

Volume II, No. 6

November/December 1988

The British & Irish  
**SKEPTIC**

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

*A 'psychic' fair in Bristol*  
*The remarkable Mr Newman*  
*Explaining the shroud of Turin*  
*Telepathic snails*  
*Skeptical predictions for 1988*  
*Book reviews*

£1.50

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<b>Manchester Skeptics</b>	71 Bury and Bolton Rd, Radcliffe, Manchester. Chairman: Toby Howard; Secretary: Dr Steve Donnelly Treasurer: David Martin; Committee: Frank Koval, Jack Steel, Mike Rutter, Jon Schofield, Alan Ings, Dr Dave Love.
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<b>Prometheus Books</b>	UK Distributor: Michael Hutchinson, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.
<b>CSICOP</b>	The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, Box 226, Buffalo, New York, USA.
<b>London Student Skeptics</b>	Mike Howgate, Department of Biology, University College, London WC1E 6BT
<b>Council Against Health Fraud</b>	Caroline Richmond, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP.

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## STOP PRESS

### Invasion of the mind snatchers

It doesn't often happen on either radio or TV, but on 21 December, BBC Radio 4 will be broadcasting a program entitled 'Invasion of the Mind Snatchers' which takes a rational look at why people believe in the paranormal.

Presenter Peter Evans and producer Nicholas Morgan attended the 1988 CSICOP conference (reviewed in this issue by Dominic Dunlop) and talked to many well-known skeptics. The program will feature interviews with James Randi, James Alcock, Ray Hyman, Paul Kurtz, Ken Frazier, Phil Klass and others, and is definitely not to be missed by *British & Irish Skeptic* readers.

You can hear the program on BBC Radio 4 on 21 December at 11.02 a.m., and it is repeated at 8.15 p.m. on 22 December.

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**Design and typesetting:** Toby Howard

Thanks to Gay Donnelly and Dave Love for proof-reading

The *British & Irish Skeptic* is published bimonthly from 71, Bury & Bolton Road, Radcliffe, Manchester M26 0LF, UK. Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the editors, associated regional committees, or the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP).

# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

## New Skeptical Groups

The stars must be shining favourably on skeptical activity at the moment. The *British & Irish Skeptic* has recently received news of the formation of two new groups with skeptical objectives, the London Student Sceptics and the Council Against Health Fraud.

The inaugural meeting of the London Student Sceptics took place on 17 October in the library of the South Place Ethical Society, Red Lion Square, Central London. Due to the rules of the University of London Student Union the Sceptics cannot become fully accredited for eighteen months, which means that despite signing up forty-two members at the Freshers' Fair no financial assistance will be forthcoming from the Union. Fortunately the committee of the South Place Ethical Society looked more favourably on the fledgling group, and not only donated the free use of their library but also voted a £100 donation to cover the initial running costs and allow free use of their photocopier.

The first meeting, which attracted about twenty-five people, heard the convenor Mike Howgate speak on his experiences in combatting the rather moribund British Creationists and the setting-up of APE (the Association for the Protection of Evolution). Other talks included Mark Hansel on 'Debunking Parapsychology and ESP' (31 October) and Jeremy Chermas on 'Astrology and the Mars Effect' (28 November). Speakers planned for future meetings are Susan Blackmore 'For and Against Parapsychology' (12 December), Ian Ridpath on 'Extraterrestrial Life and UFOs' (23 January) and Colin Brewer on 'Alternative Practitioners, the Witch Doctors of Today?' (6 February). The December meeting will take place in the library of the South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1, and the other two meetings will be held in the University of London Union Building, Malet Street, WC1. The meetings start at 7.15 p.m. and all are welcome. For further details of the London Student Sceptics write to Mike Howgate, Department of Biology, University College, London WC1E 6BT.

At a meeting on 1 November, a group including doctors, journalists and a barrister decided to form the Council Against Health Fraud, an information and action service against the growing tide of quackery. A steering committee was formed at the meeting and its first tasks will be to assemble an advisory committee, to find premises and funds, and to formulate policy. It will then canvass for members committed to the application of high standards of science and hon-



esty in health care claims and services. For further information write to Caroline Richmond, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP.

## Amazing

In the third week of October, James (the Amazing) Randi—professional conjurer and CSICOP's most flamboyant investigator of paranormal, occult and supernatural claims—came to the U.K. Although a scheduled appearance on the *Wogan* television programme was unable to take place because of work-permit problems, Randi was interviewed on both Granada TV's *This Morning* programme and by Roy Cross on the late Radio Manchester (recently reincarnated as Greater Manchester Radio). On Thursday 20 October Randi was guest of honour at a dinner in London which was attended by more than sixty paying guests. An account of this dinner was given in the *New Statesman* 'Diary' column on 28 October by journalist Sean French, who was one of the guests. The following day Randi gave a lecture entitled 'Critically examining claims of the paranormal' at a public meeting in Manchester (see photograph), organised by the Manchester Skeptics. During his lecture Randi

mysteriously bent a spoon and started a watch—and all without any assistance from paranormal powers or the spirit world. The lecture was attended by more than 150 people.

On returning to Manchester from Granada's Liverpool studio after the appearance on *This Morning* in time for Randi to do the radio interview, I (Randi's driver for the day) realised that I had inadvertently left my wallet in a bar at the Albert Dock. Despite entreaties, Randi steadfastly refused to teleport my wallet from Liverpool to the Radio Manchester studios. I feel certain that Uri Geller would at least have tried (and failed). The only consolation was that Jack Steel, fellow Manchester Skeptic, professional conjurer and pickpocket immediately offered to procure me another one!

## Abominable Lizard

It appears that the American Bigfoot (or Sasquatch) now has a rival. The *Sunday Times* of 7 July reported that a monster lizard from the swamp has been terrifying a community in South Carolina. The story began when a young driver claimed to have been attacked by a seven feet tall green, red-eyed, scaly creature (some of my closest friends answer to that description) which chased his car at speeds of up to forty miles per hour and jumped on the roof. The creature apparently came from a local swamp, near to which police officers found some giant footprints. There have since been other sightings of the creature, now known as Lizardman, and seventy hunters have been trying to trap him, perhaps spurred on by the \$1 million which a local radio station is offering for his capture—dead or alive. The article goes on to point out that Lizardman has one important attribute in common with other monsters which have been sighted in the fields and forests of America—the ability to attract tourists.

## Observerational Astronomy

In a regular item called 'The Expert's Expert' the *Observer* magazine of 20 November asked leading astronomers to name their favourite astronomers, past and present. (Astrologers were featured in 'The Expert's Expert' on 2 October). Professor Francis Graham-Smith, Astronomer Royal, was quoted as saying that 'Patrick Moore is a man who has done more in the U.K. to popularize astrology than almost anyone else'. This presumed typographical error must be a considerable embarrassment to both Graham-Smith and Moore but is perhaps not surprising from a magazine which two weeks earlier gave us a two-page run-down on 'alternative' medicine. The article recommended that treatments such as homeopathy, chiropractic and acupuncture should now be described as

complementary therapies. The *British & Irish Skeptic* prefers to stick to the good old-fashioned term *quackery*.

## Stealthy UFO

An article in the *Sheffield Star* of 28 September discussed a UFO which was sighted earlier in the year by many people, including two Sheffield policeman. David Clarke, an investigator with the British UFO Research Association (BUFORA) has investigated the claimed sightings and is now fairly certain that the unidentified object was in fact the American F-19 Stealth fighter on a test flight. This is the reason, he suggests, that RAF Finningley have referred all queries about the sighting to the Ministry of Defence in London. Meanwhile on 21 July, a UFO made headline news in the *Milton Keynes Citizen*. Amateur cameraman Gerry Twaites managed to capture, on video-tape, an image of a mysterious cigar-shaped light hovering over the centre of Milton Keynes. The object didn't hang around for very long and vanished as mysteriously as it appeared. *British & Irish Skeptic* reader and Milton Keynes resident Marjorie Mackintosh suggests that any alien with good taste would not be able to stand the architecture of MK—so that the UFO probably shot off in search of some nice Cotswolds village!

## Life Forces

Amongst the large bundle of newspaper clippings sent in by diligent readers over the last two months were a large number of articles on the paranormal culled from the pages of the *Guardian*. A number of these are scientific, skeptical articles and I was particularly pleased to learn that the head of astronomy at Glasgow University, Professor Archie Roy, does not believe that the mysterious crop circles of Wiltshire are caused by 'hordes of hedgehogs rotating in unison'.

A significant and worrying percentage of the clippings, however, are credulous and pseudoscientific. Elsewhere in this issue Wendy Grossman discusses a *Guardian* column by Judy Collings entitled 'Life Forces'. At the risk of boring readers by repetition I would like to endorse Wendy's sentiments and add that the column often contains not only utter rubbish, but dangerously misleading rubbish as well. The danger arises from the fact that Ms Collings knows a few impressive sounding scientific words and phrases such as 'intravenous potassium therapy', 'electromagnetic energy' and 'superconducting quantum interference device'. Unfortunately Ms Collings' scientific knowledge appears to stop with the the ability to spell the words. As a consequence, readers are informed that paranormal abilities such as ESP may help in the early diagnosis of diseases and that the 'better'

Philippino psychic surgeons genuinely heal by manipulating some sort of energy field. If any readers have, like Wendy, stopped buying the *Guardian* because of articles like these, please don't forget to write to the *Guardian*, explaining your reasons for changing newspaper.

## Books, Boats and Biggles

A recent survey reported in *Weekend* magazine (18 July) revealed that almost half the population of these sceptered (but not sceptical) isles believes in ghosts. It is perhaps not surprising, in the light of this figure, that newspapers often feature stories of hauntings.

For instance, an article in the *Sunday Express* (24 July) was concerned with a strange haunting in Brighton which had a rather literary explanation. Sally Holland was haunted by a strange ticking sound which a medium (with typical accuracy) explained was due to the ghost of a grey old man who liked clocks. In fact, a BBC expert who heard a recording of the sound identified it as the courting sound of *trogium pulsatorium*—more commonly known as the book louse. The insects were feeding on mildew in Mrs Holland's collection of old books and attempting to attract mates by banging their bellies on the surface of the books. This could truly be described as a lousy explanation for a purported paranormal phenomenon.

Articles published in the *Sunday Express* (17 July), the *Daily Mirror* of (17, 19 August) and the *Hull Daily Mail* (14 October) indicate that the inhabitants of the spirit world are belatedly moving into the twentieth century. It may or may not have some cosmic significance, but ghosts have taken up residence not in another stately home but in a Lincoln bomber and a control tower at two separate RAF bases.

The Lincoln bomber, which is housed in the museum hangar at RAF Cosford, Shropshire, hasn't flown for thirty years. Apparently a radio broadcaster made a tape recording—under 'strict scientific conditions'—of ghostly sounds emanating from the aircraft. Former pilots who listened to the recording claimed that it revealed the exact sounds of a Lincoln in flight. Other mysteries surround the old bomber: for instance on a cold day with 'icicles hanging from the roof' the Lincoln was warm enough to work inside dressed in shirtsleeves. It also apparently gets a regular polish, presumably from the ghostly airman in a battle jacket who is occasionally seen inside the hangar.

A similar figure has been seen several times wandering mournfully around the control tower at RAF Linton-on-Ouse in North Yorkshire. According to the *Mirror* articles the airman in this case has been identified as Warrant Officer Walter Hodgson (deceased) whose ashes were scattered on the runway in 1959.



On the other hand the *Hull Daily Mail* tells us that Hodgson's relatives have denied this claim. Two cases of airmen from another plane perhaps?

Boats too seem to be receiving some attention from the other side. According to the *Weekly News* (3 September), Tony Cornell of the Society for Psychological Research will be searching for poltergeists on board the *Queen Mary*, accompanied by SPIDER (Spontaneous Psychophysical Incident Data Electronic Recorder). Mr Cornell admits that there is both fraud and misinterpretation in the world of psychical research but claims that there is 'definitely a hard core of things that defy the laws of physics'. He will be investigating reports of noises and yells, mysterious people who have been sighted in the swimming pool, paintings dropping off walls and plates smashing. His investigations will apparently take place while the *Queen Mary* is in dry dock. If readers know of a cruise ship afflicted with a similar problem (especially if the ship in question cruises to warm and exotic locations) please contact the editors—they would be delighted to provide a team of investigators (at the cruise company's expense).

