cause of their success. This is an old parlour trick which relies on nothing more than simple muscle coordination. Try it!

## Hypnosis' lot is not a happy one

The *Guardian* of 30 July reported that the Home Office had advised the police not to consider hypnosis as an aid to solving crime. A spokesman said 'The conclusion is that there is no real proof you can obtain real information by hypnosis that could not be obtained in other ways. Hypnosis does not reveal any more. We do not think it is a practical weapon for the police to use against crime.' However the circular to chief constables is not an instruction, and they will still be free to use hypnosis if they wish.

## Type your job applications!

In a large spread the *Sunday Mirror* (26 June) featured US graphologist Sheila Kurtz extolling the power of handwriting analysis. Ms Kurtz is president of A New Slant Inc., a company specialising in handwriting analysis for staff selection. Graphology has attracted interest in the USA as a method of gaining extra information about prospective employees. *Executive Post* looked into the efficacy of handwriting analysis in its 4 August edition. The article concluded that 'leaving aside the kind of detailed personality analysis practised by graphologists, it is probably safe to form some very broad conclusions from a handwritten job application. For example, is it legible, is it reasonably neat and tidy, are there lots of crossings out? Beyond this level of analysis, you are likely to be in uncharted waters.'

Another method of filtering job applications is the 'ipsative personality inventory', in which applicants answer simple questions phrased in such a way that, allegedly, personality traits are revealed. Writing in the *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, three psychologists maintain the test has no value whatsoever in discriminating between applicants, and is so widely used only because of high pressure marketing targeted on personnel departments.

Back in the *Mirror*, Ms Kurtz pondered over Michael Jackson's handwriting and opined 'no natural rhythm'.

[CSICOP is holding a session on handwriting analysis at its 1988 conference in Chicago, and is anxious to receive any examples of its claims and practice.]

## Irish Skeptics Meet

Peter O'Hara writes 'The Irish Committee are starting regular monthly informal meetings on the second Tuesday of each month, starting on Tuesday 11 October 1988. All are welcome, in the basement bar of Buswell's Hotel, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2 at 8.30 p.m. We are keeping this venue for at least two months (11 October and 8 November). After that, please consult the November/December issue of B&IS for subsequent times and places.'

## All the eights ...

What were you doing at eight minutes eight seconds past eight on the eighth of the eighth eighty-eight? Do you care? According to the *Guardian* (8 August) some people certainly do: construction crews worked round the clock to complete the new Bank of China, Hong Kong's tallest building, in time for the official opening on this important date. This is the Year of the Dragon, considered to be the most auspicious in the Chinese twelve-year cycle. In East and West Germany a record number of marriages were celebrated.

## Hocus Pocus

We're grateful to our roving correspondent Hocus Pocus for the collection of psychics' literature he sent us from the recent 'Earth Spirit' Festival in Bristol. A truly New Age extravaganza, we will feature his report in the next issue.

## Randi After Dark

Channel 4's *After Dark* programme on 3 September was all about alternative therapies. Amongst those present were respected French scientist Jacques Benveniste—whose extraordinary *Nature* paper is being touted by homeopaths as 'proof' of the success of their methods (but see page 9)—and investigators James Randi and Walter Stewart. A tape of this programme is available from the B&IS Video Library (see page 2).

## Oily hands

The *Independent* of 10 September reports a miracle in the 16th *arrondissement* of Paris. Bassam Assaf, a devout member of the Greek Orthodox Church has experienced five apparitions of the Virgin Mary. When the second apparition occurred on 12 August, as he was praying before a statue of the Virgin, oil began to flow from his hands. The oil is said to have healing properties: former journalist and politician Nazir Fansa claimed that rubbing it on his back cured his chronic lumbago. Now a Greek Orthodox nun attends Mr Assaf when he prays, and collects the oil—which smells of olives—from his hands.

## CSICOP 1988 Conference

The theme of the 1988 CSICOP conference is *The New Age—A Scientific Evaluation*, and it will be held on Friday 4–Sunday 6 November, at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare Hotel, Chicago International Airport. Amongst those speaking will be Paul Kurtz, James Alcock, Lee Nesbit, James Randi, Philip Klass, Kendrick Frazier and Ray Hyman, and subjects will include channelling, crystal healing, the Shirley MacLaine phenomenon, cryptozoology, graphology, psychics in the legal system, UFO abductions, and media responsibility and the paranormal. At the Awards Banquet entertainment will be provided by 'Magicians from around the world' when Randi will present B. Premanand (India), Ben Harris (Australia), Henry Gordon (Canada) and Robert Steiner (US). The keynote address will be given by Douglas Hofstadter, of *Gödel, Escher and Bach* fame, who will offer 'Musings on the elusive nature of common sense and science'.

The conference registration fee is \$85, and for further details contact CSICOP directly at Box 229, Buffalo, New York 14215-0229, Tel. (716) 834-3222.

## Predictions

Get out your crystal balls, inspect your entrails, throw your yarrow sticks, and send us your predictions for 1989!

## Next issue

We welcome contributions from our readers, especially clippings, articles, reviews, letters or illustrations. For information on sending in your contribution on floppy disk, please see page 11. Please note that the copy deadline for the next issue is 1 November.

## Putting the 'k' in 'Skeptic'

Dave Love

We write *skeptic* and *skeptical* in contrast to the more common *sceptic* and arouse scorn for supposed transatlantic influences. Adoption of the *k* would be justified as jargon, following the US, where the organised skeptical idea originated—compare *program* in computing. However, it has a solid basis otherwise; here is what appears in *Modern English Usage* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, W.H. Fowler, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, Oxford University Press, 1965):

*sceptic(al)*, *scepsis*, etc. The established pronunciation is *sk-*, whatever the spelling; and with the frequent modern use of *septic* and *sepsis* (the latter a 19th-c. word only), it is well that it should be so for fear of confusion. But to spell *sc-* and pronounce *sk-* is to put a needless difficulty in the way of the unlearned, [*surely not something skeptics would want to do*] for *sce-* is ordinarily pronounced *se* even in words where the *c* represents a Greek *k*, e.g. *scene* and its compounds and *ascetic*. America spells *sk-*; we might pocket our pride and copy.

While we are being scholarly, perhaps it is worth consulting the Oxford English dictionary for a definition (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. J.B. Sykes, Oxford University Press, 1982):

*scē'ptīcal* (*sk-*), \**skē'ptīcal*, *a.* 1. inclined to suspend judgement, given to questioning truth of fact(s) and soundness of inference(s), critical, incredulous.

(The \* indicates *chiefly* American in the dictionary's eye.)

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Dr David Love is a physicist at the Science and Engineering Research Council's Daresbury laboratories.

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We depend on our readers to keep us informed! Our thanks for sending clippings for this issue go to Tom Coombs, Steve Donnelly, Gerald Fleming, Wendy Grossman, Toby Howard, Mavis Howard, Frank Koval, T.G. Pearce, Hocus Pocus, Nick Pope, Paul Quincey, Alan Remfrey, Andrew Tomlinson, Chris Tossero, Chris Wright and Karen Wyrwas.

# Is There Antibody There?

Richard Kay

## *The remarkable experiments of Jaques Benveniste*

There has recently been quite a controversy in the scientific press which involves this very question. An article by Dr Jaques Benveniste and his colleagues (*Nature* vol. 333, June 1988) claimed that solutions which statistically did not contain any antibodies ('solute-free solutions') still retained the activity of the antibody that had once been dissolved in them.

The claims surround a model which has been used to study allergic disease activity *in vitro*. This model involves a specialised type of white blood cell called the mast cell. In people with allergic disease, such as hay fever or certain types of asthma, this cell is coated with allergy-mediating antibodies called immunoglobulin E, or IgE for short. When two or more of these antibodies are cross-linked on the mast cell surface (usually by the substance, called the allergin, that the patient is allergic to) they cause the mast cell to release certain chemicals stored in granules inside the cell. Histamine is the most notable of these, causing many allergic symptoms such as watery eyes, sneezing, itching and so on. This is why allergic diseases are sometimes treated by anti-histamine therapy. Basophils work in the same way as mast cells and can be easily isolated from blood forming a suitable way to study allergy in the test tube. Instead of an allergen, antibodies directed against IgE (anti-IgE) can be used to cross-link surface IgE molecules and cause basophil granules to be released experimentally. In addition to measuring histamine release, which is technically quite difficult, granule release can also be measured by staining the cells. Cells which contain granules stain red, but those that have released their chemical packets are colourless, providing a simple means to quantify allergy (and its treatment) *in vitro*.

The controversy surrounding this affair stems from Benveniste's attempts to answer the question 'How little anti-IgE is necessary to cause basophil granule release?', or rather the answer that these experiments provided. He obtained a solution of anti-IgE antibodies and diluted them in successive ten-fold dilutions. As one would expect, the more he diluted them the weaker their activity became, until finally they caused no more granule release than that observed when the cells were put in diluent only. However, Benveniste continued to dilute the antibody solution still further and to his surprise (and that of many others) the capacity to cause basophil degranulation recurred. As he diluted still further this capacity disappeared and then reappeared in cyclical fashion down to a dilution of  $10^{140}$  when the last maxima of release was noted. This means he was observing the effect of the original antibody many millions of times after the last anti-

body should have been diluted out and lost. Put simply, a solution that statistically no longer contained antibody exhibited antibody activity.

This was not the only claim made in this extremely bold paper. He claimed that this effect could occur with other substances besides antibodies, that the effect depended on the nature of the diluent (it had to be polar) not the initial substance diluted, and, most important of all, the diluent had to be vortexed violently for at least 12 seconds for this effect to be transferred. This practice is commonly used by homeopaths when they dilute their substances, and they also claim it is fundamental to the efficacy of their treatments. So astonished were the editors of *Nature* that they only agreed to publish these results if they could be ratified by other laboratories, and if the author would agree to an examination of the technique in practice by a team of 'specialists' of their own choosing (which turned out to include James Randi). The experiments were repeated by six other laboratories in four different countries and all confirmed the original findings, and so subject to an independent examination and with several disclaimers the article was published.

