

Volume IV, No. 1

January/February 1990

The British & Irish  
**SKEPTIC**

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

*The 1989 Bent Spoon Award*

*Hypnosis: fact or fiction?*

*The Case for PSI*

— *John Beloff and John Maddox debate*

*Modern-day alchemy*

*Skeptical predictions for 1990*

*On the track of leylines*

£1.50

IR£1.70

---

<b>U.K. Skeptics</b>	Secretary: David Fisher, 27 Elderberry Road, Cardiff, CF5 3RG.
<b>Irish Skeptics</b>	P.O. Box 20, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland. Chairman: Peter O'Hara; Members: Frank Chambers, Michael Faragher, Jacqueline Helme, Johanne Powell.
<b>Manchester Skeptics</b>	P.O. Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH. Chairman: Dáve Love Treasurer: David Martin; Committee: Toby Howard, Dr Steve Donnelly, Frank Koval, Jack Steel, Mike Rutter, Jon Schofield, Alan Ings.
<b>London Student Skeptics</b>	Mike Howgate, Department of Biology, University College, London WC1E 6BT.
<b>Wessex Skeptics</b>	Robin Allen, Department of Physics, Southampton University, Highfield, Southampton, SO9 5NH.
<b>Campaign Against Health Fraud</b>	Box CAHF, London WC1N 3XX.
<b>CSICOP</b>	The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, Box 226, Buffalo, New York, USA.

---

<b>Electronic mail</b>	The Skeptics' Electronic Mail (email) network is coordinated by Dave Love (skeptics-request@uk.ac.daresbury).
<b>Prometheus Books Skeptical Inquirer</b>	UK Distributor: Michael Hutchinson, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.

---

ISSN 0955-6575

The *British & Irish Skeptic* relies heavily on readers' contributions of articles, ideas, letters, and newspaper clippings, etc. Please mark clippings clearly with the name of the publication and the date. Articles and comments may be reprinted only by permission of the original author; however such permission is automatically granted for all in-house material (that unsigned or signed by the editors) to the publications of national or regional groups recognised by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), including those of CSICOP itself. U.K. subscription rates (six issues) are £10 per year (see back page for overseas rates). Any additional donations to the *British & Irish Skeptic* or any of the regional committees will be most gratefully accepted and directed to the appropriate destination.

---

<p>We depend on our readers to keep us informed! Our thanks for sending clippings for this issue go to John Yates, Jennifer Bradshaw, David Fisher, Mavis Howard, Tim Pearce, Chris Torrero, Tom Ruffles, Earnest Jackson, Mike Hutchinson, Nick Pope, Austin Moulden, Jim Lippard, Bill Penny, and Chris Wright.</p>
---

# CONTENTS

---

Vol. IV, No. 1: January/February 1990

4	<b>Hits and Misses</b> Steve Donnelly
7	<b>Hypnosis and the Occult</b> H.B. Gibson
12	<b>What is Hypnosis?</b> Lewis Jones
15	<b>A Skeptical Quiz</b> Peter Popper
15	<b>The Myth of Leylines</b> Medawc Williams
16	<b>Romancing the Stone</b> Tom Ruffles
17	<b>Predictions for 1990</b> Marjorie Mackintosh
	<b>This House Believes in Ghosts</b>
18	<b>The Case For PSI</b> John Beloff
21	<b>The Case Against PSI</b> John Maddox
23	<b>Skeptic at Large</b> Wendy Grossman
24	<b>Psychic Diary</b> Toby Howard
25	<b>Heaven and Earth</b> Michael Hutchinson
26	<b>The First Annual Bent Spoon Award</b>
26	<b>New Skeptical Groups</b>
27	<b>Reviews</b>
31	<b>Letters</b>

---

**Editors:** Dr Steve Donnelly and Toby Howard

Thanks to Mary McDerby for typing, and to Gaynor Donnelly, Jane Bousfield and Dave Love for proofreading.

The *British & Irish Skeptic* is published bimonthly from P.O. Box 475, Manchester, M60 2TH, U.K. 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

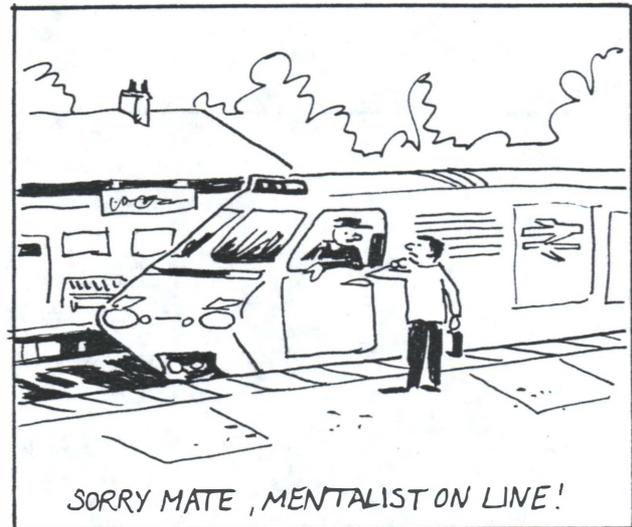
## Aliens

Despite the rapprochement between East and West since Mikhail Gorbachev took power in the USSR, some significant differences of opinion remain. Take aliens for example. Since the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* achieved spectacular box office success in 1977 we have been steadily moving towards a sort of Western Standard Extraterrestrial (WSE), similar in appearance to the aliens featured at the end of the film. UFO abductees all over the United States are now having odd experiences with creatures four and a half feet tall with somewhat triangular faces and large slanted eyes. But the Soviets have not seen *Close Encounters* nor have they had the pleasure of reading Whitley Strieber's best selling work of 'non-fiction' *Communion* which features a WSE on the front cover. It is this cultural deprivation which presumably accounts for a report by TASS on 9 October of pin-headed aliens, 13 feet tall at large in the town of Voronezh. In TASS's own words: 'A large shining ball or disc was seen hovering above the park. Then it landed, a hatch opened and 1, 2 or 3 creatures similar to humans and a small robot came out. The aliens were three or even four meters tall, but with very small heads, witnesses say'. Contrary to opinions expressed in the British media this is not the first time that the serious TASS has reported UFO stories. In fact since June of this year at least half a dozen such stories have been carried by the agency and according to an Associated Press report by John Thor Dahlburg on 10 August topics such as UFOs, ESP and the occult are getting more and more exposure in the Soviet media since the introduction of *glasnost* despite the firmly materialistic ideology of the ruling communist party.

As a final note I should like to request of all would-be close encounterers and UFO abductees that here in the British Isles we resist the cultural imperialism of both the USA and the USSR and produce our own alien stereotype. Perhaps something along the lines of the Mekon, so bravely fought off by Dan Dare in the 1950s would be appropriate.

## Train stopper

Staying in the Soviet Union for just a moment, a tragic event involving one of the country's growing number of psychic healers and mentalists occurred at the end of the summer. The daily newspaper *Sovitskaya Rossiya* on 1 October reported that investigators looking into the death of psychic, E. Frenkel,



who jumped in front of a freight train in the city of Astrakhan, found the answer to the riddle of his mysterious death in a briefcase which he had left by the side of the track. Frenkel believed that he could stop the motion of vehicles by the power of his mind alone: 'First I stopped a bicycle, cars and a streetcar. Now I'm going to stop a train' wrote Frenkel in notes found by investigators. He felt that stopping a train would be the ultimate test of his psychic powers. —It was.

## Exclusive Beliefs

Not everyone has a particular affinity for computers and some people feel downright intimidated by them but a Christian sect known as the *Exclusive Brethren* takes a rather stronger line according to a report in the *Guardian* on 5 October. Members of the sect were pressing for a meeting with John MacGregor, the Education Secretary, to demand that their children in state schools be exempted from compulsory teaching about computers. The *Brethren* believe that computers are 'a scientific imitation which rivals what God has put into living persons making man increasingly independent of God and leading to infidelity'. Their concern is not restricted to computers as they also regard television as the work of the devil and demand that their children be permitted to leave the classroom if any new technological appliance is switched on. However the *Independent* on 24 October reported that their demands have been refused by the government. Angela Rumbold, the schools minister said, in response to a Commons question, that no group of parents has the right to withdraw children from secular lessons in state schools on the grounds of religion or conscience.

## The Wall

If you were under the impression that the dismantling of the Berlin Wall resulted from a thawing of

the relationship between East and West an article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 16 November will put you straight. In fact, the real reason for this welcome event was a series of conjunctions between Saturn and Neptune according to cuddly (*chacun à son gout*) psychic astrologer, Russell Grant. In the *Telegraph's* Peterborough column, Britain's favourite syndicated soothsayer claimed that he first predicted the event on the programme *TV AM* a full year ago: 'I said that 1989 would see the sweeping away of old regimes'—quite clearly an unambiguous reference to the Berlin Wall!

Whilst we're on the subject of predictions, I feel I should point out that the *British & Irish Skeptic's* resident seer, Marjorie Mackintosh (see her predictions for 1990 on page 17), last year was extremely accurate in her prediction for December 1989. She wrote that, in this month, 'No earthquakes will occur in California'. In the slightly oblique language of all clairvoyants this was quite obviously a reference to the major earthquake which occurred in *October!*

## Geller sues Randi

Uri Geller, the Israeli conjurer who, in the 1970s, convinced an awful lot of people that he had paranormal powers, has been in and out of the newspapers since that time. At the height of his popularity, in 1974, the *Daily Mail* conducted a poll of its readers asking them whether Geller had psychic powers and 95% responded 'yes'. (On reflection this could be more of a comment on *Daily Mail* readers than on Geller's popularity!) Although media interest in Geller has somewhat diminished since this time, stories about his 'powers' surface regularly in both national and local media. For instance in 1988 the *Sunday Times* ran the headline 'Did Uri Bend the Will of Gorbachev?' referring to the fact that Geller was present in Geneva during the 1987 arms negotiations and was telepathically broadcasting messages of peace to the participants. In the same period, the *Manchester Evening News* ran a story on Geller's claims to have worked for the CIA, helping them get information from defectors by telepathy. There have also been articles about his being engaged by an Australian company to dowse for minerals.

Throughout all this period, one man has been extremely unimpressed by Geller's claims and demonstrations. In 1975, James Randi published his book *The Magic of Uri Geller* in which he exposed the various 'Geller effects' as mere conjuring tricks and arguably this book was at least in part responsible for the subsequent decline in media interest in the psychic spoon bender from Tel-Aviv. Although letters which Randi received from Geller's lawyer prior to publication of the book threatened a libel writ if the book contained anything untrue about Geller (or two scientists who tested him), no libel writ was issued—a

tacit acknowledgement that Randi's exposé of Geller was true.

All of which makes an article in the *News of the World* on 5 November seem rather curious. The article reported that Geller is suing Randi for £45 million, not over allegations of fraudulent spoon bending but, in part, over a purported statement by Randi that a scientist, taken in by Geller, had tested Geller's powers and found them baffling and had subsequently shot himself in dishonour. The scientist in question is presumably Professor Wilbur Franklin, a metallurgist at Kent State University who had been initially convinced that a ring, fractured by Geller could not have been fractured by normal means. In fact, he later acknowledged that the 'paranormal' fracture was just a bad brazing job. Franklin died soon afterwards and Geller claims to have obtained proof that the man died from cardio-respiratory failure and not self-inflicted gunshot wounds. What is entirely unclear in the *News of the World* article is how this forms the basis of a libel writ by Geller against Randi.

Still Geller must know what he is doing. The man is psychic after all!

## Channellers Banned?

Astrologers and mediums in the Channel Islands are concerned that a scheduled telephone 'Horoscope Hotline' may breach 'anti-psychic' legislation which was enacted in Jersey eighteen months ago. *Psychic News* on 11 November reported that the legislation, which forbids the practice of clairvoyance and astrology for financial gain, has meant that astrologers and mediums who used to work on the island are now 'not earning any money at all'. Jersey's mediums have, however, formed the 'Ring of Spiritual Enlightenment' to fight the ban. Diane Postlethwaite, the island's best known medium is quoted as saying 'We are determined. We are going to the Court of Human rights.' And what about the Court of Spirit Rights to plead on behalf of all those Channel Islanders on the 'other side' who are being denied their rights of free speech?

## Dowers in their Dotage

There is perhaps some cosmic significance to the fact that when I looked up the word *dowse* in my thesaurus my eyes skipped across a column giving me the number for the word *dotage* instead. The synonyms I came up with were, thus, words such as senility, senescence, decrepitude and second childhood. Now whilst I, in no way, wish to imply that any of these terms apply to any particular dowser it certainly seems to me that many dowers are not exactly in the first bloom of youth either (the mailbag will undoubtedly be full of irate letters from adolescent water-witchers within a week or so!) And although many people, of my

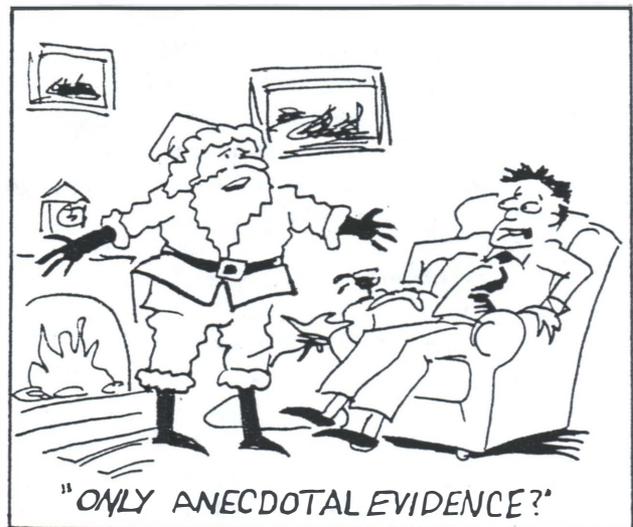
acquaintance, regard dowsing as one of the more 'scientific' of paranormal claims it is very educational to discover the large kitbag of odd beliefs which dowzers often carry around as part of their mental baggage.

The *Independent* on 23 October ran a half page article on Elizabeth Sullivan, a charming elderly lady who was interviewed in *Midweek* on BBC Radio 4 the following week. Mrs Sullivan's beliefs extend way beyond those in her ability simply to detect underground water. For instance, she carries around with her a bottle of *Dr Bach's Rescue Remedy*. This mixture of brandy and plant extracts has remarkable powers including those of reviving the dead. 'You can do the most amazing things with it. Young buzzards fly along my drive and sometimes one of them will hit my car, and I'll get out and it's absolutely dead. I'll open its beak and slip in a drop of *Rescue Remedy*. Within minutes it's up and away'. She also talks of mysterious 'black lines', one of which runs through her driveway: 'If you sleep on a bed with a black line under it it's exactly as if you're next door to an X-ray machine without a lead guard'.

Mrs Sullivan does not of course only divine water, she is also an experienced map dowser and the *Independent* article deals at some length with an incident in which she dowsed a stolen carriage clock actually being driven along the M5 to Bristol—a very impressive achievement. And fortunately Libby Purves on *Midweek* revealed the details which the newspaper article left out. The carriage clock was dowsed using its key which had been left behind by the burglar and Mrs Sullivan was able to identify its location as a house in a nearby village. Of course, the local constabulary, in their unimaginative way, were unwilling to search the house on the basis of such flimsy evidence. However, some days later the ever-vigilant Mrs Sullivan was once more map dowsing when she again detected the clock, this time in motion along the M5 towards Bristol. Like an air traffic controller using his radar to track an aeroplane, Mrs Sullivan followed the clock all the way to a particular area of Bristol but her map was not of a sufficiently high resolution to identify the exact building. Nonetheless, judicious use of the Bristol Yellow Pages directory revealed that there was a pawnbroker's shop in this area.

Unfortunately, after all this first-rate psychic detective work the uncooperative owner of the clock refused to go to the pawnbroker's, claiming that it was a very common type of clock which he would never be able to identify with certainty. But then who needs verification when psychic powers are involved? And that, folks, unbelievably is the end of the story! In psychic terms, a remarkable hit, judged of sufficient interest by a newspaper editor and a radio producer to feature in a half page article and a ten minute live interview.

So the next time you talk to your friendly neighbourhood dowser, get him or her off the 'scientific' subject of dowsing for water and onto far more interesting topics such as 'black' lines, life-giving brandy and psychic detective work!



