

Volume 5 Number 1
January/February 1991

The Skeptic

*Interview
with
Paul
Daniels*

*Potty
Training*



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Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

Firework Night

It is traditional to see bright lights in Britain's skies on and around the 5th of November. But last Guy Fawkes night, spectacular sights were seen in the skies over a large part of western Europe. A series of yellow and red 'stars' with a large luminous tail were seen by thousands of people in parts of western France, Switzerland, northern Italy, and southern Germany—a distance of well over 1000 km. The reported time to cross the sky varied wildly, from minutes to a few seconds. The estimated luminosity was comparable with the full moon although air traffic radars did not detect anything, indicating a high altitude (≈ 100 km). A classic UFO sighting—but a UFO which soon turned into an *Identified Flying Object*. According to reports which came to the *Skeptic* over the academic electronic mail networks, the event was caused by the reentry and burnup of the upper stage of the rocket that carried the Soviet comsat GORIZONT 21 into orbit on 3 October. Experienced observers on the ground had guessed that fact already from the long duration of the phenomenon, 2 to 3 minutes—even a really big meteor crosses the sky in a few seconds.

Give us this Day...

Old prayers sometimes get updated but 'give us this day our daily burger and fries' seems an unlikely request even to a bountiful God—except, perhaps in Pennsylvania. According to a report in the *SubGenius Digest*, a mix-up in frequencies on the cordless microphone at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Upper Southampton, PA, caused broadcasts from a local MacDonald's restaurant to be heard during Mass. One parishioner said she thought she was hearing things when, in the middle of the Mass, she heard an order for 'a Big Mac, large fries and a chocolate shake.'—a far cry from the usual unleavened bread and chalice of wine. 'It was really loud,' the parishioner said. 'At first I thought I was just hungry and imagining it, but then I heard it again.' Rev. Gerald Dennis Gill, a priest at the church commented: 'It's sort of funny, but it's also very disrupting when it breaks in in the middle of the Mass.'

Three Men and a Ghost

Haunted manor houses and castles are all too familiar and, more recently, haunted aerodromes have been in the news but a haunted movie set, with the ghost an extra in the movie certainly has novelty value. *Empire* magazine in November reported that the former owner of an apartment, in which the movie *Three Men and a Baby* was filmed, was horrified to see the ghost of her deceased son peeping out from behind some translucent curtains at the back of the set when she watched the movie on video. America's *60 Minutes* TV programme investigated the spectre on celluloid and concluded that the

image was indeed a ghost—a conclusion with which Disney, the American distributor of the film did not concur. According to a spokesman for Disney, the ghost is in fact a standee (which is moviespeak for a cardboard cutout) of Ted Danson, one of the lead actors in the film. Although this is perhaps somewhat more credible, no-one yet seems to have provided a reasonable explanation of exactly why a life-sized cardboard understudy should have been on the set during the filming.



Natural Nasties

As anyone who has suffered food poisoning from wild mushrooms will testify, natural food is not necessarily good for you. Unfortunately, the idea that natural equals nutritious is a very popular misconception which is causing increased concern to pharmacists. The *Guardian* on 9 December reported on a warning by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (who could be said to have somewhat of a vested interest in the matter) that many 'natural' or alternative remedies have never been tested for even the most basic standards of safety or quality. In the last year, the RPS has complained to the Medicines Control Agency about 20 products. These include a preparation that 'readjusts the hormone level at the hair root' and an alternative to hormone replacement therapy for women. Although very many alternative preparations are governed by food regulations which means that no medical claims should be made for them, the rules are increasingly being bent by marketing companies eager for a slice of the £225 million a year food supplement market. The society warned that these products are by no means free of risk. For instance, oil of primrose can trigger fits in epileptics, ginseng can cause problems in people with high or low blood pressure and the herb comfrey (used as a natural treatment for arthritis) can cause a potentially fatal liver disease.

Flaming Bibles

We skeptics always knew that playing with a ouija board was a waste of time, and Christians generally claim that it is a dangerous practice which calls on demonic forces and which can presumably lead to eternal damnation. The *Sun* on 12 December, however, claimed that the eternal flames came a little early for some Ouija players in Derbyshire. Whilst playing with a 'black magic ouija board in a church club' a group of youngsters 'fled in terror when a bible burst into flames and crucifixes snapped in half'. Boy Scouts please take note as this may be a more efficient way of starting a fire without matches than the traditional rubbing together of two sticks.

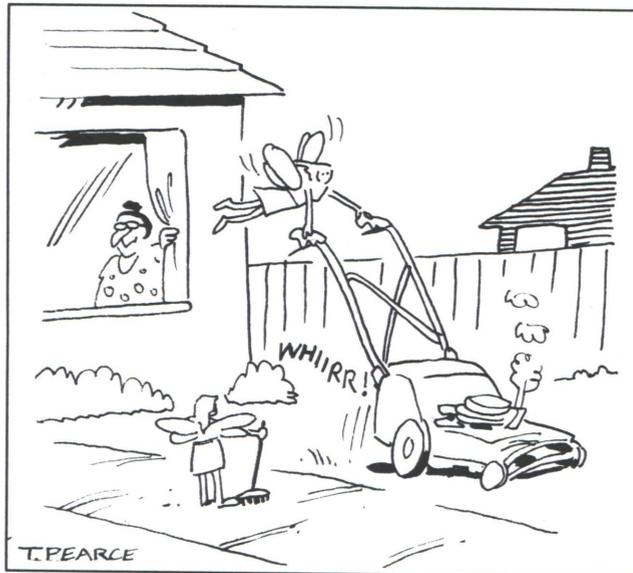
Precarious Stance

Throughout history, religious figures have made great personal sacrifices for their beliefs and in northern India this tradition is being continued by a bearded Hindu by the name of Khadeswari Baba. According to Simon Midgley in the *Independent* on 9 October the so called 'stand-up saint' has spent the last five years standing on one leg under a banyan tree. The 40 year old bearded mystic who lives on a diet of fruit, milk and marijuana intends to maintain his somewhat unbalanced stance until a temple dedicated to the god Rama is built on the site of a mosque in the town of Ayodhya. He says (and few will disagree) that it is difficult to perform all your tasks when standing on one leg. In the same *Independent* column on 20 November the subject of legs is raised once again when it is reported that a follower of the late Bagwan Shree Rajneesh has some reservations concerning the veracity of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's TMers ability to fly. According to Professor Satya Vedant: 'Maharishi's flying is a form of hopping where students learn to trigger a sudden muscular reflex that just causes their legs to jerk a few inches off the ground for a split second...If this is levitating then all frogs are born yogis.'

Fairy Nuff

Back in 1921, the indomitable Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a book in which he argued that fairies really existed. Since that time, belief in the weefolk has seriously declined, to such an extent that I often use the fairies as a counterexample when faced with the but-how-can-all-the-people-who-have-seen-them-be-wrong variety of argument in support of UFOs, ghosts and the like. (This doesn't always work, as recently when I met the only man in Manchester to have regular visitations from UFOs and fairies.) But if one is to believe *Take A Break* on 10 November (and why not) the little creatures with the gossamer wings may be staging a comeback. In fact, not only are fairies finding their way into the bottoms of our gardens but some of their more wizened companions are as well. For instance Josephine de Gournai from Leeds is quoted as saying: 'Until I saw gnomes, I was as sceptical as the next person'. Sandra Garstang, on the other hand, sticks to the fairies: 'People see fairies of different types and different shapes and sizes...Fairies are spirits that

look after grass, trees and flowers'. Hers are particularly tiny as they look after her grass (cheaper than a lawnmower and probably less smelly than sheep). Apparently, her fairies don't have wings, have old-looking faces and wear little homespun dresses. So the next time you're out in your back garden in your wellies watch where you're stepping.



Cancer Help Centre

In *Hits and Misses* in the last issue I discussed the statistical survey published in the *Lancet* which had implied that patients attending the Bristol Cancer Help Centre had a reduced life expectancy compared with patients undergoing more conventional treatments. It now appears fairly clear that the statistical methods used by the authors of the *Lancet* article were seriously flawed—an extremely worrying occurrence when one remembers that the *Lancet* is a highly respected medical journal. Until research with proper controls and using valid statistical methods is carried out, in fairness, it now has to be said that it has *not* been demonstrated that the Bristol approach to cancer reduces life expectancy or that it is, in any way, damaging to health.

Steve Donnelly is a physicist, a reader in electronics and electrical engineering at the University of Salford and a member of the Manchester Skeptics and the UK Skeptics.

Erratum

In the article 'Reason, Science and the New Demonology' by Andrew Belsey which we published in the last issue we inadvertently omitted part of the concluding sentence. As this totally altered the sense of the sentence we apologize for this error and reprint the entire final paragraph below:

The notion of a complete explanation of everything is implausible, for many reasons. It is likely that there will always be things that are not understood, perhaps because they are beyond the reach of human intelligence. But why should this be a troubling thought? It is more modest as well as more sceptical, to suppose that there are limitations to the powers of the human mind than to hand responsibility for unexplained happenings to the inhabitants of the so-called supernatural world.

The Houdini File

Number Four

Frank Koval

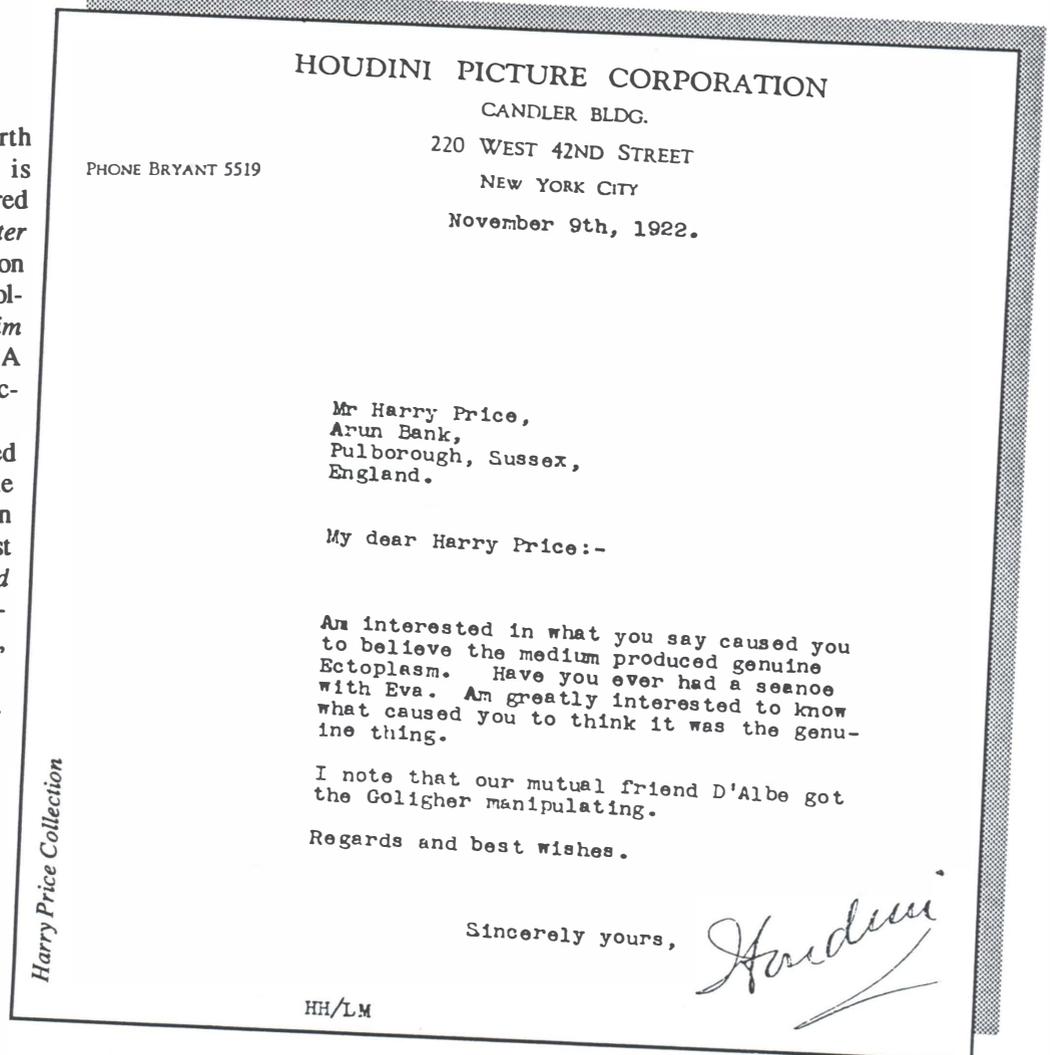
The letterhead of this fourth Houdini letter to Harry Price is interesting. Houdini had appeared in the silent movie, *The Master Mystery*, for B A Rolfe of Octagon Films, New York. He had followed this by starring in *The Grim Game* and *Terror Island* for J A Lasky of Paramount Artcraft Pictures, Hollywood.

Houdini became fascinated with film-making and formed the Houdini Picture Corporation in late August, 1920. He made just two films: *The Man from Beyond* and *Haldane of the Secret Service*, but they were not a success, and the project was wound up.

Houdini's reference to a medium producing ectoplasm refers to a series of seances that Harry Price attended in Munich, the first one being held on May 22, 1922. The medium was 18 year-old Willy Schneider. At the end of the first sitting, Price dropped his handkerchief on the floor. He later wrote (in his *Search for Truth*, published in 1942): 'It

rose in the air. Then a misshapen hand (technically known as a pseudopod) appeared and slowly disappeared'. Price believed that 'fraud was absolutely impossible' because of the tight control they had over the medium.

Goligher was Kathleen Goligher, a young medium who had been investigated by Dr W J Crawford, a Belfast lecturer in mechanical engineering. Kathleen Goligher's chief talent was in table-lifting, and Crawford came up with a fantastic theory of cantilevers of ectoplasm to explain the levitations of the table. He described his investigations in three substantial books: *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena* (1918), *Experiments in Psychical Science* (1919) and *The Psychic Structures at the Goligher Circle* (1921).



The unfortunate Crawford committed suicide before this last volume was published. In this work there are a number of photographs taken of the ectoplasm issuing from the medium's body and moving the table. The 'ectoplasm' looks for all the world to me like lengths of cloth.

After Crawford's death, the Goligher Circle was investigated by Dr E E Fournier d'Albe, who discovered fraud and collusion in the case. d'Albe wrote to Houdini on October 10, 1922: 'Yours of the 26th ult. just received. Yes, the Goligher legend has lost its glamour. I must say I was greatly surprised at Crawford's blindness'.

Frank Koval is a teacher, writer and conjurer and is a member of the Manchester Skeptics

The Philosophical Prestidigitator

Skeptical entertainer Paul Daniels talks to Michael Hutchinson

'That's a fiddle. It's sleight of hand' was Paul Daniels' reaction when, in the early seventies, Granada television showed him their film about psychic surgery in the Philippines. Their response was to say that they had watched the surgeon. 'But I watched the assistant', he said. Standing next to Daniels was a leading Spiritualist who wasn't convinced: 'No, it isn't a cheat' he asserted. 'But you can see it' Daniels insisted, but to no avail. The man just couldn't be persuaded.