## Independent Thinker

On a more positive note, eagle-eyed reader Paul Quincey spotted the following quote from an interview with comedian Stephen Fry in the *Independent* (31 October): 'I'm not cynical. I'm just rational. I hate superstition. I really do abominate it. I refuse to tell anyone my birth sign. I might just as well ask you the length of your penis because it will tell me something of your character. I mean, really. You pick up the newspaper and find that Hitler, Ghandi and Gulbenkian were born on the same day, and oh yes they have *such* a lot in common. I'm sorry, it does make me very angry. I know it sounds silly, but I am ... ultimately rational.' And so say all of us!

## Perfumed Placebo

In case the contrast between the *Guardian* and *Independent* articles may have left the *Independent* smelling of roses, an item in the *Independent* (11 October) restores the balance. The article, by Christine Aziz, is about a form of quackery known as aromatherapy, and is based on an interview with aromatherapist Ziva Bellic. Aromatherapists claim to heal by massaging scented oils into the skin of the patient and Bellic claims that, for instance, jasmine essence rubbed into the abdomen can soothe menstrual cramps and is effective against prostate problems (but will presumably not do both for the same person). The article finishes by pointing out that a 'reputable aromatherapist' should be registered with either the International Federation of Aromatherapists, the Guild of Aromatherapists or the Association of Tisserand Aromatherapists. Personally, I smell a rat!

## In Loco Parentis

A report in the *Dallas Morning News* of 10 September carried the worrying (and ungrammatical) headline: 'Many teachers hold pseudoscience, superstitious beliefs'. Researchers at the University of Texas surveyed 200 teachers from all over the U.S. and found that, among other things, 30% would rather teach 'creation science' than evolution and 28% felt that some people can predict the future by psychic power—a move towards the replacement of the traditional three 'Rs' by cold reading, automatic writing and numerology perhaps? I wonder what a similar survey would reveal about British and Irish teachers?

## The Eyes Have It

For any reader wanting to own his or her very own weeping statue, John Gaskell's 'Sixth Column' in the *Daily Telegraph* of 25 August revealed how to make one using plaster of Paris and a mould. 'Simply take a polythene bag and fill it with wet plaster. Seal the bag and suspend it in the centre of the mould. Fill the mould with plaster. Allow to dry in a cool room. Pierce the eyes with a pin sufficiently big to penetrate the inner bag. As the plaster within slowly dries out it will expel water through the tear ducts—or you can have a statue with a runny nose'.

## The Domino Theory

According to the *People* (24 July), even the humble domino has fortune telling powers! Just lay some face down on a table and concentrate on your question.

Then choose three and look at their faces. For example: double six means success; double five: money luck; 5-1: successful social event; 3-2: a good start but don't take chances; 5-0 (and a good one for those inclined toward visiting fortune tellers): don't waste your money.

## The China Syndrome

'The ancient art of Chinese Astrology has been continuously developed over three thousand years into a sophisticated and revealing method of character analysis.' Says who? The 'Chinese Horoscope Company', in large advertisements in the psychic press announcing *your very own opportunity* to share the ancient secrets of Chinese astrologers. With prices ranging from £19.95 to £44.95 you can buy a personal Chinese horoscope tailored exactly to your 'four pillars of destiny'. Your horoscope will be (like the *British & Irish Skeptic*) handsomely 'computer typeset and laser-printed'. Unlike this magazine, however, it is unlikely to contain many hard facts. The belief, implicit in the advertisement, that Chinese astrology enjoys widespread popularity in China, is fallacious, according to Fuyan Zhang, Associate Professor at Nanjing University, and currently a visiting scholar at the University of Manchester: 'Almost no educated people in my country give credence to Chinese horoscopes. In fact, in mainland China the publication of books about astrology is prohibited by the government.'

## Christmas presents

As Christmas approaches, the popular occult publications positively *explode* with 'unusual gift ideas' for today's discriminating (or otherwise) New Ager. The use of random CAPITALS in advertisements goes through the roof, and when the words 'an ideal and unusual gift' appear, you just know there's going to be something daft around the corner. Wouldn't the 'ju-ju wishing doll' make an ideal present for granny? You can get your money back if good fortune doesn't overwhelm her within fourteen days—or perhaps she'll notice that it looks a bit like grandad and get out the pins. Dolls seem to be in vogue: you get two with Elizabeth Swift's 'Complete New Age Spell Kit' (£23.50, or £30 for the *de luxe* edition), and this does contain some 'unusual' items—as well as the expected holy water, ritual candles and anointing oils, you get (honestly) magical Stonehenge rainwater, a magical pen (and magical ink), healing tea, laughing stone, magical shampoo, 'unhexing and jinx-removing equipment' and FULL INSTRUCTIONS. Thank goodness for that. Fancy a read? What about the 'Clavis Magica Artium' ('not a book for the timid'), which comes with a free quartz scrying stone and pouch. Or a game: 'Telepathy—the fasci-

nating new board game that may be guesswork'. Or perhaps some 'ritual paraphernalia', a colour crystal healing lamp, or a 'pyramid energy generator' ('will sharpen razor blades, improve the taste of wine, make tobacco smoke milder') and increase your gullibility?

### ...and talking of gifts

Throw away your credit-card catalogue of useless gifts. Stop worrying about which presents to buy for whom this Christmas. We have the perfect solution for the discerning gift giver: write to us immediately enclosing a cheque for £10 per subscription and a note marked 'Gift Subscription' with the names and addresses of the people to whom you would like to give gifts of a year's subscription to *British & Irish Skeptic*. Also clearly write the message you would like to enclose with their first issue (this one). If you are really prompt with your order we will do our best to ensure that this issue gets to the lucky recipients before Christmas, complete with your Christmas message. If your order comes too late for this to be possible we will enclose a 'Happy New Year' greeting instead.

### Cuttings and Cassettes

Once again we thank everyone who has taken the trouble to send us newspaper and magazine clippings, and other information of interest to the *British & Irish Skeptic*. Many of the clippings do not, of course, get a mention in the magazine and you may wonder what happens to them all. In fact, no clippings are wasted—they are sorted, classified and placed in the *British & Irish Skeptic* files. This information resource is available to any subscriber who may require information on a 'paranormal' topic. Simply drop us a line and ask for the specific reference required. Alternatively we will send you our clippings file for a particular topic, on the understanding that you return it as soon as you have finished with it. Please keep sending the clippings so that this valuable resource may continue to grow.

We regret that the listing of the other part of our information resource, the video and audio cassette library, has been removed from the magazine for legal reasons. The tapes are still available for loan, however, but any subscriber requiring a list of the contents should now write to us to obtain an updated copy.

We depend on our readers to keep us informed! Our thanks for sending clippings for this issue go to Christopher Allen, Bill Donnelly, David Fisher, Wendy Grossman, Mike Howgate, Mike Hutchinson, Ernest Jackson, Steve Kimmins, Marjorie Mackintosh, Philip Paul, T.G. Pearce, Paul Quincey, Alan Remfry, C.L. Torrero and Andrew Tomlinson.

### AN ANECDOTE OF THE LATE, CELEBRATED, DR ROCK

'He was standing one day at his door on Ludgate Hill, when a real doctor of Physic passed, who had learning and abilities, but whose modesty was the true cause of his poverty.

'How comes it," says he to the Quack, "that you without education, without skill, without the least knowledge of science, are enabled to live in the style you do? — You keep your town house, your carriage and your country house: whilst I, allowed to possess some knowledge, have neither, and can hardly pick up a subsistence!"

'Why, look ye," said Rock smiling, "how many people do you think have passed since you asked me the question?"

'Why?" answered the Doctor, "Perhaps a hundred."

'And how many out of those hundred, think you possess common sense?"

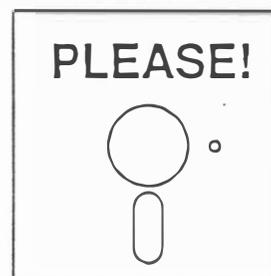
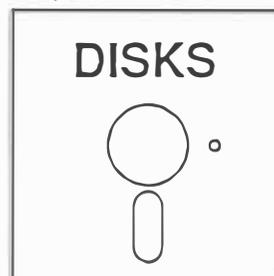
'Possibly one," answered the Doctor.

'Then," said Rock, "That one comes to you: and I take care of the other ninety nine."

*From the Northern Impostor, being a faithful narrative of the Life, Adventures and Deceptions of James George Semple, commonly called Major Semple.*

PRINTED FOR G. KEARSLEY, 46, FLEET ST, AND SOLD  
BY ALL BOOKSELLERS, 1786.

### Contributors!



We always welcome contributions from our readers: articles, book reviews, letters—anything!

Although it's not essential, we'd be delighted if you could send your contributions on floppy disk. It makes 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 14 January.

# Down to a Bristol Fair

## Hocus Pocus

Two of the essentials of a free society are absence from censorship and freedom of choice. But we know that absolute freedom would destroy society, so we frame laws which prevent us from taking goods without payment; from injuring others; from injuring ourselves by the use of certain drugs, even though use of other substances perhaps equally harmful, are permitted—or even encouraged. We willingly submit to many curbs on our freedom because we recognise their necessity. We even allow ‘knowledge’ to be constrained though aware of the dangers of censorship (someone once asked ‘who is to censor the censors?’) because we accept that some policies, ideas and beliefs contain within themselves perils for our society. However, by virtue of freedom of debate, ultimately we do reach a *modus vivandi*.

I believe that to seek after *truth* is perhaps mankind’s most valuable and important occupation, and only by accumulating knowledge is it possible to recognise what may be true. It may be debatable that everything is relative—even truth—as what may be true *here* and *now* need not necessarily prove to be true *there* and *then*! It all depends not only on what one means, but on the meaning of meaning.

So I am concerned when I learn of supposed happenings manifestly opposed to what I consider to be *truth*, and when I am subjected to propaganda for beliefs which have no substance, but depend on lies, half truths, obfuscation and a belief in magic and fairies. I am then led to ask whether such activities ought perhaps to be proscribed as being harmful to society; not only to our society here in the UK, but to mankind as a whole, regardless of nationality, race or creed. Am I alone in thinking it harmful for the President of a powerful nation to be guided by and give credence to any degree whatsoever to the prognostications of an astrologer? And doesn’t it follow that it must be harmful for humanity that a significant proportion of the population of the planet believes in the efficacy of the Tarot cards, the influence of the stars, clairvoyance, and that the dead communicate utter banalities via (it seems almost invariably) American Indian guides or weirdo characters conjured out of a mish-mash of arcane origins? Whatever may be meant by ‘what is good for us’, surely all this rubbish *can’t* be good for us!

On Saturday 20 August I drove 228 miles to Bristol and back in order to attend the Earth Spirit Festival ’88 and report thereon to the readers of *British & Irish Skeptic*. Unfortunately there just isn’t enough space to do justice to this mega-show. I have a (waste) basketful of printed matter painstakingly collected for your edification and available for inspection at the editorial offices by appointment. However, you need not

suffer the pangs of extreme disappointment for long, as similiar festivals seem to be taking place with great frequency where you will be able to explore and witness all the goodies on offer. So I won’t try to tell you all about everything—just some of my favourites.

Pride of place *must* go to the Aetherius Society, which their handout states is ‘a worldwide brotherhood—formed in England in 1955 by Western Master of Yoga, His Eminence Sir George King, OSP, ThD, DD, KtC, GCJ, HuSaD’. And that’s only for starters. It goes on to give details and offer opportunities to attend various courses and workshops in September. Please don’t fail to note that ‘the Society reserves the right to alter their programme without notice as this will be as a result of enhanced Cosmic activity, which will be of vital interest to you.’ Their HQ is at 757 Fulham Road, London SW6 5UU; do ask them for information—it’s quite surprising what you’ll get. Well worth a 14p stamp!

The stalls and exhibits consisted of booths with ample displays of the services, goods, artefacts, jewellery, sculpture, stones, crystals, things to rub in, things to spray on, things to hang on, to any part of the human frame that should benefit from a close association with such magical balms and accessories. As I don’t wish to adorn my fat little frame with strange colours and shapes or to smell any more delicious or insect attractive than I am, and have long spurned use of razors, I didn’t need to buy magic pyramids or other objects so tastefully set out to break down my consumer resistance.

I picked out two seers for investigation; first, ‘David of Avalon’ who was part of a family operation, the House of Avalon in Milton Keynes which offered guidance from Madame Morgana and Merlin (yes, Merlin) through the agency of the Tarot, palmistry, ancient stones and magical talismans; and second Roy Rama, International Consultant, one time Lion Tamer and Full member of the North American Psychic Lodge (!) who decided to settle in Manchester and was an interesting looking guy adorned with much ornamentation who had toured many countries.