Approximately four weeks later, *Nature* printed the independent investigation results pronouncing the "High-dilution" experiments a delusion' and reported that the 'phenomenon described' was 'not reproducible in the ordinary meaning of that word.' The crux of their decision was that the trial had not been designed properly. First of all the experiments were not properly 'blinded,' and in experiments where adequate blinding had taken place the results were always negative (three times). In other words the experimenter who read the results (which are subjectively interpretative) knew in advance which tubes contained which dilution and could therefore have been influenced in her findings. When she did not know this information her findings were negative. Secondly, Benveniste had chosen not to take account of those times that the experiment did not work. There were also claims that the sampling procedure was not adequate, leaving the experiment open to sampling error. Finally, Benveniste's results were 'too perfect'. In his control experiments where cells were treated with water alone they should not degranulate except spontaneously. The published results reflected this with a release rate of 0-30%. However, as both the pre- and post-treatment cell numbers were counted by eye, one would expect that on some occasions more cells would be counted as staining red after the treatment than there were before—i.e., there

# A Day in the Country

Denys Parsons

## *Dowsing on display*

Mike Hutchinson alerted me to the intention of BBC Oxford to do a feature on dowsing on the afternoon of 14 July 1988. According to the *Radio Times*, listeners were 'to take part in some rather unusual field experiments this week using the much-derided but usually accurate skills of water divining.' I telephoned the presenter/producer, David Freeman, and asked if anybody of a critical turn of mind was to be present. He replied 'Oh, Michael Shallis, the dowser is 'proper'—he has a Ph.D. in physics.' Anyhow I was invited to attend on the day. Dr Michael Shallis, a lecturer in physical sciences in the Department of External Studies in Oxford, was quoted in the *Radio Times* as saying, 'Anyone can dowse or map dowse, providing they are guided by someone who knows what they are doing.'

In turn I alerted the *Oxford Mail* and hydrogeologists at the Institute of Hydrology at Wallingford, but neither sent observers.

Mike and I reported at midday at Radio Oxford, 242 Banbury Road—'over *Allied Carpets*' we had been told, and it was! Waiting to join the party were a couple of BBC television producers who had come to investigate whether there might be a programme in this for them later on, and also Nicholas Booth, who had written a book on Mars, and who worked for the journal *Astronomy Now*—what has that to do with dowsing, I asked. Nothing, he was just going to talk about his book on the programme. The venue for the programme was the village of Binsey on the outskirts of Oxford and we drove out there with the astronomer and a girl physics student, who was interested in the subject.

We had a snack at a pub named *The Perch* and there we were introduced to Dr Shallis, and the programme started promptly at 1.10 p.m. with the presenter's microphone linked to an estate car fitted with a five metre high radio mast. The announcement of the dowsing item had attracted a handful of spectators including a lady member of the British Society of Dowsers, whom I shall call Bridget.

Attention centred on a low electric cattle fence. Dr Shallis issued angled dowsing rods made from clothes hangers to sundry volunteers. They were told that the fence current was switched off and Dr Shallis showed that the rods gave no reaction (did not cross over each other) above the electric wire. A few minutes later the presenter's secretary, Anne, announced that the farmer had switched the current on. Why did you

tell them, I asked; now they will all get the dowsing reaction, and they did. Anne explained that she was concerned about the party receiving electric shocks, which was understandable. Well, I suggested, now ask the farmer to switch off without telling the dowsers and see what happens. She said she could not tell the farmer what to do.

Meanwhile it was a joy to watch the brilliant way in which David Freeman kept the show running in a lively manner. The whole programme from 1.10 to 3.30 p.m. was entirely unplanned and unscripted. David rushed all over the place with his microphone, keeping up a constant commentary but frequently drawing in spectators, including myself, for comments on what had happened so far. 'Now we'll have a short break for music,' he would say at intervals, or 'Now Nicholas Booth is going to tell us about his book on Mars.'

The next dowsing item was a search for keys. Nicholas hid his bunch of keys somewhere in a tufty patch of rough grass, a patch forming a triangle with sides of about 20 metres. Shallis walked slowly over this patch for 20 minutes without finding the keys, but Mike and I noticed that his rods frequently crossed and he would look down and disturb tufts of grass with his foot. Meanwhile Bridget from the British Society of Dowsers was really stealing Shallis' thunder and almost monopolising the microphone. 'Dowsing is entirely a matter of sympathy,' she said more than once. At the end of the abortive search for the keys, David Freeman said into the microphone 'Well, that seems to prove what Denys Parsons said earlier, that dowsing does not work.'

I intervened to say 'No, that's going too far. You can't condemn a man on the basis of one failure. Anyhow Michael Shallis classed this part of the programme as a 'game' which it is. For a proper test of dowsing you need a long series of double blind tests.'

'Now it's time for Dick to tell us about mountain biking, and he's brought along several models to demonstrate.' Most of us were shivering by this time and those wise enough to have brought them donned anoraks and the like. Next David announced we would attempt some map dowsing. This was the signal for the rain to pelt down with some force. The dowsers and David climbed into the van that had brought the bicycles, and the rest of us huddled together at the tailgate under umbrellas.

Shallis announced that he had prepared two maps,

a genuine map and an imaginary map. On the real map he had dowsed a real well, and on the imaginary map he had dowsed an imaginary well. In both cases, he said, recent tests with more than 100 of his students had shown that a fair number had indicated each well on the same square of the 40 square map, a one in 40 chance, and the odds against this degree of success were 47,000 to 1. Here I made the point, on the air, that psychologists and magicians were familiar with the fact that when asked to pinpoint an area in a pattern of objects many people would go for the same part of the design—for example, nobody chooses the corner squares or the centre squares. This remark was backed up by Nicholas, the astronomer, who was also asked to comment. Volunteers in the van, however, who tried the map dowsing, did not seem to be able to locate the correct squares.

After the broadcast was over I had a short conversation with Shallis. I said that surely the only way to test a phenomenon such as dowsing was to tot up successes against failures. He replied, 'Not necessarily. After all the discovery of a single meteorite showed that meteorites existed.' I could not quite follow the logic of this reply.

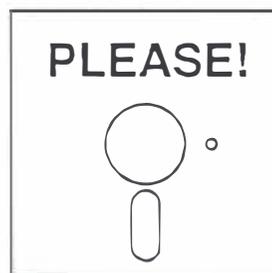
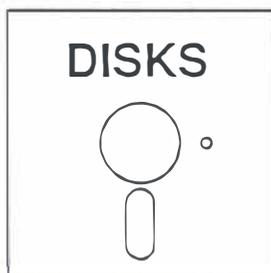
At around 4 p.m. Mike and I, slightly damp, made our way back to London. We agreed it had all been 'good clean fun' but we realised that our small contribution had been only a drop in the ocean of determined credulity of dowsers, the general public, and indeed the media.

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Denys Parsons is a piano tuner, formally a research chemist, and has made a special study of dowsing.

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## Contributors!



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. 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. Copy deadline for the next issue is 1 November.

should be some negative figures. The fact that there were not suggests that some 'massaging' of the data took place.

*Nature* obviously allowed Dr Benveniste the last say in the matter, and unfortunately his reply was acrimonious to say the least. He obviously felt that he had been the subject of a 'witch-hunt' where certain demands he had made had not been complied with, and that the principal worker had been forced to carry out an excessive workload in an unsatisfactory atmosphere of distrust which precluded her normal functioning. His argument maintains that this phenomenon is so impossible that it should never occur at all, and that if it only occurs one quarter of the time that this experiment is still worthy of further study. He further claims that if all unusual research is subjected to this torrent of abuse by the 'orthodoxy', then no original thought will ever come out of recognised scientific establishments.

Clearly, all of this leaves much to be desired. The most satisfactory course of events would have been to explain this phenomenon without recourse to experimental design or statistical methodology, either of which implies incompetence or dishonesty on the part of the experimenter. Jacques Benveniste is an accomplished scientist with an international reputation, and has nothing to gain by making spurious claims. However, if an experiment is poorly designed, subject to observer bias (however unintentional), and not repeatable then clearly there is no 'result' to explain. The problem lies in that this does nothing to resolve the continuing conflict between homeopathic practitioners and 'established' medicine. Homeopaths will clearly feel that the major issues raised by this paper have not been addressed, i.e., that substances diluted far beyond a pharmacological dose can still exhibit specific activity and the retraction will be held as yet another example of a 'hatchet job' by the unenlightened. Furthermore, I, in common with many colleagues, consider that *Nature* had no right to publish a paper which they clearly believed to be untrue from the very start. This unfortunately appears to be an attempt to create sensationalism at Benveniste's expense and serves only to trivialise the issues that such research raises.

The original paper and the subsequent retraction have caused considerable reaction in both the scientific and lay press, and accusations, implications and conclusions have been flying wildly about. What is clear is that the story will not end here, and that Benveniste's work neither proves nor disproves the principles behind homeopathy. For my part, I would only say that this data is still too speculative and unproven to be used as validation (for which it will most certainly be quoted) of scientifically unproven claims.

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# UFO Hunt

Marcel Hulspas

Translated by Jan Nienhuys

## *How one phone call roused all Amsterdam*

The precise happenings of the evening of 3 March 1988, cannot be reconstructed any more. The Amsterdam municipal police, the RLD (State Service for Aeronautics), and the personnel of the traffic tower at Schiphol (Amsterdam airport) don't like to go into the matter any further. Things got completely out of hand. How could it come to this? A reconstruction of that chaotic evening follows.

It all started with a call at around 9.30 p.m. to Schiphol's air traffic control tower. Someone (the name and address were not taken down) had seen a formation of strange lights, and wanted to know whether the personnel at Schiphol had seen them, too. Indeed, three lights oscillated in the north-northeast, over Sloten, seemingly right above the apartment buildings. The radar people, one floor below, were asked whether they had seen anything, but they hadn't.

Schiphol has three radar systems: a ground radar with a reach of 5 km, an approach radar APP, with a reach of about 60 km, and the Area Control Center, with a reach of 280–350 km, depending on atmospheric conditions. Probably reconfirmation was requested by APP because an approaching plane was suspected. Nothing can be said about the telephone call. The tower observations can be explained. ACC said visibility was excellent at that moment, maybe 400 km, and at the time an airliner was passing Helgoland (200 km). Possibly this was what was seen. Tower personnel saw the lights go north, slowly, oscillating. Oscillation can be explained as an effect of atmospheric refraction. The airplane was too far away for APP-radar. It must be considered impossible for tower personnel to confuse local stationary lights or stars with UFOs.

Mr Van Solingen, head of the traffic control centre, decided to call in the RPD (State Police Department of Aeronautics) at 9.45 p.m. RPD didn't know what to do with the story, and asked tower personnel, after some internal consultation, whether the unexplained lights were still visible.

Tower personnel looked again, and again saw something (no details are known about this second sighting, so no explanation can be given. Possibly it was the same aeroplane mentioned above). No radar confirmation being given, the RPD commander concluded that it was a small, local phenomenon. He decided to inform local police departments (State and

municipal) through INRAP, the interregional police radio network. (Note that communications through this network cannot be monitored by civilians, but local police radio can. INRAP is intended for use during disasters in and around the airport.) The RPD commander asked that local police be on alert for the cause of the lights. Police stations relayed this request via radio to surveillance cars. Now all fences were down, because lots of Amsterdam residents monitor police radio, and many started their own investigations.

