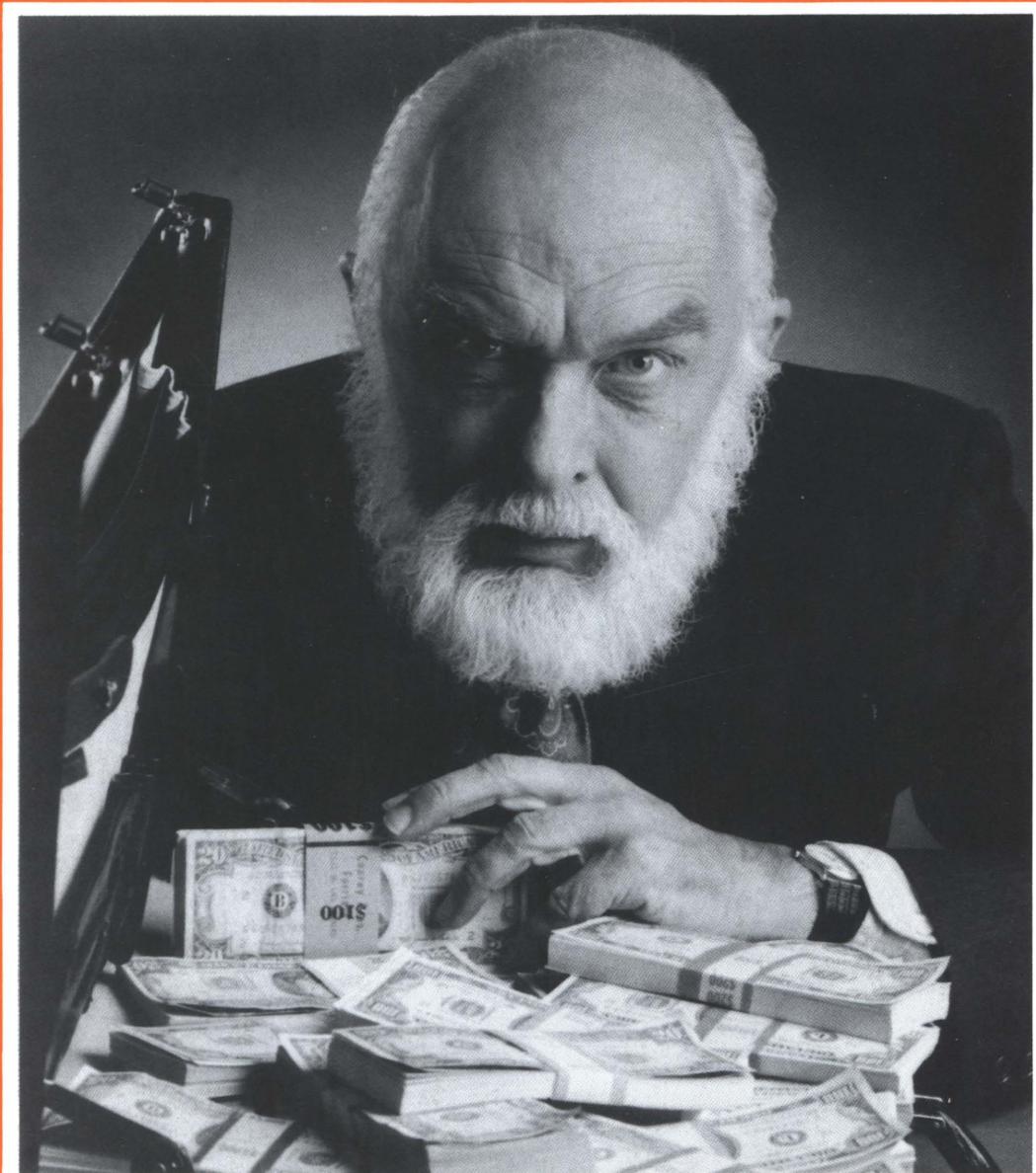


Volume 5 Number 4
July/August 1991

The Skeptic



James Randi: Charlatan

Also in this issue:

The Medjugorje Virgin
Why not to test a psychic
100 years of free thinking

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Convenor: Mike Howgate, Department of Biology, University College, London WC1E 6BT.

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Convenor: Robin Allen, Department of Physics, Southampton University, Highfield, Southampton, SO9 5NH.

Campaign Against Health Fraud

Box CAHF, London WC1N 3XX.

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Electronic Mail

For information on skeptical information by E-mail or for subscription or other magazine enquiries contact:

Dave Love: (Love@uk.ac.daresbury).

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Editors: Dr Steve Donnelly and Toby Howard

Associate Editor: Dr Dave Love

Finance: Dave Martin

Typing: Mary McDerby, Mavis Howard and Angela Linton

Cartoons: Donald Room and Tim Pearce

Proof-reading: Jane Bousfield

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Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

Not a good day

If you are an Aquarian or a Leo and are reading *Hits and Misses* from a hospital bed then perhaps you need to treat astrology with a bit more respect than usual. The *Guardian* on 6 June reported that, due to a rare configuration of the planets Mars and Saturn, this day was to be a worldwide Black Thursday. For Virgos and Libras—presumably less influenced by the planets in question than the rest of us—no problems were anticipated. But for Aquarians and Leos things looked very bleak indeed with a peak in misfortune occurring at 2.56 pm. 'It's more a question of individual frustration rather than Chernobyl kind of stuff. They are pretty nasty planets and whatever you do, you seem to come up against a brick wall', said Maggie Hyde of the Company of Astrologers, 'Just go slow, don't rush and don't expect to achieve a great deal.' Sounds like an average day to me.

The end is nigh...

For all you Virgos and Libras out there who are now smiling complacently at the fact that you were unaffected by the planetary shenanigans, the *Sunday Express* on 23 June provided some information which should serve to wipe the smiles off your faces fairly rapidly. What it boils down to is the fact that the Cosmos is out to get you and if it can't do it with astrology then it will try with astronomy. Apparently, scientists who are meeting later this month in California (where else) claim that it is a statistical certainty that a giant asteroid—up to a mile across—will hit the Earth within the next 50 years resulting in the end of civilization as we know it. However, the newspaper obviously subscribes to the 'damned lies' school of statistical analysis as elsewhere in the article the headline 'End of the world is odds on—giant asteroid to hit within 50 years' is seen to be a translation of

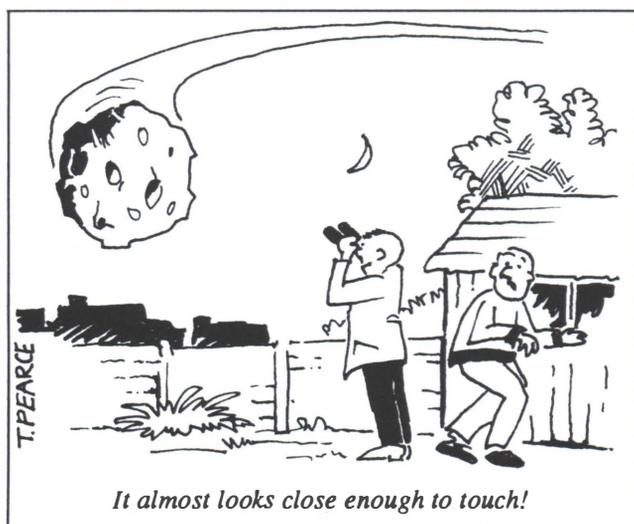
'there is one chance in 6,000 to 20,000 of being killed by an asteroid impact in the next 50 years. According to the article death by asteroid impact is the fourth most likely cause of accidental death for Britons after car crashes, house fires and drowning. It is not clear where these figures come from as I am fairly certain that I do not pay an extra life insurance premium to cover me against this serious risk...

Alienation

...And whilst on the subject of insurance, although we may not insure against the sky falling on our heads most of us do pay out vast amounts of money each month to insure ourselves against a variety of more down-to-earth risks that we run in our everyday lives. We may have policies insuring us against death, house collapse, road accidents, plane crashes and even the destruction of food in our freezers due to a disruption of the electricity supply but we have entirely neglected to insure against a risk which a number of Americans regard as highly significant. We are failing to insure against kidnap by aliens. The *Sunday Express* must have a tap into some intergalactic actuarial data bank as, according to another report in this newspaper on 27 January, 4,800 Americans pay £7 a year each to the UFO Abduction Insurance Company of Altamonte Springs in Florida. (I wonder if Whitley Strieber would be regarded as a high risk and have to pay more for his policy). In the event that an insured individual *can prove that he or she has been kidnapped by aliens*, £10 million compensation will be paid. This would seem to be nearly as good a racket as that of the vendors of nuclear fallout shelters who promised a full refund if your shelter didn't work.

Crops up again

As the corn and the wheat ripens in the summer sunshine (poetic licence), the silly season is beginning once again. Depending on your personal preferences, the deer are rutting, the hedgehogs are rotating, the aliens are landing or charged whirlwinds are taking evening classes in Egyptian hieroglyphics (or is it runes?). The simple circles of flattened crops of a couple of years ago have progressed through concentric annuli and multiple circle formations to complex pictographs—and one wonders what new developments will take place this year. The *Ayresshire Post* on 14 June showed a photograph of a crop 'image' (we can't really use the word 'circle' any more) in a field near Prestwick which was in the shape of a perfectly formed giant fertility sign. Despite the fact that this image appeared in a field of rape (fertility, rape, get it?), Dr Nick Martin of the Scottish Agriculture College at Auchincruive is quoted as saying, after seeing the mystery shape: 'There was a plant pathologist with us and he



ruled out plant disease as a cause. Apart from that we are unable to come to any firm conclusions'.

Meanwhile, further south, a Japanese professor, Yoshihiko Ohtsuki (yes, he of artificial ball lightning fame as reported in *Hits and Misses* in issue 5.2) thinks that he has the answer to the mystery. According to the *Independent* on 22 July, Professor Ohtsuki is currently visiting Wiltshire with a team of 18 Japanese physicists in the hope that they will catch ball lightning (or a similar atmospheric phenomenon) in the act of creating a crop circle. In a report a week earlier in the *Daily Mail* the Professor offered a useful tip to city-bound crop circle enthusiasts. He believes that the London Underground might be a good place to search for these spectacular formations: 'We found circles in dust along railway tracks. It was too dangerous to continue research there so I have no idea if these are connected to the plasma state', he said. 'But I believe that there are a lot of circles in the London Underground because it's so old'.



Cold fusion—the end?

It looks as though the astonishing saga of cold fusion—which began two years ago when Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischman announced that they had discovered nuclear fusion in a test-tube—is now almost at an end. The National Cold Fusion Research Institute, founded by the State of Utah a few months after the announcement, closed down at the end of June. The Institute, which was in Salt Lake City, hoped to attract investment from both government and private investors but managed to raise very little funding as a result of the controversy surrounding the claims of Fleischman and Pons and scandals involving the Institute. The *Independent* on 22 June reported that its director, Chase Petersen, eventually resigned after he was discovered diverting money from the University's reserves. Frank Close, a British physicist whose recent book on the cold fusion affair was reviewed in *The Skeptic* 5.2 believes that the reactions which gave rise to the claims of cold fusion "...still interest materials scientists but the work is generally regarded as no more and no less important than any other area of scientific activity." Dr Close believes that an important lesson from the whole affair is that scientists working in one area should consult with more knowledgeable colleagues when they carry out research outside their own areas of expertise. And so say all of us.

Geller vs Randi

In the last issue we published an open letter from James Randi in which he reported that Uri Geller had announced that he intended to sue Randi 'in every state and in every country'. Uri Geller has now responded with his own open letter, addressed primarily to skeptics, in which he attempts to explain his position. The letter begins by saying that: 'Since the early 70s, James Randi has been trying to debunk me. I always chose to ignore these attacks, which were directed mostly at my abilities. In recent years however, his statements about me were outrageous, libelous and defaming lies which have hurt me and my family and caused me incalculable damage.' He goes on to complain that in a magazine interview, Randi called him a 'psychopath and a social disease which I am not and I have not'. James Randi has subsequently responded to Geller's letter in an unrepentant tone in a message which has been published on an electronic computer network in California.

Interestingly, the bulk of Geller's letter (and presumably the main substance of Geller's grievances against Randi) does not concern itself with statements that Randi has made about Geller's psychic abilities but rather with statements which Randi has allegedly made concerning the death of an American scientist and remarks attributed to Randi concerning a friend of Geller's. Unfortunately, for reasons of space, it is not possible to reprint Geller's letter or Randi's reply. However, readers should be able to obtain a copy of Geller's letter from Uri Geller Associates Ltd, Sonning Court, Sonning-on-Thames, Berkshire, RG4 0UR whilst information about Randi's side of the story and his defence fund can be obtained from Lewis Jones (not Michael Hutchinson as erroneously reported in the last issue) whose address is given on page 15.

Wooing the flock

As from the end of June, religious organizations are allowed to advertise and solicit funds on commercial radio provided that this does not involve 'improper exploitation'—presumably, as opposed to proper exploitation—'of any susceptibilities of those listening'. According to the *Independent* on 21 June, only religions with charitable status will be allowed to advertise or raise funds, in this way, which should cut out the 'shadier religious cults'.

In my view this gives rise to some interesting possibilities for imaginative producers; for instance an advertisement for condoms could be immediately followed by an upbeat jingle by the Catholic Church. Alternatively, an exhortation to buy Salman Rushdie's collected works could be followed by an offer of a free tee-shirt for anyone willing to contribute funds to his local mosque. In between the adverts, of course, heavy-metal music with subliminal satanic themes.

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.

The Houdini File

Number Seven

Frank Koval

Houdini's letter of August 30, 1923 to Harry Price was handwritten and obviously it was dashed off in some haste. This is not surprising when it is realised that at this time Houdini received on average some seventy letters per day—and sent out a similar number himself. (For a transcript of this letter see box.)

The book that Houdini was looking forward to appearing was his *A Magician Among the Spirits*, published by Harper Brothers in 1924. The 294 page volume was quite an achievement for someone who had had so little schooling as Houdini. The clue as to which 'Abbott' Houdini was hoping to see on his travels was the location given as Omaha. From there hailed David P. Abbott, author of *Behind the Scenes with The Mediums*, first published in Chicago in 1907 by The Open Court Publishing Company. This book, which went through quite a few editions, is still fascinating and informative to today's readers.

