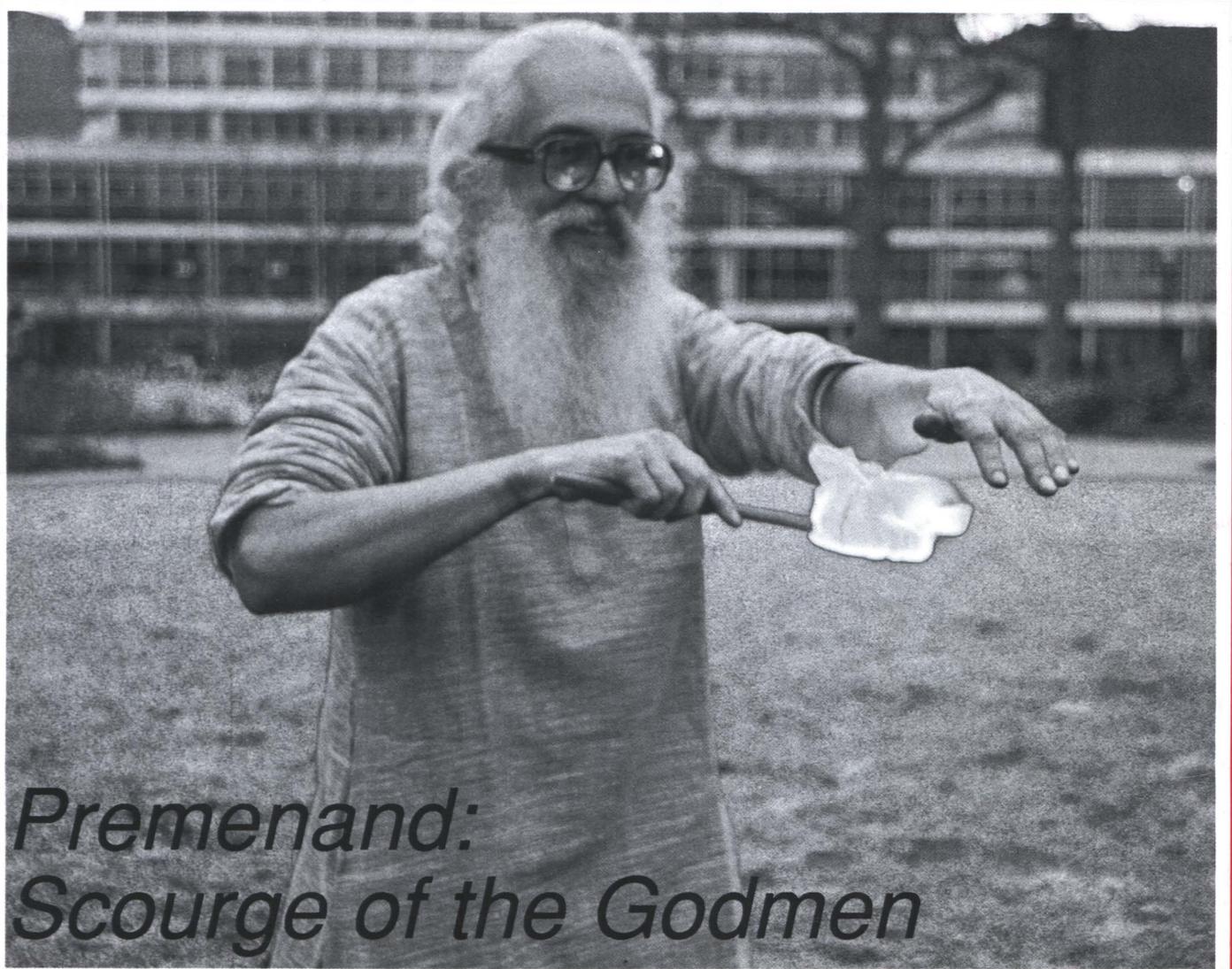


Volume 6 Number 3
May/June 1992

The Skeptic



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Scourge of the Godmen*

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Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

Didn't they do well?

I felt a great disappointment, in the recent general election, that the Natural Law Party (NLP) did so badly. Any party which holds that 'politics is a pious profession', claims that it will 'bring fulfillment to the goals of all parties' and publishes a pre-election advertisement in all national newspapers consisting mainly of partial differential equations and Sanskrit characters deserves to be treated with the respect normally reserved for the Monster Raving Loony Party. Mind you, here in Greater Manchester we are obviously more enlightened than in the rest of the country as, in Davyhulme, the NLP polled their highest score in the land—an amazing 665 votes (compared with the winning candidate's—Winston Churchill's—24 217 votes). In my view it is very uncharitable and churlish for the Manchester *Messenger* on 17 April to claim that this large vote was due to a confusion on the part of voters who failed to distinguish between the Labour candidate, Barry Brotherton and the NLP man Terence Brotheridge who were represented on the ballot paper as 1 BRO and 2 BRO respectively (or was it the other way round). For anyone who managed to miss the poster and newspaper campaign, the NLP was rapidly formed in the run-up to the general election by no less a personage than the Mahirishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation (TM) fame who has, more recently, become leader of the World Government of the Age of Enlightenment. In an interview published in the Newcastle-on-Tyne *Evening Chronicle* before the election, party spokesman David Cook claimed that Transcendental Meditation gave their would-be MPs an unfair advantage. Given the NLP's awesome results in the election where they came last (typically with about 200 votes) in (I believe) every constituency—and in one case polled fewer votes than the single issue (single person?) Push for Mars Party—this is possibly the kind of unfair advantage that most of us can do without.

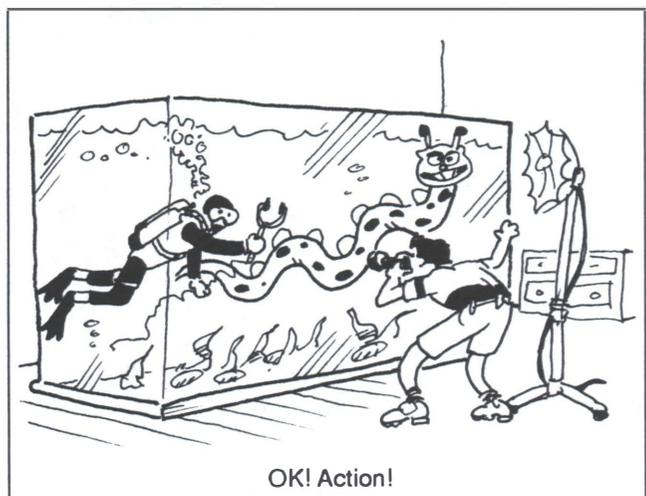
Future President?

I hope that Da Vid—pronounced 'Dah Veed', the non-practicing holistic physician who has proclaimed himself the New Age presidential candidate in the United States is having talks with the NLP to get some pointers on how to run a successful political campaign. According to the *Ithaca Journal* on 27 May, Da Vid—who was born in New York 44 years ago as Dolph Ornstein—claims to have earned a medical degree in Scotland before returning to the US. When asked his age, however, he says, 'I don't think of myself in terms of age, because I don't believe in time' (we all get a bit like that after 40) and is equally non-committal on his origins claiming that, as the human body is made of atoms and electrons that come from the sun, he too comes from the sun (but now lives in the slightly cooler climate of Southern California). The policies of his Human Ecology

Party seem less all encompassing than those of the Natural Law Party but includes the setting up of a 24-hour video network to 'inspire, delight, heal and enlighten' (sounds just like B-Sky-B). Also in Da Vid's six-point plan is the transformation of Alcatraz Island—the former hard-core, federal prison in San Francisco Bay—into a solar temple with botanical gardens, a health spa, an international restaurant, a conference centre and dance and movement space housed in pyramids and geodesic domes. There is no truth whatever in the rumour that, at astrologically propitious moments, Da Vid has received packets of jelly beans from an influential, anonymous supporter.

No Peking at Nessie

In the last issue, Stuart Campbell suggested that the Loch Ness monster may have been the invention of journalist and water bailiff, Alex Campbell (no relation). To readers of the state-controlled *Peking Evening News* in China however, the legendary monster recently became reality when the newspaper reported that a female monster, 60 ft long and weighing 80 tonnes, had been caught by an international team of researchers. And where, I hear you asking, could the *Peking Evening News* have possibly obtained its information? According to an article in *The Times* on 18 March: 'a Mr Wang told *The Times* the information came from a British paper, and the organ in question was *Sunday Sport*'. Apparently, the Chinese do not have 'newspapers' exactly like the *Sunday Sport* and although they wondered why no other news agency had reported this remarkable catch they were persuaded that the *Sport* was the only paper that had managed to break a news blackout imposed by the research team. It has to be said that the offending article, published in the *Sunday Sport* on 26 January, included a front page photograph of a diver clutching Nessie's neck that appeared significantly more authentic than the photo of '58-inch Tiffany Towers' that adorned the same page.



Tim Pearce

They seek EM here

Following hot on the heels of the fabric whose colour changes with your body temperature (which does work), expect to see in your shops soon the fabric that is claimed to protect the wearer from stress (which certainly doesn't work). Alright, this is a fairly dogmatic statement for an open-minded skeptic to make and I suppose, strictly, that the fabric in question could work by tuning the wearer's vibrations to the cosmic frequency. But the mechanism claimed by the designer to give protection from stress is a masterpiece of pseudoscience. According to the Femail section of the *Daily Mail* on 15 April, dress designer Azzedine Alaia has produced a series of outfits which use a fabric known as Relax. Relax differs from most fibres in that it is electrically conducting, thereby 'shielding the wearer from damaging electromagnetic waves that are almost everywhere in our environment'. Now leaving aside the issue of whether electromagnetic waves cause stress (at best unproven), the body would only be totally shielded from electromagnetic radiation if the dress entirely covered the body from head to toe and if the wearer was permanently connected to a good electrical earth via a stout length of copper wire. I suspect that dedicated followers of fashion, paying out in the region of £1000 for an outfit, might find these necessities a little restrictive.

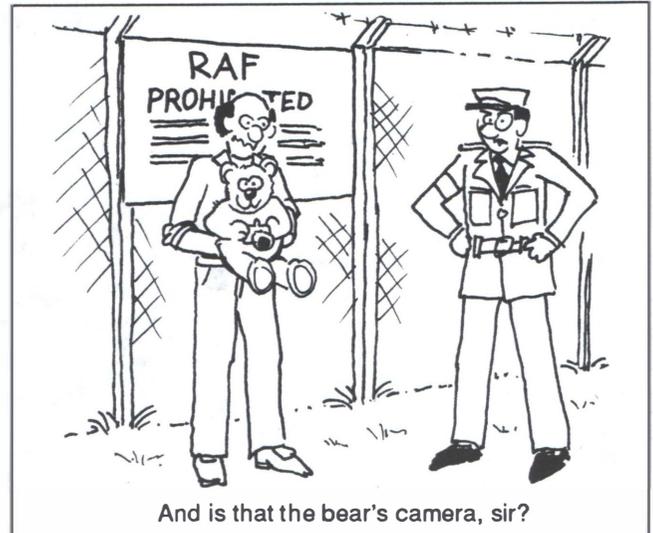
It's a gas

Readers of articles published in a number of newspapers on 23 and 24 April concerning a mysterious UFO sighted by the pilot of a passenger aircraft should read Dave Mitchell's article (page 8) on do-it-yourself UFOs with special interest. On 23 April the *Sun* told readers of a 'black lozenge-shaped object' whose existence became public in a Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) report published at the beginning of April which had buzzed an aircraft on its way to Gatwick airport. The incident, which occurred almost a year ago, was reported by the pilot who stated that the object had passed within 100 yards of his Britannia Airways Boeing 737 and CAA investigators confirmed that it had been seen on radar but that it remained unidentified. After publication of the *Sun* article, the CAA and Britannia Airways were inundated by calls from journalists who were seeking a story about invasions of little green men from outer space. But the *Independent* on 24 April struck a more sensible note when it reported a Britannia spokesman as saying '... there was even a suggestion, which was ruled out, that this might have been a black bin liner caught in a freak air current'. No-one apparently considered the possibility that it might have been a gas-filled bin liner.

Trance would be a fine thing

It is, of course, always reassuring to know that even when the country is in political turmoil at general election time the country's security services are carrying out their duties with characteristic intelligence and efficiency. Their vigilance has recently prevented a severe security leak being perpetrated by a ruthless, highly-trained, undercover teddy bear called Biggles. According to a number of newspapers on

4 March, Biggles and his owner, stage hypnotist Ian Armstrong (aka Mr Fantasy) have been banned from performing at RAF bases because of security concerns about what airmen may say under hypnosis. According to the *Guardian*, the RAF stressed that it had nothing specifically against Biggles and his boss but rather: 'this is a blanket ban on hypnotists. We just haven't got the time to investigate the past of every performer'.