With eleven television series and numerous specials behind him (the twelfth series is currently being broadcast) Paul Daniels is a well established household name. When I went to interview him for *The Skeptic* I knew from previous interviews I had read that he is very outspoken about religion and morality (in its widest sense). However, what I wanted to discover were his opinions about psychics and psychical research, and whether he had originally been a believer in the paranormal. He answered my questions with great enthusiasm.

'Yes, as a growing lad in the North, I believed that it was probable that people could transmit thought waves to one another. I believed in religious mysticism and I thought therefore, that as an extension of transmitting thought waves, telekinesis might be possible. I used to sit for hours trying to move a ping-pong ball across a table. It was only when I could afford a wider range of books that I became a lot more logical, and a lot more observant.'

This wider range of books included books about magicians of the past and the history of magic itself. 'Magic meaning conjuring' he clarified. 'It was Robert Houdin in the last century who said that a conjuror is an actor playing the part of a magician, magic being a thing of fable, fairy stories, and dreams. I realised that religion was a set of rules for society to live by that was operated by a set of guys doing magic tricks. It was an Egyptian guide who explained to me that Tutankhamen was a sentence: "King Tut, son of the sun god". At that time in history kings, pharaohs, and religious leaders were frequently called "son of god", and frequently given a virgin birth. I thought: Why wasn't I told this at school? Within a primitive society you may need a mystical fear to control children, but I believe that now you can educate them as to why those rules are good to live by and that if you break them there's a pyramid effect of people who are going to get hurt by your action. I really would like to see all schools have religion removed from them. It's time for the world to grow up. If people want religion they should give it to their children at the weekend'. These are strong statements, and come—surprisingly—from a man who was once a Methodist lay preacher.



Equally surprising, perhaps, is that Paul Daniels is very sympathetic towards Uri Geller. *Humanist News* once reported him as saying that he doesn't mind Uri and that he goes up and does his act, adding that Uri 'is a nice guy'. Daniels told me 'Uri is interesting. On the next series of *The Best of Magic* [recently transmitted] he comes out of the closet and does a magic trick—a trick similar to one we did a few years ago in which you set a clock up and do certain things while the clock is ticking, and then you take the clock back the amount of time you've been busy. We boiled water for example, and although the water has boiled you pour it over your hand and it's cold again. Oddly enough, rumour has it that despite his paranormal powers the whole thing didn't work anyway and it had to be reset behind a screen. But he is a great showman. I don't know where you draw the line. I mean if people say he's a con-artist to what extent is he a con-artist? Who has he conned? He is entertainment value, but, in my view, he has no psychic powers whatsoever. I don't believe that he can bend metal by thought waves—or do anything else by thought waves. He's a good entertainer if you leave it at that. In fact, he goes to a few magic conventions now and David Berglas (President of the Magic Circle) is a close friend.'

Daniels once got a typist to re-type the star sign information from an astrology book, but switched the headings around. 'Several times at parties people asked me "What star sign are you?" and I'd say "It's funny you should ask. I'm doing a book on that" and show them the piece marked with their star sign. They'd say "Yes, this is me". He laughed. 'When I told them what I'd done I lost so many friends...'

But why do so many people seem to need to believe in the paranormal? 'I think that because of bad education—capital



B A D—people have a need for mysticism; they're missing out on the simple fact that what you are is amazing; what you are is wonderful. What you *are*. No extraneous influences. What you are, inside you, is just fantastic. It really is, and yet they sit in front of the TV and watch David Attenborough going on about some mysterious animal that has developed its eyes so that it can see in the dark and they say "Isn't that wonderful". And they miss out on the fact that the thing that's watching the programme is the most developed animal of all in terms of thinking, and movement, and sense—and yet they look for mysticism, and that just drives me up the wall.

Nobody's promoting the human animal as being *it*, as being the be-all and end-all. Only Humanists to an extent. But Humanists aren't really promoting it, are they? They're not getting out there, writing articles and getting on television programmes. Maybe the answer to the paranormal is an awful lot of practical proof of what you are, what you can do. What we as a group can do without invoking paranormal powers.

Although it's not difficult to find skeptical books, people are not made aware by the media that they exist. It's sad that the people who have written these books which say "Oh, come on! This is nonsense" don't get much publicity. When you do, you're the bad guy. When Doris Stokes died, I got a phone call from the press, and I told them it was nonsense before, and it's nonsense now. I got quite viciously attacked in the press because they said I didn't pick up on her while she was alive. Well, I did—at every opportunity. So I became the bad guy, although I was telling the truth. And I think that's the real oddity in human nature. An oddity, but understandable. It's a truth, isn't it, that the mass of the people will always be poor, comparatively, and it's the poor people that need mysticism. The mass press will therefore always promote it.

TV people doing skeptical programmes do it in the wrong order. People flip channels and there is research to show how soon after the start of a programme they do so. (This research shows that viewers flip from 'The Paul Daniels Show' later than most programmes.) 'What they should do right at the start of a debunking programme is say "What you are about to see is a programme that will show you how these people cheat, how they play on emotions. The people are fakes". They should say that right up front, but they don't. Inevitably they do the programme as if it's for real and then they do the debunking. It's at the wrong end of the programme because by then you've convinced a major proportion of viewers who have changed over. "Oh well, yes it's another psychic and we know about psychics don't we?"'

He picked up a copy of the *The Skeptic*. "This word, "Skeptic", is going to drive away the people you're trying to

get to. Might I suggest a change of title to *The Paranormal?* with a question mark?"

In the last few years Daniels has spent two days a week developing and promoting a high speed language learning system which uses an ancient Greek memory technique. Already there are courses in French, German, Italian and Spanish. Using the system, Daniels learned enough Spanish in a week to perform his act before a Spanish speaking audience. Portuguese has just been recorded and Japanese is next in line for the treatment. 'Japanese is proving very interesting. It is different, not because of the sound, but for the way they speak. But it's marvellous. Very difficult for the Japanese to explain it to me.'

Daniels strongly approves of James Randi's work. 'It's something that really needed to be done. I think in his life he must have done more than anyone has ever done to raise public awareness—certainly in America—among thinking people. The saddest part is that Randi isn't young, and that he isn't on every day doing this as the audience is changing all the time. It should be taught in school. To me, the works of Randi should be taught alongside the works of Shakespeare because it's as necessary for your quality of life as art or literature'.

For several years in addition to his series and Christmas special Daniels also made a special Hallowe'en show which he enjoyed doing. The BBC would only allow a 1990 show if it was made in the middle of his new magic series. This would have meant putting up with the enormous physical and mental strain of doing two different shows in two days. 'But what I find odd is, here's an organization that's got, arguably, a pretty good magician, and Hallowe'en is a mystical kind of an evening and they don't use it as part of an annual celebration of entertainment. I think it's a mistake. Well, come on, it's hard enough as it is to fill the schedules, and here's a free gift almost. Funnily enough, a BBC radio producer phoned my manager and wanted me to go on his show and perform a miracle on Hallowe'en. Mervyn said I wasn't available that particular night, but would be the following week. "Oh, no!" said the man. "You don't understand. It's on Hallowe'en. That's the day their powers are greater isn't it?" This is a BBC producer in 1989. But come on! In this day and age he believes my powers are greater on a particular day of the year!'

'Some psychics maintain that I have a negative attitude. But I am a professional magician who has been in love with magic since the age of eleven. The one thing I would love to encounter is somebody who could really do it. This is my hobby, my life. I wouldn't be offended at all. If I could find somebody who could really do magic, really bend metal, I'd put him on my programme. On the other hand, if you really had that power, would you want to spend your life bending spoons? To say I'm negative is a joke. I want to meet a *real* psychic; I want to see a ghost. And I would be prepared to pay. Even now, with all the knowledge and the reading that's in my head, I'd really like to meet one. Wouldn't you?'

Michael Hutchinson is secretary of the UK Skeptics and British distributor of Prometheus books.

Martian Waterways

Sean O'Brian

The story of the canals of Mars

Today it is widely known that people once believed that there were canals on Mars. But the story behind this strange state of affairs is much less well known. The astronomical data in the following account comes from William Sheehan's *Planets and Perception*, an excellent account of the story.

During the nineteenth century, telescopes increased in size and quality and Mars naturally became the subject of increased observation. The best views of it are obtained approximately every two years, when Earth lies between Mars and the sun (this is known as an 'opposition'). The distance between the two planets at opposition ranges from 34.6 million miles (55.7 million km) to 62.9 million miles (101.3 million km). This results in significant differences in the quality of Earth-based observations with the best oppositions occurring every 15 years.

In the opposition of 1877, Mars was only 35 million miles away; Asaph Hall in the USA discovered its two moons, and Giovanni Schiaparelli in Italy drew the best map of Mars of that time, also inventing the modern naming system for Martian features. He copied some of the existing naming systems in calling dark coloured areas after bodies of water and lighter areas after lands and deserts. Connecting the dark areas he drew a large number of *canali*—which in Italian means channel or canal. Although past astronomers had also observed *canali*, Schiaparelli was the first to mark them in such numbers and to draw attention to them.

Schiaparelli confirmed the existence of the *canali* during the oppositions of 1879 and 1881, but in these drawings they became significantly straighter and narrower. He also saw that many of these *canali* had 'germinated', such that they were actually two narrowly separated lines. The name, their straightness and germination all suggested they were artificial, but on this fact Schiaparelli always remained unsure.

Other astronomers agreed there was something where Schiaparelli drew his canals, as they were by then being called in English, but they believed he had simplified what was really there. Although they remained unconfirmed, his observations were not dismissed because of his high reputation, gained in the 1860's for his work on meteors. This led to many observers assuming that their inability to see the canals was a reflection on their own lesser observational skills.

In 1886 independent confirmation of Schiaparelli's canal observations was made, and reported in the prestigious journal *Nature* (3 June, 1886). By 1890 the existence of canals was generally accepted by astronomers. Almost all the maps of Mars produced at that time showed them, many even in the same positions as those of Schiaparelli.



Mars as drawn by Schiaparelli on 27 May 1888, showing highly geometric surface features.

To understand why other observers confirmed the canals some knowledge of how Mars was observed is required. Because of atmospheric interference, the view of the Martian surface is normally neither clear nor persistent but is constantly fluctuating, with details only sharp for brief moments. Hence observers had to be selective in which details they recorded. So observers who knew the layout of the canals would know which details to record as canals. Observers had to go by eye in planetary observation at this time because photography was too slow, only being good enough to record the coarsest features.

Great things were expected from the 1892 opposition, in which Mars would make its closest approach to Earth since 1877, but unfortunately the best views were obtained from the southern hemisphere, away from the best telescopes. Edward Pickering at Arequipa in Peru reported seeing lakes on the Martian surface. Other astronomers reported high altitude clouds, and some publicly claimed that these were attempts by the Martian inhabitants to communicate with Earth.

Following this, two events occurred which may have affected the later developments of the canal story by their influence on Percival Lowell. In 1892 the French astronomer Camille Flammarion published *La Planete Mars*. A believer since the 1860's in life on other worlds, he interpreted the canals as proof of Martian habitation. In his book he assumed the canals were indeed waterways, and described how Mars, being an older world, might contain a more advanced and wiser human race. The second event was a paper published in 1893 by Schiaparelli, in which he argued that Mars had a significant atmosphere, ice-covered polar regions and temperatures similar to those of Earth. Although he supported the highly geometric appearance of the water carrying canals he argued they had been created naturally.

Not until 1894 did Percival Lowell, the person now most associated with the canals, enter the story. Lowell came from

a wealthy family in Boston, Massachusetts. A gifted mathematician, he declined an offer to teach at Harvard, travelling to Europe instead. On his return he chose to work in his grandfather's textile business for six years. Between 1883 and 1892 he made three journeys to the Far East and his interest in this area led to four books. An amateur astronomer, Lowell was so taken by Schiaparelli's canal observations that he decided to devote his own time and money to their study. He wanted to build an observatory somewhere in the American west where he believed the air was better. Returning to Boston in December 1893 he was given a copy of *La Planete Mars*. In January he, Pickering and others went west, reaching Tombstone, Arizona in March. They tested various sites, finally choosing one near Flagstaff. On May 31 they made their first observations of the 1894 opposition.

Schiaparelli's 1893 paper and Flammarion's book provided the outline of Lowell's own theory, which he formed after only two months observation of Mars. It generated great public interest, inspired H G Wells' *War of the Worlds* and he continued to promote and defend his ideas until his death in 1916. His theory was as follows. He noticed there were canals in the dark areas, areas which other observers had assumed to be seas. With this and other evidence he realised that Mars must be almost all desert. Mars was smaller than Earth and had therefore aged more quickly, and so any intelligent races would also be at a later stage of evolution. The ancient, peaceful Martian civilisation—desperate for water—had constructed a planet-wide canal system. With the end of winter the polar ice melted and the water was carried by the canals to the drier equatorial regions. In Lowell's view, the dark lines on Mars were not the canals, however; they were actually strips of irrigated vegetation growing on either side of the canals. These strips ranged in width from 2 miles to about 30 miles and could be over 2000 miles long. The interest of the general public was increased by Lowell's claim that this planetary desertification would also happen on Earth, the existence of deserts demonstrated that it had already started.

Lowell promoted his theory in a series of lectures and magazine articles, and in December 1895 he published *Mars*, discussed what had been observed, designed a possible planetary canal system and speculated on what Martian society might be like.

In July 1896 Lowell and his assistants began new observations which generated greater criticism than their Martian

results. They recorded lines on both Venus and Mercury, and one observer saw lines on a satellite of Jupiter. Most of the lines on Venus radiated from a central point like spokes of a wheel. For Lowell to claim he saw the surface repeatedly when most astronomers agreed that Venus was covered by a layer of clouds sowed doubt in the minds of some of those who supported him over the canals.

During the 1890s some objections to the canal theories were raised. In 1894 Edward Maunder explained how the canals could just be a series of separate dark areas, 'lakes' not 'canals'. In 1903 he and J E Evans performed what Lowell later called the 'small boy theory'. They found that when a disc containing dot-like markings was viewed from a great enough distance, their volunteers (boys from a Greenwich school) drew canals. Lowell correctly responded that this only showed what *might* be the cause, not what actually was.

Photographic evidence of the canals was finally obtained at Lowell Observatory during the 1905 opposition. Of the experts who viewed the quarter inch diameter images, half saw canals and half did not. Subsequent photographs obtained in 1907 and 1909 were no more decisive. Eugene Antoniadi had seen many canals while working with Flammarion in the years 1895 to 1902. In 1903 the small boy theory, together with his existing doubts about the canals led him to publish one of the first maps of Mars for 25 years which showed no canals. During the 1909 opposition he observed Mars using the largest telescope in Europe. The atmosphere was so good that on his first night's viewing he saw the surface of Mars for seven hours. He saw no canals or lines just 'a prodigious and bewildering amount of sharp or diffused natural, irregular detail.' (Sheehan 1988, p. 244). Similar conclusions were reached by many other astronomers.

In the following years supporters of the canals made more use of photography as the technology improved. As late as 1962 Earl Slipher (who had worked with Lowell) published a photographic atlas showing the canals, but once again while some could see the canals others could not (Mutch 1976). It was not until 1965 when the spacecraft Mariner 4 passed Mars and returned photos showing no signs of canals that the controversy finally ended.