To top it all off, the national press service, ANP, also listens to police radio channels, and shortly after 10 p.m., the Schiphol UFOs were already on the Teletekst news. One half hour after the first innocent report, dozens of Amsterdam people were already hunting enthusiastically for UFOs. The sky was scanned with binoculars, police cars were pursued in the supposition that they were headed for the UFO, and lots of dramatic reports were phoned in. Schiphol, the police stations and newspaper editors were overwhelmed with reports and requests for information.

The main police station information centre only knew that a mysterious light was flying back and forth over the town. Many reports mentioned 'lights in the west', but some stories were very complex.

Tower personnel can be considered trained observers, but ordinary policemen and civilians cannot. On that evening, Venus and Jupiter were very bright in the wester sky, and also very close together. Many reports were probably due to this pair of planets. Probably lots of fantasy reports must have been called in as well. Neither Schiphol, nor the RPD, nor the Amsterdam police took down the names and addresses of witnesses. No one has come forward with photographic evidence or films, etc.

The stream of reports continued (10.30 p.m.), and the Amsterdam municipal police asked RPD to let a helicopter investigate. This request was turned down—people would only get even more excited.

For the police in the surveillance cars, the whole affair was an entertaining break in their otherwise dreary routine. They kept each other informed through police radio of the latest news. Lots of Amsterdam people listened in on that, and phoned in their comments. A police station in the north of Amsterdam reported little green men checking in at the desk.

Other cops took their task seriously, and tried to track down the sources of the stories. The main office found out that the lamps on the NISSAN terminal could be seen from a large distance.

The NISSAN terminal in the western harbour was unloading the 'Hual Trapper'. Seen from Schiphol, this is directly behind Sloten. Normal area lighting has been functioning for 14 years, and the large cranes there carry lamps which are used regularly. The ship also has searchlights, and possibly one of them, directed upwards, gave striking light effects.

The police considered that this light was the cause of the reports from that moment on. Journalists asking for information were only told that the UFOs were explained, and they were not satisfied. The press got the impression that the police didn't know what to do. Reports kept coming in from all sides, and also from out of town. It was altogether implausible that Schiphol's tower personnel mistook cranes for UFOs.

Schiphol air traffic control still didn't know what they had seen, but they believe that many people had mistaken NISSAN lights for UFOs. Traffic control asked NISSAN to turn the lights off to calm down the excitement. NISSAN refused: they were still working. Meanwhile, the municipal police were getting fed up with all the reports, and also with the press's questions. They decided on a *tour de force*.

RPDL got another (this time urgent) request to send up a helicopter to identify the UFOs.

At ten minutes past midnight, their request was granted. The helicopter crew reported that the NISSAN cranes are the only bright object in the western harbour. The helicopter (generating a couple of new UFO reports) flew low down over the NISSAN area, and returned to base after 40 minutes. The city police considered this the end of the affair.

Most journalists couldn't see any pattern in the reports either, and agreed with the police interpretation of the facts. At about 1 a.m., the telephone reports stopped. Everyone was confused, and had a hungover feeling. The *Telegraaf* newspaper found the whole affair interesting enough to give it a large spread on the front page the next morning.

This story was as confusing as the events of the previous evening. As a reaction, SKEPSIS chairman Prof. de Jager sent a press statement to ANP, explaining that the coincidence of Venus and Jupiter may have generated many reports. From this reconstruction, it is clear that Jupiter and Venus can explain some or many civilian reports, but *not* the first reports from the traffic tower at Schiphol. During the day, Friday, 4 March, Prof. de Jager's explanation was accepted as a complete one—an understandable, but regrettable, simplification.

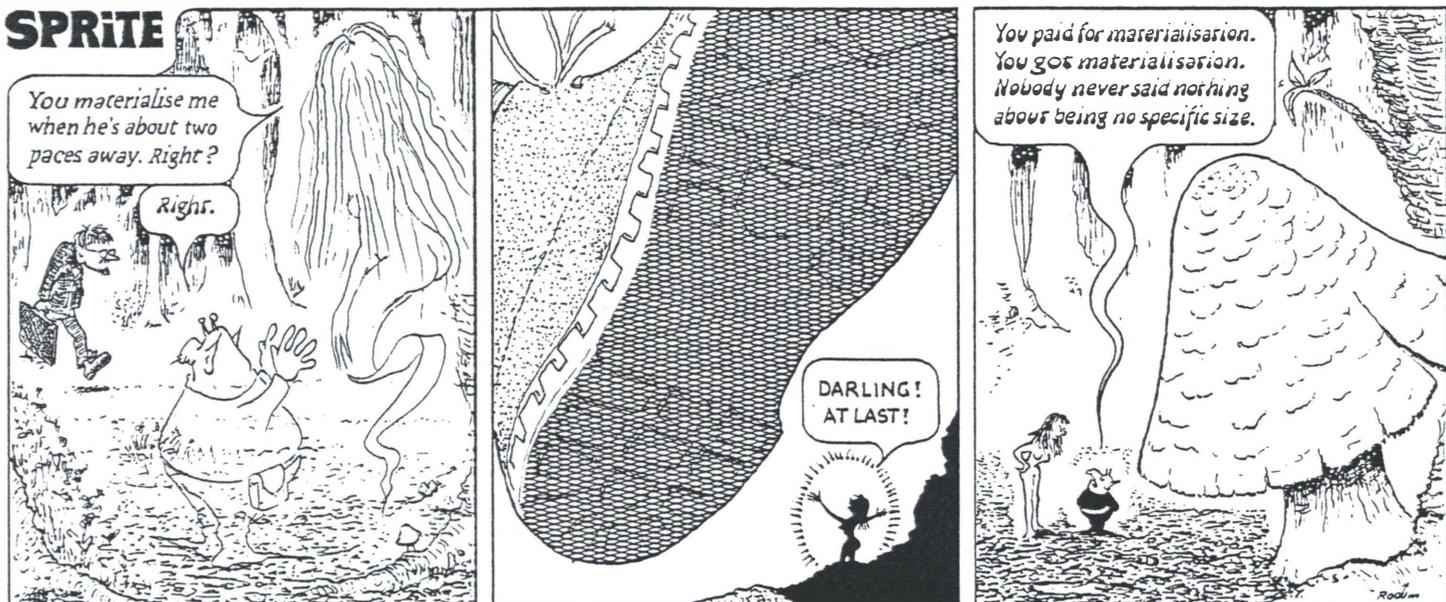
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This article originally appeared in SKEPTER, the magazine of the Dutch skeptical group.

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# SPRITE

Donald Room



# The 'Saints and Martyrs' of Parapsychology

H.B. Gibson

*What role does fraud play in parapsychology?*

Parapsychology continues to exist as a research area marginally recognised as legitimate, on the fringes of the academic world. In the UK, the first Chair of Parapsychology has been founded at Edinburgh on the money left by the late Arthur Koestler, but we should remember that a Chair in Phrenology was once established at Glasgow University.<sup>1</sup>

Just occasionally there are scandals in which it is revealed that a previously respected academic has been publishing results that were obtained by carefully planned fraud, and this is true in science as well as in pseudoscience. But while cheating in research is by no means confined to parapsychology, the significance of it within the latter is unique. For in the general sciences cheating is merely a nuisance variable that weakens and retards research; but cheating is the very life-blood of parapsychology, and discussion of it has always loomed largely in its literature. We do not even get close enough to examine the pretensions of the parapsychologists because, as Stephen Toulmin points out, 'For the moment, the world of the paranormal embraces enough plainly unscrupulous quackery and exploitation to keep us fully occupied.'<sup>3</sup> Here Toulmin implies that at some future hypothetical date we will have succeeded in cutting through all the dead wood of charlatanry and be in a position seriously to examine and assess worthwhile phenomena produced by the world of parapsychology. In this he displays the weakness of the pure scientist, as exemplified by the following example.<sup>4</sup>

A group of 'pure' and a group of 'applied' scientists were once given the following test. It was essentially the classic pea-and-thimble trick in which the subject has to try to detect under which of the three thimbles the operator has concealed a pea. After he demonstrated the method, the operator removed the pea by sleight of hand. In this test the operative measure was to see how many trials it took the subject to realise that there was no pea under any thimble. The group of 'applied' psychologists realised this after about six trials, but it took the 'pure' psychologists over twice as many trials before they realised that it was all a trick. It seems that 'pure' scientists are slow to realise that in parapsychology there is really nothing to be explained other than the human propensity to deceive oneself and others.

No-one would expect a branch of science such as

biology to collapse if people stopped cheating in biological laboratories, but it is arguable that all activity in parapsychology would literally come to a full stop if a relatively small number of people stopped planning and producing fraudulent results. I refer to these dedicated people as the 'Saints and Martyrs of Parapsychology.' I do not use the latter terms ironically; I use them perfectly seriously in the sense that Jean-Paul Sartre used them in referring to the novelist and playwright Jean Genet.<sup>5</sup> Sartre sees Genet's sanctity as stemming from the fact that from his youth onwards he became a dedicated person cut off from the ordinary run of humanity and devoted in a mystical way to a system of values that ordinary people can hardly comprehend. Thief, cheat, prostitute, and above all betrayer, Genet became a being apart, not only seeing beauty in vileness, but as Coe<sup>6</sup> has expressed it, 'One of Genet's most disturbing paradoxes: that the most miraculous of miracles is the fake' (p. 51). Sartre sees Genet as much a saint as those medieval characters who were quite cut off in their habits, aspirations, and values from the ordinary concerns of more or less honest working people. The saints were fakes as Genet is a fake, but not in the pursuance of the mundane human goals that motivate the occasional dishonesty of ordinary people. For ordinary people a lapse from an accepted code is generally regarded as 'sin,' but where this code does literally not exist for an individual, he or she is sinless and achieves sanctity.

Of course Genet's dedication to the beauty of vileness and falsity involved martyrdom. Sartre saw Genet's prolonged Calvary as being inevitable and consciously adopted by him, at least in the earlier bourgeois society which demands certain standards of honesty, morality and loyalty. Much of Genet's early life was spent in abject poverty, in prison, and in subjection to the coarse hoodlums whom he loved and venerated whilst fully understanding the nature of their baseness. The sight of the manacles on the wrists of a condemned murderer produced in Genet a hallucination of a fragrant garland of roses, all the sweeter for his knowing that the apparent boldness of the man was no more than the fake bravado of a trembling coward.<sup>7</sup>

In parapsychology there are, and have always been, those who are dedicated to faking. In one sense one must respect them more than those who

merely capitalise on their dedicated dishonesty. In the latter category there are those who have not to my knowledge ever published any fraudulent results, because they have never claimed any 'positive' results at all. Instead they have pursued the more comfortable course of retaining their formal integrity whilst celebrating the outrageous miracles of those like Eusapia Palladino who may have done their cheating for them. These respectable, and some might say cunning, celebrants of other people's cheating are not saints and martyrs; they have determined on a course wherein they have their cake and eat it. No one can accuse them of being cheats and liars: at worst they can be publicly accused of being naïve, trusting souls, but perhaps their naïveté is more apparent than real. But the saints of parapsychology have sacrificed much so that others may exploit their sacrifice. They have laid upon the altar their own personal integrity. In the academic world they pose as scientists in order to betray science; in the world of entertainment they betray their magician colleagues by pretending that effects that are achieved by the ordinary techniques of conjuring are achieved by mysterious 'psychic' powers. They cut themselves off from ordinary humanity and endure the martyrdom of lonely, singular lives in which they cannot admit the truth to their fellows. Always there is this convention of pretence that has to be maintained. The saints and martyrs have to pretend to believe in the reality of one another's miracles, just as in Genet's world of thieves and braggart hoodlums they keep up a pretence of believing one another's foolish boasts and poses of indomitable courage.

