

Volume 7 Number 1  
January/February 1993

# The Skeptic



## *The Truth about Tarot*

Also in this issue:

*Skeptics in Hong Kong*  
*The Near-Death Experience*  
*Skeptical Predictions for 1993*  
*Snake Oil for the 90s*

£1.85

# Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



Ugo Tonarelli, of Piombara, wasn't feeling too good. So he went, as Italian countryfolk will, to his friendly neighbourhood gypsies, to see what was wrong with him. They were quickly able to diagnose his trouble: an ill-wisher had placed a malevolent spell on him, which would see him dead within the month, unless some counter-magic was rapidly activated. Where could such good magic be procured? Ah, well, we gypsies know about such things... True, it comes expensive, all those costly ingredients; but when it's a matter of life or death... By the end of the month Ugo had bought 1,600,000 lira's worth of good gypsy magic. But here's the good news: he was still alive...

Source: *La Domenica del Corriere*, 6 August 1961

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Steuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Arthur Chappell, Gerald Fleming, Ernest Jackson, Chris Torrero, Mavis Howard, Bill Donnelly, Wendy Grossman, Mike Williams, R G Hooper, Brian Monahan, Alan Remfry, Gregory Young, Christopher Allen, John Green and Austen Moulden.

Sorry if we've missed anyone out! Please keep the clippings coming!

# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

## Britain Leads US

On a recent visit to Chicago, having not visited the United States for three or four years, I eagerly popped into my local drugstore to buy a copy of the *National Inquirer* for the latest news of UFO landings, hauntings and other everyday stories of everyday folk. Imagine my surprise when I found photographs of Princess Di in a bikini, details of a recent kidnapping and several new miracle diets but not a single article on a paranormal topic. The *National Inquirer*, a few years ago, could be relied upon to bring you information on the latest government coverup of crashed aliens or of Amityville-style hauntings but now there was nothing. A look at other similar magazines yielded the same result. Although publications on New Age topics abound in the bookshops—and I did hear astrological consultations on a local radio station—I was surprised at the extent to which I was *not* confronted by the paranormal. The worrying upshot of this is that, with the coverage given by British tabloids to paranormal topics and the fact that even a publication as serious as the *Sunday Times* now has an astrology column in its magazine section, Britain may well be the most paranormal-obsessed nation in the west. . .

## Sucking the Lifeblood

Fortunately, Britain will continue, for the foreseeable future, to be runner up to Russia in the world league of most irrational nations. You might imagine that with crime increases, food shortages and the value of the rouble almost a thousand times less than a few years ago, the Russian people already have plenty to worry about. But, as Tim Axon discussed in *The Skeptic* 6.1, the paranormal is undergoing a tremendous resurgence in the countries of the former USSR—to such an extent that, in the ancient Russian city of Vologda, the threat of attack by vampires is the menace that

is uppermost in the minds of residents. According to the *Independent* on 14 November, a recent opinion poll in the local Vologdan newspaper, *Russky Sever*, revealed that a supernatural beast known as an energy vampire is the entity who most strikes most fear in the hearts of Vologdians. And it's not surprising when you realise that the vampire in question delights in sucking, not the blood, but the life energy from the people of northern Russia. Second place on the list of things to fear was witches and black magic but, perhaps a little bit more pragmatically, third place was taken by 'silly bosses and their stupid orders'.

## DisCERNing Observers

For a group of presumably fairly skeptical physicists on the Franco-Swiss border, the influence of celestial bodies on their daily lives has recently been clearly demonstrated. The physicists in question work at CERN on LEP, a huge particle accelerator housed in a tunnel 27 km in circumference—the machine is used to accelerate sub-atomic particles to very high speeds and collide them head-on in order to search for the 'fundamental' constituents of matter that they hope will result from the collisions. According to Tom Wilkie in the *Independent* on 26 November, the scientists had been aware since they began using the machine in 1989 that their measurements were being perturbed by minute variations in the energy of the accelerated particles: the energies were found to differ by amounts of up to 200 parts per million depending on the time of the month when the experiments were being conducted. However it was only recently that they discovered the reason for these small variations—Earth tides. Not many people are aware that the moon exerts tidal forces on the Earth's crust in the same way that it does on the oceans. As a result, the Earth's crust rises and falls by between 20 and 30 cms per lunar month. Because of the large diameter of LEP this gives rise to a variation in its circumference of about 1 mm so that particles are then travelling distances varying by up to 1 mm per circuit and this gives rise to the observed small energy variations.