Now, let me tell you about David Avalon. My approach was one of absolute honesty. His fee was £7. I told him I was a total sceptic (he might not have understood if I’d said ‘skeptical’), that I didn’t believe in anything psychic or occult at all, which I’m sure immediately endeared me to him, *but* that I had an open mind and was there seeking knowledge. Could he help and play ball, I asked, to the extent that I would pay his fee for a consultation if he told me true facts about me he couldn’t have known—but that I needn’t pay if he failed to come up with the goods.

He looked a little surprised but agreed. He gave a brief explanation of his procedure and I shuffled and cut the pack of twenty-two Tarot cards. Up came a smiling sun and a chariot. I thought these were very significant as I'm a sun worshipper who's mad keen on motor cars. David talked a lot about their meanings, keyed into my persona, but nothing about sun worship in an open car in St Tropez. Disappointing. Nothing new, nothing exciting, nothing interesting. I then dealt more cards and up came *the hanging man* and *the Emperor*—more guff from David, who, to give him credit, said he really wasn't getting any positive messages from my cards. I asked him whether he thought the consultation merited payment and he immediately said 'of course not'. So we parted the best of friends and I'm sure you won't be surprised if I tell you that my belief in the efficacy of the Tarot is no greater today that it was last week.

On to dear old Roy Rama, who did put on some sort of show. He told me three things, two of which were mildly surprising, and I'd welcome anyone telling me his method. I'm afraid that his big hit misfired though, as even I, the most gullible of subjects, could think of two ways it could have been done. Anyway, I gave him the same approach as with David and he agreed to try his skill. His fee was to be £10. Having ascertained I was right-handed he studied my palm, told me what the lines meant and applied a pair of dividers which indicated that I could expect to live well into my eighties. Jolly good so far, I thought, I like you. At this stage a young woman appeared and asked whether I minded if she listened in as she 'didn't believe', but if what Roy Rama told me sounded interesting, she might consult him. I said OK. Rama produced a card and asked me to write my date of birth on it—without his seeing, of course. He took the card—face down—and put it in a small envelope which he didn't seal. He pattered on for a few moments and then said—your birthday is in July, but I can't see the exact date. 'It is July, isn't it?' 'Yes it is', I told him. He then took another card, wrote something on it and handed it to the lady now sitting next to me and asked my age. I told him and he asked the lady for the card and showed it to me. He had correctly given my age. He then said 'Your birthday is about the middle of the month—I can't say exactly which date, but it's between the 13th and the 16th—it is the 16th, isn't it?' I had to give him right. Strike one. He then told me I'd had a traumatic experience before the age of fourteen—could I tell him what it was? Well, I just couldn't think of anything remotely traumatic at that period, so he said not to mind, but something very important which changed your entire life happened in your forty-third year. Strike two—I was married midway between my forty-second and forty-third birthdays. And I had to agree—it *did* change my life. He then said 'You have three children'. Wrong. 'How many then?' 'Four.' 'Strange,' he said, 'but wait a minute—there is a large gap in

years between the first one and the other three.' He was right; my eldest son was from my first wife and there is a ten year gap between his birth and the next one. To be fair I think old Rama could be credited with a half hit on that one.

Of course, the woman seated next to me could have been a plant or Rama saw the date I'd written on the card, so I'm sure the age hit was a well done trick. But strike two is not an easy one, is it? Intriguing. And strike three could have been an inspired guess, and Rama was experienced enough to waffle through and improve it. I asked him whether he thought the session justified payment and he said 'certainly not—you deserve a free reading for your sauce.' So I can't grumble at not having received fair value, can I?

It seemed to me that I had just seen two sorts of people during the day. First, the majority, the public who attended this sorry little 'festival', brought to mind a vision of Jack London's *People of the Abyss*. They were all, in some way or another, what I can only describe as 'a bit odd'. Both male and female dressed in what seems to pass as today's norm, where nothing matches, nothing fits, everything looks scruffy and a visit to the laundromat is overdue. People wandered about in a lackadaisical sort of way—there were few smiles. I'm not dramatising, really they looked dull and hopeless—some almost bordering on the half-witted. They were seekers—not seekers after knowledge, but seekers of cures, words of comfort, hope, or the promise of some application of magic whereby they will be yanked out of the sordid here and now, the miserable world of reality and dropped into wonderland. They brought to mind the people who 'read' books of coloured pictures with captions and balloons.

The second variety of people consisted of the stall-holders, the Tarot readers and palmists and astrologers and clairvoyants and rune experts who had answers for everything and were peddling their hopes and cures. Parasites on the ignorant unfortunate and hopeless who need comfort from whatever unlikely source. I hadn't the patience to go the rounds of the fraternity to see how they would each differ in their interpretations and prognostications or how ably they explain away how you, the subject, won't pick up the same Tarot 'hand' every time. It might be a good subject for a Ph.D. thesis though!

Let me finish with two questions. Should society permit these baseless and childish beliefs to be traded for profit by the sly, the unscrupulous, and the unprincipled liars? If not, what should be put in their place? Lastly, if you *really* want to know more about the oddities of human behaviour and belief, I strongly recommend the reading of Patrick Moore's *Can you speak Venusian?* and John Grant's *A Dictionary of Discarded Ideas*.

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Hocus Pocus is the *British & Irish Skeptic's* roving correspondent.

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# The remarkable Mr Newman

Frank Chambers

## *Has Joseph Newman solved all our energy problems?*

Remembering that I claimed to be an electrical engineer with experience of patents, Wendy Grossman, founding editor of the *British & Irish Skeptic*, sent me a pile of photocopied material about Joseph Newman, proprietor of the Joseph Newman Publishing Company, author and publisher of *The Energy Machine of Joseph Newman*, and self-proclaimed discoverer of 'The Unified Field Theory' which will revolutionize the world by allowing us to tap the energy inherent in the gyroscopic particles he is convinced are a component of all magnetic fields. Time for the second sentence, none too soon. Newman claims that this new form of energy, which is generated by machines he has invented, is harmless (I agree), non-polluting (I agree), and will replace all present forms of energy generation (would that it were so). Always succinct, Wendy appended a note saying 'wot abt this?', which I take as a challenge to pontificate.

## Diversion

Before proceeding with this so fructuous subject, I must ask my readers to pardon a necessary diversion into natural history. Students: do not skip this section!

The call of the crackpot inventor, by which he (for the female of the species has not been observed) can easily be recognized, sounds like one or more or all of the following:

'They scoffed at Columbus; they scoffed at the Wright brothers. If they scoff at me, that proves that I, too, am right.'

'Orthodox scientists are afraid to come out and fight because they know they would be licked.'

'My revelation will overturn the whole field of ...'

'I could save the world if they would only listen.'

'Unidentified individuals are out to get me.'

'Specific individuals are out to get me.'

'My perpetual motion machine ...'

'I had to pay to publish my own book.'

'I won't show you my machine because you might wreck it.'

'I can't show you my machine because it has been stolen by sinister representatives of ...'

'I won't show you this machine because I am working on another which will be much better.'

'Only those who accept my premise on faith can understand.'

'The patent office is full of' (choose one) 'incompetents', 'evil men', 'persons who want to steal my invention.'

'When I was on board (insert type of alien spaceship).'

One or two of these songs may occasionally be heard from individuals of other species, but the occurrence of all of them is a sure identification of the adult out-of-tree marbles-missing crackpot. We owe much to L. Sprague de Camp's and Martin Gardner's independent field studies of the species and its habitat.

## Who is Joseph Newman?

According to one reporter, Newman, an American now living in Lucedale, Mississippi, had a difficult childhood, with parents separated at three, the child sent to live with a grandmother who beat him with an electric cord and told him he was possessed by the devil, then sent to an orphanage where his older brother died and he had no friends, then pushed out into the world at fifteen. Perhaps that background helped to form the character of this fifty-one-year-old self-styled backwoods inventor, holder of patents for plastic-covered barbell sets, a mechanical orange-picker, a bike that does 'wheelies', a knife that always lands point forward, and others. His publicity agent tells us that Newman's formal education ended after his junior year at college, though what courses he pursued at which college and why the pursuit was not consummated is not specified. For the past twenty-three years he is said to have made his living by inventing.

'Following fifteen years of independent study', Newman filed an application with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) for what is known as a 'pioneering patent'. This is a class of patent which covers a wide range of devices which may result from an inventor's ideas, rather than a single device. (If one has discovered a new law of nature, one is not permitted to patent it. The only way to achieve protection is by claiming for all possible devices which might ensue and sitting back to see what the PTO will allow.) A good pioneering patent is very valuable, even if only to some industrial giant who will pay to suppress it.

## His book

As I write, I have ordered but not received a copy of Newman's book which I hope will answer the very many questions of historical fact raised by the various media reports I have on hand. For example, had he built a working model of any size before making his patent application? Certainly he later built an 800-pound and a 5000-pound demonstration model at the urging of his patent attorney. It depends on whose reports you read whether these were ever shown to work. In any case, he was denied a patent, appealed and was denied again, and filed suit against the PTO to force them to issue a patent. In addition, in October 1985 he got a bill introduced in the House of Representatives to force the PTO to grant him a pioneer patent. This bill was referred to the House Judiciary Committee and thence to the Subcommittee on Courts and the Administration of Justice. I for one have not heard of it since but am making inquiries to see whether it disappeared there forever, like so many other embarrassing pieces of legislation. His sponsor, Representative Burton of Indiana, also announced plans to initiate a congressional investigation of the PTO to discover why it has denied Newman a patent. Nothing more has been heard of this, either.

In the cause of brevity I have left out many succulent details: how he took the 800-pound prototype to the National Bureau of Standards for testing, how he would not give them the test data they requested, how it turned out that they were not in the business of testing such machines and did not have the equipment, how he was shunted to Auburn University in Alabama (not one of the great American universities), how he abandoned the quest when they would not promise him confidentiality or guarantee not to tear the machine open to look for hidden batteries.

## What has he claimed?

Instead, I shall mention one of the implementations of his theory, a son-of-an-electric-motor which should, if the moon is in the right ascendancy, produce useful amounts of power though energized solely by a small 9 volt battery such as those used in transistor radios. Newman does not claim a perpetual motion machine: he knows that that is a naughty word in the PTO. He does claim that his machine, when a small current is initially sent through its windings, will cause a conversion of part of the mass of the windings into energy which will manifest itself as an electric current much greater than that available from the small battery, thus causing the motor to turn and be able to generate useful work at its output shaft. This conversion, which follows Einstein's famous  $E = mc^2$  relationship, but fortunately not as rapidly as the nuclear bomb, uses up such a small number of the atoms in the copper windings that the process can be

continued for millennia without ill effect. Now, the epoch-making results of such a discovery are apparent. All the atomic energy plants, with their very-low-efficiency conversion of mass to energy will become obsolete. So will all other methods of electric power generation and eventually distribution, as we will each have a Newman motor in our back yard which will run for many lifetimes, needing only the odd touch of grease and the occasional 9 volt battery.

Where do things stand at present? Newman does not have a U.S. patent, although it is said that patents have been granted in Spain and South Africa. A unit driven solely by the aforesaid single battery has not been demonstrated to my knowledge. A prototype driving a lightweight car body was shown, running at 4 mph for two hours. However, it contained a battery pack incorporating not one but over 1800 small 9 volt dry cells, providing 17000 volts at 20 mA (high voltage is apparently essential to Newman's special motors). Calculations described in the referenced article and checked by me indicate that a battery of this capacity could drive a car of the given weight assuming typical rolling resistance at 4 mph for upwards of 25 hours, given a good push to start it. Thus, in the words of the writer of the article, 'Until Newman drives his car at 4 mph for more than 25 hours, he'll remain within the realm of the first and second laws of thermodynamics'. The single 9 volt transistor radio battery was not in evidence at this demonstration, although the car had a flashing neon sign proclaiming 'GYRO POWER' when it was shown (not running) on another date to about a thousand people at the Mississippi Coliseum with seven TV cameras, a number of thirty-foot banners, and a poster of the Wright brothers' first flight. (The significance of the Wright brothers in species identification has already been remarked upon.) On this occasion it was announced that the car had been damaged in transit, but a rear wheel was jacked up, the tiny battery displayed, and the wheel caused to rotate while the neon sign flashed to cheers and applause. Some of Newman's comments to the crowd were recorded: 'You people here are gonna see this, and you're gonna know that I'm right, because you're not stupid like a lot of people in the scientific community ... I'm gonna change the world! ... The opposition to me goes to the highest echelons of this government ... The current energy conglomerate, who has a strong interest in maintaining the status quo ... wishes my technology to stay down ... it will do more for world peace than all the kings and queens and politicians who ever lived. And that's what motivates me in my dream!'

