

Volume 6 Number 1
January/February 1992

The Skeptic

Paranormal Trends in the USSR



Faking an Alien

Also in this issue:

- A Cure for Sea-Sickness?
- Where Do You File 'Flying Saucers'?
- Psychic Questing Conference
- Predictions for 1992

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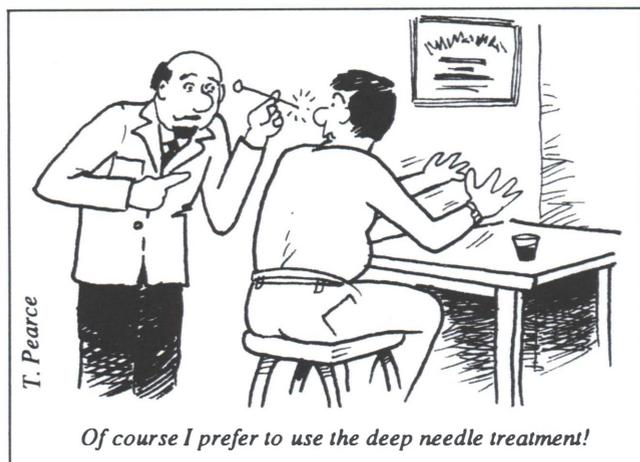
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Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

Getting the needle

Acupuncture, devised over 4000 years ago in China, is one of the most 'respectable' and widely established of the the alternative therapies. As a consequence, many patients take it for granted that their treatment will itself pose no threats to health. But according to Dr Bernard Lee, who runs an acupuncture and herbal medicine training scheme, British patients should be concerned at the treatment they may be receiving at the hands of badly-trained acupuncturists. In an article published in the *Guardian* on 29 November, Lee expresses his worry that many patients are receiving treatment from British acupuncturists which is a poor imitation of the real thing: 'There is no such thing as British acupuncture. . . only acupuncture done well or done badly.' As most acupuncture treatment involves inserting needles into patients only to a depth of a few millimeters, in general, little danger is involved—provided that regions such as the eyes are avoided. However a variant known as deep-needle therapy, in which needles may be inserted to depths of up to 25 cm (10 inches), is sometimes practised (and is used by Lee where 'necessary'). It is clear that, in the hands of practitioners with inadequate medical training, this could result in the puncturing of important internal organs or blood vessels. *Skeptic* readers in need of alternative healing are advised to stick to homeopathy ('Nothing acts faster than Anadin') or non-contact therapies such as healing by post.



Spooky snooker

I'm always struck by the mundane nature of the activities of denizens of the 'other side' when they make contact with the world of the living. It seems so improbable that Auntie Enid would struggle downwards through the astral levels just to pass a message—through a homely medium called Doris—reminding her family to look after the cat. I, therefore, should not be surprised at an article in the *Daily Mirror* on 4 December describing a ghost which has been haunting a police training centre in Crewe. This ghost is not providing cosmically-inspired suggestions on how better to fiddle

forensic evidence or write more convincing confessions for suspects but instead is helping snooker-playing police trainees by putting their balls back on the table. According to the principal officer of the centre, an officer was playing snooker alone late one night and had almost cleared the table when he heard a noise behind him, 'He turned around to see what it was and when he turned back the balls were back on their spots'. Two cleaners claim to have seen a nun staring out of a ground-floor window and—as the centre is on the site of a former convent—the ball-manipulating ghost is presumed to be that of a snooker-playing nun. Police have appealed for information from witnesses (material, immaterial and non-material) who remember the site when it was a convent.

Maxwell speaks

When Robert Maxwell jumped, fell or was pushed from the side of his boat there were, of course, no witnesses (or at least no-one is owning up) but we need be puzzled no longer about his death. Nella Jones, the *Sun*'s resident medium has talked to Mr Maxwell (now domiciled on 'the other side') and described him as 'arrogant, rude and bumptious'—it seems that death has not improved his character much. Maxwell claimed that he did not jump and was not pushed and did not steal from the *Mirror*'s pension fund only 'used' the money. Lending the interview (which was published in the *Sun* on 2 January) almost total credibility was Maxwell's statement that one of his great disappointments was the fact that he 'never managed to make the *Mirror* a great newspaper like the *Sun*'.

Prophet and loss

Skeptic readers will be relieved to learn that former footballer, Green Party spokesman and TV sports presenter, David Icke, may not be the Son of God after all. In interviews with Nicky Campbell on both Central TV and Radio 1 at the end of last year, Icke explained that his specific claims and predictions may not have been accurate but that he was essentially being made to say these crazy things by higher beings. The purpose of this, apparently, was to make him experience a difficult and traumatic year that was in some way necessary for his spiritual development. Although Icke has now stopped making specific (and therefore testable) predictions he is still sticking to his major beliefs such as reincarnation, karma and the existence of spiritually superior beings who vibrate at higher frequencies. (High frequencies are apparently close to godliness which presumably implies that satellite television is better for the soul than television transmitted—from ground-based transmitters—at lower frequencies.) Despite his unfortunate experiences with the media (in particular *Wogan*) earlier last year, Icke is again giving interviews to publicise his latest book 'Love Changes Everything' which is to be published in March.

Narnia nonsense

The author C S Lewis was one of the best known writers on Christian apologetics of his time and one of his books, 'The Screwtape Letters', uses a purported correspondence between an elderly devil and a junior colleague as a means of putting across the author's Christian beliefs. However it is not this book but his popular series of books for children, 'Tales of Narnia', which has recently resulted in accusations of inciting children to devil-worship in the USA. According to the *Daily Mail* on 30 November, extracts from Lewis' book 'The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe' appear in an anthology used by primary school children in California. This is not at all to the liking of some parents who, backed by right wing Christian groups, have brought a court action against the Dixon unified school district for sanctioning a book 'which encourages children to dabble in witchcraft'. Also accused of promoting satanism in the classroom are J R R Tolkien and Liverpool poet, Roger McGough (a devout Roman Catholic) whose works are also featured in the anthology.

Devilry in Devon

Meanwhile, somewhat closer to home in Devon, whilst reading 'Tales of Narnia' may be an acceptable activity for Christians, practising Yoga is not. According to the *Independent* on 7 December 1991, 'Yoga has been judged to be the eighth deadly sin at the austere parish church of St Andrews in Ashburton, Devon'. Twelve women who, until recently have used the church hall for their weekly yoga sessions have been banned from the hall because yoga is based on Hindu teachings. The women have been told that their activities are unchristian and that evil could enter their minds during meditation.



Up-and-away

Some people have no sticking power. Staying with the topic of meditation for a moment, the *Guardian* and the *International Herald Tribune* reported on 17 December that those best known of meditators, the transcendental ones (or TMers as they are known to their friends) are abandoning the city of Washington DC to its own devices and will no longer work to raise consciousness in that crime- and politics-ridden city. The TMers' head man, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, sounded adamant: 'I would not advise anyone to stay in [that] pool of mud'. For the last ten years, TMers have

been attempting to lower Washington's crime rate by collective meditation but have not made any perceptible headway and are now packing their prayer mats and heading for Iowa. According to the *Guardian* article: 'in a city where running a car pool can be lethal, the thought pool never quite took off'. The major reason for the exodus is not just that the sound of nocturnal gunfire was disturbing meditators' concentration but that the government refused to give official support for the Maharishi's offer of heaven on earth through collective meditation. Given the documented ability of TMers to levitate, Washington is about to lose a few thousand floating voters.

Is your goldfish a pisces?

Astrological influences are not limited to individual human beings. Astrologers will use their skills to predict the fortunes of businesses, cities or even entire nations. So why should pets be deprived of the benefits of knowing what's been written in the stars? Well from now on they don't have to be. You can have your cat's horoscope drawn up by Julia Holliday, who will also do dogs, horses, donkeys, and goats, as well as people. She'll even consider hamsters. Those interested in pursuing this should know their pet's date, time, and place of birth, the breed and sex of the animal, and whether it has been neutered. (Castration, it seems, is not written in the stars?) They will also be asked to supply a cheque for £15 and a self-addressed envelope. Answers take one month, which you are welcome to spend predicting what the chart will say, based on the details you've supplied her with.

Gardner's world

Believe it or not, but *The Skeptic* has it on reasonably reliable authority that in Seattle, Washington, a new New-Age group has formed that is centred on the personality of arch-skeptic Martin Gardner. The group members meet once a week, to meditate, and to study Gardner's works. A spokesman for the group claimed that this will prepare them for an age in which science will be 'obsolete' and 'the force of human will' will allow a closer spiritual empathy with the universe. The spokesman, when queried about Gardner's skepticism, replied 'Well, Martin, he's Trickster, he's the Coyote. We all collect his columns from *Skeptical Inquirer*' and suggested that Gardner is 'just trying to throw people off.' In Native American mythology, Coyote is a 'cosmic trickster', who delights in misleading people for a deeper spiritual purpose. Apparently these people view Martin Gardner in much the same light. However, the spokesman's final claim that they received 'encouraging letters' from Gardner did not receive confirmation from the man himself. Martin Gardner when confronted with his near-divine status in Seattle replied: 'Well, that certainly is a surprise...do let me know if you learn any more about it. I certainly can't recall writing ANYTHING to such a group, so maybe the whole thing is a joke.'... But then the Cosmic Trickster would say that, wouldn't he?

Steve Donnelly is a physicist and a reader in electronics and electrical engineering at the University of Salford.

Where Do We File 'Flying Saucers'?

Hilary Evans

A glimpse inside the Mary Evans Picture Library

If you are giving a lecture on UFOs, you can conceal your true opinions of what they are (and even whether they are) behind a smokescreen of ambiguities as dense as any government conspiracy. But you can't hedge bets in a picture library. Whether or not flying saucers exist, pictures of them do—and they must be filed, if not here then there. We must make up our minds whether we go along with the true believers and file our UFO as a nuts-and-bolts alien spacecraft whose rightful place is 'Transport', subsection 'Space Travel' or with the conspiracy buffs, in 'Military' as a secret weapon of the US government; or with the occultists in 'Paranormal'; or with the fundamentalists in 'Religion', alongside other works of the Devil; or with the folklorists along with Seven-League Boots, pumpkins that change into coaches, and other forms of locomotion you won't find in the transport museum [1].

If you work in a picture archive, such decisions recur. Sorted out the flying saucer problem? Right, then. What about crop circles [2]? Where do we file Nessie and her kith and kin [3]? Or strange blue lights hovering over sleeping Italian ladies [4]? Or somnambulists walking on rooftops [5]?

Or Fairy Godmothers?

Fortunately, the uncertainty principle is something an archivist learns to live with fairly early in his career. Even if your fairy godmother [6] neglected to bestow a healthy skepticism on you at your Christening [7], your work will soon thrust it upon you. Those princes in the tower, for example: we have engravings showing them being 'orribly done to death on the orders of Richard III—so we file them as historical fact, even though we suspect they are not so much an early instance of child abuse as a case of political disinformation, not to mention displaying a sadly non-caring prejudice against

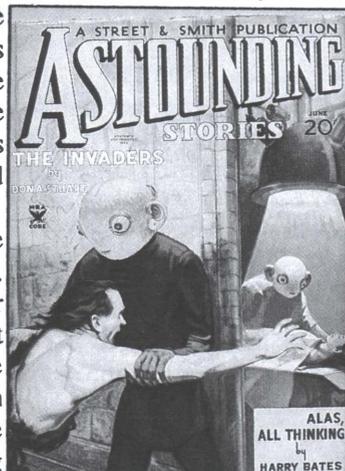
one who, as a disabled person, deserves our sympathy rather than our malice.

Is there, indeed a single picture in our files which faithfully depicts the scene as it actually occurred—that is, *if* it occurred? If we'd been there to witness Giuseppe of Cupertino levitating or Francesco of Assisi receiving the stigmata, would we have seen what the artist shows us? Would we have been on firmer ground with photographers rather than artists? Those pictures of mediums with ectoplasmic gunge exuding from their private parts—would you and I have seen it if we'd been present?

Take our files at face value, and there's no doubting the

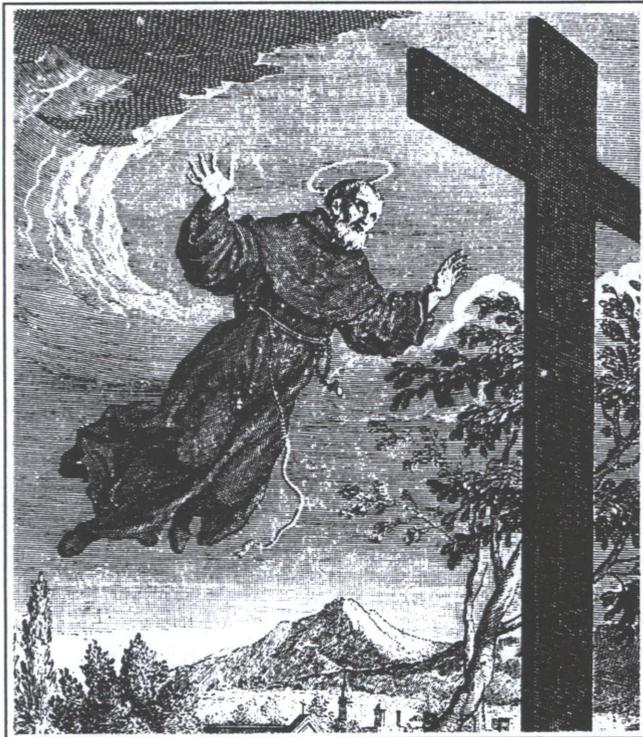
fact that Jeanne d'Arc was instructed by her visions to go and bash the English (as though any Frenchperson with *sang rouge* in her *veines* needs to be encouraged to do that!) while Robert the Bruce received similar instructions (as though any red-blooded Scotsman etc) from a spider. But what price our pictures of Columbus discovering America, what price Archimedes discovering whatever it was he discovered, what price Washington refusing to tell a fib and Galileo regretting that he did so?