Next time you talk to your friendly, neighbourhood, scientific astrologer this will be used as clear proof that Saturn on the ascendant can have a profound influence on your sex life.

## Plutonic Investments

Perhaps even more worrying as far as celestial influences are concerned, readers whose fortunes depend on the vagaries of the stockmarket should take note of the fact that Pluto and Saturn will be 90 degrees apart in the sky in March and November of this year. This event, known to the astrological cognoscenti as the square of Pluto and Saturn, could be very bad news for the stockmarket, according to financial



astrologer Daniel Pallant. The last time that this event occurred was in September 1974 when the stockmarket fell by 40% but on earlier occasions in 1939, 1940 and 1956 Pallant claims that the market also fell significantly.

In an article published in the financial pages of the *Daily Mail* on 17 December Pallant claims that the market falls by on average by 25% during a Pluto-Saturn square and that the square coming up this year carries a 'strong whiff of nuclear weapons blackmail' Any *Skeptic* readers with stock in nuclear weapons should perhaps consider selling and investing in New Age paraphernalia instead.

## New Age Divorce

The New Age is not just a way of life, it is also big business, particularly in the United States. In Tacoma Washington, this was recently illustrated in a court case in which the ex-husband of America's most famous New Age channeller, J Z Knight, is suing his former wife for using mind-control techniques to force him to accept a small divorce settlement. According to the *Times* on 5 October, in the 1980s Jeffrey Knight, helped his wife to amass millions of dollars by charging devotees up to \$1000 to hear the words of 35 000 year old Ramtha emerge from her mouth. Ramtha is a Cro-Magnon fugitive from Atlantis and it is unclear why anyone should wish to follow his advice. (Neither Atlantis nor Cro-Magnon man can be regarded as spectacular success stories). But many followers, including Shirley MacLaine, take Ramtha's words very seriously indeed. Poor old Jeffrey, who no-longer believes in Ramtha's teachings, claims that the \$120000 divorce settlement which he accepted in 1988 was only a tiny fraction of the fortune that he helped generate and he is now hoping to be awarded a much larger share of the proceeds. So far Ms Knight has refused to put Ramtha on the witness stand.



Tim Pearce

## The Lady Appears

As we approach the millennium it is not only New Age beliefs that seem to be sweeping like a contagious disease through our society; some Old Age beliefs seem also to be enjoying great increases in popularity. Visions of the Blessed

Virgin Mary (BVM) have been a common phenomenon in Roman Catholic circles since St Catherine Laboure had a visitation in Paris in 1830. Since that time the two best known appearances have been at Lourdes in France in 1858 and Fatima in Portugal in 1917 but her appearance every day for the last twelve years or so to a group of children in Medjugorje in former Yugoslavia constitutes the best known BVM visitation since the first world war. The BVM's visits, however, have not been confined to these locations; in catholic communities throughout the world, she has frequently appeared—rarely to non-catholics and usually to impressionable children or young women.

An exception to this formula is currently occurring in the tiny town of Marlboro, New Jersey where resident Joseph Januszkiewicz is visited by the BVM once per month. In a sense, however, this is a secondary visitation, in that it followed a pilgrimage by Mr Januszkiewicz to Medjugorje. According to *The Times* on 7 September, on his return to the US, Mr Januszkiewicz claimed that a back injury and a hearing loss had been cured and that soon afterwards he began to receive messages from the Virgin in a 4 ft shrine in his back yard. In keeping with other visitations, the several thousand pilgrims to the New Jersey shrine do not themselves see the BVM but this does not deter their belief that she really appears.