Tim Pearce

Crop circle competition

Rupert Sheldrake, of morphic resonance fame, has recently introduced a competition that should certainly add a new dimension to this year's crop circle season (due to start soon in a field near you). In an article in the *Guardian* on 8 May he suggests that the only way that all or most circles to date could be explained away as the work of hoaxers is via a conspiracy theory which he finds unlikely. This to me always seems a strange argument, human character being what it is. Some readers will no doubt remember the case a few years ago when a jar of baby food in a shop was contaminated with ground glass by a disgruntled former employee of the manufacturers. However, before the person responsible was apprehended, ground glass turned up in baby food in shops in a number of towns. Using the logic of crop circle enthusiasts, one would claim, presumably, that as it was not possible that all the incidents were the work of one man, there must either have been a conspiracy (unlikely) or something paranormal was at work. But, of course, the real answer is much more prosaic: a number of people in different parts of the country felt so inspired by the idea of putting glass in baby food that they too decided to have a go. Surely in the case of a phenomenon such as crop circles which poses no threat to anyone's health and is simply fun, this copycat hypothesis should at least be considered? In any case, Sheldrake (or the *Guardian*), in his wisdom, is offering a £3 000 prize for the best hoaxed crop circle of the coming season in an attempt to find out exactly what the hoaxers can do. For further details send a SAE to Guardian Crop Circle Competition, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3ER. My money is on the Wessex Skeptics.

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

Scourge of the Godmen

Lewis Jones

One extraordinary man's fight against deception

ON THE AFTERNOON of the last Saturday in March, London's Conway Hall was packed with 350 people who had come to see miracles. They were not disappointed.

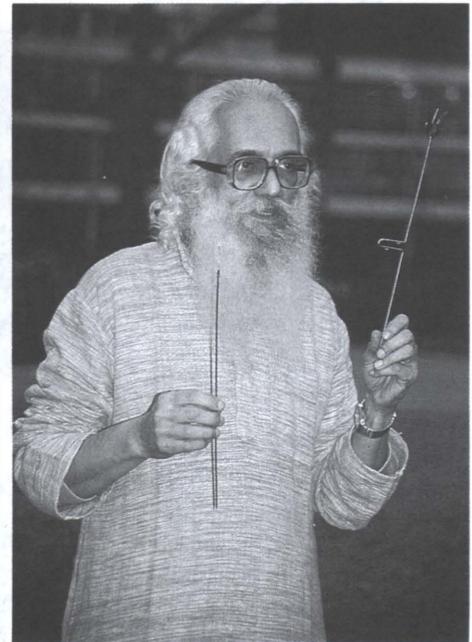
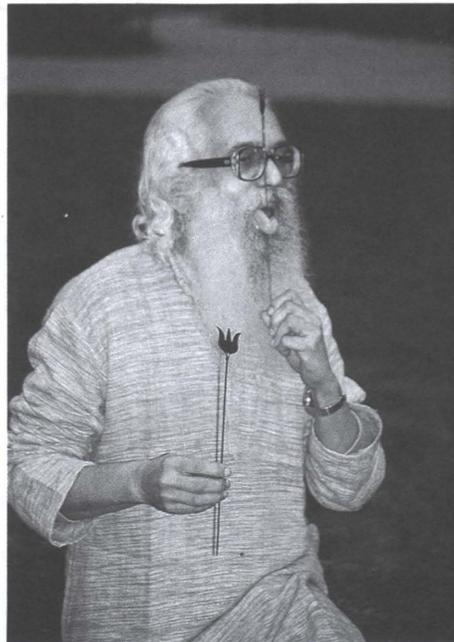
The performer was everyone's idea of a bearded Indian guru. He ate glass, ran flaming torches along his bare arms, handled lighted camphor freely and put it into his mouth, hung a weight on a hook stitched through his skin, shoved a nasty-looking spike through his tongue without harm or any bleeding, caused pieces of paper to burst into flame by the power of thought, changed a single biscuit into a pile of dozens of them, produced enough holy ash out of thin air to be able to deliver some to a great many people in the audience, showed spoons that bent and broke at a touch, and, of course, turned water into wine.

And that would have been enough for any self-respecting guru. But this was no guru. This was Premanand, whose mission was not only to demonstrate miracles, but to explain how they were all done. And this he did, to the further amazement and amusement of his audience.

There was a time in his youth when Premanand was highly impressed by the miraculous feats of those of his fellow-countrymen that he calls 'godmen'. He was willing to learn from them, and he spent a great deal of time and effort trying to acquire their magical powers, but doubts began to creep in. The yogis were forever telling other people how to achieve good health (not to mention immortality). So how come a number of the godmen had cancer, rheumatic complaints, liver complaints, tuberculosis, asthma, diabetes...?

One yogi's reply to Premanand's query was 'I could achieve health, but I am consciously atoning for sins in a past life.' But it was soon obvious that a critical frame of mind was not welcome. The yogi Sivananda's response to Premanand's probing was 'No questioning! Get out!'

The young Premanand's skepticism took a practical turn. One godman was regularly brought out and put on show while apparently possessed. Premanand wondered if gods



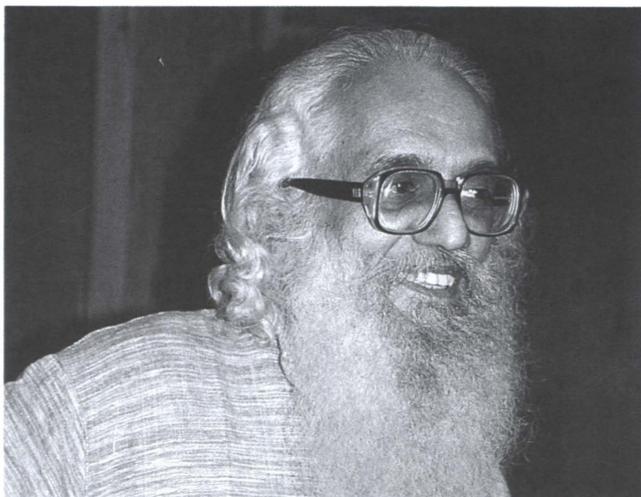
Clare Martin

ever went to the toilet. So he laced the godman's bottles of country liquor with epsom salts. In mid-performance the mystic called out for a wooden barrel. He sat on the barrel and evacuated into it while his head and body continued to sway. A disappointingly human response. It was soon clear that every one of the godmen's miracles was merely a trick, and since 1976 Premanand has been mercilessly exposing their methods.

To be allowed to infiltrate the inner circles of the godmen has sometimes required large expenditures of money, and Premanand himself is a man of modest means. He had to find 2 million rupees (about £65,000) in order to worm his way close to his *bête noire*—the highly influential Satya Sai Baba. To do this, he had to give away 90 acres of fertile land.

Premanand became particularly incensed that poor people were being tricked into handing over sizeable amounts of their hard-earned money for worthless remedies and advice. 'Religion,' he says, 'is a means to exploit people who believe in god.' Even more ominously, Sai Baba 'has followers amongst bureaucracy, law enforcement departments, revenue departments, the judiciary, the state and central ministry, and among the elite and the influential'.

Clare Martin



Premanand toured the villages and small towns of India in a jeep, and deliberately set off the car's alarm when he stopped at the roadside. He treated the crowd of onlookers to a miracle show in the manner of a godman, and then set about exposing the trickery. 'If the claims of the godmen are false,' he says, 'then godmen should be prosecuted for cheating the credulous public in order to exploit them. Or, if they are true, the education department should stop teaching the theory of conservation of energy and relativity to the students'. Right now, Premanand is gunning for Sai Baba in particular, and is proceeding with legal action against him.

Premanand has given over 7 000 lectures, 'educating our people in the scientific temper'. And by now he has met about 20 million people, and visited 27 countries. 25 days of every month are spent travelling, and he has written 30 books in Malayalam and 6 in English.

In 1989, he was awarded a fellowship by the Director of the Communication Department of India's Council for Science and Technology. His brief is to complete a video library of 1200 miracles, to write books, and to train 1000 people to tour 50,000 villages. 'They will explain the science and tricks behind miracles, superstitions, and blind beliefs, so that exploitations in the name of gods and miracles are stopped.' He is now close to fulfilling a dream of 40 years: the building of a research centre, with a library where explanations of religion, magic, science, miracles and psychic phenomena are available to everyone. This is to be on a 15-acre site in Kerala, at a spot that the poet Rabindranath Tagore named 'Shrishaila'.

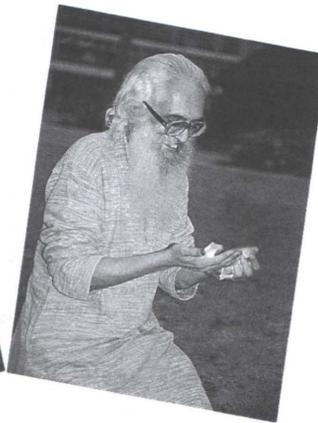
Premanand has not achieved all this without attempts on his life. He has been physically attacked by the godmen's followers. He has been hospitalised, his car has been tampered with so that it overturned at speed, and a lorry has tried to run him down. None of these things has dampened the energy of this remarkable 62 year-old: he is Convener of the Indian Rationalist Association, and since 1976 he has been Convener of the Indian Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

And in 1988 he began publishing *Indian Skeptic*, and it still comes out every month (see end of article for subscription details). It's a magazine that goes in for plain speaking. Premanand led the August 1991 issue with an article strongly critical of Uri Geller. And to make sure the message reached

its target, he sent a copy of the magazine to Geller, by registered post.

Each issue includes the methods for performing a number of miracles—and there are 1200 of these to get through. Talking of miracles—everyone who was in that Conway Hall audience can now perform the feats that at first seemed impossible. And so could you. If you want to run a flame along your arm, just keep the flame moving: you'd need to apply it to one spot continuously for about 3 seconds before you got burnt. A piece of glass just needs chewing into very small pieces before you swallow it: after that, it will pass through you without harm. But make sure you use glass from a clear light bulb: opaque bulbs contain toxic mercury.

Create psychic fire with ingredients from your local chemist's shop. Beforehand, secretly add a little potassium permanganate to some pieces of paper on a plate. In performance, pour on a little glycerine (call it melted butter), and wave your hands impressively. Within seconds, the paper will smoke and then burst into flame. For holy ash, begin with a pellet of anything that will crumble into a powder. (In India, cow-dung works wonders.) Hide the little pellet between your fingers, and when you're ready for the miracle, start crumbling. The supply of 'ash' can seem endless.



Clare Martin

Some of the other items require simple gimmicked apparatus. The spike doesn't really go through the tongue: there's a little U-bend in the middle that fits around the tongue. But it looks alarmingly realistic. Premanand left a few sets of the gimmicked spikes with Mike Hutchinson, for sale at £8 a go. If you fancy upsetting squeamish neighbours, give Mike a ring (081 508 2989).

Is there anything else Premanand would like to accomplish in his lifetime? 'Oh yes,' he told me. 'To see a real miracle before I die.'

But I can't convey in print the twinkle in the eye, or the blossoming grin. It was like so many of Premanand's performances. You had to be there.

Lewis Jones is a freelance writer living in London.

An air-mail subscription to *Indian Skeptic* costs 12 US dollars a year (about £7), or 150 US dollars (about £90) for a lifetime subscription. (And if the magazine should ever fold, you would get the whole of your lifetime subscription back again.) Write to *Indian Skeptic*, 10 Chettipalayam Rd, Podanur 641 023 (Tamilnadu), India.

Do-It-Yourself UFOs

Dave Mitchell

A little black (bag) humour on UFOs

GIVE THE AVERAGE sixteen-year-old budding scientist liberal access to common or garden materials lying around the house and garden shed, and there is not much that he or she can not do. For example setting the house on fire, blowing him or herself to very small pieces, or even creating, albeit unintentionally, a UFO.

It all began the day an extremely old gas heater in our kitchen was pensioned off to make way for one of those new shiny heaters which run on castors and bottled gas. I had no designs on the heater, which had already become an antique when it had been converted to run on natural gas ten years earlier. However, the flexible gas pipe by which it was attached to the mains supply was a highly prized commodity. No doubt the Gas Board has long since abandoned this design, and devised something a little more teenager-proof.

What, I hear you ask, has an old gas pipe fitting got to do with UFOs? Well the answer quite plainly is, that this old bit of hose opened up a whole new field of home research, and kept me amused for endless hours. My plan initially was to use my newly-acquired access to a gas supply to build a Bunsen burner. Why did I want a Bunsen burner? Well that is a long story but it involved lots of chemicals, stinks and the occasional very loud bang, so we'll leave it at that. Anyway my Bunsen burner was a tremendous success. Perhaps not terribly elegant, but definitely functional.

Then one fine day shortly afterwards, a lad from a local farm brought in to school some debris that he'd found in a field. Not the charred remains of an alien spaceship, I hasten to add. It looked like an old wireless set wrapped up in a very large condom. In fact it was the remains of a weather balloon. This caused more than a few little light bulbs to go on in my head. Reaching for a chemistry text book, I confirmed that methane is considerably lighter than air. Natural gas is almost pure methane. A few quick calculations on volumes and displacements told me what I needed to know. If you fill a black rubbish bag full of natural gas, it should float.

Home I dashed, quickly disconnected my Bunsen burner from my gas pipe and drained the air out of a rubbish bag. I wasn't in such a hurry that I wanted to risk blowing myself to smithereens with an explosive mixture of gas and air and besides I wanted all the air out to get as much lift as possible. The hosepipe was duly thrust into the bag, and the great experiment had begun. Slowly but surely the bag began to fill. I was a little disappointed at first, as the growing pocket of gas initially showed no inclination to lift itself off the ground. However, just as the bag was getting



Tim Pearce

full, lift off was achieved. It wasn't anything dramatic that necessitated my climbing on a chair to rescue the thing from the ceiling, but it was buoyant. Next, to extract the hose without letting all the gas escape and devise a mechanism for securing the end. The twist tapes that come with freezer bags proved admirably suited to this task. They didn't effect a complete seal, but then again my bag was only pressurised to atmospheric pressure, and wasn't about to go whizzing out of the window making loud raspberry noises.