## Santa Claus

All over the world, at this time of the year witnesses report sightings of a red garbed figure often propelled through the air by unorthodox means. Although the substance of such reports is difficult to accept in its entirety there is such a wealth of reliable information that even skeptics have been forced to admit that there must be some underlying reality to the claims. Jaime Runtles, director of investigations of BUBFMA (the British Unexplained Bearded Fat Man Association) has written in her book *The Santa Conspiracy* that 'The time has come to remove this matter from the province of the Christmas card and the children's book shop. The time has come to treat the evidence for Santa Claus with due respect, to debate it as we would debate any other issue subjected to a massive policy of obscurity.' Santa Freeman, an American unclear physicist (who changed his first name from Ebenezer as an indication of the sincerity of his belief of the reality of this phenomenon) is convinced that the American government is engaged in a mammoth conspiracy to hide the truth from its citizens: 'I have obtained eyewitness testimony that in 1947 government officials recovered the wreck of an anti-gravity machine, entangled in which were the remains of a red-snouted quadruped,' claimed Dr Freeman in an exclusive interview with *Flying Sleigh Review* last month. *British and Irish Skeptic* readers are urged to treat this phenomenon seriously but to avoid panicking if confronted by a vision of a burly, white-bearded figure in the fireplace over the holiday period. There is every chance that this will simply be an illusion of the hypnopompic, hypnagogic (or alcoholic) variety. But just in case it isn't, we suggest that, for protection, readers chant the Buddhist mantra 'All right, what have you got in your sack for me, Fat Man?'

... And a Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year to all our readers.

---

Dr Steve Donnelly is a physicist, a lecturer in electronic and electrical engineering, a committee member of the Manchester Skeptics and the UK Skeptics, and co-editor of the *British & Irish Skeptic*.

---

*There has of late been considerable controversy in the psychological and skeptical literature regarding the nature of the hypnotic state. In the following two articles Dr H.B. Gibson and Lewis Jones present their contrasting viewpoints of this complex issue.*

# Hypnosis and the Occult

H.B. Gibson

Many people, even with a quite educated background, still believe that hypnotism (or hypnosis as it is generally referred to nowadays) has something to do with the occult. When some people hear that I practise hypnosis, and research into it, they give some such response as 'What, you actually do this sort of thing and it works?' When they say 'this sort of thing' they wave their fingers in the air with a stroking motion which indicates the confusion in their minds, and indicates the main sources from which they have derived their stereotype of hypnosis.

Hypnosis has got nothing whatsoever to do with the occult, with parapsychology, with spiritualism, or with the huge body of confused belief that James Randi has so appropriately characterized as 'flim-flam'. This, of course, will be hotly contested by many enthusiastic practitioners and believers in the latter, and they have their own folk-lore of how telepathy, psychokinesis and such-like magic wonders can be assisted by hypnotizing their subjects. Let me first examine the basis for this belief and why even some seemingly educated people wave their fingers in the air when hypnosis is mentioned.

Towards the end of the 18th Century, Anton Mesmer, a Viennese physician, came to Paris and opened salons where he and his followers practised what they called 'animal magnetism', an art that had a notable success with people suffering from various disorders, notably those of a hysterical and psychosomatic variety. Mesmer's thesis was not entirely original, but he brought it up to date by expressing it in the more scientific terms of the Enlightenment which superseded the religious terms of a previous age. What he practised was very much like the exorcism of religious healers like Father Gassner who had preceded him. He maintained that there was a universal fluid that he called 'animal magnetism', with which he and other favoured cognoscenti were richly endowed, and that they could convey it to their patients (whose animal magnetism was deficient and deranged). The waving of the fingers in the air relates to the supposed 'magnetization' of patients by followers of Mesmer—mesmerists. The illustration on the next page shows a 19th Century artist's impression of how a mesmerist

operated, but it is quite inaccurate since the 'passes' were made either in light contact with the subject's body, or very close. The stroking movement was after the model of stroking an iron bar with a steel magnet, and thus conveying the property of magnetism to the former from the latter.

Space does not permit the complexities of the career of Mesmer or an adequate account of the early mesmeric movement to be outlined here, but it must suffice to note that in the first half of the 19th Century there was a flourishing mesmeric movement in most of the European countries and in the U.S.A. This is dealt with in considerable historical detail by Ellenberger (1970) in his voluminous work, and in my own introductory text (Gibson, 1977) I try to trace the connections between mesmerism and occultism. Mesmeric procedure certainly did have a beneficial effect on many sick people, and some eminent doctors, such as John Elliotson, embraced it. He introduced it into his practice at University College Hospital, an enthusiasm that eventually forced him to resign because of the opposition of the medical Establishment. Almost any practice, however weird, will have a beneficial effect if it is applied by prestigious doctors and believed in by trusting patients. This is the well-known placebo mechanism. However, mesmerism did have one undeniable property when applied in certain circumstances to some susceptible people: it attenuated or abolished the perception of pain. This could have brought very significant benefits if it had been widely applied in the early 19th Century before the introduction of chemical anaesthetics such as ether and chloroform in the 1840s. This use of mesmerism evoked the most extreme forms of scepticism and disbelief, and it is only now in the late 20th Century can we begin to understand how it probably worked, owing to the scientific researches into clinical pain, notably those of Melzack and Wall (1966) whose Gate Control Theory of pain has had wide repercussions. One may cite an animal analogy. A variety of animal species can be put into a state of 'tonic immobility' by gently stroking and immobilizing them, and in this state it has been established that they do not react to stimuli that normally cause pain. According to some recent researchers (e.g., Carli, 1976), the



Wellcome Institute Library London

endorphin system is evoked in this manipulation of the animal, and hence it feels no pain. It would be rash to assume that the 'mesmeric trance' in so complex a species as the human is precisely the same as tonic immobility in other animal species, but at least it provides a plausible model. Good accounts of how mesmerism, in the later period, was actually applied, are given by Deleuze (1837) and by Esdaile (1852), and interested readers are referred to these original sources and warned that some contemporary writers are shockingly inaccurate in their descriptions of it.

But the mesmerists did not stop at producing painless surgical operations and trying to treat disease. Many of them believed that they were possessed of miraculous power and were capable of producing all sorts of psychological and physical wonders. The mesmeric movement attracted every sort of crank, charlatan, and believer in the occult. Using the sloppy sort of methods of inquiry that have always characterized the parapsychology movement, they convinced the gullible and sometimes themselves, that they could teach people to see without the use of their eyes, transfer thoughts, prophesy the future and perform other forms of magic. Consequently, the pillars of orthodox medicine seized upon this all too blatant display of flim-flam, and refused to believe in some quite genuine cases in which severe surgical operations had been conducted painlessly. When Dr Elliotson tried to present the case of a man whose leg had been painlessly amputated with the aid of mesmerism, many of his colleagues refused to listen, and one of them facetiously inquired if the man had yet been taught to read with the back of his neck, as this was a feat that other mesmerists had claimed.

But all sceptical doctors in the early 19th Century

were not so implacably unbelieving. Sir John Forbes (1845), although utterly contemptuous of the parapsychological aspect of the mesmeric movement and concerned to expose its charlatanry, gave a fair consideration to the considerable evidence that mesmerism was a genuine phenomenon and capable of producing an impressive degree of anaesthesia in certain circumstances. Testimony from such critics as Forbes is far more impressive than that from enthusiasts such as Elliotson.

#### Hypnotism is not mesmerism

In stating quite categorically that hypnotism should be distinguished from mesmerism I am aware that I differ in this from some quite eminent theorists. The difference is well put by Stam and Spanos in the following passage:

the concept of hypnosis is, at best, vague and ambiguous and many of the behaviours associated with this label have changed quite substantially over the years ... For most investigators the term 'hypnosis' refers to an ill-defined altered state of consciousness, the characteristics of which have never been clearly denoted or agreed upon ... Moreover, there is little agreement as to variables that are necessary and sufficient for producing an hypnotic state. For historical reasons most investigators employ hypnotic inductions that consist primarily of verbal suggestions for relaxation and sleep ... Some (Sheehan and Perry, 1976) argue that the largely non-verbal 'passes' made by Mesmer and his followers were variations of hypnotic induction procedures.' (Stam and Spanos, 1982, pages 14-15).

As I see it, we have much to gain in reserving the term mesmerism for the procedures that were fully described by the more literate of the 19th Century mesmerists. It should be noted that these procedures relied on non-verbal manipulations, sometimes lasting for hours, and producing an unresponsive torpid state much resembling tonic immobility. By contrast, hypnotism is essentially a verbal procedure, the hypnotist suggesting ideas to the subject, and working upon the latter's powers of imagination, to produce a state that may be very responsive and active, and, when well developed, has traditionally been called 'somnambulism'.

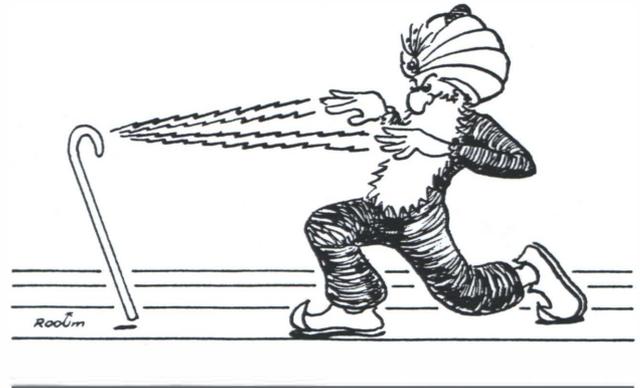
We need not pursue the question of the differences between mesmerism and hypnotism any further here, except to observe that the two may exist coincidentally. An illustration in George Du Maurier's famous novel *Trilby* shows Svengali making manual passes in the air in front of the girl, but he is also murmuring 'Maintenant, dors ma mignonne', thus using a blend of mesmerism (inaccurately portrayed) and hypnotism—the verbal suggestion of sleep. Some mesmerists undoubtedly used a measure of verbal suggestion, working on their subjects' powers of

suggestibility and fantasy, as well as immobilizing them and lulling them with long-continued, rhythmic passes. What is evident, however, is that the evil reputation that was acquired by the mesmerists, a reputation for charlatanism and claiming occult powers, became attached to those who practised and investigated hypnotism from the earliest times.

Historically, the earliest hypnotist in the 19th Century, in the sense of employing verbal suggestions to induce psychological changes, was the Abbé de Faria whose book, published in 1819, rejected the whole mesmeric flim-flam of animal magnetism and sought to establish a sound psychological basis for his discoveries in hypnosis. However it is to James Braid, a Scottish physician working in Manchester, that we owe the term 'hypnotism'. At first he thought that the phenomena he induced were due to sheerly neurological mechanisms, and because of his 'scientific' stance and rejection of the mesmeric claims, he received a sympathetic hearing in at least some respectable medical circles. Later, he realized that really the hypnotic phenomena were due to psychological mechanisms, the suggestions of the hypnotist affecting a change in the state of consciousness of the subject. His ideas were later taken up in France, and the patronage of such ideas by prestigious figures such as the great neurologist Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, and Bernheim at Nancy, made the topic of hypnosis relatively respectable in the medical and scientific world. But the mesmerists clung to their occult beliefs. At the International Conference on Magnetism in 1889 they emphasised that their master was the long-dead Mesmer, and that magnetism should not be confused with hypnotism.

#### Reasons for ultra-scepticism about hypnosis

When I was a lecturer in Psychology at Hatfield Polytechnic I continued my researches in hypnosis, researches I had begun in the 1950's at the Institute of Psychiatry. It was interesting to see the degree to which the public image of hypnosis had improved over the years and how the subject was gaining acceptance in orthodox Psychology. Yet even so I still had fingers waved in the air by people who should have known better. At one time the rumour went round that I was conducting experiments in telepathy, and hence I had some difficulty in persuading a few students that I had no time for parapsychology mularky, and that I would not steal their minds away if they consented to be my subjects for hypnosis experiments. It occurred to me, however, that in some quarters the misunderstanding was not wholly unintentional, for if you are engaged on boring experiments messing around with computers, or trying to get students to participate in dull experiments in psychophysics, a colleague engaged in highly interesting experiments in hypnosis excites envy. The students are only too willing to participate, so can it be wholly respectable? Does it not smell of the parapsychology game, ouija boards

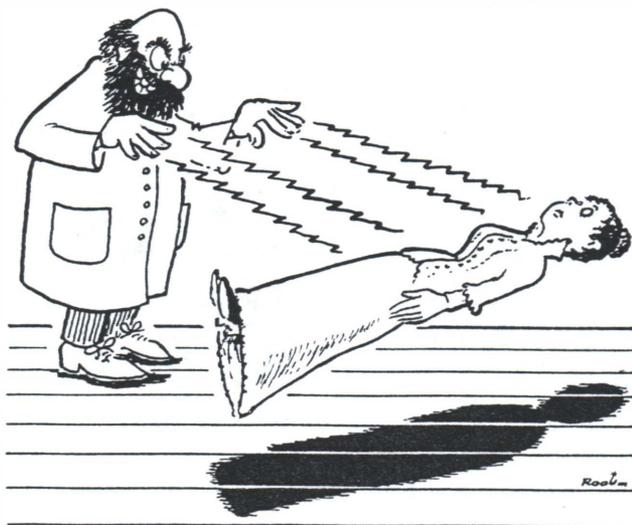


and table-turning?

It occurs to me that other psychologists have also encountered this difficulty. The great experimental psychologist Clark Hull made valuable advances in the investigation of hypnosis and suggestibility in the 1920s, yet when he obtained a new professorial chair at Yale, he had to give up his work in hypnosis research because of the extreme prejudice against the subject there. Hull wrote:

Such, in brief, is the history of hypnotism. All sciences alike have descended from magic and superstition, but none has been so slow as hypnosis in shaking off the evil associations of its origin. (Hull, 1933).

Some practitioners of clinical hypnosis, of course, do not want to shake off the legacy of the past with all the associations with mesmerism and the occult, as they wish to appear as miracle-workers and mystery men. One such practitioner, who now has a huge and prosperous posthumous following in the 'New Age', was an American psychiatrist of the name of Milton Erickson. The late Dr Erickson rivalled the late Ron Hubbard in his pretensions, and followed the practice of Anton Mesmer in wearing purple, the colour of emperors and magicians ('Principle 1. Wear lots of purple. All good Ericksonians know that it was Milton's favourite colour because he was colour-blind except for purple. Also, all legitimate books on Erickson are bound in purple', Chamberlain, 1988). Many academic psychologists, anxious to pursue a respectable career in experimental psychology, have reacted and over-reacted to the supposed overtones of occultism in modern hypnosis, and leaned over backwards in their declared scepticism, so that many lay people are wondering whether the very topic of hypnosis is merely a con, and whether the concept should be relegated along with telepathy, psychic spoon-bending, dowsing, and a lot else, to the world of the flim-flam. Thus Hearne (1982) argues that hypnosis is an umbrella term covering a whole range of known psychological phenomena, and that the concept has no scientific utility so the term should be abandoned. His main plank is that, in the psychological laboratory,



by means of 'task motivating instructions', we can get students to do the same things and report the same things without hypnosis as with hypnosis. Another name for 'task motivating instructions' is 'intimidation'. This really relates to some old psychological experiments by Asch (1958) who showed that if you rigged the laboratory situation sufficiently you could compel many laboratory subjects to deny the evidence of their senses and report just about anything you wanted them to report, and the experiments of Milgram (1963) in which some fairly normal people were intimidated into *doing* some highly abnormal things in the supposed infliction of pain on others.

Such experimenters do not face the fact that people may say and do the same things for totally different reasons. A student may report that he felt no pain in a laboratory experiment either (a) because a negative hallucination for pain had been induced by hypnotic suggestion; or (b) because he'll get in the professor's bad books if he does admit that it hurt a bit, and thus spoil the professor's hypothesis.

It should be noted that although Hearne, writing in 1982, supported his article by 15 published studies, none of them is later than 1967, with the exception of two articles by himself and with a colleague. His paper was old hat. The peak of this ultra-scepticism came at the end of the 1960s with the publication of a book by T.X. Barber (1969). Barber was, at that time, the Big Bad Wolf of the hypnosis world, the Ultra Skeptic No. 1. He has softened since, and twenty years later seems to admit that hypnosis is, after all, a useful concept.