In Chile, according to a recent article in *The Guardian*, this belief has even survived the application of the modern technique of DNA fingerprinting. In the poor Santiago suburb of La Cisterna a porcelain statue of the Virgin Mary has been weeping blood since 14 November at the home of the devoutly catholic Nuñez family. As with Mr Januszkiewicz's backyard shrine in New Jersey, this has caused the Nuñez's home to become a place of pilgrimage for the local faithful and has resulted in top nightly TV billing for the apparent Marian manifestation. DNA tests on the blood, however, carried out by the city coroner have shown that there is a 99.99995% chance that the blood in question belongs to Mr Renato Nuñez, the owner of the statue. However, the family has reported the occurrence of a number of miraculous healings including two babies who were cured of cancer. And who can argue with Mr Nuñez's reasoning when he says 'If it's my blood it's a divine miracle'.

Appearances and manifestations of the BVM seem likely to continue as we approach and enter the next millennium (if the world doesn't end beforehand, of course) and, no doubt, many French catholics hope that she will manifest herself in some clear manner at Lourdes sometime in the near future to ensure the primacy of this site over places such as Medjugorje or Knock, in Ireland. According to an article in the *European* on 17 December, this most popular of all shrines is being crippled by the sheer number of pilgrims—currently 5 million—who flood into the town every year. The shrine has not had a documented miracle in the last 16 years and is now hoping for both a miracle or two as well as European funding to help it survive the millennium.

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

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# Ask Professor Mesmo

*Britain's leading metaphysical pure mathematician divines the answers your psychic questions*

*Unfortunately, just prior to writing his problem page for the last issue, Professor Mesmo was the victim of a particularly nasty Spontaneous Human Combustion incident. Understandably he was unable to write his column, despite his repeated efforts to contact the Skeptic office through various mediums.*

*Happily, Professor Mesmo has since been reincarnated (again) with all memories and psychic abilities intact, as Dr Montana Smith—*noted specialist in archaeological remote viewing at Harvard University.* Dr Smith has now changed his name by deed poll to John Alouisius Mesmo and is working on the accent.*



Dear Professor,

I am Randy, Randy Clark. And I challenge you to carry out one of your paranormal or psychic events under scientific controlled conditions. As I am incredibly cautious, I shall offer you 1000 US dollars if you can:

1. Make a ghost appear and shake the Prime Minister's hand.
2. Divine water using a pair of knitting needles in the Gobi desert.
3. Cure someone of cancer overnight.
4. Make a purple aura appear around my head on prime time TV.
5. Bring back my grandmother from the dead.

I will undertake to pay you if you can demonstrate any of the above. If you fail to do any of these things, I will know you use trickery and 'sleight of hand', especially on your radio programmes. You can name the place for the experiment but it will have to conform to the following scientific precautions:

1. Passed with a metal detector.
2. All surfaces to be wiped with Jeyes fluid prior to performance.
3. All spoon-bending to be performed using Marigold rubber gloves.
4. All participants to be strip-searched and all performances to be carried out naked and whilst standing in a bucket of water.

I have examined videos of the last 50 TV programmes 'Hey Profesto!' and 'Prepare to be MESMORised' to see how many camera tricks you have used—especially when you appeared to make that small Central American country disappear from under the tarpaulin. My colleagues and I know about the magnet in the tie and the duplicate wildebeest.

Yours frostily,

**Mr Randy Clark, Dr Eric Sumo (Physics),  
Dr Joan Splot (Vet Sci), Prof D Nombolo (C Eng),  
Mr F Barff (S Sport).**

**Professor Mesmo replies**

Well Randy, I can see straight away that you do not understand anything about the occult or psychic events. Firstly, they cannot be demonstrated in front of scientists. Secondly, they do not always work in the presence of shuttered and closed minds of a 'hostile nature'. Thirdly, these phenomena cannot be demonstrated unless there is group harmony and total belief, usually confirmed through the purchase of a very expensive ticket. This all has to do with those mysterious E-rays. Discovered by a French physicist, these take the form of infinite strings that get knotted throughout the Universe. Topologists (people who understand knots) say that these are like rubber tubes with holes in them, and that they can instantly turn into coffee cups (or doughnuts). The laws of new quantum physics give us these explanations. These rays are so incredibly sensitive that even looking at oneself in a mirror can upset the time/space continuum and throw the whole event into a parallel universe, or 'Astral Plane' as we prefer to call it.