So, the big question remains: why *did* people see the canals? The answer comes from the study of perception. Schiaparelli, in 1877, observed surface features at the limit of resolution for the type of telescope he used. Atmospheric interference permitted only brief glimpses of surface features and colours. His mind had to build an image from these and the canals were part of the structure it built. Later observers had the same problem but the maps of Schiaparelli gave them an idea as to how their glimpses of the surface of Mars should be interpreted. The idea of canals on Mars may be charming, but alas, it is without foundation.

NOTES

Percival Lowell's three books on Mars are *Mars* (1895), *Mars and its Canals* (1906) and *Mars as the Abode of Life* (1908). For a detailed account see William Sheehan's *Planet and Perception: Telescopic views and interpretations, 1609-1909* (1988). For good short accounts see *The Planets*, by Peter Francis (1981), and *The Geology of Mars* by T A Mutch et al (1976).

Sean O'Brien is a computer programmer.

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INCREASE

A year's subscription to the *Skeptic* (then the *British & Irish Skeptic*) cost £9.50 when the magazine began in 1987. By mid-1988 the subscription had risen to £10.00 and it has stayed at this price until now, despite numerous increases in postal charges and significant increases in quality (and cost) of printing. The *Skeptic* makes no profit—any excess revenue is used to improve the magazine—and no-one involved with the magazine draws any fee or salary. Reluctantly, to make ends meet, we have had to increase UK subscriptions to £12 for 6 issues. The extra cost of overseas subscriptions just reflects the extra postage charge.

Nostradamus and the Middle-East Crisis

Allan Lang

Did Nostradamus predict the Gulf War?

During the recent events in the Middle East some people apparently rang radio talk-back programmes with the news that Nostradamus had predicted the crisis. Unfortunately I was not able to hear any of these claims, and have no idea what was said. At first I thought that this might prevent me from making any comment on the latest 'Nostradamus was a prophet' claim. Then it occurred to me that ignorance has never been a handicap to other people when writing about Nostradamus.

On the basis that any fool can make any case from Nostradamus, I decided to simulate a case for the Nostradamean prediction of current Middle Eastern events, considering that I have assumed an argument that was actually not made, its place would be completely filled with one that was worse (*pace* Mark Twain).

Author's disclaimer: The following is a simulated argument and should be believed at your own risk.

Nostradamus predicted the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait! Four hundred years ago Nostradamus foresaw that the Final Anti-Christ (A-C) would rise up when the Cold War between the USA and the USSR ended.

Quatrain 2:89

One day the great powers will become friends.
Their great power will be seen to increase.
The new land (America) will be at the height of its power.
To the man of blood (the A-C) the number is reported.

Nostradamus of course actually named his candidates for the first two Anti-Christes as Pau Nay Loron (Napoleon) and Hister (Hitler). Is it possible that he also named the third? In the Nostradamus industry, nothing is impossible. We can probably discount Nostradamus's naming of people like Louis Pasteur and Tony Barber in this context.

However, there is the interesting case of:

Quatrain 2:62

Mabus will soon die, then will come
A horrible slaughter of people and animals,
At once vengeance is revealed coming from a hundred lands.
Thirst and famine when the comet will pass.

Up to now Nostradamus have failed to interpret Mabus, however, I can now reveal the real meaning for the first time. As is well known, Nostradamus spoke anagrammatically (see Pau Nay Loron above). If we reverse Mabus, while at the same time reversing the "b" to make it "d", we get "Sudam" QED.

And where will the A-C arise? Nostradamus knew.

Quatrain 8:70

One who is ugly, wicked and famous will come to power
And tyrannise all of Mesopotamia.
He will make friends by seducing them
And the lands will be made horribly black by destruction.

The final line obviously refers to the use of chemical weapons by an Iraqi Third A-C. These are even more clearly referred to in another Quatrain:

Quatrain 8:77

The Third Anti-Christ very soon be annihilated.
Twenty seven years his bloody war will last:
The heretics dead, captives, exiles
Blood soaked human bodies, water and reddened icy
rain covering the entire earth.

There is a seeming conflict between 'soon dead' and a twenty seven year war. Nostradamus obviously meant, by personalising it to 'his' bloody war, that it covered Saddam's entire struggle to achieve his personal ambition. This can be considered to have begun in 1968, making 1995 the final year.

'Heretics dead' refers to the execution of Saddam's opponents; 'Captives' are western hostages; 'Exiled' are the Kuwaiti El Sabah family 'A reddened, icy rain' is an obvious reference to chemical weapons.

The rise of the Iraqi war machine is predicted, as is the battle over the Shatt-el-Arab waterway, in:

Quatrain 3:61

The great band...will arise in Mesopotamia
Near the river shall be a light company
Which will hold that law for an enemy.

The Iraq-Iran conflict is also alluded to in:

Quatrain 5:25

The Arab Prince, Mars, Sun, Venus in Leo,
Will make the rule of the church suffer at sea,
Towards Iran nearly a million men will march
Ver. Serp will also invade Turkey and Egypt.

Here we have Nostradamus seeing Saddam Hussein (the Arab Prince), fighting the theocratic Iranian mullahs (Church...towards Iran) and then, later Turkey and Egypt (which were among the first countries to mobilise after the Kuwait invasion). The accuracy of Nostradamus's vision is attested to by the number he ascribes to the size of the Iraqi army (nearly a million). The World Defence Almanac 1989-90 (Monch Publishing Group) gives the strength of the Iraqi army as 950,000.

Immediately after the invasion of Kuwait, there was concern that an economic embargo of Iraq might fail because Turkey would not close a pipeline. Nostradamus knew better.

Quatrain 5:47

The Great Arab will march on,
But his ambitions will be undermined by the Turks.

The surprise of the Kuwaiti invasion and the speed of the western response is predicted in:

Quatrain 4:39

The Arab Empire will now reveal its intentions
And Hesperia (land of the west i.e. America) will compensate
for the losses.
Here endeth the argument.

The preceding was just to demonstrate that anyone can mine Nostradamus to find the odd reference for any historical event. The real question is, 'Did anyone see these predictions in Nostradamus's writing before August 1990?' As always, the answer is no.

The turn of events in the Middle East has been as much a surprise to the Nostradamans as to everyone else. Nevertheless, I will here make a fearless prediction. At least one Nostradamian will write a book, after the event, which will retract N's knowledge of the events.

Real people, however, must recognise that Nostradamus lived in a world where the geopolitical situation was somewhat different from that which applies today. It was only 60 years since the last of the Moslem territory in Spain had been recaptured. To the east, the Ottoman Empire was advancing into Europe and was only 50 miles from Vienna. To the south, the Barbary States were major naval powers.

Under these conditions, Nostradamus's many quatrains dealing with a Moslem-European war, involving invasion of Europe through Spain, Italy and Germany, described a possible, though as history proves, a not-to-be fulfilled prophecy.

Where modern writers fall into absurdity is through assuming the situation today to be identical to that in the 16th Century. While Nostradamus spends considerable time worrying about a Moslem invasion of France, he spends none considering a Mesopotamian invasion to seize the oilfields of Arabia or the Gulf. (Does that surprise you?)

While it is easy for modern writers to produce predictions for a violent Arab/European war, getting specific forewarnings of actual events in the present day Middle East is slightly more difficult.

A brief review of modern writers on Nostradamus shows that almost all of them totally discount the possible rise of an Arab military leader in Mesopotamia, or as Nostradamus unaccountably failed to call it, Iraq. I examined the works of the current crop of Nostradamus analysts to discover how they had previously analysed two quatrains (3:61 and 8:70), which were chosen because:

- (i) they mentioned Mesopotamia;
- (ii) their meanings could, just possibly, be taken as referring to the current crisis:

Quatrain 3:61

The great troop and cross bearing sect
Will arise in (or direct itself to) Mesopotamia
From the nearby river the light company (will come)
Which such a law/religion will hold for an enemy.



Mary Evans Picture Library

Quatrain 8:70

He will enter, vile, wicked, infamous
Tyrannising over Mesopotamia.
He makes all (his) friends by the adulterine lady;
Horrible land, black of physiognomy.

Line 4 may have been meant to have been read 'horrible thief...' Much of the ambiguity in Nostradamus may be due to atrocious proof reading. In this case, Nostradamus may have written 'lerre' and his publisher then printed 'terre'.

In chronological order, Nostradamus's interpreters saw these verses as follows:

Lee McCann (1941) includes news of a bit of future trouble with the Arabs, principally by lumping N's Arab Threat quatrains into a bundle. However, she omits both Mesopotamia quatrains as an Arab invasion of Europe and that the events associated with this would be all over by August 1987.

Henry Roberts (1947) declares that 3:61 means 'A great organisation, with some sort of cross as its emblem, shall emerge in a land between two rivers. Near one of these rivers, some traitors shall given the enemy assistance.' Like most of Henry's interpretations, this is nicely literal and inane and no real advance on N's own impenetrable poetics. No-one could possibly specifically relate this to the current crisis, or indeed to anything else. According to Henry, 8:70 means 'the country near Babylon will be terrorised by a person of the Negro race', which is even less apt than the previous example.

Erika Cheetham (1975) has no idea what 3:61 means, but thinks that Mesopotamia might be the area between the Seine and the Marne, and that the verse refers to Germany's occupation of France in 1940. In 8:70 she thinks Mesopotamia may be Avignon, between the Rhone and the Durance.

Charles Nelson Gattey (1977) includes N as one of the prophets in his *They Saw Tomorrow*. However, as Gattey only mentions past fulfilments, his book might better be called, *They Saw Yesterday*.

Probably the best claim could be made for Jean Charles de Frontbrune (1980). Although he considers 8:70 to refer to Ayatollah Khomeini's exile in Iraq from 1963-78, he did relate 3:61 to future Western-Arab conflict. Just to ensure that we did not overlook this, in August, a report from the Agence-France Presse pointed out that Jean Charles was saying 'I told you so'. The translation given in the report was:

'The great band and anti-Christian sect of Moslems shall rise up in Iraq and Syria, near the Euphrates, with an army and shall consider the Christian law as its enemy.'

This is substantially what he wrote in 1983, except that then he translated *compagnie legere* as 'tank force' rather than 'army'. It should be noted that Frontbrune tends to add his own interpretations into N's text. In 'anti-Christian sect of Moslems' the naming of the Moslems is solely Frontbrune's addition. What N originally said was 'sect crucigere'. Most commentators have taken this as coming from the Latin for 'cross-bearing', *crux-gerens*, Nostradamically modified so that it will rhyme with the subsequent line three and meaning 'crusaders'. Frontbrune declares that the original was *sect crucifigere* or 'sect of crucifiers' meaning Moslems. I would be the first to admit that N did seem to suffer from syncope on occasion, however reading 'crucifying sect' as 'Moslems' stretches the meaning of crucifiers to Humpty Dumpty proportions. Frontbrune shares with Nostradamus the nationality of Nicholas Chauvin and restricts the basic arena of the predictions to France. As such, he probably reflects the original intentions much better than do British or American interpreters, however, while the predictions may be reasonable reflections of 16th Century France, their applicability to 20th Century occurrences requires a substantial suspension of reality. Frontbrune principally sees the Arab/European war occurring in Europe.

Rene Noorbergen (1981), although he follows a similar pattern to de Frontbrune, sees it slightly differently. In his scenario, Russia is allied to France, America and Britain (Frontbrune has them allied with the Arabs). The Chinese attack before the Arabs, rather than after them. In particular, he places 3:61 at the end of the Holocaust War. (Prior to this, a large meteor has hit the Earth, China has launched a nuclear attack, then germ warfare, against the West, invaded Russia, invaded Europe in concert with the Arabs. England has been flooded, the British have landed in France, the Russians and Americans have taken the offensive and recaptured Europe and the Chinese have surrendered. Dull it ain't.) He does see 8:70 as referring to a Mesopotamian Arab, of questionable reputation, making trouble about August 1987.

John Hogue (1987) did not consider either of these quatrains worth mentioning. Indeed, Iraq does not loom large in his writing. This may be because he predicted that Hussein would be totally defeated by Iran in August 1987, so it is unlikely that current events would have been anticipated. Hogue, in his *Nostradamus and the Millennium*, nominated four candidates for the Third Anti-Christ, none of them Saddam Hussein. But then Hogue also said that the great new

spiritual teacher who will bring peace and enlightenment in the New Age, is none other than the late Silly Old Bhagger, Shree Rajneesh. Hogue's four candidates for the Anti-Christ are:

A pair of terrorists known as the Two Abus; Ayatollah Khomeini and Colonel Khaddafi of Libya, whom Nostradamus considers a 'posturing fool', or at least that is what he told Delores Cannon.

Delores Cannon (1989) had the advantage of actually talking with Nostradamus. In *Conversations with Nostradamus: His Prophecies Explained*, she used hypnotic regression techniques to conjure Nostradamus from several subjects, similar to 'past life therapy'. But it can't be that. They couldn't all be Nostradamus, could they?

Despite this 'advantage' she failed to give us any warning of current events. Like the others, she appears not to consider Mesopotamia an interesting area and totally ignores both quatrains. (All may not be lost. Her book is styled Volume 1, and these verses may appear in Vol 2 as 'fulfilled predictions'. But what's the use of postdictions I say.)

If any conclusion can be drawn it is that the current mob of Nostradamus experts have shown a remarkable degree of almost 'psi-missing' in failing to relate either of these verses to presently unfolding events. So, despite all claims for Nostradamus's amazing vision, the situation remains: in 400 years, no-one has yet managed to predict the future by using the writings of Nostradamus.

LATE NEWS

It has now been noted that a 1949 Warner Bros cartoon had Bugs Bunny falling into the clutches of a black-moustached Hussein of Baghdad. This appears to be a far more accurate prediction than any of Nostradamus's nonsense.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank M V Jones for providing an non-credulous translation of Nostradamus, and, in particular, his suggestion of a possible misprint in quatrain 8:70.

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Allan Lang wrote this article for the Australian *Skeptic* from which it is reprinted with kind permission.

Potty Training

Ian Woods

A skeptical look at management training

It is time for the psychics, the quacks and the astrologers to stand aside. They have held the centre stage of sceptical enquiry for long enough, and must now make way for the new stars of the money-for-moonshine circus. Hats off then, one and all, to the men with the flipcharts and funny videos, the Management Training consultants.

To be absolutely fair, close scrutiny does reveal a major difference between Management Training and, say, selling quack medicine. It comes just after the pound sign on the bill. Quack medicine exploits personal health problems, is wholly ineffective, and costs a few quid a go. Management Training exploits corporate health problems, is similarly ineffective, and leaves little change out of £300 per person per day's course. In revenue terms alone, the Management Training gurus are way ahead of the field in the fakery stakes.

At the heart of this multi-million pound scam is the fact that companies are wealthier than individuals, but not necessarily less gullible. Nor are they less prone to hypochondria. All companies face tough management-level stickies at some time or other. Poor morale, manufacturing inefficiency, inadequate quality control, poor presentation skills—the litany of common sins is sufficient to fill a forest of glossy brochures, and does. Such problems can be extremely costly and damaging, which is why glad tidings of an effective 'quick fix' solution are going to sound like manna from heaven. Not a point lost on the just-add-water schools of Management Training, who turn out quicksilver prose like this:

'The individual learns how to placate, organise and control situations to ensure maximum customer satisfaction'.