## Finance

Newman has had a number of rich backers who provided funds for his experiments and demonstrations. Not all of them are totally happy with his perfor-

mance. Dan Benvenuti, a Sacramento, California real estate magnate and admirer of evangelist Pat Robertson, says he has given Newman \$355,000 in cash and close to \$150,000 in expense money in two years. Benvenuti was inspired to part with the spare dollar by the voice of God, which came to him as he saw the face of the inventor on his TV screen in 1984. However, faith began to fail when a 1986 demonstration in the Louisiana Superdome was, as he described it, a fiasco. Benvenuti subsequently filed suit against Newman for making misleading claims that persuaded him to back the inventor. He also asked the FBI to investigate and determine whether Newman was a fraud.

## U.S. Skeptics' investigation

I have read some incomplete correspondence between the Mid-South Skeptics' Association of Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Mr Evan R. Soule whose stationery proclaims him to be in the Public Relations business and whose name appears as source in many of the clippings about Newman. Apparently the MSSA had invited Newman to attend an awards ceremony at which he would presumably have been given a perpetual motion award or the like. Soule's response reads in part 'While Joseph Newman would have loved to attend, he was unable to do so since he had to walk his dog at that particular time. I would recommend, however, that as a 'runner-up' winner you should present to yourself the PERPETUAL STUPIDITY AWARD for the pseudo-scientific contraption known as your mind.' The MSSA's Corresponding Secretary responded quite politely, I thought: 'We hope Mr Newman and his dog are feeling well', and then went on to describe the absence of reliable evidence for Newman's claims and a simple test which would convince scientists and lay persons alike: put it in a locked room and let it drive a 150 watt light bulb for one year. The MSSA also sponsored an analysis of the machine by a professor at Louisiana State University. The professor's three-page report, which is negative, and Newman's seven-page diatribe in response make fascinating reading but will not be abstracted here. This and much other material is available in CSI-COP's file on the subject, of which we have a copy.

## Avatars

Newman's International Patent Application, referred to previously, contains four exemplary embodiments of his discovery. Those whose interests don't extend to the technical electrical area can skip this section. Those who want more details than I give below will have to study this fascinating work of art themselves—I can't do it credit in the limited pages of this magazine.

The first embodiment consists of a set of linearly-

aligned permanent magnets surrounded by a gas or a fluid or a mixture which may or may not contain solid particles, surrounded by a vacuum surrounded by a soft iron tank. The tank is to prevent the magnetic fields from escaping, while the vacuum is to prevent the electrostatic charges, which it is hoped will be formed, from escaping. A pickup system, not detailed, extends through the fluid and is expected to generate current into an external load. All these elements are fixed with respect to each other. I have seen no evidence that this device ever generated a microamp; in fact, it is not mentioned in any of the other references.

Neither is embodiment two, which consists of three elements, two permanent magnets and a bar of 'special material' suspended between them. The special material is described as having its atoms especially aligned to produce electric current when positioned in an electromagnetic field. Again, the three elements are specifically described as being held static with respect to each other. The inventor believes that brass and lead, brought to a temperature of 1000° C and then cooled in a magnetic field will exhibit the desired properties. I have tried to order this special material from several vendors, but they are all back-ordered indefinitely, so I have not been able to make my own tests. Neither has anybody else.

Embodiments three and four are motor-generator-type devices with armature, rotor, and commutator (variously spelled 'communicator' and 'communtator'). I can't seem to grasp the concepts here. He makes many nonsensical remarks such as 'In a resistor, for a given amount of electric current input, the heat release increases as the diameter increases' (false); 'the total current will be 1.5 volts' (confusing voltage and current); and '... the motor is performing no obvious work, force, or power ...' (not understanding the meaning of these terms). His gyroscopic particles are believed by him to have inertia and to be moving at the speed of light. Isn't inertia a property of mass? What does this tell us about the mass of these particles? Again the gyroscopic particles are said to 'rotate at the speed of light'. To an engineer or physicist this is a nonsense statement, as rotational speeds are measured in angle and time units, not distance and time units.

When I was last gainfully employed, my title was Manager of Advanced Development for a division of Lockheed Aircraft's Electronics subsidiary. Besides inventing things myself and nursing a group of MAD inventors, I had to review all the patent applications made by employees as well as the many ideas sent to the company from outside inventors who hoped to become rich and famous overnight. I have never seen a patent application with exclamation marks before or the use of adjectives like 'fantastic'. Certainly none of them had  $E = mc^2$  mentioned more than once. Newman uses all of these like salt to flavour his text.

## Conclusions

I have to conclude that Newman does not have the educational background to contrive a theory to explain the claimed phenomena. That in itself does not mean that the phenomena do not occur. However, up to this point in my researches I have not found any reputable report of his claims being acknowledged or reproduced by those versed in the field. It was Laplace who said, 'The weight of the evidence should be proportioned to the strangeness of the facts.' It would take a lot of evidence to convince me that Newman has disproved the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics. Let's start with the sealed room and light bulb test!

## Afterword

After writing this article, I was given a chance to have a look at Martin Gardner's new book, *The New Age: Notes of a Fringe Watcher*. He devotes three pages to Newman and reports that a year ago Newman announced plans to run for President as an independent in his own Truth and Action party. God directed him to seek the presidency, he says, and he has 'clear scientific facts' showing that the human race is headed for catastrophe unless people listen to him.

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Frank Chambers is a retired electrical engineer, a magician, and member of the Irish Skeptics Committee.

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We want to spread the skeptical viewpoint as far as we can, and we are always looking for ways to increase the circulation of the *British & Irish Skeptic*. Please let us know if you can help in any way.

## Predictions for 1988

### Marjorie Mackintosh

**January:** Astrologers in the US will be up in arms when it is leaked that the new President's preferred aid to decision making is the *I Ching*. The astrologers will claim that this is unamerican.

**February:** Mrs Thatcher will announce the privatisation of her family. Shares will be sold in Mark and Carol, but Dennis needs significant cash injections before even his more prosperous divisions can attract private investment.

**March:** Prince Edward will announce his engagement to a young Australian woman but trouble will develop when she insists on wearing dangling corks around her tiara.

**April:** Hollywood will be shattered by the revelation of Joan Collins' secret life: she has been happily married to the same man for thirty-five years and has six children—all chartered accountants.

**May:** Mikhail Gorbachev will be toppled when it is discovered that he holds an American Express gold card.

**June:** Whitley Streiber's allegations of alien visitations will be dramatically substantiated when the aliens take Streiber to court demanding their share of the royalties from *Communion*.

**July:** Edwina Curry will tell Northerners that the best way to avoid old age is to stop eating now.

**August:** Scientists still examining the now-discredited Turin Shroud will find a hitherto hidden label reading 'Made in Hong Kong'.

**September:** Work on the Channel Tunnel will stop when oil is discovered during excavation. Hostilities will develop as both sides claim the rights. Marks and Spencer will be forced to close its French branches. Nouvelle cuisine will be banned in Britain.

**October:** The Booker prize for fiction will be won by Margaret Thatcher after the text of her party conference speech is published.

**November:** American-Soviet negotiations will take on a renewed intensity as attempts are made to arrange a summit in Washington in time for Raisa to shop in the winter sales. (I know that this contradicts May but what do you want? Prophecy is imagination not logic.)

**December:** No earthquakes will occur in California. As Nostradamus did not predict one, his followers will claim that he has once again been proven correct.

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Marjorie Mackintosh is a teacher, and is currently studying with the Open University for a Ph.D. in Art and Religion in the Eastern world.

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# Explaining the Shroud

*Steve Donnelly interviews Joe Nickell*

*When the Turin Shroud was last put on display in Turin Cathedral in 1978 more than 3.5 million pilgrims flocked to see it, but if it ever goes on public display again it will be merely as a 14th century work of art. The results of carbon dating experiments carried out at laboratories in Oxford, Zurich and Arizona were, after a considerable delay, officially announced on 13 October and indicate clearly that the shroud is a piece of linen which was woven between AD 1260 and 1390. The image on the shroud of an apparently crucified man is now quite unambiguously not the image of Jesus Christ mysteriously imprinted at the moment of resurrection. The only remaining mystery appears to be how a mediaeval forger managed to produce a lasting image which has some of the properties of a photographic negative. Dr Joe Nickell has spent a number of years researching this very question and has written a book on his findings entitled *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin*. On 29 September, two weeks before the long awaited official announcement, I interviewed Joe Nickell for the BBC Radio 4 programme *Science Now*. What follows is an edited transcript of that interview.*

SD: The aspect of the shroud which is in the news at the moment is the carbon dating, but what I'd like to talk about are the various hypotheses which have been put forward to explain the image. The reason for this is that, assuming that the question of the dating has been settled, I think the question in everybody's mind is going to be how did the image get there, if it wasn't by miraculous means at the time of Christ. Could you tell us a little about the various hypotheses that have been put up over the decades or over the centuries to account for the image?

JN: Of course the shroud first came to light in the middle ages and the earliest report is a bishop's report to Pope Clement that the forger had been found, and had confessed, and so the earliest claims are that the shroud image was cunningly painted. But when the shroud was first photographed by Secondo Pia in 1898 it was found that the darks and lights on the negative were reversed. That is to say that when you looked at the glass plate negative you saw a positive rather than a negative image, and so the modern era of shroud studies really began there with people asking how it could be possible for a forger to produce a photographic negative in the middle ages. Actually the question is a little bit of a bogus one because it isn't a true photographic negative. There are blank spaces in the image that would not be in a photographic image. Also the colour of the hair is reversed, so that in a positive image Jesus looks like a white haired and white bearded old man. But putting that

aside, the earliest obvious theory that would be consistent with the shroud being genuine was that it was simply an imprint made from the body being covered with the burial spices myrrh and aloes, and that this had caused an imprint on the shroud. The problem is, as I've found by experimenting along those lines, that you get a severe wraparound distortion. That is when you press a cloth around a three dimensional form like the human face with the nose sticking out the way it does, you get severe distortions with elongated eye sockets and other distortions that are really rather grotesque.

SD: So it's a bit like a projection of the Earth's surface onto a flat plane?

JN: It is a mapping type problem, yes, and it is such a severe problem there is no way of getting around it. Also people realised later that there were places which had been imprinted which would not have been touched by a draped cloth. So a fellow named Paul Vignon suggested that there must have been some form of imprinting across a distance. He postulated the so called vaporograph theory which included the notion that body vapours—weak ammonia vapours from morbid body sweat—might have interacted with the burial spices on the cloth to produce a so-called vapour photo.

SD: But it seems to me that this would not give rise to a very detailed image.

JN: Right. In fact I experimented with that technology. I used a sculpture, coated it with ammonia and used a cloth treated with phenolphthalein and draped it over, and of course what I got is what most scientists could extrapolate would happen—a big blur. And that theory has been negated now and no-one pays any attention to it. Then, because of the faint brown or sepia colour of the image which is approximately the colour of a scorch, people suggested that maybe it was caused by a burst of radiant energy at the moment of resurrection. The problem with that is that the image on the cloth is very superficial. It does not penetrate through the fibres to the back of the cloth. And while this was used to argue that it was not a painting it also argues against radiation because there is no radiation known that would travel the varying distances from body to cloth, and as soon as it hit the cloth drop to zero.

SD: So any kind of radiation, ultra-violet for instance, wouldn't just scorch the very surface of the fibres. You're saying it would penetrate?

JN: That's right. But also there are problems with the fact that the image would really have to be focussed in order to get an image that's not blurred and distorted. What one is doing when one goes down

that path is just invoking a miracle. And so the question then is whether there is any reason to invoke a miracle. Is the *prima facie* evidence of a nature that we should give up other explanations? And my position is that we know from a body of evidence that the shroud was produced by an artist in the middle ages.

SD: What scientific analysis, other than the carbon dating, has been carried out on the image and blood-stained areas?