In short, working in an historical picture library doesn't give one much respect for man the historian; instead it gives one a wide-eyed admiration for the creative powers of man the mythmaker. The Russians didn't invent rewriting of history; our archive is a monument to revisionism. Take Noah's ark, for instance: there was only one of it, so one at most of our representations of it can be authentic. But which one? There are times when we are tempted to re-locate half our library in the 'Folklore' section...



Or Cosmic Tricksters?

Such complications were not more than a twinkle in the Cosmic Trickster's eye [8] when, more than a quarter of a century ago, we rather pretentiously gave the name *Mary Evans Picture Library* to the set of folders on a shelf over a clothes cupboard in our little Span houselet. Mary had to stand on a stool to get at the pictures for our first request: the BBC wanted illustrations showing 'horses abusing their riders'. Today, our millions of images of the past are more conveniently housed in a former church hall, where the BBC couriers are still our most frequent visitors.



St. Joseph of Copertino airborne

Then as now, we try to find pictures which in one way or another help us to understand the past, either as it was or as our forefathers thought it was—or as they liked to think it was—or as they wanted others to think it was. For this reason, we have always sought to collect marginal material that tells you more about the undercurrents of history than the textbooks do. Some examples: the leaflet from the French government, anxious in 1939 to breed more cannon fodder for the imminent conflict, trying to persuade the reluctant Frenchwoman that motherhood will make her more, not less, attractive, tells us something about government opportunism; the science fiction journal from the 1930s which shows sinister extraterrestrials examining a spacenapped earthwoman 20 or more years before Betty and Barney Hill experienced their interrupted journey tells us something about the current abduction mania; the scene from the World War One trenches, which shows a French soldier saved, thanks to the timely appearance of Therèse of Lisieux tells us something about the power of faith; and the '20s scenes depicting topless beaches, nudity on the stage and the like, teach us that today's so-called permissive society is no more than a turn of the wheel in an endless cycle of now-you-may, now-you-mayn't, in which humankind has indulged since Adam and Eve had *la difference* brought to their attention [9].

Or Martians?

Every picture tells a story, and often different from the one that its creator intended. There's much to be learned, for instance, from our pictures of what our ancestors thought the future would be like. Jules Verne was only one of many who anticipated our landing on the moon; Wells was only one of many who sounded alarm bells that the Martians are coming. If we praise, as we surely do, the wisdom and foresight of that fine statesman, Ronald Reagan, for his Star Wars initiative, our respect can only deepen when we find the idea was already anticipated when Roosevelt was in the White House. And whether or not the predictions we have for the rapidly-gaining-on-us year 2000 turn out to be correct, they certainly tell us much about the time when they were made—the year 1900.

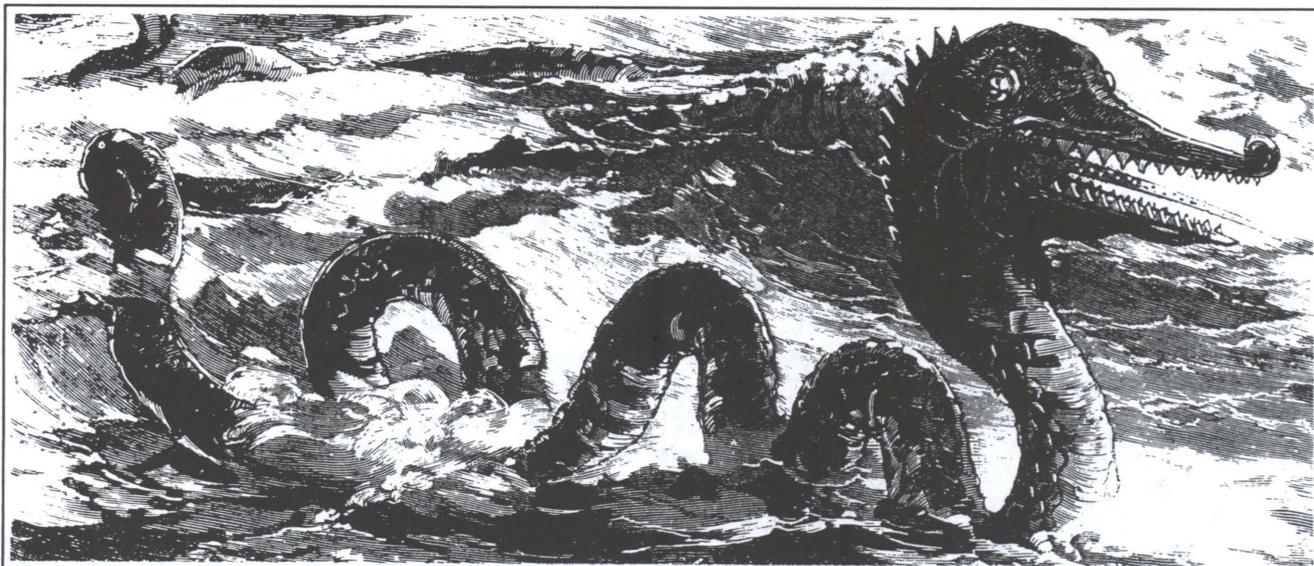
Most such items can be safely classified as 'Fantasy', 'Future Wars' and the like; after all, we can always reclassify them in the improbable event of any of them becoming fact. Wells could be rather vague about the appearance of the Martians: his illustrators had no choice but to be specific, and it is the fact that the illustrator had no option but to commit himself which makes his work fascinating.

Ask any schoolboy to draw a being from outer space and he will happily oblige, regardless of the fact that BFOSS may very well not exist, and his drawing will be no more factual than the image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in your friendly neighbourhood Catholic church. Were I asked to name the person most likely to be recognised worldwide, I would plump, not for a real-life celebrity like Monroe or Mozart, nor even for Jesus or Hitler (both of whom have attained the status of myth [10]) but for someone who never existed; Sherlock Holmes [11].

Of course, in a certain sense, Holmes *did* exist. But if we admit that, can we say that flying saucers, or Nessie or levitating saints are any less real? Where do we draw the boundary between the real and the rest? Working in a picture library could tie you in metaphysical knots five times a day. Come browse, for instance, in the file we label 'Concepts', and marvel at the illustrator's brave attempts to



Sherlock Holmes – Silver Blaze



depict the undepictable. Many date from the early years of the present century, when theosophy and suchlike belief systems were turning many minds towards what was seen as spiritual realities. Realities should be realisable, and if realisable, then depictable. So Mahatmas and Bodhisatvas were invited to lend a hand, and obligingly did so with varying success. More aesthetically rewarding is a work like *Pictures from the Great Love-Mother's Book of Life* which I rescued, battered and dismembered, from a bookstore in Amsterdam. I wouldn't expect any reader of *The Skeptic* to be turned on by the subject-matter, but we would all have to admire not only the artistry of the illustrations (and they really are superb) but the courage of the illustrator who sought to express in visual form 'The Rending of the Veil', 'Through the Valley of the Shadow' and suchlike ineffabilities.

Umberto Guglielmina is snatched by an eagle



Or Baby-Snatching Eagles?

If such pictures show man the mythmaker at his most imaginative, others of our pictures show how durable a myth is once it has been created. If one of your past lives was an Italian peasant in the 1920/30s you will recall that the greatest threats to your security were, first, the danger of having your small child abducted by an eagle, and second, the danger of being attacked by wolves on the way to the shopping centre. Though I am assured, by people who know

them, that baby-snatching eagles and peasant-ravaging wolves are as mythical as the werewolf, in our files they are enshrined as the recurrent enemy not only of Little Red Riding Hood [12] but of actual peasants (names, locations and dates supplied on request).

Working in a picture archive teaches you there is nothing new under the sun, and that we no more invented disinformation and cover-up than we invented the permissive society. Pictures can lie as blatantly as words, and they do it more effectively because they do it more explicitly. We have a file labelled 'Propaganda' which is made up of the more swingeing lies to tell about our adversaries in time of war; but in fact there is hardly a picture in any file which isn't trying to rise above here-and-now actuality to a level where things are not as they boringly are, but as someone wishes you to believe they more excitingly or rewardingly might be.

On that level, the differences between fact, fiction and fantasy blur into meaninglessness. Really, does it matter where we file our flying saucers?

Notes

[1] We finally opted for 'Folklore'. [2] Crop circles are 'Natural Phenomena'. [3] Anomalous lake creatures belong in 'Cryptozoology'. [4] 'Anomalous Luminous Phenomena'. [5] 'Altered States of Consciousness'. [6] Fairies are in 'Folklore'. [7] Christening is in 'Customs'. [8] Cosmic Tricksters are in 'Folklore'. [9] Bible Events are a subdivision of 'Myth'. [10] See, for example Donald McKale, *Hitler, the Survival Myth*. [11] Though see, in this respect, Jean Dutourd's delightful tour-de-force, *Les memories de Mary Watson*. [12] 'Nursery Tales'.

The Mary Evans Picture Library is a private historical reference archive. Because we are not subsidised and derive our income solely from the use of our pictures, we of necessity charge professional rates and so our clients are mainly professionals of one kind or another. Our hearts can be melted (ask your Editors for hints as to how this may be done) but our melting-point is relatively high. We will happily, though, send our brochure on request. Our address is 59 Tranquil Vale, London, SE3 0BS, phone 081 318 0034, and fax 081 852 7211.

Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, and has written widely on the paranormal.

Psychic Questing

Lucy Fisher

How the People of Hex threaten Gothic goings on...

It is not easy to say exactly what psychic questing is. It all ties in with a mishmash of the Tarot, ley lines, reincarnation, archaeology and the old gods. It's like a medieval pilgrimage—an excuse for a jaunt with your mates. Together you travel around the country to destinations which have been indicated to members of the party by dreams, meditations or omens. Meditation in this context takes the form of one person describing a vision or image while the others visualise it. Sometimes the image is projected onto a real landscape, and this can lead to hallucinations, or visions. When you arrive at one location, further meditations and omens will direct you to the next. Meanwhile, by a process of midrashic interpretation, you try and impose some kind of pattern on, or see some purpose in your wanderings, ideally with a specific end point. You may find significant artefacts along the way. It's rather like a treasure hunt with cryptic clues.

The 'Third Great Psychic Questing Conference' was held at Conway Hall on the 9th and 10th of November 1991. On the first day there were lectures and a party, followed on the second by visits to 'sites of historic, magical and mystical interest across Central London, plus 'meditation and psychic work'. I attended the first day (but not the party). The lecture-room was packed, with the younger members of the audience tending towards leather jackets, Megadeath T-shirts and Gothic silver jewellery. The conference was organised by Andrew Collins, inventor of the concept of 'psychic questing' and author of *The Seventh Sword*, just released by Century as a follow-up to *The Black Alchemist*, *The Brentford Griffin*, *The Knights of Danbury* and others.

Collins is from Essex, as were the other conference speakers. He put on a good performance. His platform style, like his book, was matey, down to earth and effective. The other speakers (all male) also put on displays of ordinary blokishness. One who referred to himself as a pagan resembled Mike Reid ('Stone me! An apport. Blimey, it's a big one.') The 'I too couldn't believe it at first' rhetorical device was used quite frequently. The speakers seemed unsure whether or not to emphasise the strangeness of what they claimed; in fact they tried to have it both ways. You have to stress the strangeness if you want to hold on to your audience by creating drama, but making out it's all frightfully ordinary might compel belief. Yet again, incredibly mundane happenings like opening a book and seeing the word 'Ewelme' are 'amazing' and 'really freak one out'.

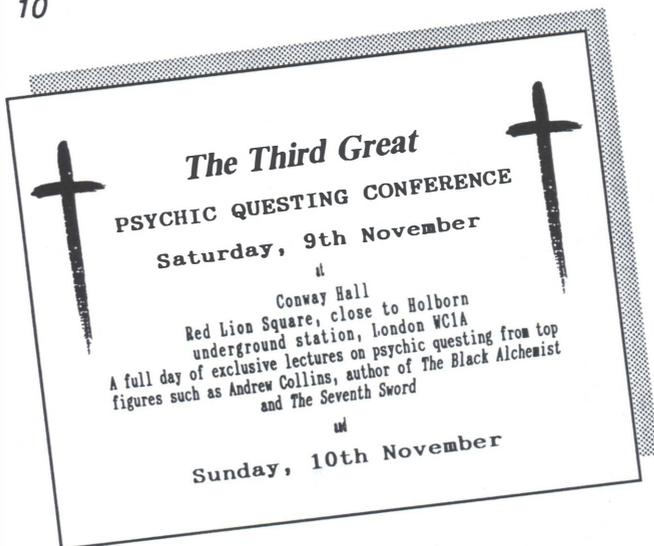
Sooner or later, the other speakers all mentioned 'my friend and colleague Andy Collins' and 'a talented psychic called Debbie'. No women spoke, yet there was a strong female presence in the accounts of the psychic questers' adventures. It was women who 'channelled' the ancient druids who told the gang where to go next ('Before we knew it, Debbie had gone into a trance in the middle of the motorway.')