The first witness to my achievement was my cat. He looked up at the bag gently bobbing against the ceiling. It was only when a sudden draught made the thing lurch animatedly, that he ran for cover.

At *t* minus one minute from launching, I gazed upward at my balloon in a self congratulatory reverie, only to be rudely awakened by the awareness that my dad was due home at any moment and would probably ask a few awkward questions at the very least. He had certainly taken exception to an unsuccessful chemistry experiment of mine which had set the dining room table on fire. It was a moderately good day for a launch. Out in the western-most tip of Wales, a force eight gale is a mild breeze and today it was a relatively calm force three to four breeze.

Manoeuvring the bag out to the launch pad was far from easy. Clearly one could have squeezed it through the door, but only at the expense of lost lift due to escaping gas. The other problem was the wind trying to tear the wretched thing out of my hands. So much so, in fact, that I was obliged to let it go sooner than anticipated, rather than see all the gas squeezed out of it. I did not experience the jubilation that no doubt the Mongolfier brothers must have felt when they first escaped the clutches of gravity. The bag lurched horizontally, bounced off the floor due to a rather strong eddy, got sucked up the rear wall of the house and almost cleared the roof, before a strong wind shear brought the thing hurtling downward, necessitating evasive action on my part.

I feared my creation might suffer the ignominious fate of being impaled on the rose bushes, but a helpful gust lifted it clear of the turbulence, and it began its majestic ascension into the heavens. I was surprised at how quickly the thing

began to diminish in the distance. Clearly the wind velocity above ground level was a good deal greater. Due to all the buffeting and loss of gas, the balloon made more horizontal distance than vertical, but I was well satisfied. Time for a well-earned cup of tea. Little did I realise that I'd spawned a monster.

The tea was put on hold, as I noticed a small congregation gathering out in the street. This was mainly made up of small children but a few adults were standing there squinting into the distance, my dad amongst them. From the direction in which they were all looking, it was pretty obvious what had gripped their attention. Time to initiate the 'I know nothing about this strange occurrence' plan. Under the guise of putting out the cat, who prior to this, had always had a great affinity for rubbish bags, I strolled over to the gathering and made a few nonchalant enquiries. 'It's an unidentified flying object' someone said. 'Mmm, could be a weather balloon' my dad murmured. 'Not usually black though.' I was tempted to say 'Usually condom coloured aren't they?' but I thought better of it. (It was to be a few years before I encountered condoms the colour of rubbish bags.) The congregation mused at great length as to what the object might be. The temptation to snigger had never been greater. As the UFO gradually became more indistinct, the congregation lost interest, and dispersed, leaving only my father and me gazing heavenward at a bin bag full of gas. My father, a quiet and insouciant man at the best of times, seemed particularly perplexed by this object, and proceeded to dash indoors for the binocs. He peered at it, uttering the occasional 'mmmm'. The temptation to laugh was great, but I knew he'd appreciate the joke, so I spilled the beans. At first he was a little sceptical, then mildly excited, a feat for him, and then he said quite casually, 'OK, show me.'

The second launch enjoyed greater success. As dusk approached so the wind dropped, and I shifted the launch site to the bottom of the garden, away from the turbulence generated by the house. The second balloon, more buoyant than the first, lifted off beautifully, and as the setting sun broke through the clouds, the black plastic bag reflected the sun's brilliance, a floating orb of ebony and gold.

Over the next week or so, launches became regular occurrences. The only limiting factors were the supply of bin bags and the weather. Several launches were noteworthy. Black polythene is not the best radar reflector in the world, and I had toyed with the idea of attaching a strip of aluminium baking foil to one balloon, just to see if I could provoke an interception from the local RAF base seven miles distant. The prevailing wind invariably took my balloons quite close to the base. My fear of possible reprisals from fighter bombers suppressed these plans, but I did manage to provoke a response from an RAF Rescue helicopter. These aircraft routinely patrolled the coast, and shortly after one of my non-aluminised launches, the helicopter pilot spotted it, and took a detour to inspect it. I promptly took cover in mission control (the garden shed).

Greatest public acclaim was probably created by a launch one Sunday lunchtime. It was done under difficult conditions, with a very strong breeze blowing. The balloon struggled to clear the roof and then travelled almost horizontally

at a height of a couple of hundred feet, straight over the village. My dad at this time was having a pre-prandial drinkie at his local pub. Somebody sitting by the window shouted out that there was a UFO heading straight for the pub. Nobody felt the urge to grab their coats and run and who can blame them. If aliens ever do arrive, what better venue for first contact than the pub? A group of ten or so late lunchers including my old man peered out of the window, to see a spherical black object pass overhead. Expostulations and oaths were uttered. Opinions were divided. Some said it was a weather balloon, others a space ship, some hedged their bets and said it was a UFO. One heretic, who clearly hadn't had enough to drink, suggested it was a bin bag. This theory was shot down in flames on the grounds that bin bags don't float. There was much heated debate by all except my dad, who was struggling to contain his laughter.

My *pièce de résistance* in the gas bag stakes occurred shortly after this event, on the day my sister had her new bed delivered. The mattress arrived in the biggest clear polythene bag I have ever seen. I helped her unpack it, carefully preserving the bag from the scissors she had originally intended to use. A few minor holes were quickly repaired with sticky tape and she (the bag) was air-worthy. Filling it took some time but the final result was worth it. A very large transparent bubble. The heavy polythene did not make for great buoyancy but the balloon was buoyant enough and ready to go. I don't know if anybody witnessed my finest work. I was astonished at the result. As soon as the balloon got more than a hundred or so feet off the ground it became invisible. Invisible, that is, until the wind gave the bag a little spin causing the sun to be reflected off it. Had I not launched it with my own hands, I would have sworn that on a clear sunny day, I had seen a mysterious flashing light appear in the sky, which then disappeared, only to reappear some distance off. Truly awesome!

The timing of my little experiment was particularly good, as at the time, the area was in the grip of UFO fever. A whole series of sightings and encounters were being reported. A book on the subject (*The Dyfed Enigma* (Faber and Faber) by R. J. Pugh and F. W. Holiday) details the events which occurred during this period. Reading through the book, the possibility exists that one of my balloons may



Tim Pearce

have been the offending culprit. One balloon certainly got a mention in an article in the local newspaper. This described several recent UFO sightings, including one by a local school teacher (who happened to live near me), who 'witnessed a small black object rise slowly into the air'. This article caused myself and my partner in crime (my father) considerable mirth. It there is one thing in the world better than pulling off an intentional hoax, it's pulling off an unintentional hoax. We decided that notoriety of this kind was not what we sought, and perhaps it was time to keep our rubbish bags firmly on the ground. Besides, the gas bill had just arrived.

These events do raise several questions though, such as how many budding Einsteins across the country are up to similar tricks? Perhaps when confronted with a UFO, rather than ask if it is a bird or a plane or an extra-terrestrial space vehicle, capable of conveying intelligent life forms light years across the vast emptiness of space, one should simply enquire if it is a bin bag full of gas?

Dave Mitchell is a research scientist, now resident in Australia and considers himself fortunate, in view of his early scientific experiments, to retain still his eyesight and all ten fingers!

It should be noted that *The Skeptic* in no way endorses the releasing of large bags of inflammable gas into the skies of Wales or anywhere else.

Crossword Solution

1	d	e	2	a	3	m	p		4	o	5	d	6	i	7	t	8	e	s
	u		a		i					i		m		n					c
9	d	o	s	a	g	e			10	a	s	e	p	t	a	t	e		
	s		h		r					t		u		h					p
			11	d	i	s	a	p	12	p	o	i	n	t	m	e	n	t	
				e		i				o		n		e		a			i
13	p	h	r	e	n	o	l	o	g	y			14	e	p	i	c		
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16	u	r	g	e			17	a	c	c	i	d	e	n	t	a	l		
	m		a			20	s		r		s		l		i				
21	p	a	r	a	p	s	y	c	h	o	l	o	g	y					
	n		o		a		s						b		h			22	c
23	e	n	t	i	r	e	t	y				24	m	e	n	t	a	l	
	s		t		e		a						n		e				u
25	s	t	e	a	d	i	l	y				26	s	t	a	n	c	e	

Congratulations to J Gilder, of Cheadle, who is the winner of last issue's Skepticus crossword competition. A copy of Martin Gardner's book *The New Age: Notes of a Fringe Watcher* (published by Prometheus Books), has been converted to ectoplasm and will ooze from a medium near the winner as soon as we can arrange it.

Proving the Paranormal

Sean O'Brien

Some people claim to be in regular contact with highly intelligent aliens or with other beings from advanced civilisations. These can be in person (for example UFO contactees) or mentally (such as mediums or channellers). The information that channellers (as some mediums now seem to prefer to be called) receive can seem impressive.

If they really want to prove they are in contact with advanced beings all they need to do is to get information from them which only creatures more advanced than present day humans would know. By getting information which is just beyond the limits of today's science, we would not have to wait long to discover if the information was correct. The physicist Victor Stenger has thought about this and kindly provided a list of such questions in his recent book (*Physics and Psychics: the Search for a World Beyond the Senses*, Prometheus Books, 1990). I list some of those questions here, so if any readers of *The Skeptic* ever meet someone claiming such contacts they can use them to carry out their own tests. The Higg's boson is thought to exist but has not yet been found, so the first question is:

1. What are the masses of the Higgs bosons and how many types of them are there?

A big topic in modern physics is the attempt to unify the fundamental forces, so:

2. How many fundamental forces are there? Is there a single unifying symmetry group for all the forces and if there is, what is it?

At present quarks and leptons are thought to be fundamental particles, but it is accepted that this might be wrong, so:

3. Are the fundamental objects of the universe particles, strings, membranes or something else?—and if so, what?

It would be useful to know at what rate the universe is expanding, so:

4. What is the precise value of the 'Hubble parameter'?

The behaviour of stars suggests that up to 90% to 99% of the mass of the universe has not yet been detected, this missing mass is the so-called dark-matter.

5. What is the nature of the dark matter of the universe?

In the near future, particle accelerators will confirm whether any answers to the following question are correct.

6. What are the masses of the neutrinos, top quark, and (if they exist) 'supersymmetric particles'.

So far three generations of quarks and leptons are known, so:

7. How many generations of quarks and leptons exist?

Other questions are:

8. How many dimensions has the universe?

9. Is the universe 'open' or 'closed'?

10. What is the mean lifetime of the proton?

Come on paranormalists, give us some answers! □

Ask Olga

Olga Destinée, astral agony aunt, answers your psychic questions

As we reported in the last issue, our regular psychic problem expert, Professor Mesmo, has responded to the call of Spring and is currently on his well-deserved, annual six-month academic retreat in the Seychelles. During his absence, we shall be passing his psychic postbag on to that renowned New Age prophetess and part-time Earth Mother, Olga Destinée. Olga is well known in psychic (and crop) circles for her extraordinary empathetic ability, which has been fully tested and documented by the experts at Shepherd's Bush's prestigious Steptoe Research Institute.

It is indeed a pleasure to welcome Olga to the pages of The Skeptic and we hope that readers will be able to resonate with her unique technique of 'Vibrational Problem Analysis'.

Dear Olga,

I'm desperate about my boyfriend's changed attitude to the rest of the Coven. He insulted us all one night by claiming that the sacred bowl of blood was nothing but lukewarm QC Sherry! He also refuses to jump naked over the fire at Beltane celebrations, even if they are in our local wood, and especially if it's windy. At work, he keeps giving knowing nods and winks to the Bank's chief accountant who happens to be our current Lord of Misrule! I think that he is using this as an excuse to drop me. One of the Coven saw him queuing for a Disney film at our local cinema with a girl from Tesco's bacon counter. I've tried to put a spell on him by cutting my toe-nails at midnight and calling out his name 17 plus 7 times over the clippings, but half of them disappear under the settee and I keep forgetting the correct incantation.

When I tried to set fire to the clippings in our souvenir ash tray from Glastonbury Tor I inadvertently spilled lighter fuel over my only copy of *Witch* magazine and accidentally set fire to it. To cap it all, it contained your precious article 'Ten fruity incantations to help you keep your man'. I can't understand how he has changed: at first he was enthusiastic and couldn't wait until the wax melted and the pin-sticking began, but now he yawns and looks at his watch all the time, even when the Goatmaster is getting through to Beelzebub in person! He seems to enjoy *Horizon* and reading back numbers of *Nature* more than the corn dolly weaving we used to do together by candlelight. Now I sleep in our fully upholstered satin-lined coffin alone.