Hotel Martin
Sioux City, Iowa

Smallest town I have played in 25 years.

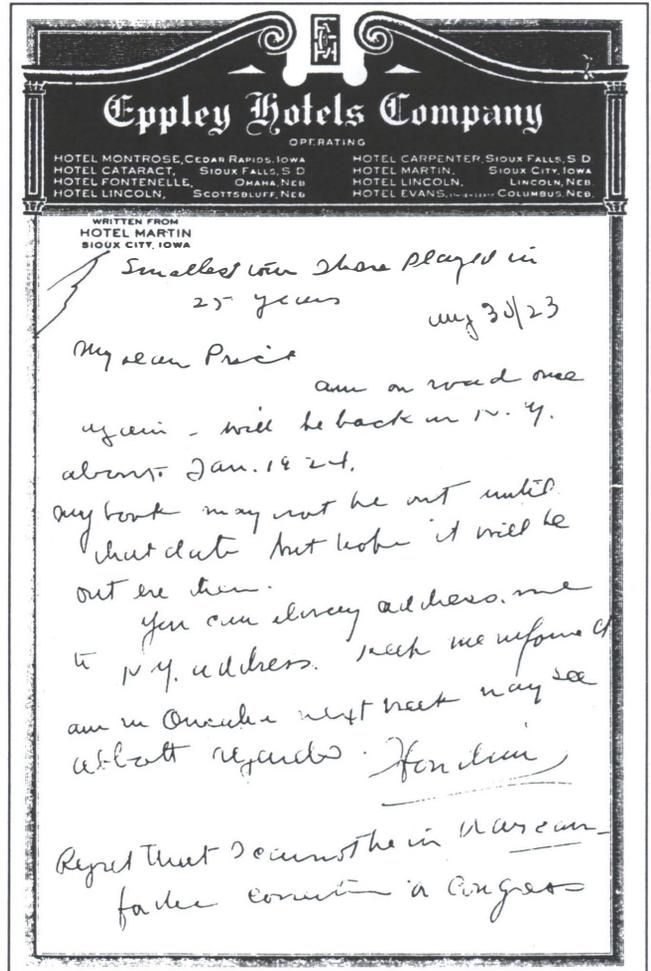
August 30/23.

My dear Price,

Am on road once again—will be back in New York about January 1924. My book may not be out until that date but hope it will be out 'ere then. You can always address me to New York address. Keep me informed. Am in Omaha next week. May see Abbott.

Regards.

Houdini.



Harry Price Collection

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



Why Not to Test a Psychic—Part 2

Lewis Jones

Why we should ignore the mysterymongers

When you're too smart, it goes around in a little circle and you get stupid again.

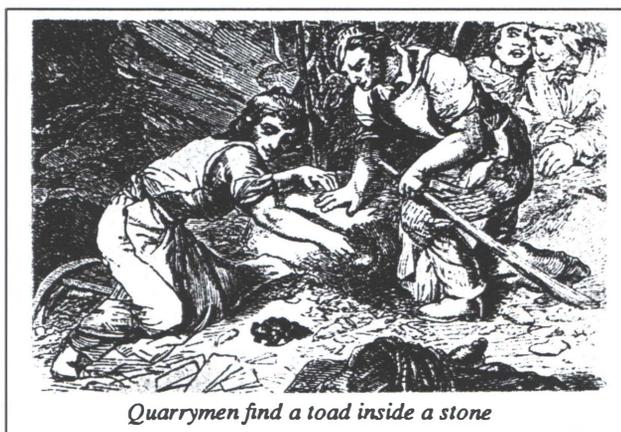
—Rita Rudner

In 1987, people who bought PG Tips packet-tea or tea bags found that each packet contained a free picture card—one of a series of 40 *Unexplained Mysteries of the World*. One of the cards showed a picture of a toad that was supposedly found in a sealed hollow flint nodule in a quarry. 'While this particular animal was found dead, there are many well-documented cases of freshly-quarried stones broken to reveal a living toad in a close-fitting hole, with no apparent way in. If the stone formed round the toad, how could it survive millions of years without sustenance, or withstand the heat and terrible pressure necessary to create rocks?'

A good question? The point I want to make is that it is not even a bad question: consideration of such a question is a waste of time. This brings me to my second criterion for assessing the absurdity of outlandish criteria for assessing the absurdity of outlandish claims. In Part 1 of this article, I proposed that Criterion One in approaching such claims was to ask 'Is this claim meaningless?' I now propose Criterion Two: 'Does this claim contradict overwhelmingly established fact?' To put it another way 'If I accept this claim, what do I have to give up?'

A living toad inside hermetically sealed stone? I need to give up the fact that such creatures require access to oxygen, along with all its physiological implications—arteries and veins lose their purpose, lungs no longer have any function, cells turn out to be anaerobic, the glottis becomes a redundant tube, the heart pumps liquid around the body for no reason. Since food is clearly not necessary, the entire digestive system is superfluous. So you can wash your hands of biochemistry.

This particular specimen has been able to stay alive and healthy for millions of years—presumably since before the advent of man on the planet. During the eons of rock formation, its skin has survived searing temperatures and its skeleton has resisted unimaginable pressures. So biology is all shot. Alternatively, we're dealing here with a normal toad, and it's our information about rocks that is all wrong. That's geology out the window. Or maybe the geology is basically OK, but we've fouled up on the time scale. But geological time scales are based on a series of interlocking checks that are founded on radioactivity. And radioactivity in turn is based on our knowledge of nuclear events in the atom. So that's physics down the tube. Well? Which are you going to ditch? Biology, geology, chemistry and physics? Or that toad?



Quarrymen find a toad inside a stone

Mystery-mongers feel that this approach is too harsh. If you are inclined to agree, let me ask: Have you tried selling a perpetual motion machine to a physicist lately? If so, why do you think you were not given serious attention? Nobel Prize winner Lev Davidovich Landau made this simple practical point: 'the brevity of life does not allow us the luxury of spending time on problems which will lead to no new results.' Those who call themselves psychics lay great store by a concept that I will call the 'pictures-in-the-head fallacy.' Zener-card guessers claim to 'pick-up' the mental picture from the head of the sender who is looking at the card. But there are no pictures in the head. The idea that there are such things is of a piece with the out-dated notion that the upside-down retinal image needs to be turned over again by the brain so that we can see things the right way up.

If there were such a mental picture, what would we see it with? A mental eye? And since that mental eye would have its own upside-down retinal image, it would need to be viewed by yet another mental eye. And since this mental eye would also... You see the problem. There is no more reason to see pictures in the head than there is to see the electric potentials travelling along the optic nerve. In the same way, it was once thought that sound-images were set up inside the head, and were listened to there. The philosopher Empedocles thoughtlessly bought this one, and he was taken to task for it by the Greek botanist Theophrastus:

'It is strange of him to imagine that he has really explained how creatures hear, when he has ascribed the process to internal sounds and assumed that the ear produces a sound within, like a bell. By means of this internal sound we might hear sounds without, but how should we hear the internal sound itself?'

The modern clairaudient still claims to tune in to the

non-existent sounds and voices reverberating inside people's heads, and would have been considered out-of-date in sophisticated Athenian company in the third century BC.

Great play is made with the manipulation of 'energy', especially in alternative 'medicine'. What kind of energy is this, you may ask: electrical? chemical? kinetic? heat? light? magnetic? nuclear? 'None of these', you will be told. 'Just energy.' Bad luck if you're trying to choose the appropriate meter to detect it. It's also bad luck if you're expecting energy to fall off with increasing distance from the source. Paranormal energies are just as effective a thousand miles away as they are close-up: so that's the inverse square up the spout.

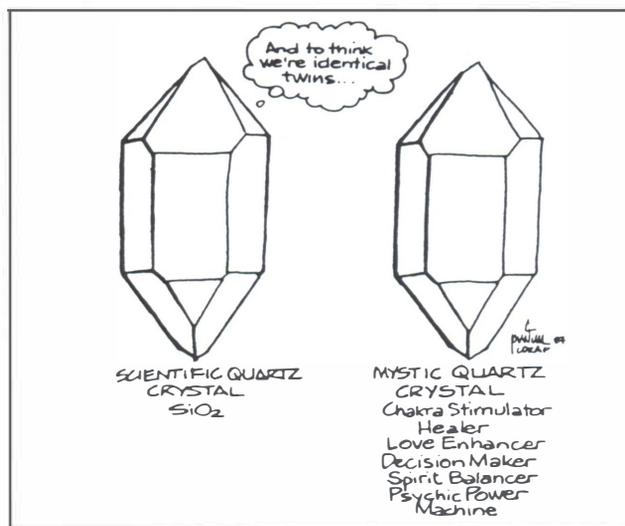
The obvious divide between psychic claims and the well-established facts of science was still bothering a scientist in 1946. In a letter, he wrote: 'Several years ago I read the book by Dr Rhine. I have been unable to find an explanation for the facts which he enumerated. I regard it as very strange that the spatial distance between (telepathic) subjects has no relevance to the success of the statistical experiments. This suggests to me a very strong indication that a non-recognised source of systematic errors may have been involved.' The letter continued: 'I admit frankly my skepticism in respect to all such beliefs and theories, a skepticism that is not the result of adequate acquaintance with the relevant experimental facts, but rather a lifelong work in physics'. The letter was signed: Albert Einstein.

You thought it was hard enough picking up the brain's electrical activity a few millimetres from the skull? That's another fact you'll have to lose. And the fact that the brain incorporates neither a transmitter nor a receiver for handling messages beaming through space. In spite of this, we're told that sensitives can tune in precisely to the eleventh card in a pack, distinguishing between the front of the card and the back, and filtering out all information transmitted by the rest of the pack, not to mention the interference from the sea of electromagnetic radiation in which we all thought we lived. And if these convenient waves can pass through mountains and the walls of buildings, how come they don't pass through the brain of a would-be receiver?

These are wonderful claims indeed 'but' (said David Hume) 'I would still reply that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature'.

Skeptics are not immune to these blind spots. In 1952, the overblown claims of the Bridey Murphy case drove a heavy nail into the coffin of hypnosis, which at the time still clung to some lingering pretensions to be taken seriously. But thirty years later, Melvin Harris, after suggesting some sensible sources of information that were missed at the time continued: 'Just as the possible sources were neglected, so was the tried and proven method of probing, under hypnosis, for the real-life origins of the Bridey saga. Perhaps its still not too late. An independent hypnotist could still put the crucial questions to Virginia.'

Eric Dingwell was a research officer at the British Society for Physical Research, and in 1970 he made it clear that



Rocky Mountain Skeptics

he could no longer bear the way science was ditched in favour of mysticism: 'A glance at the stories published quarter by quarter by the British SPR and the mode of presentation there adopted would amply suffice to make any sane man approaching the subject for the first time take second thoughts... What is perhaps the most damaging aspect is that few protests are made by serious officers of the Society. Year by year the same kind of tales and experiments are published, and money urgently required for other work is frittered away on articles of not the smallest scientific value. Little is done to show disapproval or publish criticism of the more extreme vagaries of the Spiritualist press which, week by week, publishes stories of the miraculous which would hardly have found support in medieval times...'

A consequence of shrugging off a scientific account and preferring an occult description is that the furtherance of knowledge would come to an end. If we had believed the mystically-minded, we would still be writing off bat navigation as a wonder of nature with no conceivable explanation. Gawping never got anyone any further forward. Contrary to the myth of the closed-minded scientist, researchers fall over themselves to be among the first to tackle anomalies in their own subject, taking Mark Twain as their guide: 'Supposing is good, but finding out is better'.

In 1990 the American physicist Carlton Caves challenged the second law of thermodynamics. But shortly afterwards a critic pointed out a flaw in the reasoning and threw out the whole idea: the critic was Carlton Caves. Then two astrophysicists decided that the standard model of particle physics was just not good enough when it came to explaining how many neutrinos were arriving from the sun: they called for a shake-up in the whole subject.

When the news of potential cold fusion hit the headlines, did you notice what happened in the laboratories? 'Within two weeks,' John Bockris reported, 'hundreds of confused fusion physicists turned away from their hundred-million-dollar magnetic confinement systems and the four-storey high giant lasers, and set up the \$100 jam-jar cells to do what Watkins had demanded—to repeat the chemists' experiments.' These guys are the *establishment*?

There have been examples aplenty. 'Perhaps most dramatic', said Richard Gregory, 'is Marconi's demonstration of radio across the Atlantic, when there was no reason (as this was before the discovery of reflecting layers in the stratosphere) for greater than line-of-sight communication. Marconi's optimism was supreme and triumphed over the physics of his day. It looked like a miracle. But he did not postulate some Mind-like entity, or some kind of telepathy, or whatever, to explain his as-it-seemed impossible reception of the letter 'M' in Morse, across three thousand miles of ocean—with no physical explanation'.

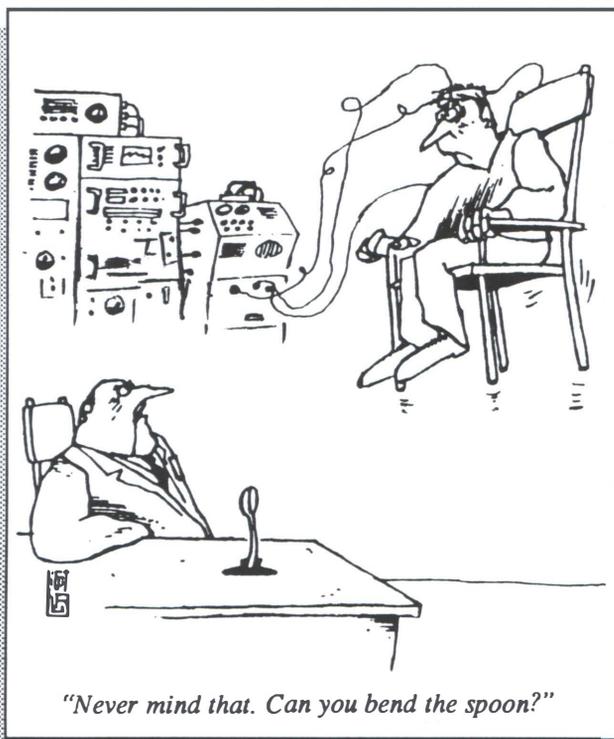
It is no good leaving these matters in the hands of believers. There are no 'experts' in psychic matters, any more than there are 'experts' in alternative medicine: there are only people who specialise in it. Parapsychologists are active only in the sense that rust is active.