Well now, that's quite a big subject isn't it? Perhaps a tough one to master? Not at all—just one day, £295 plus 15% VAT, according to the brochure. Here's a course on writing well:

'Participants are taught...how to plan their output in terms of structure, layout and language. The course teaches people to convey their message in a way that is simple, clear and human'.

Two days for this one, £470. The Pot Noodle approach to Management Excellence.

It's a nice idea. Does it work? Normally, a course stands or falls on whether it fulfills its aims. With specific skill training, such as teaching someone shorthand, it is fairly easy to tell if the course has succeeded. But the stated 'aims' of a management training course (so pithily summarised in the brochures) are sufficiently vague or generalised as to elude evaluation. Moreover, benign effects upon the trainees would probably require several months or even years to be

evaluated properly, and even then there would be no 'control' to demonstrate a causal link between the course and a perceived improvement in performance. As with so many pseudo-sciences, there is simply no way to tell if it works, and that's the way the gurus prefer to keep it.

But they do have one neat trick up their sleeves when it comes to evidence: favourable testimonials from past clients. Almost all the wham, bam, have-a-diploma-Sam schools of Management Training gather feedback on their courses by means of follow-up letters or, more usually, phone calls. These may be made to the actual managers who were sent on the course, or to the chief organ grinder who decided they needed it. It amounts to the same thing since, come the post-mortem, the organ grinder only has the trainees' opinions to go by.

This is where things get very interesting. A manager who has recently been on a training course, and who is asked for an opinion, has to be sensitive to the office politics involved. First of all, to suggest the course was useless may seem ungrateful or churlish. This feeling intensifies in proportion to the cost of the course. Secondly, an unfavourable verdict on the course risks being seen as a criticism of whoever made the decision to book it. Advising your boss that he or she just blew several hundred pounds is hardly a smart career move.

Thirdly, an unfavourable opinion can backfire on the employee. If the course is deemed to be for those of managerial status, 'failure' to find it useful can be viewed as evidence that one is not, at heart, the managerial type. Not good reasoning, but it does happen. Fourthly, the employee has to consider the 'have you stopped beating your wife?' factor. Suppose you were recently sent on a course all about how to be well organised. If asked, are you now going to say that since going on the course you are (a) well organised or (b) not well organised? Naturally, (a) wins every time, hence the course gets a thumbs up by association.

For all these reasons, few employees are going to say anything unfavourable about courses they have been sent on. It is much easier and safer simply to offer vague sentiments of having found it worthwhile, stimulating or whatever, and leave it at that. Thus a generally favourable response is conveyed up the company hierarchy, and may in turn be conveyed back to the training organisation.

There is, then, very little to be gleaned from testimonials as to the quality of the courses. Yet these are often a critical factor in a company's decision to go ahead and purchase. All the same, would companies really go on paying for training courses year in year out unless there was some benefit? It's a fair question. I would suggest that companies fork out for



reasons having a lot to do with how companies actually 'tick', and precious little to do with the merits or otherwise of the courses on offer.

In the first place, companies are extremely motivated to believe that the courses are beneficial. For managerial deficiencies to be 'healed' by the judicious application of select training courses, some of them only lasting a day, is a very seductive idea for those faced with resolving such problems. Do not be surprised, therefore, if companies exercise the critical faculties of an ostrich with a balaclava on backwards. In addition, there is the corporate equivalent of keeping up with the Jones's. 'Hey, if all these other guys are investing in training (the brochures always call it an 'investment'—nice touch), we'd better do it too or else they'll be more brilliant than we are!'

A third factor is that personnel departments (or any staff engaged in a comparable role) can keep themselves tremendously busy with the searching, sourcing, selecting, booking and arranging of training courses. This gives them an excellent chance to fuel their own sense of purpose, and to do so in a conspicuous way. All to the good in a hierarchical company structure, where any justification for one's own continued existence is highly coveted.

Finally, note that better training, and more of it, is often trumpeted as vital to improving British industrial performance (a notion I happen to agree with, provided the training is genuinely productive). This gives training a respectable, worthy aura even before the training organisations have got their brochures out.

And so it is that favourable testimonials come about, which help to sell more courses, which generate more testimonials, and nobody is stopping to check if anybody is actually managing things any better than they did before. That the courses are in any sense worthwhile is a matter of corporate cultural mythology, not demonstrable results.

To digress for a second, I must say that if these courses do work, then the gurus themselves seem strangely immune to their own magic. I've known Time Management courses delayed because the tutor was late. I've endured courses on personal presentation skills that make Norman Wisdom look sharp. My pick of the bunch, though, would have to be courses on quality control, pamphlets for which unflinchingly

distinguish themselves by containing more glitches than a vintage copy of the *Grauniad*.

Any delusions that these courses achieve something are sorely tested by analysing what they consist of. Over the past ten years, I have witnessed (or seen the contents of) more management training courses, videos, seminars, books, shows, conventions, lectures, audio tapes and talks than I can shake a stick at. Hand on heart, in all this time, I have not seen anything even slightly as useful as a candyfloss cricket bat.

Your so-called 'investment' consists largely of An Expert who will talk at you for hours or days on end, until your cheque runs out. There are usually a few 'jollies' thrown in to give An Expert a rest—John Cleese videos, role-playing games, group discussions and so forth—but these are all subservient to the wonderful privilege of watching An Expert talking.

The talking is typically a cocktail of three principal ingredients. You get some true-life Case Histories (related at length and sometimes including a point), natty little Anecdotes, and some gentle 'Blue Peter' style explanations of one or more Theories concerning the subject in hand. You can bet your life's savings the Theories will contain a number of clever acronyms, such as TOPS (Targets, Objectives, Plans—if you didn't know) which are supposed to help you remember things. So that's Case Histories, Anecdotes and Theories, which we can sum up using the acronym 'CHAT'. Got that?

This pricey talking does command a certain sneaking admiration. To have An Expert talk at me for seven hours (a working day) can easily cost £250. Last year I paid £25 to see Frank Sinatra talk *and* sing for about 90 minutes. Work it out—anyone who can charge more for talking to me than Sinatra does for singing has to be given credit for nerve if nothing else. If the talking achieved anything, that would be different. If.

I have had the good fortune to know many excellent managers, none of whom ended up that way by attending courses. I think it is a fair generalisation to say that expertise in any form is necessarily a combination of natural aptitude, some hard work, and practice. This is, of course, rather dull and uninspiring news, especially the bit about hard work. How infinitely preferable for all concerned to believe that a somewhat relaxed, not unpleasant day or so spent watching someone draw diagrams on a flipchart, and playing grown-up role-play games, is the route to management mastery.

Hence it is that numerous aspects of corporate psychology combine to form a self-perpetuating belief system which suits all and serves none. I have nothing against real training, any more than a critic of faith healing has anything against penicillin. But when there is such a pressing need for the genuine article, the substitution of a quack alternative becomes all the more deplorable and deserving of a sceptical rout.

Not convinced squire? You need my special 'Instant Skepticism' course. One day, £400 all-in, and we show a funny video. Any takers?

Ian Woods currently works in the software industry. He has worked as a writer and producer on behalf of numerous companies.

Warning—Graphology Can Damage Your Health!

Barrie Whitaker

Does handwriting analysis provide information on personality?

I have always been over keen to offer my mind and body in the furtherance of the Sciences. Years ago at University, I was usually the first to put my name on the 'Guinea Pig' volunteer list to participate in the latest research into human behaviour or whatever and this inclination has stayed with me to the present day.

As a psychometrician, I now have the pleasure of applying a large variety of valid psychological instruments on to a not-so-willing captive population and in my efforts to ease the pain, I have investigated other means of assessment, one of which was graphology.

There is some considerable debate as to how this activity should be classified. Is graphology an art, science or a myth, can it be taken seriously—after all, it is an 'ology; or should we relegate it to the fairground?

ORIGINS OF GRAPHOLOGY

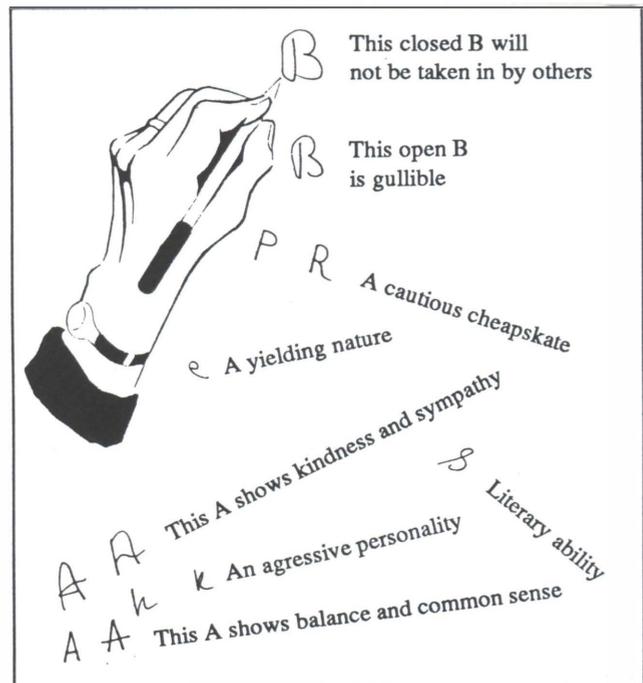
According to some writers, the elementary principles of graphology were known six thousand years ago with the Chinese being the first to recognise handwriting as a means of revealing personality traits. However, it was not until very much later that the French decided to take the subject more seriously, and this has persisted to the present day where graphology is widely used on the European continent. It has also gained popularity in the USA where many large commercial organisations use it in employment selection.

CURRENT USES OF GRAPHOLOGY

Its best known use in a more scientific form, is in crime detection, where criminologists have long been able to substantiate their findings in the Law Courts. Graphologists have gradually widened its use—unscientifically in my opinion—to generate personality profiles and predict behaviour from unwarranted generalisations. Handwriting analysis is used in job selection, vocational guidance, marriage compatibility, and in the detection of physical and mental illness. In the latter context, graphologists believe that they can see examples of the deterioration of mental functioning in the handwriting of Napoleon and Richard Nixon when they were in their final years of office.

VALUE OF GRAPHOLOGY

On the very simple premise that the brain communicates with the hand, in a similar way to which it does with the other skeletal muscles, there should be little doubt that the brain has an influence on hand movements and hence the workings of the psyche could be expressed in our handwriting.



Experienced graphologists, whilst accepting that the writing emanates from the conscious, reckon they can detect the subconscious activity in the script and therefore assessment through handwriting cannot be faked.

They ignore the possible effects of classical conditioning in the infant stages, they ignore autosuggestion and compliance, they couch their reports with phraseology which is unspecific and consequently could apply to 90% of the population and finally they dismiss any serious attempts to objectively validate their work.

Under these conditions most of us could claim to be graphologists! After all, I recognise the handwriting of a friend, I recognise that my Doctor conceals his numerous weaknesses by scribbling. I have seen that some theatrical persons have flamboyant large handwriting (others can't write at all). I could detect the introverted accountants who supposedly have small backward sloping features to their script, or the wavy letter formation on the octogenarians' poll tax form. It all sounds very convincing stuff, doesn't it?

Can I therefore accept that there could be an expression of our personality in our script?

Well I have found one lady to be damned accurate on two occasions—hardly significant I know—she predicted from

The Case for Super-Skepticism

David Fisher

Time for a schism between wet and dry skeptics

'By the great body, I mean such as reject all consideration of the equality of cause and effect, who refer the results to electricity and magnetism, yet know nothing of the laws of these forces...'

Michael Faraday (publicly expressed opinion of 'table-turning')
Athenaeum, 2nd July 1853.

Every growing movement has its growing pains, and almost every organisation has its splinter groups. Most relevantly, the original *Zetetic* magazine soon divided to give the *Skeptical Inquirer* plus the reformed *Zetetic Scholar*, with its strange editorial mix of moonlighting CSICOP stalwarts (Hyman, Alcock, Diaconis) and leading apologists for the paranormal (Harry Collins, William Corliss, Michael Gauquelin, Charles Tart).

The above schism occurred because one of the *Zetetic*'s founders (Marcello Truzzi) felt that the others were too extreme in their skepticism. I have reluctantly, and not suddenly, come to the conclusion that a similar schism is needed here; but in the other sense. That is, I find the attitude of many skeptics to be too 'wet'; to use Marek Kohn's terminology (*Guardian*, 18/19th August 1990). The cartoon which accompanied that article also made skeptics look like everyman's idea of the worst sort of waffling and ineffectual philosophers.

Perhaps the cartoonist was confused by his dictionary; the definition (of skepticism) in my dictionary encompasses every attitude from pyrrhonism (nothing is knowable) to cynicism (sneering fault-finding). That is the root of the problem; I am basically a follower of Antisthenes and his Cynics, but I find that I have to play too much ball with the followers of Pyrrho. When they are not getting under my feet with their philosophical quibbling, or under my skin with their quisling concessions to 'the other side', they are undermining every skeptical view of my own by their insipid media efforts.

Some people seem to be content for skepticism to be an hermetic talking-shop, wining minor victories far away from the public eye. I think that it should play a more uncompromising role; of the type played by *Greenpeace*. Thus, in my opinion, Project Alpha (Randi's successful planting of two people with apparent paranormal powers in a parapsychology laboratory—see *Skeptical Inquirer*, volume 7 p24, volume 8 p36) is the most effective act of 'cynical' skepticism that has yet been attempted. It was, of course, particularly disliked by the victims (and by the likes of Truzzi and Collins).

Meanwhile, the milksop-skeptics have brainwashed us into believing that the only way to proceed is never to pre-judge, to give the proponent of some anomalous claim every benefit of the doubt, and to win the media over to our side by calm and reasoned argument. This would be the correct method *if* the miracle-mongers were obliged to comply, but there is no obligation, desire, or advantage in this from their point of view. When they say that they do not have to test something, 'because they already know that it works', they are correct in a way that any capitalist would applaud. It survives in the market-place, so there!

However, the milksop strategy is clearly at variance with good oldcommonsense (or should it be 'street-wisdom' these days). After decades, centuries, or millenia of failure to provide concrete evidence, why *not* pre-judge telepathy, homeopathy, and astrology, at least?

Why give the miracle-mongers the benefit of the doubt? The dice are usually already weighted heavily in their favour by economic power, the bottomless gullibility of the general public, and a greater natural affinity with the media.

Above all, the media are a major cause of the problem; not part of the solution. The media are entirely entertainment-driven; not at all information-driven, as they like to pretend. Dog-bites-man would be *information*. They are the natural bed-fellows of the miracle-mongers. Both of them feed off the natural (but self-destructive) preference of human beings to emote rather than to think, to dream rather than to act, and to delude the brain with drugs rather than to exercise it with puzzles. The first-named route always has the edge; for that path leads downhill and is therefore easier, especially for the lame of brain.

A corollary of the above is that skeptics must avoid the media like the plague. A skeptic who is popular with the media is as unwholesome an entity as a wealthy scientist or a rich policeman. That is, one senses that principles must have been sacrificed in some way in order that such an animal could exist. Why is it that 'wealthy astrologer', or even 'wealthy surgeon', do not sound so strange to the ear?