The mutual pretence of belief in what everyone knows to be false is not invariable outside the academic world of parapsychology. Soal's two 'telepathic' Welsh cousins no doubt had many a good laugh over what they probably perceived as the old fool's credulity (not realising his deeper purpose in encouraging the farce); Eusapia Palladino perhaps had cronies with whom she could mock at her dupes; Uri has his Shipi, Yasha Katz and others. But in the academic world they must be more wary. It does not do to admit frankly to colleagues how experiments have been rigged, for there is always the risk of betrayal, as Walter Levy found to his cost at the Institute of Parapsychology. Joseph Rhine,<sup>8,9</sup> who more than any other man can be said to have been responsible for the corruption of Levy, turned upon his protégé and denounced him after associates had plotted to demonstrate how he performed his miracles with rats. A case of martyrdom at the hands of three Judases? Levy should have known what Genet tells us what all thieves know—that you can trust no one in the same game as you.

The business of denunciation between parapsychologists is, of course, a two-edged sword. Thus Carl Sargent, parapsychologist at the University of Cambridge, now says, 'My feeling, for what it's worth, is

that Geller is definitely a fake. It seems to me that there are enough documented incidences of definite trickery for us to be able to say this.'<sup>10</sup> It is, of course, open to Geller to retort that in his opinion, for what it is worth, Carl Sargent is definitely a fake and there is enough published evidence to support such a conclusion. Earlier I referred to the fact that in the fake world portrayed by Genet, the criminal boasters had in general to pretend to believe one another's lies, but there would, of course, be fights. Betrayal was at the heart of the mystical fascination this phoney world had for Genet.

CSICOP, as its title proclaims, exists to investigate the claims for the paranormal. If a little boy tells me that there is a unicorn in the back garden, naturally I look to see what (if anything) is in the garden, but also I try to ascertain why he is making the claim. Is he claiming it for fun? Is he trying to find out how gullible I am? Is it a misperception or an hallucination? My inquiries naturally go beyond seeing if there is a unicorn in the garden; in fact I am being somewhat dishonest with him if I pretend that I am going out to look for the unicorn, because I honestly do not believe in unicorns. It strikes me that constantly looking in gardens and finding out that there are no unicorns there, as some members of CSICOP do, is a rather dull and unrewarding exercise. Rather I think that we should be concerned with why parapsychologists continue to make the preposterous claims they do. To treat the claims of pseudo-scientists as one treats the claims of scientists is not logical. One is right in assuming that scientists are interested in finding out facts and constructing models to explain these facts. It is true to say that they are also interested in furthering their careers, doing down rivals etc., and this occasionally leads to cheating. But this mundane and all-too-human propensity to resort to dishonesty just occasionally, does not explain pseudo-science, and we make a big mistake if we approach it with this assumption.

I have used the analogy of Genet's world of thieves because, as Sartre shows us, it cannot be understood simply by acknowledging that people steal things because they want material goods. I do not mean to impugn the morality or the dignity of those whom I have designated the saints and martyrs of parapsychology; indeed, I have said that they merit more respect than those who merely exploit their dedication to fraud, whilst cunningly abstaining from fraud themselves. In parapsychology there are dedicated and indeed religious people, but their dedication is not to finding out facts and constructing useful theoretical models.

It would be foolish and ignorant to argue with a sincere Roman Catholic over the fact that after the miracle of transubstantiation has been performed, the bread and wine are demonstrably not flesh and blood. Similarly, it would be pointless to insist to the ecstatic Genet that manacles on the wrists of the condemned man were not garlands of flowers. The critic who,

with ponderous care, examines the experimental controls on the miracles claimed by such people as Targ and Puthoff, risks making a fool of himself. Miracles are a mockery of science. It is the scientist who is being obtuse when he does not acknowledge and understand when and why he is being mocked. While uneducated and unsophisticated Roman Catholics may believe that by some divine magic, bread and wine become flesh and blood, this is hardly so of the educated. An educated Roman Catholic knows as well as I do that the physical and chemical nature of the host remains unchanged after the miracle has been performed, so what does he actually believe? This matter has been the subject of argument by Catholic theologians for a long time, and by and large the views of Thomas Aquinas are accepted today—that the accidents of the bread and wine do not change, but the substance does, so in terms of substance it is correct to believe that it is the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Thus human reason is mocked and humiliated, to the greater glory of God.

Similarly, a true believer in parapsychology, when not on the defensive, may agree with me that in terms of accidents, parapsychology is made up of error, fraud, and selective publication, but that these accidents do not matter, for in another sense the substance of parapsychology is genuine. Indeed, if every report and every experiment in parapsychology that have ever taken place could be demonstrated to be a fraud, that would not make the slightest difference to the grounds for belief, as the substance of parapsychology is genuine. Once one has grasped this fact, it becomes evident why much debate about the credibility of the paranormal is idle.

It strikes scientific critics of parapsychology as extraordinary, bizarre and perverse that intelligent defenders of parapsychology such as Collins and Pinch<sup>11</sup> should advance meaningless rubbish—their postulation of 'backwards causality'—as a defence. But would such scientific critics expect sensible and meaningful arguments, in a scientific sense, to be advanced if the Virgin Birth were to be debated in medical journals devoted to obstetrics, or the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand to be discussed in *The British Journal of Nutrition*? As I see it, the people who are at fault are the scientific critics who are prepared to extend the ordinary standards of scientific debate to discussing reports of what are in fact miracles, even if these miracles are given such names as 'psychokinesis', 'precognition', and 'telepathy', and are performed, or are alleged to be performed, in places that are dignified by the name of 'laboratories'.

The only interesting and valid line of research seems to me to inquire why certain people become so divorced from ordinary human concerns that they are dedicated to fraud, mockery and deceit. The easy answer is that this is just the outcome of a wish to advance their careers, and perhaps to court a little easy notoriety, but I think that this invokes too facile

a concept of human motivation. Some businessmen occasionally resort to fraud to advance their business interests, but there is all the difference in the world between such occasionally dishonest characters and the criminal devotees such as those portrayed and exemplified by Genet, who accept their inevitable martyrdom at the hands of a bourgeois society. I call attention to the latter to find a useful analogy in seeking to understand the parapsychologists enamoured with fraud and dedicated to the mockery and perversion of science.

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H.B. Gibson is a psychologist and President of the British Society of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis.

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## Erratum

The editor apologises to Mike Hutchinson for a typo in his article *A Thorn in Geller's Side* (B&IS II.4); The sentence 'Do you believe in God?' Uri asked. *should have read* 'Do you believe in God?' Uri asked. 'No' I replied.

# Astrology and Gauquelin

Anthony Garrett

## *The real explanation of Gauquelin's results*

Some years ago Michel Gauquelin, for many years skeptical, suggested that astrology was validated by findings on top European sportsmen and women. In Gauquelin's sample of sports stars, the planet Mars lay in two particular sectors of the birth chart more often (22% of the time) than for random samples of the population (17%). This observation is the central plank of a new book, irresponsibly entitled *Astrology: the Evidence of Science*, by Percy Seymour, a professional astronomer.<sup>1</sup>

CSICOP confirmed these facts, though the effect was not clear in a later test of US sports stars.<sup>1</sup> CSICOP pointed out that the 'Mars effect' could arise from a biased sample containing an undue proportion of sports stars showing the effect.<sup>2</sup> CSICOP stopped short of accusing Gauquelin of fraud, although that is the only way to choose a sample to get a predetermined result. Perhaps independent criteria of performance for defining 'top sports people' will be agreed on, and Gauquelin's sample checked for bias. If it is unbiased, should we then embrace astrology?

The answer is a resounding no. We shall present plausible alternative ways in which the results could have arisen. First, what Gauquelin means by 'astrology' presents a moving target: when the US results were negative, Gauquelin suggested that the qualifying standards were set too low. If he wished, he might next claim it works only for particular sub-disciplines, more heavily represented in the European sample; and so on. But astrology makes no claims to apply only to top European sportsmen and women. Far from it: its practitioners set great store by its universal validity. They accept that astrology is empirical, positing no mechanisms; this is a tenable position, if unenquiring.

Moreover, astrologers do not claim that Mars lying in Gauquelin's sectors leads to sporting prowess. So whatever Gauquelin is testing, it isn't astrology. It cannot be ruled out that a single planet affects only top European sports stars; but a mechanism which does this and nothing else is utterly implausible, except apparently to Gauquelin (who already concedes that half the planets do nothing). Astrologers approve of Gauquelin only because his results seemingly indicate some sort of planetary effect. But astrology has already been conclusively disposed of, in a double-blind test conducted with the cooperation of leading astrologers.<sup>3</sup>

Statistical results which deviate from chance can be viewed either as freaks or as evidence for a systematic effect. The choice can only be made on the basis of prior information, and without it nothing more can be done, no further tests proposed. We should therefore ask Gauquelin: on what grounds does he believe that the Mars/European sports stars effect is real, rather than a chance result? What information, known only to him, makes him prefer this alternative?

It is also worth asking how Gauquelin came to select this particular profession and planet, and these particular birth chart sectors. Many professions might have been examined, and one showing a strong effect, which turned out to be European Sports Stars, presented without mention of the rest. Alternatively, a secret hunt for correlations between planets and sectors of sports stars' birth charts could have led to the choices of Mars, and of sectors.

These suggestions involve fraud. I am not suggesting Gauquelin cheated; he could perfectly well have found his results by chance, and be mystified by their cause. But the skeptic, sensibly, will want to check this. To do so, planet-sector correlations must be tested. If Gauquelin's choices correspond to one of the largest correlations, we can reasonably cry 'foul!' This is the test which is crying out to be done, rather than a check of whether Gauquelin chose his sportsmen and women fairly.

We should also ask: on what grounds does Gauquelin posit a correlation between sporting ability and the Mars effect? He is adamant about this. What secret information led him to suggest it? These questions demand answers.

## References

1. Percy Seymour, *Astrology: the Evidence of Science*. Lennard Publishing, 1988.
2. The *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp.19-63 (Winter 1979-80), and Vol. 7, No. 3, pp.77-82 (Spring 1983), and further references therein.
3. S. Carlson; *Nature*, Vol. 318, p. 419 (5 December, 1985).