There is no need to fear the accusation of closed-mindedness. Being open-minded requires nothing more than placing a welcome mat at your door, and being prepared to be hospitable to those who ring the doorbell. It does not require you to leave home and throw open your front door with a notice that says *Walk right in, whoever you are. The place is yours.*

If a claim fails on Criterion One and Criterion Two, forget it.

The alternative is a system of thought that functions in the way that John Dewey described the working of IQ tests: 'This intelligence-testing business reminds me of the way they used to weigh hogs in Texas. They would get a long plank, put it over a crossbar, and somehow tie the hog on one end of the plank. They'd search all around till they found a stone that would balance the weight of the hog, and they'd put that on the other end of the plank. Then they'd guess the weight of the stone.'

Lewis Jones is a freelance editor and writer.



The Inside-out Cosmos

Bill Penny

In the field of strange beliefs which go against common sense, one of the strangest is the idea that we live not on the outside surface of a sphere, but on the *inside*. In the USA in 1869 an angel appeared to Cyrus Reed Teed. It told him that the Earth is hollow and that we live on its inner surface and that the stars, Moon and Sun are all tiny bodies inside the sphere moving along very complicated paths. In 1870 he described this in his book *The Cellular Cosmogony, or the Earth a Concave Sphere*. He believed God wanted him to found a new religion, so he changed his name to Koresh and began a cult called Koreshanity. It soon attracted believers. In the 1890's he took his colony of believers to Florida where they built the town of Estero. It was not until 1949 that the cult's magazine, *Flaming Sword*, finally ceased publication.

The idea of an inside-out universe was also adopted in inter-war Germany by Peter Bender. He, and after his death Karl Neupert, led a cult which published several books during the Nazi period. They attracted the attention of the Nazi leadership, some of whom were attracted to many strange beliefs. In April 1942, a secret expedition, approved by Hitler and Himmler, set off to the Baltic island of Rugen. Led by Dr Heinz Fischer, it included some of Germany's top radar experts. After they arrived their radar equipment was pointed into the sky at an angle of 45 degrees. The other scientists in the expedition assumed this was merely a test of the equipment. It was only after the radar had remained in this strange position for several days that Fischer told them exactly why they were there. Hitler wanted the the inside-out cosmos theory proved scientifically. This was to be done by sending radar waves up into the sky where they would eventually hit another part of the inside of the sphere and be reflected back. After doing this the expedition were then to try to get an image of the British fleet in Scapa Flow.

The inside-out universe idea still has some supporters. Martin Gardner (*Skeptical Inquirer* vol 12, p355) recorded that in 1981 a mathematician, Mostafa Abdelkader, described in a mathematical paper how the universe could be mapped point by point into the inside-out cosmos model. In this mapping the further an object is above the surface of the Earth, the nearer it is to the centre of the hollow Earth, and the smaller it is. All the laws of the normal universe would be much more complicated, but to an observer in that universe everything would appear to be the same as to an observer in the normal universe. Both models of the universe are valid but in the inside-out cosmos the laws of physics are much more complicated. As there are no advantages in using this model, Occam's Razor suggests it should be discarded.

Bill Penny is a graduate student in computing.

The Freethinker: 1881–1991

William McIlroy

The life and times of a bastion of free thought

The 110th anniversary of any journal is notable; particularly one which has espoused or pioneered causes while remaining free from advertising interests and organisations. Considering the large number of well-financed and long-established periodicals which have gone under in recent years, *The Freethinker's* unbroken publication since 1881 (for most of its history as a weekly) is all the more remarkable. It has survived bans, boycotts, legal action, innumerable financial crises and two world wars (its offices were destroyed during an air raid in 1941).

Although *The Freethinker* dates from 1881, the origins of freethought publishing ('the infidel press') can be traced to the middle of the eighteenth century, when Peter Annet (1693–1769) started the *The Free Inquirer*. Regarded as the first freethought journal, rather than a pamphlet, it ran for nine issues, resulting in Annet being fined, pilloried and imprisoned for a year at the age of 68.

Throughout the nineteenth century the freethought press operated in defiance of the Church and State. Blasphemy was linked with sedition by prosecuting authorities who argued that an attack on Christianity was an attack on civil government. This did not worry freethinking editors and publishers who regarded religion as superstitious nonsense and a bulwark of rotten politics.

However, it was not only the representatives of law and order who threatened pioneers of freethought publishing. Many Christian organisations, like their present-day counterparts, endeavoured to impose their narrow standards on society and constantly pressured the authorities to take action against 'the infidels'. There were many victims of these pious informers and self-appointed censors. One of them was Richard Carlisle (1790–1843), who spent nine years in jail for publishing and selling the works of Thomas Paine.

During three decades that followed the collapse of Chartism at the end of the 1840s, freethought journals did much

to keep the spirit of radicalism alive. They provided an outlet for the advocates of social and political reform and a forum to debate advanced ideas. By 1881, when *The Freethinker* was launched, scepticism and unbelief were no longer confined to an educated elite.

George William Foote (1850–1915), who founded *The Freethinker*, declared in his first editorial:

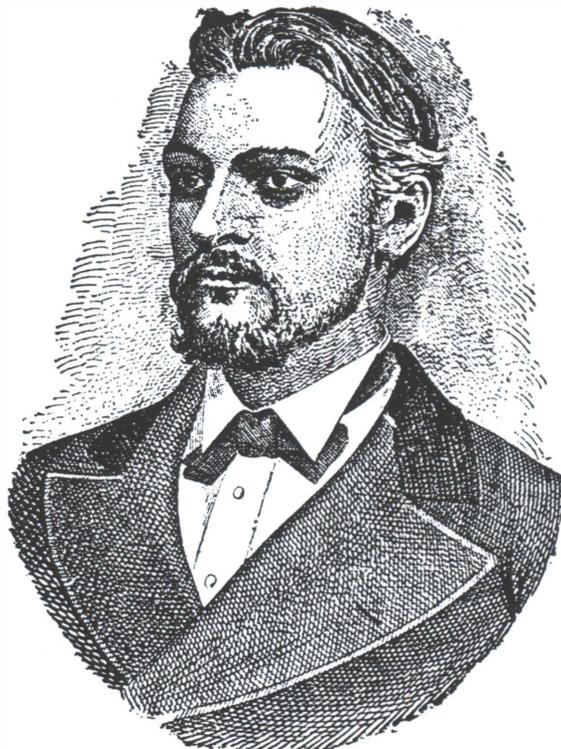
'Our principles belong entirely to the regions known and becoming known to man. We have no occult or mysterious sources of information, no profound secrets...No Gods, angels, spirits or devils have ever spoken to us...Satan is as great a stranger as Pluto; Jehovah as empty a name as Jupiter. The separate existence of the 'soul' and the 'future life' are to us inconceivable...For us the 'verities' of Christianity are all fables.'

This was strong stuff for Victorian England, and Foote soon discovered that his religious and political enemies were as vindictive as their predecessors who had persecuted Richard Carlisle. Newsagents refused or were afraid to stock *The Freethinker*. Its suppression was demanded in the House of Commons.

It was not long before *The Freethinker* was in trouble. Foote published a series of Comic Bible Sketches somewhat disrespectful, but which would not now cause Mary Whitehouse to bat an eyelid. He was tried for blasphemy and sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment, most of which was spent in solitary confinement. On his release he resumed and continued his editorship until his death.

Readers of the first *Freethinker* were informed that it would 'wage relentless war

against superstition in general and against Christian superstition in particular'. But *The Freethinker* never confined itself to criticism of religious beliefs and practices. It championed personal freedom, most controversially people's freedom to control their fertility and plan their families by recourse to effective methods of contraception. This infuriated



George William Foote



ated religious opponents, fearful in case the supply of pew fodder became less plentiful and—horror of horrors—people might indulge in pleasurable sexual activity without fear of unwanted pregnancy.

The Freethinker has always been resolute in defending freedom of expression and in opposing censorship. It has argued the case of Church disestablishment, the right to affirm, and reform of laws relating to blasphemy, school religion, Sunday observance, divorce, abortion and homosexuality.

Spookies have often been in *The Freethinker*'s range of

fire. In 1919, Foote's successor, Chapman Cohen (1868–1954) wrote:

'The present recrudescence of Spiritualism is largely caused by the heavy death-toll of the Great War. There is a quite natural desire among the bereaved to seek consolation through almost any channel...The money the 'medium' rakes in is the flow of tears from the sorrowful and distressed, and is one of the shadiest of shady businesses.'

At one time *The Freethinker* was virtually a lone voice speaking out against religious charlatans, and also sects like the Moonies, Divine Light Mission, Children of God and the Jesus Army. The paper was accused of intolerance, but its warnings have been justified by subsequent investigations and court cases.

Is there a role for journals like *The Freethinker* today? The upsurge of religious fundamentalism, with attendant aberrations like creationism, moving statues, 'anti-satanist' witch-hunts and other manifestations of irrationalism, provide an answer to that question.

For a free sample copy of *The Freethinker* write to: 117 Springvale Road, Walkley, Sheffield S6 3NT, or telephone 0742 685731.

William McIlroy edited *The Freethinker* in 1960–61, 1975–76 and has been its current editor since 1981.

Crossword

Ian Rowland

Across

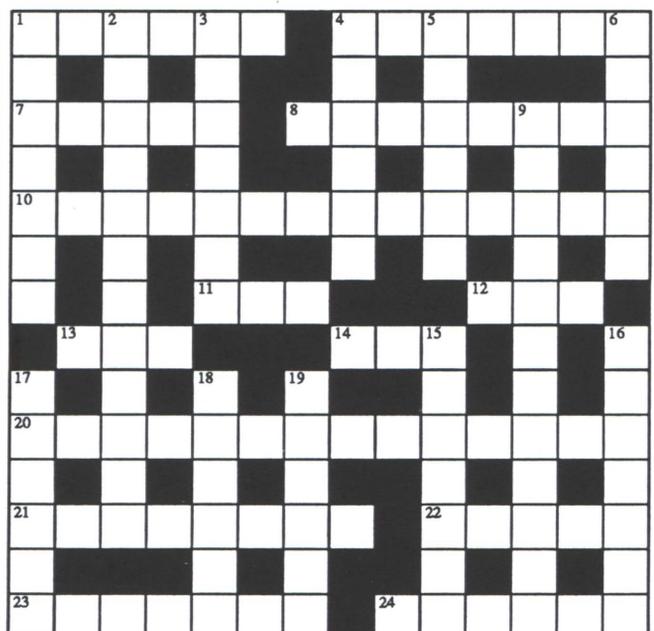
- 1 Kind of sound close to raw material (6)
- 4 The fanciful say it's a weird zone of bare mud (7)
- 7 A psi source at one extreme distance (5)
- 8 Oft-repeated point of view has lost its edge? (2,3,3)
- 10 Perpetual machines do a display of chaotic quality (7,7)
- 11 Being angel faced (3)
- 12 (See 13 across)
- 13 (And 12 across) Those whom a psychic can fool, no matter which (3,3)
- 14 She pretends to be modest, lively (3)
- 20 Sort of pact isn't fixed evidence of a past presence (4,10)
- 21 Studies bugs around a psychic capital (7)
- 22 Yeah yeah abroad it's said to be occult communication (5)
- 23 It's immaterial how Borley appears to wishful thinkers (7)
- 24 It's a mark of disgrace the way believers attach hate (6)

Down

- 1 Seer's reading material Eastenders think dishonest? (3,4)
- 2 State ritual somehow explains many strange claims (4,8)
- 3 How the rib lies describes New Age beliefs (7)
- 4 One who deforms may label Geller (6)
- 5 Tell it means again deceased (6)
- 6 The dismal way some folk ignore the truth (6)
- 9 Old PK trick (Spooner would say a gift parting with cash) (5,7)
- 15 Claim to harbour most of a pet sound somehow (7)
- 16 Make up dogmas, car advantageous (7)
- 17 Serving line delivery, which many mediums are good at (6)
- 18 Two irons mixed with sea tea said to get illusion (6)
- 19 Half castle half shy (like an astrologer's fee) (6)

Most of the clues or their answers are related to subjects which might well feature in the pages of *The Skeptic*. Send your entries to *The Skeptic* (Crossword), PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH. The closing date is 15 August.

The first correct entry to pop out of the hat when we stare at it intently and use psychokinesis will win a £10 book token. (In the unlikely event that this technique should fail, we'll close our eyes and pick one out).



A Chat with a Charming Charlatan

James 'The Amazing' Randi talks to Steve Donnelly

If you want to madden a medium, harass a homeopath or anger an astrologer just mutter the magical incantation 'James Randi'. Although his name is not yet a household one in the UK, his investigations and exposures of quackery, pseudoscience and paranormal flimflam give his name similar popularity in psychic circles to that of matoadors amongst the animal rights community.