But there have been many contenders for the mantle of Barber and the title of the Ultra Skeptic No. 1. Graham Wagstaff, an ex-collaborator of Hearne's, published a book in which hypnosis was more or less equated with compliance, and in his book he cited T.X. Barber 213 times! Wagstaff's book is interesting in that he presents his case like a very good barrister presenting a highly dubious case, yet seeking to implant in the minds of the jury sufficient suspicion that will eventually be developed into certainty that the accused was (or was not) guilty. With regard to

compliance, early in the book he writes:

In this chapter examples have been given to illustrate the importance of compliance in determining hypnotic behaviours. However, as the final study seems to indicate, there appears to be more to certain reports by some subjects than compliance; it appears that some subjects may genuinely believe themselves to be, or to have been, in a special condition or state of 'hypnosis'. (Wagstaff, 1982, page 55.)

Of course these subjects are mistaken about themselves, Wagstaff proceeds to show, for as he sees things, there is no such thing as a special condition or state of 'hypnosis'. And having given this cautious caveat, he goes on throughout the book to demonstrate that all the phenomena of hypnosis could be explained in terms of compliance, and so the ultra-sceptical layman who thinks that the hypnotic subject is just doing as he is told, may well be right!

The latest contender for the mantle of Barber (1969) and the title of the Ultra Skeptic No. 1 is Nicholas Spanos at Carleton University. Spanos has even gone the length of devising his own scale for measuring hypnotic responsiveness—there were already quite a few well-known and widely used modern scales published, but they did not suit Spanos' special requirements. And what are these requirements? Let me quote a published commentary on Spanos' creation, the Carleton University Responsiveness to Suggestions Scale (CURSS):

Recently, Spanos and his associates introduced the Carleton University Responsiveness to Suggestion Scale (CURSS; Spanos et al 1983c,d) ... While the CURSS clearly taps the domain of hypnosis to some degree, it also tends to define hypnosis in terms of the subject's willingness to cooperate with the procedures rather than in terms of subjective experience, as is characteristic of the Stanford scales. (Kihlstrom, 1985, page 387; emphasis added).

Enough said. Recently Spanos contributed an article to the *Skeptical Inquirer* (Spanos, 1987–88) in the course of which he set out his own theory of hypnosis and made what were, to my mind, certain misstatements of fact. I therefore wrote to the SI pointing out that another writer had correctly identified at least seven other respected theories of hypnosis that are accepted by the scientific community, and that Spanos' theory was not the only acceptable one, as readers might suppose. I also called attention to a mis-statement of fact that he had written, and pointing out that the position that he takes 'has finally been abandoned by most serious research scientists'. My letter (Gibson, 1988) was published alongside a reply from Spanos, in the course of which he writes,

'According to Gibson, this position has been abandoned "by most significant research scientists". Unfortunately Gibson never tells us who these scientists are or what evidence led them to abandon this position'. Unfortunately it would take up many pages of space to name all these scientists, and to cite all the published studies; indeed many significant scientists researching in the field of hypnosis, have never held this position in the first place. However, it is up to me to let readers know just who the scientists are and where their arguments can be read in a concise form, if readers are interested. Fortunately, this task is easy. I would refer readers to the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 9, pp. 449-502; (1987) 10, pp. 519-529; pp. 773-76; (1988) 11, pp. 712-714. Spanos writes the initial article, but this is followed in the same issue of the journal by no less than 22 contributions from other scientists, some of them highly critical of Spanos' work, and charging him with failure to cite all the relevant evidence, and themselves providing many additional references relevant to the controversy that Spanos had not mentioned. The controversy continued in the 1987 and 1988 issues of the journal that I have mentioned, 12 more protagonists leaping into the fray!

### The dangers of ultra-scepticism

I am a highly sceptical person myself, and concerned about all the rubbish, codswallop, half-truths and sheer lies about hypnosis that the public is being fed with, mostly by interested people who aim to make a living out of it by preserving the occult aura that has bedevilled it for so long. Why then, should I object to the ultra-sceptics' efforts to de-bunk it completely out of existence? As I see it, by leaning too far over backwards and reinforcing the view held by some laymen that 'It's all a con', they do, in fact, play into the hands of those who are anti-science and gleefully proclaim that as scientists can't agree, maybe the occultists were right and it's all a question of mysterious fluids of animal magnetism. I do not claim that we know all about hypnosis; I have been researching in the area for thirty years and there are still mysteries about it that still amaze me, but I also know that considerable progress has been made by applying the methods of natural science in its investigation, and I am optimistic enough to expect that we shall continue to make progress.

In my experience, I have found that some people who take a really way-out, ultra-sceptical stance on certain issues, in the teeth of reasonable evidence, are suffering from intellectual and emotional insecurity, and the fear that if they admitted the existence of certain phenomena that cannot be fully explained, some dreadful supernatural bogey might jump out at them and dissipate their tenuous hold on reason. In the case of hypnosis, knowing their own propensity for abject compliance, they may fear that some evil Svengali figure may get them in his power some day, and

really put the fluence on them. I do not object to the brand of scepticism displayed say, by James Randi and his like, for such sceptics merely offer a more reasonable explanation of the observed data than do those who, for example, when observing a professional entertainer bending a teaspoon, prefer to maintain that it is all done by psychic power.

Let me end by quoting the great ex-Ultra Sceptic No. 1, T.X. Barber, who ended his 1969 book thus:

Although research in 'hypnosis' promises to provide a broader understanding of human behavior, the reverse is also true—as psychologists working on other topics develop general principles, their principles should help us attain a deeper understanding of the topic 'hypnosis'. Finally, the topic 'hypnosis' may lose all of its aura, mystery, and separate status and become integrated into general psychology. (Barber, 1969, page 242).

I agree with him there.

### References

- Asch, S.E. (1958), Effects of group pressure upon modification and distortion of judgements. In E.E. MacCoby & E.L. Hartley (Eds.) *Readings in Social Psychology*, (3rd Edition) New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston. Barber, T.X. (1969), *Hypnosis: A Scientific Approach*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. Chamberlain, L. (1988), How to be an Ericksonian (Milton not Erik). *Swedish J. Hypnosis*, 15, 128-130. Carli, G. (1978), Animal hypnosis and pain. In F.H. Frankel & H.S. Zamaniski (Eds.) *Hypnosis at Its Bicentennial*, New York: Plenum Press. Deleuze, J.P.F. (1937), *Practical Instructions in Animal Magnetism*, (Trans. T.S. Harshorn) Providence R.I.: B. Cranston & Co. Ellenberger, H.F. (1970), *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. New York: Basic Books. Elliotson, J. (1843), *Numerous Cases of Surgical Operations Without Pain in the Mesmeric State*, London: H. Bailliere. Esdaile, J. (1952), *The Introduction of Mesmerism as an anaesthetic and Curative Agent into the Hospitals of India*, Perth: Dewar & Sons. Forbes, J. (1845), *Mesmerism True—Mesmerism False*, London: J. Churchill. Gibson, H.B. (1977), *Hypnosis: Its Nature and Therapeutic Uses*, London: Peter Owen. Gibson, H.B. (1988), Understanding hypnosis. *Skeptical Inquirer*, 13, pp. 106-107. Hearne, K. (1982), A cool look at nothing special. *Nursing Mirror*, 20 January Hull, C.L. (1933), *Hypnosis and Suggestibility: An Experimental Approach*, New York: Appleton Century Crofts. Kihlstrom, J.F. (1985), Hypnosis. *Ann. Rev. Psychol.*, 36, pp. 385-418. Melzack, R. & Wall, P. (1966), Pain mechanisms: a new theory, *Science*, 150, pp. 971-979. Milgram, S. (1963), Behavioral study of obedience. *J. Abnorm. Soc. Psychol.*, 67, 371-378. Spanos, N.P. (1987-88), Past-life hypnotic regression: A critical review. *Skeptical Inquirer*, 22, 174-180. Stam, H.J. & Spanos, N.P. (1982), The Asclepian dream healings and hypnosis: a critique. *Int. J. Clin. Exper. Hypnosis*, 30, pp. 9-22. Wagstaff, G.P. (1982), *Hypnosis, Compliance, and Belief*, Brighton: The Harvester Press.

---

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

---

# What is Hypnosis?

Lewis Jones

Take statements like these: 'I don't remember where I heard that'; 'I've forgotten the word'; 'I don't know why I did that'; 'It doesn't hurt'; 'I've gone deaf'; 'I can't see it'; 'It's red'. There are two ways of finding out whether these statements are true. One is to simply ask the speaker, and believe whatever he says. The other is to sit down and figure out independent ways of getting at the truth.

Hypnosis is a case in point, and for my present purpose I intend to deliberately restrict my main references to one of the latest and largest offerings on the subject—*Hypnosis: the Cognitive-Behavioural Perspective*, edited by Nicholas P. Spanos and John F. Chaves (Prometheus Books 1989). This is because the book is available to the general public, and saves me from appending a list of references to professional journals that you won't have ready access to, and won't consult anyway. The book contains 19 papers in all, and the text is backed up by about 1500 references that you can chase up if you want to.

What is hypnosis? Spanos and Chaves point out that for most laypeople and many research workers and health care providers, it involves a trance, or at least an altered state of consciousness. It is brought on by some repetitive verbal rituals, known as an induction procedure. The person hypnotised becomes a passive automaton, and comes under the control of the hypnotist.

The vogue began with the German physician Anton Mesmer in the late 18th century. It became entwined with a range of other occult beliefs, and took on a new lease of life. And now here we are towards the end of the 20th century, with the American Psychological Association sheltering a fully-fledged Division of Psychological Hypnosis (are there other kinds?).

It is about 40 years now since T.R. Sarbin (one of this book's contributors) threw out the long-held belief in an 'altered state of consciousness.' And in the 1960s, T.X. Barber finally unsheathed the simple weapon that has been the death of so many groundless belief systems—the control group.

Usually one group was given a hypnotic induction procedure. A second group was asked to just imagine whatever was suggested to them. And a third group was simply urged to do their best to respond to suggestions.

'Hypnotised' subjects responded to suggestions for age regression, hallucination, amnesia, pain reduction, and so forth—but so did the controls. And those who were simply told 'Do your best' did just as well as those who were 'hypnotised.' (I'm afraid the word

'hypnotised' often has to go about with quotes acting as bodyguards.) Other workers soon found that nonhypnotic subjects also did as well in producing 'so called immoral, self-destructive, or criminal behaviour.' It turned out that all subjects knew perfectly well that they must be safe from harm, since they were aware they were taking part in experiments in an academic setting.

The subjects who showed up best in tests of hypnotic susceptibility were those who had been asked to *pretend* to be hypnotised. And hypnotic performance could be noticeably improved by some training. In other words, what had been thought of as a genetically-endowed susceptibility was in fact a skill that could be learned.

The fact is that hypnotic subjects know how hypnotic subjects are supposed to behave, and their general goal is 'to behave like a hypnotised person as this is continuously defined by the operator and understood by the subject.' (R.W. White) For many subjects, merely defining the situation as hypnosis results in them classifying everyday behaviours like arm-raising as 'involuntary.'

And T.X. Barber and D.S. Calverley made the amusing discovery that when a group of subjects were told that hypnosis was a test of gullibility, 'hypnotic responding was virtually nullified.'

When a subject is told that he will perform a certain action on cue, after 'waking up,' is that action really beyond his control? Thirteen subjects were told to scratch their ear when they heard the word 'psychology,' and they all did so. The hypnotist gave the impression that the experiment was over, and had an informal conversation with a colleague, in which the cue word was used. 9 of the subjects failed to respond. When the hypnotist then intimated that the experiment was still in progress, 7 of those 9 began responding again. Another experimenter found that all post-hypnotic responding stopped when he left the room, apparently to attend an emergency.

In a similar experiment, Spanos and his associates found that subjects all dutifully coughed when they heard the word 'psychology' in the experimental situation. But Spanos had arranged for a confederate to pose as a lost student asking for the *psychology* department. None of the subjects responded to the cue word.

I.F. Hoyt and J.F. Kihlstrom have concluded that 'posthypnotic information processing is no different than nonhypnotic information processing.' Subjects are sometimes given a posthypnotic suggestion that they will not remember certain key words. Do they



Mary Evans Picture Library

really forget these words? According to their verbal reports, they do. But according to their galvanic skin resistance, they don't. In another example, subjects are given a list of words to learn. They are then 'hypnotised,' and given another list to learn. This second list has been constructed so as to interfere with the recall of the first list. Some subjects are then given a posthypnotic amnesia suggestion to forget the second list. Other subjects are given no suggestion. When recall is tested later, subjects in both groups recall the first list at the same level. William C. Coe asks simply: 'Is their amnesia credible?'

Spanos and others found that between 40 and 63 per cent of their 'amnesic' subjects later admitted that they had suppressed their reports. Coe wonders: 'Perhaps we should wonder how many did not confess?' And he comments: 'The "skill" they employ is *not reporting*.' It is probably no surprise to learn that simulators are just as successful in employing this 'skill.' Furthermore, most amnesics will confess to remembering more and more of the 'forgotten' material under adequate pressure, 'to the extent that they have nothing left to remember when amnesia is lifted.'

Hypnotic deafness? If you get someone to read or speak into a microphone, and feed back the sound of his voice into headphones after a momentary time lag, his speech will become seriously disrupted, with slurring, hesitations, and stammering. Hypnotic subjects claiming to be deaf show the same disruptions. 'High-susceptible' subjects and 'low-susceptible' subjects have been told that they are deaf in one ear. Then pairs of words have been presented simultaneously, one member of the pair to each ear. Subjects should only be able to hear words presented to their 'good' ear. In fact both groups show the same number

of intrusions from the 'deaf' ear.

Colour blindness? When hypnotically colour-blind subjects are shown the Ishihara 'malingering' card, they report that they can't see the number that in fact can be seen by all genuinely red-green blind individuals.

Posthypnotic negative hallucinations? Hypnotically blind subjects continue to process the visual information they claim not to see.

There are a number of standard ways of reducing the effects of pain (e.g., self-distraction, placebos, relaxation, cognitive re-interpretation, positive imagery). Does hypnosis do a better job? Perhaps the best-known (and most often quoted) person to use mesmerism for surgical pain was the 19th-century physician John Esdaile. He reported thousands of minor surgical procedures as well as several hundred major surgical procedures. Medical workers in Austria, in France, and in the United States all tried to replicate his successes. They all failed. Like the acupuncture miracle-workers of China, Esdaile plied his trade in a distant clime (in his case, India)—'far from the din of skeptical colleagues' in the polite phrase of John F. Chaves. When the time came to investigate Esdaile's achievements, the Bengal government appointed a commission. Esdaile selected only ten patients for observation. Three were discarded because they appeared to be unresponsive to his techniques. One case was 'inconclusive.' Three showed 'convulsive movements of the upper limbs, writhing of the body, distortion of the features, giving the face a hideous expression of suppressed agony ...' The remaining three showed no outward sign of pain, though two of them showed erratic pulse rates. This was hardly the wonder anesthetic that everyone had been led to expect. Esdaile's tiny (and selective) sample did not take into account the wide variation in different people's ability to tolerate pain. More recent attempts to use hypnotic analgesia have suffered the same flaws that have ruined the claims for acupuncture analgesia: the treatment has almost always been accompanied by chemical anesthetics, sedation, or local anesthesia. In fact suggestions for reducing the perception of pain can be effective whether accompanied by hypnotic induction or not. And sadly, as Chaves points out, 'a recent review of significant developments in medical hypnosis over the past 25 years fails to cite a single report of hypno-analgesia ...' Joyce L. D'Eon reports that in childbirth, 'hypnotic procedures have failed to meet the grandiose claims that have sometimes been made for them.' Without the counter-check of a control group, it is all too easy to attribute an easy birth to the use of hypnosis, because 'anywhere from 9 to 24 per cent of women experience relatively painless childbirth without any intervention.'

Richard F.Q. Johnson asked 42 prominent researchers if they had ever tried to produce blisters by hypnotic suggestion. Seven said they had obtained positive results. But none had published their re-



Franz Anton Mesmer

sults, and they were very skeptical of their findings. They suspected that highly motivated subjects might secretly injure themselves to produce the results the hypnotist wanted. Nevertheless, further research is called for, especially comparing normal subjects with those who have a sensitive skin. After all, anxiety is associated with the production and intensity of other skin ailments, such as hives. Nearly all cases of religious stigmata can be explained in terms of deliberate self-injury. The bleedings are brought to the attention of the investigator only after they have begun, and it is almost impossible to keep a 24-hour watch on the individuals. Warts? If they are left untreated, they will generally go away of their own accord after two or three years. In a controlled study, 17 patients with warts on both sides of the body were given hypnotic induction, then told that the warts would disappear from one side of the body. Some warts did in fact go away—from both sides of the body. But any treatment that the patient believes in is likely to produce results just as dramatic as those claimed for hypnosis. Johnson summarises: ‘the skin may at times be strongly influenced by thinking and suggestion. Nevertheless, the precise relationship between verbal suggestion and changes in the skin has yet to be determined.’