Nigella Blackhat



Donald Room

Olga Destinée replies

I haven't been over 30 years as a paranormal practitioner without knowing what's wrong with him, my girl! And Olga has the very thing to cure him of that nasty outbreak of scepticism—for that's most certainly what it is. This maladjustment of the psyche attacks those who lose their faith through dabbling in trivia and reading rags like *New Scientist*, which are full of lies, more lies and character assassination. The tell tale signs are—does he know all the elements in the Periodic Table? Has he defended evolution over breakfast? Does he leave copies of 'The Laws of Physics' lying around? It seems to me he has adopted a childish attitude to a serious life-style. Involve him more in rituals, give him the golden dagger and the live chicken! Let him put the adverts in *Loot*. He could also be usefully employed painting all the candles black. Try rehearsing the ceremonies in different surroundings; the kitchen, in the billiard room etc.

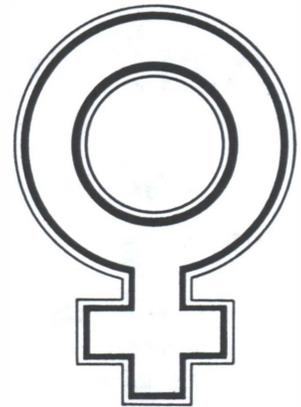
My dear, I have to share a little open secret with you: most devil worshippers nowadays do not go into the buff when leaping over the open fire. They use a finely woven body stocking (obtainable from all branches of Littlewoods), but don't say it out loud at the next Cabal. Most of all, do all you can to stop this momentary lapse developing into ugly and full-blown scepticism. It's very hard to rescue those who have gone over to naked rationalism. As for the article I'll send you another (somewhat exclusive) one on the same theme: 'Ten love potions that you can rustle up in the kitchen—to help you keep hold of that man'. Luckily this series was sponsored by Kingwood Cheffette and Blenders Inc. (obtainable from all branches of Littlewoods).

Olga Destinée

Women and the New Age

Lucy Fisher

Are New Age ideas damaging the feminist viewpoint?



FOR CENTURIES women were oppressed, and their supposed irrationality was one of the excuses. Many women are now taking pride in irrationality as an ancient female power. Is it a substitute for the political power they lack? Or are they compensating for feelings of inferiority by emphasising powers they have always (supposedly) had? Ought we to persecute them for trying to raise their self-esteem?

There's no such thing as harmless nonsense. To tell the gold from the pinchbeck you have to know how to think. We should at least try and persuade women that irrationality can be dangerous. Its practical consequences can be unfortunate or even deadly. If you dismiss the scientific method as a male conspiracy, you may end up with liver failure after an overdose of comfrey tea.

In her book *The Skeptical Feminist* (now about ten years old) Janet Radcliffe Richards deplored the fact that some feminists rejected logic and reason on the grounds that men had used them for bad ends. This branch of feminism, instead of withering away, has burgeoned and now seems the most healthy part of the plant. Is this perception correct? Feminist academic Janet Montefiore agreed that feminists still reject reason, 'but academic feminists put it rather differently. They reject the contamination of so-called masculine rationality.' In the 18th century Enlightenment the philosophers said that women were irrational. When academic feminists discard rationality in response to this they are 'deconstructing the rhetoric'. They think reason has been contaminated by rationalisation, 'but they don't use words like that. They're more likely to say it's "phallogocentric"'. Ten years ago we were discovering our true female nature—"We reason with our bodies, we feel it in our wombs etc". The academic version of this is "We are decentred subjects and we have dethroned King Phallus (King Reason)".'

How does this get translated to the woman in the street? 'There is a popular version of the academics' polysyllabic arguments ("We don't want male logic")', but, said Janet Montefiore, it's not fair to criticise what people say in pubs, as it's not the same as what they say in aca-

demical discourse. She concluded that it was an unresolved argument in feminism.

However, even if feminists claim to have rejected reason, it doesn't mean they actually have. It's possible to declare you have rejected reason without knowing what it is. Women may fear its name because men invoke it (this is not the same as using it) as a weapon to keep them in their place. The feminist magazine *Spare Rib* may put 'proof' in quotes, but the decline in the Bristol Cancer Centre's attendance shows that people do want proof (or 'proof'), even though the results of the originally unfavourable Bristol study turned out to be inconclusive.

The women's movement has certainly become less pragmatic. Instead of working on issues such as abortion, day care and equal opportunities, women are worshipping the goddess. Instead of campaigning against unnecessary episiotomies, they are applying Bach flower remedies. According to Freya Aswynn (a Netherlands-born Odinist, former witch, and author of *Leaves of Yggdrasil*, *Runes*, *Magick*, *Divination and the Feminine Mysteries*) feminism since its



60's incarnation ('women's rights and all that') has developed into 'lesbian feminism on the one side and the development of worship of the goddess, also a great awareness of the earth, animals, plants, trees on the other.' Feminism has taken on many of the characteristics of the New Age.

What is the New Age? In the first place, it's about as new as the New Forest. Superstition has always existed side by side with official religions and learning, adapting to suit the time and the place. All you have to do is change the trappings. Superstition has moved upmarket, shedding its image of elderly ladies with badly dyed hair making a poor living reading tea leaves in a seedy backstreet. Out go the crystal ball and the chenille table cloth with bobbed fringe, in come the Arts and Crafts designed tarot cards and the stripped pine furniture. The New Age has gone for the people with most spare cash and repackaged superstition for the middle classes.

There's supposed to be something particularly female about all things New Age. The right side of the brain (the 'good' side) is associated with 'feminine' qualities such as spirituality, intuition and aesthetics. This sounds familiar—isn't it the little woman whose brain can't cope with science but can throw together a pleasing colour scheme for her sitting room? The early 70's feminists fought against such stereotyping. According to Freya Aswynn, occultism is divided into separate realms: 'There are basically two branches, one is the celestial branch, usually tied up with intellectual people who study astrology, or hermeticism, or runes. And then there are the people who work with the earth: herbalism, healing, seasonal energies, festivals. And the two are complementary. And it is in the latter category that you find most feminists. Women are more interested in the earth, which of course is only natural.'

In the past, women were always pegged as the superstitious sex, but it was hard for them to know better because they were barred from education. And some of their 'superstitions', such as herbal medicine, may have been quite effective. One shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater, but on the other hand one shouldn't have to take the chaff along with the wheat. Formerly, magic was one of the few routes to money and power open to women. Why are so many intelligent, well-heeled, educated women turning to it now, when it's so much easier for women to get their hands on money, power, learning and liberty (though the battle is by no means won)?

We should be worried—it is frightening that what seems to be sheer silliness can acquire a sinister power. An uncritical attitude can result in thralldom to those who take money from the vulnerable in the name of spirituality. Freya Aswynn, though to an outsider she might seem typical of the genre, thought her opinion of many features of New Age was 'perhaps not printable'. She thought the recent popularity of the occult was due to fashion as well as cynical marketing exercises. She continued: 'It focuses incredibly much on self-development. It doesn't actually espouse a philosophy of helping people out and trying to alter social conditions. It's a heavy ego-trip: "Oh aren't I wonderful, aren't I liberated". Everybody's really into themselves.'



The Goddess

What is the goddess? Leaving aside the question of how a bodiless entity without genitalia or chromosomes can be either male or female, is the goddess a superstition, a genuine religion, or an enabling metaphor? Or is 'enabling metaphor' a respectable term for superstition? 'It all originates from the human mind, though energy exists 'out there' that corresponds,' said Freya Aswynn. 'All we do is personalise them into the form of a god or goddess and use that image as a mediator to express ourselves in forms of religion or magic. I know I ought to worship a goddess. There are literally dozens about, but for some peculiar reason Odin is.' She said that she didn't mean 'worship' in the Christian sense. 'We haven't got that self-abasement. We argue with our gods. We negotiate and drive hard bargains, and we take the piss out of them. It can be a personal idea of a goddess, or god, but it doesn't have to be. Lots of people are into the earth, or into animal liberation, or healing. Most people believe in a spiritual dimension more in terms of the earth. There are people in the occult world who look to the universe as a spiritual dimension of growth, and then there are those who work with the Gaia principle—the earth is an organism, the great mother from which we come and to which we go.'

Publishers such as Thorsons and Arkana (a Penguin imprint) are flourishing in the present climate. My local bookshop's health section, as well as a *Nurse's Dictionary* and *Pears Medical Encyclopedia*, contains: *The Detox Diet*, *Food Combining for Health*, *Beyond Codependency*, *Smile Therapy*, *The Silva Mind Control Method of Mental Dynamics*, *Aromatherapy*, *Massage*, *The Family guide to Homeopathy*, Norman Vincent Peale's *Art of Positive Living*, *The Greening of Medicine* (foreword by HRH the Prince of Wales), *Peace Love and Healing: the Path to Self Healing* ('I wish that someone had told me when I was in medical school that over 50 years ago Carl Jung had interpreted a dream and made a physical diagnosis.') Under 'miscellaneous' can be found *The Way of Energy*, *The Dowser's Workbook*, *Natural Magic*, James Berlitz (and Isaac Asimov), Fritjof Capra (and James Randi), Carlos Castaneda, Linda Goodman's *Sun Signs*, Nostradamus, Lobsang Rampa, and Robert Pirsig. The shop is owned and run entirely by women,

but a spokeswoman denied that it was a feminist outfit. 'We are fulfilling our brief as a general bookshop. It's market forces. A lot of our customers are women with children. There's a large population in the area of, er, literate women.'

Cherry Gilchrist's *The Circle of Nine*, published by Arkana, is a description of feminine archetypes. It could be seen as a worthy attempt to counteract centuries of the effect of such as the Catholic Church on women's self-esteem, but sadly she has accepted old style images of femininity and given them a new respectability. Freya Aswynn, on the other hand, rejects the conventional image: 'I work with mainly the female archetype of the valkyrie. Christianity has always kept women suppressed, and Islam of course.' Gilchrist presents what are not so much archetypes as stereotypes. They are like the character descriptions in an astrological handbook, or from one of those articles women's magazines used to carry about what colours to wear to suit your particular skin type.

Gilchrist's book is well and entertainingly written—no nasty neologisms like 'gyn/ecology'. And she's not entirely uncritical: she describes an astrology workshop run by women that was left to 'flow' into chaos while the men administered the crèche with military precision. But generally she doesn't bring evidence or support her assertions ('The boundaries between "self" and "other" are less marked in the female'), and a critical attitude is lacking.

So why should we want to know about female archetypes? Gilchrist rehearses the Joseph Campbell/Schumacher argument that myths can be created and that you can alter people's behaviour in socially useful ways by giving them the *right* kind of myths. This sounds unpleasantly dirigiste—is propaganda acceptable as long as it is good? 'We have become aware of the need to retrieve symbolic insights into life...' says Gilchrist. What practical purpose is symbolism? Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* said that the trouble with women was that they mistook symbolic gesture for effective action. The Greenham Common women used the word 'action' to mean gesture ('We did an action at Blue Gate') though they still managed to have an effect.

And if you aspire to be deep and intelligent without too much hard work, metaphors and symbols represent profundity. They make an impressive sound. However, once Gilchrist gets away from 'the circle is a symbol of receptivity' there are nuggets of practical information and illuminating insights, again like women's magazines. In fact, when

she says that everything and everybody is beautiful, and even ugliness has a beauty of its own, and that true beauty (as if you hadn't guessed) can be achieved without fashions and make-up, one cries out 'Come back, Patience Strong, all is forgiven!' (The poems of Patience Strong, a women's magazine staple for many years, aimed to help people—women—accept appalling situations rather than trying to change them.)

Unlike astrology (where the character write-up is chosen for you) you can choose your own archetype from a list including the Queen of Beauty, The Weaving Mother, the Lady of Light, the Queen of the Night, the Great Mother, the Lady of the Hearth, the Lady of the Dance and the Just Mother. I come out as a cross between the Great Weaving Mother and the Queen of the Night (better than being a Metal Rabbit). The Queen, whose attributes are anger, wit,

fierceness and cunning, is the only archetype which isn't paralytically nice. She has the ability to see through pretence, but unfortunately this is bundled with 'gifts' such as clairvoyance and telepathy. Gilchrist equates handicrafts with astrology, and adds that part of the Weaving Mother's character is a love of intrigue. (I deny this.) According to Angela Carter women have a private, imprecise language—'a bit of cheese, a knob of butter'—which alienates them from (male) scientific discourse with its language of precise measurements. What about k1 s11 pss0 k2tog? Woe betide the Weaving Mother if she's imprecise enough to get one stitch wrong.

What's dangerous is Gilchrist's implication that you don't need to think straight, perform double blind controlled tests, or use your brain to try and understand the world.

She moves seamlessly from telling stories around the hearth to divining the future. 'Where such ability exists, [it] is not solely of the feminine province, but is probably more readily acceptable to women. To be divine requires a willingness to let go of "rational" [her quotes] concepts, and to allow intuition and imagination to be the communicators of information.' There is no 'because' between these two sentences, but she implies that it follows that women are more *au fait* with divination because they are, not less rational, but more willing to let go of rationality and turn to intuition. But what does 'intuition' mean exactly?

Janet Montefiore referred to 'worthy articles in the *Independent*' which explain women's intuition in terms of a different style of thought, the ability to listen, and skill at



making connections, but 'intuition' in Gilchrist's paragraph refers to magical powers. Freya Aswynn also used the word in this context: 'I am mainly involved in the intellectual side. However I am intuitive myself in that I can do readings for people.' There's a great difference between the two meanings. Magic is said to be irrational, because it's irrational to believe it, but if there was such a thing as magic it would not be irrational in itself. But since it's thought to be irrational to believe in it, those who believe in it claim that you have to be deliberately irrational in order to use it. It might be worth sacrificing reason if you gained magic powers as a result. Though if magic existed, it wouldn't be irrational to believe in it; in fact you wouldn't need to 'believe' it because you'd have enough evidence to know it existed.