Similarly, a genuine skeptic cannot be popular, almost by definition, because he must always make others question their assumptions; and that tends to make their brains hurt as badly as Mr Gumby's (he of the knotted handkerchief in Monty Python sketches).

It was, in fact, an unwise reflection (*Skeptic* 4.6 p22) about a typical social situation (a party) which triggered this out-



burst. There, Toby Howard had lampooned an archetypal 'Super-Skeptic' who would not give an inch in his disbelief.

I accept that this could not have been consciously intended to be a parody of myself, since Toby and I have never met. But others instantly recognised me as 'Super-Skeptic'; probably because I have been known to take part in public slanging-matches with the more obnoxious miracle-mongers at psychic fayres, to grill mercilessly anyone who approves of the usual nonsenses within my hearing, and to invite Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons to come back again, 'when I have had time to check their stories'.

I hasten to add that, unlike Super-Skeptic, I do not wish to ban *anything* (except perhaps the uncontrolled sale of comfrey). However, I do believe that opposing opinions should have a right of access to 'equally loud megaphones'. Instead, skepticism is granted all of the public address facilities of a Sony Walkman. If skepticism was banned, nobody would notice.

Meanwhile, the miracle-mongers are given free access to every sort of public forum on a daily basis, but nevertheless yelp, 'suppression', at the slightest hint of informed criticism.

Free speech has now overtaken patriotism as the last refuge of a scoundrel, and every pressure group has a dodgy opinion poll or dubious 'scientific' report to support its case; be it 'pornography causes rape', 'TV causes violence', or 'nuclear power stations cause leukaemia'. In Ceausescu's Romania, the birth-rate was maximised (for communist motives) by telling women that any form of contraception caused cancer. The unwelcome result, in the form of unwanted and HIV-positive children, is well known.

In the UK, the food industry has been shaken by a series of health scares; all on the basis of minimal proof, and initiated by a single self-styled 'expert'.

In a world in which the people cannot tell the difference between science and pseudoscience (including disastrous social inventions such as communism), and in which some scientists get a taste for power at the price of sacrificing scientific objectivity, how long will it be before another Lysenko (or even Hitler) causes more widespread misery?

In view of this danger, I fully concur with 'Super-Skeptic' and find Toby Howard's criticism of him to be divisive. Why should 'extreme' skeptical views (where skepticism is at least in line with demonstrable facts) be considered embarrassing or even *outré*? Call me an old extremist if you like, but I happen to believe that the same flaws in reasoning that

lead to the cosy exploitations of the paranormal are the source of *all* human misery. The pseudoscientists who told us about the natural inferiority of Negroes and Jews, the baseless psychological theories (popular among paedophiles) of the innumerate drug-addict Freud, and the shoddy pseudo-historians who argue that the Holocaust never happened, succeed only because of a common failure to appreciate the importance of strict rules of evidence.

Overall, I think that I prefer Super-Skeptic's denial, of 'everything short of quantum mechanics', to Toby's easy surrender to polite social conventions. Perhaps the piece was written *at a party*, and while in a particularly mellow state.

However, his jibe was but the last straw in a series of irritations. For instance, Susan Blackmore had criticised me, in private, of having too adversarial an approach. I tried to correct this by offering to work, with a well-known monger of precognition claims, in such a way that no double-dealing would be possible on either side. Nevertheless, his reply was that he found skeptics to be 'narrow-minded' and that he would rather work with people 'who are as dissatisfied with science as he is'.

This exchange was conducted via Susan Blackmore, and I noted with interest (but no real surprise) that she did not accuse *him* of being too adversarial!

For this, and other reasons, I am thoroughly sick and tired of using kid gloves on those miracle-mongers whose entire attitude and past record militate against their being accorded any sort of rational consideration.

What exactly is the use of continuing with this farce of pretending that the miracle-mongers have any sort of integrity, or any interest in the paranormal, outside of getting their profitable published drivel into bookshops? Are those parapsychologists who have tenure at a university really going to try to saw completely through the branches upon which they are sitting? What exactly does it mean to hold a doctorate in a subject which might not exist? (Doctors of divinity face a similar moral dilemma, but *they* do not pretend to be scientists).

Above all, why are we still arguing about the same sort of nonsense that the Ancient Greeks, the Renaissance scholars, and the scientists of the Industrial Revolution, argued about? Is it because there really are eternal mysteries which are not amenable to scientific analysis? No, it is because there exist those in every age who realise that exploiting their fellows requires less effort than does wrestling a living from Nature, or understanding Nature's laws. Seen in this light, the permanent skeptic/believer dichotomy is not a reflection of some reassuring and continuing equilibrium that exists between a host and its parasites.

Some would argue that one must distinguish between those who are innocent followers of the paranormal, and those who are unscrupulous leaders. I refuse to draw any such distinction; the gullible are as culpable as the criminal.

'I have not been at work except in turning the tables upon the table-turners,...I declare that, taking the average of many minds that have recently come before me...I should far prefer the obedience, affections, and instinct of a dog before it.'

Michael Faraday (private opinion of 'table-turners')

Letter to Schonbein, 25th July 1853.

So what exactly would the practice of 'cynical skepticism' entail?

Firstly, it would mean a refusal to continue to ennoble notorious pseudosciences or paranormal claims by meekly inviting them to submit to proper testing. Instead, claims should be unceasingly ridiculed, caricatured, and subjected to uncompromising criticism. By their very nature, dubious claims are always at the mercy of hoaxes of the Project Alpha type. But far be it from me to suggest that a massive hoaxing campaign could be a satisfying pastime. If the proponents do not like these attentions, let them prove us cynical skeptics wrong by submitting to the tests that they should have performed in the first place.

Secondly, it would mean using a wider range of techniques to influence public opinion (without the interference of journalists). Those with artistic aspirations might think in terms of dramatising true historical events which emphasise the dangers of irrationality. Current TV dramas are certainly sorely in need of original plots.

Thirdly, one must refuse to be exploited as mere 'gestures to balance' in Kilroy-type programmes. Belief/disbelief is a 50:50 choice; having 1 skeptic (or 2, post-schism?) in an audience of 100 sends entirely the wrong signal to the viewer. If the media should happen to pay some direct attention to skeptics, then cynical ones would not shoot themselves in the foot by allowing 'balance' to be built into the programme. For example, 'balance' made the recent *Equinox* profile of CSICOP horrendously counter-productive. Why give Geller a right to reply? When did *he* ever extend the same courtesy to skeptics? Do *not* play fair with miracle-mongers until they have been dragged, kicking and struggling, into the laboratory.

Those who fear that this is all very unscientific and closed-minded should recall that there is a somewhat super-skeptical tradition in science. Thus, while some like to trace atomic theory back to Democritus, others refuse to give him any credit at all; on the basis that a theory without evidence is undeserving of the name.

Other dissenters will bring up the old favourites of continental drift and meteorites. I also happen to know of a case (within the past 50 years) in which an individual, who had all the classic hallmarks of a 'crazy inventor' and who was castigated by scientists, finally turned out to be correct. Criticism of these ideas may have been premature, unfounded and complacent; but always remember that these ideas finally won through not by peddling the same old insubstantial evidence, but by providing stronger and stronger evidence.

If this diatribe has found favour with *any* readers, I suspect that it will be with older ones. However, the real trick is to become cynically skeptical when one is still young and energetic enough to rock the boat. Even Faraday tired of this game:

'If spirit communication not utterly worthless, of any worth character, should happen to start into activity, I will leave the the spirits to find out for themselves how they can move my attention. I am tired of them.'

Michael Faraday (d. 1867)

Letter to Thos. S. (a spiritualist), 1st November 1864.

David Fisher is a physicist who has recently resigned his position as secretary of the UK Skeptics.

Skeptical Predictions 1991

by resident seer
Marjorie Mackintosh

January: astrologers and other prognosticators announcing their 1991 predictions declare that they really did predict Mrs Thatcher's downfall in 1990 but were prevented from publishing it under the Official Secrets Act.

February: tears sighted running down the surface of Madonna and Child icons are explained when it is discovered how much money the two had lost in the American savings and loan scandal.

March: French scientists announce an important homeopathic breakthrough: cars which run on the memory of petrol.

April: fundamentalists' warnings of Satan's presence in all aspects of modern life are proved correct when someone notices that the word 'fundamentalism' contains the letters S A T A N in backward order.

May: aliens land in Trafalgar Square. The army can't stop them, but they leave anyway unable to tolerate the sight of streets piled high with waste paper and rubbish.

June: the Prime Minister calls an election hoping that the 'alien factor' will lead to his return to power. The alien is elected instead.

July: as the BBC attempts to implement new government-imposed equal time legislation, Patrick Moore is forced to share his *Sky at Night* television programme with Russell Grant.

August: Prince Charles reveals that his pronouncements on the environment are the result of discussions with two of his most trusted advisers—a Swiss Cheese plant and an Aspidistra.

September: American evangelists condemn rock music as an offense against God, but God says that She really isn't bothered. In fact, She rather likes the beat.

October: parapsychologists make the headlines by developing the most coherent theory to date to explain the Dan Quayle phenomenon. They say he is having a permanent out-of-body experience. His body is in Washington, but his mind fled the country years ago to avoid the draft and has never managed to find its way back.

November: a conference of remote viewing practitioners has to be abandoned when most of the participants can't find the venue.

December: red lights appearing in the night sky toward the end of the month cause controversy. UFOlogists claim visitors from Mars while government officials insist it's Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

May I try out a few words and phrases on you? Here we go: leisure centre, fact sheet, mini-bar, personalized, bite-sized, *Bullseye*. These words send shudders down my spine. I can't explain why, but I'm sure you have your own pet—I mean *personalized*—loathes. Quite recently, a new phrase has begun to haunt me, and it's (I can barely stand to type it) *New Age Music*.

According to the advertising, New Age Music is designed specifically to give you space in which to meditate, spread out, and seek your inner awareness. This is an admirable intention, and may well be more advisable than a large G & T or *EastEnders*. My first encounter with New Age Music was at a *Mind, Body and Spirit* exhibition a few years ago, where it was attracting a good deal of attention amongst Aquarian punters. It is certainly very pleasant, at least judging from the various samples I've tried. There are rarely strong melodies or rhythms: instead, synthesized textures ooze between your speakers, and velvety voices 'om' and 'aah' softly. In fact, all this is rather *too* pleasant and anodyne for my tastes, in common with much New Age paraphernalia. But, hang on—why is there a need for this 'designer music'? After all, music has been around as long as we have, and surely there is already a huge amount of music which can help us achieve states of well-being, and—more importantly—do so without sacrificing *style*.

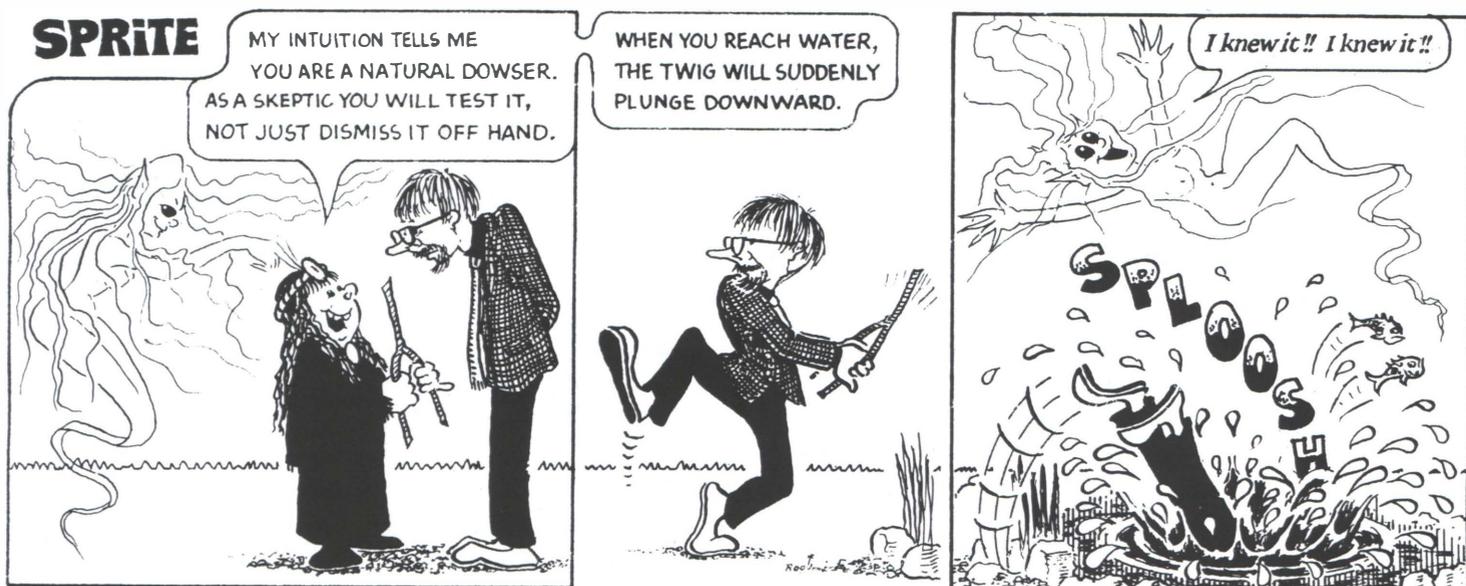
For many years I have been an evangelist for Brian

Eno's 'ambient music'—music, in his words, 'which is as ignorable as it is interesting'. The idea isn't new: Erik Satie, for example, wrote music 'to mingle with the clatter of knives and forks.' Ambient music should not be confused with Muzak (which I think needs a TM after it), that scourge of lifts and Arndale Centres. Muzak is emasculated music, with all the interesting bits snipped away. What's left is certainly ignorable, but not *interesting*.

Today, of course, to hear the music, you need to see the video, and New Age Music is no exception. Hit video for 1991 has got to be 'Field of yellow rape seed blowing in the wind' (£10.99). Have you seen it yet? Let me describe it: there's this field of rape seed, and it, well, blows in the wind—for twenty very long minutes. This is *New Age Video*, the complement of New Age Music. For ideal viewing, grab your crystal collection and crouch in your New Age Pyramid (you might as well take your blunt razors along too). Or, if rape seed isn't your thing, spend an hour with close-up shots of 'Basil the Parrot' clicking and clawing on his perch. (I'm not making this up).

Recently, New Age Video arrived at Channel Four, which broadcast the *Art of Landscape* series. The films were quite nice, in an infinitely boring kind of way, which after all, matches New Age Music perfectly.

Toby Howard is a lecturer in computer graphics, a member of the Manchester Skeptics, and likes a nice tune.



Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

Bringing it all back home

This seems like a good time to say a few thank yous. First of all, I would like to say that I think Toby Howard and Steve Donnelly do a wonderful job of getting *The Skeptic* out. I say this because I know from experience that when you're running something and working very hard at it, most of the time the only comments you get are the complaints. So...thanks, guys, and please keep it up.

Thanks are also due to Robin Allen and the Wessex Skeptics for the work they've put in. *Skeptic* readers who are relative newcomers may have heard of us because of articles in the *Guardian* or the *Independent*; the Wessex Skeptics were the ones who were doing interesting enough stuff for the skeptics to be written about.