Andrew Collins, the star of the show, began his talk by saying that: 'Psychic questing needs a little bit of definition,' and promised to reveal 'what brought us into the whole business in the first place.' In the 70s he was a UFO researcher, but he became more interested in the witnesses than their testimony ('Were these people liars? Did they have a vivid imagination that ran riot? They were very genuine people but seemed to live in a very strange world.')

He found that many were of Irish, Gypsy and Jewish descent and had undergone other psychic experiences, as had their families. Instead of concluding that there was a cultural connection, he formed the 'psigenic' theory—that psychic ability was transmitted in the genes.

In this way he became interested in the psychic world, and instead of watching telly after coming back from the pub he and his friends would do a spot of hypnosis and meditation. The group started discovering artefacts. They wanted to be involved in psychic research, but couldn't relate to the methods of the Society for Psychical Research. They wanted to bring it into 'the day to day context, taking it out of the clichéd, stereotyped idea of people round a table with a crystal ball and a woman in a gypsy headdress saying 'Is anybody there?'. It's obviously a thing of Edwardian antiquity. We couldn't handle that. We thought, let's do it in a more streetwise manner. So psychic questing was born.' It was a 'mystical history of spirituality making a cohesive story that stretched back through thousands of years. It was given to us snippet by snippet in the form of messages, synchronicities and omens. Dreams revealed certain information we weren't previously aware of...creating this idea of gallivanting around the landscape looking for artefacts.'

Revealing a story in snippets helps to keep up the suspense. He added that looking for artefacts is a 'carrot dangler' to make you go out and do something. So, the idea of psychic questing was established: 'Those involved in this are agents of fate. Once you say to the forces that be, 'OK, hit me with the dreams', you are led on a personal course of



enlightenment. It may take years to understand what is going on,' but 'there's plenty for everybody in it'.

Every good story needs a baddie, like SMERSH or the Mafia: 'The story gets bigger and more awesome as time goes on, but we are beginning to understand the whole web of intrigue involved.' In the case of psychic questing the enemy is 'a sinister group called the People of Hex'. Unseen but leaving clues, they perform dark rituals at sacred sites all round the country. Debbie had a vision of a druid, which led them to a pond barrow: 'This druid was basically saying "Come down 'ere, summink 'eavy's 'appening."' At the barrow, they found a bone inscribed with strange characters—evidence of the People of Hex. 'People were pumping up the energies in relation to ancient warriors causing a considerable imbalance of energies.' The People of Hex perform negative rituals and 'we had to stop it. It was like unblocking the plughole.'

The second speaker, Paul Weston, had a slightly apologetic manner. Was he afraid of looking a fool? Afraid of people saying 'Leave it out, John'? Had he been persuaded into all this by Andy Collins—or Debbie? In March 1990, he said, 'strange phenomena abounded. The general climate was such that we were prepared to believe that anything was possible. One night in my living room, everything was very relaxed, candlelight, spacey music and all that.' Then a strange phenomenon happened: an electric fire turned itself on unaided. Debbie was sitting right by it all the time and saw nothing. But she *did* see a cat goddess, a woman with a cat's head, in the house. 'This was an enigma for me. I didn't know what to make of it. This of course to me meant nothing—it was non-reality. This was meaningless to me, but I was willing to be open to the possibilities. I was willing to go further with it.' Debbie then discovered a gateway to Ancient Egypt in Paul's bedroom (audience laughter) including the step pyramid of Saqqara and a temple to the Ancient Egyptian cat goddess Bast. 'I mean what can you say? It's a load of bollocks? This was non-reality. But I was willing to believe that something could come out of it. I said show me, prove it to me. But it would never have become reality to me if I hadn't kept a dream diary.'

Paul started getting dream messages about seven holy wells of Isis at the source of the Thames. 'You won't find this in the conventional history books. But I was prepared to

take it on board. I was talking to Debbie about it and she said "This is a clue". He performed Bast rituals in his bedroom. 'I was talking to a brick wall. I was aware of the absurdity.' After one of 'these little spectaculars' he opened a book at random and saw the name Ewelme. I focused my attention on Oxfordshire. I had a dream of a sign saying Godstow.'

After a sequence of events which were rather hard to follow, he decided to try and 'accomplish something with the River Thames...sacralising the river...I was going along the river of darkness. I took it as a little experiment with creativity. I turned the Lady of Shallot into the Goddess Isis by using imagery from Apuleius's Golden Ass.' He read out Apuleius's description of Isis in the ruins of Reculver: 'Gothic ruins by moonlight, very fetching. Some kind of meditation was in order.' After this, 'We were completely shattered. People could hardly walk. Something very powerful was going on here.'

They went on to another site: 'Some of the people I was with thought this place was well dodgy and like something out of an H P Lovecraft story (knowing laughter from the audience). Make of that what you will. I ended up doing a Basil Fawlty, holding my head and barking like a dog. This to me was just so bizarre.' However, 'The climax of the whole thing was very inconclusive.' They ended up in a pub in Oxfordshire where he had a vision of a Toulouse Lautrec cafe. 'I tranced out. I got really melancholy, I really spaced out. I wasn't happy about it any more, I didn't feel right. I felt I had lost the concept of resacralising the river. This Bast thing—what the hell was it all about? But finally its emergence seemed to stimulate the dredging of my subconscious.' Long-buried memories returned that 'would tax the ingenuity of a Marcel Proust or a James Joyce'. He decided it was 'part of Jung's individuation process. I'm grooving on that now.'

Psychic questing is a Romantic pursuit. You make contact with ancient civilisations who had a superior aesthetic sense to post war town planners or speculative builders. It's a way of repossessing Britain (Albion), looking for the real land under its hideous disguise of bloodless suburbs, emasculated town centres, shopping malls and heritage industry. It's a way of turning your own life into a story, an outlet for your fantasy, imagination and feelings. You have an opportunity for dressing up (Celtic jewellery, black leather) and play-acting (performing rituals). The quest plot is one of the oldest, but what seems at first sight to be an occult version of Tinker, Tailor, turns out to be not an enigma with a solution, but a prolonged tease, more *Twin Peaks* than John le Carré. There is always 'more work to be done'. 'Information comes out all the time' and the bandwagon keeps rolling. The artefacts are part of the tease, not an end to the quest. Could the 'carrots' be 'salted'? A quester must keep his or her reputation, and a leader must keep his followers.

Ultimately it's all strangely pointless—and Paul Weston seemed to sense this. It's like the Great Secret or the Holy Grail. When you find it all it says is 'The All is the One' or 'There's no Place Like Home'.

Lucy Fisher is a journalist living in London.

Ask Professor Mesmo

Britain's best-loved dilettante metaphysicist divines the answers to your psychic problems

Dear Professor,

Can you explain the inexplicable behaviour of my West Highland Terrier—Rabbie? Once my trusting and loyal companion, but whom I now suspect to be a paranormal channeller. One night after retiring from dinner to smoke a 'Hamlet' or two, Rabbie joined me, taking up his usual position supine on the carpet in front of our flame-effect gas fire. As the light flickered over his tiny, furry frame I felt as if the world was at rights. I savoured the sharp tang of my cigar smoke without a thought or anxiety to cloud my relaxed repose. I must have dozed off but within a few minutes I was woken by a sudden yapping and scuffling noise. I was shocked to see Rabbie limping around the floor whining—then inexplicably, he would bound about, running over the furniture like a young pup! I shouted to Rabbie to stop but my remonstrations came to nothing. Then the most extraordinary thing happened. Rabbie stood on his hind legs and danced! Something he had never done before, despite my efforts to teach him when he was young. But Rabbie was not two feet away dancing, turning circles as if waltzing. I was thunderstruck by this vision, for I recognised something truly uncanny. This behaviour—the limping, the energetic leaping onto furniture, but most of all the dancing—were all the tricks that my deceased brother taught his dog, Tammie, before they both died in a fearful train accident on the Tay bridge. Was my Rabbie channelling the spirit form of Tammie? Was Rabbie possessed? Then my housekeeper came in with the tea tray and tripped over my dancing canine psychic. In the ensuing row Rabbie ran off and hid in the garden shed. Although I watched Rabbie with considerable care I never saw him 'channel' again. He often fixed me with a baleful eye, almost as if he were accusing me of something. When I retire of an evening I cannot stop thinking about Rabbie, and I am growing more convinced that he is channelling again in the privacy of the garden shed when the rest of the household is asleep.

Colonel Basketcase

Professor Mesmo replies

I have files of incidents like that you describe. It is well known in psychic circles that animals are incredibly sensitive to the plethora of energy waves that continually surround and penetrate us. The Astral Plane cannot be full of spirit animals, but I am convinced that the description of the 15 circles of the Aquarian Universe as outlined in MZ Statin's book *The Onion of Karmic Influence* are a true reflection of what lies out



there. One of these Ethereal (if minor) concentric rings contains all the animal spirits. This can be likened to the lower levels of a multi-storey car park. It is at this level that Rabbie opens communications. Take a thermos and some sandwiches down to the shed and wait for Rabbie to go into another canine trance. Then go to your neighbours to find out which recently deceased animals displayed the observed 'Party tricks'. If you are lucky there may be a Pet Cemetery nearby! Don't forget that Rabbie will not only commune with the 'Doggie' dead but with all domestic animals. So if you've heard of a recently deceased Newt or a Hamster that has given up life's struggle in or near your house, it may be its spirit controlling Rabbie. Personally I would delight in having a psychic pet, so cherish Rabbie and report your findings to the 'Psychic pets Investigation Group' (PIG) at their office in Barking.

Professor Mesmo



Thank you for calling the Parapsychology Institute. We're out right now. When you hear the tone, please concentrate, and your message will be returned.

New Beliefs for Old?

Tim Axon

A look at paranormal trends in the Soviet Union

In my article 'The New Age and the Crisis of Belief' (*The Skeptic* 5.2), I explored the probable reasons for the growth of New Age beliefs and practices. Firstly, I argued that human beings have an innate need to conceptualize the world in terms of facts, theories and values to form relatively comprehensive and coherent structures of beliefs—so-called 'belief systems'. Belief systems may be true or false. They may be supported with evidence and argument, or they may be unsupported. They may be accepted in an open-minded spirit or adhered to in a dogmatic fashion. They may be explicitly formulated or implicitly assumed. And they may be either religious or secular in character. But whatever is the case, they must be 'workable' in the sense of providing believers with a satisfying explanation of the world and with a useful guide to action.

Secondly, I argued that we in the West are today faced with a situation of 'ideological crisis'. The influence of orthodox religious beliefs and institutions has declined in comparison with the past, yet the secular forms of belief (such as Marxism) which helped to displace them have largely failed to take over the central role formerly occupied by the Christian religion. Nowadays, only the values and attitudes associated with pluralist democracy, consumerism and market economics perhaps have a claim to ideological supremacy. Given the relative weakness of both orthodox, mainstream Christianity and its secular alternatives, and given the persistent need for belief, it is not too surprising that the ideological vacuum thus created should have become filled with many strange new creeds. Thus, whilst it would be naive to suppose that the particular character of contemporary forms of belief is the result of any single cause, the growth of New Age thought, the rise of new religious movements ('cults') and even the resurgence of Protestant fundamentalism (and, with it, creationism) must surely be seen as in large part reflecting this present-day 'crisis of belief'.

This analysis is intended to apply only to the case of Western industrialized societies such as exist in Britain and the United States and it is not necessarily immediately applicable elsewhere. It was therefore of great interest to me when recently I read a couple of articles in the June and August 1991 issues of the popular science magazine *Scientific American* which shed significant light on the rather different situation existing inside the Soviet Union: 'Science? Nyet—Disillusioned Soviets Embrace Mysticism and the Paranormal' by Philip Ross, and 'Antiscience Trends in the USSR' by Sergei Kapitza.

In contrast to the West, the Soviet Union provides an example of a society which (for a time) successfully insti-

tuted a thoroughly secular ideology: that which came to be referred to as 'Marxism-Leninism'. Yet, it seems an interest in the paranormal, in fringe science and in new religious movements is discernible there also, just as is the case in the West. How are we to understand such beliefs in their proper social and historical context?

Paranormal claims emanating from the Soviet Union are of course by no means a new thing. For example, many readers of *The Skeptic* will recall the case of the Russian 'psychic' Nina Kulagina who achieved a degree of notoriety some years ago by claiming to be able to move objects by the power of thought alone. But according to Sergei Kapitza, a physicist and member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the profound changes taking place in the USSR associated with *perestroika* have resulted in a marked increase of interest in the paranormal and in the 'irrational' generally.