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# Heaven and Earth

Michael Hutchinson

## *Introducing a new regular column by an active skeptic*

An advertisement in the *Bookseller* for a book about developing psychic powers claimed that the author, Abbe Gail (surely a pseudonym for someone who can't spell Abigail) claimed 'the Los Angeles Police Department relied on her gifts to locate missing kidnap victims.' I immediately sent a letter to the publisher (Llennard Publishing) asking for some evidence of this claim. The Managing Director telephoned me, sounding concerned. The author was not in the country at the moment but he would approach her for such evidence as soon as possible. I never heard from him again! However ...

A copy of my letter to the publisher went to the Advertising Standards Authority who took the matter up with Llennard. One month later and without further reference to me the ASA sent me a draft copy of its decision. This was that Llennard had submitted an article from the *Los Angeles Times* in which it was stated that Gail helped the police in the search for a missing child. 'Having no reason to doubt the validity of the article, but as the advertiser had submitted evidence of only one such incident' the ASA requested Llennard 'to modify the claim in the advertisement to reflect this'. I wasn't satisfied. I phoned the ASA.

I asked Charlotte Reid of the ASA if the article said that Gail had helped to find the missing girl. Reading the article to me over the phone, she realised that the girl had not been found. She sent me a copy of the article and advised me that the ASA would reconsider the matter. This time they reached the right conclusion. They were 'not satisfied ... that Abbe Gail's involvement had in any way been connected with the LAPD investigation of [the girl's] disappearance and thus concluded that the contested claim was unsupported. The advertisers were requested to delete the claim from future advertisements.'

Forget all about Ronald Reagan's use of astrology! He has far better help than any astrologer can give according to the 20 October 1987 edition of an American newspaper called *Sun*. He's negotiating with aliens. Or, to put it more precisely: He's negotiating with aliens according to a 'noted' psychic who says he's been picking up vibrations from outer space and the White House.

If you can believe anything which appears in a newspaper called *Sun* it seems that Reagan has been having top secret meetings at his California home with visitors from other planets. He has convinced them to become part of the USA and will end his presidency by adding several planets as states. So now

you know why Ronnie wasn't available from time to time. It had nothing to do with astrology—that was just a bluff. He was meeting with aliens.

Geoff Kirby of Weymouth had a whole series of letters published in the *Dorset Evening Echo* earlier this year. The subject of his first letter was an article on faith healing and it took up eleven column inches. This letter in turn received criticism from three supporters of quack remedies (I refuse to use the term alternative 'medicine'—that's like calling cyanide alternative sustenance) including a 'reflexology practitioner' whose letters were also published.

Geoff responded to criticisms levelled at him by the reflexology practitioner in another letter of eleven and a half column inches. Subsequently the newspaper published a second, and then third letter from the reflexologist plus one from the director of 'New Approaches to Cancer'. They also published two more from Geoff Kirby who was even given the last word.

In his letter which accompanied copies of the published letters Geoff told me that all of the material used by him was derived from back issues of the *Skeptical Inquirer* or Terence Hines' excellent book *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*. I applaud Geoff for his perseverance and would like to encourage other skeptics to follow his example. It is individual action like this which could make all the difference to rational thinking in this country.

Shirley MacLaine is reported to have threatened Prometheus Books with a law suit over one of their forthcoming publications. Called *Channeling Into the New Age* by Henry Gordon the book features the quotations of Ms MacLaine who is the foremost guru of the New Age scene. It is humorous, informative, includes an extensive collection of her often-contradictory statements and is a lively commentary on the New Age movement (it says here in the Prometheus catalogue).

Does MacLaine's threat bother Prometheus Books? 'Sure it worries us, but what the hell', Paul Kurtz, president and founder of the company, has said. He feels compelled to present a rebuttal to MacLaine's insistence that she has lived past lives. The book will be available in the UK—lawsuits permitting—before the end of the year.

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

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# Skeptic at large...

Wendy M. Grossman

Quite frequently in skeptical circles, someone will say, 'If I didn't have a conscience, I could go out there and make a fortune as a psychic.' Except in rare cases, this is not true. Why? Because it isn't enough just to know the tricks.

I was a full-time folksinger for six years, and still perform when asked (and sometimes when not asked). I have performed in folk clubs, at colleges, on radio and TV, at folk festivals, in bars, and in college cafeterias at lunchtime. And let me tell you, it isn't all that easy to get up on a stage and hold an audience's attention. Anyone who has ever performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (I haven't) can tell you that in some places it isn't even all that easy to keep them in the room.

You may be able to bend a spoon or move a compass needle 'better than Geller does'; you may know the standard cold-reading gambits cold. But unless you can do those things in such a way that the audience is excited, conscience or no conscience, you wouldn't succeed, any more than being able to sing songs and play the guitar is enough to keep an audience entertained... and entertained is very much the key word.

This was all brought home to me when I watched in succession tapes of Geller on the Wogan show and tapes of a couple of skeptics on various other shows. Geller, whatever else he may or may not be, is a consummate professional when it comes to performing. He knows how to present himself and his act, he knows what he wants to say and he gets it said, whether he is given the opportunity or not. He makes the opportunity—and the hosts give way. Next time he's on TV, watch how he relates to the studio audience, the host, anyone else with him on stage and the camera. He is conscious all the time of what the camera is seeing. After all, what most psychic performers are doing, really, is promoting themselves, and then denying it, humbly. Skeptics, by contrast, unless they are, like Randi or Gordon, Asimov or Sagan, professional skeptics, have rarely mastered performing skills. Most skeptics are amateurs interested in promoting a point of view. Most have other work they consider their 'real' work. I was not, obviously, a folksinger who became a household word. But I would still like to offer a few suggestions for the would-be performing skeptic. After all, write enough letters complaining to the media, and it could be you.

First: know your subject cold. I don't mean you have to know everything under the sun about it, but whatever it is you have been asked to present, be sure in your own mind what the key points are and what your most important message is. If, for example, you

are going on the radio to be interviewed just before a major event—say a meeting or a conference—the thing you want to be absolutely sure to get across is the information about that event. If your interviewer is unsympathetic, you could get sidetracked into trying to defend yourself and your point of view. That is, in those circumstances, a waste of time. Instead, keeping your eye firmly on your message, you might tell him that those are exactly the kinds of questions that will be answered or discussed at the meeting—and then you can go straight into a reminder of when and where it's being held. Avoid making errors of fact. If you don't know something, or aren't sure, say so. It does no good to the skeptical 'cause' if proponents are caught out in mistakes. Those mistakes can become ammunition against you in later arguments or discussions.

Second, try to avoid truly useless debates. There are some people who will never alter their opinions no matter what you say, and arguments which are going nowhere are less than interesting to the listener, who will promptly change channels. As a corollary to this, avoid trying to comment on things you can't possibly know anything about. I have heard Randi say, for example, when asked how he would explain a case which is then described to him, 'I don't know. I wasn't there.' He then may or may not go on to describe a similar case, which he was able to investigate personally.

Third, look presentable. I am a veteran wearer of blue jeans, and I'll probably never change now, so I don't mean everyone has to wear suits and ties, or dresses, or anything like that. By presentable I mean, look as though you care enough how you look to put in a little effort. If you look like you don't give a damn about yourself, why should any audience (or interviewer) care what you have to say?

Fourth... give credit where it is due. Not to excess—you don't want to wear the audience out with references. But if you're going to talk extensively about someone else's work, say it's theirs. It's not just that it's the honest thing to do—it gives the impression there are lots of us out there backing you up.

Fifth, enjoy yourself. That's the real secret of performing. If you enjoy it, chances are your audience will, too. If you at heart don't want to be there, they'll know it. They're practically psychic that way.

*This article is also appearing in Skeptical Briefs*

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Wendy Grossman is founder and editor of the B&IS, and a writer and folksinger.

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# Reviews

## Forbidden Knowledge

Michael Hutchinson

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Bob Coultie, *Forbidden Knowledge*. Lutterworth Press £9.95.

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This book is based on a Radio 4 series of the same name which was broadcast a couple of years ago. It is written in four parts: The Miracle Workers; Hidden Forces; Towards and Anthropology of the Paranormal; and How to be Psychic. In many respects, *Forbidden Knowledge* is a welcome addition to the skeptical bookshelf, although I do have some reservations about it.

Coultie has made a useful contribution to the continuing Geller saga. During the course of making the radio series, he saw Geller bend a spoon. Although Geller claimed not to have used force, Coultie became the fourth person I have met who has quite clearly seen Geller do just that. Coultie has also cleared up another claim—or counterclaim—by Geller concerning a court case in Israel.

It had been reported in the *Daily Mail* in January 1974, that an Israeli court ruled that Geller performed his tricks by sleight of hand or other stage tricks, and not by some hidden power. Geller denied this, saying, 'No. If there was such a court case, wouldn't it be very easy for you to fly to Tel Aviv and find that court case? Of course there wasn't a case. This is elementary. Go to Israel and find out.' Coultie didn't need to go to Israel. He just asked the BBC's office there to check the story. The result is explained in the book.

Two chapters on astrology are generally fair, but I cannot understand why Coultie uses astronomy as an argument against astrology. That astronomy and physics cannot explain astrology is immaterial, although the author of a recently published book *Astrology: the Evidence of Science* would disagree with me. The question to be asked is, 'does astrology work?' If it does, and astronomy and physics cannot explain how, then what we know of these disciplines is at fault, not astrology. But astrology doesn't work, which Coultie makes clear by giving details of some of the negative experiments which have been conducted.

There are a number of annoying spelling and other small errors throughout the book. The *Skeptical Inquirer* is consistently spelt *Enquirer*. But more importantly, Coultie makes one particular error which I find disconcerting considering he runs a parapsychology course and has designed ESP tests for the *Radio Times* and a computer network. Although from what I know of them these tests do not seem to have

been badly designed, Coultie should have consulted a psychologist and a statistician with experience in this field. He didn't do so until after the experiments had been conducted. What a chance may have been wasted. Coultie's error concerns the chances of Doris Stokes getting a positive response from any audience when mentioning the name Rogers (or Rodgers). As Coultie explains:

'Such names seem not uncommon. For instance, in my own local telephone directory the names Rogers and Rodgers, which sound the same, occupy one page out of 712. It is reasonable to estimate that each person listed lives with two others of the same surname. If one went into the street and stopped anyone living in the area covered by the local telephone directory and asked, 'Is your name Rogers or Rodgers?' the chances are about one in 237 of getting a positive response.' Can you work out where Bob has gone wrong?