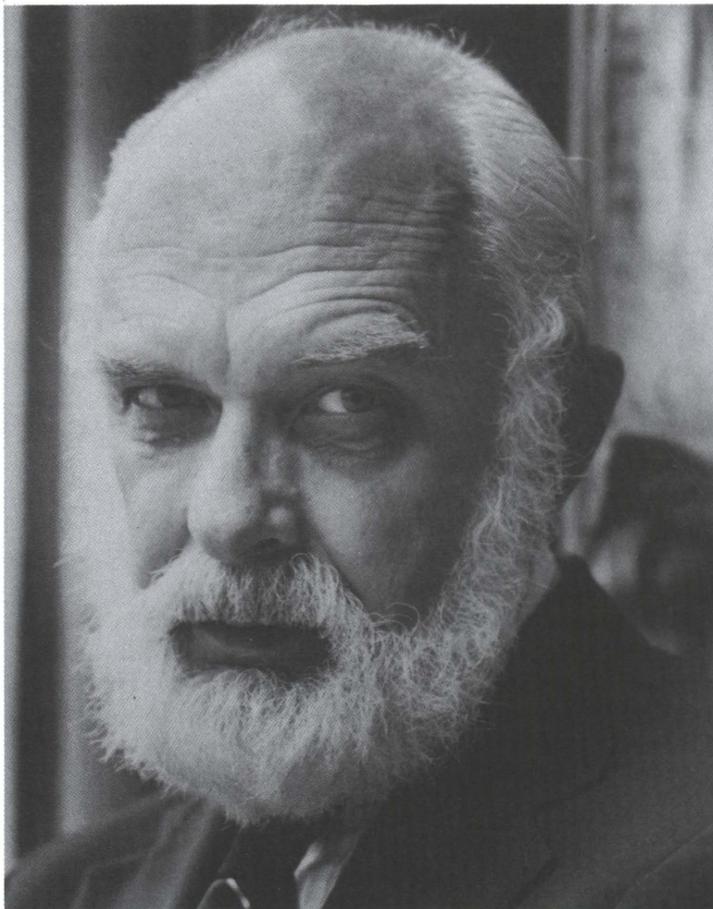
Randi is soon, however, to be a familiar face to millions of television watchers all over the UK when the six-part mini-series *James Randi: Psychic Investigator* begins on ITV on 17 July. In this series, Randi challenges individuals who claim to have paranormal abilities to demonstrate their powers in front of the cameras and a live studio audience. It is probably giving away no great secret to reveal that the series is unlikely to cause the discerning viewer to queue for treatment at his local psychic surgery or to consult an astrologer before choosing a marital partner.

Randi, who as the 'Amazing Randi' had a long career as a magician and escapologist, also has the musical distinction of being the man who cut off the head of rock musician Alice Cooper with a magician's guillotine. Nowadays, however, he uses exposure rather than execution, the scientific method rather than sleight of hand, to further the aims implicit in his adopted rôle of writer and psychic investigator—a career change which was greatly helped in 1986 by a \$270,000 grant from the prestigious MacArthur foundation.

In March of this year, Randi spent several weeks in Manchester at the studios of Granada television both filming his mini-series and writing a new book which is to be published in Britain as the series is broadcast. Despite a hectic schedule which left him visibly exhausted (off the

set) by the time the sixth episode was in the can, Randi kindly agreed to talk to *The Skeptic* about his life and his work.

I began by asking him about his childhood and his early influences: 'I was born in Canada a long time ago, and by the time I was 12 I saw a performance by the magician Harry Blackstone Senior and that inspired me



enough that I got curious about conjuring and how people fool themselves and how they are deceived by other people, and I got very interested in it—interested enough that I took up the conjuring trade. I did magic for years—I didn't tell my mother, she thought I was selling narcotics but I didn't want to embarrass her. Seriously, my family didn't take it very kindly—they wanted me to be a telephone company executive but I wasn't quite cut out for that type of work—and up until the day he died I don't think my father ever forgave me for going on stage. But it has been very satisfactory for me and has returned me a good living over the years—although I have never gotten rich, I have always supported myself and paid my bills. But about 10 or 12 years ago, I began to slowly

get out of the straight performing mode and began to get requests for my lecture without the magic show that went with it.

I guess it began gradually when word got out at my college shows that I also had some opinions on the paranormal and would be willing to talk to perhaps a psychology class on the subject. Eventually I started to get requests to lecture, not just to individual classes, but to the whole school body and I found that I could pack the necessary materials for my lecture into a single attaché case rather than the large van which the equipment for my magic show required. And frankly I began to get a great deal of personal

satisfaction out of doing the lectures rather than the magic shows. The shows were entertaining and I hoped that along the way the college audience would learn to consider things a little more carefully. My lectures too are meant to be entertaining—and I still generally do some conjuring demonstrations to illustrate how easily we can be fooled—but now I'm specifically trying to inform my audience as well and that's an important function.'

Although Randi makes no attack on people's personal beliefs—only on the unscrupulous exploitation of those beliefs—his investigations inevitably bring him into conflict with people's belief systems. This is a general hazard implicit in a skeptical world view in that, for instance, the exposure of the Turin shroud as a forgery or a Christian faith healer as a fraud may be perceived by believers as an attack on their religion. Randi was, in fact, himself brought up within the Christian faith and was gently encouraged, as a child, to go to church. He was even, for a brief period, an Anglican altar boy but he never took religion terribly seriously and never saw a necessity for supernatural forces to explain the world he saw around him:

'I can't prove a negative but I don't see enough evidence to convince me that gods exist. Although I don't have a dogmatic disbelief I guess I would define myself as an atheist rather than an agnostic because when you have lived 62 years, as I have, and never seen anything which required the assumption of a deity or the supernatural, it pretty well forces you to the conclusion that it's all mythology. But I have to acknowledge that it's interesting mythology and that it perhaps has its use in a society.

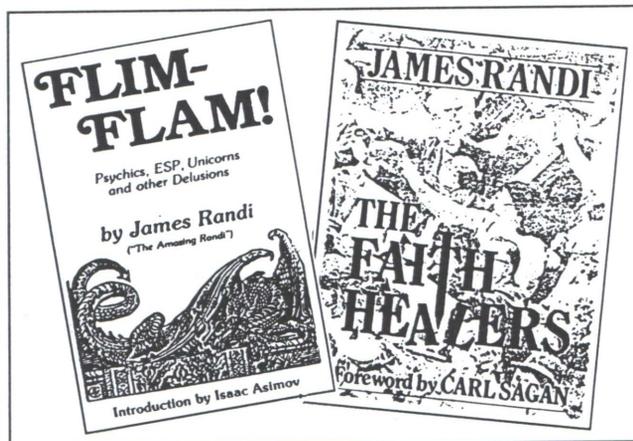
Having said that, I think I would prefer to live in a culture in which people don't have to lean on the supernatural in order to bring themselves solace. I don't think it's any harder to face a world in which you know, one day, you will cease to exist. I've published seven books with three more in the pipeline and that's my immortality and I'm satisfied with it'.

Religious belief, of course, is a personal matter which is not the concern of Randi or any other skeptic but faith healing, particularly in the context of a major religion, is a topic about which Randi has strong views: 'I'm afraid that faith healing when carried out by a minister of a major religion is particularly dangerous because people may conclude that as the man doesn't make any money from it he is somehow more likely to be genuine. They seem to feel that money is the only possible motive for people's actions. But of course a priest may practice healing simply because it gives him enormous power. I'm not saying this in a negative fashion—I'm not saying a priest would do it in order to show his contact with divinity—rather that perhaps it gives him status in his community. My concern is whether or not it helps the people who believe they are being helped by it and I don't think that it does. I think it leads them to a magical form of thinking which can be extremely dangerous if not fatal. Now, I accept that someone suffering from a complaint which has a psychosomatic component to it may feel that he has been helped by the

faith-healer but you have to look ahead. What happens if that person now gets some sort of a cancerous condition which needs surgical and/or chemical attention—what does he do? He says "Hey it worked for my asthma, it worked for my migraine, now it will also cure the cancer because God can cure any of these things." Of course my question is why would God give him the cancer in the first place? Is God some sort of capricious being who plays with you like a pair of dice? Does he say "Yea, I think I'll flip this one a tumour—that will be fun to watch". I find it so incredible that anyone can believe this kind of nonsense but the world is made of all different kinds of people with different kinds of beliefs.'

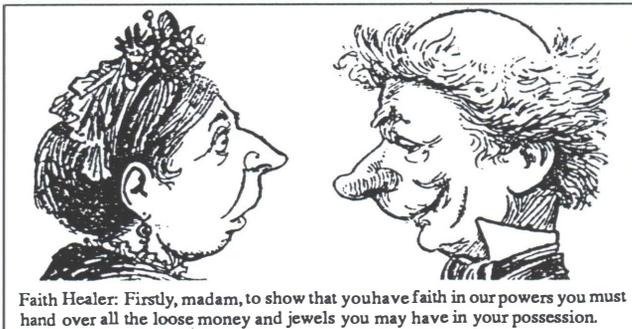
Despite his strong views, however, even if Randi were President for a day he would not wish to introduce legislation to ban all faith healers. Rather than someone who wishes to impose his views on others he sees himself primarily as an educator: 'In a position of power and influence, I would seek only to use my power to educate people. I'm just a man walking down the street who sees someone being hit by a car and knocked into the street. I'm neither a lawyer nor a medical person but I can summon appropriate help—I drag the person out of the way of the traffic and I make sure that medical assistance is summoned and perhaps legal assistance as well—but that's the most I can do. If that person then wants to crawl back into the traffic to get run over a second time, I may even go after him a second time and drag him out of the traffic. But if he gets angry with me and says "I would rather be run over, thank you" I'll say "That's your choice" and walk on my way—but not without at least attempting to summon legitimate assistance for the person. That's essentially what I'm doing, I see these people being 'run down', I go over and pick them up and say "You've been run down by forces beyond your ability to control them and I want to arm you so that you can control them and understand them in the future." But if they say, "Sorry I don't want to know about it," then I simply leave them and go on my way.

I wouldn't want to use legislation to prevent people feeling the way they want to feel and doing what they want to do as long as it doesn't harm other people. I think people should have the right to be stupid if they want to be—because in among all that range of things that I class as 'stupid' there may be lurking a new discovery.'



There is however, at least one exception to Randi's unwillingness to use legislation to limit stupidity and irrationality and that is in specific areas of faith-healing where harm may undoubtedly be done: 'I find it incredible that, here in Britain, you have no laws whatever against even the most extreme forms of faith-healing. I'm not talking now about healers who wave their hands over your body and put you in tune with the Cosmic Frequency. No, I'm talking about healers—who practise in this country—who poke things up the noses of their patients, and worse still, make real incisions in people's bodies *without antiseptics*. They can do this quite freely and there is nothing to prevent them from doing so. This to me is a shocking situation and I would say to people in the UK that you should be in touch with your MP to see whether something can be done about it. I really am not, in general, in favour of legislation but there has to be some limitation on the extent to which people can assault you *physically* and do some of these really horrendous things—particularly today when these people can be vectors of very serious communicable diseases that in many cases are fatal. I just hope that somebody doesn't have to die at the hands of one of these so-called healers before an MP somewhere in the country decides there are enough complaints and attempts to introduce legislation to do something about it. Perhaps an important message to British skeptics is to encourage them to make their angry feelings on this subject known to members of parliament'.

Mary Evans Picture Library



Faith Healer: Firstly, madam, to show that you have faith in our powers you must hand over all the loose money and jewels you may have in your possession.

Although Randi is not (and never claims to be) a scientist he did work many years ago as a research technician at the University of Toronto. He is extremely interested in science and the scientific method and is accustomed to working in close collaboration with leading scientists in some of his investigations: 'I have a healthy interest in science but I have always said to my audiences, during my lectures: "I appear before you without any academic credentials whatsoever, which gives me a certain freedom to say things that academics dare not say because they have someone to be accountable to in the morning. I have to account to no-one except my own conscience"'.

Despite the fact that he has a healthy respect for science in general and certain scientists in particular, Randi is not always in awe of a person because he has the letters 'PhD' after his name (I made no comment about my own academic qualifications at this stage of our conversation): 'I have a theory about PhDs: I suspect that when the doctorates are handed out there is a secret chemical in the degree certificate that is absorbed into the skin. The chemical goes directly to the brain where it paralyzes specific parts of the

speech centre. This part of the brain controls two sentences only and those sentences are: "I was wrong" and "I don't know", because I've never heard a PhD ever give either of those answers. Now, it's possible that I'm wrong and that the speech centre can handle these sentences perfectly well, but I have a feeling that the person with the PhD would just go "beedeee beedee beedee bee" when they tried to pronounce the words.

Joking apart, I have interacted very well with scientists over the years and can claim as good personal friends people like Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, Murray Gell-Mann and the late Richard Feynman—whom I miss greatly. They have generally appreciated my efforts and have lent me their valuable advice over the years. They are pretty heady company to keep and I always feel a little awed when I'm in their presence. Of course, I have neither their accomplishments nor their reputation. I have a relatively minor reputation but nonetheless, though my spectrum is very narrow, I think it can be very strong and I think that the skeptical movement should also keep its spectrum fairly narrow.'

On the theme of breadth of interest, Randi feels that CSICOP, the main skeptical organization in the US, with which he has been intimately connected for many years (until his recent resignation because of legal problems with Uri Geller) has, in some instances, over-extended itself. Surprisingly he feels that the evolution versus creationism battle—which is still being fought in schools in some states in the US—is one in which CSICOP should not be involved: 'I think the evolution/creationism debate is really a religious matter—naturally it's a scientific matter too but I wouldn't put it in the same bag as the paranormal and I think you can stretch yourself a little thin'. Although Randi himself has no time for the creationist arguments, unlike many skeptics, he would be prepared to allow the proponents of creationism equal time in schools, at least as far as debate and discussion are concerned: 'I think they should get equal time in schools, but the people that oppose them and represent the rational aspect of the argument should be very well chosen. I myself will not attempt to confront a creationist because I'm not trained in that direction. I don't understand enough about biology and evolutionary theory to be able to argue from a point of strength and I think this is true of many skeptics.

However, when I talk of equal time I don't mean that creationism should be *taught* in schools on an equal basis with evolution—it is *not* a science and should *not* be taught—but it should be debated. I think that frequent debates should take place. Some of the creationists do a good job of representing their cause but most of it is just blather. Their arguments often only consist of unsubstantiated claims but nonetheless I think that the people who oppose them must be well trained. I'm happy to leave that to people like Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould in the United States who do a marvellous job of handling it.

As far as the remit of the skeptical movement is concerned, my personal preference is that CSICOP certainly comment on it from time to time but I think that, in the main, it is better for us to stay out of it because there are other

things that require our attention. I guess I could be argued out of that view but I've always felt that it is better for me to keep my spectrum relatively narrow. I'm not going to spread myself too thin by arguing Santa Claus, squaring the circle and Fermat's last theorem. I think we spin our wheels doing that sort of thing—other people can handle it much better'.