The evidence is unsystematic and largely anecdotal, and so perhaps needs to be treated with some caution, but Kapitza quotes several examples to support his claim. For instance, he discusses the case of Anatolii Kashpirovskii, a faith healer who has demonstrated his purported abilities on television on many occasions and who has now acquired a large following. The medical profession has apparently offered only feeble opposition to such practices, whilst the Communist party newspaper *Pravda* actively came out in support of Kashpirovskii's claims. Meanwhile, the same newspaper has also provided a sympathetic report on a certain seer from India who (Kapitza tells us) offers advice on political and personal matters. The Soviet news agency Tass (which, incidentally, reported the arrival of three-eyed extraterrestrials in southern Russia some months ago—see Hits & Misses, *The Skeptic* 4.1) has produced photographs to support the claim that a ten year old girl from Georgia can attract metal objects to herself by paranormal means. The popular and progressive newspaper *Young Communists of Moscow* has apparently provided a regular daily horoscope for its readers, whilst the publishing house of the Academy of Sciences has recently released a large number of copies of a book on astrology. Even what purports to be a scholarly journal, *Social Sciences and Modernity* (also published by the Academy of Sciences), bears a message on the back cover of one of its issues promising the future publication of dialogues with the Cosmic Mind, as received by staff members of the 'All Union scientific coordinating study centre for UFOlogy'!

Such cases can no doubt be explained (at least in part) by the relaxation of censorship that has followed as a result of *glasnost* and by the fact that publications now have to compete for circulation (and even advertising). The tempta-

tion for editors to resort to sensationalism must be strong. But a market for such material clearly exists, and the absence of open dissension and debate that has previously characterized Soviet political culture can only assist the uncritical acceptance and further propagation of such sensationalist stories. Meanwhile, at a more serious level, a centre for alternative medicine has recently opened in a Moscow hospital and is able to administer unconventional treatments with the full protection of the law; Krishnaites have begun to appear on the streets of Moscow; and religiously-inspired creationism is being imported from the United States. Kapitza is clearly worried by such developments and he is not alone. Loren Graham, an historian of Soviet science at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was recently involved in organizing a joint US-USSR panel to discuss the problem of 'anti-science' trends, focusing especially on the case of the Soviet Union, with contributions made by scientists and scholars from both nations. 'A diminishing in the prestige of science, accompanied by a rise in the prestige of occultism, would not bode well for a free society', Graham is reported as saying.

What might be the root cause (or causes) behind the growth of such 'alternative' forms of belief? One obvious candidate explanation is that such growth can in large part be attributed to the effects of popular disenchantment with the state ideology of Marxism-Leninism. This disenchantment was demonstrated most dramatically during the aftermath of the failed *coup* attempt of August 1991, which saw statues of Lenin and his confederates come tumbling to the ground, and marked the effective end of over seventy years rule by the Soviet Communist Party. But of course such disenchantment had long preceded these events and the policy of *glasnost* had already allowed it a voice. The rise of alternative beliefs such as those described above can probably be seen as one manifestation of that disenchantment. Marxism-Leninism, as an ideology and as a political system, failed to satisfy both the material and the spiritual needs of the population, and was extremely oppressive into the bargain. This failure created an ideological vacuum that was perhaps even more sharply felt than the West's. If the need for belief is as persistent as I claim it to be, then it is not surprising we should find that many people are turning to alternative systems of belief now that they have the freedom to do so.



Nina Kulagina attempting to project an image into a camera.

Skeptics face an uphill struggle in attempting to counter these newly emerging belief systems where these can be shown to conflict with the available scientific evidence. Respect for science amongst even educated Soviet citizens is at present apparently extremely low. The scientism of Marxism-Leninism—the fact that it advertised itself as 'scientific socialism'—has clearly not helped improve the status of science amongst the general public. Moreover, its uncritical acceptance of the unqualified benefits of scientific and technological progress helped create the conditions which made possible such ecological disasters as the draining of the Aral sea and the Chernobyl nuclear accident, and has thereby also contributed to a widespread disillusionment with science and all its works.

Nevertheless, I understand that Paul Kurtz is planning to establish a Russian version of the *Skeptical Inquirer*. One can only wish him well, but there are grounds for doubting how much impact this is likely to have on a nation that seems to be in the process of disintegrating and which faces the prospect of economic and social upheaval on a massive scale. The growth of alternative belief systems seems to me to be likely to continue apace, not least because these belief systems offer security and hope during a time of great uncertainty and crisis. The revival of more orthodox forms of religious belief also seems probable, and the growth of extreme forms of political ideology grounded in nationalism is a distinct possibility. If the Soviet Union is successful in making the transition to a market economy then the materialism of the consumer society may well offer yet another kind of ideological option. But the Western experience suggests that, even then, a significant minority of the population will continue to seek solace in the occult, in the paranormal, and in other forms of alternative belief, however ludicrous these may often appear to be.

To the extent that such alternative beliefs form part of larger belief systems which are able to confer significance and meaning on the human condition, they can legitimately be described as 'quasi-religious' in character, and the persistence of such beliefs is really not difficult to understand. As Marx himself proposed, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people'. Of course, Marx's argument also amounted to a call for the abolition of such illusions through the creation of a society which would not need illusions. But if Soviet-style communism was intended to provide for the realization of such a society then in time it also was revealed to be a kind of illusion, and it is not yet clear that there are available any truly adequate ideologies to replace it. In this sense, the Soviet Union now faces its own more acute version of the Western 'crisis of belief'.

Neither crisis is likely to be easily resolved, and it remains to be seen whether or not there are valuable fragments buried deep in the ideological debris of human civilization which might still form the basis for new perspectives and for new world-views as yet unimagined.

Dr Tim Axon is the author of *Beyond the Tao of Physics: Mysticism and Modern Physics—A Reappraisal* (Tehuti Press, 1988).

The Silver Man: Retouched Reality?

Ole Henningsen

A famous picture of an 'alien' is a simple hoax

Over the years, articles in the UFO literature in many countries have dealt with the picture of the little Silver Man, who is often claimed to be a flying saucer crewmember from a UFO crashed near Mexico City. Often it is stated that the bodies of his alien pilot colleagues found in the UFO wreckage have been sent to Germany for 'further investigation'. It is certainly a strange picture. But is it genuine?

When Claus Westh-Henrichsen, a commercial artist, saw a picture of the Silver Man in the Danish UFO magazine *UFO-NYT*, he wrote to the editor 'As a professional draughtsman and retoucher, I can imagine the situation: it's the silly season on the newspaper, and there's simply no news, no world-shattering story. The newspaper's photographic retoucher is bored, scratching his ear with a pencil. On the archives cupboard is a couple of pictures; one is showing a family wheeling a pram along, the other showing a group of jugglers from a circus. One of the jugglers sticks out in the photograph, looking odd as he stands there in his strange costume, slightly out of focus, receiving the cheers of the crowd. Snip, snip, out with the pram, in with the juggler—and a whole new situation is created! After closing time the work is lying there on the draughtsman's desk. The pictures editor wanders by, notices the picture, and smiles wryly: 'What the heck? This could be quite a joke!'

Far-fetched? No, I tried it myself on the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, back in 1958. Using a portrait and a picture from a soap advertisement, I undressed the celebrity in the advertisement! And it was *better* than the Silver Man!

So, let's take this theory, and examine the famous picture of the Silver Man a little more closely. Let's call the two men in fore-

ground of the picture A and B, and the Silver Man S. We shall begin by considering the perspective in the picture. If you make the picture bigger, so that the position of the feet can be drawn (considering the length of the coats), this makes S hover above the ground. Also, S is situated parallel to A and B (that is, in their plane in the photograph), but he is still missing 25 cm to reach the ground. But we can see that S is also standing on something! If not, the angles of his feet would be different.

The picture shows a group of walking people, but S is standing still. A and B have an 'arm function', which indicates that they are holding something stiff and horizontal (see * in the diagram). The positions of the palms of their





hands, and the bending of their arms, show that they are pushing or pulling something. Also, B's glove would look like this if he was holding something (above).

Furthermore, it is not logical that the height of A's and B's hands above the ground would be the same—not if they were holding something alive! Note that all three of A, B and S have bent arms. This is an unnatural stance. If S can walk by himself (which one would assume), A's and B's arms should be relaxed.

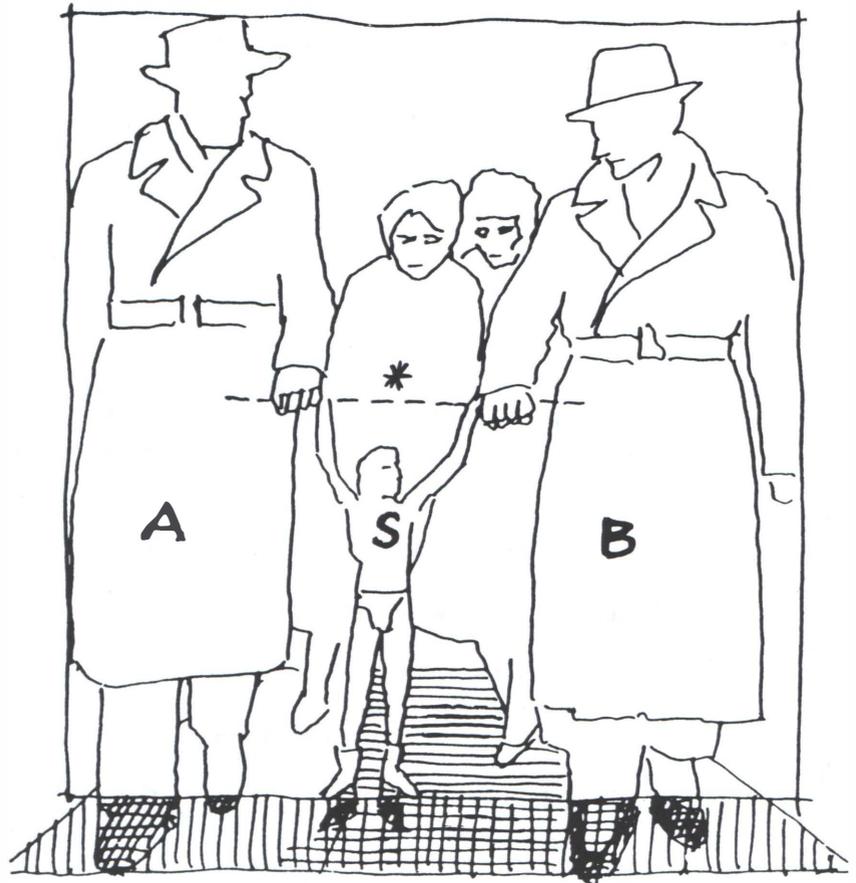
Finally, where are the thousands of curious people, missing from the picture? There is no doubt that the sun is shining. However, the ground under S has been 'softened' (the retoucher was not quite able to account for the shadow here). Note also that S does not cast a shadow, as one might expect.

So, this is the solution of Claus Westh-Henrichsen. A nice stroll in the spring sun in Berlin has been cleverly altered to make a mystery. We can see that the expressions on the two ladies' faces have nothing to do with the apparent situation. Meanwhile, the two men are pushing a pram, which at that time had high, broad grips. The hoax is revealed!

What of the true origin of the picture? Where did it first appear? Hans-Werner Peiniger, of the German UFO organization GEP, believes that the Silver Man comes from an April Fool's joke in a German magazine sometime in the early 1950s. Alas, nobody has yet been able to trace the magazine in question. However, Peiniger remembers that the picture illustrated a report about a crashed spacecraft. The authors of the article were G Falscht and R Logan. If you know your German, these names become the words 'gefalscht' and 'erlogan'—'forged' and 'imaginary'! In English, the authors might have been 'D Lusion' and 'M Aginary'! It is said that non-German speaking reporters did not get the joke and unwittingly passed the picture on to worldwide picture bureaux.

On the other hand, maybe it isn't a hoax at all...

Ole Henningsen originally wrote this article for the Danish UFO magazine *UFO-NYT*, from which it is reprinted with kind permission. It was translated by Helle Nielsen.



London Student Skeptics Spring Term Meetings for 1992

All meetings will be held on Mondays in Room 3C (unless otherwise stated) of the University of London Students Union building on Malet Street, London WC1E (opposite Dillons bookshop). Please arrive from 7.30 for a prompt start at 8.00. Everyone is welcome! For further details contact Mike Howgate on 081 882 2606.

3 February: Dr John Horsfall on debunking one of the last decade's most pervasive New Age myths: the GAIA hypothesis.

17 February: Ellis Hillman, international President of the Flat Earth Society on 'The history and current state of the Flat Earth movement'.

2 March: Caroline Richmond of Health Watch (formerly the Campaign Against Health Fraud) on 'Why do people need Quackery?'. (To be held in Room 3B).

16 March: London Student Skeptics AGM, with a glass of wine as a bit of a bribe. Come along, bring your proposals and elect next year's committee.

30 March: A video presentation of the 'Dowsing' segment of last year's James Randi TV series, plus a chance to test your own dowsing capabilities. Bring your own coathanger and/or crystal.

Future Imperfect

Robert Sheaffer

Psychics' 1991 predictions fizzle

Saddam Hussein was not killed in an accidental nuclear explosion, nor was he brought to trial. A massive earthquake did not dump California into the ocean. Pope John Paul II was not charged by a crazed camel, and Tom Cruise did not lose his hair. These were just a few of the many predictions that had been made for 1991 by famous 'psychics', but were dead wrong, as chronicled by the Bay Area Skeptics in Southern California.