The Tao of Psychokinetics has explained this, evocatively encapsulated in the enigmatic Bhuddist phrase; 'What's the sound of a one-member band practising?'. Negative thoughts such as yours can tip the precarious balance and throw the event into chaos. My TV shows have a greater audience than 'Eldorado' and are spectacular events, enlivening the dull, pedestrian existence of the vast viewing public. I daresay no more than a handful of people have read one of your murky grey scientific papers in some dusty academic library. I use a \$1000 note to clean my shoes. I have to say that if you persist in your defamatory remarks I shall SUE, and SUE AGAIN!

Yours,

**Professor Mesmorandum**

# Across the Great Divide

Rebecca Bradley and Tso Wung-Wai

## *Skeptics and the paranormal in Hong Kong*

**H**ERE WE ARE, caught between the PRC and the deep blue South China Sea, six million Cantonese speakers and a couple of hundred thousand ex-pats. Hong Kong's two cultures interdigitate, but don't easily mix—except, perhaps, in matters of the stock market and the looming great question mark of 1997. This split also holds in the paranormal tastes of the two populations, as dramatically different as Cantopop is from British heavy metal.

On the ex-pat side, we have at least our fair share of resident New Agers, western astrologers, fortune tellers and health gurus, with heavy input from Britain, the US and Australia; and booming markets in alternative medicine, such as homeopathy, iridology and crystal power. The big fads of the last two years have been Life Dynamics (and several generations of the Sons of Life Dynamics), and variants on the 'healing energies' theme, notably a hands-on system called Raiki. There is also some two-way traffic with Chinese belief systems, in that some ex-pats consult Chinese traditional practitioners, while some bilingual HongKongers participate in the ex-pat community's fads.

We're also on the international circuit, regularly visited by birds-of-passage: grandmasters of this and that new wonder, travelling psychics with no surnames, itinerant healers, psychic surgeons, even a man with a marvellous mynah bird that could be stroked for luck—at the equivalent of thirty quid per customer. This month alone, November, we're seeing two Raiki grandmasters and a psychic prophetess from Australia, an eminent British miracle-healer (sponsored by the prestigious Hong Kong Cancer Fund), and the advent of Psychocalisthenics, brought in by an American. And so it goes.

On the other side of the great divide, we have the ethnic Chinese fortune tellers and astrologers, feng shui (geomancy) practitioners, and the large grey areas of traditional Chinese healing techniques, herbal remedies and qi gong (pronounced chi gung); grey because, with all their valid and potentially valuable aspects, they are wide open to abuse by quacks, charlatans and incompetents. In all these, the expatriate skeptic treads on thin ice, and must respect the imperative not to stick his nose into somebody else's cultural orthodoxy unless invited to do so. The ethnic Chinese skeptic, on the other hand, runs into the same limitations as, say, CSICOP might when dealing with orthodox Western religions—some things are beyond the skeptics' brief.

About five years ago, a small group of ethnic Chinese scientists, drawn from the science faculties of several terti-



ary and secondary institutions in Hong Kong, began to meet to discuss the method and theory of qi gong. This is a discipline which, at one extreme, combines slow, gentle, beneficial exercise with a mild form of meditation. At the other extreme, however, some qi gong masters claim the ability to focus and transmit their energies to the bodies of other people, to diagnose, to heal, to discover lost objects, and to change the chemical composition of certain substances. This group of scientists, themselves committed practitioners of qi gong exercise, decided to see if there was any substance to the more ambitious claims.

Out of this grew, spontaneously, Hong Kong's Research Committee on Unexplained Phenomena—not modelled on CSICOP, indeed one member (co-author Tso) first heard of CSICOP about three years later, and began to subscribe to the *Skeptical Inquirer* only last year. The first test was of a qi gong master's ability to transmit his energies across a room to either the right or left hand of a confederate. When both sender and receiver could see each other, the score was 100%. However, when the receiver was blindfolded and the sequence of transmission randomised and under the control of the Committee, the score immediately dropped to the level of chance.