The twelve pages of the final chapter, 'How to Be Psychic', over-simplifies the task. It tries to show that someone who knows a few pseudo-psychic tricks used by magicians can present himself or herself as a psychic. Coultie suggests conjuring books specialising in mental effects as a suitable source for the would-be psychic. In fact, very, very few psychics use conjuring tricks. In the lifetime of the *Skeptical Inquirer* I can recall only four who could be accused of this: Jean-Pierre Girard, Suzie Cottrell, James Hydrick, and Jason Michaels. However, if you want a few ideas for party tricks, this chapter is for you.

On the basis of this book, Coultie has received some good publicity, appearing on radio and television and having articles written about him and the book. He is certainly the most publicised skeptic in the country at the moment, attributing this to being called a 'reluctant' skeptic.

I cannot unreservedly recommend this book, especially at £9.95, but I would recommend that you look at a copy, then decide for yourself if it is for you.

*Answer to the Rogers problem:* Bob Coultie has not taken into consideration that *all* the people in the telephone directory might be expected to live with two others of the same surname. Dividing 712 by three is therefore unnecessary. The chances of meeting someone called Rogers or Rodgers in the circumstances outlined are somewhere below 1 in 700, bearing in mind that many of the directory entries are for business subscribers.

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

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## Reason to Believe ... or not

David Love

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Terence Hines, *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal: A Critical Examination of the Evidence*. Prometheus Books, 1988; paper, £12.95, 371 pp.

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All subscribers to this magazine should avail themselves of—or at least read—this excellent book. Hines, as he intended, has done us a considerable service just by producing the most comprehensive review of pseudoscientific and paranormal beliefs of which I am aware, quite apart from the other features of the book discussed below. The depth of coverage varies rather from two chapters devoted to UFOs to a paragraph on homeopathy, but across nearly the gamut of current beliefs beyond the fringe of science. The material is up-to-date and there are few omissions, although one—the supposed New-Age powers of crystals—comes to mind. Relatively unusual is a chapter on psychoanalysis.

There is a fine collection of references amounting to 32 pages. Many of these are to *Skeptical Inquirer* articles, a lot of which are collected in *Paranormal Borderlands of Science* and *Science Confronts the Paranormal*. Hines provides a reasonable index however, which the collections lack, so it is worth the possible duplication of material from these collections or *Skeptical Inquirer* back-issues. As well as treating specific topics Hines provides a useful chapter discussing the nature of pseudoscience and the rationale for its study. (The paranormal is subsumed as a part of pseudoscience.)

The book is written from the point of view of a psychologist; indeed it is partly intended as a textbook for a course like that on 'Parapsychology and the Occult' taught by the author. He is interested, like me, in why belief in the paranormal and pseudoscientific claims continues in the face of empirical evidence of their invalidity. Thus, as well as calmly debunking the claims he catalogues, Hines examines in the light of modern psychology the 'cognitive illusions' often responsible for apparently paranormal experiences. As well as such 'auto-illusions' the tricks employed by those exploiting those susceptible to crank beliefs crop up regularly through the book—cold reading for instance. The uselessness of testimonials to the effectiveness of quack 'cures' and other pseudoscience is emphasised, particularly with reference to the nature of serious illness: the point is most graphically illustrated for me by the reproduction of a c.1911 poster of five good-faith testimonials for tuberculosis cures provided by people who died of the disease within two years.

How useful this book will be as a psychology text, I am not qualified to say, and that is presumably not its main interest in this context, but it is definitely a most useful reference work with few faults that I could

see. It is well-produced and, I hope, will be widely bought. I expect this will make the author rather less money, however, than he as a 'volunteer usher' witnessed collected at a single fraudulent W.V. Grant 'service', as described in the chapter on faith healing.

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Dr. David Love is a nuclear physicist interested in cognitive science and is on the committee of the Manchester Skeptics.

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## The New Age

Wendy M. Grossman

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Martin Gardner, *The New Age: Notes of a Fringe Watcher*. Prometheus Books, 1988; 273 pp., index.

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The 30,000 subscribers worldwide to the *Skeptical Inquirer* will have read about two thirds of the 33 pieces in this book, as 19 of them appeared in Gardner's regular column in that journal, and a few others appeared as articles. Some others appeared in SI's sister humanist magazine *Free Inquiry*, and the rest are taken from such publications as *Discover* magazine and *The New York Review of Books*. Gardner has always been a lively, acerbic, and entertaining writer, and the pieces collected here are typical of his work.

The title *The New Age* is slightly misleading. Few of the chapters refer to what are generally thought of as 'New Age' beliefs. More typically, the chapters cover more familiar topics, such as the relationship between Freud and Fließ (the inventor of biorhythms), Randi's project Alpha, an assessment of Margaret Mead's paranormal beliefs in the light of recent reappraisals of her anthropological work, the Great Stone Face of Mars (which recently resurfaced in one of the UK tabloids) maverick scientists, and a host of others.

Gardner's sharp-edged critical skills demolish some of the fuzziest thinking to come out of America today—and other places in the past. He examines the claims made by the big television evangelists, he dissects Shirley MacLaine's autobiographical discussions of reincarnation and trance channelling, and recounts the history of perpetual motion machines and comments on the story of L. Ron Hubbard's life. As with his other collections of skeptical pieces, when readers have written back to criticise or disagree with him, Gardner prints their criticisms along with his answer. Sometimes he stands by his original article; other times he agrees he was wrong, and admits his errors.

Even though I've been a subscriber to the *Skeptical Inquirer* ever since 1982, I enjoyed reading all those pieces collected together; however, it was a disappointment that more of them weren't new to me. For that reason, I particularly enjoyed his critical discussion of two of Shirley MacLaine's autobiographies and trance channelling, which I hadn't seen before.

Gardner has been writing about pseudoscience for many years, and his voice has lost none of its sharpness over time. At a time when America's president has been revealed to have been functioning under the advice of his wife's astrologer and the BBC has reported that Los Angeles residents have been running for the hills because of an equivocal prediction by Nostradamus, we need Gardner more than ever, if only to prove that in the America of the 1980's there are few rational people.

## Life After Death

Wendy M. Grossman

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S. Ramsay Blackley, *As in Adam All Die*. The Book Guild, 1986; £9.50, 283 pp.

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A cardiac arrest inspired S. Ramsay Blackley, formerly Chief Executive of the British Wool Marketing Board, to examine the evidence about what might have awaited him had he not been revived. His conclusion: nothing. This book is a survey of the material he used.

It is divided into six sections. In the first, he describes his cardiac arrest and reawakening, and poses his main question: is there any kind of life after death, and what is it like? He also briefly discusses near-death experiences. In the next four sections, he examines in detail spiritualism, psychic phenomena, theology, and then religious views on reincarnation. In the sixth and final part, he critiques his evidence and draws his conclusion.

An aspect of Blackley's thesis is that views of the after-life reflect the desires of those who promoted them. He doubts, for example, whether modern women would be much attracted by the Islamic view of the after-life. He points out the discrepancies between the various religions—and, in the case of Christianity, between different sects of the same religion.

Blackley does not approach his material as a scientist might, looking for scientific proof. Rather, he uses his reason to determine whether the differing views of life after death make sense in terms of the world as we know it. For example, on page 36 he discusses 'Direct Voice' communication: '[it] is ... well beyond my 'boggle threshold' ... my mind cannot take such phenomena very seriously.' Most skeptics will sympathise with Blackley here; however, disbelief is not evidence.

I suspect that, were I a believer in some one or other of the life after death theories, I would not be inspired to change my views by reading Blackley's book. He critiques views of the after-life over and over again according to the natural, physical laws as we know them. A die-hard believer's answer to

that would be simply that trying to understand the after-life by using the laws which govern our everyday world is much like a circle trying to understand what it's like to be a sphere: it is simply beyond our comprehension. In addition, I personally don't have the same problems Blackley does with resurrection—why shouldn't it be possible for a soul to have access to a lifetime of memories and experience without the problem of senility?—or with the question of occupation in the after-life—the idea of an eternity without TV does not fill me with dread.

Blackley has, however, done a good job in assembling the various theories for comparison. I particularly like his short discussion of 'World-enders' in which he tells the story of Scotland's Buchanites. Some people may find his discussion of the various Christian dogmas long and involved; others may question the inclusion of paranormal phenomena such as dowsing, which really makes no predictions about an after-life. On the other hand, he makes many sound points about the way in which church doctrines evolved. Like many dowsers mapping underground water in the same field and each drawing a different map: either only one theory is right, or they're all wrong. Faced with the myriad versions of life after death, Blackley chooses the natural world. 'Who or what,' he says, 'owes Mankind an after-life?'

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Mr Blackley's book is available from *Hamdon House Books, New Galloway, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland DG7 3RP*.

## Seymour's Astrology

Anthony Garrett

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Percy Seymour, *Astrology: the evidence*. Lennard Publishing, 1988; £12.98, 200 pp.

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This is an important book. In it, a professional astronomer attempts to construct a theory, consistent with present-day science, which supports astrology. Because few astrologers possess the background necessary to evaluate the theory, it is certain to be used indiscriminately as a brickbat against skeptics.

So: is Seymour's theory correct? I shall argue that, at the least it is seriously misleading. In one sense it is unfortunate that this review is appearing in the *British & Irish Skeptic*, which astrologers would doubtless expect to give the book a hostile reception no matter what. Let me therefore stress that the arguments beneath are derived, as Seymour would wish, from scientific criteria.

Before theorising, though, it is well to be certain that there is something to explain. Many 'tests' of astrology have been run. Broadly speaking, those conducted by astrologers have been favourable to astrology, while those conducted by scientists have been

unfavourable to it. This has led to schism. Also, it is agreed today that double-blind testing, in which the experimenter is ignorant of the expected result during the experiment and cannot subconsciously cue the subject in to it, carries greater credibility. There has been only one double-blind test of astrology conducted with the cooperation of astrologers, and this is therefore of utmost importance. It concluded that 'the experiment clearly refutes the astrological hypothesis.' Consequently it is disturbing to observe Seymour dismissing this in two paragraphs (on page 76), the first stating that with corroborative detail that the experiment tested 'the embroidery, not the principles' of astrology, and the second criticising the additional references provided by the journal in which it appeared. The failure of perspective here is so great that one might reasonably conclude Seymour has an axe to grind.

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## How to be a Contactee

Steuart Campbell

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Gary Kinder, *Light Years: An Investigation into the Extraterrestrial Experiences of Eduard Meier*. Viking 1987; £10.95, 266 pp., 11 plates.