JN: An earlier series of tests was done by a once-secret commission which later produced a report, although it has been very difficult for people to obtain copies of the original report. But we do know that they took threads out of the shroud from the so-called blood-stained areas and these went to forensic laboratories in which internationally known forensic experts tested them using all the standard tests, then the more specific tests for blood and blood compounds, and the fibres failed all those tests. The Church authorities did not like this, apparently, so they issued a rebuttal report, but later the Shroud of Turin Research Project visited Turin and they lifted sticky tape samples from the fibres just by placing the tape on the cloth, peeling it off and mounting these on microscope slides. The samples were first analysed at the world-renowned McCrone forensic laboratories in Chicago. Immediately they found traces of various substances identifiable as paint pigments. They found red iron oxide of a type used in the pigment red ochre and smaller amounts of vermilion and rose madder.

SD: Are these all pigments that were used in mediaeval times?

JN: Right. Even some pro-shroud analysts found traces of the vermilion but much smaller traces than McCrone. One of the big questions was whether that red iron oxide was primarily on the image area or not. McCrone's results, in a blind study, demonstrated that the iron oxide was on the image areas and very little on the off-image areas. McCrone then took the view that the image was a painting. I have a problem with that viewpoint because again the body image is superficial and does not soak through the cloth whereas the so-called blood areas do soak through. Later tests after McCrone (although by pro-shroud people which makes a bit of a problem for objectivity) seem to have found that there is very little pigment or very little iron oxide, and that what you see as a body image is really just a yellowing of the cloth. So what I think might have happened is that a powdered pigment was rubbed onto the fibres and over time that has caused a yellowing just by its presence on there. That is, by being slightly acidic it has stained the cloth over time and most of the powder has been sloughed off.

SD: You have written a book entitled *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin* on your investigations into the shroud, and in the book you write about a type of rubbing technique which you have used to produce



an image very similar to the shroud image. Can you tell me a bit about this and whether you feel that a mediaeval forger would have had the skill required to produce such an image?

JN: Joe Nickell master forger! Well, when I began to realise that wraparound distortion was a problem, and when I found out about the lack of history, the forger's confession and so forth and also the presence of some reddish granules—although at that time we didn't know what they were—I began to seriously consider the possibility of artistry. I had eliminated contact imprinting. I had eliminated vaporography. The miraculous theory, of course, could not be tested and I felt was not yet warranted until we had tried everything. So I then took the other category of possible solutions—artistry—and began to work on it. Immediately it occurred to me that a full three-dimensional sculpture would not work. But there did seem to be evidence that it was not a painting and that it did have three-dimensional information—there have been microdensitometer tracings and other studies that show that the darks and lights of the image are consistent with some kind of three dimensional form.

SD: Can we just recap on why you felt it wasn't a painting? This was due to the lack of penetration of pigment into the fibres?

JN: Right. There was no evidence of capillary action where there would be a soaking of a fluid medium into the fibres of the shroud except in the blood areas. There also were no brush marks, and of course there was the phenomenon of light and dark reversal which would be another unusual characteristic for a painting. And there were other indications. For example there were various flaws in the image that were interesting. There were the blank spaces we talked about earlier and a number of things that indicated to me that we might be dealing with some kind of imprinting technique from a bas-relief—a low sculpted relief,

not a full three-dimensional relief, but not a flat plate like an engraving. So my first experiments were to try to make an actual print by coating the bas-relief and pressing cloth to it.

SD: So you're talking about a fairly familiar technique—brass rubbing?

JN: Well that was the next step. Printing was a possible technique but it had some serious drawbacks. So I then tried a technique, as you pointed out, analogous to brass rubbing except that usually we put a paper on a flat surface and rub it. In this case I was using cloth and a curved form, but by wetting the cloth and moulding it to the bas-relief I was able to form the cloth to the relief, rather like a mask. Then when the cloth was thoroughly dry I took a dauber and some powdered pigment and rubbed it on carefully in strokes. When I did this the dauber hit the prominences and left the recesses blank, and since the prominences in a positive image, like a face, are in highlight my technique produced the prominences as dark areas. So it made a systematic quasi-negative image just like the shroud image. It had the darks and lights reversed, the hair was still white in the positive image, there were blank spaces and tonal gradations and, in all, there were some thirty points of similarity between my images and the shroud images at the visual or macroscopic level and even at the microscopic level. The only differences, I believe, are those due to the effects of 600 years during which time the image would be expected to have yellowed the cloth and most of the powdered pigment would have sloughed off.

SD: How confident are you that you have arrived at the technique which was used in the 14th century to do the forgery?

JN: I have a very high degree of confidence. It is very unlikely, in my thinking, that the shroud is an ordinary painting. There are serious problems with that, although there are ways around the difficulties. For example if you wanted the pigment not to soak into the cloth you could give the cloth a coat of a sealer of some kind. The problem there is why would you have the blood areas soaking through; why would parts of it soak through and parts not? But it is also very difficult for a person to paint a negative image. It's easy enough to copy one if you have one in front of you. In other words an artist can look at the shroud and copy it but, you see, he is sort of cheating because he has a negative already made for him to copy. It's harder to take a positive image and translate it into a negative, whereas my technique does it automatically. And then I would point out that the technique I used duplicates a number of these very particular flaws and peculiar characteristics, and whilst those might be imitated by a counterfeiter, the question would arise why would you put these particular distortions, faults and flaws in? Whereas the answer for me for my technique is because that's what my technique does. It just naturally produces them—blank spaces for example.

SD: So you're saying for instance that when a negative photograph is taken of the shroud image and gives an apparently positive image the fact that the beard and hair come out white is a natural function of just the way it has been done?

JN: Yes, you see when we look at an ordinary photographic negative we're looking at colours like brown hair which is dark because of its colour. But when we make a rubbing from a bas-relief, that which is raised will be dark, regardless. So the hair becomes dark on the original image but light on the apparently positive photographic negative, so there is that reversal of form. Now it may be that an artist, since rubbings were beginning to become common during the middle ages, had studied some rubbings and then did a painting imitating them. I would point out too that there is evidence that the shroud image was once much darker than it is now. So it does appear that the image is losing pigment over time and so the problem is that when we try to figure out exactly what the artist did there is so little left of the original painting or printing that all we have is a residual stain and that does complicate it. Plus the fact that skeptical people with artistic training have really not been allowed access to it.

SD: Given the results of the carbon dating that seem to indicate clearly that the shroud dates back to the 14th century and not the 1st century, and given your findings on a fairly convincing method by which the shroud may have been forged, do you think this will kill forever speculation about the authenticity of the shroud?

JN: Well, it's difficult to say. There may be some really pathological believers who simply can't accept what everyone else will be able to accept. But when you look at the totality of the evidence, and you look at the age of the cloth, which is now apparently established with a very high degree of accuracy as the same time as the forger's confession, and you realize that this is supported by the lack of historical record, the method of wrapping the body which is contrary to Jewish burial practice, and the evidence from the paint pigment, the fact is that although we may disagree slightly about the method of artistic simulation, the skeptics have maybe too many techniques on their side whereas the believers have none. And so the evidence is just overwhelming and if all issues were this clear life would be much simpler.

*Joe Nickell's book is published by Prometheus and contains photographs of 'shroudlike' images produced by the author using the technique discussed in the interview. The updated paperback edition costs £9.95. An audio tape recording of the interview is available from the Skeptical Tape Library.*

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

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# Skeptic at large...

Wendy M. Grossman

I stood at the crossroads, cancelled my standing order for the *Guardian*, and abandoned myself to my fate. I've bought it since, but it's not the same.

It was Julie Collings. Her articles began appearing, every two weeks or so, on the 'Thursday Women' page. Readers of the *British & Irish Skeptic* started sending them in, a sure sign of impending trouble. In B&IS II.4, I wrote a short piece about the column on holistic dentistry for 'Hits and Misses'. Besides the electrical current theory of dental fillings, she has written on the use of auras as a diagnostic tool, said the danger of living near electric pylons was a proven fact, and, in the last piece I read, criticized *Nature* for sending Randi along to France to check out Benveniste's homeopathy experiments.

All of this did not go unnoticed. A *Guardian* reader commenting on a review of Shel Drake's morphic resonance theory said the *Guardian* seemed to be heading in the direction of metaphysics. And at least two people I know of wrote to the *Guardian* complaining about Collings' credulous articles—to get no reply or acknowledgement. My own (ignored) letter to the *Guardian* on the subject queried the placement of these articles on the women's page. Now, you have to understand, I don't *really* expect to find things I want to read on the women's page. I didn't when the women's pages were dedicated to home and beauty, and I don't now when they are devoted to feminism. But in my role as *British & Irish Skeptic* editor, I felt I had to take note of Collings. My point was this: if Collings is reporting on valid research, why don't these reports appear on the science pages? Or the front page? Or the health pages? Does this mean that the *Guardian* doesn't take them all that seriously either? In which case, why are they printing them at all? Is the implication that women will read anything? Or that men aren't interested in alternative therapies, or *what*? No answer from the *Guardian*. (I'm sure they will bankrupt instantly if I don't buy it every day).

I find Collings difficult to understand. Does she never query anything by a fringe practitioner? She seems to think that *Nature*, in choosing Randi as a member of its team, automatically biased the inquiry against Benveniste: 'Presumably the last thing *Nature* wanted was for its July investigations to be biased against Benveniste, but the fact remains that the experiments did involve biological systems—and new lines of scientific thought are beginning to reveal that the observed is affected by the observer. This could work negatively as well as positively, surely.' This argument should be familiar to readers of this magazine. It misuses quantum mechanics to justify the 'shyness effect'. She appends a note about Randi's career

as a magician and investigator of paranormal claims: 'He has also become expert in the mind-manipulatory games (probably involving hypnosis) which are a feature of the best magicians' and '... surely Randi is committed to expose frauds, he is not usually hired for other reasons.' Aside from Collings' improbable, paranoid vision of magicians ruling the world through conjuring tricks, Randi presumably was 'hired' to detect trickery, *if any*. And a little investigation into Randi's career might have brought to light the fact that he has actually worked in a biology lab. Collings' main argument seems to be: *Nature* was biased against the results, and hired a team which would produce the conclusion they wanted. In that case, why publish the paper in the first place? *Nature* paid Benveniste the tribute of taking his research seriously enough to publish it, despite the fact that it contradicted a large portion of scientific knowledge. And then, responsibly, they investigated. *Guardian*—0.

The *Independent* ran its own piece on 10 October (on the Science page). In 'Scientists in murky waters testing H<sub>2</sub>O', writer Tony Jones drew a parallel between Benveniste's research and the 1960's Soviet discovery of 'polywater', which excited great media attention, many experiments, and, ultimately, much embarrassment when polywater was shown to be silicate-contaminated ordinary water. Jones said relatively little about Benveniste, but the article was well-written and incisive, without bludgeoning people with what they ought to think. *Independent*—1. However, they lose a half point for running an uncritical piece on aromatherapy the very next day. The *Sunday Times* ran a similar one the following week.

When a newspaper like the *Guardian* runs articles like Collings', we draw a conclusion about the quality of the newspaper and its editor's intellectual strength: consider how we think of the *Sunday Sport*. There is a difference, of course. When the *Sunday Sport* predicts that evil aliens are going to abduct the Wimbledon finalists, we can turn on BBC-TV and find out if it's true. When the *Guardian* runs one-sided articles on the wisdom of replacing our amalgam fillings, we have no such simple recourse. And the question then arises: is their reporting of current events as carefully researched? An editor at a prominent New York publisher recently turned down a skeptical book with these words: '... I think I'm one of those people who would like a less prosaic explanation of these enigmas.'

And these are the *quality* publishers, folks.

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

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# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

In 1850 a French inventor made a discovery he believed would revolutionise communications. With his insights the electric telegraph would become obsolete overnight. He predicted instantaneous communication around the globe—at the time an extraordinary idea, since wireless telegraphy would not be demonstrated by Marconi for another forty-five years. What made it all the more remarkable was that he had discovered the telepathic powers of the humble snail.

Jacques Toussaint Benoit was a character of his time. After a lifetime's immersion in the occult, he was now on the verge of a breakthrough. Having observed the evolution of the new electric telegraph, he was aware there were problems. When in 1850 the first submarine cable was laid between England and France, the gutta-percha wire casings soon decomposed in the water, and contact with the brine rendered the wires useless. If electric telegraphy could not span the meagre English Channel, what hope was there for transatlantic communication? What Benoit had in mind was a different force of nature, free from the trappings of gutta-percha and dry copper wires, a force that needed no conductor except the presence of living beings. He proposed to use *animal magnetism*. Benoit had recently discovered that two snails placed together, and subsequently separated, would remain forever united by a telepathic bond. When one was stimulated, an exchange of animal magnetism meant that the other, regardless of distance, also responded. Benoit had glimpsed the future of communication, and he was to be its pioneer.