At the end of each year, many well-known 'psychics' issue predictions for the year to come. Twelve months later, they issue another set of predictions, conveniently forgetting those made the year before, which are always nearly 100% wrong. Each year, however, the Bay Area Skeptics dig up the predictions made the year before, to the embarrassment of those who made them.

Many of the 'psychic' predictions made are so vague that it is impossible to say if they came true or not: for example, Jeane Dixon's prediction that 'pressures behind the scenes will force Carol Burnett to make an important decision about her future this winter' is not obviously true or false. Many other 'predictions' involve things that happen every year, or else are not difficult to guess, such as hurricanes along the Gulf Coast, marital strife for Charles and Diana, or severe winter storms. Many supposed 'predictions' simply state that ongoing events and trends, such as economic uncertainty, or conflict in the Middle East, will continue. Some predictions did of course come true, especially those that were unspecific, or not at all difficult to guess: Jeane Dixon correctly predicted that the 'tenure will be short' for 'the new priest-president of troubled Haiti' Jean-Francois Aristide [*The Star (US)*, April 16, 1991]. However, since in recent years the government of Haiti has been averaging about one coup a year, such an outcome was hardly unexpected. Significantly, not one prediction which was both specific and surprising came true.

Other supposed 'predictions' are not really predictions at all, but are actually disclosures of little-known events which are already under way, such as movie productions, business ventures, or developing scandals. Because questionable claims of having made an amazing prediction frequently are made in the wake of major news stories, the Bay Area Skeptics only evaluates predictions that were published or broadcast before the events they claimed to foretell.

Denver 'psychic' Lou Wright predicted that a magnitude 7.0 earthquake would devastate the Los Angeles area in September [*The Globe*, Dec. 25, 1990]. She also predicted

that an air disaster would kill hundreds of vacationers on their way to Hawaii in March, and that a famous politician would cause a scandal when he leaves his wife for Whitney Houston [*National Enquirer*, Jan. 1, 1991].

Los Angeles 'psychic' Maria Graciette predicted that a massive earthquake would strike the Grand Canyon in the spring, and that Tom Cruise would temporarily go bald because of a stress-related illness [*National Enquirer*, Jan. 1, 1991]. New York 'psychic' John Monti predicted that Vice-President Quayle would temporarily stand in for the president when Bush is stricken with heart problems, that a former U.S. president would die in the fall, and that an assassination attempt on Soviet president Gorbachev would be foiled by a courageous American tourist [*The Examiner*, Dec. 25, 1990].

The famous Washington, D.C. 'psychic' Jeane Dixon, who supposedly has a 'gift of prophecy', saw Rev. Jimmy Swaggert's ministry being 'saved' by a last-minute donation this year, rather than being destroyed by another scandal involving a prostitute. She also predicted that Prince Charles and Princess Diana would announce their separation. [*The Star (US)*, Dec. 25, 1990]. In April of this year, Jeane Dixon issued her predictions for the aftermath of the Gulf War. While this did contain the correct prediction of the release of the Western hostages in Lebanon, she also predicted that Saddam Hussein would either be assassinated, or else be put on trial for war crimes in a Moslem court. She also saw terrorist attacks being made against the British Royal Family, and Monaco's Prince Rainier, and predicted that the world would be stunned as 'the old order' in China, Korea, and Japan suddenly fell apart, like the



Berlin Wall. No major changes occurred in any of those governments during 1991. [*The Star (US)*, April 16, 1991].

Southern California 'psychic' Judy Hevenly predicted that Saddam Hussein would be killed in February, in an accidental nuclear explosion at a secret Iraqi facility, and that scientists would find evidence of extraterrestrial life using the Hubble space telescope [*National Enquirer*, Jan. 1, 1991]. Another of her predictions was that Pope John Paul II would have a 'close call' while visiting U.N. Troops in Saudi Arabia when he would be charged by a 'crazed camel' [*The Globe*, Dec. 25, 1990].

Another Southern California 'psychic,' Clarisa Bernhardt, who is claimed to make 'uncanny earthquake predictions,' foresaw that the much-heralded earthquake that was supposed to hit Missouri in December, 1990, would actually strike in the fall of 1991. She also predicted that Imelda Marcos and Tammy Faye Baker would team up to open a nationwide chain of clothing and shoe boutiques [*National Enquirer*, Jan. 1, 1991].

In Northern California, 'psychic astrologer' Terrie Brill predicted that a massive earthquake would hit the West Coast from Washington to Mexico, causing California to fall into the ocean [*San Jose Mercury News*, Jan. 1, 1990, p. 1B]. She also predicted that housing prices in the Bay area 'will go down by at least 25%,' and perhaps even 50% [*San Jose Mercury News*, Dec. 31, 1990, p. 5B]. In reality, the average price of a house in San Jose today is very close to where it was 12 months ago. She also foresaw Liz Taylor going back into the hospital in a 'near-death situation' [*San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 31, 1990].

I am sure that readers of *The Skeptic* take this stuff with a pinch of salt but 1992 would be a better year if, based on the continuing failure of the 'psychics' to make accurate predictions over the years, everyone—including the media—exercised similar healthy skepticism when 'psychics' and other purveyors of the paranormal made extra-ordinary claims or predictions. Anyone who swallows the 'psychics' claims year after year without checking the record is setting a bad example for students and for the public.

It is important to note that no 'psychic' succeeded in predicting the genuinely surprising news stories of 1991: The military coup in the Kremlin that was defeated almost bloodlessly by supporters of democracy, followed just a few months later by the complete dissolution of the Soviet Union; Saddam Hussein deliberately causing one of the world's largest oil spills, then torching Kuwait's oil fields; the most destructive wildfire in California history devastating the Oakland and Berkeley hills; the arrest of Pee-Wee Herman for 'indecent exposure'; a highly-publicized rape trial involving a member of the Kennedy family. These major news stories were so totally unexpected that someone would have had to be genuinely 'psychic' to have predicted them! Given the sheer number of so-called 'psychics' out there, one would expect that if even one of them were genuine, these things would have been correctly predicted; and since they were not, it suggests that all such claims of 'psychic powers' are without foundation.

Robert Sheaffer is an author and former chairman of the Bay Area Skeptics.

1992 Skeptical Predictions

by resident seer
Marjorie Mackintosh

January: the coincidence in 1992 of two major elections—US and UK—will lead to a marked increase in the sale of crystal balls, tarot cards and other devices for seeing the future. Astrologers will have a boom year. Chief among their customers will be politicians trying to discover who they should say they've always supported.

February: the Russian government will send scientists to the West to study homeopathic techniques. They want to learn how to feed 250 million people with only one loaf of bread.

March: officials within the government will leak the news that an exorcism has been arranged at Number Ten as part of John Major's latest attempt to be rid of the ghost of his predecessor once and for all.

April: with an election looming, the government will discover large amounts of money suddenly available for public spending projects. This will become known as the 'out-of-Treasury experience'.

May: the government will award a large contract to the followers of the Maharishi. Their job will be to reduce European travel costs by teaching EuroMPs to levitate to Brussels.

June: an increase in reported UFO sightings will cause the Prime Minister to begin work on an 'Aliens' Charter'.

July: Oliver North's latest book on how to do your patriotic duty will come bundled with a free personal paper shredder.

August: the appearance of new and more complex crop circles will be explained as the first appearance of new 'K' reg. flying saucers.

September: sources close to Dan Quayle will reveal that during one of his major pre-election speeches, he had an out of body experience but nobody in the audience noticed the difference.

October: owing to errors on the part of their respective private secretaries, Prince Charles and Princess Di will appear in public together.

November: Uri Geller will enter into secret negotiations with several Western governments who want to use his metal-bending abilities to disable the armies of Colonel Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein.

December: US government remote viewers, called upon to locate hidden Iraqi weapons caches in late 1991, will now turn their attention to pinpointing the location of S. Claus's North Pole hideout.

Bands of Hope

Lewis Jones

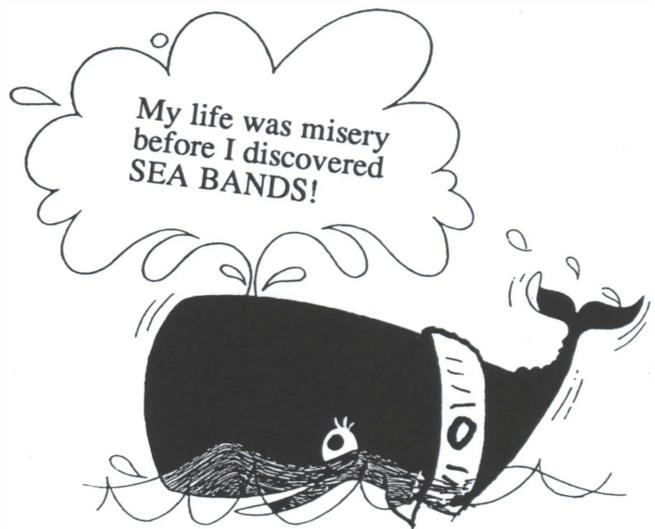
The wrist bone connected to the ...?

The sea has always brought out the best in me. Such as a good lunch. So all those ads for Sea Bands have been striking a responsive cord. You know the things. They keep coming up in those glossy colour brochures that fall out of your magazines and into your waste paper basket. HOW THE ROYAL FLEET FIGHTS SEASICKNESS—you can't speak plainer than that. If the Navy doesn't know about being seasick, who does? 'The Royal Fleet Auxiliary tested the system in 1986, and declare it a useful, drowsiness and side-effect free alternative to drugs'. At this point you look at the accompanying photograph, and see what looks like a cotton wristband with an inset plastic button the size of an aspirin. You look closer, and examine the picture in careful detail to see what a Sea Band really is. It turns out to be a cotton wristband with an inset plastic button the size of an aspirin.

Curiosity eventually got the better of me, and I decided to follow the Sea Band trail and see where it lead. When I contacted the Royal Fleet Auxiliary's Principal Medical Officer, Dr Driver, I struck lucky right away. It was Dr Driver who had tested the Sea Bands aboard *Sir Lancelot* in the South Atlantic. Of the 17 people tested, two thirds said they thought the Sea Bands effective, and one third didn't. This is a very small sample, so how about a control group? Well, another test had been planned on the good ship *Tristram*, without the plastic buttons, but there wasn't enough bad weather. Dr Driver emphasised that such evidence as there was, was merely anecdotal. Fair enough.

Then the Consumers' Association (CA) decided to hand out Sea Bands to 27 passengers on a cross-channel ferry. About two thirds thought they felt less ill than usual, and one third didn't. Still no control group. And again the sample was small. The CA admitted that this was not a controlled clinical trial, but couldn't resist going on to enthuse about results that were 'quite dramatic'. They reported giving Sea Bands to children who felt sea-sick, and within minutes, 'they were up and frisking around again'. And there was one young girl who stopped being seasick when she put the bands on, but was sick again when she took them off to fill in the questionnaire. The CA don't agree that they were misleading their readers, in spite of a forthright picture-caption saying, 'Sea Bands might work for you' (and so might touching wood). They saw it as an advantage that Sea Bands does not produce side-effects (neither does touching wood).

Enter the Institute of Naval Medicine (INM), who tested Sea Bands against the drug hyoscine, sometimes known as scopolamine. (At sea, this gives good control of symptoms for some hours). But the INM also tested against two placebos. One was a dummy drug (Vitamin C), and the other was a dummy band (the Sea Band with the plastic button reversed so that it didn't press against the wrist). Eighteen male volunteers were exposed to a 'cross coupled nauseogenic motion challenge'. In other words they were blindfolded and rotated in a chair while they performed head movements to commands from a loudspeaker above them. This may sound pretty innocuous, but in fact it's a



fairly severe test. It will bring on the first symptoms of vomiting within 15 to 20 minutes on average. Each subject was tested on the motion challenge on four separate occasions, with at least a week between each. The results? The hyoscine had an effect. But Sea Bands? No better than the dummy remedies. In fact, it emerges that the US Naval Aerospace people had tested Sea Bands back in 1982. The results then? No benefit.

You can browse through *Gray's Anatomy* until your thumb is sore, without ever finding any connection between your wrist and being seasick. So why on earth did anyone think there was anything in the idea in the first place? It turns out that a Mr D.S.J. Choy had come up with a 'seasickness strap' in New York in 1982. The idea was to find a way

of pressing against the Nei Guan or P6 acupressure point, which is situated two *Chinese* inches away from the wrist crease. Why? At the end of the trail, we open *The Treatment of Disease by Acupuncture* by Felix Mann, President of the Medical Acupuncture Society. He lists the ailments you can cure by pressure on the wonderful P6 point:

'Headache, insomnia, dizziness, palpitation of heart, epilepsy, madness, easily frightened, swelling under armpits, cramp of elbow, cardiac pain, vomiting, middle regions blocked full and swollen, spleen and stomach not harmonised, stomach very painful, gastritis, enteritis, swelling of abdomen, diarrhoea, hiccoughs, coughing, depleted and weary, summer-heat diseases, rheumatism of foot, jaundice, irregular periods, post-partum bleeding and dizziness, spermatorrhoea, nearly pulseless'.