In the areas in which he does operate, Randi's knowledge and experience are second to none but there was one classic case where (unlike the person with the PhD) he was able to say clearly 'I was wrong': 'This wasn't a paranormal subject at all. It was just highly unusual and began a few years ago when *Time* magazine called me to ask if I had seen an article in the *New York Times* that morning concerning a gentleman who claimed to be able to 'read' the surface of vinyl records. That is, he could look at the surface of an LP recording and tell you the name of the composer and which piece of music it was. At the time I didn't realise that it was limited to classical composers from Beethoven to the present—no *avant garde* composers and so on—which limited the field a great deal. Anyway, I was asked by the journalist what I thought of it and I said that it was clearly *possible* as the information is on the surface of the LP but very *improbable* but I'd look into it. Of course by the end of the day he had demonstrated to my entire satisfaction that he could do it—although there was nothing whatever paranormal about his ability'.

Having been 'wrong' once does he think it likely that one day someone will successfully demonstrate a paranormal ability and thus be entitled to the \$10,000 cheque which he has been carrying around in his pocket for the last 25 years—and what would be his reaction be if this were to occur? 'Oh, this would be a very exciting moment in my life and worth every cent of my \$10,000, believe me. I am certainly prepared for a genuine demonstration of paranormal abilities—but I think that it is extremely unlikely. Put it this way; I have been sitting by the chimney for 35 years now and all my evidence tells me that Santa Claus is unlikely to appear on Christmas Eve (or any other day of the year). On the other hand should a fat man in a red suit come down my chimney on December 24, by golly, I'll give him my list and tell him that I have been a very good boy!'

Whether St Nicholas would accept that James Randi, atheist, skeptic—and the only man in the world to have the profession 'charlatan' on his American Express card—had behaved himself for the previous 12 months is a matter about which even the credulous might be skeptical.

James Randi Defence Fund

James Randi is currently involved in legal proceedings in connection with Uri Geller, and he has appealed to skeptics to help him with his legal costs. If you would like to more details about the legal defence fund for James Randi please contact Lewis Jones, 23 Woodbastwick Road, Sydenham, London SE26 5LG. Please do not contact Michael Hutchinson, as advertised in the previous issue of *The Skeptic*.

skepsis

3rd Annual Euro-Skeptics Conference Park Hotel, Amsterdam 4 & 5 October 1991

The 3rd annual European Skeptics conference is being organised by Skepsis, the Dutch skeptical group, and they promise a varied and exciting programme. The following speakers have already been confirmed:

- **Dr Terence Hines (USA):** *Placebo practitioners—psychotherapists as native healers from Park Avenue to Borneo*
- **Amardeo Sarma (Germany):** *Testing dowsing claims in Kassel—aims, methods, results*
- **Dr Claude Benski (France):** *A pedagogical project of paranormal research in an engineering school*
- **Michael Howgate (UK):** *Looking for a witness of the Flood*
- **M A Klein Breteler (Netherlands):** *The diagnostic value of Electro-Acupuncture according to Voll*
- **Prof J Hilgevoord (Netherlands):** *The world according to Quantum Mechanics*
- **Dr Michael Heap (UK):** *Science in everyday life*
- **Dr Piet Jongbloet (Netherlands):** *The eminence effect in human annual birthrate*
- **Carl Koppeschaar (Netherlands):** *A critical look at neo-astrology*
- **Prof Cornelis de Jager (Netherlands):** *The Mars Effect related to annual birth rates*

There is a single registration fee of Hfl 75 which covers both days of the conference. Accommodation is available at the conference hotel for an additional charge (Hfl 187 single, Hfl 248 double), and a conference banquet will be held on Friday 4 October.

For more information, and a registration form, write to Dick Zeilstra, Stichting Skepsis, PO Box 2657, 3500 GR Utrecht, Netherlands. The closing date for registration is 1 September.

More Light on Medjugorje

Hilary Evans

Is the Virgin Mary appearing regularly in Yugoslavia?

Although believers in the Medjugorje visions have dominated the media scene, skeptics have been doing their best to undermine the pro-vision propaganda. Frère Michel de la Sainte Trinité has been publishing periodic reports on the happenings, demonstrating the weakness of the claims; now he has brought his evidence together in a massive 510-page report which is essential reading for all students of the affair, and which throws fascinating light on the machinery which activates this kind of imposture.

The story is of course far more complex than the media versions would lead one to believe. On the face of it, it's a simple, touching tale of a group of young village teenagers, from a quiet country district of Yugoslavia, who were privileged to encounter the Virgin Mary on a stony hillside on 24 June 1981, and to continue speaking with her on a virtually daily basis ever since. Apart from the personal messages for the visionaries, what the good lady has to say is pretty much what she said at Lourdes, Fatima, and on numerous other occasions: that we humans must repent of our naughtiness or it will be the worse for us.

The visionaries have been supported in their claims by some of the local clergy, though the local bishop is resolutely and outspokenly skeptical. Millions of pilgrims from all over the world have preferred to believe the visionaries themselves rather than their bishop; and the local authorities have come to look on the claims with more favour now that Medjugorje, once an obscure village, contributes 45% of Bosnia-Herzegovina's tourist revenue. New hotels, cafés and shops, with streets, car parks and so on, are springing up to serve Medjugorje's visitors: a definitive rebuttal of the visionaries' claims would be a severe setback for the economy of the region...

Also involved is church politics: many of those favouring the visions adhere to a fashionable charismatic approach to religion, at odds in several respects with the established position of the Church. One of the priests most closely involved with the visions subsequently set up a religious commune, together with a German girl who had been miraculously cured by the Medjugorje Virgin: the tenets of the commune were based on a declaration, by the Virgin herself, that love is the strongest weapon against Satan and that those who are

'enflammées par l'amour' will be the 'front line' confronting the devil. The rule of the community is that the Brother and Sister who head it shall 'offer themselves in sacrifice of satisfaction one for the other'. My speculations as to what this actually means are no doubt a product of my prurient mind, but they certainly alarm, too, the author of the report... The fact that such goings-on have been explicitly authorised by the Virgin is alone sufficient grounds for questioning her authenticity.

Another of the priests, again one who was specifically nominated by the Virgin, is now known to have got a nun pregnant; in addition, the Virgin has shown herself unexpectedly partisan in respect of other controversial matters. All this could, I suppose, be taken as an indication that the Virgin is moving with the times, and becoming more permissive as she moves towards her third millenium; such, however, is not Frère Michel's view, which is that the doctrines of the Church are unchanging, and that the visionary Virgin's divergence from those doctrines is a strong reason for questioning her identity.

But in any case, all this is of course marginal to the central improbability of the affair: which is, that the Virgin would choose these particular inhabitants of this particular village, to visit daily—at a time and place of their choosing—on what now adds up to many thousands of occasions.

Such improbabilities are of course glossed over in the pro-visionary propaganda, which has made Medjugorje an international best-seller. While his wife was receiving





otherworldly counsel of a different kind, that great and wise statesman President Reagan was delighted to receive, in December 1987, a message from the Virgin, via one of the visionaries, and replied: 'Now, I will go to my meeting with Gorbachov in a new spirit.'

His successor, also, is receiving heavenly aid. on 15 November 1990, President Bush gave 20 minutes of his time when he might have been attending to other things, to meeting and talking with one of the visionaries who was touring the US.

Ironically, the best criticism of the Medjugorje nonsense has from the start come from within the Catholic Church. Père Ivo Sivric, a priest from Medjugorje now working in St Louis, Missouri, wrote an account of the imposture in *The hidden side of Medjugorje* (1988), a valuable report containing many important transcripts hitherto unpublished. Together with Frère Michel's study, they present a factual review of the evidence, an exposure of the political and theological-political motivations involved, and the theological reasons for questioning the claims.

From the skeptic's point of view, the ironies go yet deeper. For Frère Michel, writing as a devout Catholic, is by no means averse to the idea that the Virgin might return to our planet with helpful advice. He accepts the realities of the Rue du Bac, La Salette, Lourdes, Pontmain and Fatima visits (while rejecting many others, including Garabandal and San Damiano).

For him, there are only three alternative interpretations of Medjugorje:

- that the visions are what the visionaries claim them to be
- that they are deliberate imposture of psychological aberration
- that they are the handiwork of the Devil.

His book is a devastating demonstration that the first of these is untenable. Deliberate imposture he rules out, and,

because the visionaries aren't sick, and because he takes the traditional view that hallucinations etc happen only to sick people, he rules out psychological aberration also. So he is left with the only remaining alternative, that the whole thing is the work of Satan.

I imagine that most readers will share my feeling, that Frère Michel dismisses the psychological alternative too easily. It is evident that a person doesn't have to be sick, in the conventional understanding of that word, to experience hallucinations and other mental phenomena. But is that what is happening to Vicka, Ivanka, Marija and the rest of the Medjugorje Six, Seven or Eight (depending on who's counting)? So-called scientific tests were conducted by a French Dr Joyeux, with much parading of photos showing the visionaries in so-called ecstasy with electroencephalographic wires attached to their heads. But as Frère Michel demonstrates, the tests are wholly valueless and don't even tell us much about the state of mind of the subjects, far less whether or not they are actually in the process of communicating with the Queen of Heaven.

What neither of these books do, beyond a limited point, is to go into the *psychological* issues involved. For this we must await the long-promised second volume of *The hidden side of Medjugorje*, currently being prepared by Louis Bélanger, of the University of Montreal. But it is clear that a great number of psychological factors and sociological forces are at work in Medjugorje, giving us the opportunity to watch them at work beneath the spotlight of world interest. It is a saddening, even alarming, spectacle.

It is also a revealing one. One of the things the Virgin has said is that Medjugorje will be the last of her visits to earth. I hope she is wrong in this, as she has been wrong in so many of her predictions. Heaven knows who she is, or what she thinks she's doing; but her visits always stir up a lot of interest, in believers and skeptics alike. We would miss her if she stopped coming.

NOTES

Books referred to:

Frère Michel de la Sainte Trinité, *Medjugorje en toute vérité*, Editions de la Contra-Reforme Catholique, 10260 Saint-Parrés-Vaudes, France, 1991.

Ivo Sivric, *La face cachée de Medjugorje*, (English translation *The hidden side of Medjugorje*), Psilog Inc, 465 Nôtre-Dame, Saint-François-du-Lac, Quebec, Canada J0G 1M0, 1988-89.

Hilary Evans is a long-time writer on the paranormal, and co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library.

The London Student Skeptics

The London Student Skeptics will be meeting in the next academic year at the University of London Union, Malet St, London WC1, on Mondays at 7.30 pm. Dates already booked are 21 October (Freshers' introduction: wine and cheese evening), 4 and 18 November, and 2 and 16 December. An annual subscription to the LSS costs £2 (includes wine and cheese!). For the full programme (to be published in late September), send a s.a.e. to Mike Howgate, 71 Hoppers Road, London N21 3LP. Please make cheques payable to Mike Howgate.

Dualism, ESP and Belief

Carol Sherrard

Exploring the connections between beliefs

Many *Skeptic* readers may have vaguely thought, as I did, that belief in ESP goes along with non-materialist and religious beliefs in general. A useful questionnaire study by Stanovich [1] throws surprising light on the connections among these beliefs.

First of all, he was interested in whether beginning students of Psychology actually share the materialist view of human beings in which teachers like himself attempt to instruct them. This was, incidentally, the first-ever study of whether adults in our (supposedly) scientific culture hold materialist views of mind, or whether they still hold to dualism, although there have been several studies of children's developing ideas about mind.

Stanovich found that half of his sample of 160 (133 women, 27 men) endorsed the statement that mind is a special form of energy currently unknown to man, but in contact with the brain and affecting it. The existence of introspection was accepted by 44% as a ground for believing that thought-processes cannot be brain-processes. The classic (Descartes') dualist view that mind interacts with brain to govern behaviour was endorsed by 49%, while 39% thought that mind and brain are two completely separate things. Dualism was widespread among these students, but there was also some evidence of penetration of the materialist world-view, the two together resulting in an incoherent view of mind. For example, total separability of mind and brain was rejected by the majority, and some form of mind-brain interaction accepted, yet the idea that consciousness survives the death of the physical body was also widespread. There was agreement with the statements that mind states are brain states, that mind-talk was often a shorthand for brain-talk, and that science will eventually explain the mind; yet they did not think that mind-talk would ever be totally replaced.

The existence of introspection appeared to be a strong reason for holding dualistic beliefs, on the ground that it seems to indicate that the mental and the physical are separate. What is surprising in Stanovich's survey is that such dualistic beliefs were not particularly connected with religiosity (that is, neither positively nor negatively correlated), although they were connected with belief in ESP. This is evidence against the 'Functional Alternative' theory that belief in the paranormal is equivalent to religion, serving the same psychological and social functions.

Another surprise was that, among those holding religious beliefs, there was a marked rejection of (nonreligious) paranormal phenomena. This was even more marked among those with fundamentalist or conservative

religious beliefs, as opposed to the liberal Protestant denominations, or those with no particular affiliation, who were more likely to believe in the nonreligious paranormal. Among the Baptists, who Stanovich describes as the most conservative denomination in his sample (I am not sure why, since there were also Catholics) there was a clearly interrelated set of beliefs. There was a moderate positive correlation between religiosity and dualism (the two went together, though not invariably), but there were strong negative correlations between religiosity and belief in ESP, and dualism and ESP, so that ESP beliefs were very rarely found together with strong religiosity or dualism in these Baptists.

It appears, then, that those with firm religious belief make a sharp distinction between religious and non-religious paranormal phenomena, and whether they hold dualistic beliefs or not is unconnected with this. On the other hand, non-religious people who hold dualistic beliefs are also likely to believe in ESP: they make a connection. The links for them, judging from Stanovich's survey, are the specific beliefs that "Some mental processes have no connections to brain processes", "The fact that I can introspect means that my thought processes cannot be just brain processes", and "The 'self' that I introspect about controls both the mind and the brain".

This is pure speculation, but it looks as if the tendency to attribute paranormal powers outside oneself may be a projection of beliefs about one's own powers. The child psychologist Jean Piaget observed [2] just this connection in young children, and at a stage in their development when they also imagine their thoughts and dreams to be made of a material stuff separate from themselves, which is therefore visible to others. He called the inter-related beliefs 'animism' (powers outside the individual) and 'magic' (powers inside).