Also, thanks to Mike Howgate and his cohorts (I am unreliably informed, by the way, that only Americans use the word 'cohort' to mean colleague; in this country apparently it's a scientific term ONLY) for running the London Student Skeptics. This is now my local group, and I've had a lot of fun going along to meetings this fall. I particularly enjoyed being tested for ESP.

This test was conducted by a member of the Student Parapsychological Association who had worked briefly in Edinburgh under Robert Morris. Out of 14 who took the test, (chance would be 5/25), one scored 2/25 (pathetic, really), three scored 4/25, five scored 5/25, three scored 6/25, one scored a whopping 7/25 (that was me—I'm obviously psychic), and one got 8/25 (clearly he was just lucky). Aggregate score: 92/350, which is roughly 26%. Since chance was 25%, the skeptics came pretty close to proving yet again that the laws of chance work.

This all brings me to the subject of local groups. I firmly believe that local groups must be the backbone of the skeptical movement in Britain. This country is too large, and people are too reluctant to travel, to organise on a national basis.

One of the first things I discovered when I founded *The Skeptic* at the beginning of 1987 was that many, many skeptics in this country feel isolated, lonely, abnormal, even. Having local groups means it's possible for this situation to begin to end. Do you pine to be able to talk to people who share your view of the world? Do you long to have conversations in which you don't have to present the arguments against graphology, in which there is a fundamental, mutual, shared understanding? Are you isolated, lost, and alone? Life doesn't have to be like this. Even if you don't want the responsibility of running an organisation, you and other skeptics in your area could meet in a local pub once a month.

Local groups in the US—there are probably over 50 of these by now—have contributed a great deal to the success of

CSICOP. Partly, this has been by doing a lot of the work of finding new subscribers for CSICOP. But, much more important, local groups have also been able to contribute to projects such as James Randi's 1986 investigation of TV evangelist Peter Popoff. In the first issue of *The Skeptic*, now, sadly, out of print, we carried an article by Randi about the value and importance of local groups.

So, the next question is, if you want to found a local group, even just a social, meet-in-the-pub-and-have-a-chat type, how would you do it? Start by writing to the editors of *The Skeptic* indicating your interest. They should be able to tell you how many skeptics there are in your area. After that, it's a matter of sending out a letter to test the waters and finding a place to meet.

That's the simple way to start, and it's worked for some groups. The Manchester group, however, started with a large public meeting, which drew more than 100 people. It was unquestionably effective in attracting potential local group members, but it wore out its organisers (Toby Howard and Australian visitor Martin Bridgstock) and involved the willingness to risk the money to pay for the hall and the rented sound and video systems. This way of starting a group is only recommended for a) the rich or b) the absolutely placid. It has to be said, though, that it was a hugely successful meeting that drew substantial media coverage, and everyone enjoyed it.

The thing is, though, you do have to keep at it. It's much too easy for a group to die through inaction. I am ashamed to say that my second attempt to inspire the founding of a local group, in my old hometown in the US, seems not to have had the desired effect. Oh, they founded the group all right, and they had a few meetings, but they never got around to putting out the newsletter, and that is crucial.

Why? Well... 'In the beginning there was the Word.' Communication is what keeps any group going. Without it, people forget to go to meetings. They feel like the group has forgotten them. They begin to feel lonely, isolated, lost. They begin to feel they don't know anyone who thinks the way they do. I've heard that before somewhere, recently.

Finally, none of us would be here now if Michael Hutchinson hadn't sat here in Britain sending out Prometheus books and the *Skeptical Inquirer* for eight years before *The Skeptic* was dreamt of. Mike rarely gets credit for the work he did during that time, but until the beginning of 1987, he was almost the only one doing any work over here. So, thanks, Mike.

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

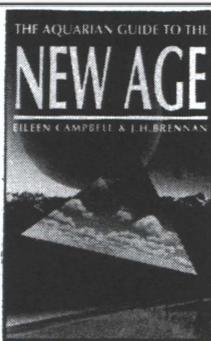
Reviews



Follow the New Age brick road

Eileen Campbell and J H Brennan, *The Aquarian Guide to the New Age* (Aquarian Press, £5.99).

With a historical introduction and some 500 entries ranging from a single paragraph to several pages in length, this book offers comprehensive coverage of New (or 'Aquarian') Age ideas. (An index would be helpful, even though entries are cross-referenced.) The bibliography occupies 10 pages, and a resource guide of 14 pages lists organisations and journals.



Articles describe the New Age's ancient sources in 'esoteric' doctrines both Eastern (yoga, Tantra, Taoism, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism) and Western (Alchemy, Astrology, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Qabalah) together with more recent developments (Swedenborg, Mesmer, Spiritualism, the Transcendentalists, Theosophy, the Golden Dawn) and modern activities such as Channelling, the Human Potential Movement, Jungian analysis, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Neo-Paganism, Psychic Surgery, Psychical Research, Scientology, UFOs, Wicca and Women's Spirituality. Shirley MacLaine's books are mentioned in the bibliography.

Virtually every New Age belief finds a warm welcome in these pages, and the result is a pot-pourri of unorthodox ideas with no attempt at an evaluation; the authors advocate discrimination and healthy skepticism, and are doubtful about some topics (the Turin Shroud is correctly described as a fake, Lobsang Rampa gets quite short shrift, and even Carlos Castaneda is criticised)—but the impression given to the unwary reader is that most items are genuine.

The bibliography mentions none of the standard skeptical authors such as Susan Blackmore, Martin Gardner, C E M Hansel, T H Hall, Paul Kurtz, L D Kusche, David Marks and Richard Kammann, James Randi, or even Ian Wilson, let alone CSICOP or the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

A book which asks: 'Was the Great Pyramid designed to stimulate astral projection? Can dewdrops heal you more effectively than modern drugs? Have Soviet scientists a machine that can read people's minds?' has surely a responsibility to give its readers some discussion, at least, of opposing viewpoints, but these are never mentioned. Also, it seems irresponsible to recommend alternative medical practices such as Homoeopathy, Psychic Healing, Radionics and Reflexology without mentioning

their (informed) critics, and the dangers of simply abandoning orthodox medication.

No indication is given that the Bermuda Triangle, Biorhythms, and Borley Rectory have been shown to be fakes, that Firewalking can be explained (and undertaken!) by complete skeptics, that Poltergeists are usually due to children acting in a quite physical fashion, and that there are serious empirical grounds for questioning the reality of Astral Projection, the extra-terrestrial sources of Dogon astronomy, the levitation of D D Home and the T M movement, past-life hypnotic regressions, Psychic Surgery, and the Barney and Betty Hill UFO case.

Articles on Channelling, Jeane Dixon, and Pyramid Power are completely uncritical, and such figures as Nostradamus, Edgar Cayce, Bhagwan Rajneesh and Emmanuel Velikovsky are apparently accorded the same status as Patanjali, Evelyn Underhill, and Frances Yates.

As an account of New Age beliefs this book has its merits, but the general reader will need some help in sorting the wheat from the chaff, and, as usual, we skeptics will have to provide most of it ourselves!

—Mike Moran

Chasing the eternal flame

Charles Paul Brown, BernaDeane, and James Russell Strole, *Together Forever: An Invitation to Physical Immortality* (Eternal Flame, \$9.95).

'All men are mortal; Socrates is a man ...' If there is one certainty in his life, it is death. Yet here is a book that tells us that physical immortality is attainable. The authors, however, are long on rhetoric, and short on evidence. They have apparently spent the last thirty years preaching their message, and it shows. Much of this book would sound inspirational from the pulpit, but on paper, it is merely banal. Some of it is incomprehensible. Apparently, what you have to do to become immortal is to experience things at 'the cellular level' (this is just like sex, only better—there is even something called 'cellular intercourse').

If only we all get together, and convince one another that we are not going to die, then we won't. It really is (apparently) as simple as that. Well, whatever their arguments are like (and I must say, I like their dismissal of the idea of any kind of soul or spirit), I do not feel persuaded, on the case that they put forward, that any of them are going to survive for any longer than any of the rest of us. I shall hang around to see, of course, but I shall be surprised if I am proved wrong.

Even so, do I want to live forever? The authors make out that immortality is a fascinating prospect. I am not so

sure. The eminent philosopher C.D. Broad (who wrote extensively on psychical research) remarked that he would feel rather put out if he found himself surviving death (he died in 1971, so I imagine that, if he is still around, people have become rather tired of his complaining). The obvious objection to immortality is that it must be boring. In Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*, the bewitching Kundry has been damned to live forever, by way of punishment, and by the time she has clocked up around nine hundred years, she is heartily sick of the whole business. (Most people I know would happily snore through Act One of *Parsifal*—it only lasts two hours. Think what nine hundred years of it might be like). And then there's Janacek's *The Makropulos Secret*. In that, Emilia only managed a paltry three hundred years before she gave in and died. Immortality, to put it bluntly, would be a mixed blessing. So, eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow ...

—Hobgoblin

We should be so lucky

Royston M. Roberts, *Serendipity: Accidental Discoveries in Science* (Wiley, £5.95).

One day in the early 1950s, George deMestral was returning from a stroll in his native Switzerland when he found himself wondering why the cockleburs which stuck to his coat clung so tenaciously. Under the microscope, thousands of little hooks were revealed ... and thus was born the idea for Velcro. More than a hundred years earlier, Daguerre was experimenting with a camera obscura, but the images he obtained were faint. With the intention of cleaning and using an exposed plate again, he placed it in a cupboard used to store bottled chemicals. Several days later, he was amazed to discover that the image on the plate had become much stronger. Cleaning out the cupboard he noticed a broken thermometer, and a few drops of spilled mercury, the fumes from which had reacted with plate and sharpened the image. The Daguerreotype photographic process was the result.



Serendipity: Kekulé dreams of a snake biting its tail and awakes to propose a cyclic structure for the benzene molecule.

Many people perceive 'science', with all its rules and experimental procedures, to be a subject as dull as ditch-water. In the school laboratory, an experiment either worked or it didn't—and if it didn't it was your fault for not doing it right. Spillages and breakages were accidents to be cleaned up, not written up. Of course, the essential rigour of the scientific method has led to extraordinary achievement, but surprisingly many breakthroughs have been the result of 'serendipity'—the discovery by happy accident of things not sought.

Professor Roberts' book is a marvellous collection of accidents, mistakes, cock-ups and plain strokes of good luck which have led to the discovery or invention of many well-known items: quinine, vaccination, vulcanized rubber, DNA, the pill, safety glass, nylon, teflon, and antibiotics—to name just a few. The emphasis is on chemistry-related subjects, and there is a large appendix giving sources for further reading. The author's enthusiasm bubbles out of every page, and he writes clearly for the lay reader.

Whether you believe that serendipity is the work of a benevolent spirit hovering on the astral, the games of a Fortean joker, or part of the wonder of our world, is up to you. But this is a book which will appeal to anyone who is curious to know the sometimes amazingly unlikely stories behind the discovery of many things we take for granted today. I have no doubt that serendipity occurs: I discovered this book entirely by accident.

—Les Francis

Conspiracies and cover-ups

Howard Blum, *Out There* (Simon and Schuster £14.95).

Nowhere is the idea of a UFO cover-up more cherished than in the USA, and *Out There* is a journalist's look at the subject. Author Howard Blum should have been ideally placed to uncover any underlying truths due to his previous sterling work laying bare spy rings and the like, but here he makes little real impact on the murky world of ufology.

Beginning with an account of how one UFO was tracked in 1986 by the space centre in Colorado, an event which, we are told, led to the formation of a special 'UFO Working Group' to 'investigate the possibility that extraterrestrials were making contact with this planet', the book's initial promise fades rapidly. The next hundred pages or so are a chronology of official UFO investigation since 1947 to date, linked with the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI), but this is really just a history lesson peppered with anecdotal experiences which prove no more than a thousand and one other UFO sightings. UFO sightings of the most undistinguished variety crop up occasionally and are treated with reverence by Blum—if someone said they saw something, no questions asked, they'd seen it—thus missing the first and most fundamentally misunderstood tenet of *The Awful Truth About Ufology*—that people cannot easily identify what they see.

MJ-12, Roswell and Bill Moore's involvement in working for a government agency in investigating a strange character by the name of Dr Paul Bennewitz are all included, and this portion of the book is a very good

precis of an interesting chapter in ufology's history. Eventually the 'think tank' appears to conclude that the MJ-12 documents are real and that even they have been victims of a cover-up in some kind of infinite regression cover-up plan which has existed over the past 40-odd years. Unsure of what to make of it all Blum ends up eulogising about the brave men and women who dare to ask questions and ultimately are sure that 'we are not alone' whilst hinting that 'a malicious clique of the powerful has conspired to keep this miracle a secret'.

Caveats aside, this book is a solid history of governmental UFO interest and the strange paths which it is alleged to have trod since. Any faults lie in Blum's acceptance of witnesses, ufologists and government sources without realising that all these people are as susceptible to the UFO mythology as the rest of the world. Read between the lines, *Out There* is a worthwhile contribution to UFO history and sociology. The definitive cover-up investigation book, however, has yet to be written.

—Andy Roberts

Whole in one

David Lorimer, *Whole In One: The Near-Death Experience and the Ethic of Interconnectedness* (Arkana £6.99).

I was rather disappointed by this book, with its clever title and important subject matter. NDEs occur widely, in remarkably consistent forms and can have powerful effects on people's lives and especially their spiritual values. They cry out for a critical approach which still does justice to their nature and effects.

In this book the experiences, from the life review and panoramic memory to mystical insights and changes in the sense of self, are well described with numerous examples. However, the explanations offered are a mish-mash of nice-sounding unifying concepts. We are led via Bergson's filter and Bohm's implicate order to accept such concepts as telepathic prehension, emotionally charged thought-forms, empathetic resonance, psychometry (with a handbook on the topic being described as 'epoch-making') and the power of the pendulum.

One conclusion is that 'contrary to the expectations of the materialists, consciousness is expanded and intensified after death... inner and outer memory are preserved ... and ... can be accessed by sensitives.' (p 70) 'The life review is not an end in itself, but a necessary stage which enables further spiritual growth.' (p 71).

That spiritual growth is compared to Maslow's 'self-actualisation' but the possibility that a psychology without anything paranormal could ever encompass such things seems to be ignored. 'Evidence' from hypnotic regression and channelled messages is used to arrive at the idea of a moral universe where unfair or arbitrary situations appear meaningful.

Lorimer's treatment of many religious and philosophical moral schemes is thorough, and perhaps the major thrust of the book. But although he explores such ideas as impermanence and the Buddhist concept of no-self, he very much assumes a substantial and continuous self, having faith and free-will and ultimately being reincarnated.

Finally he draws his conclusions on ethics, interconnectedness and spiritual values. Many readers will find them greatly comforting, but I cannot accept the basic argument that psychic phenomena and the NDE are evidence for interconnectedness and this in turn is the way 'to absorb the essential lessons of life and love' (p 287). For those lessons can certainly be learned by his straw man, the materialist, too.

—Susan Blackmore

Christians vs. the New Age

Lowell D Streiker, *New Age comes to Main Street: what worried Christians must know* (Abingdon, \$7.99).