It's difficult enough to come up with a remedy that can make a firm claim to cure one specific ailment. Remedies that claim to cure everything from hiccups to madness can only expect to be taken seriously by medieval visitors from a time warp.

Sea Bands does list a medical advisor: Dr Stainton-Ellis, a retired medical man. But Dr Stainton-Ellis said he had little contact with the company, and it is not clear that he is called upon to actually do anything. He told me that Sea Bands 'are now being used in pregnancy, radiotherapy and chemotherapy'. In fact, in these areas Sea Bands have not so much been 'used' as put under test, usually by the same small group of enthusiasts. These studies have been heavily criticised for their statistics, their poor methodology, their lack of double-blind controls, and the fact that other researchers have been unable to reproduce the results. But acupressure is a mere ghostly cousin of acupuncture. So is it worth considering acupuncture itself before a sea-voyage?

Dr Peter Skrabanek has surveyed the needle scene, and reported to the medical journal *The Lancet* on 26 May 1984: 'numerous controlled trials have shown that the claims for acupuncture have no scientific validity... Let us leave quackupuncture to quacks and let us tell the misinformed patient the truth, so that he or she can choose'.

Lewis Jones is a London-based freelance editor and writer.

Crossword Solution

1	s	k	e	p	t	i	c	5	d	o	w	s	7	i	n	g	
	k		s		r		h		o		a		n		e		
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Congratulations to David Simpson of Lusaka, Zambia, who is the winner of last issue's Skepticus crossword competition. A copy of CSICOP Fellow Kendrick Frazier's new book *The Hundredth Monkey, and Other Paradigms of the Paranormal* (published by Prometheus Books), has been placed in the centre of *The Skeptic's* Human Potential Realization Pyramid, along with all our old razor blades, and we expect it to materialise in Mr Simpson's house any time now.

Prometheus Books specialises in skeptical books about the paranormal. For a free catalogue, write to Prometheus Books, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG 10 4PZ.

SPRITE

THE ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP SHOWS A ZODIAC ENCIRCLING GLASTONBURY, AND ANOTHER ZODIAC NEAR KINGSTON.

AND A TUFTED DUCK SOUTH WEST OF HUDDERSFIELD.



IF YOU FOLLOW SOME LINES ON A MAP AND IGNORE OTHERS, YOU CAN FIND PICTURES OF ANYTHING !!

ER... RIGHT.

And all such pictures have existed on the Astral Plane for ever.



Psychic Diary

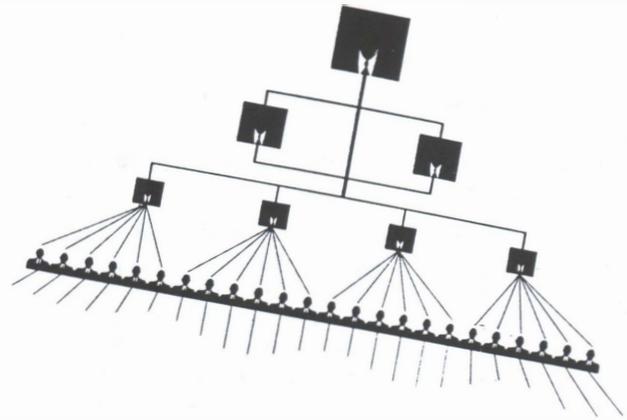
Toby Howard

Listen to me, for I know the truth...

Deep inside a secret installation, somewhere in the desert of Arizona, live two alien spacemen, survivors when their UFO crashed in the Midwest sometime in the 40s. The bodies of their not so lucky cabin-mates lie preserved in freezers. A nearby facility holds the remnants of their spacecraft, its shiny hull made of a metal unknown on Earth. Elsewhere, people who see strange lights in the sky are visited by sinister Men In Black, who hint that they are government agents, and advise extreme caution about discussing things seen in the sky. But if it's all so secret, how do we know about these goings-on at all? Simple. Because there is a small band of people who have found out about a conspiracy of silence, that involves the highest levels of the governments of the world...

Are there groups, perhaps including the government, who conspire to suppress the truth? According to folklorists, stories about 'suppressed truths' form a kind of 'escape valve' for individuals who feel increasingly powerless in a stifling bureaucratic society. You can feel a sense of personal triumph against a monolithic bureaucracy if you discover secret and sensitive information, and the nature of the information doesn't really matter. It could involve Jack the Ripper and the Royal connection, the alleged murder of Pope John Paul I, the ultimate truth about the JFK assassination, Masonic Policemen, Paul McCartney's 'death' in 1967, Elvis alive and well in Texas, the inflated price of CDs, secret NASA tapes of astronauts describing flying saucers, the deaths of scientists working in connection with Marconi defence contracts, the Iraqi super-gun, the recent spate of burglaries of MP's offices...

And it's easy to rationalise, and answer the question 'Why is truth suppressed?' If it were not, it would cause top officials to lose their jobs, or cause panic in the populace, or endanger a secret government plot, and so on. What of the UFO conspiracists, for example? Could the US government possibly have earth-shattering evidence for alien visitors ferreted away somewhere, and keep it secret? The UFO scene, perhaps more so in the USA than over here, is positively seething with conspiracy theorists, and one can imagine the origins of this situation. After all, it must be terribly frustrating to be a UFOlogist these days. Claiming a government cover-up is a perfect excuse for the lack of tangible UFO evidence. It seems that it is entirely because of the lack of widespread evidence, rather than despite it, that belief is growing amongst the hard-core UFOlogists about three par-



ticular species of alien who are already here visiting us. These are the 'Greys' (they're from Zeta Reticuli), the 'Nordics' (origin unknown, but it sounds like it should be Sweden), and the 'Talls' (they're quite tall). Last December, two British UFOlogists appeared on Channel 4's *Clive Anderson Talks Back*, and it was hard not to be impressed with their conviction that Greys, as real as you or I, had walked up their garden paths. You could also see that they were quite delighted to be 'special'. After all, it was them—and not the rest of us—to whom the Greys had chosen to reveal themselves.

The belief that certain individuals are selected to be recipients of revealed truth is something which conspiracy theorists, cultists, hard-core UFOlogists, scientologists, and so on, all share. The whole 'New Age' movement—although this term is becoming less and less useful as time goes on—is based on the premise of discovering (or re-discovering) 'truths' which have been forgotten in the modern world. New Agers are 'special', because they have seen the light that the rest of us miserable post-industrialists haven't. Of course, skeptics themselves are not immune to the specialness syndrome, although most of us would like to believe that we are. Where you sit on the line stretching from Super Skeptic to Wet Skeptic depends on many factors, but one might be whether *you* feel special because you know—whereas others may not—that everything 'paranormal' is bunkum. You have read all the skeptical books, you read *The Skeptic*, so you know *the truth*. Does that make you part of a worldwide conspiracy of skeptics...?

Skeptics often get accused of poking fun at the New Age, but it works the other way, too. On New Year's Eve I visited the Yorkshire village of Haworth, 'home of the Brontës' and all that. Amongst all the tourist paraphernalia I came across 'Spooks', a New Age shop to end them all. 'Spooks' sells everything a New Ager could ever dream of wanting, and the rest. (I almost shelled out for some black candles, but with first-footing only a few hours away it didn't seem like an auspicious move.) Leaving the shop, something in the window caught my eye—a photograph of James Randi, of all people. I looked closer. 'Spooks' had voted him 'Twit of the year'.

Toby Howard is a lecturer in computer graphics and an initiate of the Arcane Knowledge of the Masters of the World (P.O. Box 666, Lhasa, Tibet).

Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

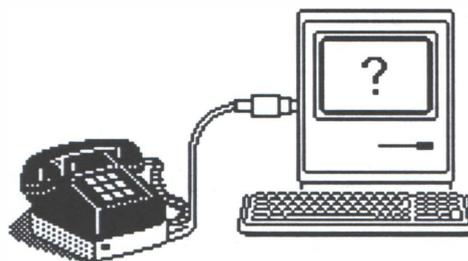
The age of the electronic skeptic

One day a couple of weeks ago I logged onto CompuServe, and there it was, on the announcements of 'What's New This Week': New Age Forum on CompuServe. Downloading the text of the announcement informed me that the New Age Forum is being run ('Sysopped') by the editors of *Magical Blend* magazine, and that it hopes to offer 'a holistic community to New Age-oriented people that will allow free discussion and personal growth.' So far, so blah. Further reading disclosed that forum topics include ESP and Mind Powers, Tarot and Astrology, and New Age Sciences (*sic*).

At this point, a brief explanation of the background might be in order. CompuServe claims to be the world's largest electronic network, with nearly 900,000 members—you dial into it using a modem and a personal computer. Through CompuServe you can gain access to literally hundreds of databases, most of which CompuServe itself doesn't manage—its computer dials those databases for you, just as you dial into CompuServe's computer. CompuServe is not responsible for the content of those databases, any more than your local library is responsible for errors in the copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* it carries on its shelves. Similarly, CompuServe is not responsible for what anyone says in electronic mail, which is private, like a letter is private.

Forums are, essentially, electronic conferences, places where people turn up, read the messages other people have left, write their own messages in answer, and go away again. It's like a very large public discussion; occasionally forums even run 'live discussions', where members are on-line at the same time, asking questions of an invited guest. New Age Forum has already done one of these with the editors of *Magical Blend*.

While CompuServe is not responsible for the content of messages left in forums—the Systems Operators ('Sysops') of the Forums are supposed to monitor those messages—it is nonetheless true that forums don't get started haphazardly. CompuServe is a business. People who want to run forums submit detailed, written proposals and undergo training, and get paid royalties based on the amount of activity in the forum they run. It is in CompuServe's interests that these forums succeed, and CompuServe helps promote them, through notices on-line, through the magazine that goes out to subscribers every month, and through advertisements strategically placed in selected publications (as in, 'Type GO ASTRONOMY at any system prompt', which appears regularly in astronomy magazines).



What is disturbing about this is that CompuServe is famous as a resource for facts, with a focus on business, science, and technology. There is news: Reuters, AP, and UPI wire services, all on-line. There is up-to-the minute news from NASA. There are health databases, some lay, some professional. There are libraries of newspaper articles, stock quotations, weather maps, an on-line encyclopedia, specialist newsletters, books in print—literally, you can research almost anything on CompuServe in a few minutes. You have to understand, I love CompuServe. It's a wonderful service. So my first reaction to the New Age Forum was one of dismay.

But skepticism means inquiry. So I logged on, and downloaded a few sections of the forum and read through the assembled messages in the General and New Age Sciences sections. About half of these messages were requests for information: did anyone know, for example, where to find information about Reiki healing? Then there were some interesting and intelligent discussions: is homeopathy provable scientifically? One message even quoted the recent *Skeptical Inquirer* article on the subject.

I'd have to say that so far, the forum seems to me a reasonable extension of discussions that already existed on CompuServe—both the Issues and the Religion forums have sections for paranormal topics. If more skeptics log onto the forum and present the evidence, perhaps the forum will serve a useful educational purpose. This leaves one question. One would think that skeptics are scientifically literate, especially compared to many New Age believers. Why weren't we in there first? Why aren't we setting the agenda for these discussions? Why is *Magical Blend* magazine the one with the forum section and not *Skeptical Inquirer*?

For once, we can't claim mass media prejudice was involved. We simply weren't forward thinking enough. Five or six years ago, there was much talk of setting up a skeptics' e-mail network; eventually, Toby Howard and Arizona's Jim Lippard got fed up with listening to the talk and just set one up. Much lively discussion ensued—but only among skeptics. When are we going to start talking to the rest of the world?

Wendy Grossman is the founder of *The Skeptic*, a member of the UK Skeptics, and a writer and folksinger. Her CompuServe ID is 70007,5537 and she can be reached by electronic mail (Internet) as wendyg@cix.compulink.uk or 70007.5537 @compuserve.com.

Reviews



Learning to be conscious

Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakthrough of the Bicameral Mind* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990 (2nd ed.) 491pp., hbk, £17.95)

This is a reprinting of the original 1976 edition of this remarkable book, with a 23 page afterword added by the author. It presents a novel theory that human consciousness arose in historical times, not slowly as an emergent property of a brain evolving to ever greater complexity. Out of it, as a consequence, comes a theory—an explanation—of religious belief, and herein lies its main test, for religion is absolutely central to much of human history. It would seem to be too remarkable a coincidence that the only species to be conscious, Man, is also religious; and it is Jaynes' greatness—right or wrong—to have recognised this fact, and to have proposed a completely original theory connecting these. There is no riddle about why humans practice farming, or medicine. But religion: an overwhelming concern with something unseen?

Unseen, says Jaynes, but not unheard. Jaynes' central thesis is that consciousness is learned, through the medium of language and the sense of hearing, and that the species began this process only a few thousand years ago when the right hemisphere of the brain, which until then had projected aural hallucinations maintaining people on auto-pilot, for some reason began to abdicate this function. Certainly it would be a brave man who asserted with confidence that a new-born baby was conscious, beyond carrying the potential for consciousness. The second part, Jaynes calls the 'breakdown of the bicameral mind', for which he adduces a staggering bulk of historical and mythological evidence. Some examples: 'I hear' and 'I obey' are one in biblical languages; the row over the building of a temple as confining a god who is everywhere; the alien flatness of the *Iliad* compared to the inner life of characters in the later *Odyssey*; above all, the doctrine of the Fall. Further evidence comes in the setting up of oracles once fewer and fewer people could hear the voices clearly; and their cessation when even the elect lost the capacity; there is also the exhortatory manner of prayer.