Henderikus J. Stam reports: ‘The use of hypnosis for the treatment of cancer pain, like other psychological techniques for the treatment of this problem, has remained largely untested. The bulk of this literature is in the form of case reports.’ His conclusions offer little hope: ‘Where does this leave the literature on the treatment of cancer pain? More or less where it began, unfortunately. The lack of systematic studies and the continued exaggerated claims made for this technique have left it in scientific and therapeutic limbo.’

Where does the law stand in all this? In the case of K. Bianchi, the so-called Hillside Strangler, the Los Angeles courts gave a curious solidity to the spirit form known as hypnosis. The law ruled that testimony from hypnotised witnesses was not admissible in court. As H.P. de Groot and M.I. Gwynn conclude in their discussion of the case, ‘it makes little sense to ask whether or not Bianchi was ‘really hypnotised,’

because the construct ‘hypnosis’ has little utility as a scientific account of hypnotic responding.’ In Canadian law, hypnotic suggestion, along with such influences as drugs and alcohol, is allowed as a basis for the defence of ‘automatism.’ And the American Law Institute’s Model Penal Code claims that anyone following hypnotic suggestion is not acting voluntarily, so he can’t be considered criminally liable. But various American states offer differing viewpoints. In England, a judge in Maidstone has ruled that the testimony of four witnesses was not admissible in court, because they had been previously ‘hypnotised.’ By contrast, the cognitive-behavioural point of view takes the position that the actions of a ‘hypnotised’ subject are voluntary. T.X. Barber has made the point that explaining a hypnotic subject’s behaviour in terms of a trance or altered state of consciousness is like explaining a shaman’s behaviour in terms of spirit possession. As for hypnotising witnesses to get at the facts, ‘there is no conclusive evidence, either anecdotal or experimental, to indicate that hypnosis can act as a “truth serum.”’ There is not even any known method for detecting whether anyone is simulating ‘hypnosis’ or not. The likeliest result of allowing the police to use hypnotists would be ‘the confident reporting of inaccurate information’ (P.W. Sheehan and J. Tilden). All in all, ‘the kinds of experiences and behaviours that are elicited by hypnotic procedures can also be produced by placebos and other expectancy-modification procedures.’

As long ago as 1962, T.R. Sarbin proposed that the term ‘hypnosis’ should be stricken from the professional vocabulary of psychology. That day has still not come, although the cognitive skills involved are being more often referred to nowadays by such terms as ‘goal-directed fantasy’ or ‘think-with suggestions.’ Hypnosis was born at a time when theological explanations were just beginning to give way to the rationality rules of science. So in the late 20th century, who is it who’s still hanging on to this concept of human conduct as a function of strange internal forces, and a vocabulary more suited to occult mysteries? The answer turns out to be—the clinicians. William C. Coe’s study of hypnosis journals is revealing. ‘It seems that the vast majority of clinicians prefer using special state concepts in vague ways, perhaps naively, or perhaps to mystify purposely. It seems equally clear that the vast majority of experimental investigators avoid using special state concepts.’

From a scientific viewpoint, ‘hypnotic induction rituals are viewed as historical curiosities that reflect outmoded 19th-century attempts to conceptualise the behaviours associated with this topic as linked in some way to sleep.’ ‘In short,’ say Spanos and Chaves, ‘clinical hypnosis as a research area appears to be at roughly the same point as experimental hypnosis research before Barber began his systematic controlled experimentation in the late 1950s.’

---

Lewis Jones is a freelance editor and writer.

---

# A Skeptical Quiz

Peter Popper

1. What do you call a coming-out party for a spirit?
2. Shirley MacLaine says that as a psychic she is still trying to find her feet. What advice should you give?
3. How would you get Jacques Benveniste drunk?
4. A corner of the Turin Shroud is found to have two tiny words printed on it in an unknown language: what is the most likely translation?
5. When Jehovah's Witnesses make their trip to Mt Ararat to greet the End of the World, what is the most important thing they need to take with them?
6. In an independent intelligence test, who narrowly beat radio and TV interviewers of psychics?
7. It is a law of the universe that a slice of bread always falls buttered side down. If you drop a slice that falls buttered side up, what is the only possible explanation?
8. Who do you greet with 'Many happy returns'?
9. What should you say to a psychic who has just read your mind?
10. What kind of volunteer subjects are past-life regressionists looking for?
11. Why does Uri Geller's supermarket trolley always veer off to the left?
12. What do you call someone who entertains the patient while nature cures the ailment?
13. Is the flat earth theory all balls?
14. What is homeopathy?
15. What do you have to be to get free admission into a Doris Collins show?
16. Where do the inhabitants of Lourdes go to be cured?
17. What is an astrologer?

## Answers

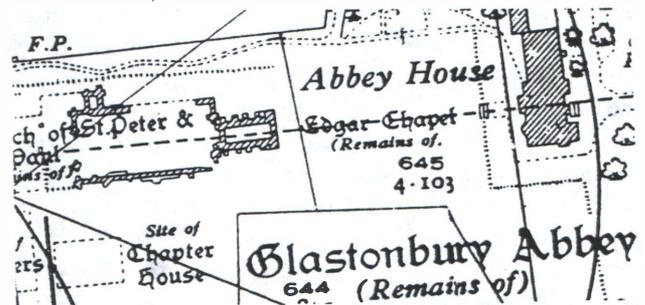
- |   |
|---|
| 1. A funeral  |
| 2. Tell her to look in her mouth  |
| 3. Give him a glass of non-alcoholic beer                                   |
| 4. April fool   |
| 5. A return ticket  |
| 6. The Speaking Clock   |
| 7. You buttered the wrong side  |
| 8. A friend who has been reincarnated                                       |
| 9. Sorry  |
| 10. People between the ages of 25 and 45, with at least 90 years experience |
| 11. The same damn reason yours does   |
| 12. An alternative therapist  |
| 13. No, it is all discs   |
| 14. Getting nothing for something   |
| 15. Dead  |
| 16. I don't know either   |
| 17. Someone who is prepared to tell you what you think of yourself          |

# The Myth of Leylines

Medawc Williams

Leylines are the supposedly significant lines that can be drawn between various ancient monuments, or buildings that might be on the site of ancient monuments. Many people see them as very important. But their very existence is open to question.

It would have been quite possible for the megalithic peoples to have built 'leylines'. There are some fairly well established alignments in and around the stone circles. On the other hand, it is surprisingly easy to find straight lines between randomly distributed points. For instance, after a few minutes looking at a high-scale local map, I managed to draw a line between two telephone boxes which passed directly through one of the little boxes used to symbolise a power line! (Of course, the telephone and electricity people could have been building on some much more ancient site.)



'Most of the lines are propped up by relatively young churches with well-recorded histories, Scots Pine trees planted in the eighteenth century or later, ponds of interest only to thirsty cows, rather boring little stones and straight tracks provided not by Stone Age mystics, but by Parliamentary Enclosure commissioners of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The leylines often managed to miss their supposed targets by a good many yards, and studiously avoid a multitude of monuments known to real archeologists'. (The National Trust *Guide to Prehistoric and Roman Britain*, 1983 edition, page 108.)

Leylines have been weighed in the balance, and found wanting. They are not real. They belong to the whole mess of old, confused and discredited ideas that are kept alive by believers in the occult and similar rubbish. Most occult beliefs have shallow roots. The Tarot cards, for instance, are no more mystical than any other pack of playing cards. They are an unfamiliar design in Britain, but are perfectly ordinary and familiar in some other countries. They were only ever used as playing-cards until the late 18th century. (The Game of Tarot, Michael Dummett, Duckworth 1980.) Claims for an ancient Egyptian origin are, if you'll pardon the pun, a complete pack of lies!

Medawc Williams is computer analyst of Welsh origin living in London.

# Romancing the Stone

Tom Ruffles

*The lure of alchemy continues...*

You might be forgiven for thinking that alchemy had been consigned to the dustbin of history. If the *Times Higher Education Supplement* [1] is to be believed, it is currently undergoing a resurgence of interest, albeit for its role in the growth of modern-day chemistry rather than any intrinsic merits in its methodology. At the recent annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, its History of Science section held a session on gunpowder. It emerged that alchemy has a respectable pedigree.

There are two variants, stemming from Egypt and China. The former propounded the familiar Aristotelian notion of the elements of earth, air, fire and water, and the possibility of combining them in such a way as to produce gold. The latter, together with Greek ideas, formed a synthesis which was imported into Europe by Arab migrants and gave rise to such words as *alkali*, *alcohol* and *naphtha*. Ironically the Chinese interest in gunpowder originated in alchemical research into immortality. Richard Gregory of Bristol University is quoted as saying that Newton 'probably spent more time on his alchemical and biblical studies than on his laws of motion, gravity, optics and colour, and mathematics', although whether he is being admiring or quizzical is not made clear.

The answer may be given in another reference to Professor Gregory, printed in the *Daily Telegraph*, in an article which also concerns the British Association [2]. It states that CSICOP speakers at the annual meeting would be demonstrating how 'stories about spoon-benders, ghosts, UFOs and communication with the dead can be exposed. In this context, Professor Richard Gregory, of Bristol University, will describe how, in the light of 17th century science, people stopped believing in alchemy and witchcraft. Superstition faded, and the modern scientific method was born.' Alas Gregory's pronouncement seems to be a non sequitur, else CSICOP would not feel compelled to expose cases which flagrantly have not been subjected to current scientific methods.

It does seem that there is a belief in certain religious quarters that alchemical processes can occur, though in this context it can hardly be said that these are precursors to modern science. Two recent news items give details of supposed miraculous transformations in Texas [3], California and Medjugorje in Yugoslavia [4]. The Californians had been on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, where miracles linked to sightings of the Virgin Mary had allegedly occurred. The description of the Texas incident does only state that 'dozens reported that the silver beads on their



rosaries turned to a gold colour'. The participants in the Californian and Yugoslav events appear to have been more specific, and asserted that the metal had changed from silver to gold (or copper). Happily for the owners, who might have had their faith tested by the power of Mammon, a jeweller who examined one such rosary said that the colour change was due to tarnishing.

Perhaps here the matter would rest, except for an odd story which appeared in the *Guardian* earlier this year [5], concerning a bizarre little organism called *Thiobacillus ferro-oxidans*. It would seem that it lives, by some unspecified means, on inorganic matter, and can liberate precious metals (including gold) as a by-product of eating spoil heaps containing such small quantities of the desired materials that it would not be economically viable to recover them mechanically. This may not be exactly what ancient alchemists had in mind, but I am sure that it can be seen as the transmutation of something worthless into something valuable. It so happens that the philosopher's stone turns out to be organic.

There has to be a catch, and not just the possibil-

ity that the main beneficiary would be South Africa, the largest gold supplier and therefore the possessor of the biggest spoil heaps. It transpires that *T. ferrooxidans* has a very low tolerance of temperature variations, making industrial applications too expensive and complicated. The article largely concerns the efforts of a team at King's College London to improve the organism so that it will flourish in a much wider temperature range. Unfortunately, it claims, commercial exploitation of the new version had been slow due possibly to an unconscious aversion to the prospect of using organisms in an industrial process (presumably brewing does not count?).

By definition, of course, this loose usage of the term 'transmutation of elements' is about the closest one can come to the alteration of one element into another by chemical means. An element is defined as a substance which cannot be changed into or from simpler forms, except by a change in its atomic nucleus. In theory it would be possible to produce gold from cheaper elements, but the energy required to do so would be so expensive that the technique would not be viable whilst substantial stocks could be dug out of the ground.

However, I came across a reference to an alleged Russian process [6] which claimed to be able to turn lead into gold in an atom smasher at a very cheap rate (about \$600 per oz) as opposed to previous processes which produced gold at a cost of between \$3,000 and \$3 million per oz, a considerable reduction and one which would have significant consequences for the world market. However, this item appeared in 1980, and nothing seems to have been heard of the process since. Fool's Gold perhaps?

#### References

1. Martin Ince, 'Rich seam of explosive ideas amid the mumbo-jumbo', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 15 September 1989.
2. Roger Highfield and Adrian Berry, 'Britain needs major initiative on science', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1989.
3. 'Hundreds of people stay in St John Neumann Roman Catholic church, Texas to talk about alleged miracle', Associated Press, 17 August 1988.
4. Robert Sheaffer, Psychic vibrations, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol 14, No 1, 1989, pp. 23-24.
5. Dan Van Der Vat, 'Answers lie in the soil—How science is harnessing the microbe to turn base metal into gold', *The Guardian*, 28 February 1989.
6. 'The escalating price of gold could make nuclear transmutation economically sensible, and the Soviets may have a method', *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 27 January 1980.

---

Tom Ruffles is a commercial analyst, but finds parapsychology rather more interesting.

---

## Predictions for 1990

### Marjorie Mackintosh

**January.** An alien spacecraft will land near Buckingham Palace, but leave in a huff after Prince Charles makes critical remarks about its design.

**February.** George Bush will make a decision. This will be hailed as a significant achievement and as evidence for the increasing maturity of his presidential style.

**March.** The Germans will sell the Berlin Wall to an American millionaire for an undisclosed sum. However, an international incident will be precipitated when he claims that he was cheated because they refused to throw in the Brandenburg Gate.

**April.** Attempts to develop a water-powered engine will be scrapped when it becomes clear that water after privatisation will cost more than petrol.

**May.** Dan Quayle will tell the world that he owes his intellectual prowess to crystal power. The price of crystals will drop through the floor.

**June.** Mrs Thatcher will unveil her master plan for the modernisation and expansion of British Rail—she will sell it to the Japanese.

**July.** Gorbachev will announce that the Iron Curtain has been lifted. Two American millionaires and an Australian will offer to buy it.

**August.** Fundamentalist archaeologists will announce the discovery of Noah's Ark on Mt. Ararat. It had hitherto evaded detection, they will say, on account of its miraculous transformation into rocks, trees and grass.

**September.** Dan Quayle will be kidnapped by aliens, much to the relief of most Americans. However, he will be returned almost immediately accompanied by an angry letter complaining about inferior goods and demanding a replacement.

**October.** Mrs Thatcher will finally become convincingly green due largely to an error in the chemical composition of her hair dye.

**November.** The Russians will admit that they failed in their attempts at extra-sensory spying. Russian remote-viewers were unable to pick up anything except Sky Television.

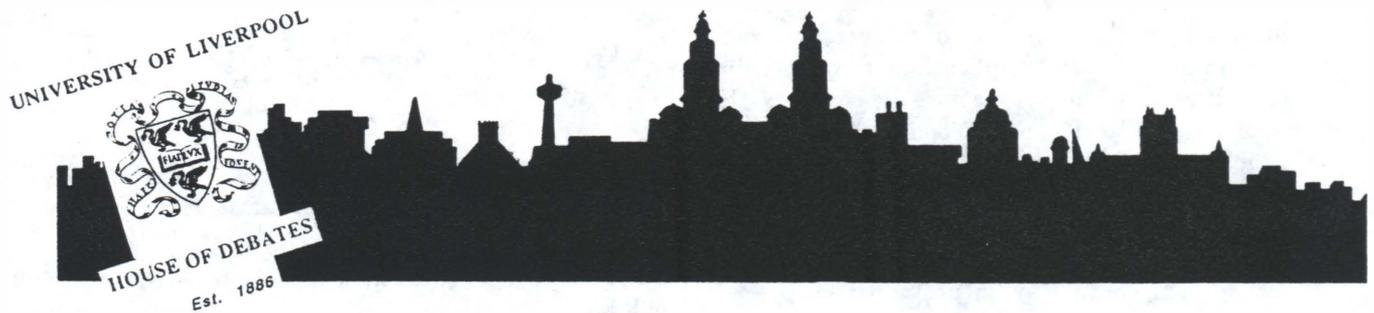
**December.** Father Christmas will refuse to make his traditional rounds claiming that his astrologer warned him not to travel near the end of December.

---

Marjorie Mackintosh is a teacher, and works at the BBC's Open University Production Centre in Milton Keynes.