My first criticism of this book is its title. While the book explains fairly carefully the various strands of the New Age movement it fails to point out that Christianity itself is almost as diverse as the New Age. My response to New Age is very dependent on my position within the Christian movement. It would have been nice if the author made his position clear from the start of the book. My own position is that of a scientist and an evangelical Christian who treats all paranormal occurrences (including Christian ones such as faith healing) with a certain skepticism. However, I do believe that even today Christ occasionally performs miracles.

Here, 'New Age' is a term used to describe various movements dealing with the paranormal and occult, ranging from the crystal rubbers and UFO abductees to the witches and radical feminists (who prefer to worship a Mother Earth rather than a Father God). The book has ten chapters which in turn deal—rather arrogantly—with other people's responses to the New Age, its roots and history, the New Age publishing industry, a meeting with some New Age disciples, and a séance with a channeller. The penultimate chapter discusses UFO abductees and New Age approaches to questions of health and death, while the final chapter ('New Age meets the Gospel') is a stream-of-consciousness stringing together of thoughts and quotes, with nothing, surprisingly, from the Bible.

And my opinion? I found the book easy to read and it did provide a good survey of the New Age movement. On the minus side the author often unnecessarily puts himself in the foreground—one could write his detailed CV from all the information here. But more importantly, given its urgent subtitle, this book fails to help me work out a Christian response to the New Age.

—Peter Bell

Nasty things in the night

David Hufford, *The Terror That Comes In The Night* (University of Pennsylvania Press, £17.95).

David Hufford's academic work, subtitled *An experience-centred study of supernatural assault traditions*, deals with a topic close to skeptical hearts—the so-called 'Old Hag' experience, a psychologically disturbing event in which a victim claims to have encountered some form of malign entity whilst dreaming (or awake). Sufferers report feeling

suffocated, held down by some 'force', paralysed—and extremely afraid. It is an experience which is surprisingly common, with Hufford estimating that approximately 15% of people undergo it at some point in their lives. Various cultures have their own name for the phenomenon, and have constructed their own mythology around it; the supernatural tenor of many Old Hag stories is unavoidable. Hufford, as a folklorist, is well-placed to investigate this puzzling occurrence.

Typically, the Old Hag is dismissed as constituting a variation of the more familiar hypnogogic or hypnopompic hallucination. It is claimed that the precise nature of the experience is shaped by cultural factors, pointing to its underlying psychological (rather than parapsychological) provenance. Hufford's work is nothing if not iconoclastic, and he strongly disputes these conclusions, and others drawn by previous researchers (who he sees as a kind of 'rush to explain way' brigade). One gets the impression that he may be right, but with the evidence he presents—aneccdotal testimony from experiencers, albeit professionally collected—one has to wonder about the strength of any conclusions that might be drawn. However, having demolished some of the simplistic 'materialist' attempts to deal with Old Hag, Hufford does not leap to a paranormal explanation, and is commendably reluctant to adopt any metaphysical position (unlike, he claims, other workers in the field). Herein lies both the strength and the weakness of the book: it tells us what won't do as an explanation of the Old Hag, but has few suggestions as to what will. Hufford is able to draw parallels with a psychophysiological state described as 'sleep paralysis with hypnogogic hallucinations', but considers that a full and proper understanding of the etiology of this experience requires something more. He tentatively links it with OBE's and NDE's, but the total absence of references to the work of, for example, Sue Blackmore indicates that his work in this area at least lacked depth.

In essence, this book is a preliminary study, and Hufford concludes with an appeal for others to investigate the subject following his lead. Whatever the cause of the Old Hag, it is evidently not to be dismissed as 'just imagination' in skeptical circles—there is more to it than that, and Hufford has done us a service by pointing this out.

—Robin Allen

Advertisement

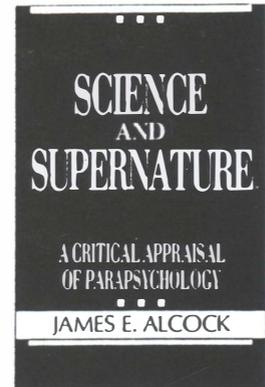
Enigmas

For an unusual look at ghosts, UFO's and other weird and wonderful phenomena read *Enigmas*, the journal of Strange Phenomena Investigations. *Enigmas* is published bimonthly; individual issues are £1.50, and a year's subscription costs £7.50 (please make cheques payable to Ronald Halliday). Write to 5 Tullibody Road, Alloa, Clackmannanshire, Scotland.

All in the mind

James E Alcock, *Science and Supernature: A Critical Appraisal of Parapsychology* (Prometheus, £15.95).

On the back flap of the dust-cover, underneath the photo of the pleasant bearded man with the toothy portrait-grin, we are told that Dr Alcock is professor of psychology at a Canadian university. On the front flap we learn that part two of this book, 'Psi in the laboratory', is adapted from a paper written for the National (U.S.) Academy Of Science.



And that is exactly how it reads. Meticulously detailed and comprehensively referenced, it will doubtless be invaluable to anyone embarking on an academic study of research into either of its two subjects: psychokinesis and remote viewing. But, unless you know some overly-enthusiastic Helmut Schmidt fans whose illusions need shattering, you will probably find it slow going as a bedtime read.

The most interesting parts are the two introductions which give brief overviews of the work which has been done in their respective areas of study. The rest of the section is a long and rather repetitive list of methods of collecting and analysing parapsychological data followed by criticisms of those methods, some of which are rather technical. In particular, the forty page appendix, 'Detailed Critique of the Schmidt Studies' can best be described as of purely specialist interest. The first part of the book is a different matter. Entitled 'Parapsychology: Science of the Anomalous or Search for the Soul', it is a modified form of an article which first appeared in *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* in 1987. Much more accessible by virtue of being more general it gives us a carefully neutral description of the reasoning used to justify the search for Psi effects, some of the various 'fields' of Parapsychology and the experimental methods used to study them. It is only when he starts to describe some of the conclusions drawn by parapsychologists from their experiments that Dr Alcock's dispassionate mask slips a little. It is hard to fault him for this. Who could resist a wry inward smile while explaining how parapsychologists have used a convenient little get-out called 'the experimenter effect' to argue that failure to repeat experiments successfully is actually evidence in favour of the existence of psi effects.

The postscript to part one, written sometime later, is a response to various criticisms of the original paper which appeared in later editions of the same journal. This is a serious book. So serious that it will probably not be appearing on airport and railway station bookstands alongside all those brightly coloured, fun-sized paperbacks whose claims it so painstakingly debunks. Which is really rather a pity since the notion that psi might not exist really ought to be popularised. Also Dr Alcock never asks the really interesting question: why are mysterious powers of the

mind so exciting that even quite large numbers scientifically trained individuals continue to believe in them despite the fact that a hundred years of research has failed to produce any convincing proof of their existence? However, if I close my eyes and concentrate on this book I think I can feel the trans-atlantic vibrations telling me to refer to a future publication.

—Steve Brooks



The constellation of Orion, the Hunter, according to the 17th century Swiss astronomer Hevelius.

A beautiful balance

Michael Rowan-Robinson, *Universe* (Longman, £17.95).

'A measure of the credulity of the present age is that most bookshops in the Western world carry more books on astrology than on astronomy' is how Professor Rowan-Robinson concludes his description of the Zodiac and the equinoxes. This state of affairs is something he cares very deeply about, and one measure of his concern is this superb book: a monumental effort to present state-of-the-art knowledge about the universe to a lay audience. It is a book of such beauty, conviction and style that it deserves to become a classic.

The author has chosen twenty different astronomical objects, from the well-known, such as Halley's comet, Polaris, Sirius and the Crab Nebula, to the more exotic, including the Andromeda Nebula, the Messier 87 radio galaxy and the strange 3C273 quasar. Around these features he weaves the current concepts, theories and insights of modern astronomy. What makes this book especially appealing is the approach of attaching the same emphasis to technical matters as to the relationship of mankind to the universe, in all its cultural, metaphysical and aesthetic forms. It is a tricky balancing act to juxtapose graphs, charts and diagrams with colour photographs in several wavebands, poetry, songs and artworks without creating a pretentious mess, but somehow it works beautifully.

—John Yates

Gardner's question time

Martin Gardner, *Science: Good Bad and Bogus* (Prometheus Books, £10.95).

The collection of Martin Gardner's articles previously only available in hardback has finally arrived in paperback format giving poor skeptics the opportunity to possess a copy of their own. Should they, of course, desire to do so. Read on.

Gardner's flag is flown very clearly and proudly on the side of extreme skepticism. From the tone of his articles and the responses to them, it very rapidly becomes apparent the wide divide between him and the parapsychologists. As a scientist I must admit to finding Gardner's viewpoint more compelling but lacking a bit of balance. He draws from his scientific background to decry the results of parapsychological experiments due to the lack of controlled conditions. And quite rightly so. But sadly I feel there is an insufficient comparison with frauds and extravagant claims that have been documented within the established scientific community. Many of these occur because of scientists seeing what they expect to see rather than what actually happens (a somewhat similar situation to the case of Professor Taylor and his observations on 'mental bending'). Two classic cases spring immediately to mind. Professor Cyril Burt who, on the premise that his theories were correct, actually invented research assistants and completely falsified the data supporting his case causing huge amounts of embarrassment to the psychological community in general when he was exposed—and of course the recent debacle over the matter of cold fusion. With the latter in mind it would have been nice had Gardner updated the book with an article written especially for the new edition since both are examples of bogus or bad science.

But it is nonetheless important to document and expose the charlatans, frauds and shysters to public view, something which Gardner does with considerable skill and dexterity but not a little overkill (despite the introductory notes). Uri Geller receives a fair amount of attention, perhaps far more than his status warrants. I find a gentleman by the name of David Copperfield (a rather good illusionist seemingly earning an honest 'ton of crust') far more impressive than Geller. In particular his illusion in which he 'disappears' a small jet airplane in front of the steely gaze of several TV cameras is far more impressive than any stunt I have seen performed by Geller. I don't know how he does it but I certainly don't think it's ESP, PK, DOP or even mass hypnotism. (Maybe the man has big pockets?)

One further point of note is the correspondence entered into with the targets of his criticism (or their supporters) which almost seems to end up as nit picking sessions with Martin Gardner always right and without fail having the last word. But it's his book so I guess he has some rights. And this is my review so I'll have the last rites.

This is a book which is amusing, informative but quite tedious in places, with plenty of examples of bad and bogus science but where oh where is the good science described in the title?

PS. Can Geller bend paperback book covers? If so is he extracting parapsychological revenge on Martin Gardner, since the review copy has covers that closely resemble his nitinol wire—very bent and will not return to the original condition even under corrective tension.

—Alan Smith

All in the overmind

Michael Bentine, *Open Your Mind: The Quest for Creative Thinking* (Bantam Press, £13.95).

The publishers must take some of the blame for combining a surefire subject and a 'name', and 'Pop' Bentine was also a strong influence. Unable to work, Pop found a purpose in life at a seance in a bungalow near Hawkinge in 1931. He involved both his sons in his scientific investigations of the paranormal. Shy, stammering 13-year-old Michael, previously unable to make his parents see how miserable he was at school, gladly cooperated.

Bentine offers a route to creativity, which is magic—and magic is the ability to 'alter future circumstances by the exercise of will'. Another benefit of original thought is a lifetime of paid employment. But the instructions are embedded in a mass of digressions: 'I often wonder if the Cabala was the basis from which the game of snakes and ladders originated?' He fulminates against politicians, left-wing sympathisers in the BBC, our 'ultra-materialistic life', and runs over well-known aspects of the paranormal such as healing, dowsing and ghosts.

He asks why spirit guides are never 'departed district nurses', and points to the romantic nature of supposed past lives. However, he mentions John Hasted, but not his retraction, and claims it was the 'establishment' that ascribed the Fox sisters' mysterious noises to joint cracking (actually one of them confessed). He is very tough on skeptics, including the 'self-proclaimed "Amazing Randi"'.

Strangely, Bentine is pleased that his creativity as a comedian is due to the 'universal overmind', that he didn't really do it himself. Here's how it's done: Open mind. Imprint picture postcard on your visual memory. Cultivate flying dreams. Progress to OOBIE. Look at picture and project yourself into it. But guard against uncontrolled imagination 'especially among more emotional Latin people'. That's it. If you want to become creative, you could do much better by not buying this book.

—Lucy Fisher

In and out of the spirit world

Joe Fisher, *Hungry Ghosts: An investigation into channelling and the spirit world* (Grafton, £14.95).

Joe Fisher, a British-born journalist living in Canada, has already written two popular books on the evidence for reincarnation. In his latest work he sets out to investigate channellers, although the book is as much a 'story' as an 'investigation'. Most of the book describes his experiences with a woman whom he graces with the pseudonym 'Aviva Neumann'. She is a trance medium whose seances

he attended for three years. Like all such mediums she is prone to enter the apparently altered state in which discarnate entities, specifically spirit guides, converse with sitters.

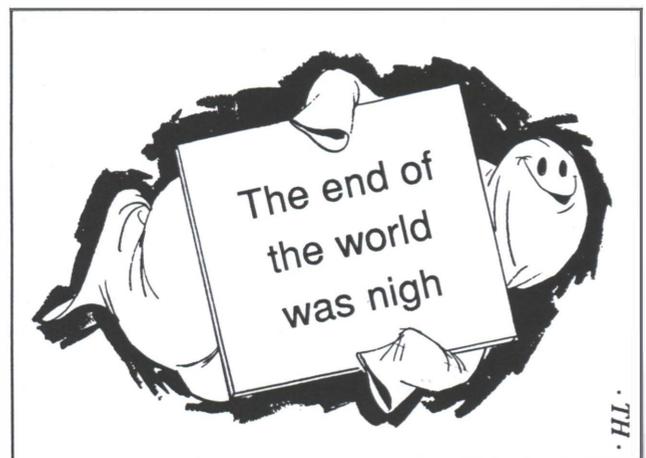
The author was no doubt pleased to find that his spirit guide was a pretty Greek girl called 'Filipa', with whom he was supposed to have shared a former life in eighteenth-century Greece. He set aside a period each day when he would try to contact her using meditation and visualization exercises. His infatuation with her even ruined his relationship with his flesh-and-blood girlfriend. In a moment of skeptical inspiration, he decided to test the claims of some of the spirit guides produced by Aviva. A guide called Ernest claimed to have been Flying Officer William Alfred Scott, who supposedly flew bombing missions in World War II. Fisher travelled to Britain to investigate but found no trace of an airman of that name—although the guide had given a reasonably accurate account of life in a bomber squadron of the period (not too difficult). Next he travelled to Greece to try to find evidence of his amour Filipa's previous existence. All he found was that her information contradicted the facts at every turn.

Back in Canada he contacted another medium, Claire Laforgia, in a vain attempt to corroborate what Aviva's guides had been telling him. He found that Claire's guide, a Dr Pinkerton (formerly a Victorian surgeon), contradicted everything that Aviva's guide had said. The good doctor then went on to suggest that Fisher should have intercourse with the medium on the pretence that it would help him to feel closer to Filipa!

At last, he became disillusioned with it all. His assessment of the medium's failings is rather revealing: In the final chapters he expounds the idea that what he had been communicating with were evil entities bent on mischief, and this ties in nicely with the Christian upbringing that he had eschewed in his teenage years, but which now seemed to be returning, with a vengeance, in the light of this experience.