Jaynes also has things to say on glossalalia ('speaking in tongues'), schizophrenia, hypnosis (the subjugation of the conscious by an authoritative voice) and much more. The diversity and richness of evidence, mostly concerning things never satisfactorily explained, compel us to take this idea very seriously indeed. On the other hand, there are problems: what caused the breakdown to begin, neurophysiologically? Also, how far has the breakdown

progressed: is it partial or complete? Jaynes is vague or inconsistent on these matters.

Jaynes' theory is so different from any other that it has been met, in the main, with silence. But it is much more compelling than the other theories of religious belief, as a parent-hangover (Freud), or as a response to the realisation of personal extinction (Ernest Becker; John Schumaker [1]), or as an explanation at each instant in history for whatever is unknown (the 'God of the gaps'). Nor, in fact, is it necessarily inconsistent with theism: greater knowledge of the operation of the physical world was not, as Galileo (a religious man) recognised, a bar to religion; and neither need be greater knowledge of the mind. The theist may take Jaynes, like Galileo, as having exposed no more than a mechanism.

This is above all a theory of consciousness, and it should be judged in all of the areas to which it relates. An essay by the philosopher David Stove [2] has gone some way to publicising Jaynes' theory, but a good deal more needs to be done. This reissue is particularly welcome.

[1] *Wings of Illusion*, J.F. Schumaker, Polity Press, 1990.

[2] *The Oracles and their Cessation*, D.C. Stove, Encounter, April 1989, p30-38.

—Anthony Garrett

Chasing the aliens

Timothy Good, *Alien Liaison: The Ultimate Secret* (Century, 1991, hbk £14.99, 242pp., pbk, £4.99); Timothy Good (ed.) *The UFO Report 1992* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1991, 163pp., pbk, £10.99; hbk, £17.50).

Timothy Good is a prolific writer on UFOs. He is always readable and marshals his evidence with conviction. His approach is more in line with American ufology, which stresses the extra-terrestrial aspects of the phenomenon, than the mainly European 'new ufology' which tends more towards discovering possible folkloric motifs. *Alien Liaison* piles on evidence for the reality of aliens and their frequent visits to earth. In the words of the jacket's blurb:



Timothy Good provides evidence from top US scientific, intelligence and military personnel that proves, beyond reasonable doubt, that recovered UFOs are being test flown, that alien bodies have been examined, and that contact has been established.

Much of the book is a rehash of earlier material, but Good has been assiduous in making contacts and includes substantial interview material with alleged establishment

insiders who are able to spill the beans on governmental duplicity. The thrust of the thesis is that because there is so much corroborative material (in the sense of cross referencing of witness's statements with each other and with official documents), there is *prima facie* evidence that there is a conspiracy to withhold the truth from the public.

Superficially plausible, he unfortunately has a tendency to be uncritical. He rarely questions the validity of his sources (except where he suspects a governmental attempt to cloud the issue). On the whole he neglects counter-explanations such as misperception, misremembering, hallucination and fraud. Good is even-handed about the possibility that Truman's signature on the MJ-12 document is forged, but he still feels that the information contained in it is essentially factual.

Good's approach towards corroborative evidence assumes that information is being leaked in order to accustom the public gradually to the idea that we are being visited by aliens. He suggests that mixed in with genuine information is a large volume of misinformation, largely concerned with promoting the notion that the US government is collaborating with the aliens (or Extraterrestrial Biological Entities—EBEs—to give them a more scientific sounding name) whereas in reality the aliens are not totally benign, the truth of which would alarm the public. There seems to be a contradiction between this trickle technique and Good's evidence for disinformation designed to discredit those campaigning for governmental acknowledgement of alien visitations.

The mysterious cattle mutilations supposedly carried out by the aliens, of which there are several photographs in the book, receive much coverage. They too seem somewhat implausible; if the US government is in collusion, it is puzzling why it should not buy its own cattle, rather than allow aliens to steal those belonging to farmers who are likely to publicise the incident, and who therefore require sinister strong arm tactics to keep them quiet.

The book concludes with a summary of Cosmic Journey, a proposed touring exhibition, involving NASA, featuring the space programmes of both the USA and the (then) Soviet Union. A third of the display would have been given over to UFOs and EBEs, featuring alien vehicles, and even a body in a cryogenic tank. It might be inferred that the US government now feels that the public has been softened up enough to be able to bear the full truth, which makes the allegations of misinformation seem stranger still. Unfortunately the roadshow was cancelled in early 1990, due to budgetary constraints. The sooner President Bush sorts out the deficit, the sooner we shall be able to hear the Truth.

The UFO Report 1992, edited by Good, is the latest in his series of annual updates on the world ufological scene. This is a compendium of reports, mostly covering events 1990–1. The quality of the reports is uneven, but the breadth is fascinating.

The first two chapters are on crop circles, one a highly entertaining piece on British circles, the other on American UGMs (Unusual Ground Markings, for the uninitiated). This article, which contains an impressive amount of statistical analysis, helpfully informs us that when examining the

various hypotheses so far propounded,

it would seem most logical to offer a poststructuralist alternative; it is simple to use deconstructive reasoning to examine all of the above theories. The solution is that no theory is inherently 'wrong', and all theories are 'right'.

Interesting though circles/UGMs are, the link with UFOs is surely not so strong as to warrant occupying almost a quarter of the book.

The rest of the volume is directly related to UFOs. As an antidote to the tendency to concentrate on US official documents, a chapter is devoted to a survey of RAF reports from the 1950s released by the Public Records Office. Developments in the remarkable Gulf Breeze case, with its wealth of photographic evidence, are outlined by Bob Oechsler, who himself features as a protagonist in *Alien Liaison*.

Chinese and Russian sightings, as well as the thriving UFO scene in those areas, are well covered, and there is also a full chapter on Puerto Rico. Finally, the editor contributes a heavily selective roundup of sightings which, although claiming to cover the world, has a distinct UK bias. This section could usefully be expanded in future editions.

Both books are illustrated and contain useful information sections. They are worthwhile reading for anybody with an interest in the subject: *Alien Liaison* is a concise exposition of the 'nuts and bolts' view of UFOs, clearly displaying all its contradictions. *The UFO Report 1992* gives an indication of how deeply embedded in the human psyche they are.

—Tom Ruffles

The Gaia hypothesis

Lawrence E Joseph, *Gaia—The Growth Of An Idea* (Arkana, 1991, 276pp., pbk, £5.99)

To the ancient Greeks, Gaia was the goddess of the Earth; mother of the mountains and the seas, provider of all things. But, gradually the philosophical climate changed, the goddess lost her competitive advantage and other, better adapted, beliefs swept in, driving her into a dormancy that was to last many centuries. Then, in 1979, James Lovelock published *Gaia: A New Look At Life On Earth*, a serious work of science which contained, as a central part of its argument, the beguiling suggestion that the Earth can be considered as a single organism. The idea leaked through into the public domain, Gaia had found a metaphysical niche, the 'new age' had begun and out of science a religion was born.

So is Gaia science, religion or both? How did it come about as a hypothesis? What do its authors think of the popularisation of their creation? These are the kind of questions that this book sets out to answer; a book about all the other books on Gaia—and if you check your local bookshop you will find there are dozens of them. Lawrence Joseph is a journalist—albeit one who specialises in science—and here he has sniffed out a fine story, full of drama and controversy and featuring a set of characters as colourful and eccentric as any novelist ever had to work with. Curiously, given the fecundity of the planet's biosphere, the only best-seller element missing is sex.

The two main proponents of Gaia are Lovelock, a British free-lance atmospheric scientist, and Lynn Margulis, an American microbiologist nicknamed The Wizard of Ooze. Lovelock wondered how Earth, alone in the solar system, manages to maintain a highly reactive atmospheric mixture of oxidising and reducing gases. He concluded that the biosphere was acting to produce atmospheric—and hence also climatic—conditions optimal for itself. Margulis' work began with the study of the complex symbiotic relationships in bacterial communities and the observation that chloroplasts—the parts of plant cells responsible for photosynthesis—have many of the attributes of autonomous bacteria including the ability to reproduce. From this she developed the concept of evolution by endosymbiosis; a process whereby one organism absorbs another without consuming it, thereby gaining many of its attributes and effectively producing an entirely new species.

These two ideas form the basis of Gaia. They are also at the root of much of the hostility from the scientific establishment contradicting as they do the tenets of orthodox Darwinism. Much of the book is devoted to describing the ensuing argument together with the evidence and examples presented by both sides. The science is simply and clearly explained—although a quick reference glossary might have been a useful addition—and the story is fleshed out with brief, often amusing, profiles of the major protagonists.

However, Lovelock's book spawned more than a few outbreaks of polite warfare within the scientific community. It, or rather a selection of its more poetic imagery, has been co-opted into some of the growing number of pseudo-prechristian religions which have arisen over the last ten years or so. Happily for the interested skeptic the dippier excesses of 'new age' Gaia fans, though covered, are carefully distanced from the science. It is even suggested that Lovelock himself is uncomfortable with much of Gaia the religion; though we are never told whether he regards his description of the Earth as a single organism as literally true or merely an elegant metaphor. Either way it is clear that Gaia, though far from proven, has posed some questions which mainstream science will find hard to answer.

—Steve Brooks

Old Moore old hat?

Old Moore's Almanack, 1992 Edition, paperback magazine, 80 pages, printed June 1991, 85p)

Foulsham's Original *Old Moore's Almanack* has been published since 1697, according to the cover. The present edition is a booklet of predictions made in June 1991 for the year 1992. Most were made using astrology, but other methods are occasionally used. A 1992 football pools forecast uses team colours and the planets; greyhound racing forecasts are made using the numbers ruling each region of the country, and for gardeners a calendar for the best planting and sowing times is given which uses the Moon's position.

The magazine can be divided into three main sections, personal horoscopes, astrological predictions of world events and the advertisements. Many criticisms have been made of

newspaper astrology columns so I do not think there is any need to describe the personal horoscope section.

Disappointingly, I found that most of the forecasts of future events were actually forecasts of events which only might take place:

"The Epsom Derby may be won by the favourite." (June)
"China may be facing massive civil unrest" (July)

Other predictions were either so vague it would be difficult to decide what would count as a successful prediction or so general that a huge range of things could fit them; eg:

"a tough EEC Summit and tension between China and Vietnam." (July)
"There will be major democratic pressures in Greece." (August)

Then there are forecasts of events which are fairly likely in any year:

"Stress will be experienced in Israel, India and Pakistan." (March)
"Expect gas problems, oil explosions or high-tech accidents" (October)

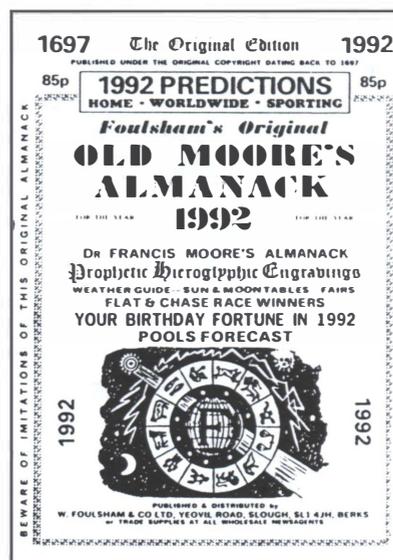
Finally, there are the 'shotgun' predictions where a prediction is repeated for many different months. Possible US military action is predicted in five separate months and potential constitutional change in the UK sometime during April to December is forecast.

Despite these criticisms the magazine does contain a few clear and relatively unambiguous forecasts. These include a military coup in Sri Lanka (April), the fall of the Algerian government (June), and a democratic revolution in Iraq (July).

The use of vague 'might happen' forecasts normally protects the forecaster from being wrong whatever happens, but the magazine contains an exception to this. Four times forecasts naming the Soviet Union are made, a country which ceased to exist even before the year had started. For example 'The Soviet army may become active.' (April) In the magazine's favour, the following forecast for January must be mentioned. 'The international focus will be on central Europe.' With the recent war and break-up in Yugoslavia this forecast could be said to be correct. Nevertheless, it is a vague generalised forecast.

The advertisements were the most interesting, and sometimes unintentionally amusing, part of the magazine. I was surprised people had the nerve to offer some of the products advertised. A piece of cork for £1 from the Wishing Cork Tree and Lucky Cyril's four-leaf clover at £1.35 each, for example.

Most of the adverts offer products to help you get one or



several of the following: wealth, power, romance, sex, friendship and luck. Only a small proportion advertised reasonable self-help things such as memory aids and confidence building methods.

How many customers will there be for the 'Miracle Power Pen' (only £20) or a piece of 'genuine vibrating Stonehenge Stone in pouch' (only £15). Each Power Pen 'is inscribed with the owner's name, then held in a psychic circle until charged with mystical forces.' Despite both its name and accompanying illustration suggesting Stonehenge, nowhere in the advert for the Stonehenge Stone does it actually say it has anything to do with Stonehenge. They claim 'While dowsing over ancient sites, gifted adepts of the MYSTIC CIRCLE unearthed the most powerful mystical stone ever found. To enable others to benefit and to fund future expeditions, a limited number of fragments will be available.'