Benoit was penniless, but he was charming. It was not long before he had persuaded Monsieur Triat, the manager of a Paris gymnasium, to be his angel. Benoit explained that he and his colleague, Monsieur Biat-Chrétien, then living in America, had hit upon a world-shaking idea. He assured Triat that he needed 'only two or three bits of wood' for the construction of his 'snail-telegraph', and that human communication would never be the same again. At first, Triat believed absolutely in Benoit, providing him with lodgings and a steady allowance. Installed in his new Paris apartment Benoit set to work, but he soon became distracted, and people began to speculate that Triat's money was funding more aspects of Benoit's life than his snails. When a year had passed, with Triat substantially out of pocket, and the snail-telegraph still unseen, Triat's patience was gone. He demanded to see Benoit demonstrate the machine. Benoit stalled, but finally he agreed. With a grand title worthy of such a daring conception, the *pasilalinic-sympathetic compass* was unveiled.

It was a grand contraption indeed. At one end of Benoit's apartment rested a huge wooden frame, a

large horizontal disc suspended beneath. In the disc were twenty-four holes, each containing a zinc dish lined with a cloth soaked in copper sulphate solution. The cloth was fixed by a copper blade, and in the dish, secured by glue, sat a living snail. Against each dish was written a letter of the alphabet. To transmit the letter, the operator would touch the snail in the dish, causing a sympathetic reaction in the corresponding snail in the other half of the apparatus—a device of identical construction at the other end of the room. Lack of space had forced Benoit to construct both stations of the telegraph in the same room, but as he readily explained—this was immaterial. Distance has no meaning for the telepathic snail—was not Benoit himself in daily 'snail-telegraphic' communication with his American collaborator? Full of confidence, Benoit invited Triat and Monsieur Allix, a journalist from *La Presse*, to a demonstration of the machine.

On the morning of 2 October 1851, the demonstration began, but at once Triat and Allix objected to the location of the instruments. Could they not at least be separated with a curtain? Alas, replied Benoit, that would not be technically possible. Nevertheless, Triat took his place at the controls of one of the stations, and began to prod the snails to spell out his message. Benoit was supposed to remain at his receiving station on the other side of the room, but found it essential to cross between the machines on one pretext or another. Triat was now certain of what he had begun to suspect in the recent months. Benoit was a rogue, and he had been hoaxed, a witness to nothing better than farce. Allix, on the other hand, was completely convinced. On 27 October a glowing article appeared in *La Presse*: '... snails which have once been put in contact, are always in sympathetic communication. When separated, there disengages itself from them a species of fluid of which the earth is the conductor, which develops and unrolls, so to speak, like the almost invisible thread of the spider, [but] the thread of the escargotic fluid is invisible as completely and the pulsation along it as rapid as the electric fluid.' Now skeptical, Triat demanded another test, this time with strict controls. Benoit agreed, and a date was set. But when the day came, Benoit had vanished.

In the following months Monsieur Benoit was seen wandering the Paris streets, destitute and deranged. He died two years later, and with him disappeared forever the dream of the snail-telegraph.

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Toby Howard is a lecturer in computer graphics, and co-editor of the *British & Irish Skeptic*.

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# Heaven and Earth

Michael Hutchinson

## *Is the 'curse of Tutankhamen' a curse at all?*

Some claims of the paranormal have been shown to be completely wrong; others, although unlikely and as yet unproven, may still have a small chance of being right. In the latter I include ESP, ghosts, life-after-death, UFO's, and even dowsing. These phenomena are so ethereal that even if any of them exist they would be difficult to prove. That is surely the whole basis of our interest and skepticism. We believe that these things have not been proven in spite of the enormous amount of publicity and support given to them.

The former category includes astrology, iridology, palmistry, the Bermuda Triangle and any phenomenon which has rules or which has a base of checkable facts. These claims are easily looked into, and have been—many times. They consistently fail to support the claims made for them. Among these phenomena is one which is regularly mentioned by the media but which has received comparatively little skeptical comment: The Curse of Tutankhamen. I covered this briefly in my review of *Time-Life's* awful series *Mysteries of the Unknown* (B&IS II.4) and thought I would enlarge on it in this issue.

The earliest and best skeptical article on the curse I can find was—not surprisingly perhaps—written by James Randi and appeared in *The Humanist* (March/April 1978). The article was motivated by a television special on the curse and a popular book *The Curse of the Pharaohs* by Philipp Vandenberg.

The first claim made by supporters of this myth is that a tablet with a curse inscribed on it was found in Tutankhamen's tomb. It is supposed to have said: 'Death will slay with his wings whoever disturbs the rest of the Pharaoh', or similar depending upon the source. The tablet has since vanished, they tell us. But in reality there is no evidence that such a tablet ever existed. As in any archaeological dig all items found in the tomb were carefully noted and documented. No mention of such a tablet is made. Or are the archaeologists guilty of a cover-up?

We are asked to believe that the earliest victim of the curse was Lord Carnarvon, the patron of the expedition to find the tomb. When he died in Cairo, the lights of the city were reported to have gone out, and back in England at that very moment his favourite fox terrier 'howled, sat up on her hind legs, and fell over dead', as if in sympathy, or sorrow. As I mentioned in my previous review, Carnarvon was a sick man when he went to Egypt on his doctor's advice. After recovering from a mosquito bite he contracted pneumonia and died one April morning at 1.55 a.m. at the age of fifty-seven.

The lights often went out in Cairo, so it is no surprise that they did so at, or about the time Carnarvon died. As for the dog, at least one believer has reported Carnarvon's son as saying that it died at 4 a.m., which taking the two hour time difference between England and Egypt, meant that the dog died within five minutes of Carnarvon. Wrong! Even if the event occurred as stated (and why was there a witness with the healthy fox-terrier at four o'clock in the morning?). England was behind, not ahead, of Egyptian time.

As the ultimate penalty of a curse is death it is therefore not surprising that most of the tales in support of Tut's curse involve the deaths of those who defiled the tomb. The odd thing though is how selective the curse is. It doesn't seem to affect those closely involved in the opening of the tomb—as we shall see—so much as those who were on the side-lines. George Jay Gould, son of financier Jay Gould, is reported to have died within days of visiting the tomb. But he was just one of many thousands of tourists who have visited the tomb. Perhaps the curse thought that he had lived long enough for he died at the age of fifty-nine, which wasn't too bad for the early twentieth century.

Another side-liner we are asked to believe is that a victim of the curse was Lord Westbury, the father of Howard Carter's assistant Richard Bethell who died suddenly of a circulatory collapse some six years after the tomb opening. Grief stricken by his son's death, Westbury committed suicide. Do curses have no compassion?

Randi checked Howard Carter's writings and determined who had been most directly involved in the tomb discovery and exploration. Included in his *Humanist* article was a table listing the names of these people, the years of their deaths, their ages, and the number of years they survived the opening of the tomb in 1922. Some of Randi's data was incomplete as he couldn't trace details of all of the people in American libraries. I have therefore updated his list, and have calculated the average life-span and 'curse survival' rates of those whose ages we have been able to find.

Of the twenty-two people on the list we know the ages at death of eleven and the years in which another three were known to be alive. On average the eleven lived to at least 72, and all fourteen survived with a curse over their heads for almost twenty-five years each. The shortest and longest survival rates were, ironically, for two of the people present at the initial

break-in of the tomb. Lord Carnarvon survived for only four months; his daughter, Lady Evelyn Herbert for fifty-eight years. She died in 1980, at the age of 79. The average survival rate of the twenty-two main participants was 20.9 years. As Randi wrote, 'Perhaps we have here a beneficent curse that "inhibits" the Grim Reaper'.

But was there a curse in the first place? Not according to Carol Andrews, an Egyptologist from the British Museum, who said on LBC Radio in July 1988 that the idea of a curse probably dates from a Victorian novelist—Marie Corelli—who wrote 'No good will come of disturbing Pharaoh's bones ...'. But more directly, Andrews said that the Egyptians didn't write curses in their tombs; she confirmed that no such curse was found in Tutankhamen's tomb and that Egyptologists wouldn't have expected to find one. She explained that the only curses made by the Egyptians were not against grave robbers but against anyone disturbing their funerary offerings of food and drink which were placed daily in chapels for their spirits to consume.

Although the general idea of a curse might have originated with a Victorian novelist, the Tutankhamen one certainly couldn't—except by pre-cognition, which we won't address here. Nearer the truth is the suggestion that it was a story made up by newsmen. On 29 August 1980, the *Daily Mail* published an interview with 'old soldier'

Richard Adamson, then 81 years old. As a military policeman in Egypt in 1922, Adamson was ordered to assist Carnarvon's archaeological expedition to leave the Valley of the Kings. Before they could do so, the tomb was discovered and Adamson was to spend the next seven years actually sleeping in the tomb as a guard.

Adamson told the *Daily Mail* that as crowds were hampering the digging work and as they were also worried about the possibility of thieves coming in the night 'Quite suddenly we thought about a curse. Inscriptions laying curses on intruders had been found on the walls of tombs nearer Cairo and it so happened that a reporter had been hanging around, asking about curses. We saw no such inscriptions laying curses in Tut's tomb, but let's say we didn't discourage him from thinking there was.'

Adamson's story is possibly true, although his claim about curses on the walls of other tombs seems to contradict Carol Andrews. Perhaps these were curses against anyone disturbing the funerary offerings. Nevertheless, if there really is a curse, having lived to be at least 81 and surviving the curse by at least 58 years, Adamson only supports Randi's suggestion that the curse is beneficent.

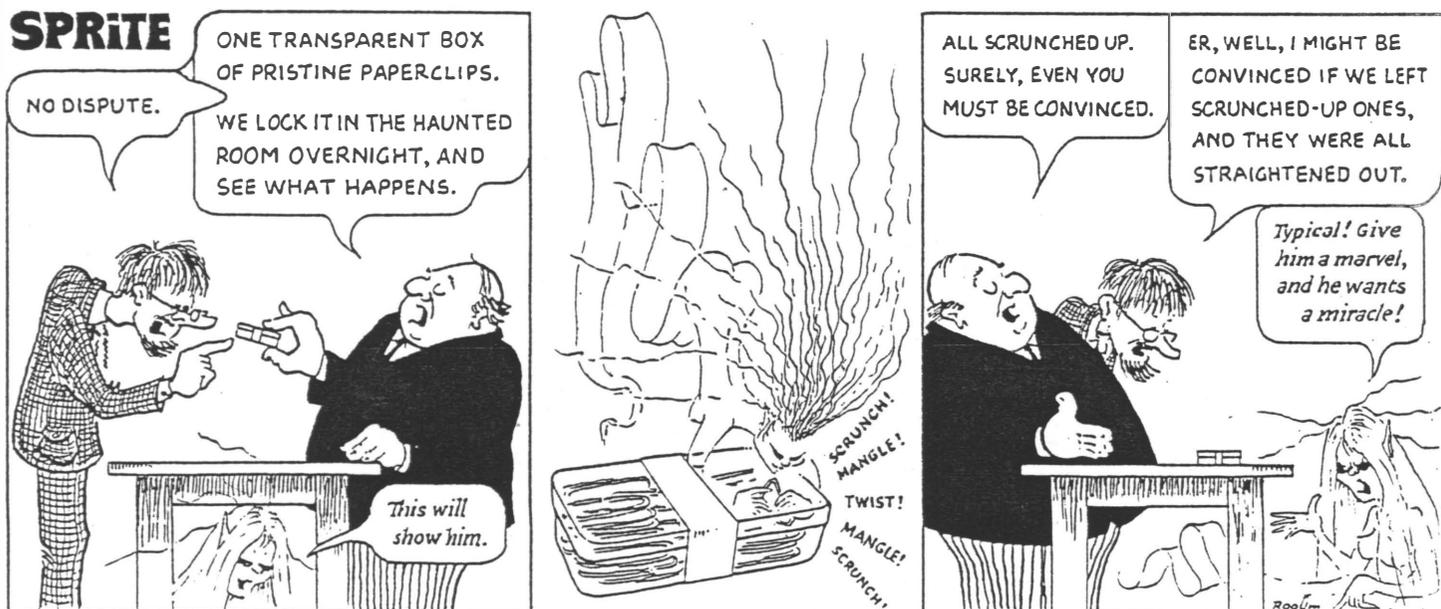
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Michael Hutchinson is secretary of the British Committee, and UK distributor for Prometheus Books.