---

# This House Believes in Ghosts



On 17 October the University of Liverpool House of Debates hosted a debate with the title 'This House Believes in Ghosts'. Proposing the motion were Dr John Beloff, honorary Fellow of the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh and former president of the Society for Psychical Research, and Carl Williams, founder of the University of Liverpool Parapsychology Society. Opposing the motion were John Maddox, editor of the science journal *Nature*, and Steve Donnelly, co-editor of the *British & Irish Skeptic*. The following two articles are transcripts of John Beloff's and John Maddox's speeches.

## The Case for PSI

John Beloff

In 1881, the newly founded University College of Liverpool appointed to its Chair of Physics a young man of thirty by the name of Oliver Lodge. Lodge's pioneer work on electrical phenomena led directly to the discovery of the Hertzian waves and to the invention of the wireless. Lodge held the Chair at Liverpool until 1900 when he was made first principal of the new University of Birmingham. In 1902 he was knighted. Sir Oliver Lodge, however, was not only a very eminent physicist, he was also a dedicated psychical researcher. While still at Liverpool he carried out some successful early experiments on what was then known as 'thought transference' of the kind where one person has to reproduce a target drawing that another person is looking at. Later he was very actively involved in the investigation of the famous American medium, Leonora Piper, when she first visited England and stayed in his house in Liverpool. He also, together with the eminent French physiologist, Charles Richet, helped in the investigation of the somewhat notorious Italian physical medium, Eusapia Palladino. Besides serving in his time as a president of the British Association and of the Physical Society, he also served as a president of the Society for Psychical Research.

Now, I mention Lodge, partly because he is a local hero, but more because he is a standing illustration of the fact that there is no incompatibility between being a rational scientist and being a firm believer

in the paranormal. And it is necessary to make this point because my opponents today will doubtless try to persuade you that to vote for the motion is to capitulate to superstition, or even to betray your education. Yet Lodge was not ashamed to believe in ghosts if, by 'ghosts' we mean those who, having survived the death of their body, now seek to communicate with the living, whether indirectly, through a medium, or in the form of an apparition or phantom. In 1909, Lodge published a book, *The Survival of Man*, based largely on his own and other people's sittings with the incomparable Mrs Piper. Then, in 1916, he published a much more positive and more influential work, *Raymond*, based on the evidence he had obtained, mainly through the English medium, Gladys Osborne Leonard, about his deceased youngest son, Raymond, who had been killed in action, in September 1915, at the age of 26.

Lodge understood that there were, of course, other interpretations of the evidence that did not require one to postulate survival. Thus it is always possible to attribute the evidence to the psychic powers of the medium herself rather than to communicators from the other side. What he rightly dismissed was the possibility that the knowledge which the medium displayed could have been obtained through normal channels; the safeguards he applied ruled that out. Lodge's firm belief in survival was very much on a

par with his belief in the ether; indeed the two were not altogether unconnected in his mind. In both cases these seemed to him the best hypotheses, given the facts as he saw them.

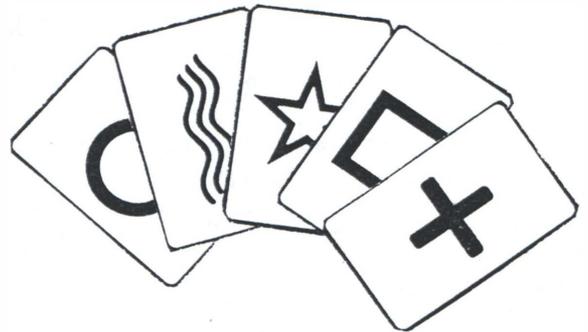
Today, thanks to Einstein, we no longer find it necessary to postulate an ether. But what are we to say about survival? Perhaps the only honest thing one can say is that we simply don't know—the issue remains an enigma. One of the difficulties is the following. If we were to repeat the experiments which Lodge carried out in his physics laboratory we could count on getting the same results as he did. But there is no way in which we can repeat the experiments on which he based his belief in survival for the simple reason that there are today no mediums of the calibre of a Mrs Piper or a Mrs Leonard. Psychical phenomena, unlike physical phenomena, are culture-bound. At the present time one cannot even find good card-guessers, although once they were not so uncommon.

Of course, you could say that science has increasingly demonstrated that all our mental functions depend so intimately on the workings of the brain that the idea of a mind surviving the destruction of the brain is unthinkable. That is not an unreasonable supposition as far as it goes. On the other hand, if it is the case that some people can sometimes know directly things remote in space and time, or can influence directly events where there is no known physical connection, this would imply that the mind has powers that cannot be accounted for by any known properties of the brain. My case is that there is a mass of evidence, which has never been invalidated, which supports this supposition. I cannot here and now present to you this evidence but I can say that it ranges from the most rigorous experimental evidence to spontaneous cases based on human testimony. The reason why such evidence is often ignored or rejected is that it has not so far proved possible to produce such evidence on demand.

So, does this house believe in ghosts? When Mr Paxton invited me to speak for the motion, I replied that I would do so provided I was free to construe the word 'ghosts', here, as being symbolical. I could not imagine that such big guns as the Editor of *Nature* had been roped in merely to disabuse us of ghosts, as commonly understood. Ghosts were surely *not* the issue. What was at stake was whether science, as we know it, should have the last word as to what does or does not exist or what is or is not possible. In other words, what *is* at issue today is the *paranormal* in its widest connotation. 'This House Believes in Ghosts' is, I submit, no more than a provocative way of saying that this House is serious about paranormal phenomena. It follows that, if you are a convinced materialist, if you are satisfied that all mental activity is ultimately explicable in terms of electrochemical events in the brain, you should vote *against* this motion. If, on the other hand, you believe, as I do, that the mind has powers that transcend the body,

that what we parapsychologists call 'psi phenomena', understood as mind acting on the world *beyond* the confines of the body, exist, you should vote *for* the motion.

My opponents will seek to persuade you that there is no compelling evidence for psi phenomena—that is, for ESP or PK (psychokinesis). What they always mean by this is that such phenomena cannot be produced to order. Now it is very understandable, that if you are the editor of an official scientific journal, that you should regard this question of repeatability as all important. Science is constantly beset by all sorts of weird claims which turn out to be quite spurious. The recent excitement over the possibility of 'cold fusion' is a case in point. Now, it would, of course, be very convenient if parapsychology could satisfy this criterion. It is precisely the elusiveness of its phenomena that, more than anything else, has cast doubt on its credibility, with the inevitable and unfortunate result that the field has remained neglected and underfunded. On the other hand, is such elusiveness so surprising or suspicious? Given that such psi abilities operate at some unconscious level beyond our control, can we expect to be able to turn them on or off at will? It seems more likely that psychic phenomena, though real enough, are highly 'situation-sensitive'.



If that is so, then we who are not the official guardians of scientific orthodoxy must look elsewhere if we want to reach a correct verdict about the reality of psi phenomena. The question we must now ask ourselves is no longer 'can the phenomenon be demonstrated on demand?' but, rather, 'is there any credible counter-explanation for the observations in question that does *not* necessitate an appeal to the 'paranormal?' And, when we start asking *that* question, we discover that there is, indeed, a mass of evidence, of the highest quality, that has resisted all attempts to explain it away. Thus, if one looks, first, at some of the contemporary experimental studies such as appear regularly in the accredited parapsychology journals—and I am thinking, here, of the work of such outstanding exponents as Helmut Schmidt, Charles Honorton, Rex Stanford or my colleague, Robert Morris (to name but a few), it becomes extremely hard (I never say impossible) to suppose that *all* their positive findings can be put down to deficiencies in method-

ology, much less to any kind of deliberate deception. Moreover, using the statistical technique known as 'meta-analysis', it is possible to survey every known study on some given phenomenon or effect, whether the results are significant are not, and calculate the overall odds against chance of this set of data and, in addition, to calculate how many *non-significant* findings must have gone unreported if all the relevant experiments are to yield an overall null result. The recent experimental literature contains a number of such meta-analyses which leaves little doubt that a number of such phenomena including, for example, precognitive guessing or PK with a random number generator are genuine phenomena and not just statistical artefacts.

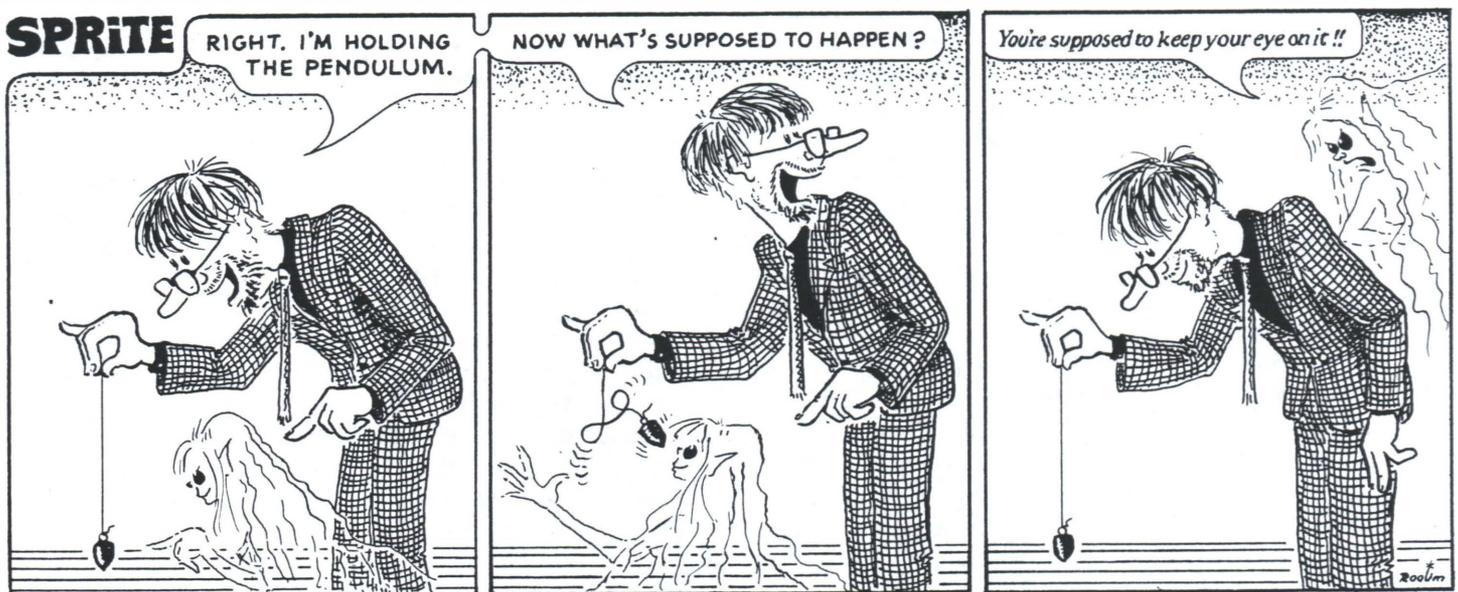
But, having said all that, do we need to *confine* our attention to the standard experimental evidence? It has always struck me that some of the most impressive evidence we have for the reality of psi are records we have about gifted individuals in the past. I mentioned earlier on, when talking of Sir Oliver Lodge, the names of some of the notable mediums of that era. But I am not thinking only of mediums, as such, but of anyone endowed with some special psychic talent who is prepared to be tested. Such, for example, was Stefan Ossowiecki who flourished in Warsaw, before being killed in the Warsaw uprising of 1944, and who, time and again, allowed himself to be tested, under the most stringent conditions, by researchers from all over Europe. His special talent was to divine the content of a sealed message. Such individuals are, however, sadly lacking at the present time.

This brings me, lastly, to a category of evidence which abounds in every generation including the present. I refer, of course, to the spontaneous cases. These comprise physical events, such as occur in poltergeist incidents, but more often they involve the paranormal acquisition of knowledge. Such cases oc-

cur unexpectedly in the course of everyday life and so it is all too easy to dismiss them as worthless anecdotes and, no doubt, the great majority of such cases can, usually, be explained away in terms of coincidence or confabulation. The most telling of them, however, stand comparison with any evidence which can hold up in a court of law on the basis of human testimony and survive cross-examination. So, to end with, and to bring the discussion back a little closer to ghosts as such, here is *one* such incident that I shall now describe. It is based on the word of no more than one solitary individual but that individual happens to be a distinguished public figure—Roy Jenkins—and the fact that he kept a diary makes it the more unlikely that his memory was at fault.

The incident is recorded in his book *European Diary*, which was published last March. Jenkins was a close friend and colleague of the late Anthony Crossland (Foreign Secretary in the Callaghan government) who died *unexpectedly* of a stroke on the morning of Saturday 19 February 1977. Jenkins was, at the time, staying at a hotel in Rome where, in the early hours of the morning, he awoke from a vivid dream. In that dream he heard the voice of his friend, Anthony Crossland, saying, in a calm voice, 'I'm perfectly all right, I am going to die but I'm perfectly all right'. An hour and a half later Jenkins received a call from London, from the BBC, informing him that Crossland had died, in an Oxford Hospital, and asking him if he would say a few words about his friend after the eight o'clock news that morning. The time of Crossland's death coincided with Jenkins' dream.

Whatever construction you put on this case it certainly *looks* as if something was being communicated through channels that lie outside current scientific cognizance. I ask you to vote for this motion and to show, thereby, your contempt for *dogmatism*, even though it may parade under the name of science.



# The Case against PSI

John Maddox

I think we ought to be clear that what we are talking about this evening is not the question 'Are Ghosts Real?' but the question 'Do you believe in Ghosts?'. I am entirely happy to accept Dr Beloff's wide definition of the subject. We are talking about psychic phenomena in general.

Sadly I only know one story about ghosts, but because it's about a Liverpool man I'll tell it. It's about an old gentlemen who had for many years been a Labour Councillor in this city and he knew that his time was coming to an end so he tidied up all his affairs, cleaned the house and tucked himself up into bed expecting never to rise again but nonetheless feeling calm and peaceful. And then there came a loud knock on the door. 'Who's there?', he asked and the voice replied 'The Angel of Death'. 'Thank God' said the old man. 'I thought it was Derek Hatton and his mob'.

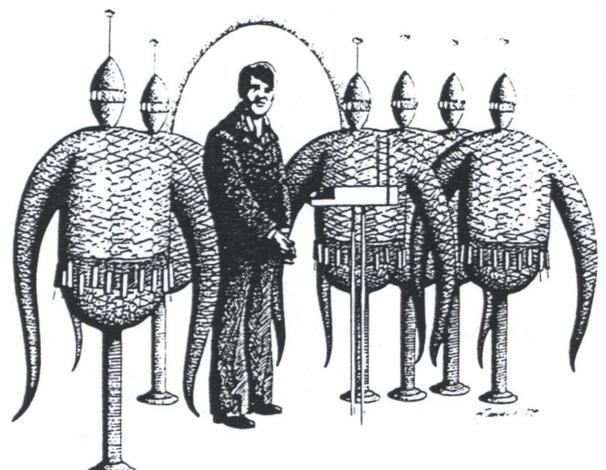
The truth is that we are talking about our beliefs, and I do believe that in spite of what Dr Beloff has said the evidence for psychic phenomena must be looked at very carefully. I would say to you that if psychic phenomena are as common and as substantial as Dr Beloff would have us believe, then most of us should have had some direct apparently psychic experience which can't be explained in any other way. If one has not had such an experience it is very risky indeed to rely on other peoples' reported experiences or on similar anecdotal evidence in books.

It is a curious situation to be asked to believe in something important about the natural world when nobody can demonstrate how this character of the real world can be reproduced, or how it can be manifested or used in any way. It depends very much on accident but it also depends very much on fashion. Indeed, I would not accept Dr Beloff's view that it is a sad thing that there are so few talented mediums about today. On the contrary I think that mediums were fashionable at the turn of the century and that nowadays because of changing circumstances other kinds of supposedly psychic phenomena are common: phenomena such as card guessing, playing tricks with computers and so on. But these are really entirely incidental to the question of what actually is the reality underlined in these assertions.

Let me just tell you a bit about our visit to Paris a year ago to investigate a Dr Benveniste's claim that it was possible to take a biological reagent, put it in water, dilute the water virtually indefinitely and still find the biological activity in the solution. We took with us a conjurer, an exceedingly good one, James Randi, the man who made his reputation by showing

that Uri Geller had been a fraud. And during our visit he littered Paris with 'magically' bent spoons, many of which broke. He was exceedingly adept at doing a trick that a few years earlier had been thought of as a manifestation of a psychic phenomenon.