Another reason why many women claim irrationality to be a valuable female quality is that they feel that male culture is cold, logical and scientific. Adversarial argument is seen as aggressive (and aggression is bad and unfeminine). Gilchrist refers to 'cool reason' and 'harsh logic'. Female culture on the other hand is seen as warm, nurturing, magical, poetic, sensitive, caring and healing. Sarah Miles was recently quoted in the *Independent* as saying: 'Corn circles are giving us an opportunity to rekindle our reverence for the unknown, that in itself is enough.'

'Men can play with ideas; women become them,' asserts Gilchrist. She says that women's reluctance to put forward their beliefs in mixed company is due to a lack of courage: 'We want to put forward our beliefs only when we are reasonably sure that everyone else will assent to them, or at least pretend to.' She says that 'cleverness is a vital feminine weapon', but she means it's a vital weapon for getting your own way, not something to be valued for its own sake. The 'cut and thrust method [of argument] doesn't suit women well,' she continues. 'To men, a verbal battle is enjoyable... to women it is not.' (There's nothing I like better.) This is the closest she gets to talking about intellectual activity. There is nothing about wanting to find out about things. The three archetypal mothers 'understand the laws of time and space', but not in the same way as Einstein. Her images of women don't include brain surgeons, professors, computer programmers or managing directors.

Despite the overlay of goddess talk in *The Circle of Nine*, the resemblance to old style women's magazines is too strong to ignore. The new feminism is depressingly like the old femininity. Superstition was always part of the *Woman's Own* weltanschauung. Gilchrist has taken the image lock, stock, barrel, astrology column and knitting patterns into the New Age and hence into middle class respectability. The final impression is of sopiness: the same romanticism and sentimentality that women are fed from *My Little Pony* to Wordsworth, the vein of tweeness that saps the strength of English society.

Conclusion

I'd like to make several unsupported assertions of my own. In my opinion it's partly a problem of self-image. The image women have of themselves is affected by the feel-good factor. They pride themselves on being warm, caring, intuitive, spiritual: unlike cold, unloving, logical, material men.



These bundles of qualities are supposed indivisible, and mutually exclusive. Women don't want to alienate men, or each other, by being 'aggressive': being logical and arguing about intellectual subjects. But this is a survival tactic—women have got to attract a man (an early 70's feminist would shriek at the suggestion). Women claim spurious powers because they lack real power, and fear competing with men on what's perceived to be their own ground. Lack of confidence and lack of education lead to alternative methods of boasting, and the adoption of spurious ideas as a substitute for genuine intellectual activity. But logic is not men's ground, it's anybody's. Logic is not a sex-linked characteristic. (Male logic? don't make me laugh.) Women may think that logic can only be used as a weapon, but it is neutral.

The danger is that the sleep of reason produces monsters. If you can't (or won't) think logically you won't be able to tell the false from the true. You can be duped by astrologers—or dictators. You won't be able to understand the world you live in, so you won't be able to control it. Instead of reverencing the unknown we must deal with the known, and the more that's known the better. (Besides, once the unknown becomes the known, do we stop reverencing it? If something is unknown, how do you know it's worth 'reverencing'? What's so great about reverence anyway?) We need logic to establish the truth. An illogical statement can't be true, and if it isn't true it can't be of any use. 'The truth shall set you free,' said Jesus—but then he was a man.

Notes

Leaves of Yggdrasil, Runes, Magick, Divination and the Feminine Mysteries are published by Llewellyn in the US and obtainable by sending an s.a.e. to Aswynn, BM Aswynn, London WC1N 3XX.

Lucy Fisher is a journalist living in London.

Chapman Cohen: Freethinker

Ean Wood

Remembering an iconoclast of the freethought movement

IT WAS GOOD to see the name of Chapman Cohen mentioned in the recent article (*The Skeptic*, 5.4) celebrating the 110th anniversary of *The Freethinker*, but he deserves more than just a mention. He was one of the great crusading skeptics of this century, and far more than simply the successor of *The Freethinker's* founder, G W Foote. Part of a long iconoclastic tradition, he was a prolific writer and speaker, witty and human, and formidably well-read.

Skeptical periodicals tend to perish with their founders, but on Foote's death in 1915 Chapman Cohen, who had been writing for *The Freethinker* since 1897, took over and continued as editor for almost forty years, producing a torrent of books and pamphlets and articles. Most of what he wrote was in support of freedom of thought in the face of established religion, but as he said himself, 'That is an accident of a situation. The larger and wider description of Freethought is that it is a denial of authority in all matters of opinion. It is because the world's greatest enemy to Freethought has been, from the earliest times, religion, that it has become associated with the narrower significance.'

On taking over the editorship he was immediately faced with all the problems arising from Britain's involvement in The Great War. Not only the shortages of paper and money and manpower, but also the difficulty—no, the necessity—of challenging popular attitudes in a war when government propaganda and restrictions were far more severe than in, say, World War Two. He got the paper out every week, often writing almost the whole of an issue single-handedly. His basic line was that the idea was not to hate and kill Germans but to learn how to co-exist with Germany after the war. This approach was not popular with the authorities. At one time, military officials called on him and demanded his subscription list. He refused to give it, saying that if the Kaiser himself ordered a copy, it would be sent. And if it was allowed to reach him, would probably do him good. At another, two mysterious agents came offering financial support and asking if the paper was for sale. Yes it is, said Cohen. Twopence a copy.

In 1868, when he was born, his Jewish family had lived in England for some two hundred years. He was born at just the right time to absorb the Theory of Evolution without finding it a shock to long-established opinions. Mostly self-taught, he was an omnivorous reader, to an extent hard to conceive today. Among historians, for instance, he casually mentions reading in his youth Prescott, Milman, Macaulay, Motley and Hallam. And these were solid thoughtful books. Writing in 1939 in praise of James Fitzjames Stephen's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, he says: '(Readers) will, if these books do them any good, appreciate the careful, detailed way in which a proposition was examined in 1873.'

Major influences on his thought were Spinoza, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill and George Henry Lewes. As he later wrote: 'My teachers made me realise that truth was many-sided. They taught me that philosophy began in doubting, not in believing, and that he who would attain wisdom must question assiduously'.



William McIlroy

Chapman Cohen

Ice in the sky

Loren Petrich

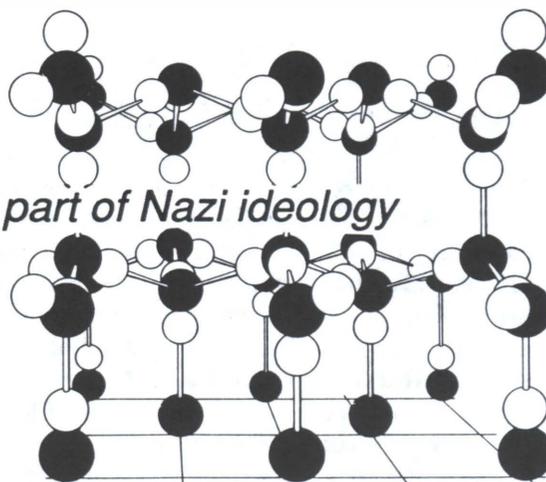
How a bizarre theory almost became part of Nazi ideology

THIS IS THE STORY of a remarkable cosmology concocted by an Austrian mining engineer, Hans Hörbiger. Hörbiger was not only a mining engineer, he was also an amateur astronomer. Often, he would use a small telescope to look at assorted celestial bodies, especially the Moon. According to his account, early in this century, as he was looking at the Moon, he was struck by the apparent brightness of its surface. He had his first 'recognition', that what he was seeing was ice, piled up in blocks, producing the brightness and roughness he saw. Some nights later, he had a dream and his second 'recognition'. He dreamt that he was suspended in space, watching the swinging of a silvery pendulum, which grew longer and longer until it broke. 'I knew that Newton was wrong and that the force of gravity stops at three times the distance to Neptune', he concluded. This was the starting point for his Cosmic Ice Theory.

He worked out this theory, in collaboration with a school-teacher named Philipp Fauth, in a giant book called *Glazial-Kosmogonie*. Here is what it said: Once upon a time, there was a supergiant star in the direction of the constellation Columba. A smaller star, dead, water-soaked to the core, fell into it. It was heated up, vaporizing the water, and causing a great explosion. The fragments of this smaller star were spewed out of the supergiant into interstellar space. The water condensed out into ice, forming giant ice blocks. A ring of this ice formed, as well as a small number of solar systems. This ring is known to us all as the Milky Way. Among the solar systems that formed was our own, with many more planets than exist today.

The Solar System has had a long history of evolution. Interplanetary space is filled with traces of hydrogen gas, which cause the planets to slowly spiral in. Also spiraling in are ice blocks which approach closer than three times the distance to Neptune. The outer planets are large because they have swallowed a large number of ice blocks, but the inner planets have not swallowed nearly as many. One can see ice blocks on the move in the form of meteors, and when one collides with the Earth, it produces hailstorms over an area of many square kilometers. When an ice block falls into the Sun, it produces a sunspot. It gets vaporized, making 'fine ice', which covers the innermost planets.

The Earth has had several satellites before it acquired its current one. They were once planets, in orbits of their own slightly beyond Earth's, but they were captured one by one over the eons. Once captured, a satellite would slowly spiral



in, as the planets are doing toward the Sun, until it disintegrates and becomes part of the Earth's structure. One can identify the rock strata of several geological eras with these satellites.

The last such episode, the infall of the Cenozoic Moon and the capture of our present-day Moon, Luna, is remembered in the form of countless myths and legends. This was worked out in some detail by Hörbiger's English follower Hans Schindler Bellamy, though some of it was originally due to Hörbiger himself. Bellamy tells us that, as a child, he would often dream about a large moon that would spiral closer and closer in until it burst, making the ground beneath roll and pitch, awakening him and giving him a very sick feeling. When he looked at the Moon's surface through a telescope, he found its surface looking troublingly familiar. When, in 1921, he learned of Hörbiger's theory, he found it practically a description of his dream. He explained the mythological support he found in such books as *Moons, Myths, and Man*, *In the Beginning God*, and *The Book of Revelation is History*.

Mythology, Bellamy tells us, forms a 'science of pre-Lunar culture'. As the Cenozoic Moon spiraled in, it pulled up the Earth's oceans into a 'girdle tide', while the rest of the Earth sank into an ice age. The people were forced into mountainous highlands in such places as Tibet and the Andes. The gigantic Moon, pitted and scaly, soon revolved around the Earth six times a day, causing an equal number of eclipses of the Sun and itself. It inspired legends of dragons, battles of gods in the sky, and the Devil. These final days are recorded in the Book of Revelation in the Bible and inspired the idea of *Götterdämmerung*, the twilight of the gods.

Eventually, this moon broke up, and its pieces fell onto the Earth, causing rains of hailstones. As the Earth went back to its old shape, there were gigantic earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The girdle tide flowed back over the rest of the Earth, inspiring countless flood legends, including Noah's Flood. Bellamy tells us that he had always wistfully hoped that there is some historical basis for the story of Noah's Flood. What followed was a time of peace and

tranquility, remembered in a variety of legends, including that of the Garden of Eden. The first chapters of the Book of Genesis tell of the re-creation after that catastrophe. The story of Adam and Eve is, in fact, the story of a Caesarean birth undergone by a heroine of the flood. Somehow, the myth got the sex wrong! Naturally, there was a serpent in this paradise, and it was the capture of the Earth's present-day moon, Luna. When it was captured, it caused more earthquakes and disasters, and sank the continent of Atlantis. It is slowly spiraling in and will one day share the fate of the earlier moons.

Hörbiger had some interesting responses to the criticism that he inevitably received. When anyone pointed out to him that this or that assertion of his did not work mathematically, he responded: 'Calculation can only lead you astray'. One recalls that he was an engineer. When anyone pointed out to him that there existed pictures that show that the Milky Way consists of billions of stars, he answered straightforwardly that the pictures had been faked by 'reactionary' astronomers. He had a similar response to accounts of measurements of the surface temperature of the Moon, which exceeds 100 degrees Centigrade in the daytime. To one critic, he wrote back: 'Either you believe in me and learn, or you will be treated as the enemy'. Astronomers generally dismissed his views and the following he acquired as a 'carnival', though it took some very un-carnival-ish overtones later on. Although Hörbiger's theories have a lot in common with Immanuel Velikovsky's theorizing about the recent history of the Solar System, the scientific community had a much calmer reaction to Hörbiger's theories than to Velikovsky's, and his publisher was (as far as I could learn) never boycotted.

His book came out in 1917, during the First World War, and did not attract much attention. But afterward, a mass movement based on the theory appeared. Its members exerted considerable public pressure to get the theory accepted. The 'movement' published posters, pamphlets, and books, and even a newspaper, *The Key to World Events*. One company would only hire those who declared themselves convinced of the truth of the theory. One astronomer at Trepow Observatory spent half his time answering ques-

tions on the theory. Some followers even heckled astronomical meetings, crying 'Out with astronomical orthodoxy! Give us Hörbiger!' Along the way, the name was changed from the Graeco-Latin *Glazial-Kosmogonie* to the Germanic *Welteislehre* ('Cosmic Ice Theory'), WEL for short.