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If you haven't actually met an alien, travelled in her spaceship 50 light years to her planet and learned cosmic wisdom, but you want people to believe that you have, how do you go about it? Well, you produce fake pictures alleged to show the spaceship hovering near the Earth (but don't let anyone see the original negatives), you flatten some grass in circular patterns and claim that as where the spacecraft hovered, you produce some odd scraps of metal and claim that they are samples of the spacecraft's hull, you go off into the woods alone at all sorts of odd hours playing tape recordings of weird noises and prattle on about 'interstellar travel [faster than light of course], life on another planet, universal law, advanced physics, archaeology, astronomy, Creation, the fate of the human race, [and] the destiny of planet Earth'! If you can also fit in a bit of spoon-bending and other conjuring tricks then so much the better! Above all, if you have only one arm and pretend to be a poorly-educated farmer then the world will beat a path to your door, bringing the fame and fortune you so clearly want. George Adamski played this card in the 1950s; Eduard Meier from Switzerland has played it again in the 1970s, but with finesse.

The somewhat impressionable Kinder documents the rise and rise of Meier, but it is disconcerting to learn that Meier saw his first UFO when he was only

five, was jailed in his youth, joined the Foreign Legion but deserted, was expelled from India in 1964 and had a try at practically every type of manual work. He also had a bad childhood and an inferiority complex. Meier is portrayed as a manic transcendentalist who, like Adamski, found an extraterrestrial voice for his potty philosophy. Unfortunately there were always plenty of people around willing and ready to believe in the guru. In this case Meier's supporters bought him a 50 acre farm worth £141,000 and helped him renovate it. So at least it improved his situation, but it drove his wife to attempt suicide.

Kinder also tells the story of some US 'investigators' and their attempts to uncover the truth. These people were not UFOlogists; indeed they would not share their findings with the UFO movement and the latter condemned Meier as a fraud. The ignorance of the 'investigators' shows through in places. For example when Meier mentioned tachyons they had never heard the term and when they later found out what it meant presumed that he could only have learned about the concept from his alien. In fact the tachyon concept is common in pseudoscience mythology and often appears in science fiction. Nor was their technical knowledge perfect. They appear to have accepted Meier's claim that the atmosphere of the alien planet consisted of 32 per cent oxygen (a level high enough to cause planet-wide fires), and they were not competent operators of a Geiger counter, with which (guess what) they found radiation traces at the alleged landing sites '400 per cent above the highest background levels' (in fact this should read '300 per cent'). They also misreported a reading of 0.2 on the counter as 'two point zero' to a physicist (and so misled him about the radiation levels). In fact all the readings were at or about normal background levels.

Picture analysis by digital processing was frustrated by the absence of the original negatives but one clearly faked picture of the next (*sic*) San Francisco earthquake (it had been taken from a known artist's impression) quickly disappeared when Meier was told. The metal sample also disappeared, but not before a scientist claimed that it could not have been made on earth.

Kinder tells an entertaining story but it suffers from technical errors and insufficient skepticism. Clearly no really skeptical investigator has looked at the Meier case and it may be that there is no-one in continental Europe capable of doing so. The book also suffers from US spelling and Americanisms.

In concluding that 'major scientists and experts have been unable to discredit his [Meier's] evidence' Kinder misses the point. The onus is not on scientists to disprove Meier's claims; it is on him to prove them. That he has failed to do.

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## Holistic Medicine at the BAAS

Steve Donnelly

Special session on science and pseudoscience: the question of holistic medicine. 150th Annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), Oxford, 5-9 September, 1988.

The annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (generally known as the BAAS) is attended every year by between 2000 and 4000 delegates and is intended to make science both accessible and interesting to a largely non-scientific audience. As always, the meeting covered a vast range of topics but of particular interest to B&IS readers was an evening session entitled 'Science vs Pseudoscience', which consisted of a debate, followed by a question-and-answer session on the subject of holistic medicine.

The first speaker was Dr David Peters, a general practitioner and secretary of the British Holistic Medicine Association. His thesis was that conventional medicine failed to recognize the fact that the disease and the patient were always inextricably bound together and concentrated exclusively on treating the disease without any concern for the patient as a human being. Holistic practitioners instead looked at the entire system consisting of doctor, patient, disease and environment and the interaction between the different elements. In this way the patient was given a feeling of control over his life and illness which conventional medical practice did not provide.

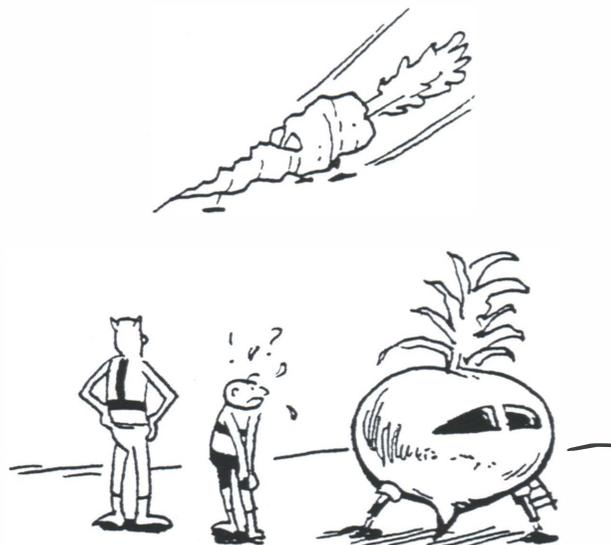
The opposing speaker was Professor Timothy McElwain, a specialist in medical oncology (the study of tumours). He made the important point that whilst alternative medicine may help for conditions such as migraine (by the placebo effect) it was utterly useless for diseases such as cancer and sugar diabetes. He went on to argue that alternative practitioners tended to string together snippets of scientific information inappropriately in order to create the impression that their treatments had a scientific basis. He cited the example of the claim often made by alternative practitioners that stress, and its relief, play an important role in the treatment of cancer. Their argument was that stress could have severe effects on the auto-immune system and thus render a patient more susceptible to cancer. According to Professor McElwain, in fact, there is no evidence that the auto-immune system plays a role in any of the more common types of cancer as is amply and tragically illustrated by the fact that AIDS sufferers, whose immune system is malfunctioning, do not contract any of the common cancers. The essential difference between conventional and alternative approaches is thus that the former uses the scientific method whereas the latter abuses it.

The third speaker was Dr Iain Chambers who was described in my conference programme as the discussant. He served as a sort of academic ombudsman and attempted to sum up the case for each side of the debate. He pointed out that conventional medical practice was far from perfect, as graphically illustrated by the fact that 20% of births in the USA were by caesarian section compared with only 5% in Holland. If the majority of American caesarians were indeed unnecessary, as these statistics would seem to imply, then the medical profession had no cause for complacency. On the other hand, 'practitioner effects' did occur and, whether favourable or unfavourable these needed to be studied and, if useful, exploited.

The meeting ended with a lively question and answer session in which a number of members of the audience claimed to have been helped by the approach of institutions such as the Bristol Holistic Medicine Centre.

For details of the BAAS and its annual meeting write to Public Affairs Office, BAAS, Fortress House, 23 Savile Row, London W1X 1AB.

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



I HOPE YOU'VE SOMETHING BETTER THAN  
THAT CARROT CAMOUFLAGE, TODAY!

The *Daily Mirror* (23 April) reported that huge flying carrots 'as big as hot air balloons' were spotted over Derbyshire. The carrots spouted flames, and one crashed into a pond.

Thanks to T.G. Pearce.

# Letters

## Crop circles

I must say that as a physicist myself, I find the rationalization quoted in B&IS II.4 profoundly unconvincing. After a moment's delight at the idea of 'stationery whirlwinds,' those dread vortices of paperclips and 9x5 envelopes which so often devastate offices ... I couldn't help wondering whether stationary whirlwinds can plausibly be modelled as possessing symmetrical outriders; whether a whirlwind could not reasonably be expected to suck up rather than press down the corn; and whether the uncompromising term 'stationary' isn't likely to be more often than not a misnomer as regards actual air movements—wouldn't we expect to see tracks as the whirlwind drifts, rather than this apparent preponderance of perfect or near-perfect circles? Local papers have alternatively suggested UFOs, gravity vortices (whatever they might be) and particle beams (blimey). My open mind keeps being invaded with notions—based on long years of reading impossible-crime detective stories—of how I might try to fake such an appearance.

Dave Langford

## Unicorns

On p. 25 of the July/August issue, Peter O'Hara says: 'Thus horses are part of reality whereas unicorns are not.'

I'm terribly sorry, but they are. There are at least six in existence, and I've met one. His name is Bedivere, and he's a very charming and well-mannered beast. I have photos of myself with him, and another of his elder brother Lancelot.

They are not, of course, horses with narwhal tusks stuck to their foreheads; they're goats whose hornbuds were grafted together on the cranial median line within a short time of birth. But their resemblance to early medieval pictures of unicorns (white coat, beard, short hairy tail, tufts on their legs) is entirely convincing. For further details, see *The Living Unicorn* (anon., but by Otter and Morning Glory G'zell), published from PO Box 369, Los Gatos, CA 95031 USA. Unfortunately, my copy bears no indication of price.

One can be over-sceptical out of ignorance. This is a trap that all of us need to avoid.

John Brunner

## The British & Irish Skeptic

I must congratulate you on the new form of the *British & Irish Skeptic*. It is so much more professionally

published. Well done! You are coming of age. I have subscribed to the B&IS since its inception and have been interested in its development.

However, I must say that the B&IS is not fulfilling its purpose. That purpose, as acknowledged on its frontispiece, is dedicated to 'the scientific examination of claims of the paranormal.'

Your latest issue [II.4] falls far short of this. A brief resume reveals four pages of newspaper reports, one of re-publications of European organisations, three of a subjective exposé of an acknowledged magician, one and a half pages of a review of a political professional's autobiography, a report of a 'low key' event in a cafeteria, one page comparing newspaper horoscopes, a page of philosophical argument (hardly scientific) on near-death experiences, a page relating to the sorry tale of three mediums addressing thirty-four participants, commentators? Where's the analysis? What is the point of ridiculing a newspaper report without an informed rebuttal?

I support the rational discussion of extraordinary phenomena, its examination, analysis and testing of evidence. Your publication has not yet furthered this purpose.

I have renewed my subscription in the hope that my minimal support will assist both your and my aims.

Keep going, but wake up!

Phillip Klein

## Divine creationism

It irritates me to have to waste what little time I have replying to ignorant anti-evolutionists like Mr Wood, but I cannot let his latest list of distortions, fallacies, and errors go unanswered. In true creationist style, he has grossly distorted my argument about the number of fossil species known. At the same time, he has completely missed the point and made a huge error of fact. In my last letter I pointed out that while there are millions of species alive today, there are only 130,000 known fossil species; i.e., more than 99% of all the species that have ever existed have simply not been lucky enough to have been fossilised and then found.