It seems more probable to me, however, that he was misled by clever women. Evidence of Aviva's manipulative tendencies surface in Fisher's revelation of the time when a spirit guide, channelled by Aviva, alienated a sitter's wife and proceeded to sexually proposition him.

—John Eastmond



The Lights are Bright

Paul Devereux, *Earth Lights Revelations* (Cassell, £7.95).

An amazing coincidence. Can there be another Paul Devereux? Or is this book really penned by the same hand that gave us *Lines on the Landscape: Ley Lines and other Linear Enigmas*? For one will search in vain through the index, and indeed through the book, for any reference to ley lines. *Earth Lights Revelations* is not concerned with such churned-up no-man's-land between the entrenched forces of skepticism and credulity. Rather it sets out to demonstrate a thesis concerning 'earth lights', which are typically small glowing, wandering globes of light that are seen for periods of a minute or so. To make his points, the author has produced a work almost as sober and coherent as a PhD thesis, though much better written and significantly less boring than many.

The first point Devereux wishes to establish is the objective existence of these phenomena. He does this by the Berlitz method, filling over a hundred pages of his book with details of sightings from, it seems, everywhere in the world—except Broadway—and covering a considerable period of time, although the majority of cases are from the twentieth century. As with most lists, this one becomes somewhat mind-numbing at times, but the effort of ploughing through it is rewarded with a consistent picture of earth lights—most sightings are like this one from Burton Dassett, near Birmingham, in 1923 (page 81): '...the light, well-defined and spherical, moved across our field of vision with its peculiar switchback motion from left to right, disappearing as suddenly as it had come. A few moments later we saw it again...until, like a dull yellow eye, it was glowering at us apparently from beneath a nearby tree.'

Some of the examples are reinterpreted UFO reports, whilst others seem to have been simple descriptions with no interpretations suggested by the witnesses. The argument is decorated with 43 colour plates, some depicting places where lights have been seen, others photographs of the lights themselves. Although the site portraits are beautiful calendar material, the shots of earth lights *in flagrante*, like UFO photos, are disappointing, all the more so because the book tantalises with reports of what sound like much better photos.

Emerging from the hundred pages of sightings, I was left feeling that there must be some objective reality to these things; that people have for years been seeing balls of light like giant fireflies that bob and swing and dart about, with a variety of colours. It is true that the behaviour and appearance of the lights varies over an enormous range, but a sketch of the typical earth light does emerge. If this consistency of form is more real than apparent, then it is perhaps good evidence for the existence of the lights independent of their social or cultural context, unlike, for example, the alien craft so often 'seen' in UFOs, which have been shown to depend heavily on expectation. The common occurrence of multiple eyewitness accounts argues that it is not a psychological or perceptual illusion; the world-wide and historical range of sightings militates against simple hoaxing.

Last, lest we think that the author has been fooled, he has himself three times seen earth lights, always in the company of others.

Devereux further argues that the lights have characteristics in addition to those which define them as earth lights. One such property is their association with strain fields in the rocks beneath them. To show this, he attempts to connect their occurrence with faults and seismic activity, making reference to statistical studies by himself and a few others. This property acquires significance as Devereux infers that the lights may be some electromagnetic phenomenon. The objects are also credited with 'intelligence', which generally consists in an apparent reaction to the acts or thoughts of the observer. This Devereux seizes upon as the peg from which he can hang ten pages of speculation at the end of the book on the relationship of these lights to consciousness, on the nature of consciousness itself, and the possibility of extraterrestrials travelling through space-time warps involving the earth energy he has identified.

Several features of the book are less than satisfying. Rarely are the counter arguments to any hypothesis explored, so that we are shown correlations between seismic activity and sightings in Leicestershire, and merely told 'although population distribution in the county confused this pattern to some extent, it certainly did not invalidate it.' The effect of population density in sightings of earth lights is by no means clear to me, and I should have welcomed more discussion—at the very least a map of population density should have been presented. Elsewhere we are informed that many lights have been explained, and what is presented are choice cuts from a much larger data sample. However, the other causes of earth light reports are rarely examined at all, and never in detail. We are frequently told that no reasonable explanation can be found, but we are not told who did the searching, so we cannot assess the meaning of their failure.

Turning to the question of the lights' intelligence, it must be observed that a simple explanation of their apparent reactions to observers might lie in the 'illusion of control', perhaps augmented here by an 'illusion of response' and a real sensitivity of the electromagnetic field to a large conducting body like a human being. Devereux pays lip-service to this explanation, which seems adequate for every such observation in his hundred page inventory, but dismisses it—in part because it is inconsistent with one of his own experiences, only now related, which involved an oblong object changing to the form of a human outline. He invites someone to look into the case, by interviewing eyewitnesses and subjecting them to lie-detector tests. Not having the resources to carry out such research, I am inclined to consign that experience to some other category than earth light, and remain satisfied with the first explanation of the lights' behaviour, at least qualitatively.

Despite its weaknesses, however, this book is well worth checking out, as a readable source of eyewitness accounts of earth lights. As for its thesis, I should say—existence of earth lights, persuasive but not proven beyond reasonable doubt; connection of lights with seismic strain fields, *a priori* reasonable and plausibly presented, but not proven; intelligence of lights and inability of science to explain them, extremely unconvincing. As for the last ten pages of waffling about consciousness, I would dismiss them as *igni fatuus*.

—Martin Hempstead



Letters

Keith Harary

I recently received a copy of Sue Blackmore's thoughtful review of *Have An Out Of Body Experience In 30 Days: The Free Flight Program* and *Lucid Dreams In 30 Days: The Creative Sleep Program*, which appeared in issue 4.5 of *The Skeptic*. There are just two points that I feel a need to correct for the benefit of your readers.

(1) I have not 'turned to making money out of psychic ventures' as Sue stated in her review. In December 1982 and March 1983 I participated in a very brief study of the attempted application of 'remote viewing' to playing the silver market. I have long since had nothing to do with such activities. Unfortunately, quite a number of people have the mistaken notion that I have been working with Mr Russell Targ on his own more recent activities in this area, and that I endorse the contradictory claims he has made about the application of 'remote viewing' to predicting fluctuations in the silver market. Nothing could be further from the truth.

(2) I quite agree with Sue that those who warn that inducing lucid dreams and OBEs may be harmful have no real evidence to back up their fears. Still, to be on the safe side, Pamela Weintraub and I did include a number of cautions in both the *Free Flight* and *Creative Sleep* books. We strongly suggested that those who have serious psychological problems check with a mental health professional before attempting to actively induce these altered states of consciousness. We also suggested that even mentally balanced readers should not get carried away with exploring these experiences. We included nights of 'free dreaming' in the lucid dream program (e.g., allowing fully spontaneous dreams to occur without any deliberate attempt at lucidity or dream incubation). We also included exercises in which readers ground

themselves in everyday reality in the program focusing on OBEs. We further suggested that readers maintain a balanced psychological approach to exploring their inner experiences even after they have completed our programs. That said, we did not wish to go overboard in issuing precautions regarding what so far appear to be fairly innocuous and quite normal subjective states.

In any event, please accept my appreciation for a balanced and thoughtful review.

Keith Harary
San Francisco

Jehovah's Witnesses

In 'Scientology: What is it? Does it work?' (*The Skeptic* 4.6) John Clarke cites a report 'that a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses called on an old lady one day and so scared her with tales of hell that she had a coronary and died'. This report is remarkable for a reason other than that for which it was cited there. For total rejection of the doctrine of hell is perhaps the most prominent distinguishing feature of that sect. Thus in Judge Rutherford's *The Harp of God*—one of its foundation documents—it is argued (p. 47) that it cannot be true, 'for at least four separate and distinct reasons: (1) because it is unreasonable; (2) because it is repugnant to justice; (3) because it is contrary to the principle of love; and (4) because it is entirely unscriptural'.

It is, therefore, also 'repugnant to justice' to accuse his followers of teaching what Darwin so emphatically and so rightly characterised as 'this damnable doctrine'. The accusation is made the more unfair in view of the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses, whatever we may think of their other teachings, have an extraordinary record of courage and persistence under the persecutions which they have suffered under every kind of one party tyranny—National

Socialist, Marxist and African. For these victims did not have the consolation of believing that their purely temporary torturers were going themselves to be punished by eternal and for greater torments!

Anthony Flew
Reading

A free comment

'A friend of mine recently became a trainee management consultant, and he told me that he thought that not many of the other people there had much real experience.' Not a good basis for a piece of informed, sceptical writing. Undeterred, Anthony Garrett (*The Skeptic*, 4.5) goes on to recount the dangers of a business practice of which he seems to have no experience: management consultancy.

I claim to be one of these beasts, and so speak from experience—or prejudice, depending on your own prejudices. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that I do not agree with all his conclusions. A point-by-point explanation of why Garrett's grasp of this business (at least as indicated by his article) is weak would be tedious. However, no client is ever forced to come back to a management consultancy for more (bought) advice. Many do. The joke goes like this: a management consultant is someone who borrows your watch to tell you the time, and then charges you £100 for the report.

This letter is sent to *The Skeptic* free of charge.

Nick Beard
London

Circles from the air

Crop circles: I promised in a letter several months ago to ask members of Britain's Air Crew Association, of which more than ten thousand of its members were airborne during or before the Second World War, if any of them had seen any crop circles in those days.

My request was duly published in the ACA's journal. The result? Of all those thousands of aircrew, most of whom had also flown over Europe, it seems that not even one had seen a crop circle during the war, or before it. In fact the only member who thought they existed hadn't seen any either, but suggested they were caused by UFO's. To be not merely skeptical but rational, I think that this totally disposes of the theory that crop circles are caused by meteorological phenomena. Unless we are expected to believe that during the war, there wasn't any weather! Q.E.D.

L J Clarke
Uxbridge

Up tiddly-up up

For lack of anything better to do, I collect books on levitation. Originally, I collected books on astral projection, but there turned out to be so many of them that I gave up, not being able to afford the effort. My thought was that there would be very few if any books on levitation. Now you have gone and mentioned one I didn't know about (*Psychic Diary, The Skeptic* 4.5)! I take it that you are serious and that there actually is a book called *Levitation for Terrestrials*. I would be very grateful for any readers who might know about this—and any other levitation books—to drop me a line, c/o the editors.

Frank Chambers
Newport, Co Mayo

Star test

I accept Val Dobson's charge (*Letters*, 4.6) that my article on astrology (4.3) failed to provide details of some allegations. The reason is that this was not a full study, but a summary of the key points concerning the validity and effects of astrology. In general, the reader should have been able to have a reasonable degree of confidence that the author *can* provide the missing data; otherwise, every article written would have to cross-reference virtually every other, and the Amazon basin would be chopped down for paper within a week. I can certainly provide the

information requested, except in one case—the countries in which astrology will become a political cause if enough of the electorate accepts it. I should have thought such prediction was more Val Dobson's department.

I shall not crave the Editors' indulgence by listing what is already in the skeptical literature. I shall be happy to provide this information if Val Dobson contacts me at the Department of Physics and Astronomy (yes, *astronomy!*) at the University of Glasgow. I too await with interest the testing of computer astrology. In the meanwhile, we must be content with something Val Dobson did not comment on: the utter failure of astrology in the only double-blind experiment to be conducted with the cooperation of prominent astrologers.

Anthony Garrett
Glasgow

Statistics and sleights

I read with enjoyment the latest issue of *The Skeptic* (4.6), and would like to raise two points: (i) Andrew Belsey appears to think he can dispose of the supernatural by a semantic sleight of hand. Having defined Nature as 'simply whatever exists', he quite rightly deduces that 'if spirits and demons exist, they are part of nature, not "supernature".' Well of course—and Plato, Gurdjieff, and the Vedantins would not disagree—but this does not mean that they (i.e., spirits or whatever) would be 'natural' in the sense of 'material' or 'scientific'—there remains the question of whether the actual constituents of Nature are limited to matter and energy in the scientific reductionist sense, or whether they might include 'mind' or 'spirit' in (say) a Cartesian or Yogic sense of those terms.

(ii) Michael Heap objects to 'cryptomnesia' as a source of past-life experiences, preferring the term 'creative fantasy'—but of course none of the authors cited suppose that such experiences are literal, verbatim reproductions of material seen, heard or read in earlier life—on the contrary, they clearly suppose that such material is only the groundwork from which the

experiences are worked up in imagination. Indeed, he himself points out that 'memory is not like a videotape loop', and presumably is much more like story-telling. Surely there is no substantial disagreement here?

Mike Rutter
Manchester

Wigs and follies

I was disappointed that there has been no letter in *The Skeptic* from Graham Wagstaff, to put the record straight regarding the charge of inaccuracy that he levelled against me in his letter in the July/August 1990 issue. There he wrote: 'Also, apparently himself donning a barrister's wig, Gibson himself attempts presumably to imply 'guilt by association' by calling me an ex-collaborator of Keith Hearne, who wrote (according to Gibson) an 'old hat' article in 1982. In fact I have never collaborated with Keith Hearne other than to supervise his PhD thesis on the subject of dreaming.'

But Wagstaff did, in fact, collaborate with Hearne in hypnosis research in an attempt to boost the Barber/Spanos paradigm. He takes credit for this collaboration on pages 87–88 of his book *Hypnosis, Compliance and Belief* and refers to their jointly published work on page 250 of that book. When I reminded him of this on the phone, he said that he had clean forgotten this! Well, we can all forget the follies of our youth, but we should have the grace to acknowledge this when it is pointed out, and not charge other people with inaccurate reporting, and such a heinous offence as donning a barrister's wig in a scientific debate.

H B Gibson
Cambridge

Science fiction

Another piece of science fiction (*The Skeptic*, 4.6)! Kurt Vonnegut's 'Ice 9' novel was not *The Sirens of Titan* but *Cat's Cradle*.

David Simpson
Lusaka, Zambia

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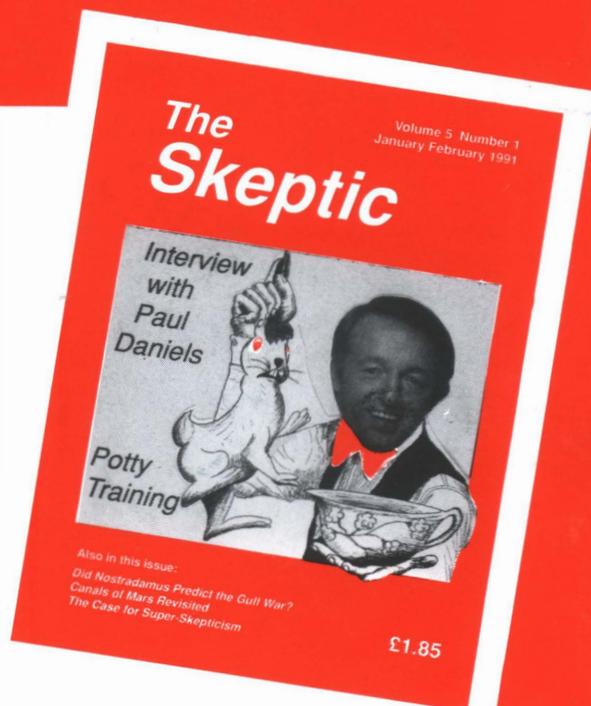
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