In the 1930's, the 'movement' became more and more pro-Nazi. Hörbiger died in 1931, so we cannot tell what his opinion would have been. Supporters of the WEL said things like: 'Our Nordic ancestors grew strong in ice and snow; belief in the Cosmic Ice is consequently the natural heritage of Nordic Man', 'Just as it needed a child of Austrian culture—Hitler!—to put the Jewish politicians in their place, so it needed an Austrian to cleanse the world of Jewish science', and 'the Führer, by his very life, has proved how much a so-called 'amateur' can be superior to self-styled professionals; it needed another 'amateur' to give us a complete understanding of the Universe'. Alas, Hitler himself was not enthusiastic about the idea, and the Propaganda Ministry felt obliged to state that 'one can be a good National Socialist without believing in the WEL'.

After World War II, the WEL cult dropped out of sight. But it revived sometime afterwards, and, according to my information, continues to have members in both Germany and England. In the 1950's, a pamphlet supporting the WEL stated that 'proof of the theory awaits the conclusion of the first successful interplanetary flight, a matter in which the Institute is greatly interested'. But more recently, some of its supporters have dropped the idea of an icy lunar surface, though they continue to support the view that it was captured and that its capture destroyed Atlantis.

Notes

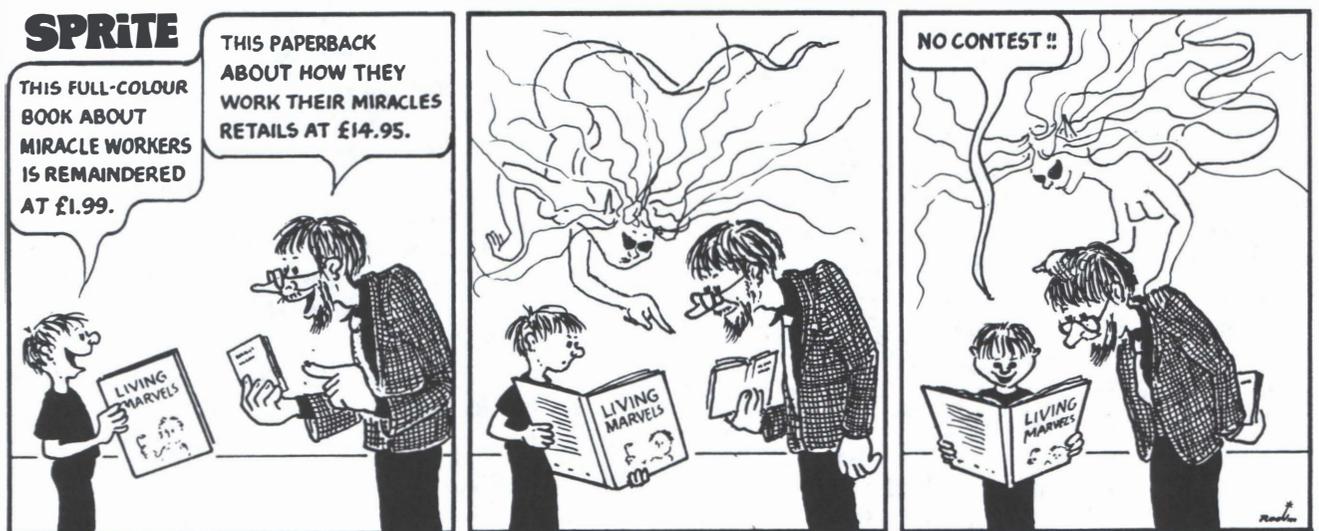
The following books also discuss Hörbiger's Cosmic Ice Theory: Hans Schindler Bellamy, *Moons, Myths and Man*, Faber & Faber, 1931.

Martin Gardner, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, Dover, 1957.

Willy Ley, *Watchers of the Skies*

Patrick Moore, *Can You Speak Venusian?*, David & Charles, 1972.

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Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

Reflections on Mirror Talk



IT IS THE MOST exciting breakthrough of human communication in all history'. This modest declaration describes 'Mirror Talk', a revolutionary new form of New Age one-upmanship which would probably have left Ian Carmichael in 'School for Scoundrels' speechless...literally.

Do we actually speak our true thoughts *backwards* at the same time as we are speaking normally? Hard to believe, I'm sure you'll agree, but according to the manufacturers of Mirror Talk, we do:

When we have a conversation with someone, we are actually sending and receiving two messages at once. The first is the normal forward dialog of our conscious mind that we are all aware of. The other, our true feelings and thoughts, are communicated in the language of subconscious... *in reverse*. We call these backwards messages MIRROR TALK. If you had a conversation recorded on a cassette tape and listened to it on a MIRROR TALK MACHINE, with a little practice and patience you would begin to hear among the gibberish, *messages straight from your subconscious in plain English!*

Somehow, the Mirror Talk people are saying, our larynxes are not only producing normal speech under our conscious control, but are also wobbling away making backwards speech which reflects our unconscious thoughts. (It's a moot point whether some people even have their larynxes under *conscious* control, but that's a different matter.) Quite *why* our vocal cords should be behaving in such an extraordinary manner isn't explained, but examples are cited which make Mirror Talk an attractive idea. It is claimed that one unnamed endorser of the Mirror Talk Machine (a tape recorder which also plays backwards, so you can hear the secret words) was involved in negotiating a business deal. On playing the conversation backwards, 'decoding the Truth he saved thousands of dollars from a would-be rip-off artist'. Quite why the dodgy businessman would be saying 'I am ripping you off, mate' backwards isn't entirely clear.

The Mirror Talk blurb goes on to say: 'Users report lucid dreams, deep psychological [sic] clearing, Self Knowledge, and altered states of consciousness'. One altered state of consciousness easily achievable with Mirror Talk is that of feeling strapped for cash, since the basic (play only) Mirror Talk Machine will set you back \$149.95. For a play and record machine, we're talking \$199.95. That's talking forwards, of course. Maybe backwards it's cheaper.

The one good thing about Mirror Talk is that it's easy to verify. Not long ago, so-called 'backwards masking' was in the news. Some people think that backwards recorded Satanic messages are secretly added to rock records, the idea,

apparently, being to persuade the listener to worship Satan. Some records certainly do have backwards messages deliberately recorded on them—the Beatles, the Electric Light Orchestra, Styx, and XTC, among many others, have had fun doing this in the studio. On Pink Floyd's song 'Goodbye, Blue Sky', from the album 'The Wall', a backwards message by Roger Waters even says 'Congratulations, you have just discovered the secret message'.

These kinds of deliberate messages are crystal clear when you hear them the right way round, but the controversy starts when people find backwards messages when they aren't really there at all. It's interesting how many phonetic coincidences do actually occur when you play ordinary speech backwards. Queen were accused of promoting drugs when it was claimed the message 'It's fun to smoke marijuana' was included backwards on their hit single 'Another One Bites the Dust'. Actually, 'sfun to scout mare wanna' is a more accurate interpretation. When I did some experiments with listening to some of my own speech backwards (reading from entries in the telephone directory picked at random) I was amazed to hear the word 'bicycle' pop out quite clearly. Was my subconscious telling me that it was time I got some exercise? Actually, it was only amazing at first. As I listened to it subsequently, a better rendition seemed to be 'bye-sss-icker'. But on first listening, my ears were obviously desperate to make some sense out of what they were hearing, so they 'heard' the word 'bicycle'.

Distrusting the principles of Mirror Talk, I set about some basic research and I can now exclusively reveal my latest invention to *Skeptic* readers: Tosh Talk. Tosh Talk is a revolutionary sonic analysis system based on the latest findings in quantum mechanics and cold fusion. Simply aim the Tosh Talk antenna at the person talking to you. Tosh Talk beams low-energy N-rays at the speaker, picking up the tell-tale variations in their aura which reveal how they really feel about you. Now that's what I call a breakthrough in human communication!

You think I'm being flippant? Well, in these litigious times, you'll just have to read all this backwards to see what I *really* think.

Toby Howard is a lecturer in Computer Graphics at the University of Manchester.

Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

Godbusters and Godmakers



SKEPTICS DO NOT take a position on religion, even though some of us are agnostics. We do, however, examine claims, even religious ones, that can be tested. This distinction is sometimes a difficult one to get across, even more so since CSICOP set up housekeeping with CODESH, the humanist organization that publishes *Free Inquiry* magazine.

However, there are godbusters and godbusters, and two of them hit London in the same week. One was Basava Premanand, leader of the Indian Skeptics, the world's oldest skeptical organization; it was founded in 1939 and claims to have 100,000 members. The other was the Reverend Ivan Stang, a 38-year-old hippy from Dallas, Texas, who likes to collect the creatively weird—his 1987 book *High Weirdness By Mail* hit the high spots of the junk mail he encourages every crank in America to send him. Stang also likes to stand up in a flamboyant white suit and rant: he is receiving the Word of Bob.

Premanand and Stang are tackling the godly ways of their countries in kind. In India, god is sold on miracles. Premanand performs the same miracles—and it doesn't hurt that he looks exactly the part of the traditional Indian swami. At Conway Hall on March 28, we watched as he put his arm in fire, created holy ash, and turned water into wine (—see Lewis Jones' article on page 6). What's different about Premanand, though, is that he explains everything he's doing. He understands, from his experience, that he must explain his tricks because otherwise people believe he himself is a godman.

I feel comfortable calling Premanand a skeptic, though. Even though his motives are to make people question their beliefs—and he says he's never really met anyone who believes in God, only people who believe in the miracles—his work is grounded in facts and proof. He tests claims; he does not argue matters of faith.

For us here, some of the claims Premanand is testing are the hardest ones for us to answer. I have met many, many people who distrust Western psychics implicitly—but believe the claims of Indian miracle-workers implicitly. One such claim is reincarnation. During an interview after the show, Premanand told the story of the investigation the Indian Skeptics did into one of the reincarnation stories. It turned out that the child of the poor family, who was believed to be the reincarnation of the child of a rich family several villages away, had in fact gotten all the necessary information from his aunt, who had worked in the rich family's household as a servant.

It would be harder to claim Stang as a skeptic. His focus is different: he looks at American religion and sees kitsch and greed for money. As has come out over the last few years, deceit and fakery are rife in the industry (for a good account, try James Randi's *The Faith Healers*, Joe E Barnhart's *Jim and Tammy* or Skipp Porteous' *Jesus Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, all from Prometheus Books.

The heart of American religion, too, is miracles, but Stang's response is limited to making fun of it all. This is not hard to do, in an industry where dogs have airconditioned houses (Tammy Faye Bakker) or preachers are caught, as folksinger Bill Steele put it, 'with their pants on the office chair'. There is, says Stang, a 'conspiracy of the normal people'. But the Church of the SubGenius will save YOU: it's a 'disorganized religion for mutants and misfits,' which is for 'disbelievers, and those who will believe anything.' 'Pull,' exhorts Stang, 'the wool over your own eyes and relax in the security of your own delusions.'

Stang preaches the doctrine of Original Slack. You, too, can hate like J R Bob Dobbs, even though Dobbs was not well connected enough to be the Messiah. 'He's a short-duration personal savior,' says Stang. But you can trust Bob. 'Bob's not going to die for your sins. He's not even going to spend his own money on the church.'

Stang even is the vehicle for predictions ('Bob said it, and I smoked it'): the world will come to an end on July 5, 1998, at 7 AM in all time zones. But this, too, is all right: join the Church of the SubGenius, and you will have eternal salvation—or triple your money back.

You can even buy the Book: the *Book of the SubGenius*, or the new one, *Three-Fisted Tales of Bob*, a collection of short stories that explore the SubGenius mythos.

It's all fairly amusing—though Stang really isn't quite funny enough to sustain an entire evening's rant—but it isn't Skeptical, in the sense that it tests no claims and establishes no new facts.

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.

Joe E Barnhart's *Jim and Tammy* and Skipp Porteous' *Jesus Doesn't Live Here Anymore* are available now from Prometheus Books, priced £14.95 and £15.50 respectively. To order, or for a free catalogue, write to Michael Hutchinson, Prometheus Books, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.



Reviews

Channelling the being

Jon Klimo, *Psychics, Prophets and Mystics: Receiving Information from Paranormal Sources* (Aquarian Press, 1991, 384pp., pbk, £7.99)

This book is entirely about channelling, not telepathy or any other type of paranormal communication. By 'channelling' the author means human communication with 'disembodied intelligences' which include such diverse entities as ghosts, gods, God and beings in 'other dimensions'. A channeller is really the same as a medium: both names arise from the fact that a person is acting as a channel or medium for communication from one place to another.