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Carol Sherrard is a psychologist at the University of Leeds.

Psychic Diary

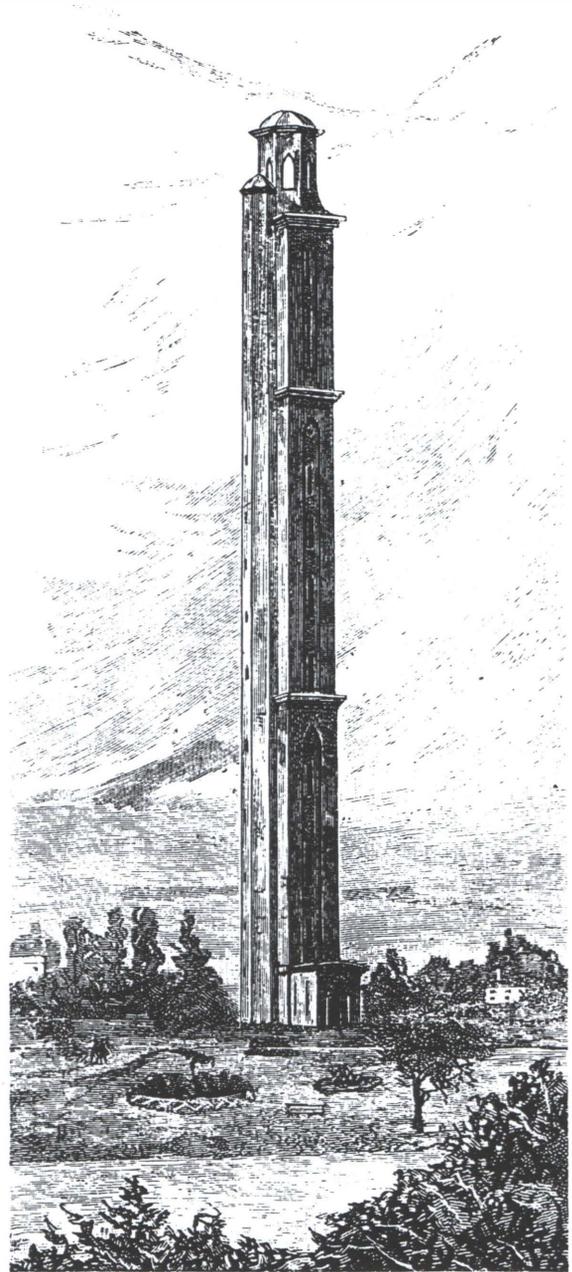
Toby Howard

Things, as they say, are not what they used to be. Trains don't run on time, dogs are no longer our best friends, the English have forgotten how to play cricket, and the days when drivers remembered to switch off the alarm *before* opening the car door at 6 a.m., are long gone.

But far, far worse for scrutineers of the paranormal is the sad truth that these days the psychic world is positively *mundane* compared with the high jinks of the past. Take spiritualism, for example. In its noisy heyday, spirits rapped and blew trumpets, were regularly summoned and photographed, and could even perform miracles unheard of today, such as exerting control over architects (see illustration). However, a visit to an exhibition of mediumship today will reveal not so much glimpse into the Great Unknown, as a complex structure of social interactions, with a shared vocabulary and conventions of behaviour. As a cooperating attendee, you do not, for example, ever tell the mediums that they are wrong. If they say that your late uncle was a leprechaun with a glass eye and a penchant for unicycles, you had better believe it. If you disagree, you'll be told to go away and think about it until you *do* agree. Nice set-up. Faced with mind-numbingly tedious scenes of modern mediums doling out trivia about lost earrings and money troubles to people selected from that elite list of 'hits'—the Ethels, Hildas, Joneses, Arthurs—one would positively *welcome* a stream of ectoplasm to come creeping out of an unexpected orifice.

It matters that things don't look quite as spectacular as they used to. The paranormal scene has mellowed out, has become less transparently laughable, and transmuted itself into the all-encompassing 'New Age'. The dotty, stupid and sometimes dangerous ideas have been stripped of their jaw-dropping showbiz elements, and assimilated into the lovely, warm, reassuring, soothing and profitable New Age pudding. From the rationalist's point of view, absurd tactile demonstrations of paranormal powers may give you the *possibility* of having an opportunity to check the evidence. We can at least decide whether the ectoplasm is cheesecloth or muslin. What, on the other hand, can you easily and quickly do about the well-meaning New Ager who takes a deep breath and intones seriously 'I can feel your energy lines are out of alignment, my darling'?

On the other hand, it's boring as hell. After all, it is the silly season, and I'd love to be able to tell you about new sightings of fairies in a Yorkshire garden, a levitating medium in a gentlemen's club, or someone stopping Big Ben just by thinking about it. The most entertaining character on the UK scene at the moment is probably Mr Icke, but even he's been quiet of late. (Have you, like me, surreptitiously flicked through his strangely-coloured book in the bookshop? I haven't the nerve to take it to



Arnewood Tower, Lyminster, built in 1885 to 'commemorate spiritualism'. The architect was 'controlled' by the spirit of Christopher Wren.

the till.) Even the golden age of spoonbending has all but gone, leaving only fond memories of watching the growing amazement of David Dimbleby and his flapping flares.

Without the over-the-top ludicrous elements, the New Age slips more easily and quietly into our society. The paranormal world may have shed most of its razzamatazz, but there remains an alarming quantity of rubbish, delusion, stupidity and ignorance around, and it is just as important today as it has ever been that people should say—and be heard to say—*prove it*.

Toby Howard is a lecturer in computer graphics and a member of the Manchester Skeptics.

Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

Skeptical fission

It all goes to show you can never tell what's going to happen. When I founded *The Skeptic*, I never dreamed we would have dry skeptics, wet skeptics, and fairly damp skeptics; soon, doubtless there will be an automatically programmable skeptic which will launder your beliefs according to EC standards. Skeptics are fissing (as in nuclear fission) everywhere, in front of my eyes. It's been said before, but I'll say it again: folks, we're all on the same side.

On the other hand, it is possible to go too far with the 'there are too few of us, we have to band together against the wolves out there' sort of argument. Recently, a fooferaw (US term for kerfuffle) has broken out between the Australian Skeptics and the Phoenix Skeptics over just such a question. Now, admittedly, as Mark Plummer, former Executive Director of CSICOP, used to love to point out, things are different in Australia (we all know that; we've all seen *Neighbours*). There the pioneering spirit survives. In a country as hostile as Australia, you had to huddle together for sheer survival. I theorize that this explains, even now, why, according even to Australian friends, when an Australian organization is under threat it pulls all its covered wagons into a circle facing outwards, while the Phoenix Skeptics are satirizing the whole thing by asking their members to sign loyalty oaths. In all fairness, however, I have to say that the Australian Skeptics and the Australian creationists have been at war for a long time, ever since the day when the Australian Skeptics called a press conference to announce that they had discovered some A\$90,000 was missing from the creationists' funds.

Here's the story, as reported in the *Arizona Skeptic* newsletter by Michael Stackpole (and kindly supplied to me in photocopy by Mike Hutchinson). The Australian Skeptics took part in a creation/evolution debate (in Australia). The debate was reported in the *Australian Skeptic*, and the report was reviewed in the *Arizona Skeptic* by Jim Lippard, the founder of the Phoenix Skeptics and instigator, together with our own Toby Howard, of the skeptics' e-mail network. The trouble started, apparently, because Lippard spotted discrepancies between the report published in the *Australian Skeptic* and the videotape he had of the debate. Lippard published his criticisms, and, so says the newsletter 'in the interests of fairness' sent a copy to the Institute for Creation Research, who had fielded one of the creationist participants. The ICR used the article to attack the Australian Skeptics, the Australian Skeptics have accused the Phoenix Skeptics of inaccurate reporting and disloyalty, and, as Stackpole puts it, 'through a series of trans-Pacific letters the whole controversy has

done anything but clear up.'

Now, I wasn't there, and I haven't read all the letters, and I haven't seen the videotape, and any of that—but I am not going to let that disqualify me from making a point of my own. The bottom line for everyone in the skeptics is or should be, as Stackpole says, a commitment to truth for its own sake. Skepticism, as I keep telling everyone I meet, is inquiry. That means investigation, accurate reporting whether we like the results or not, and a certain amount of tolerance of diverging points of view. In any organization at any time you care to name, stifling dissent is the first step to ending people's rights to think for themselves. And if there is anything that we stand for it is the promotion of free, critical thought on all topics, not just the limited range of the paranormal. My passion for truth (however you think that sounds) is why I founded *The Skeptic* in the first place, and it's what keeps me here (it certainly isn't the politics).

Having said all that, in Lippard's place, I probably would not have sent the article to the ICR; I would have mailed my criticisms to the *Australian Skeptic* for inclusion in the next issue or to give them a chance to publish a correction. We are not, after all, publishing daily newspapers, where time is of the essence and everything has to be done yesterday. And this is one of the central points: most of us are not professional skeptics or even professional writers. We make mistakes (even professionals make mistakes). I have made mistakes myself, some of them connected with *The Skeptic*, most of them through inexperience, all of which I regret deeply. The key is, once you have made a mistake, to learn from it so you are not condemned to repeat it.

We are a small community in a large world, most of which suspects that we are godless, inhumane creatures wanting to deprive everyone else of harmless emotional comforts. The best way for us to survive—and grow as a movement—is through tolerance, of each other and of other people, always keeping in mind that basic commitment to truth. Believers all produce the same arguments and rationalizations; each skeptic is an individual thinker. That is, or should be, our strength; legislating a 'skeptically correct' way of thinking should be a contradiction in terms.

Five hours after I wrote the above, I heard that Randi had resigned from CSICOP.

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

Reviews



Boundaries of knowledge

Isaac Asimov, *Frontiers* (Mandarin, £4.99)

Frontiers is an interesting idea for a book—exploring the frontiers of human knowledge. The range of the book is very impressive—from prehistory to the present day, from the smallest sub-atomic particles to the universe. It is full of fascinating facts, providing just a glimpse of a subject (about three pages) before the book moves on.

Naturally Asimov tends to concentrate on fields that interest him, and there is plenty of material on astronomy in particular. I was disappointed, however, at the lack of anything on computers and particularly robots, which feature very heavily in Asimov's science fiction. His style is very readable; he has the knack of being able to keep your attention and can make the most unlikely of subjects appear interesting. The book is clearly designed to be suitable for non-scientists, which does entail a slightly patronising style at times. This is not helped by the book's rather sexist subtitle—'New discoveries about man and his planet, outer space and the universe.'

In the introduction, Asimov admits that some of the conclusions are tentative. The frontiers of knowledge are changing all the time and theories are constantly being revised. Asimov is not afraid, however, to put forward his own theories. He admits that he could be wrong, but it is one of his strengths that he is able to come up with unconventional and thought-provoking suggestions. After all, he is also a science fiction writer. However, it could be frustrating that there are no references, so it is not possible to check out his sources or tell which ideas are his.

Some essays inevitably bring up political issues, with respect to ecology in particular. He even includes some of his own political views. The future is fraught with problems as well as excitement, but Asimov remains largely optimistic. It is interesting to see how his visions of the future have changed in the 40 years since his first science fiction stories.

In conclusion, I would certainly recommend *Frontiers* if you would like a taste of subjects that you are unfamiliar with. If you are looking for technical knowledge or detailed theories, you will probably be disappointed.

—Steve Wallis

Cold confusion, the latest fax

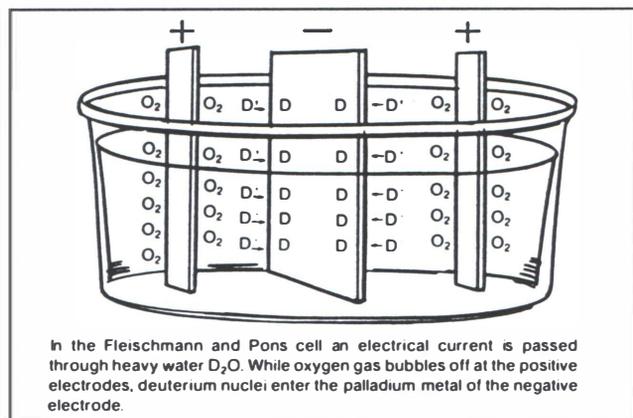
F David Peat, *Cold Fusion, The Making of a Scientific Controversy* (Contemporary Books, \$8.95)

Cold fusion fever hit the world with the announcement on the 23rd of March 1989 from the University of Utah that a simple experiment had achieved what billions of dollars had failed to do, and an inexhaustible and cheap supply of safe

energy was now a reality. Like many scientific 'break-throughs', Fleischmann and Pons' ideas suffered a fast and traumatic birth. This was followed by an equally meteoric crash with the last rites being effectively read over their cold fusion cells by many scientists and laboratories worldwide within 6 months (see *The Skeptic* 3.4). This is in many ways normal within the scientific community and should not detract from the research undertaken—with the very large body of knowledge available it is simply not possible to know everything about a particular area not directly related to your own field of specialised knowledge. In fact the input and judgment of scientific peers is a valuable and necessary part of the research process.

This book serves to highlight the speed of F & P's claims and the publicity associated with them. The usual path of scientific publication and the accompanying peer review can lead to the quiet and gentle demise (at least in the public eye) of ideas inadequately supported by solid, objective scientific evidence. F, P and the University of Utah's approach of a dramatically worded press release stunned the scientific community, caused havoc in the money markets (the price of palladium went up dramatically) and generally raised hopes and expectations throughout the world. And quite rightly so, as the long term benefits of such an inexhaustible and readily available clean energy source are enormous. But sadly, as well described by Peat, the true facts were obscured behind the fog of hyperbole and the threats of patent attorneys and legal actions.