The fossil record is not, and never has been, the main source of evidence for evolution. It was not fossils that led Darwin to evolution, but biogeography, comparative anatomy, taxonomy, animal and plant breeding, rudimentary structures, and so on. Modern science has added genetics and molecular biology to the growing list. Fossils provide no more than interesting but scattered glimpses of the past. What fossil material exists represents only a minute portion

of the total evidence. To conclude, as Mr Wood does, that '99% of the supposed evidence' for evolution 'is missing' just because 99% of species are not known as fossils is obvious rubbish and to say that these fossils 'should be found' betrays a lamentable ignorance of the chancy nature of fossilization and of finding them and of the biased nature of the record. Could Mr Wood please tell us what made him make such a foolish statement and if he really believes that fossils are the only evidence for evolution?

Despite its imperfections, the fossil record does support evolution, and it does not surprise me to see that Mr Wood is utterly incapable of answering any of the examples I gave. Most of them he just ignores, but he makes a fool of himself with *Archaeopteryx*. His claim that it 'was not a half-way bird. It was a bird' demonstrates an ignorance of this creature as abysmal as the Mariana Trench. Its reptile features were more than just claws, teeth, and a bony tail. What modern bird has abdominal ribs, a pubic peduncle, three separate metacarpal bones and three separate metatarsal bones? These are typical dinosaurian conditions possessed by *Arch.* The following features are unique to and characteristic of birds: possession of a pygostyle (a small bone in the tail), a wishbone, fused metatarsals, a hypotarsus, a carpometacarpus (formed from fused metacarpals 2 and 3) and feathers. Of these, *Arch.* had just two—a wishbone and feathers. In all other respects it exhibits the dinosaurian condition. Like dinosaurs and unlike birds, it had no bony sternum and, as far as we can tell, the articular surfaces of its vertebrae were dinosaurian, not avian, and its bones were not hollow.

Mr Wood mentions three reptilian features—bony tail, teeth, and claws, but fails to come up with a modern bird with all three. He cannot even think of one with a long, bony tail. Even the hoatzin, with its two claws on each wing is not so good—*Arch.* had three, each with the same number of bones as in most dinosaurs. Anyway, it is perfectly possible that a species or two might exhibit a few primitive features betraying its ancestry, but what Mr Wood does not seem to appreciate is that creatures like the hoatzin are isolated exceptions. Practically all birds do not have either claws on their forelimbs or teeth. Practically all reptiles do. These, therefore, do count as perfectly valid reptilian features. *Arch.* had over a dozen features characteristic of dinosaurs and only two of birds. Of these two, only the feathers represent a major evolutionary advance, as a wishbone is no more than fused collarbones. If it had not had feathers, *Arch.* would have been classified as a reptile—a fate which actually befell more than one specimen with poorly preserved feathers. Are you still so confident that *Arch.* was 100% bird, Mr Wood?

To cover Mr Wood's other points briefly: 'the true birds existing millions of years before' *Arch.* have not been substantiated. What Mr Wood is referring to are some fragmentary remains from Texas that may

or may not be avian and which have not yet been properly described or published (*Nature*, Vol. 322, 21 Aug. 1986, p. 677). To use such evidence as if it were established fact long before it actually is, is not only unscientific and premature, it is clutching at straws.

Mr Wood's claim that we are like the AIDS virus compared to the rest of nature breaks down when one realises that for tens of thousands of years mankind lived non-destructively with nature as a product and a part of it. Our present ecological destructiveness is a very recent phenomenon indeed, and not typical of our species.

I finished my letter by challenging Mr Wood to explain why the earliest known whale fossils had the vestiges of hind legs if they did not evolve from walking ancestors. What this has to do with penile bones I do not know, but that is what Mr Wood responded with. Rather than answer the question (which of course he can't), he changed the subject to penile bones. Could he please explain the connection, which eludes me, and also try answering my question about whales' legs?

Stephen Moreton

I read with interest Colin Wood's letter in the July/August edition concerning his views on creation.

He goes into some detail regarding the *Archaeopteryx* and claims it to have been a true bird but seems to be unaware of the fact that most of its features are reptilian. This point is dealt with very thoroughly, it seems to me, by Dr Chris McGowan in his book *In the Beginning*, published by Prometheus Books.

I hope Mr Wood reads this excellent, well-informed book, and then writes us another letter.

Cyril James

I feel obliged to comment on the letter from Mr Wood (B&IS II.4). (1) The perversion of Mr Moreton's argument about the incompleteness of the fossil record is breathtaking. (a) The unlikelihood of fossilisation firstly occurring, and then of appropriate discovery makes it practically impossible that a complete evolutionary sequence could be found, though 'segments' may be, as Mr Moreton indicated. (b) The theory of punctuated equilibrium requires 'intermediate' forms to be rare in the fossil record. (c) The fossil record that we have is totally consistent with the theory of evolution, and, indeed, almost impossible to interpret in any other way (a 'trickster' creator perhaps?). (d) Using the same argument presumably Mr Wood would reject all the findings of modern astronomy, being based, as it is, on surely less than 1% of all the 'available' information theoretically open to it. (2) *Archaeopteryx*. Mr Wood can define it as a

'bird' as stridently and simplistically as he wishes, but he cannot ignore the reptilian features. He mentions only three, one of which, the long bony tail, he then ignores. Of the others, the claws of the juvenile Hoatzin simply demonstrates the retention of a primitive feature, while the toothed birds he mentions are presumably Ichthyornis and Hesperornis of the Upper Cretaceous. If these were indeed toothed (it has been doubted) then it simply provides evidence for the gradual 'evolutionary' loss of teeth. Nor are these the only reptilian features, e.g., the intermediate nature of its skull, the similarity of the reconstructed brain to that of reptiles rather than that of all other known birds, the reptilian vertebrae lacking the saddle shaped articulations, the typical reptilian hindlimb, and the lack of air-sacs in the bones. As to his claim that true birds existed 'millions of years before *Archaeopteryx*, would it be too much to ask for references? There have been claims, but, to put it kindly, of a doubtful nature, e.g., the Jensen Colorado material is more probably the fossil of a theropod dinosaur. (3) Man's 'apparent' unique lack of a penile bone amongst the primates. Is Mr Wood not entirely confident of his 'facts'? He ought to be, because he is setting it against not only the morphological evidence but the fact that we share no less than 99% of our genetic material with the pygmy chimpanzee! One could not ask for a better example of the selective and arbitrary nature of the creationist 'arguments'.

To sum up, it was not Mr Moreton's argument that I found to be 'a poor case . . . to present to any intelligent being', and, though I support without reservation the right of reply and debate, I must confess to feeling dispirited to find the same old pseudo-scientific nonsense as rampant in the pages of the *British & Irish Skeptic* as everywhere else. I had hoped to find a haven!

C.S. Kershaw

[This correspondence is now closed—ed.]

## Gods, Spirits, Cosmic Guardians

I wish to take issue with a point made by your reviewer in his comments on my book *Gods, Spirits, Cosmic Guardians*. Not that I wish to question his judgment of the book—if he didn't like it, he has every right to say so—but because the point is a fundamental one which applies to the attitude of skeptics in general.

He reproaches me for the fact that 'in spite of putting forward adequate evidence which overwhelmingly favours the mistaken belief hypothesis, Evans does not draw this conclusion', and suspects that I '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.'

The reason I don't conclude as he thinks I should is because I don't have the right to do so. My assessment

of the reports has led me to the conclusion that it is more probable that Bernadette Soubirous did not meet the Virgin Mary than that she did; but I can't prove that she didn't, and if I were to assert it as a fact that she didn't, I would be guilty of just the same kind of closed-minded assertion as that for which skeptics rightly blame the believers.

It is a tendency to just this kind of assertion which has earned CSICOP in the US an unenviable reputation for unwarranted dogmatism: I frequently wince at the assertions made by some contributors to the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and have on occasion written in protest. Still, I can understand that an extreme position on the part of American skeptics may simply be a response to an intellectual climate which is so thickly clouded with unquestioning True Belief. I would have thought, however, that in the more open-minded climate of Europe, skeptics would not need to be quite so bristly.

This way of thinking is further demonstrated by your reviewer's final paragraph, in which he notes that 'Evans espouses some other paranormal ideas: for example, 'that the moon's phases influence human behaviour.' But there is nothing paranormal about this idea; the question, whether the moon which influences the tides also influences human physiology, is a matter for scientific investigation. I believe there is good evidence that it does so; your reviewer evidently does not, but that is no reason why he should label it 'paranormal' and suppose that anyone who disagrees with his opinion is guilty of espousing paranormal ideas. Again, this is the kind of closed-minded attitude by adopting which, skeptics weaken rather than strengthen their position.

Hilary Evans

### Peter O'Hara replies:

In response to Hilary Evans, I feel everyone has the right to reach conclusions, and on some occasions may even have some *duty* to do so. The conclusion I had in mind, in this case, is that the reported phenomenon can be fully explained without the actual presence of Mary, or by any message sent by anyone in heaven (if such a place exists), and that the probability of the prosaic explanation is at least 90%. Where failing to draw this conclusion results in mistaken belief, then the *duty* as above applies. Even if the 100% certain explanation cannot be found, people can draw a provisional conclusion, and this does not amount to being closed-minded if the person is willing to modify his view if new evidence appears.

I could not find a definition of 'paranormal' in several dictionaries, or in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, such as to decide whether the moon's alleged influence on humans is included or not. There have been several articles on lunar influence in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, where reviews of numerous studies showed no lunar phase effect on humans. Perhaps I should have omitted 'paranormal' and said instead that the lunar effect is a disproved claim.

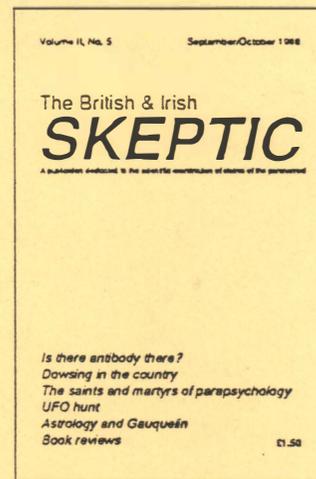
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- No. 2 Brook Bond's "Unexplained Mysteries" (Lewis Jones); The Geller Bumph (Frank Chambers); A Spanish Close Encounter (Ian Ridpath); Reviews: *Sorry, You've Been Duped*, *The Adventures of a Parapsychologist*; Profile of a small time psychic; New regular columns: *Hits & Misses*, *Psychic Diary*, *Letters*.
- No. 3 The BMA Report on Alternative Medicine (Peter O'Hara); The Monstrous Myth at Loch Ness (Steuart Campbell); Reviews: *The Transcendent Temptation*, *Scarne's New Complete Guide to Gambling*. UFO-Line.
- No. 4 Proper Criticism (Ray Hyman); The Telepathic Philodendron (Henri Broch); Mark Plummer Interview; Knock: Two Alternative Views (Leslie Shephard, Steuart Campbell); UFO Exploded (Luis Dominguez); Profile of Doris Stokes; new regular columns: *The Press Gallery*, *European Report*, *Skeptics in the News*.
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## Volume II (1988)

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