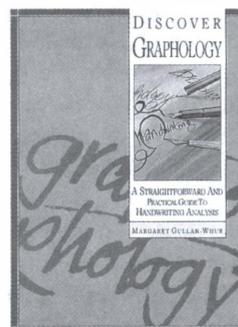
In the introduction Klimo explains his own belief in channelling. Apparently, he has tried to be objective on this subject but thought it best for readers to know his own standpoint. While a small section is given over to skeptical comments on channelling, most of the rest of the book takes channelling as an accepted fact and attempts to describe and explain it. The book is a very comprehensive, but overly long, guide to modern day channelling. The first two-thirds describes historic and modern channellers—who they are, what they say, how they do it and who they claim to be channelling. The messages seem to fall into two main groups. In one they say the world is an illusion produced by human minds and humans are actually immortal entities. The other has the world as real but humans having become too materialistic, they will soon be entering a new age of greater spirituality. Most of the final third of the book deals with science and channelling. A detailed chapter of various possible psychological explanations is given, such as self-hypnosis, multiple personalities, and various disorders. An interesting point is raised on a double-standard in society. While it is acceptable for Christians to claim to know Jesus and regularly speak with him while much less acceptable to do so with entities such as 'Fulton, the Galactic Oversoul'. In his descriptions of the brain biology and physics of channelling the author offers various speculations as to how it occurs. These include use of the extra dimensions sometimes used by theoretical physicists, and the frequency of vibration of natural signals in the brain enabling it to receive messages. This all seemed, to me, to be more science fiction than science fact. The author thinks we are all part of one Being, channelling being 'the growing awareness of any part of the one Being that it can access any of the rest of itself.' He also believes that intuition, inspiration and creativity are all forms of channelling, to which he gives the name 'open channelling'. Despite having some interesting points, I would not recommend this book to anyone, unless they particularly wanted to learn about the subject in which

case it might be a useful place to start. If you want to try channelling yourself, the book gives a list a ways you can try it. The worst thing in the book is a comment by Charles Tart in the Foreword in answer to the claim that some channellers are crazy or faking. He writes: 'the best lies always contain a very high proportion of truth'. If someone believes this and they believe in the paranormal (or worse, believe in racist or anti-semitic theories) they can happily go on holding their beliefs even if you can prove every claim they make to be false.

—Sean O'Brien

Revealing writing

Margaret Gullan-Whur *Discover Graphology* (Aquarian, 1991, 174pp.,pbk, £6.99)



Graphology, the analysis of a person's character through their handwriting. This should not be confused with graphoanalysis which is a specific way of analysing stroke formation and direction within the written word.

Margaret Gullan-Whur's book was originally published in 1986 under the less inviting title *The Graphology Workbook*. As

far as one can see there have been no widely accepted changes in the techniques employed since her original work. The author, as the title suggests, attempts to lead the novice reader through the delicate process of studying somebody's handwriting to discover the personality behind the script. She gives the student plenty of examples as they work through the different areas of analysis from the general quality of the writing, use of space, stroke and finally typology. The book concludes with the full analysis of a job application letter, written by a post A-level 18 year old.

One should be aware that the subject is still not an accepted topic in most academic circles, though there is a strong movement to get the subject approved as a branch of psychology. Like other social sciences, graphology suffers from being an inexact discipline without universal rules of interpretation. With this in mind, the writer attempts to steer clear of some of the more contentious areas of her field. A lot of information in the book is geared towards what signs to look for in a person's writing and does not give many clues about what to disregard. For example, is the choice of writing instrument or ink colour significant? The final full analysis is restricted to one particular individual of whom a

great deal could have been deduced from his letter's style and contents. The author might better convince the doubters if she had two or three different full studies, so that the reader can appreciate how different traits combine to give the final analysis.

Anybody interested in graphology or psychology should certainly add this work to their reading list. People skeptical of the work of graphologists ought to read *Discover Graphology* so that any preconceived notions can be either confirmed or renounced.

—Phillip Williams

In praise of scientists

John Hamilton (Ed.), *They Made Our World: Five centuries of Great Scientists and Inventors* (BBC/Broadside Books 1991, 175pp, hbk, £13.50)

Science began with Bacon, who invented public research funding and rejected speculation and political debate as methods of finding out about the natural world; and who ended his political career in some disgrace. Next came Newton, who invented gravity, mass, light, and the differential calculus, was rather religious, and Master of the Royal Mint. Priestley and Lavoisier invented Chemistry, and the latter got his head chopped off; Faraday instituted the Royal Institution lectures and investigated electricity; Watt developed the steam engine and became very rich.

Continue in this vein through 26 heroes of Western technological history, and you have the flavour of *They Made Our World: Five centuries of Great Scientists and Inventors*, derived directly from a BBC World Service series. The book has the laudable aim of introducing the general reader to some of the highlights of scientific history, to give some insight into the lives of the people involved, and to emphasise the impact of science on our lives—which so many people take for granted, despite its evidence just about everywhere you look.

One popular model of science goes something like this. Science has all been done by a handful of geniuses, who have popped up every now and again amid a sea of nondescripts. Without them, the developments they made wouldn't have happened. Largely, however, scientists are introverts ('wets' and 'losers' according to a recent attitude survey amongst Australian schoolkids) who neurotically waste their time (and public money) in esoteric investigations into things which couldn't possibly have any importance or interest for fully-developed human beings, and which they can only talk about in an arcane language which they use to protect themselves from public scrutiny.

Some of which is possibly true; but the more books we can give to our non-technical friends and relatives to give them a clearer idea of what they owe to scientific endeavour, and how it really works, and what the people who do it are really like, the better. So is this book one of those? Will it give my Aunt Henrietta a better appreciation, of the impact of, say, mathematicians, on her life?

The BBC and Dr John Hamilton have produced a readable and attractive account of some of the major innovators

who took part in them. By building the book around the lives of particular characters, there is an element of human interest which may bring the subject to life for those who would—sigh—find the subject matter dull by itself; and though 'enthralling' would be something of an exaggeration, there is a good sense of the linkage between social and scientific matters, and the revolutions which were brought about in people's lifetimes.

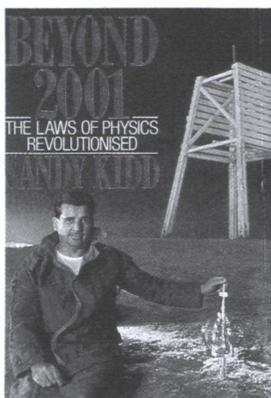
Unfortunately, it does to some extent promote some of the myths, rather than dispelling them. Myth number one—that it was all done by a few towering geniuses—is hard to avoid, given the format. Although influences and colleagues are mentioned, it would be distinctly easy to come away with the impression that Turing 'invented' the modern computer, or that Einstein produced relativity entirely out of the blue. It's interesting that many of the characters have been popularly celebrated in their own times or since: Stephenson gets a chapter rather than Trevithick or Brunel, who were less good at self-publicity; Fleming, worshipped by the Press for his rather accidental discovery, gets a chapter in preference to Florey and Chain, who did the real hard work to make penicillin usable.

So in conclusion, I think this book would be a second choice if I could find my Aunt something with the same level of technical presentation (though without the occasional inaccuracies and confusions) and the same linkage of scientific to social history, but focussing around the subject areas, and presenting a more balanced view of the roles of the people involved. And most of all, showing how it's not just the immediate inventors who influence the world, but the great body of theoreticians and hard-working researchers in the background as well.

—Alan Wills

Floating with Kidd

Sandy Kidd and Ron Thompson, *Beyond 2001: the Laws of Physics Revolutionised* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1991, 410pp., hbk, £14.95)



Sandy Kidd believes he has invented an anti-gravity drive: a machine that produces thrust without any reaction. He is not sure how it works, whether it breaks Newton's third law of motion (action and reaction are equal and opposite) or converts the circular motion of gyroscopes into linear motion but he is certain that it loses weight when it runs. Similar claims have been made before. Kidd's machine is no simple gyro and he has spent years trying to make it work. I know what you're thinking, but please read on.

We learn of Kidd's early life when he re-invented the two-stroke engine on radically new lines but soon lost interest and how he devised a new driving mechanism for bicycles using only 'half the pedal power'. Do you see a familiar

pattern emerging? Don't give up yet.

Next comes a short account of his RAF career when he wore a royal blue uniform and worked on Avro Vulcan bombers which were 'built like a battleship' and had a wing area of one and a half acres. (Actually, Airforce blue is blue-grey, Vulcans are built like aeroplanes and have a wing area of 3,964 square feet or less than one tenth of an acre.) Similar mistakes crop up throughout the book, though whether intentionally to deceive or negligently from poor research is not clear. While working with Vulcans he had his first experience of the forces exerted by gyroscopes and his great idea started to take form. Easily checked mistakes seem like part of that well-known pattern but don't stop: the best is yet to come.

After much experiment Kidd eventually built his machine and found that when it ran it could lose weight. On his makeshift counterweighted apparatus the device would regularly lose a pound in weight and float free but this was less likely to happen when there were witnesses present. However, he persevered and, after his initial success, started looking for financial backing and proper facilities. I know this sounds like a story of the 'mad-scientist' genre but it does get better.

With support from interested academics he obtained offers of help from Dundee University. The sums involved, as you would expect, were small but what Kidd wanted was approval from a recognized engineering institution. Unfortunately, for complicated reasons this arrangement did not yield the results that would prove his machine really worked. As he tells the story the blame lies with university politics. It is possible. The result of his work at Dundee was another version of the machine which exhibited similar shyness to that of his first device.

From here he passed through more troubles before finally reaching an agreement with an Australian company, part of the contract being that his machine should undergo testing by an independent laboratory. Eventually the tests were made and, what is more, the results are printed in the book. Now, wasn't that worth waiting for? Alas the results are not convincing. If the machine works, it is very inefficient, producing on average one percent thrust/weight ratio, and the laboratory is 77% confident that the force is significant and not a secondary effect. No matter how well Kidd's machine works for him, as soon as proper measurements are made they produce less convincing phenomena. This is not to say that they do not work at all but that if they do, the effect is at best marginal.

Kidd has applied for patents on his ideas and surprisingly, the Patent Office has accepted the application. However, as yet patents have not been granted although there is still time. There should be sufficient detail in the patent applications to allow other engineers to build copies of the machines but there are no drawings in the book and considering that the descriptions are complicated I find this a bad omission. There is a photograph on the dust jacket which shows some detail. The story of how the photograph was taken is worth reading.

Unfortunately, little of the book is worth reading for its own sake. The style is poor—attempting but failing to achieve

a vernacular style in the narrative sections and a popular scientific style for the technical descriptions. The outcome is stilted and does not read true to life. It would also have benefited from better proof-reading.

Kidd's battle has been to get proper independent tests made and this is what makes his story different from the usual mad-scientist book. He has not been hiding his machine from proper investigation and has published the results of tests which have been made. He does not blame anyone for being sceptical of his claims. I don't think he has revolutionised the laws of physics: the effect, if any, produced by his machine is not significant and he proposed no theory to account for his claims. But wouldn't it be nice to be wrong.

—Ernest Jackson

In search of the miraculous

T C Williams, *The Idea of the Miraculous: the Challenge to Science and Religion* (MacMillan, 1990, 269pp hbk £35.00)

Historically speaking, the idea of the miraculous has always occupied a central place in Christian belief, for the miraculous occurrences reported in the Gospels have in the past often been taken as powerful evidence for the authenticity of the Christian Revelation. Nowadays, however—in an age which arguably has a more highly developed sense of the inviolability of natural law (and a greater scepticism regarding the credibility of historical reports) than was the case in times past—the evidence of the miraculous is now more likely to be viewed as an embarrassment and as an obstacle rather than an aid to faith. It is therefore not surprising that liberal theologians (such as Rudolf Bultmann, for example) have sought to purge Christianity of its allegedly anachronistic 'supernatural' elements. Nevertheless, against such 'demythologising' tendencies within theology, this new book (written by a philosopher of religion) seeks to restore the supernatural to its central role in religious thinking.

The book begins with a philosophical analysis of the idea of the miraculous and examines Hume's famous arguments as well as those presented in more recent discussions. The common definition of a 'miracle' as a 'violation of natural law' is clearly open to the charge of incoherence on the grounds that any supposed violation can only show that no such law was in fact operative in the first place. But Williams seeks to rescue the concept of the miraculous by dividing events into two logically distinct classes—'miraculous' and 'natural'. Miraculous events (which he allows to be possibly law-like) are distinguishable from natural events through the direct action of mind on matter (in the manner of psychokinesis). In short, Williams would seem to want to regard the miraculous as simply an aspect of the 'paranormal'.

The next few chapters attempt to establish a case for the actual existence of paranormal events and give an historical description of early investigations into mesmerism, spiritualism and psychic phenomena, as well as of the more recent research into paranormal metal-bending. (The author, we

are told, was in fact personally present at some of the experiments investigating the last of these). The skeptical case promoted by Randi and CSICOP is acknowledged but is unfortunately dismissed rather too readily. In my opinion, Williams does not treat with sufficient seriousness the possibility that such phenomena are explicable without the need for postulating the existence of paranormal activity.

The remaining chapters of the book attempt to place the paranormal in an appropriate philosophical framework (basically idealism, emphasising the contribution due to Kant) and includes a chapter entitled 'The Demise of Scientific Materialism' which discusses the philosophical implications of modern physics. I am inclined to agree with Williams to the extent that I think modern physics has made it very difficult to defend any historically identifiable form of materialism (along mechanistic or dialectical lines, for example). Whether it is best interpreted as therefore supporting idealism (specifically, Kantian idealism) is perhaps more doubtful. But the Kantian position is presumably consistent with modern physics and Williams is probably correct in thinking that the paranormal is more easily reconcilable with this position than with a view in which space, time and causality are regarded as objective features of 'things in themselves'.