This was only the beginning. For the next four years, the Committee acted as a kind of flying squad, rapidly organising tests of paranormal claimants around Hong Kong and even across the border in Shenzhen. They tested remote-energy healers; examined people who claimed to see into the body for detailed diagnoses; discovered the use of skills at qi gong rallies by photographing the audiences; and, in one well-publicised test, used NMR spectroscopy to examine claimed chemical changes in samples of a standard organic solvent. In all cases, they found either that the phenomena disappeared under scrutiny, or were explicable by non-paranormal means. They wrote articles for the Cantonese press and appeared on Cantonese radio and television programmes, often in direct confrontation with par-

anormal claimants, and had some measurable effect on paranormal box-office receipts. And in due course, they ran out of 'targets'.

This was not because the ethnic Chinese community had been cleared of quacks and charlatans—far from it. It was because no self-respecting charlatan would allow the Committee near enough to run tests any more. For the last year, therefore, the Committee has been more or less inactive, although the Cantonese media continue to consult some members on questionable claims, such as the wonderful Ghost Train flap of the last few weeks—a long story, better told on its own sometime.

Enter the ex-pats, all unaware of these healthy developments on the Cantonese side, and concerned about the rising tide of New Age faddism on Hong Kong shores. In October 1991, a meeting was called of the ten HK subscribers to *Skeptical Inquirer*, in hopes that an action group of some sort could be organised. At this initial meeting, we decided that our first priority was to collect information—to cull the media for articles and ads on paranormal activities in Hong Kong; to contact the advertisers with requests for pamphlets and price-lists; and to open files on the birds-of-passage, and contact skeptics' groups in their home countries. Most significant, however, is that the ex-pat and local skeptics have now discovered each other. One of the SI subscribers (again co-author Tso) is also the founding chairman of the Research Committee on Unexplained Phenomena, and a frequent skeptical voice in the Cantonese media. And now that we know about each other, who knows what will happen? Will the ex-pats sensitise the Committee to new 'targets' on the fringes of the local scene? Will the committee provide the ex-pats with much-needed backup, experience and expertise? Will we be able to bridge the great divide in the interests of rationalism in both communities? We do not yet know—but we'll certainly keep you posted.

Both resident in Hong Kong, Dr Rebecca Bradley is a freelance writer, and Dr Tso Wung-Wai is Senior Lecturer in Biochemistry, at Chinese University.

## FAIR

Family Action Information and Rescue

### Influence and stress-related issues

Monday 22 March 1993, Royal Society of Medicine, 1 Wimpole Street, London W1M 8AE, 1.45 – 5.00 p.m.

F.A.I.R. is a voluntary organisation offering support and information to individuals affected by involvement in cults. Presentations at this seminar include:

- 'The psychology of unethical influence: lessons for resisting such manipulation' (Dr Bryan Tully).
- 'New religions: totalism and its effect' (Dr Peter Clarke).
- 'The group approach to coping with, and recovering from, stress' (Surgeon Cmdr. M.R. O'Connell).

Attendance is strictly by advance booking, at £14 per person. Seminar F.A.I.R., Box BCM 3535, PO Box 12, London WC1N 3XX. Tel: 0689 853128 or 0642 782810.

# 1993 Skeptical Predictions

by resident seer  
Marjorie Mackintosh

**January:** Nancy Reagan declares that her astrologer predicted the Bush defeat in June—'But we didn't want to tell him in case he became discouraged and didn't win'.

**February:** John Major's denial of any knowledge about the Iraqi arms sales is explained when it is revealed that he was having out of body experiences at the critical times. His body was behind his desk, but his mind was home watching a cricket match.

**March:** As a defence against the increasing invasion of his privacy by people monitoring his portable telephone calls, Prince Charles asks Uri Geller to help him develop his telepathic ability.

**April:** Investigative journalists reveal that the government is considering using psychic surgeons in NHS hospitals as they cost less than traditional surgeons and their patients do not require aftercare... only burial.

**May:** Speaking after a visit to Lourdes, Madonna claims she saw the Madonna. Shortly after, when appearing to a group of children in Eastern Europe, the Madonna claims she saw Madonna. Neither is impressed by the other.

**June:** After two months of training sessions, Prince Charles admits that he has still experienced no increase in telepathic power, but the Palace complains about the sudden appearance of dozens of bent spoons.

**July:** Ex-President Reagan is recruited as an advisor by the Centre for Crop Circle Studies as he's been going around in circles for years.