Peat manages to explain, albeit in a very simplistic manner, the theory and ideas behind cold fusion and places it in perspective within the framework of worldwide energy sources. A layman's description of atomic structure and the isotopes of hydrogen and palladium are included and shed some illumination on the background to fusion. (Anyone wanting a further non-technical look inside the atom is referred to *Mr Tompkins in Paperback*.) A chronological description of the events leading up to the public announcements and of those following it gives a clear overview for



In the Fleischmann and Pons cell an electrical current is passed through heavy water D_2O . While oxygen gas bubbles off at the positive electrodes, deuterium nuclei enter the palladium metal of the negative electrode.

those who did not follow events closely at the time. Most importantly the characters and conflicts are brought sharply into focus. Fleischmann and Pons are depicted as scientists of previous good repute and standing who seem to have been pressurised into going public before they were truly ready. Perhaps the pressure came from the University of Utah in an attempt to gain a major scientific coup. Possibly they were deluded by the dream of a Nobel prize into believing that cold fusion was happening in their basement laboratory without sufficient corroborating evidence. The relationship with Brigham Young University and Steven Jones in particular is explored in some detail and their behaviour throughout the whole affair is subjected to close scrutiny. Also included are the results of more recent research into the cold fusion field but here there is very little to actually convince the reader of either viewpoint.

Throughout the whole book Peat does not actually do any more than sit on the fence offering both sides of the story with only a seemingly slight bias. This appears to arise as a result of reticence in the dissemination of information from the F & P camp which does give the appearance of bias against them. The book is nonetheless informative, readable and seems to cover most of the aspects of the cold fusion controversy from the science to the people. With the prospect of many years more research before a definite conclusion can be reached over cold fusion Peat left me wondering if there is a Phoenix to rise out of the ashes. Will Fleischmann and Pons join Blondlot and will cold fusion join polywater in the hall of infamy? We will just have to wait and see. I truly hope not because mankind could benefit greatly from just such a discovery but I fear that it will not be for sometime to come.

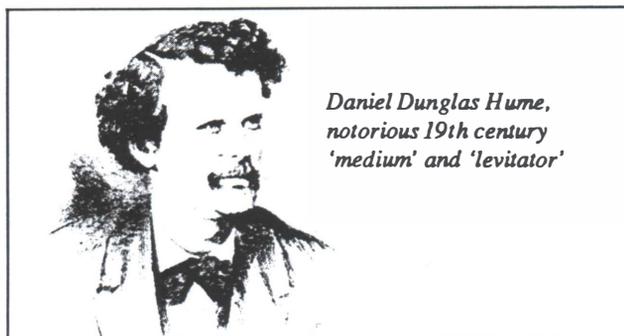
—Alan Smith

Braudely speaking

Stephen E Braude, *The Limits of Influence, Psycho-kinesis and the Philosophy of Science* (Routledge, £10.99)

Stephen E Braude is a perfect example of what happens when you reject science. In his world, mediums can levitate, precognitions can cause disasters, and collective hypnosis is a hypothesis which deserves serious discussion. Braude seems to feel the academic community has somehow betrayed him by refusing to accept his pronouncements. Intellectuals, he writes early in the book, are not dedicated to the pursuit of truth. But is Braude?

Throughout the book there is a pattern: he embraces gladly those who agree with him and ignores or dismisses those who do not. Braude rejects the laboratory testing of psi: we don't know what psi is, he says, therefore how do we know how to test it? The rule-bound discipline which underlies the fields of physics and chemistry is exactly the wrong atmosphere for psi to flourish. Therefore, he prefers to examine the eyewitness testimony which, he proclaims, skeptics dismiss out of hand or don't even bother to read. And what is this eyewitness testimony that is so devastating to science? The descriptions of the feats of DD Home and Eusapia Palladino. Long-time readers of *The Skeptic* will



Daniel Dunglas Home,
notorious 19th century
'medium' and 'levitator'

remember a three-part discussion by David Alexander of 'Magicians, Mediums, and Psychics' (in issues 1.5–2.1) which focuses on Palladino. The so-called Naples sittings which impress Braude so much were, in these articles, revealed to have been conducted by none other than her agent, who made a lot of money out of promoting her in the US. But the fact that Palladino was caught cheating does not impress Braude: she was genuine the rest of the time. Scientists were just prejudiced against her because she was an illiterate peasant—and in any case she wasn't clever enough to fool scientific observers. (Thereby, Braude manages to have his prejudices and eat them, too.)

Braude is undoubtedly right: many skeptics do not know the literature in detail. On the other hand, he doesn't seem to know the skeptical literature in detail. For example, Trevor Hall's *The Enigma of Daniel Home: Medium or Fraud*, available from Prometheus Books. Hall makes specific points about Home's methods. Braude does not examine this sort of thing, nor does he examine magic books for possible explanations of the phenomena; instead, he devotes pages and pages to debunking a 'skeptical' hypothesis that no one entertains: collective hypnosis. There is, of course, much more in this book besides Home and Palladino. Braude has an endless chapter on apparitions, in which category he includes poltergeists, and an even more endless one on precognition, in which he seriously examines the theory of retrocausation. This is the possibility that predicting that a plane will crash causes it to crash. If you'll believe that, you'll believe anything, and, as Randi often says, "I have this swamp land in Florida I'm sure you'd be interested in..."

—Rachel Winston

Down the plug-hole

David Ash and Peter Hewitt, *Science of the Gods: Reconciling mystery and matter* (Gateway Books, £5.95)

I sometimes wonder why in non-scientific circles some scheme is often thought or said to be so wonderful because it was—or supposedly was—discovered by the ancients, forgotten and then re-discovered by a modern messiah. The one here is a bit different since it was current towards the end of the last century and has the distinction of being invented by William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) to explain the nature of atoms. He suggested that they were *vortices* in the aether, the complement of the waves that were light waves—not an unreasonable conjecture at the time. Of course the

idea got dumped because it was found that a) the aether doesn't exist and b) atoms are composed of nuclei and electrons.

Hewitt and Ash try to resurrect this vortex theory in a different form to provide the key to life, the universe and everything mysterious and paranormal. Realising, at least, that atoms aren't vortices, they propose instead that the sub-atomic 'elementary particles' are, and given that the aether doesn't exist, that 'vortices of energy' propagate without it in the same way as light waves (not that light is as simple as a wave and, indeed, 'quanta' of light are themselves a type of elementary particle, albeit a different type from electrons). Further, for some reason they don't assume Kelvin's sort of vortex—like a smoke-ring, where the circulation follows the same sort of path as the coils of a spring that has been joined end-to-end—but instead, the sort you get when water runs down the plug-hole. In the case of the plug-hole, the material (water) has a 'source' (the sink) and in jargon a 'sink' which isn't the sink itself(!), but the outlet pipe. In other words, the water doesn't merely circulate as with smoke rings, but flows from A to B. For 'vortices of energy' this would require that energy was somehow created continuously and destroyed at the centre of vortices and in their surroundings; energy is actually conserved. There's more, because the vortex motion is supposed to be wrapped up into a sort of ball.

This theory is explained mostly in the 8-page Chapter 2 without any real indication of how it is supposed to account for physical facts; that isn't surprising since it is at odds with them and this isn't a good basis for a supposed 'science of the gods'. The rest of the book mostly ranges over the gamut of the paranormal and pseudoscience with bits of religion thrown in, touching on UFOs, telepathy, 'healing' the miracle of Fatima, Sheldrake, Benveniste and homeopathy, astral bodies, the secret of life and the afterlife, the existence of God. All this is supposed to be unified with science, thanks to the wonderful vortex. I'm afraid I didn't try too hard to follow how, since I don't see the need to explain the non-existent, untested or untestable in terms of a pseudoscience. The saddest thing is that the authors apparently studied physics at London and natural sciences at Cambridge; it certainly doesn't show.

—Dave Love

The green man

William Anderson, *Green Man: the archetype of our oneness with the Earth* (Harper Collins, £14.95)

What is the 'Green Man'? According to the author of this book—which manages to be almost equally inspiring and infuriating—he is an archetype of life and fertility, appearing again and again throughout history. He is 'the perennial symbol of our unity with the natural world, the male image of our rootedness with earth'. This sounds rather abstract, and horribly New-Agey, but in fact the reality of the symbol of the Green Man is extraordinarily strong.

The visual image of the Green Man permeates ancient folklore and art, from prehistory through the Gothic civilization of Medieval Europe, to the Renaissance and contemporary pub signs. Traditionally, the form in which he

appears has two main varieties. In the words of the author: 'In the first, he is a male head formed out of a leaf mask; his hair, features and physiognomy are all made from a single leaf or of many leaves; in the second form he is a male head disgorging vegetation from his mouth and often from his ears and eyes; the vegetation may curl round to form his hair, beard, eyebrows and moustaches.'



The Green Man is captured beautifully in this book by a series of photographs which reveal his presence in the most unlikely of places—who would expect his earthly pagan image to appear hundreds of times in the devotional architecture of Châtres Cathedral and St. Paul's? It is truly astonishing to discover how widespread the image of Green Man has become over the centuries. Quite why this is the case is the question considered in the book, although I would have liked to see a more probing, and less reverential, approach. Perhaps a clue to his ubiquity may be found in the fact that 'folk ideas' rarely survive unless they serve a purpose for the community. In this respect, fertility and reproduction are usually quite popular. But what was in the minds of the architects decorating medieval churches when they chose to use his image so frequently? Were they 'tuning in' to an 'archetype', or obeying current stylistic conventions? Romantics (and Jung enthusiasts) will naturally prefer the 'archetype' explanation.

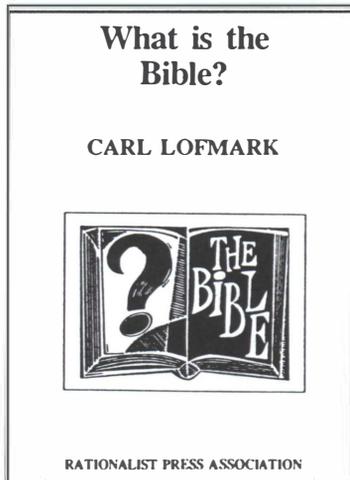
The symbolic role of the Green Man I can swallow. What sticks in my throat is the osmosis of the Green Man into the current New Age mêlée of 'Earth Forces' and 'Living Earth' platitudes. The idea that the earth is not simply a piece of real estate for us to plunder is to be applauded—but to suggest that the earth is an independent living entity accompanied by various spirits which look after forests and trees and so on is quite another matter.

Philosophical quibbles aside, this is a very beautiful book, and anyone who watched and was stimulated by the recent BBC *Omnibus* documentary (which the book accompanies) will want to browse its pages and learn more about the mysterious Green Man who is a major figure in our heritage.

—Les Francis

Asking big questions

Carl Lofmark, *Does God Exist?* and *What is the Bible?* (Rationalist Press Association, £4.50 each)



If you're going to ask questions at all, you might as well make them big ones. In these two books, Carl Lofmark asks two of the biggest of all. One must admire his *chutzpah*: would you tackle these questions in 116 and 100 pages respectively?

With such slim volumes, one might expect two rather superficial essays, but in fact, one gets a great deal more. Carl

Lofmark is Professor of German at the University of Wales, and writes with a crispness and flair that is uncommon in works of religious criticism. In one sense, the conclusions he reaches are neatly reflected in the fact that these books are published by the Rationalist Press Association, that long-standing nest of free-thinking vipers. But it's as unfair to judge a book by its publisher as it is by its cover.

Lofmark begins *Does God Exist?* with an anecdote: 'It is said that the French mathematician Laplace presented to the emperor Napoleon a copy of his famous book on the motions of the heavenly bodies. Napoleon asked him what was the place of God in his system. To this Laplace replied: "I have no need of that hypothesis".' In Lofmark's view, this describes the concept of 'God' precisely: it is a hypothesis used to make sense of the workings of the world—but he does realise (in Chapter 2) that it might actually be *impudent* to question the existence of God. After all, for thousands of years entire civilizations have believed fervently in a supernatural God. This suggests that the belief system has something going for it. However, he soon lays his cards on the table: 'We should never be impressed by the *number* of people who believe something. Any number of people can be wrong. Instead, we should pay attention to the *reasons* they have for their beliefs.' Skeptics, 'super-', 'wet', 'dry' or otherwise, please take note.

The thrust of *Does God Exist?* is to examine some of the arguments which have been put forward over the centuries, including St Anselm's famous ontological proof, the 'argument from design', and the 'first cause' approach. His discussion of faith is excellent. He quotes from the great explorer Magellan, who once observed an eclipse of the moon and noticed that the shadow of the earth was curved: 'The Church says that the earth is flat. But I have seen its shadow on the moon, and I would rather trust a shadow than the Church.'

What is the Bible? is a model of clarity, and answers the main question by considering a number of subsidiary ones, including 'What is the Old Testament?', 'What are the main translations?', 'Is the Bible true symbolically?', 'Is the Bi-

ble true sometimes?', and so on. The author manages to keep a pleasant balance between being opinionated and humble, and both books end with a number of suggestions for further reading, some of which are written by Christian theologians. But in spite of his even-handedness, Carl Lofmark is not sitting on anybody's fence. He is a rationalist, not a theist.

Naturally, your reaction to these books will be coloured by many factors. If you do not believe in God, who knows—these books might help clarify your thoughts; if you are a believer, you will probably not like the conclusions the author draws, and you might well find them to be blasphemous. Perhaps you will change your mind. Either way, as examples of unpretentious, bold analysis, and clear, careful writing, these books are highly recommended, and deserve the attention of a major publisher. Buy them for yourself, your children, and your friends.

—Edward Smith

Scientist and state

Sir Bernard Lovell, *Astronomer by Chance* (Macmillan, £18.99)

Any discussion of successes in post-war British science has to include radio astronomy. Britain has been in the forefront of this subject almost since its beginnings in the 1930s. This is in no small part due to Sir Bernard Lovell, the driving force behind the creation of the radio telescopes at Jodrell Bank in Cheshire. For many years the Mark I radio telescope was the largest in the world, leading the way. That it is still useful as a scientific instrument, 35 years after its completion, is a remarkable testament to the vision of its creators, principally Lovell.

Jodrell Bank figures large in Lovell's autobiography, but almost the first quarter of the book covers his wartime experiences in the development of radar. We have recently witnessed the use of advanced technology in warfare, but it is worth recalling that the Second World War was the first major conflict in which scientific and technological developments in many areas played a large part in the outcome. Pioneering work in rocket and jet propulsion, aviation, computers, and of course nuclear technology was done at a breakneck speed. The development of radar was no different.