Despite significant shortcomings, this is an intelligent and wide-ranging book, likely to be of interest to all those concerned with the philosophical aspects of the paranormal.

—Tim Axon

Events

Saucers over Manchester

The Aliens Revealed, a public meeting held at UMIST, Manchester, Saturday 2 April 1992. Sponsored by the Independent UFO Network and Enigma Design and Publishing

This one-day conference drew a good audience and had four presenters spread over some six hours. The first was veteran US UFOlogists George D Fawcett, who has been investigating UFOs since he was 15, during the days of the 'foo fighters'. He showed a great many slides, perhaps too many, some decidedly unconvincing. He supports the 'grand extra-terrestrial hypothesis (ETH) cover-up' theory, believing in abductions, crashes, electromagnetic effects, cattle mutilations, and so on. He even told us that 'angel hair'—the mysterious sticky substance sometimes reportedly found on the ground after UFO activity—has been tasted on one occasion (it was salty)!

John MacNish of the BBC spoke at length about crop circles, and gave an excellent video showing many of the latest formations, including the Mandelbrot Set near Cambridge (see *The Skeptic* 5.5). He went through the intended secret Operation Blackbird and revealed the hoax perpetrated on the project in 1990. There was also the memorable film of Doug and Dave 'doing their bit' with a most embarrassed Messrs. Andrews and Delgado looking on. Even Dr Meaden, despite putting on a brave face, had to eat some

humble pie. Shown for the first time were some of the circles made in other countries, notable Canada and Germany. MacNish still has an open mind on circles, and ended by saying that we can only hope and wait for further developments this summer.

Jenny Randles began her talk with a discussion of SETI, and went on to the UFO connection. She also emphasised that Arnold's original sighting did *not* describe the objects as disc-shaped. Another point she brought home was that UK 'aliens' generally look quite different from US ones, the latter being much smaller. This point should be stressed, she said, and does tend to negate the ETH concept. She also asked why, in view of the vast increase in camera ownership and hi-tech, the number of 'good' photographs seems to be decreasing with time, when it should be increasing. A point well made.

The Ilkley alien photograph was shown. Oh dear, it appears that this man (who remains anonymous) has now been hypnotically regressed and even visited by 'Men In Black'. Although the photo has allegedly been very well investigated, we still do not now why this witness should just happen to have a camera with him at dawn on a winter morning while walking on the moors. Has Jenny any idea, I wonder?

Jenny erred in the case of the Stephen Darbishire photograph (taken in 1954) in saying that Stephen had never heard of George Adamski. This is not the point. It is true that he had not read the book, but he certainly *had* seen the Adamski photos beforehand—they were widely published at the time. Desmond Leslie, who interviewed Stephen within a few days of the sighting, specifically said that Stephen had indeed seen the Adamski 'scout ship' photo in a magazine. Contrary to what some have claimed, it would not have been difficult for a bright and artistic boy of 13 to cut out a paper model to the same proportions and photograph it, out of focus, atop a landscape drawing. In an old report such as this it is always better to go back to the original accounts rather than rely on recent re-interviews as Jenny has done.

Jacques Vallée was the fourth speaker. He is highly skeptical of crashes and abductions, but did say that several cases of physical evidence do exist (without giving any dates or locations). He also believes the Voronezh (Russia) affair is very important. Most interesting was his account of investigations into a number of night-time incidents in Brazil, where witnesses report being zapped by beams of light. Apparently the Brazilian Air Force also investigated, but never published their findings. Vallée did show one good daytime photo of a disc seen directly under a plane off the coast of Brazil, and this photo is still undergoing extensive investigation. Vallée still takes the 'other dimensions' and 'another form of consciousness' approach as the likely answer.

All in all, a varied and interesting day's ufology. Unfortunately, some speakers go on far too long. After about 20 slides I have usually had enough, especially as so many UFO photos, ones which which pop up time and time again, are of such poor quality as to be worthless. As a result, schedules overrun and question time suffers.

—Christopher D Allan



Letters

In praise of Hubbard

Do I find a whiff of snobbery, a hint of denigration, in Jeff Jacobsen ('Dianetics from out of the blue?', *The Skeptic*, 6.2), when he states that L Ron Hubbard wrote Science Fiction?

Hubbard is acknowledged as one of the 'greats' in Sci-Fi. To treat him with derision would be to deride Poul Anderson, H G Wells and Jonathan Swift. As for plagiarism, are we not all guilty along with Sir Christopher Wren, Shakespeare and Paul the Apostle? When teacher told us that two plus two equals four and we agreed did we not join the happy company?

Hubbard's system was brilliant and has helped and will continue to help millions. Today, when we hear so much about the Humanities, a more generous approach by *The Skeptic*, with less bias, would leave the door open for questions, which could lead to knowledge, which could lead to beneficial control and would be more generally helpful. After all, 'Charity never faileth'.

G Kingston
London

The truth about truth

Wendy Grossman is right ('No one knows anything', *The Skeptic* 6.2), but she is more right than she knows! The current philosophy of science (and therefore of everything else) teaches that there are no facts and that nothing is actually known.

All we can do is *believe*; truth is not attainable. It follows that predictions (descriptions of future facts) are also not possible.

I note that Wendy's only prediction (that there will be another Prime Minister) proved false!

Steuart Campbell
Edinburgh

Gospel truth

Steuart Campbell (Letters, *The Skeptic* 6.2) shows just how difficult it is to draw any consistent view from the Gospels of what Jesus did or did not do or say or think. Certainly, as he says, Matthew 26.53 portrays him as reluctant to call down the heavenly hosts to save him from his fate. But numerous other texts in all four Gospels represent him as miraculously overriding nature: for example, by multiplying bread, walking on water, turning water into wine, raising the dead, etc.

Mr Campbell wonders whether I am claiming that Jesus did not exist. It is an interesting question, and I think the balance of probabilities is that he did not. I have come to this view only through a careful study of the case developed with the attention to detail of a forensic scientist by Professor George Wells in four books: *The Jesus of the Early Christians* (Pemberton, 1971), *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Prometheus, 1982), *Did Jesus Exist?* (2nd Edition, Pemberton, 1986) and *Who was Jesus?* (Open Court, 1989). Having obtained an honours degree and a higher degree in theology in the 1960s, I was no pushover for the view that Jesus never existed. I was, of course, already aware of the view shared by many liberal protestant theologians, including Rudolf Bultmann, that the New Testament contains no reliable information about the historical Jesus; but Professor Wells makes a far better case than any of those theologians, in my considered opinion.

Daniel O'Hara
London

Stultified research

I am puzzled as to why Steuart Campbell (Letters, *The Skeptic* 6.2) is so persistent. He goes to much trouble

to analyse the text of a fiction, making a great issue of Jesus's reported hesitation to call up Dad's Angels. The assertion that Jesus 'dared not use [his] supernatural power...' seems to me to be sheer empty speculation worthy of 'Thought for the Day'. Similarly, all learned discussion on whether or not the OT prophecies were 'fulfilled' is seen to be vacuous until one has established 'Jesus's' historicity. For me a much more satisfying starting point is Professor Wells's hypothesis that 'Jesus' was indeed a fiction, which puts Marduk and Jesus and Mondamin and John Frum on an equal footing.

I further contrast Mr Campbell's assertion that doubters have to 'show why' a miracle story was invented. Surely the reasons *why* otherwise sane people accept irrational explanations (such as phlogiston or the Turin Shroud) is a fascinating study, but it is not necessarily the province of the historical investigator. If I reject the supernatural elements of, say, the cargo cults, do I then have to waste time and energy demonstrating the origin and mechanism of the delusion?

What has hitherto largely stultified research is that investigators start us off on the wrong foot, lumbered with the junk paraphernalia of the past, be it 'god', a flat earth, or all those bits of the True Cross worn by crusading brigands. You don't *start* by accepting as genuine the amorphous 'footprint' on the Mount of Ascension and then go off looking for the deity. It is the duty of the advocate of a given hypothesis to demonstrate the (rational) grounds for preferring his theory, and to show how it may be tested.

H B Corbishley
Ealing

This correspondence is now closed—
The Editors.

Intelligence

In his letter (*The Skeptic*, 6.2) Nick Beard chose to repeat the old joke that all IQ tests measure is the ability to perform IQ tests. Perhaps he extends this nihilistic view to other tests of ability? Thus completing an assault course would prove the ability to complete an assault course, and would have no bearing on questions of agility or physical fitness. One could shout down all knowledge and attainments by using such 'reasoning'.

IQ tests chiefly measure two related abilities: problem-solving and pattern finding in apparently random material. These are real skills, and while they may not make you wealthy, happy, imaginative, or any of the other irrelevancies that have been dragged in, they are essential prerequisites in science or any intellectual pursuit.

Depreciation of IQ tests is one manifestation of the popular anti-intellectual prejudice that helps shelter irrational beliefs against the better evidence that would shatter them. If we grant it house room in this area it will only serve to make the overall task of achieving the supremacy of reason that much more difficult.

Peter Williams
London

More intelligence

John S Green's ridiculous hyperbole (Letters, *The Skeptic* 6.2) about 'thousands' leaping to dispute me does little for my faith in his rationality.

I wish I had a pound for every time I'd encountered the old chestnut that IQ tests measure the ability to do IQ tests! The actual ability to do such tests is, it's true, of little practical use. The significance lies in what it indicates in terms of the ability to absorb complex knowledge, understand complicated information and solve difficult practical problems. The correlation between the ability to perform well on intelligence tests and the ability to do jobs requiring

superior intellectual ability is very high indeed: although, sadly, it is often found that people in menial jobs have high IQs because they have failed to realise their full potential (I most heartily agree with the third sentence of Nick Beard's second paragraph), the converse is *never* found: academics, scientists, doctors, lawyers, etc., are always found to be above, mostly far above, average.

I thought I made it clear in my first letter that I am well aware there are countless other factors influencing success, as the phenomenon of high-IQ low-achievers shows, and I certainly would not advocate reliance on an IQ test alone, or any arbitrary 'cut-off point'. Countless other factors must, of course, be taken into consideration, and I for one would much prefer someone of lower ability who made the best use of what they've got, to a brighter person who sat around contemplating his or her brilliance.

As for Nick Beard's final point, I don't know if Wendy Grossman's leaving Mensa *does* mean she's changed her mind. I know Mensa members who assert that IQ tests are meaningless!

Ray Ward
London

Even more intelligence

I wonder why some people are so seriously disturbed by the use of the word 'intelligence' (Letters, *The Skeptic*, 6.2). This attitude irritates me. Are they denying that there are differences, for example, in the capacity to isolate salient factors in a problem and relate them to each other in a meaningful way? Do they never mentally classify someone as 'bright' or someone else as 'rather dim'?

'Intelligence' is a useful word which has stood the test of time. What do the dissenters propose to put in its place, bearing in mind that no one has ever claimed to equate it automatically with social success, happiness, usefulness, emotional maturity, loveliness or a high standard of morality? 'Abstract efficiency'?

There are others who claim that 'morality' is a meaningless word.

Nonsense. We have *given* it a meaning. It's a *useful* word. For Heaven's sake, what *more* can we ask of our vocabulary?

Vivien Gibson
London

This correspondence is now also closed—The Editors.

Errata

Our apologies to Stuart Campbell, who was twice the victim of *The Skeptic's* pet gremlin in the last issue. In his article 'Who invented the Loch Ness monster?', the final sentence should have read 'If anyone invented Nessie, it was Alex Campbell'. And in his letter, 'Miracles under scrutiny', the final sentence of the first paragraph should have read 'If this does not indicate that Jesus did not dare use supernatural power, I should like to know what it does indicate.'

Sorry also to Michael Heap, whose article 'Taking it all too far' was also paranormally mangled. Beginning with the fourth sentence in the second paragraph of the first column on page 14, the text should have read:

'The nerve fibres from each ear go to both sides of the brain (albeit more cross over to the other side) so under monaural listening conditions messages from one ear go directly to the primary auditory cortex of *both* hemispheres. Similarly, it is implied that stimulating one eye means you are stimulating only one half of the brain. This is complete nonsense. The optic nerve from each eye goes to both sides of the brain (the primary visual cortex at the back of the brain). Nerve fibres from the *right half* of the retinae of *both* eyes go to the *right half* of the brain and those from the *left half* of the retinae go to the *left half* of the brain. This means that if you look straight ahead, what you see on the left side is going first to the right hemisphere, and what you see on the right side goes first to the left hemisphere.'

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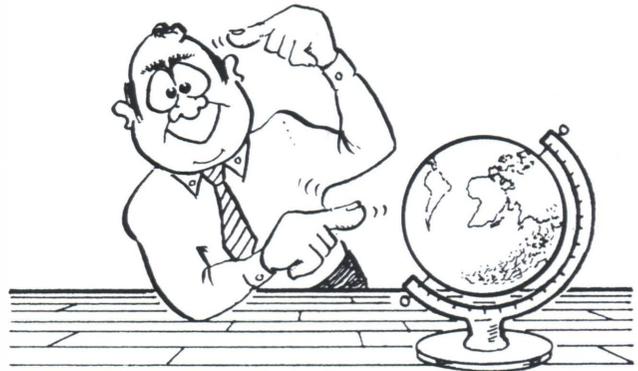
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