**August:** Fundamentalists announce the launch of a study to discover the variety of apple eaten by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.

**September:** Norman Lamont tells the nation that he sees an upturn coming. British psychics express amazement at his powers as none of them can see that far into the future.

**October:** Just in case there should be another uninsured disaster at Windsor Castle, government officials suggest the Royal family learn a new skill—fire-walking.

**November:** End of year reports show a decline in the number of UFO sightings reported. Owing to the state of the economy, aliens are no longer investing in Britain.

**December:** Traditionalists contest the claims of the Maharishi that Santa Claus and his reindeer owe their powers of flight to transcendental meditation. The North Pole refuses to comment.

# Obituary: Charles Honorton

Susan Blackmore

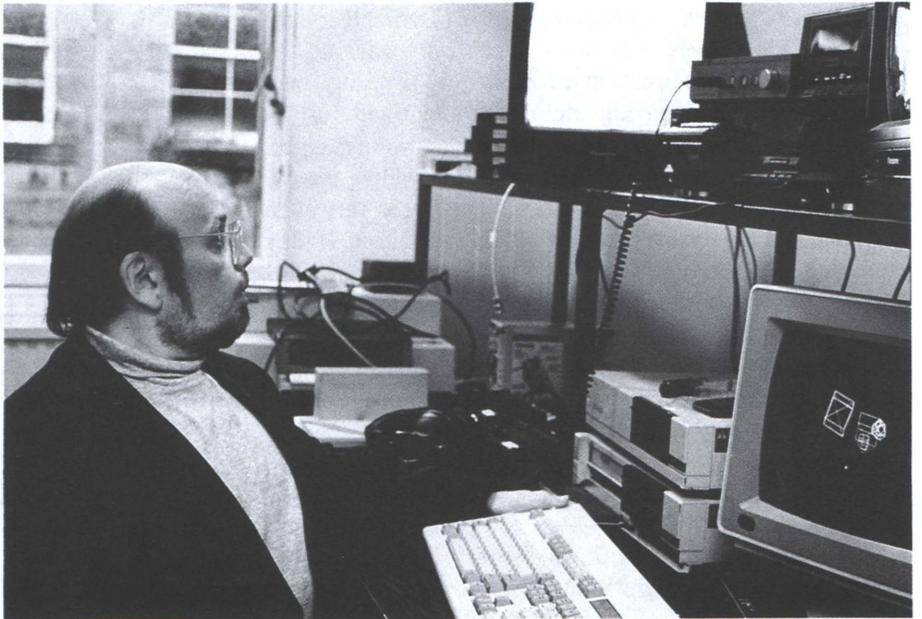
**C**HARLES HONORTON died on 4 November 1992, of a heart attack at the age of 46, leaving the small world of parapsychology shocked and shaken. Although he had had heart problems for some time, the loss of an active researcher in the midst of his career must always be a shock. And to parapsychology it was doubly so because of the unique importance of his work.

I wanted to write something in his memory, not only because I have known him for many years but because his loss will have an enormous impact on parapsychology. And I am not at all sure just what that impact will be.

Chuck and I have not, to say the least, seen eye to eye on the paranormal. I remember with affection a somewhat drunken argument at one parapsychology conference in which we were both more or less reduced to tears and hopeless hugs by our complete failure to understand how the other could go on believing what they did. At that time, in 1985, he was Director of the Parapsychology Research Laboratories, in Princeton, New Jersey and claiming impressive evidence for psi. In 1989 the funding dried up (as has happened to so many parapsychological laboratories) and he moved to Edinburgh University to work with Bob Morris and his team at the Koestler Chair. Since his arrival he and I have had many extended phone conversations and learned that, whatever our differences, we shared a determination to try to understand paranormal claims and an unwillingness to accept shoddy research or shoddy criticism. But that is enough of my personal memories of Chuck: more important is to explain why his death will make such a difference to the subject.

It is often said that in parapsychology fads come every decade or so and then go away: like Soal's work in the fifties or dream-telepathy in the sixties. The supposed fad of the 1970s was the Ganzfeld. But it has not gone away yet.