Two companies (Marie-Simone and Charmwood) both operating from the same address seem to have a very low regard for their customers. In an advert for the 'Problem Solver' Marie-Simone offers an unspecified something which she guarantees will solve all your problems, or your money back. Elsewhere in an advert for 'FREE birthstones' she says 'Everyone wants health, happiness, love, wealth and good fortune. No-one can guarantee such things.'

One of Charmwood's adverts is for 'Patsy the lucky Cornish Piskey', a small figure on a chain. It might purely be coincidence or perhaps they could not be bothered to write a new story but both the adverts for the 'Problem Solver' and the Cornish Piskey tell a similar misery-to-riches story even using similar phrases. Both describe how the seller's life was a wreck with everything going wrong, at the lowest point they discovered the Method/obtained the Piskey. Then all went well so now they want to help others by offering copies of their Method/Piskey for £10. They guarantee it will work or your money is refunded.

A slightly unpleasant side to these adverts is their claim of being able to give you power to make others do what you want them to do. A book of Atlantean secrets promises readers sexual domination over others, complete control over members of the opposite sex and even the ability to influence the weather and world events.

To sum up I would say its well worth having a look at the magazine just to read the adverts.

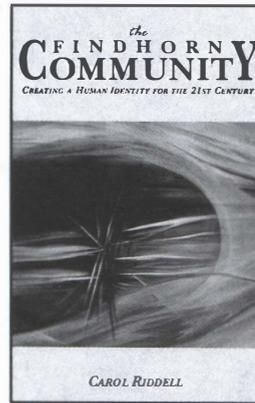
—Bill Penny

Communing with the Findhorn Angel

Carol Riddell, *The Findhorn Community: Creating a Human Identity for the 21st Century* (Findhorn Press, 286pp., pbk, £8.95)

Let's try a word association test: I'll say a word and you have to say the first thing that comes to mind. Here we go: 'Findhorn'. Hands up who said 'giant vegetables'?

Findhorn, in case you didn't know, is a long-established 'New Age' community in the North-East of Scotland, near Forres. As far as one can see from the picture painted by Carol Riddell's book, Findhorn's residents feel quite misrep-



resented by the 'giant vegetables' association; they see themselves not as canny gardeners, but as the pilots, and cargo, of the Ark of the New Millennium.

The Findhorn Community has its origins in the early 1960's, when Peter and Eileen Caddy made their home in a tiny caravan park at Findhorn Bay. Eileen had been receiving an inner voice for a number of years, and with the addition of Dorothy Maclean as Peter's secretary, who began to make contact with Nature Energies she called 'devas', the garden became the focus of the little community, and strange things began to happen. The extraordinary success of growing huge vegetables in the poor soil attracted a lot of publicity, and many guests. The community became a charitable trust in 1968, and following the arrival of 'guru' David Spangler, and a host of others, the focus shifted 'from plants to people'. There were, and are, channelled messages galore, and the community has expanded remarkably.

From the description of the Findhorn Community in this book, one might obtain the impression that it is a smug, self-satisfied group of individuals who are insecure about their place in the late 20th Century society the rest of us have to put up with, and consider themselves to be infinitely 'superior'. I hope that this is not the case. In a sense, self-congratulation is inevitable, if one considers oneself to be part of a community which is 'an ongoing, practical, working example of how a transformation can occur in relatively ordinary individuals within a short period of time'.

Relatively ordinary individuals? Let us look at the process by which a Relatively Ordinary Individual may join the community. It goes something like this: first, you must be prepared to 'go through the experiences which the 'Angel of Findhorn' will provide, to strip away the egocentric identity and begin to replace it with a 'God-centred one'. After an 'Experience' week, there is a 'Departmental Guest' week, and then, following a successful 'attunement' with the 'focaliser' of the 'Living in Community Guest Programme (LCG)', you join the LCG for three months. Following another attunement, you proceed, if acceptable to the 'Orientation Focalisers', to the 'Orientation Programme' for another three months. The next step is to become a 'Student Member', and you may then, after eighteen months (and two more interviews) be accepted as a member of the community. It would be easier to get a job as an astronaut.

This is a comprehensive, enjoyable and well-written book about the Community. Unexpectedly, in amongst the nature-spirits and channelling, the author makes some unfavourable comments about 'psychic glamour', and appears to view the popular 'New Age' movement as something quite different to what goes on at Findhorn. I find the distinction hard to see, but don't listen to me. Be skeptical: read the book for yourself and make up your own mind about Findhorn.

—Peter Piper



Letters

Gospel truth

While I agree completely with the first and last sentences in the letter from Stuart Campbell (*The Skeptic*, 5.6), there is much in between which calls for comment.

While the 'Temptation Stories' in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels certainly represent Jesus as abjuring certain sorts of self-promotional miracles, or 'signs' or 'mighty acts' which on any view (including that of the writers) demonstrate his supernatural power and suspension of the usual 'laws of nature'.

To state, as Mr Campbell does, that Jesus 'may have believed that ... he had supernatural powers, but he dared not use them' does total violence to the text of the Gospels and the views of their authors.

It is often suggested that the Gospel writers are generally accurate reporters of historical events, but lacking in understanding of what they witnessed, so that we can offer more modern, acceptable and 'scientific' explanations of those events. I consider this approach totally misconceived, since it is most improbable that the alleged events happened at all. The Gospel stories need to be seen as myths and fables, not pre-scientific history. Thus it needs no 'careful research' to show that 'the Gospel accounts of miracles are either mistaken or contrived'.

Daniel O'Hara
London

An aerial view

Terrific article by Martin Hempstead on crop circles ('The Summer of '91', *The Skeptic*, 5.6). He's certainly right that 'rarely do the media examine issues like this thoughtfully'. Early in 1991 I sent *New Scientist* an item on the wartime aircrew poll (see Letters, *The Skeptic*, 5.2) of no crop circle sightings by 10,000 of fly-boys

during six years of war. Eight months later a letter querying the fate of my item produced a reply suggesting that they preferred theories to facts!

Two more bits of evidence against the 'natural phenomenon' idea: First, our Victorian forbears spent decades tramping Britain, enthusiastically nosing out unusual phenomena, about which they wrote at great length. So where is the Victorian literature (or even mention) on crop circles? Second, soon after the war, the 'flying saucer' craze sent hordes of people, worldwide, hunting down evidence that 'flying saucers have landed'. Crop circles, being saucer-shaped and sized, would have really hit the headlines. But it was a couple of decades later that they were apparently first noticed.

Last year, Dr Meaden's claims that megalithic circles were copied from crop circles, and so the latter was indeed a common natural occurrence, led to a weird theory amongst amateur archaeologists to account for no one seeing them. Either they were so common that people didn't notice them, or 'no one was looking for them', so they weren't seen. Presumably, this must also mean that because Columbus wasn't actually looking for the Americas (he was aiming at Asia), he didn't notice them.

A final, sad, note. The *Observer Magazine's* last issue of 1991 contained a 'Mastermind' competition of 26 ten-question sections, each on subjects ranging from Fashion to Golf. Science, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

John Clarke
Uxbridge

Stand up and be counted

May I take this opportunity to congratulate you on a magazine which is invariably both entertaining

and informative. It is with great frustration that I witness the resurgence of belief in the supernatural; so much of humanity's time and resources have already been wasted on these things, that for us to embrace once more these beliefs is a tragedy of cosmic proportions.

It is heartening to see *The Skeptic* rising to the challenge and taking a higher profile in our society. Perhaps when more people realise that they are not in the minority, stand up, and declare themselves to be skeptics, we may finally dispense with these outdated and dangerous ideas.

Ian Harris
Chester-le-Street

TV failure

Most of your readers will have seen the TV series *James Randi: Psychic Investigator*. And most of those who did will have welcomed it, while perhaps wishing that the production values had been a bit higher. The series attracted some attention from the media and from people in general. But I can't help feeling, after having read the reviews and listened to various comments, that it ultimately failed to get its point across.

There seems to be a widespread tendency to see the whole venture as nothing but an expression of James Randi's personal prejudices. In other words, here is this curmudgeonly, slightly abrasive character, who clearly doesn't have much truck with all this psychic nonsense, and who is determined to present *his* slant on the subject. Of course he's perfectly entitled to his view, and can sometimes put it across in an amusing way; but equally, many other people believe passionately that psychic phenomena are real, and there's no reason why they should change their minds simply because this man Randi disagrees with them.

Coupled with this attitude, I think, is a tendency to see Randi as representing one of two extremes. Randi's thoroughgoing skepticism is perceived as being about as unpalatable as other people's unquestioning gullibility. The 'sane' view, it is suggested, lies somewhere in between; perhaps 95% of all psychic claims are baseless, but somewhere, surely, there must be a hard core of genuine cases which cannot be dismissed so easily.

Both of these attitudes represent obstacles to understanding which, as skeptics, we should want to see overcome. The fact that people can still think in this way after having seen Randi's TV series is something that should be borne in mind when the sequel is planned.

Andrew Phillips
Peterborough

Fair play

Two letters in issue 5.6 of *The Skeptic* have prompted me to air my views. The first concerns Jim Kelly and his use of the word 'McCarthyism' in his condemnation of alerting educational welfare officers to the 'strong fundamentalist leanings' of a senior social worker. Surely alerting this social worker's superiors to his views is essential. Social work, by definition, requires that other people's views and beliefs be taken into account, weight being given to the importance which the clients attribute to their beliefs. As I understand it, educational welfare officers were 'alerted' to the 'strong fundamentalist leanings' of the social worker. No one demanded his removal from a position of authority, or any other position. How would fundamentalists have approached the 'problem' of a pagan in such a position?

The question of those with strong beliefs of any description occupying positions from which sociological judgements are made, and acted upon, about other members of society, is one where openness should be paramount, especially where those being judged are relatively powerless. Thank you, Jean Dorricott's husband, for being more socially responsible

than I think I could be, and why should Jim Kelly want to suppress information enabling others to make more informed decisions.

The second letter concerned the James Randi Defence Fund, the complaint being that similar space should be given to Geller's Defence Fund, and the desire to see 'fair play'. The subject of equal space is presumably very simple. Either *The Skeptic* commissioned the article and could (some clearly say 'should') commission an article by Geller or a supporter, or *The Skeptic* publishes submissions and Geller hasn't submitted one. I fail to see why you should commission a reply to a submission which is printed. That's Geller's problem, not yours.

I subscribe to *The Skeptic*. I don't subscribe to *The Possibly Skeptic*, or *The Probably Skeptic*, or the *Mail on Sunday*. Why do correspondents object to the transmission of information about skeptics who, as James Randi puts it, are 'in trouble' and 'need help' for broadcasting and heightening awareness that activities which are claimed to have supernatural forces driving them *can* be emulated in more mundane ways, and that it is therefore possible that some people *could* be cheating. Geller doesn't appear to be in trouble; Randi is. Surely 'fair play' demands that every effort be made to bring Randi's resources into line with Geller's?

R W Hamilton
Portsmouth

Let's talk about sex

Following my article 'Why don't creationists talk about sex?' (*The Skeptic*, 5.5), I have received a courteous letter from Colin Wood, pointing out that creationists *do* talk about sex. As evidence Mr Wood sends a 21,000-word pamphlet of his own, in which he argues that God never gave permission for Adam and Eve to practise sexual intercourse, and that the sin of anticipating permission is the cause of the present world population explosion.

My mistake. Of course creationists talk about sex, and I apologise for my careless choice of words. The question I intended to

discuss was not 'Why don't creationists talk about sex?', but 'Why don't people who seek to disprove the theory of natural selection by citing counter-examples offer the origin of sex as a counter example.'

Donald Room
London

Skeptic virus attack

When I saw the Mandelbrot set shaped crop circle (*The Skeptic*, 5.5) it was like a fairy whispering the solution in my ear. *The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy* is right. The world is a giant computer with crop fields as monitor screens and aliens running their computer graphics demos. Everything would be alright and we would be in harmony with the cosmic network, if there were not this bloody *Skeptic Virus* playing his dirty tricks.

Gerald Huber
Germany

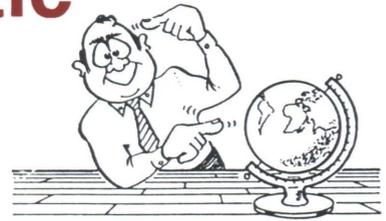
A question of intelligence

I was saddened by Wendy Grossman's comment on IQ tests (*The Skeptic*, 5.6). A commitment to rational thinking in one area—paranormal claims—is, it seems, no guarantee against irrationalism in others. The scientific validity of IQ tests is established beyond all reasonable doubt. This does not mean that anyone thinks they are as precise as physical measurements like height, weight, etc., nor does anyone believe that there aren't many factors other than IQ which influence a person's success, be it academic, financial or in life generally, but they are by far the best and most objective indicator we have: certainly far better than the subjective judgements of teachers, etc.

Why was Wendy once a member of MENSA, the high-IQ society (of which I am a member), entry to which is gained by passing an IQ test, if she fundamentally disbelieves in the criteria for membership?

Ray Ward
London

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