When we arrived in Paris we found Dr Benveniste was not doing his experiments with his own hands but that somebody else was doing them for him in an exceedingly sloppy way. He was not actually taking proper account of the statistical controls that in those circumstances any first year undergraduate biologist would recognise to be necessary. His results were better than they could possibly have been. Nonetheless, I don't believe for a minute that he thought other than that his discovery was real. And the reason why it is possible for a person to be transparently honest and convinced of the correctness of his assertions, but at the same time wrong is of course that all of us are capable of deluding ourselves. One must be careful to avoid accusing the perpetrators or discoverers of psychic phenomena of fraud. One must recognise that frequently they are deluded, self-deluded, as we ourselves frequently are in other less harmful contexts. But there is a long list of them. I don't know the details of recent research published in the parapsychology journals but I do know that every time that one of these phenomena is investigated in detail, because it captures the public imagination, the phenomenon turns out to be insubstantial.



Mary Evans Picture Library

Look at the way in which Rhine had people guessing which card was going to turn up next in the pack. Such experiments were shown to be statistical artifacts after a great deal of investigation. I've mentioned Uri Geller already as somebody who is exceedingly skilled at doing these things and yet who in the end was found to be playing quite common conjur-

ing tricks. I think it would be unwise of anyone to take the view that these phenomena are real, when it happens that whenever close investigations are carried out not just by people working in the field but by scientists and others at large, the phenomena turn out to be insubstantial. So that is my first point. Whenever issues published in obscure journals circulating amongst believers are studied publicly and generally we find they collapse. I think it would, thus, be unwise of anybody to believe that such fringe material, the less important material, which has not been subjected to general scrutiny, may nevertheless contain something substantial.

Where does science come into this? Dr Beloff, asked whether science should have the last word on what does or does not exist. But science doesn't ask for that. Science is not a priesthood. Science is actually a way of discovering things about the natural world and it seems to me that the methods of science are modest. Indeed, claims made on behalf of science are themselves very modest and all scientists will acknowledge that there are a great many things about the real world in which we live that are not understood, matters such as the beginning of the universe and the origins of life. There are still problems to be tackled and the fact that nowadays it is possible to use sensitive magnetic detectors to look at the patterns of electrical currents within the brain, shows that scientists are by no means averse to applying their skills to problems which have a lot in common with the kinds of questions that the psi people ask themselves from time-to-time. But what science has the perfect right to ask is that if an important claim is made about the reality of the world, and Dr Beloff has made many this evening, then those who make it have the responsibility to ensure that it can be tested. The trouble with these claims, sadly, is that they cannot be tested. They are anecdotal; they are flying saucers that have come and gone in the night. Science, broadly speaking, has no great interest in these phenomena which, in my opinion, are launched on the world not for the sake of letting us know more about the world and helping us to understand it better, but because they have in one way or another an appeal to the credulousness which is in us all.

Let me make one final comment: I believe that these phenomena are insubstantial; I believe that they are not a necessary part of any explanation of the real world in which we live. But I believe that they are nevertheless dangerous. Now you may ask why it should be dangerous, for people to read their horoscopes in the paper, or to believe that one or other psychic phenomenon can put them in touch with their ancestors or their dead relatives? And I will give two reasons although there are many that could be given. A lot of these psychic phenomena depend on people's impressions of the world and they can easily be regarded as hallucinations of a kind. In other words one can actually think one hears a noise com-

ing from a flying saucer that is hidden in the dusk or one can imagine that the curtain on the window has the shape of one's grandfather. But hallucinations in medicine have a much more specific meaning. They are, of course, one of the symptoms of schizophrenia which sadly is one of the most common, debilitating and intractable of psychiatric illnesses. And I think, that to the extent that many of these phenomena are conceivably and quite probably the reports of people suffering from real organic physical diseases of that kind, it is really rather cruel that we should humour them by taking their reports seriously when appropriate medication would help them better.

The second reason why all this is dangerous is that I think it is evidently catching. People do read their horoscopes in the paper; people do brood about what they mean by telepathy; people do tell tales to each other of how they have been in touch with their relatives who are on 'the other side'. I believe that this is bad for our society which increasingly should depend on the rationality and not the irrationality of the human mind. I am all for acknowledging the importance of the human mind but it does seem to me that to assume it has a power that can transcend the normal operation of the material world requires not merely more evidence but a great deal more conviction that these phenomena are worth taking seriously. I worry, in other words, about the future of countries like this if indeed we one day find ourselves taken over (as the Soviet Union appeared to be on a recent visit) by a pathological interest in magic and the like.

So my reasons for asking you to reject Dr Beloff's claim on behalf of psi and to do the sensible thing and vote against the motion 'This House Believes In Ghosts' is simply that this is the only thing that rational people can rationally do.

---

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL



HOUSE OF DEBATES

Est. 1886

---

*At the end of the formal speeches there were several lively and entertaining contributions from the audience. One speaker suggested that the house abstain from voting, whilst another recommended that the audience not vote at all! This is perhaps the explanation of the vote, which was 38 abstentions, 35 votes for the motion, and 18 against.*

---

# Skeptic at large...

Wendy M. Grossman

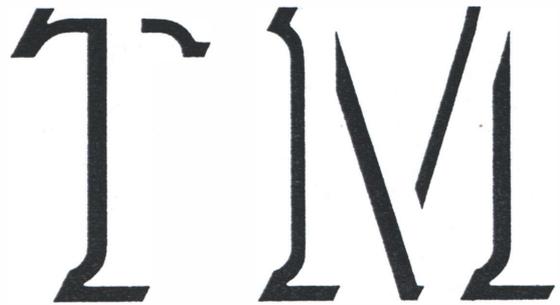
Well, here we go again. The *Observer* magazine ran an article on 3 September on the Transcendental Meditation development in Skelmersdale. Reporter Andrew Purvis begins, 'After quietening the mind, *sidhas* can release stress in such a way that they raise cross-legged into the air.' Purvis does not say that he himself actually witnessed the phenomenon. In fact, it's very unlikely that he did; magician James Randi spent years trying to get documentary evidence of such feats. The Skelmersdale colony's predecessor, MIU (Maharishi International University), in Fairfield, Iowa, was very unhelpful. What photographs Randi has seen have been easily duplicated by non-meditators.

Purvis goes on to talk about the 'TM effect'. TMers say that 800 *sidhas* 'could enrich the lives of everyone in Britain'; 3000 *sidhas* in one place 'could create a Maharishi Effect in Europe.' Purvis does not question whether such an effect exists: he is reporting primarily on the economic revival the TMers have brought to Skelmersdale, a town whose industries had largely died prior to their arrival.

We, however, can afford to question whether the Skelmersdale settlement is likely to have the advertised effects. After all, we have the benefit of the figures Randi collected for his book *Flim-Flam*. In his chapter 'The Giggling Guru: A Matter of Levity', Randi examines the effect of the Iowa settlement on crime, unemployment, and auto accident fatalities. TMers had claimed that a population level of 1% would drastically lower the rates of these things. But Randi wrote to the relevant Iowa departments and found that there was no discernable Maharishi Effect. Purvis and the residents of Skelmersdale should take note.

Even more interesting for those who like to be in on things usually kept secret is information published in William Poundstone's *Bigger Secrets*. Poundstone specializes in filling books with information people want to keep from you so they can sell you their mystique. Amid recipes for Coca-Cola and Joy perfume, instructions on how to beat Rorschach and polygraph tests, explanations of magic tricks, ways to cheat at baseball and golf, and the complete initiation rituals for the Freemasons, Knights of Columbus, and the Rosicrucians, Poundstone has snuck in the complete list of TM-issued mantras.

Now, I remember TM from my days at Cornell, when TM classes were held on campus occasionally. A couple of friends of mine went in for it. They were issued with mantras to chant. They were told not to tell them to anyone. And they told me that a mantra



changes over time as you chant it. I wouldn't know, personally. Poundstone explains that there are sixteen mantras in use by the TM organization. Poundstone's book was published in 1986, and his information comes from *The Transcendental Meditation Secret Manuscript*, published 'a few years back' by 'a bunch of [TM] dissidents.' Poundstone reports that a magician got hold of it and built a successful mantra mind-reading act around it. Poundstone suggests using this age-based system: 'next time a TMer tries to sell you a flower in an airport, try yelling his mantra.' I would be delighted to hear the results gotten by any skeptic who cares to visit Skelmersdale and try this simple list.

It's all based on age: 0-11 *eng*; 12-13 *em*; 14-15 *enga*; 16-17 *ema*; 18-19 *aeng*; 20-21 *aem*; 22-23 *aenga*; 24-25 *aema*; 26-29 *shiring*; 30-34 *shirim*; 35-39 *hiring*; 40-44 *hirim*; 45-49 *kiring*; 50-54 *kirim*; 55-59 *sham*; 60-plus *shama*. Remember, the list is likely to have been written down by Americans using American phonetic pronunciations. Mantras are assigned orally, and are, as Poundstone puts it, 'not supposed to be written down'. A skeptic good at American intonations and guessing ages should be quite successful with this list. As Poundstone points out, this means that a student who sees one TM instructor, drops out briefly, and then sees another TM instructor, may be very impressed when he is assigned the same mantra by the second instructor. One can certainly imagine that such a student would believe that something sacred and intuitive was going on. The TM line, of course, is that mantras are assigned on the basis of subtle personality clues. One warning, though: avoid celebrity TMers. They get special ones. Of course.

Purvis says that so far the Skelmersdale Ideal Village Project has 340 adults and 150 children in residence. While Purvis says they 'levitate just a little', the *Observer* picture shows everyone sitting cross-legged on their mats. Just like you'd expect if gravity works.

---

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

---

# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

Of all the traditional festivals we celebrate each year, Christmas is one of the richest in terms of its customs. It is a time for rituals—some relatively modern, like Christmas Cards and Christmas Trees, and some exceedingly ancient, such as exchanging gifts and hanging decorations. There's the build up to Christmas (how many shopping days is it now!), and then there's the aftermath. Christmas is one of the most important events in the year, and almost everyone will, to some extent, have some part to play in its customs.

The origins of our modern Christmas are ancient: in antiquity the winter solstice was celebrated on the 25th day of December, as the 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun'. This midwinter festival was a joyous time marked by festal fires to celebrate the slow departure of Winter, and to usher in fertility and good fortune. It was only around the beginning of the 4th Century that Christianity assigned the Nativity of Christ to the date of the existing pagan festival. The revamped festival soon absorbed influences from other sources, including those of the Germanic midwinter feast of 'Yule'. By the 11th Century 'Christ's Mass' had solidified into an uneven fusion of the Christian Nativity with Yule, Roman and pagan customs.

Many of these traditional elements were condemned as superstitious by the Protestant Reformation. Today, recognisable pieces of pagan ritual still remain: the mumming plays, with their pre-Christian themes of death and resurrection; sword dancing and wassailing. One pagan practice that has nearly died out is the wearing of animal disguises at the Winter festival. In this country the custom lives on in the 'Mari Lwyd' Hobby Horse of Llangynwyd, with its hinged snapping jaws and bottle-glass eyes. Mari Lwyd visits the houses of the village wassailing—drinking toasts and singing the health of everyone on the route. Memories of the ancient Fire Festivals live on with the Yule log. One Christmas Eve tradition, now sadly in decline, was to carry the new Yule log into the house and set it alight with the remnants of the previous year's; it was commonly believed that to burn the log for twelve hours or more would ensure that the following year would be free of misfortune, and that the charred remains of the Yule log could preserve the house from fire, storms and lightning. Another custom with extremely ancient origins is the decoration of buildings with greenery during the Christmas period. Today we buy our Christmas decorations man-made, pre-cut and shrink-wrapped; but whatever their form, evergreens such as holly, ivy and mistletoe have long been symbols of life and fertility, and their presence at midwinter festivals serves to ensure that life will return again. The Church has found a convenient context for these fundamental beliefs: the berries of the holly symbolise the blood of Christ,



and its prickles His Crown of Thorns. Mistletoe, however, occupies a special place. It has long had sacred and magical associations (it was the Golden Bough of classical legend) and to the Church it remains thoroughly pagan—by tradition it is never allowed to hang in a place of worship. For a long time mistletoe was the centrepiece of the 'Kissing-Bough', a large garland of greenery and ornaments which was hung from the ceiling of the main living-room. Surprisingly, the Christmas tree is a relatively new tradition; originally of German origin, it spread to America in the 18th century, before coming to England, it is thought, in the early 1800's. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had their first tree in 1841, and its popularity soon spread.

Most areas have their own local Christmas customs; an interesting example is 'Tolling the Devil's Knell', which takes place every Christmas Eve at All Saints' Church in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. The tenor bell sounds a stroke for every year since Christ's Nativity—with the final stroke coinciding exactly with the first chime of midnight. Christ is born and Satan is dead—but every year the Devil tries to reappear, and one extra chime must be sounded to banish him, or he will return to plague the parish for the next twelve months.

But for all its fascination, Christmas is still a time better experienced than discussed. As an old Cornish Christmas Wassailers' song has it

Ask not the reason, from where it did  
spring  
For you know very well, it's an old ancient  
thing

I hope you enjoy your customs this year—whatever they are—and a very Happy Christmas to you all!

---

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

---

# Heaven and Earth

Michael Hutchinson

*Quest* is a fortnightly publication aimed at children between the ages of about eleven and fifteen. It has a scientific and technological basis covering different subjects each issue. Items covered so far include brain power, transport, money, weather, weapons, and crime busting. In the latter edition they explained how to make a lie detector using a simple electrical test meter. For Christmas they have produced a special edition called 'The Science of Magic'. In theory this was a great idea, to describe and explain magic of all types: conjuring, confidence tricks, the paranormal, and special effects in television and films. Commissioned as a consultant and writer I suggested a number of magic tricks which readers could try, and wrote about illusions and famous magicians.

The publishers, Marshall Cavendish, also commissioned Lewis Jones to write about 'the science of illusion' and Bob Couttie (author of *Forbidden Knowledge*) to write on 'sleight of hand (great cons)' and 'magic of the mind'. With a team like this, it looked as though the end product would be rational and responsible. I agreed to validate the copy before publication, believing that this would ensure that no nonsense would be included. In the end, however, Marshall Cavendish didn't get back to me to validate the copy, possibly because I had disagreed with the editor over their consultancy payment. Or perhaps, like so many journalists they thought they knew everything. In any case, the finished publication was an example of the very worst in publishing. Lewis Jones and I have written to Marshall Cavendish listing around thirty examples of gullibility and inaccuracy.

Two of our main complaints concern a couple of projects which *Quest* readers are encouraged to do. The first is to make a cardboard pyramid to show how a piece of butter can be 'preserved outside the fridge'; the second how to 'find hidden objects with your mind' by dowsing. If these projects had been presented objectively there would have been little motive to complain, even though such tests would have been too complicated for *Quest* readers (and editors?). But the way these projects were positively presented, any negative results would have looked like failures, especially in the dowsing test as readers were informed that 'American research has shown that 99 per cent of the people tested could successfully use dowsing rods to find water or hidden objects'.

The following are a few other examples of the gullible nonsense peddled to children in this dreadful publication:

- Doris Stokes 'heard messages from the dead'.
- Of Uri Geller: 'Apart from reproducing other people's drawings by telepathic means and

mending badly damaged watches and clocks, Geller is best remembered for causing metal to bend just by stroking it.' Also: he 'could make metal keys, spoons and forks bend just by stroking them—and continue to bend after he had left'. No comment of mine is necessary!

- A caption under a photograph of a man lying face down on a bed of nails states that 'the weight on each nail is less than 10 grams'. This would require a 10 stone person to be supported on about 6000 nails. The photograph showed a bed of only forty or fifty nails, some of which did not support the fakir at all.
- Although the article I submitted on illusions clearly stated that the Indian Rope Trick is a myth, a caption to a photograph claims that it isn't. *Quest* added two paragraphs to my article, giving possible explanations which I hadn't included because they are so absurd. The sub-editor took these explanations from a book which I had loaned to him. If he thought I had overlooked them he could at least have had the sense to consult me.
- In two places *Quest* claim that con-men perform the three card trick by palming the queen and replacing it with a different card. Such a move is not only risky, it is totally unnecessary for a successful con.

Having been paid by Marshall Cavendish for my contribution I don't know—or care—whether it is ethical for me to say so, but I can't recommend this or any other edition of *Quest*. But if the editors and publishers question my ethics, I suggest they get their own house in order first. They have a great responsibility to the young people they earn their living from.