This part of the book is a remarkable record of how science and technology progressed during the war years. In these days of tight budgets and controlled spending it is truly awe-inspiring to see just how fast resources could be mustered to overcome an obstacle that was impeding progress on an important project. The reason for this was of course a shared goal amongst scientists, politicians and administrators: survival, then victory. There was the usual in-fighting between teams with rival ideas, but once a high-level decision had been made on a choice of direction (even coming from Churchill in one instance) the degree of cooperation was amazing. Despite this, it is clear that the successful development of radar owed much to the unforeseeable flashes of genius by individual scientists, without which the course of the war may have been quite different.

The immediate postwar period saw Lovell returning to academia and entering the (then-new) field of the radio astronomy. Lovell points out the sharp contrast between the resources made available to important war-time projects and those to post-war academic projects. However, things were not completely gloomy: the image of science and scientists had been transformed by the war from that of ivory-tower eccentrics who did things that nobody understood and that were of no relevance to anybody, to 'back-room boys' or 'boffins' capable of dreaming up wonderful (and sometimes terrible) inventions. Their collective contribution to the victory was acknowledged. This could be seen in Lovell's initial successes in obtaining funding for his work: the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (the predecessor to today's Science and Engineering Research Council) awarded research grants on a timescale that would make a present-day scientist green with envy. This was in part due to the positive light in which science was viewed, but perhaps even more due to the worldly-wise methods of scientists towards obtaining money from the state. Six years of involvement with Government and Civil Service had brought useful contacts, and taught them how to handle bureaucrats.

The story behind the development of the Mark I telescope is of Lovell's stamina and determination not to quit, against increasing costs and a bureaucracy becoming less inclined to part with money. As the popular image of science faded, presented with the Cold War and the nuclear threat, so the state withdrew its support. Eventually, thanks to a variety of shrewd manoeuvres by Lovell and his supporters, and to other fortuitous events, the telescope was completed. The book closes with some of the successes achieved at Jodrell Bank.

This book has much to recommend it, far more than can be mentioned here. There are numerous lessons to be divined from its pages, but I will select only one. There is little real understanding of the nature and outcome of science and technology by the popular masses and by the state. This is clear from the interactions Lovell has had with the state (which on many occasions simply could not comprehend the serendipitous nature of scientific research), and from the way some scientifically minor events at Jodrell Bank have been blown out of all proportion by the popular press, whereas significant results have been ignored. Our daily lives are dominated by the products of science, but few understand the scientific principles behind them or the methods by which they are discovered. How can a democratic society function effectively when the majority of people cannot understand what is going on around them, and cannot think critically about what they are being told?

—Mario Wolczko

Essential science

Max Perutz, *Is Science Necessary: Essays on Science and Scientists* (Oxford University Press, £5.99)

Max Perutz is a molecular biologist who fled persecution of the Nazis, came to Britain, was treated as an enemy alien and was transported twice to Canada. He is a very committed man, with a profound belief in science, and as such does

not allow a sufficiently critical approach to science.

His book falls into four parts. The first is a justification of science—his attempt to answer the question 'Is science necessary?'. This long essay derives from a lecture he gave on the impact of science on society. He describes at some length the relationship science has with food production, health and energy: the three key features for human existence. What he does not recognise is that science does not exist in isolation from the social, economic and political developments surrounding it. Not only does science shape those processes, but in turn is changed itself. Where scientific developments have led to disasters it is the result of mismanagement or political dogma (for example, Chernobyl) rather than problems inherent in the developments themselves.

Perutz has an almost blinkered and uncritical view of science, and in his vigorous defence of the benefits it has undoubtedly conferred, he rather skates over the problems which we experience in a world dominated by scientific and technical advance. He is passionate that science should address the injustice and inequality but fails to recognise the political limitations: 'Science is just knowledge and has no political content'. He only alludes briefly to the role of science under fascism.

I fear this uncritical approach to science provides fodder for those who adopt an anti-scientific approach. Perutz suggests that the desire to escape to some rural myth has 'engendered the antiscience sentiment so prevalent today'. But we must accept justified criticism of science and debate the issues publicly or we may well foster the very attitude to science we wish to oppose, and some will find it all too easy to slip from a position of constructive criticism to outright hostility to scientific thought and method.

In the second section of the book Perutz has written two essays on 'Science in War', describing his own experiences during the war, including his role in the development of pykrete, and a review of the book *Klaus Fuchs: The Man who Stole the Atom Bomb*.

The third and fourth sections are reviews of books and articles about famous scientists or aspects of science. Perutz persists with the myth that scientific discovery is somehow the inspiration of a singular genius. Scientists always have exceptional personalities—even Klaus Fuchs is described in terms of his personality rather than his political views, and of course in his case it was pathological.

Despite my general unease at the overall perception of science held by Perutz, the latter essays and reviews did reveal some of the excitement of science as an intellectual activity. The observation which led Rutherford to say 'as though you had fired a 15 inch shell at a piece of tissue paper and it had bounced back at you' is one I remember from my school chemistry books and still induces a sense of wonder in me.

I believe science is much more than a means of improving the human lot, important though this is. We need science as we need music and art—it is an essential element of the human condition. I regret that this is only partly conveyed in this book.

—Salle Dare

Letters



Pulp pedantry

Ian Saunders (Letters, 5.3) is right in substance but wrong in fact, and if he aspires 'to be a pedantic smart-arse' he must get his facts right. Paper is made from hardwoods as well as softwoods. *The Skeptic* is printed on a mixture of softwood fibres which bind the paper together, and hardwood fibres which give it a smooth surface. Much of the Java rainforest has been incorporated into paper.

It is true, however, that jokes about forests being cut for paper are based on a misconception. Wood-pulp is a by-product of the timber trade, made from residual forests and plantations after the big, straight trees have gone. If it were not so, paper made from herbaceous plants would be cheaper.

Donald Room
London

A waste of words

Oh dear—the 'hypnotic state' again (*Hits and Misses*, 5.3). This non-issue is beginning to become a bit of a bore. Let me make it clear that most intelligent psychologists realised long ago that philosophers were laughing at them when they argued about it. It is not a difference in psychological theory, but a matter of semantics. The 'state of hypnosis' exists in the same way that a 'state of pain', 'a state of expectation', and a 'state of anger' are useful concepts—so we use them.

Now all experts in the respective fields acknowledge that there are no unique physiological or behavioural criteria of any of these states, just as there are no unique criteria of hypnosis. All such 'states' can be defined only ostensibly, not operationally.

We can quite well dispense with the words *pain*, *expectation*, *anger*, *hypnosis* (and a lot more) altogether, if we are prepared to go in for a great deal of circumlocution, but most sensible people are content to use the language as it is. It may suit a Christian Scientist to declare that 'pain'

does not exist, and waste many, many words explaining the word away, just as Keith Hearne and his associates waste a lot of words explaining that 'hypnosis' does not exist; but Thomas Hobbes warned us that 'Words are wise men's counters, they do but reckon with them, but they are the money of fools.'

'The Amazing Kreskin' (who is he? Only Randi amazes me!) is quite safe with his \$100,000, for no-one can prove to him that hypnosis exists, just as they cannot prove to him that pain exists; but in the latter case they might try kicking him on the shins.

H B Gibson
Cambridge

Hubbard hullabulloo

If Allen Hunt ('Another look at Scientology' 5.3) was 'surprised to read' my Scientology report (4.6), I was more surprised to read his comments. For many of them merely repeated what I had already said: Hubbard's debt to Freud, his increasing barminess, his 'trillions of years' claim for our true age, and so on. The rest of Mr Hunt's article seemed only to repeat what he'd read in books or seen on TV—including the media myths such as that 'hypnotism' chestnut.

I say again: in my 14 years of checking out Scientology by actually trying it, Hubbard always condemned hypnotism, and if a preclear showed any sign of it (signified by lazy 'hunting' of the E-meter needle) the drill was to bring him up to present time and rub his nose in reality.

Mr Hunt commits other errors. The Tone Scale began with Dianetics, not Scientology, and his curious remark that some improvement I noticed was because I 'grew up and matured' suggests that he is at 1.1 on the Scale (a tendency to contradict others' experiences).

But it is his dire warnings against actually trying Scientology before offering comment on it, that I find most significant. After all, I was

writing for readers of *The Skeptic*, not of the *Sun* or *Beano*. And that attitude of, in effect, 'don't investigate or experiment, just listen to me instead', I—like Galileo—firmly reject.

May our Thetans ever get less enturbulated...

John Clarke
Uxbridge

No reason to believe

'Why not to test a psychic (5.3)' is a swingeing, salutary piece. Lewis Jones is absolutely right to insist that the term 'telepathy' refers not to a means of acquiring information, but to the absence of means; that the expression 'extra sensory perception' is as self-contradictory as 'female husband'; and that the suggestion of backwards causation is equally incoherent, since it would involve making not to have happened what has already happened.

But he is wrong to claim that Thouless made no contribution in introducing the 'psi' terminology, 'being under the impression that this... was an advance on ESP.' For this terminology does at least enable us to describe—without at the same time falsely or incoherently pretending to explain—phenomena which conceivably might occur, even though we have the best of reasons for believing that in fact they do not.

Lewis Jones is, again, absolutely right to insist that, if openmindedness is to be a sensible stance, then it must mean: not a lack of any firm beliefs about what is probable or improbable, possible or impossible, but a willingness nevertheless to reconsider any of our previous beliefs, given sufficient good reason for so doing. In the case of the putative psi-phenomena, phenomena which at present we have every justification for dismissing as in fact physically impossible, the sufficient good reason for admitting that we had after all been mistaken would be that respectable demonstration which over a hundred years of

psi-research has completely failed to provide.

**Antony Flew
Reading**

People in glass houses...

Thank you for publishing my letter pointing [*sic*] out the deliberate mistake in *The Skeptic* 5.2 regarding the *Mary Celeste*. I note you have made another one in issue 5.3, in the article 'Another look at Scientology', 'impostors' being spelled thus, and not as you, or perhaps Allen Hunt, have (no doubt deliberately) misspelled [*sic*] the word.

**John L. Broom
Orkney**

...shouldn't throw stones

I subscribe [*sic*] to *The Skeptic*: I enjoy it, possibly, because it re-inforces opinions to which I already tend. I also use what *The Skeptic* says to proselytise the uncommitted: to preach unto the heathen.

I could preach better to my co-professionals were not a few of those who write your views and articles illiterate.

For example; in the issue May/June 1991, there is an article "Passing the Torch" by Ian Woods. It is obvious from his first paragraph that he is a computer specialist: he has never had to consider the written word as a means of affecting people in the way he wishes to affect them.

He writes as he speaks and diffuse, childish and illiterate his writing is. You can say "Ha! Ha!" (like the horse in the Bible) but you must not write it, except in a novel when you write it as I have just written it. Otherwise, it dilutes your meaning; it is silly. Ian Woods might write that it writes sillily.

My profession is words: I use them to affect people (as I remark earlier in this letter) in the way that I wish them to be affected. If *The Skeptic* wishes to do the same then its editors must consider not only what is said but how it is said, because otherwise my interlocutors will throw out the medium with the message.

As a mental exercise (which I ill need) I have re-written the beginning of Ian Woods's article as he ought to

have written it to start with. He will not understand me but others will and they we need.

"In the Jan/Feb issue of *The Skeptic*, David Fisher put the case for "super scepticism" (not "skepticism"). His argument was powerful but I think it wrong: Marcel Marceau does not need a megaphone.

David Fisher asserts that since most people today cannot understand a logical argument and that since journalists for television and newspapers are, first, stupid and, secondly, disposed against rational analysis, a calm and reasoned approach [*sic*] to superstitious and idiotic ideas will not work."

After 32 lines of Mr Woods's computerese, I gave up work. What does "drossy" mean? Does "oodles" mean other than "many"? Why "credulousness" for the correct "credulity"? Why use " 'em" for "them"?

Illiteracy (or as Mr Woods would say "illiterousness") rules (I fear) OK.

**M W Evans
Fife**

According to our dictionaries, both 'imposter' and 'impostor' are correct. According to our high-school grammar book 'they we need' should read 'them we need'—'them' is in the accusative case.

—The Editors

A matter of belief

Judging by her remarks, I think that Lucy Fisher (Letters, 5.3) must have misconstrued the intended meaning of the term 'belief system' when reading my recent article on New Age thought (*The Skeptic*, 5.2). So please allow me to clarify my position.

In the context on my article, a 'belief' refers to any sincerely held view concerning the nature of the world (or concerning ethical matters), and a 'belief system' refers to any relatively comprehensive collection of related beliefs (considered together, perhaps, with possible associated social practices). By this definition, religions, political ideologies, philosophical world-views and (I assume) Lucy Fisher's own humanist standpoint all qualify as belief systems.

It should be noted that the use of the term 'belief system' is entirely

neutral on the question of whether or not the beliefs concerned are actually true and are adequately supported. Of course, any belief system will seem very persuasive to the person who happens to subscribe to it! Nevertheless—speaking as a skeptic!—I personally do not think that there is any major contemporary belief system which is not (to borrow Fisher's phrase) 'highly questionable' in some significant respect or other (and I would include humanism in that evaluation).

However, my article argues that belief systems (despite their imperfections and inadequacies) nevertheless perform an important psychological function by giving a coherence and meaning to life, in a way which is broadly explicable in terms of ideas drawn from modern cognitive psychology. I therefore predict that New Age beliefs are unlikely to undergo a significant decline until new forms of belief arise that are able to take their place. Of course, whether these new forms of belief will prove to be any better founded than those that preceded them remains to be seen! Since we do not yet know what these new forms of belief will turn out to be, that is not an issue on which we are now able to make a judgement. Nor does my article attempt to do so.

**Tim Axon
London**

Faith in management

I am surprised that no-one has taken Nick Beard (Letters, 5.2) to task for suggesting that people coming back and paying more money to management consultants necessarily means that their services are useful. I find this argument unconvincing. Surely the question of whether management consultancy actually works can only be answered by controlled tests. I have no direct experience of management consultancy, but it is not difficult to imagine that it 'works' in a similar manner that faith healing may be said to 'work'. I would be very surprised if it were alone amongst the professions in this respect.

**Joe Gerard
Liverpool**

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