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# SPRITE

Donald Room



# Reviews

## Impressions of CSICOP '88

Dominic Dunlop

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'The New Age—A Scientific Evaluation': the 1988 CSICOP Conference, Chicago, 4–6 November.

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One of the aspects of British life that has me slightly bemused is that a colourful invitation to start a collection of books about the *Mysteries of the Unknown* can fall out of my copy of *New Scientist*. I suppose it must pay *Time-Life* to advertise in that way in this market. Arriving at the Chicago Hyatt Regency O'Hare hotel, I turned to CNN, the satellite news channel, to find that, in the USA, it must pay them to advertise on national TV, buying time in competition with the vendors of investment schemes, health insurance and compilations of sixty hits from the sixties.

Paul Kurtz, in his opening remarks for CSICOP's 1988 conference, confirmed that big money was at stake: *Mysteries of the Unknown* has sold 700,000 copies, making it *Time-Life*'s most successful publication to date, with double the sales of the previous best. Kurtz was leading off a day of talks about the 'New Age'. As one of the few non-American members in the audience of three hundred or so, my knowledge of the phenomenon had been culled largely from the pages of the *Skeptical Inquirer* and—I admit it—the labels of a few items in my record collection. In the USA, exposure is easier to come by: you can get it in anything from airlines' in-flight magazines to neatly-packaged seminars at hundreds of dollars a shot. The speakers pondered why this might be so—and why, although the New Age had, in the words of Robert Basil, been 'blanched into inanity by the mass media', it had found such a ready market among those children of the sixties who were 'above the norm in intelligence'.

These people are the same ones to whom advertisers sell investment schemes, health insurance—and compilations of sixties hits. Therein, suggested Jay Rosen, lies the key: 'The underlying conceit in New Age is that you can change the world by changing yourself', a message that the consumer culture has been promoting for a hundred years as a means of selling goods. J. Gordon Melton pointed out that New Age is essentially a religion: one which relies on borrowing attractive parts from sources such as Zen and Buddhism, then repackaging them without the less agreeable self-denying aspects of most traditional creeds. And because New Age is a repackaged religion, it is resistant to the science-based attacks mounted against it by CSICOP and others—particularly where those attacks are couched in 'intemperate, dismissive and bigoted language'. Building on Maureen O'Hara's point that, after four hun-

ded years of ascendancy over religion in the western world, the usefulness of the scientific method was beginning to be questioned, Ted Schultz added that such a disdain for science had to be taken as an 'indictment of the science education that these New Agers got.' The many educators in the audience nodded their agreement.

How, then, to get the skeptical message across? This topic was the subject of the final day of the conference. Perhaps, said Jeff Mahew, many skeptical messages were no better than 'moose calls', attracting one skeptic to another. Mayhew underlined his point with a snappy series of cartoons showing an angler who, after diligent preparation and researches into the habits of fish, succeeds only in reeling in another angler. This, he explained, was an example of packaging—that word again—an idea so as to make it easier for its intended audience to swallow, a method which must be applied to the skeptical message both at conferences and in the mass media.

Mayhew, the last speaker of the morning, followed not just one but three tough acts, all with visual aids (still something of a rarity at the conference as a whole), and all brimming with infectious enthusiasm—the sort of enthusiasm that can make even the most lukewarm audience think a little. Ray Hyman illustrated how Zöllner, an eminent astronomer of the late nineteenth century was just one of a number of scientists taken in over the years by 'psychics' who had subsequently proved to be charlatans; Paul Macready showed that, by building man-powered aircraft, sun-powered cars, and more, he had proved that real science could offer the next generation more excitement and satisfaction than pseudoscience. And Jerry Andrus, described as 'the only magician who can consistently fool other magicians' showed how, because the mind works by jumping to conclusions, all of us can jump to the wrong conclusions for the right reasons.

Andrus and other magicians had been in action at the previous evening's banquet, where Douglas Hofstadter, best known for his award-winning book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, was given another award, *In Praise of Reason*. Hofstadter had given the conference's keynote speech, kicking off with the observation that he had recently seen all of his books advertised in a catalogue of New Age publications! Then he, too, captivated us with insights into the way that the human mind works: how, for example, can 'the long march' be corrupted into 'the great walk'? Accepting his award, Hofstadter said of CSICOP that 'it has an impertinent quality which I appreciate.'

Among the many sessions on the second day of the conference, the speakers on cryptozoology revealed

that they had been rejected by the scientific establishment at the beginning of the decade. Their impertinence had been to suggest that there was sufficient evidence to merit serious searches for animals thought, for one reason or another, not to be living at all, or not to be living in particular habitats. While it is only the more sensational examples—the monsters and the ape men—that get media attention, investigation of less exotic species has yielded dividends and the occasional specimen over the years. Sadly it's hard to get funding if you're only searching for salamanders; UFOs are far more bankable, as Whitley Strieber, author of *Communion*, has found out. Whitley had been invited to the conference, but didn't come; it was left to Philip Klass and Robert Baker to analyse the patterns and psychology of UFO abductions, a phenomenon which seems, like the New Age, to be centred on North America.

Perhaps next year's conference will have a slightly more international flavour. But there's no way it can unless more delegates turn up from outside the USA.

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Dominic Dunlop is the research and development director of a computer software company.

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## Announcing Geopathic Stress

Caroline Richmond

The medical fringe event of the season took place in a Manchester hotel in September. It was the launch of this year's new disease, *geopathic stress*. Ninety people turned up to hear Käthe Bachler 'without doubt the world's leading dowser' reveal the true cause of cancer, allergies, fatigue and academic failure in children. Not to mention twitching, tinnitus, facial paralysis, angina, asthma, heart attacks, strokes, inflammation of the kidneys and tuberculosis. Ms Bachler explained that we are all at risk from underground radiation lines that run across the globe from NE to SW and NW to SE. The lines are 80 cm thick and 3.5 metres apart. So they run under all our houses, sending up vertical rays that cause disease. Where they intersect is doubly dangerous and where underground streams cross is even worse.

The way to avoid these intersections is to get a sensitive dowser like Ms Bachler to give your home the once-over, which she offered to do for anyone who lived locally. The audience, though clearly impressed, didn't leap at the offer. Perhaps they feared for her safety: working with rod and pendulum can make a person ill. The radiant aura that healthy people have is easily punctured by various influences. This is why they might need a RadiTech dowser, £49.50 for the household model. There is also a larger version for factories and a portable one for the car. This is useful as road accidents take place at nasty geophysical intersections.

How can you tell if you are suffering from geopathic stress and live too far from Manchester to be dowsed? You can be tested by post—just send a plan of your house and a map of your area. To clinch your diagnosis, the Heinz-Spagrich company of Stroud will test a sample of your saliva, urine, blood, sweat or tears. Pets know intuitively where the lines are—cats like to sleep in dangerous places but dogs know the safe bits. If in doubt, doss down in Fido's kennel. The Dulwich Health Group are also into geopathic stress which has been implicated in diseases that Ms Bachler hadn't contemplated—myalgic encephalomyelitis, AIDS, meningitis, kidney and gallstones, rheumatism, heart and circulatory problems, blood pressure, depression, insomnia and alcoholism. For the benefit of public health, they would like a law passed enforcing house dowsing.

Doctors Katharine Cheng and Jim Devlin of Booth Hall Childrens' Hospital were unimpressed. Dr Cheng said afterwards 'It sounds incredible. It's amazing anyone believes it.' And Dr Devlin added 'It was a very entertaining afternoon but I hope no-one took it seriously.' However, according to Ms Bachler (*The Times*, 14 October), 'Those who scorn the existence of these lines are behind the times or downright malevolent.'

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Caroline Richmond is a writer on biomedical sciences.

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## Bienveniste on 4

Nick Beard

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*After Dark*, Channel 4 TV, 3 September.

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This television debate was prompted by the recent storm which surrounded the publication in *Nature* of Professor Benveniste's results which appeared to provide evidence of homeopathic activity *in vitro*. In addition to Professor Benveniste other participants included Dr Jonathan Miller, neuropsychology researcher and theatre director Dr David Reilly, a research fellow into homeopathy at Glasgow University, and James (the Amazing) Randi, a magician and member of the team of investigators which visited the Paris labs, who had himself labelled as J. Randi—Charlatan. Walter Stewart, another member of the investigative team, was also present. One of the participants, Deborah Fairchild, was introduced as an iridologist. Sadly, none of the debaters cited the research which demonstrates the validity of iridology and viewers might have been left with the impression that the method is of some value.

There were some entertainingly heated exchanges, as Dr Miller described the blasphemy of devoting such large amounts of energy, time and money to an area which is highly unlikely to produce results of

any value. The absence of any worthwhile evidence for the clinical efficacy of homeopathic methods was surely sufficient grounds for rejecting the claims of the homeopaths, observed Mr Stewart. Not surprisingly, the homeopaths disagreed, claiming that there was sufficient weight of evidence—although not scientifically rigorous—from the past 200 years of homeopathic practice to support their claims. It was also pointed out by Dr Miller that it is indeed remarkable that the fact that homeopathy is popular with the Royal Family is often seen as grounds for taking the subject seriously.

The debate shifted away from the Benveniste controversy and back again, rarely getting to the root of the issues surrounding the use of the homeopathic treatments. The programme was mildly entertaining, but generally rather unsatisfactory—there is plenty of genuinely useful and worthwhile research going on in medicine, most of which rarely reaches the public eye. The obsession with the mysterious and the mystical, the esoteric and the peculiar cannot be in the best interests of those who are sick.

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Dr Nick Beard trained in medicine and psychiatry, and is currently studying knowledge-based systems.

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## From Flying Saucers to Pseudoscience

Steuart Campbell

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John Spencer and Hilary Evans (eds.), *Phenomenon: From Flying Saucers to UFOs—Forty Years of Facts and Research*. Futura, 1988 (in conjunction with the BUFORA), UK paperback £3.95, hardback £11.95, 413 pp.

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This book appears to be a revised version of *UFOs 1947–1987* (see review in B&IS II.2) with many of the same contributors saying much the same as before. The new contributors include Paul Devereux on ‘earthlights’, Pierre Lagrange on reporting distortions, John Shaw and Gerald Mosbleck on UFO photographs and films and Budd Hopkins on ‘abductees’.

BUFORA’s publishing effort appears to be aimed at gaining the respect of other scientific disciplines (begging the question of whether or not UFOlogy is a scientific discipline). This purpose will be frustrated by the evident lack of scientific understanding demonstrated by most contributors and even the editors (Spencer confuses ‘facts’ with hypotheses and ‘certainties’ with beliefs). It will also be frustrated by the fundamental error in assuming the existence of a UFO phenomenon distinct from any other phenomenon and the claim that there is ‘little doubt that an “intelligence” of some sort is operating’. These assumptions will not be acceptable to scientists.

UFOlogical pseudoscience reaches dizzy heights in

Kenneth W. Behrendt’s ‘anti-mass field theory’ (as an explanation of how UFOs fly!). But there is doubtful science in Martin Shough’s discussion of radar reflections, erroneous statements by John Keel on Geiger counters and noctilucent clouds, statistical tautology by Willy Smith, a claim by Chris Rutkowski that crustal movements ‘generate energy’ and a disagreement between Devereux and Rutkowski on whether or not ball lightning is accepted by science (even their common references differ in spelling). In addition Devereux cannot spell ‘spectroscope’ and Spencer cannot spell ‘Welles’ (as in Orson)! Other misspellings include the Australian *Skeptic* as ‘*The Sceptic*’! There is evident conflict on the value of hypnosis, with Evans expressing qualified acceptance of the Lawson experiment and Jenny Randles claiming that ‘failed’ hypnosis sessions prove that hypnosis does not create a climate in which the witness is encouraged to recall a story to satisfy the researchers (as experts claim).

I was interested in a claim by James McCampbell that only ten percent of ‘UFO witnesses’ report their sightings. If this is true then the core reports on which UFOlogy is based (already accepted as ten percent of all received reports) represent only one percent of all sightings! Such a small sample is likely to be very unrepresentative and any strange features in these reports could be explained by factors that have nothing to do with the postulated phenomenon.