\*

Mark Twain is not exactly well known for his skepticism even though Prometheus Books have published an anthology of his works under the title *Mark Twain: Selected Writings of an American Skeptic*. An article of his from 1909 passed to me by Lewis Jones included a couple of quotes which I like enough to pass on to you: '... if it is a *Miracle*, any sort of evidence will answer, but if it is a *Fact*, proof is necessary' and 'The difference between a *Miracle* and a *Fact* is exactly the difference between a mermaid and a seal.'

---

Michael Hutchinson is a member of the U.K. Skeptics and British distributor for Prometheus Books.

---



## First Annual UK Skeptics Bent Spoon Award

And the runners-up were ...

1. The *Guardian*, for Julie Collings' series of credulous articles about alternative medicine.
2. The *Observer's* Andrew Purvis for uncritically reporting that Skelmersdale TMers can levitate.
3. Colin Andrews and Pat Delgado, for their theory that crop circles are caused by an alien intelligence. Special mention goes to Andrews' and Delgado's find of a lump of white jelly that is supposed to have infected everyone who came into contact with it and to *Today* for its headline 'Defence probe jelly wobbles in great field circles riddle'.

But the winner, for the most utterly silly idea to feature in a major newspaper in 1989, is the *Sun* for its 'Psychic Second of the Century'. This summer, after a week of intensive publicity, the *Sun* commanded its readers to stare into the eyes of a photograph of Doris Collins at 12.34 and 5 seconds on the 6th day of the July—the 7th month—1989 (12.34:5 6/7/89—geddit?) and to phone in and say what happened. The *Sun* claimed that the second those figures lined up was one of great psychic significance. *Sun* readers obediently phoned in to report cosmic happenings, such as a successful job application, the resolution of a passport mix-up, and a ghost or two (see B&IS III.4 for more details). The *Sun* said that this lineup wouldn't happen until 2089, even though, as the *British & Irish Skeptic* pointed out, next year we can have 12.34:56 7/8/90 (*Sun* reporters, take note)—but only in Britain: calendars are man-made, and vary all over the world (at that moment in the eastern United States it was 7.34:5 7/6/89).

The award was decided by the spirit of Doris Stokes and communicated to the judges at a specially conducted séance. The award winners were informed telepathically at the precise second of 12/3 4.56:7 '89 (3 December, 4.56 and seven seconds 1989). We are not saying whether it was a.m. or p.m.; only your telepath will know for sure.

## New Skeptical Groups

### London Student Skeptics

The London Student Skeptics is thriving at their new venue, the University of London Union. After an initial recruitment of seventy student members at the U.L.U. freshers' fair, they have continued to expand with new and old members being signed up at each subsequent meetings. There is now a paid up membership of over 100—and at only £1 per year, it's exceptional value!

Future meetings will be on alternate Mondays in Room 3C of the University of London Union Building, in Malet Street, commencing at 7.30 pm, and the programme for Spring Term 1990 is as follows.

- **29 January.** Dr John Lord (University of Surrey) will speak on 'How to be skeptical about parapsychology'.
- **12 February.** Graphology or Skeptical Video evening.
- **29 February.** Mike Howgate, Convenor of LSS will speak on 'Fred Hoyle and the "Faked" fossil—a case history of pseudoscience'.
- **12 March.** Colin Wood will speak on 'Biblical creation, evolution, or the third option'.
- **26 March.** John Morris of the LSS will speak on 'New Age ... Old Age'.
- **7 April.** Annual General Meeting.

### Wessex Skeptics

Following an advertisement placed by former Manchester Skeptic Robin Allen in a Southampton University newsletter, which attracted a lot of media attention, the Wessex Skeptics have been formed from a band of likeminded individuals—scientists and non-scientists, materialists and Christians. The experience of the group includes such diverse fields as electronics, medicine, neurophysiology, nursing and physics.

Membership of the Wessex Skeptics is open to all members of the public who agree broadly with the stated aims of the group, and the annual subscription is £10 (£5 for students, senior citizens and the unemployed). If you're interested in finding out more about the Wessex Skeptics, please contact Robin Allen in Southampton (work number 0703 592084).

# Reviews

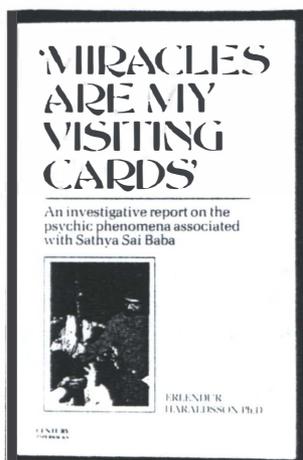
## The non-miracles of Sai Baba

Erlundur Haraldsson, *Miracles Are My Calling Card* (Century Hutchinson, £6.95).

What conclusions can be arrived at in assessing the psychic phenomena associated with the contemporary Indian mystic Sathya Sai Baba? Someone who can, amongst other things, emanate sacramental ash (vibuti) in some mysterious manner from his forehead, mouth and feet, and who has performed miracles similar in quantity and magnitude to those that the scriptures claim for Jesus Christ.

Dr Haraldsson concludes in *Miracles are my calling card* that there is experimentally no evidence of genuine paranormal phenomena having been produced by Sai Baba.

'The methods of science can never explain the miraculous—they are outside science' says Sai Baba, and thereby evades the controlled experiments that Dr Haraldsson and Dr Osis wished to carry out for this study. Sai Baba in the book says that it would be black magic to use his powers to prove that he had them, rather than using them for the good of his followers. He however then diverts the conversation by pointing out that the stone has come out of Dr Osis's ring which Sai Baba had given to him a few days before. He then exclaims 'You asked for a miracle and I gave it to you'. So unfortunately after a total of eight journeys (not all involving visits to Sai Baba) by Haraldsson to India, during the period 1973 to 1983, the book recounts not personally analysed miracles but extensive interviews with witnesses. The method used in this book is therefore descriptive, rather than experimental science, relying on case studies and field work, to approach the truth. This was a great disappointment to me as a reader. What follows in the next 136 pages are long recitations from devotees, and some ex-devotees, of Sai Baba during the period 1940–1977. These consist of accounts of the materialization of objects such as statues, out of season fruit, the inevitable vibuti, and numerous small trinkets. Also recounted are marvelous feats of Sai Baba disappearing and then appearing smiling and laughing at the top of an adjacent hill, without those around him even noticing that he had moved from their side! There were some doubts expressed, however, about his ability to



cure the sick and to exorcise devils, and one devotee said that his mind reading divinations were no better than yours and mine. He had, from the testimonies, a tendency to exaggerate when talking of his 'miracles' and then have all his followers agree that that was what had happened. One striking aspect of the testimonies is the unquestioning acceptance, in all but a few cases, of all that Sai Baba does and says by his followers. It was accepted that he is a holy man and therefore all that he does is miraculous.

The author assesses all this testimony in part two of the book, concentrating primarily on the miracles of: raising the dead, teleportation and extra sensory perception. In all of these cases the author is forced to conclude that there is no definite evidence for psychic abilities on the part of Sai Baba, however neither is there evidence of fraud. The testimonies are long, sometimes contradictory, and unfortunately second and even third hand. The investigative report style of the book makes for heavy reading. This is a well researched book but is definitely not for the New Age bestsellers list.

—Kevin Orrman-Rossiter

## Careers by hand

Nathaniel Altman and Andrew Fitzherbert, *Palmistry: Your Career in Your Hands* (Aquarian Press, £5.99).

Some large American companies employ graphologists to assist in the recruitment of staff. If you believe what this book is saying, it won't be long before they are supplanted by a new breed of expert—the occupational palmist.

*Palmistry: Your Career in Your Hands* purports to demonstrate how modern scientific hand analysis can enable individuals to choose a career that best suits their personality. We learn that farm labourers have plain hands with no special features, farmers who employ these featureless-handed sons of toil have substantial gaps between their fingers and forestry workers often have longer fingers than the average farmer. In case you're wondering, the reason why lumberjacks have lengthy digits has little to do with holding chainsaws. No. It's because there is a spiritual quality to be found in forests and those that work in them often have a touch of 'nature mysticism'.

But enough of the mystic lumberjack, what does this book have to offer those of us who pursue indoor careers? In the chapter on 'Communicating Hands', I was fascinated to learn that long, feminine hands belong to ultra-feminine persons. I'm rather relieved

about that. I also learnt that the hand of Xaviera Hollander, author of *The Happy Hooker*, reveals an ambitious nature and well-developed managerial skills. On this single occasion I sought in vain for deeper insights. Not at all reticent when discussing the spirituality of forest folk, the authors seemed mysteriously tight-lipped about the oldest profession of all.

What constantly amazes about this book is the claim for almost total accuracy when matching careers with hands. For example, we are told that scientists have knotty hands. The only exception are biologists who, rather sadly and inexplicably, possess hands of the knotless variety. Engineers, of course, not only have knotty hands but are also the proud owners of a short, straight and downward sloping head line. Eighty percent of computer programmers (no, I'm not making this up) have long fingers. Perhaps they're all frustrated lumberjacks.

Perhaps I should declare my interest in careers counselling. It is what I do for a living. Now I'm all in favour of new ways of working but the day hasn't yet arrived when I would feel comfortable about grabbing someone's hand, poring over their whorls and advising them to become a housing manager. I have a problem, in any case, with the logic. Do career changers experience major hand change? Are stubby fingered holders of Forestry degrees wasting their time applying for jobs? What happens to contented folk, happy at work, who discover—to their horror—that according to their hands, they are in the wrong job?

Nevertheless, it's a fascinating book, painstakingly researched and written in a rather engagingly earnest style. It's every bit as interesting to search for truth in the humble hand as it is to search for enlightenment in the stars. Now there's a thought. An astrological guide to career choice. If only I could find a publisher . . .

—Chris Phillips

### The disbeliever's pilgrimage

Malise Ruthven, *The Divine Supermarket* (Chatto & Windus, £14.95).

'I had become obsessed with Obese Persons, who seemed to be everywhere', Malise Ruthven confides on page 15 of *The Divine Supermarket*, recalling the frank observations in Peter Carey's acclaimed short story *The Fat Man in History*. Typically, Ruthven is never anything short of honest in this account of his 'unbeliever's pilgrimage' across the United States. Riding in a clattering second-third-fourth-hand camper van, Ruthven set out to discover why secular America has such a diversity of religions for the searching soul. It is perhaps not surprising to learn that '81 per cent of the 166 million Americans over the age of seventeen described themselves as Christians; of these 62 per cent believed in the second coming'. But to assume that Fundamentalism is all that's going on would be a mistake.

Arriving in Puritan New England, Ruthven starts moving, and keeps moving, but he does not share Paul Theroux's *travel for travel's sake* ethos that makes for the best travel writing. Ruthven has one eye on the people, and the other on the clock, often sacrificing depth for inclusiveness. He heads west to Salt Lake City, samples Mormonism, and is not impressed. This is familiar territory, and Ruthven hasn't really got much to say that hasn't been said before. What comes next is more unsettling. He is brave to search out neo-nazis in the foothills of the Rockies, where they can get away with almost anything as long as it's under the umbrella of 'registered church'. WHITES ONLY signs, shotguns, swastikas and 'Thank God for Aids' sermons make for scary reading. In California things are lighter, and he meets Love Israel, one of those Sixties Characters who met Jesus on an acid trip listening to the Grateful Dead and who just can't seem to shake off the day-glo and patchouli. Love (Paul Erdman) is a sad character—a charismatic leader who's seen better days, something he shares with Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, long departed from Ruthven's next stop, the Ranch at Rajneeshpuram in Oregon. Here the dwindling devotees still cling to the memories of the Rolls-Royces, the flowers and mystic sex. Those were the days, before Sheela, the IRS and Aids made things complicated.

In San Francisco, skeptics will enjoy Ruthven's acidic account of New Age fads, and in particular the words of 'Emmanuel, a being from an outer galaxy', who speaks his soft, gentle messages through the soft, gentle voice of channel Ms Pat Rodegast, prompting Ruthven to observe 'If Joseph Smith had been around today, he would definitely have been a channeler'. Ruthven dashes on, meeting Fundamentalist preachers, snake-handlers and creationists across the country at breakneck pace.

Excellent in places, overall *The Divine Supermarket* can't make up its mind what it is supposed to be, and ends up a mish-mash of travel book, history book, sociological study and agnostic comment. Salman Rushdie, writing recently in the *Observer* called the book 'a tourist guide to God'. One can sympathise with Rushdie's unease. Ruthven's forthcoming book is about the Satanic Verses affair.

—John Yates

### The nature of trance

Brian Inglis, *Trance: A Natural History of Altered States* (Grafton, £15.95).

'What is a trance?' With this impossible question Brian Inglis begins his interesting, but deeply problematic survey of altered states of consciousness through the ages. He bemoans the fact that trance is a neglected topic, finding few entries in encyclopaedias or books like the *Oxford Companion to the Mind*.

In fact the *Oxford Companion* refers to trance in its long entries on the paranormal and covers topics like hypnosis, out-of-body experiences, sleep and dreams, spiritualism and even automatisms and autism—all topics covered in Inglis' book.

What Inglis never seems to consider is the possibility that there is no unitary phenomenon to which this word applies, and that therefore it is quite reasonable that people have abandoned the term and studied the phenomena in other ways.

This problem undermines the whole book. Inglis makes statements which are hard to understand if, as he seems to have shown, no-one really knows what trance is. For example he claims that animals spend their lives in trance and, more worryingly, that trance plays a role in evolution which would not be expected by natural selection alone. What I found hardest to cope with was the many unsubstantiated assumptions about the power of hypnosis or the paranormal abilities of those in trance. Although he is critical at times his approach is bewildering, for he uncritically accepts that out-of-body experiences are hallucinatory and yet drops in comments like 'this group mind operates telekinetically' (page 267).

His main argument is that trance needs to be restored to its rightful position in science. If by this Inglis means that we have neglected altered states of mind and need to incorporate them into our lives and our understanding of human nature then I wholeheartedly agree with him. But I do not think this confusing book will do much to further this cause.

—Sue Blackmore

## Mystics galore

---

Anne Bancroft, *Twentieth Century Mystics and Sages* (Arkana, £6.99), *Weavers of Wisdom: Women Mystics of the Twentieth Century* (Arkana, £4.99), *The Luminous Vision: Six Medieval Mystics and Their Teachings* (Mandala, £5.99).

---

There have always been mystics, and there always will be—the good, the not so good, and the downright fraudulent. In *Twentieth Century Mystics and Sages*, we meet the big names—Alan Watts, Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff, Meher Baba, Rudolf Steiner, the Maharishi, as well as the lesser known—Chogyam Trungpa, Dhiravamsa, and others. Of the nineteen featured, only two of the mystics are women, a fact that led the author to write the companion volume *Weavers of Wisdom: Women Mystics of the Twentieth Century*. Here the names are lesser known still, although this is a fact that one must not misinterpret. Reading the accounts of Joanna Macy, Kathleen Raine, Simone Weil, and Danette Choi, I was moved by the sincerity of their feelings, and their portrayal of a sense of awareness that should definitely shake the notion that only men can make mystics. Meinrad Craighead's account of her glimpse of enlightenment when staring

into the eyes of her dog makes startling reading. In *The Luminous Vision* we meet six medieval mystics, including Jan van Ruysbroek and Julian of Norwich, and although the cultural differences of the middle ages stand out, the spiritual ones do not.

Anne Bancroft writes with flair and the authority of experience, and the colourful lives of the mystics themselves make these books immensely readable. It is tempting to say that Ms Bancroft's greatest failing lies in her ubiquitous magnanimity; Castañeda's 'Don Juan' is accepted as a bona fide person, although there is not one shred of evidence to support this belief; Eileen Caddy's explanations of the giant greens of Findhorn go unchallenged; the Maharishi is here, rosy cheeked and innocent to the last; and auras and Kirlian photography are endorsed by Lyall Watson of *Supernature* infamy. However, one can detect a glimmer of cynicism—or is it realism?—in her generous appraisals of the spiritual players in the game. After lauding his insight, she admits that Gurdjieff was a rascal-guru, a pure seeker tainted by the element of showmanship in his personality; she wonders why Guru Mararaj Ji really needs all those Rolls-Royces and jumbo jets, and she points to the ludicrous goings-on of the Golden Dawn.

The questions that these mystics ask are real questions, and buried somewhere in the mantras, hero-worship, and word-game gobbledygook there might just be some truth.