It was in 1974 that Honorton and Harper published the first paper describing the psi-Ganzfeld technique. Typically the subject relaxes on a comfortable chair or bed, has halved ping-pong balls over the eyes to produce a uniform



Carol Gordon

visual field (the Ganzfeld) and white noise or repetitive sounds fed through headphones to the ears. Chuck's hypothesis was that this reduction in patterned sensory input would encourage free-flowing imagery and with it the incorporation of ESP—and it would be far easier to study than other supposedly 'psi-conductive states' such as meditation or dreaming. The positive results encouraged many other parapsychologists to use the technique.

By 1982, at the Society for Psychical Research centenary conference, the 'Ganzfeld Debate' was under way. Ray Hyman, a psychologist from the University of Oregon, evaluated the entire database of some forty Ganzfeld experiments and argued that the claimed 55% success rate was a gross over-estimate, that multiple testing pushed the true significance level way above the assumed 0.05 level and that many studies suffered from procedural flaws. His meta-analysis showed that some flaws positively correlated with effect size—in other words they were responsible for the effects and the data were too weak to support any claims about psi.

In response Honorton used a statistical technician to eliminate the problem of multiple analysis, showed that the successful results did not depend on any one investigator and performed his his own meta-analysis showing no relationship between flaws and study outcome. The whole debate was published in 1985 and has been a turning point in

parapsychology. Although people remained divided over the substantive issues—is there ESP in the Ganzfeld or not?—there was general agreement that the debate was extremely useful and that both Hyman and Honorton were to be congratulated for their persistence and courage in working together. Perhaps most important was that the debate brought together skeptics and parapsychologists to discuss the issues properly. I can recall several conferences at which they tried to agree on just what would count as a flawless experiment. It was then Honorton who designed a completely automated Ganzfeld testing procedure.

Over the next few years, Honorton and his team at Princeton worked with their system and in 1990 published the results of eleven experiments with 241 volunteer subjects and 355 Ganzfeld sessions. I can only imagine the amount of time and work involved in this from my own experience with a single Ganzfeld experiment with just 20 trials. The results of these automated studies were staggeringly significant. My own impression from reading the paper many times was that the experiments were very well designed and the results certainly not due to chance. If they were due to something other than psi it was not obvious what it was. In other words these experiments stood out from all the mass of failed, barely significant or obviously flawed studies.

Why were they successful? That is the crux of the matter and the reason why Chuck will be so sorely missed. Everyone interested in parapsychology, whether believer, disbeliever or skeptic, ought to take these results seriously. They cannot be dismissed lightly—they conform to most, if not all, the requirements laid down by the skeptics and the results were highly significant. Certainly the Edinburgh group took them seriously and were delighted that Chuck was able to come there to set up the same automated system in a different place and with different colleagues. They, like the rest of us, wanted to know whether the same results would be obtained.

Now, of course, we shall never know. The Edinburgh team are determined to carry on Chuck's good work but what will they find? If they are as successful as his Princeton team was then there will be something to work with and we may yet get to the bottom of the mystery—whether that bottom is a psychic or a normal one. But if they fail I suspect we shall never know why Chuck Honorton seemed to have the magic touch when it came to producing psi.

Was it his personality? Was it something he brought to the experimental design? Was his hypothesis about sensory noise reduction actually correct? I am very very sorry that we are not to see Chuck himself repeat these experiments over here and give us the chance to find out. His death was a blow to parapsychology and he will be greatly missed.

Interested readers will find more information on the 'Ganzfeld Debate' between Hyman and Honorton in *Journal of Parapsychology*, 49, 1–91, 1985. Honorton's automated Ganzfeld research is in Honorton, C. *et al* (1990) 'Psi Communication in the Ganzfeld', *Journal of Parapsychology*, 54, 99–139.