Despite a claim that the viewpoints range from the sceptical to the fantastic there is no article by a known sceptic (although Evans gives a good account of scepticism as it should be understood by UFOlogists). This omission is not explained by the editors and it must be assumed that sceptical contributions were unwelcome and unsought. This pro-UFO attitude will not gain the respect BUFORA seeks. Randles accuses most sceptics of ignorance of what ‘real UFOlogists’ think and claims that there is greater scepticism in Britain than in the USA (in that case some of it should have appeared in the book). Dennis Stacy’s entertaining and light-hearted review of the contactee era was welcome relief from pseudoscience.

The cover blurb asks, ‘Do extraterrestrials regularly visit the planet Earth? Are we being watched, studied, even contacted and kidnapped by intergalactic travellers?’ This may be publisher’s hype, but in fact the book does not answer these questions (it does not even ask them). Certainly they are irrelevant to the problem of explaining UFO reports, the matter to which BUFORA ought to be addressing itself. The blurb then warns ‘Be careful before you say “No” ... Make up your own mind—but don’t wait too long...!’ There is no explanation for this unnecessary and enigmatic warning.

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Steuart Campbell is a science writer, and a frequent contributor to the *British & Irish Skeptic*.

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The following review was inadvertently truncated after the fourth paragraph when it was published in the last issue. We republish it here in full.—Eds.

## 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 (p.76), the first stating without 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.

By contrast Seymour places great store in the findings of Michel Gauquelin [2]. Gauquelin's results are controversial and are quite beyond the detailed evaluation here. Gauquelin claims, on the basis of lengthy examination that certain categories of people tend to be born when certain planets lie in certain regions of the sky. Certain planets only, certain people and nothing to do with sun signs; so these results, true or false, have little to do with common astrology—whose practitioners set great store by its universal validity. Nevertheless, they do, if correct, indicate a

correlation between humans and the heavens. What Seymour attempts to do is to strengthen this into a causative mechanism.

Seymour's idea is as follows. The Moon, and the planets identified by Gauquelin, cause tides in the Earth's magnetic field, just as the Moon raises tides in the sea. These effects, which are very weak, are amplified by 'bays' and 'estuaries' in the Earth's magnetic field, as sea tides are amplified by such features. Neurons (cells conducting nerve impulses) in human foeti pick up the resonances due to these planets, and there is a genetic correlation between the personality-formative factors of a foetus and the time of birth. After birth, humans face many new stimuli and the effect of the planets tends to be swamped.

Seymour claims his theory is scientific because it is testable. But there is insufficient information about the theory's mechanisms to allow numerical calculation, and therefore no possibility of statistical validation or refutation. This work cannot—yet—be described as a theory; rather it is speculation.

If Seymour's mechanisms are correct, his theory stands a reasonable chance of backing Gauquelin up. But there are far too many loose links in the chain. Planetary effects are tiny, and there is simply no evidence for the magnetic bays which might amplify them. How are neurons tuned to cycles lasting many hours? We know how to calculate resonant frequencies of organic molecules and they are typically millionths of a second. Analogy with the daily cycle is misleading at the level of the neuron. The hypothesis of genetic correlation is reasonable but, in our present state of knowledge, so is genetic correlation between almost everything. Finally, the very planetary motions which cause the planets to have tidal periods slightly different from each other (and from 24 hours) also cause slight changes in the periods. Seymour's system, with its precise 'tuning' to distinct frequencies, is helpless in the face of this fact [3].

Seymour closes with some speculations that the Magi of the biblical nativity were in fact astrologers, guided by a rare conjunction. This is interesting and made plausible, but is not part of the major thesis, which for the time being is best described as a flimsy speculation.

### References

1. S. Carlson, *Nature* 318, 5 December 1985, p. 419.
2. M. Gauquelin, *The Truth about Astrology*, 1984.
3. N. Henbest, *New Scientist* 1612, 1 May 1988, pp. 66-7.

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Dr Anthony Garrett is a physicist at Glasgow University, and a former member of the Australian Skeptics and the Manchester Skeptics.

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# Letters

## Soviet Healer

I am really enjoying your publication. In many instances it has been more informative and balanced than its sister publication here in the U.S., CSICOP's *Skeptical Inquirer*.

My comment and inquiry regards your recent 'European Report' section under Bulgaria (B&IS II.4). It seems that an L. Gregoriev wrote a positive article on Djuna, the Russian lady who purportedly has successfully been healing people. The *British & Irish Skeptic* reported on another article that criticised Gregoriev for his pseudoscientific approach which says that Djuna's healing can be explained by massage and psychotherapy. This report from Bulgaria, however, also alludes to the fact that Djuna has been examined by the USSR Academy of Sciences who concluded she was curing people who could not be cured by conventional means. This is akin to the American Association for the Advancement of Science examining and endorsing a psychic healer.

Thus, it peaks one's curiosity as to: 1—Why such a significant test is glossed over, and 2—is the author of the article critical of Gregoriev so brazen to suggest the Soviet Academy of Sciences is collectively pseudoscientific because of its positive conclusions of Djuna?

This is too important an issue not to address. What say the *British & Irish Skeptic* editors?

Philip Paul  
Hampton, Virginia, USA

*Philip Paul is quite right to query our reporting of the Russian healer Djuna (probably better transliterated as Juna). On returning to the original article by Dr Genchev (in Bulgarian), the passage which refers to the USSR Academy of Sciences actually quotes the article by Gregoriev as saying '... the chairman of the USSR Academy of Sciences has called for continued examination of people with miraculous abilities ...' Genchev goes on to criticise the article for attempting to make readers believe that the chairman of the Academy believes in such abilities. Later, in the same passage Genchev again quotes Gregoriev as stating that he has material from an international psychological meeting which shows that a number of successful experiments were carried out with Juna. Genchev challenges him to produce this evidence. Due to difficulties in the translation from the Bulgarian our article erroneously associated the sentence about the testing with the USSR Academy of Sciences, referred to earlier in the same paragraph. We apologise to British & Irish Skeptic readers and the USSR Academy of Sciences for this error. We are indebted to Ilya Katardjiev for the correct translation.—Eds.*

## The Mars Effect

I was interested to read Anthony Garrett's proposed answer to Gauquelin's 'Mars Effect' (B&IS II.5). I had only just read the relevant chapter of Gauquelin's book and reread the analysis in the *Skeptical Inquirer* (Spring 1983).

One thing that struck me was that Gauquelin chose 12 sectors of the sky for his tests of sportsmen. Presumably he chose this number because it is a factor of 360, and is thus a good round number to use. Suppose, however, he had chosen 13 sectors, 11 sectors or some other number, and in doing so had obtained a negative 'Mars Effect'. Would he then have announced his results at all? Suppose also that the 12 sectors chosen were rotated slightly so that the sky positions were moved, say, 15°. What would then be the results of the tests?

It is certain he would have obtained quite different results, perhaps producing a positive effect, perhaps a negative one, perhaps none at all. Anthony Garrett is right. We need to know much more on why Gauquelin chose sportsmen and not, say, musicians (or even astrologers!), why he picked the planet Mars instead of, say, the star Sirius, why he chose 12 sectors and many other things besides.

Incidentally how accurate are the birth registries over the times of the births anyway? A ten minute difference can make quite a difference to a horoscope.

Christopher Allan  
Stoke-on-Trent

## Crop Circles

Have you noticed how often editors say 'this correspondence is now closed' just when things are hotting up and getting emotional? This is the reason I hasten to respond to Dave Langford, and his remarks about crop circles (B&IS II.5). This is the very Langford who wrote *War in 2980: The Future of Military Technology, The Leaky Establishment* (a splendid send-up of the nuclear establishment which takes place at 'Robinson Heath', the home of the 'Nuclear Utilization Technology Centre'), and who 'edited' *An Account of a Meeting with Denizens of Another World, 1871*, a must reading for UFO fans of all ages.

Perhaps the following theory has been discussed in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, or perhaps I thought of it myself. All my books are in storage at the moment, so I can't pin down sources. An easy explanation for the crop circles is that they are due to a fungal or bacterial growth underground which starts at a point and multiplies itself, expanding evenly in all

directions and one way or another killing or stunting the plants above it. The well-known fairy circle phenomenon is an example of this sort of thing. In gathering evidence, the first question I would want answered is whether the circles really appeared 'literally overnight'. Few farmers examine their entire property every day, and it would seem more likely that the phenomenon occurred between visits a week or fortnight apart. Then I would like a reliable observer's description of the actual damage. What plants are involved? Are they wilted or dead? Is there a swirl pattern or a radial pattern or a random pattern? Is there a break in the stem? Any evidence of damage in the root structure? Will earth taken from the site and planted elsewhere reproduce the effect? I think that some one of our readers should interview Colin Andrews of the Circles Research Phenomenon Research Group (reported in B&IS II.5 p. 5) and find out what they have discovered. Meanwhile, I find T.G. Pearce's cartoon a most appealing theory until a better one comes along. I should mention that I have experienced 'dust devils' in the arid southwest of the United States. These midget whirlwinds stand in one position or move slowly about and will sand your windshield with the dry particles they pick up and spew out. They are so common that automobile insurance firms only allow each customer to claim windshield damage from them once, and paint damage to the bodywork is not allowed at all. Like their giant brothers, they Hoover the area and have no tendency to lay down circular patterns.

Frank Chambers  
Co. Mayo, Ireland

## Crop Circles Revisited

An item in 'Hits and Misses', a letter from Dave Langford, and a cartoon all gave the distinct impression (B&IS II.5), that this subject is entirely beneath the serious consideration of skeptics. My opinion was, and still is, that the concentric rings and the single discs with very neat collections of out-riders are hoaxes perpetrated by some widespread organisation which is likely to benefit indirectly from them. Several such groups spring to mind, do they not?

I used to believe that isolated perfect discs were hoaxes as well. However I spoke to Colin Andrews at the end of June and he told me that there are also many 'scruffy' ill-formed examples which no self-respecting hoaxer would stoop to making. Mr Andrews seemed to be level-headed, did not subscribe to paranormal explanations and was eager to hear of any possible conventional explanation. My own *ad hoc* suggestion was vortex shedding from a fairly distant obstruction, or some complex mass transfer phenomenon such as the one which has been suggested to account for the fixed red spot (a presumed vortex) on Jupiter (see *Chaos* by J. Gleicke, Heinemann).

Upon thinking more deeply, I deduced that a vortex would have to form in the air above the crop, prop-

agate downwards, and then be immediately braked and dissipated by friction against the collapsing crop before it had time to move laterally. I had to imagine this because, like Dave Langford, I assumed that a whirlwind would otherwise leave a track.

However, unlike Mr Langford, I decided to look into the matter more deeply (not trusting newspaper versions of expert opinion), rather than to make assumptions based on dramatic newsreel footage of tornados and half-remembered hydrodynamics lectures. Just a few minutes of zealous zetetic searching unearthed interesting information. For instance, in *Ways of the Air* (R. Pilkington, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), there is described a miniature whirlwind (18 inches in diameter) which remained steady over a small pine seedling and tore it to pieces. Yet more impressive, in *Les Bases de la Météorologie Dynamique* by Hildebrandsson and Teisserenc de Bort there is a description of a 'dust devil' in Cairo which remained stationary for 2 hours. It then began to move slowly (in response to a breeze and not of its own accord) and survived for a further 3.5 hours. This happened over desert sand; could it happen over crops? In *Environmental Dynamics* (R.S. Scorer, J. Wiley, 1978), it is pointed out that standing ripe corn is a good source of sensible heat.

But warm conditions are not essential. In *Physics of the Air* (W.J. Humphreys, Dover, 1964), are mentioned so-called 'whirlies', which occur in Antarctica. These are a few yards to 100 yards in diameter, with a sharp dividing line between hurricane-force winds and dead calm. They 'burrow downwards' towards the ground; just as I had already proposed for a hypothetical crop vortex.

Finally, on the subject of vortices in general, I came across several *theoretical* papers which considered the possible regular forms of stable cluster into which various numbers and types of vortex could arrange themselves.

So, perhaps I am conceivably wrong to dismiss neat clusters of discs as hoaxes. Also, some authorities hold that dust devils can be hollow; so perhaps I am wrong about the narrow ring-like circles as well. I am not suggesting that the isolated data above prove anything; that would be pseudoscientific. Nevertheless, they allow one to argue that the phenomenon requires careful evaluation. Particularly interesting would be information on its 'epidemiology'. When did it start, where etc.

May I urge skeptics not to base their opinions upon what they think they know in the comfort of their armchair. Get out and look!

David Fisher  
Cardiff

*From this exhortation we assume that David Fisher read the books on which he bases his opinions outside and either seated in an uncomfortable chair or standing up!—Eds.*

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