—Les Francis

## Seeking the 'Superself'

---

Ian Wilson, *Superself: The Hidden Powers Within Ourselves* (Sidgwick & Jackson, £12.95).

---

I have often thought that so-called 'paranormal' phenomena are far more fascinating if we consider them as natural psychological occurrences than as mysterious manifestations of the occult. For example, I find the 'cryptomnesia' approach to déjà vu experiences much richer, more provocative, than the assumption that they are due to the capricious operation of some arcane power such as clairvoyance, and Sue Blackmore's view of the out-of-the-body experience as something that takes place 'inside our heads', as it were, seems to me to be much more interesting than talk of astral projection. Ian Wilson seems to be of the same opinion.

He takes us on a tour of many human prodigies and oddities: hypnotic 'regressions', authors who rely on trance-like inspiration, Zen archers, mnemonists, calculating geniuses, idiot savants, fakirs, stigmatics and the like. It's chatty and an easy read, but could have been better edited. Much of the stuff is anecdotal, and Wilson sometimes relies too heavily on secondary sources. Then he gets into more contentious areas: dowsing, the mysterious quasi-telepathic performances of 'primitive' tribesmen, and the curious

correspondences to be found between separated identical twins. He is disposed to take these seriously, but cautiously.

He discounts paranormal 'explanations' (such as reincarnation or divine intervention) and claims that there is far more to human beings than we realize. I cannot disagree, but ultimately, I am afraid he disappoints. What is this mysterious 'superself' that Wilson is seeking? It operates, he tells us, without conscious effort. It is more than just our 'unconscious mind'. Perhaps, he suggests, it exists on 'a different evolutionary plane' from the rest of us, and is our 'real' self, 'timeless, imperishable'. This sort of platonic-cartesian talk really will not do. It is bad enough to suggest that human beings are a sort of mortal physical body that, for most of the time at least, is inhabited by a mysterious mental stuff, the two kept in co-ordination by some mysterious power; but to introduce a third kind of stuff above these two, even more ethereal than the mental substance, is philosophically difficult to sustain.

The book is written at the popular level, with no claim to originality; it is a useful survey of some human oddities, but it is weak on both philosophical and psychological analysis, and that is a serious shortcoming in a work of this kind.

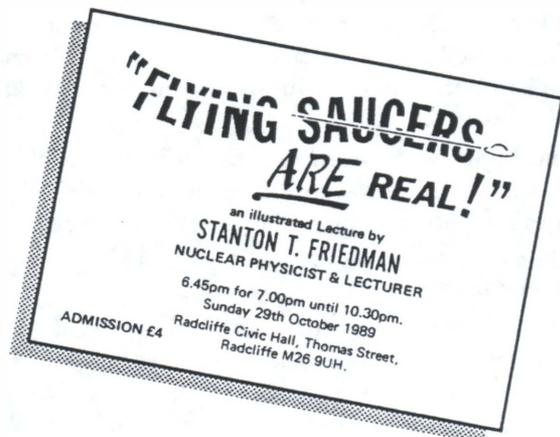
—John Lord

## UFOs in Radcliffe

*Flying Saucers are Real*, an illustrated Lecture by Stanton T. Friedman, Radcliffe Civic Centre, Greater Manchester, 29 October 1989.

To say that Stanton T. Friedman's two and a half hour lecture on UFOs was boring is to imbue the word boring with an unduly negative connotation. Friedman's lecture was excruciatingly, unbearably uninteresting for both UFOlogists, the general public and intrepid skeptical journalists alike.

Let me give you an example: Friedman is a leading advocate of the MJ12 cover-up theory which, in short, claims that back in 1947 the US government was involved in a secret operation to recover the wreckage of a crashed UFO; wreckage which included the bodies of four extraterrestrial occupants. The cover-up (directly involving presidents Truman and Eisenhower) has continued to the present day and would have remained forever unexposed if it were not for some supposedly top secret government documents which came into Friedman's possession. Now all this could make a highly interesting story even if it were all fiction. But Stanton T. does for an interesting story what Mike Oldfield did for the short snappy instrumental. He spent so much time immersed in the minutiae of his top secret documentation that any interest anyone in the audience may have had in the saga was relentlessly destroyed. One page of the 'secret' papers contains the names of the 13 important and prestigious



Americans (all now deceased) who were supposedly involved in the MJ12 project. Friedman spent an unbelievable 15 minutes simply going through each name on the list and explaining who each person was and demonstrating that each was a highly respectable individual. And this after the audience had already sat through almost two hours of his discourse. Hardly the stuff of which riveting evenings are made.

Overall the lecture was divided into three parts. The first was a statistical analysis of UFO information which was about as interesting as statistical information usually is (apologies to any statisticians out there!) and which didn't seem to shed any new light on anything. The second section was (I kid you not) devoted to Betty and Barney Hills' abduction experience and the Fish map, a tale which would take too long to go into here (See *The UFO Verdict* by Robert Sheaffer (Prometheus), pages 34-44). Suffice to say that the Hills' yarn of abduction by aliens (revealed under hypnotic regression) is probably not believed by a single member of the serious UFO movement in this country. In fact since Barney Hill died and Betty began regularly watching UFOs take off and land at a secret location known only to her, I doubt if their tale is believed by too many serious UFOlogists in the US either—although, admittedly the whole business of alien abductions is taken more seriously there than here. The final section dealt with the MJ-12 cover-up and the talk ended with Friedman showing (as genuine) a few well-known fake UFO photos.

Friedman, who for a time made his living giving UFO lectures (and if they were all £4 a ticket it was probably a pretty good living) was sufficiently practised in the art of giving such lectures that he overran his time to the extent that there was almost no time left for questions. In fact when no-one responded immediately with a question at the end of his marathon talk he asked himself a question and spent 5 minutes replying to it. (Yawn!)

Given a choice between attending another of Friedman's lectures and being abducted by hostile aliens I'd plump for the latter every time!

—Steve Donnelly

# Letters

## Mediums in action

A few years ago I went to see a 'world famous' medium perform, plus supporting act of novice medium. I use these words deliberately because the evening was composed of much hype and razzle-dazzle befitting a magical mystery show. I was mostly sceptical but a little anxious as to what I might experience to challenge this view. At the end of the show I was satisfied that I hadn't seen much that couldn't be explained in social psychology terms, i.e., expectation, mental set, conformity etc. The audience was composed mostly of women. Many had come in organised groups from local spiritual churches and the like. I have no doubts that they were set to expect wonders and hoped, in most cases that they would be 'selected'. The medium gave bits of information that would eventually lead to the person for whom the message was meant. This involved 20 or so people putting up their hands at the outset and as each extra snippet of information was given people eliminated themselves from the running when they failed to find a sufficiently substantial association with their own lives. Eventually only two people remained with their hands up, vying with each other until some crucial bit of information discriminate the true recipient of the message. Two factors now prevailed: First, the amount of information the 'chosen person' had already revealed about herself (it was always a female and often a widow) during this 'competition'; Second, the pressure on the 'winner' to confirm as true the following statements made by the medium. Is she really going to tell the medium and the thousands of people in the audience at this stage that the facts offered don't

fit? At one point the medium was able to tell a woman in the audience what number bus she had travelled on and the number of her house in a particular street. I couldn't see the relevance of this to the proceedings other than it amazed most people. I had no explanation for this revelation—but then I don't know how Paul Daniels is able to produce from a sealed envelope a card containing a word which has just been chosen at random by a member of the audience from a dictionary. But I do know that he calls it magic!

Eileen Braben  
Widnes

## The Burt affair

In his balanced and fairminded review of *The Burt Affair*, by my sometime schoolfriend R.B. Joynsons, John Lord remarks: 'A moment's thought will suggest that separated identical twins are an uncommon commodity; where did Burt find them all?' It is, I think, remarkable that in all the furore about Burt's work no one ever mentions *Crime as Destiny: A Study of Criminal Twins*, a work by a distinguished German investigator Prof. Dr. Johannes Lange, first published in Leipzig in 1929, and then in English translation in 1931. Lange started by identifying all those prisoners held in Bavarian jails who were members of pairs of twins. He then proceeded to compare their track records with those of their twins. In the proverbial nutshell, he found extraordinary similarities in the behaviour of all most all those who were members of pairs of monozygotic (one-egg, identical) twins; but precious few and certainly no extraordinary similarities between members of pairs of dyzygotic (two-egg, non-identical) twins. These

findings clearly anticipate the much contested findings of Burt. But what is especially interesting is that *Crime as Destiny* had an introduction by Professor J.B.S. Haldane and was translated by his future wife Charlotte. He was at the time Britain's most distinguished geneticist, and author and future author of innumerable popular scientific essays, a first collection of which was Pelicanned in 1937 as *The Inequality of Man*. Both Haldane and his wife were in the late thirties and throughout the forties very active members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Muscovite). In essays written before he joined that party, Haldane had foreseen the possibility of a conflict between Soviet power and scientific genetics. It was greatly to his scientific credit that it was on account of the Lysenko affair that he eventually left the Communist Party.

Antony Flew  
Reading

## Wicker man

*The Wicker Man*—No, no, NO! You missed the point of this brilliant film. Not 'the sacrifice of a true Christian believer'—and Summerisle's people despise Christianity and admit no respect for it—but the sacrifice of a virgin by choice, in the pagans' view a blasphemer against the forces of Nature! (Excuse me. I always dare to hope sceptics may prove more knowledgeable than dupes, and am infuriatingly often disappointed...)

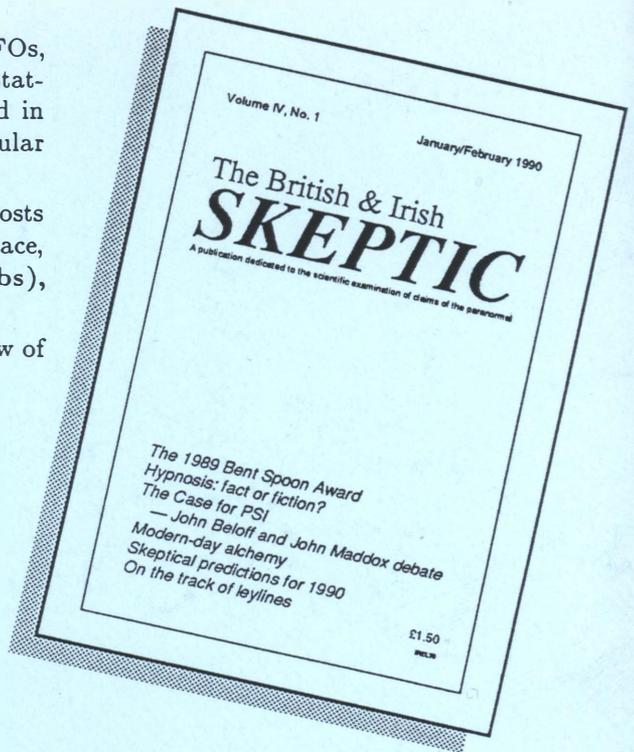
John Brunner  
Somerset

*Toby Howard replies: On the contrary, I do not believe I missed the point of the story; however, I am indebted to Mr Brunner for pointing out my inadequate summary of it.*

Why not join us in investigating claims of the paranormal—UFOs, alien abductions, ghosts, faith-healing, astrology, moving statues, metal bending, crystals, mediums—all these are covered in the *British & Irish Skeptic* magazine, plus news, reviews, regular columns, comment, cartoons and much much more!

A year's subscription to the *British & Irish Skeptic* (six issues) costs just £10 (UK only—Europe £12, all other countries £14 surface, £18 airmail). Write to **The British & Irish Skeptic (Subs)**, P.O. Box 475, Manchester, M60 2TH.

If this is the first time you've seen the B&IS, here are just a few of the feature articles you've missed!



## Volume I (1987)

Nos. 1-4 Out of print.

No. 5 Abductions in perspective (Hilary Evans); Geller in Reading (Michael Hutchinson); Magicians, Mediums and Psychics-1 (David Alexander); Carl Sagan's Universe (William Steele); Science vs. Pseudoscience-1 (Peter O'Hara); I Saw a Dupe (Karl Sabbagh);

No. 6 Creationism in Australia (Martin Bridgstock); Noah's Ark Founders on the Facts (Stephen Moreton); Nessie Hunt (Steuart Campbell); Magicians, Mediums and Psychics-2 (David Alexander); Science vs. Pseudoscience-2 (Peter O'Hara); The Royal Nonesuch of Parapsychology (H.B. Gibson); Skeptics' predictions for 1988;

## Volume II (1988)

No. 1 Geller's Sailboat (Frank Koval); Magicians, Mediums and Psychics-3 (David Alexander); Knock: Some new evidence (David Berman); Predictions 1988; Nelson's Emporium (Frank Chambers); Telepathy: a Mechanism? (Gordon Gray); The 'Alternative' in Alternative Medicine (Michael Heap);

No. 2 Doris Collins and the Sun (Wendy Grossman); Paul Kurtz Interview-1 (Wendy Grossman); State of the Art (Frank Chambers); S.G. Soal: Master of Deception (Chris Scott);

No. 3 Findhorn (Steuart Campbell), Paul Kurtz Interview-2 (Wendy Grossman), The Case Against ESP (Anthony Garrett), Telepathy: a mechanism? No! (Steve Donnelly), Recognizing Pseudoscience (Sven Ove Hansson),

No. 4 A Thorn in Geller's Side (Michael Hutchinson); Sprite; Skeptic at Large (Wendy Grossman); UFO days (Steve Donnelly); Comparative Astrology; Dreams and Visions of Survival (Antony Flew);

No. 5 Is There Antibody There? (Richard Kay); Dowsing in the Country (Denys Parsons); The Saints and Martyrs of Parapsychology (H.B. Gibson); UFO Hunt (Marcel Hulspas);

No. 6 Bristol Psychic fair (Hocus Pocus); The Incredible Mr Newman (Frank Chambers); Skeptical Predictions for 1989 (Marjorie Mackintosh); Joe Nickell on the Shroud of Turin;

## Volume III (1989)

No. 1 Firewalking in Indonesia (Chris Wright); Randi in Manchester (Frank Koval); Complacently Irrational or Irrationally Complacent? (David Fisher); Alternative medicine and the question of evidence (Nick Beard); Psychic Diary; Skeptic at Large; Heaven and Earth; Reviews: Special report: the paranormal on radio.

No. 2 Perpetuum Mobile (Anthony Garrett); Joseph Newman followup (Frank Chambers); My Psychic Odyssey (Mike Rutter); Cosmic Crystal Crankery (Stephen Moreton); Some Rational and Irrational Feedback (David Fisher); Skeptic at Large; Heaven and Earth; Reviews: Hollywood Channelling; Skeptics Under Attack; Physics and Psychics; Two Casebooks; Ghost Train.

No. 3 The Committee Against Health Fraud (Nick Beard); Pyramids, pyramyths and pyramidiotis (Barry Williams); Near-death experiences (Sue Blackmore); Twitching sticks (Anthony Garrett); European skeptics conference (John Lord); Skeptic at Large; Heaven and Earth; Reviews: Nicholas Witchell's Nessie, The Psychic Tea Room, Klimo's Channelling, The Electric Shock Book.

No. 4 Remembering Richard Feynman (Al Seckel); Two unpublished Feynman stories; The world of weird HiFi (David Fisher); The lessons of 'cold fusion' (Dave Love); A new test of religion? (Anthony Garrett); Eye-to-eye with Iridology (Hocus Pocus); Having faith in skepticism (Nick Beard);

No. 5 Elementary, My Dear Mystic (Medawc Williams); Science vs Religion (Barend Vlaardingbroek); The Cultist's Defence (Anthony Garrett); Scepticism: Universal Or Occasional? (Antony Flew); The Nullarbor UFO Mystery—Solved (A.T. Brunt); The Cards Can't Lie? (Mike Rutter);



This document has been digitized in order to share it with the public through AFU's project, running since 2010, to share files donated/deposited with the AFU foundation. Please consider making single or regular monetary donations to our work, or donations of your files for future preservation at our archival centre.

Archives for the Unexplained (AFU) · P O Box 11027 · 600 11 Norrköping, Sweden · [www.afu.se](http://www.afu.se)

Paypal: [afu@ufo.se](mailto:afu@ufo.se)

IBAN: SE59 9500 0099 6042 0490 7143

BIC: NDEASESS – Nordea/Plusgirot, Stockholm

Swish (Sweden only): 123 585 43 69