**Dr Susan Blackmore** is a psychologist at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

## Crossword Solution

1	y	u	l	e	t	i	d	e	5	u	n	i	t	e	s				
	o		i		w		e			a		i		p					
9	g	u	l	l	i	b	l	e	10	s	p	a	r	t	a				
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11	s	c	e	p	t	i	c	s	12	b	l	a	s	t	s				
	m		s		s		t		13	w		e		o	e				
									14	p	a	r	a	n	o	r	m	a	l
15	o		16	p		17	e		b		v		n		e		y		
18	c	h	a	n	n	e	l	l	e	d									
	c		r		c		e		r		19	a		20	p		21	k	
22	u	n	a	b	l	e			23	d	i	l	u	t	i	o	n		
	l		s		o					n		r		n		o			
24	t	h	i	r	s	t			25	a	g	n	o	s	t	i	c		
	e		t		e					l		r		o		k			
26	d	r	e	a	d	s			27	b	y	p	a	s	s	e	s		

Congratulations to D F Gibbs of Bristol, who is the winner of the Skepticus Xmas crossword competition. We shall be chartering a cigar-shaped UFO to deliver a copy of Milton A Rothman's book *The Science Gap* to the winner.

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# The Theft of the Tarot Pack

Daf Tregear

## *A look at the history of the Tarot*

**C**URRENT HISTORICAL EVIDENCE gives no indication of regular playing-cards being used for card games in Europe before 1377, and no mention of Tarot cards before 1440. In fact, Tarot cards were designed for play, and *not* for telling fortunes. There are many variations of the Tarot game, and hence variations of the Tarot pack (see box). The practice of telling fortunes by means of ordinary playing cards was not heard of in Europe until the eighteenth century. Exceptions were the use of playing cards drawn at random used as indices into a book containing prophecies (dice would have done just as well), and a special fortune-telling pack which was devised in England at the end of seventeenth century.

In the 1780s, when the practice of fortune-telling with regular playing-cards had been well established for at least two decades, the use of the Tarot pack for cartomancy began. It was confined to France for the next century before spreading to other countries.

### The Tarot Pack

There are many variations of packs used for playing the game of Tarot, some with as few as 42 cards and others with as many as 97. All of them have sprung from the 78 card pack which contains 56 suit cards (1–10, king, queen, knight and jack) and 22 picture cards not associated with any suit. Of these twenty-two cards one is called 'The Fool' and is un-numbered with the remaining twenty one numbered with Roman numerals from I to XXI. These cards are called *tarocchi* in Italian (where the game originated somewhere between 1420 and 1440) which became *tarau* in French and was anglicised to *tarot*. During the fifteenth century these cards were also referred to as *carte da trionfi*, that is cards with triumphs (the triumphs, or trumps, being the 22 picture cards)—strictly speaking tarocchi cards are the trump cards only, excluding the suit cards. A sixteenth century treatise on card games explains the sometimes one plays with extra cards called tarocchi and sometimes without them.



### The beginning of the occultist tradition

The entire occultist Tarot tradition stems from the work of Antoine Court de Gébelin (1719–1784), a Protestant pastor, Freemason and savant. Between 1773 and 1782 he published by private subscription the first nine volumes of a huge work entitled *Le Monde Primitif*. All of this work is now forgotten, except for his essay on the Tarot pack published in the eighth volume in 1781.

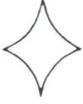
At the time de Gébelin was writing, the Tarot pack, and the games played with it, had been known in France for two and a half centuries. However card-playing traditions in France were highly localised and the game was at that time quite unknown in Paris (de Gébelin's home). De Gébelin discovered in these, to him, very exotic cards, symbols of the ancient Egyptian religion. He concluded that the pack had been invented by ancient Egyptian priests, and that it contained a symbolic representation of their doctrine and was in fact a seventy eight page book. At that time Egyptian hieroglyphics had not yet been deciphered by Champollion; nevertheless de Gébelin concluded that the word 'Tarot' means 'the royal road', being derived from ancient Egyptian 'tar' meaning 'way' and 'ro', 'ros' or 'rog' meaning 'royal'. Neither word can be found in any classical Egyptian dictionary. The clever disguise of the Egyptian priests' teaching had ensured its preservation through the ages, and card players had been innocent dupes in its perpetuation. He added also that the twenty two triumphs (picture cards) correspond to the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

De Gébelin appended to his own essay one by another (anonymous) author which contributed more to the Tarot

## The Occult Tarot Pack

A Tarot pack designed for fortune-telling has four suits consisting of Swords, Batons, Cups and Coins. These suits are the traditional ones still in use in Italy today for playing local games and are the oldest European suit system (the Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds and Spades with which the French, English and Americans are so familiar were probably not thought up until the 1470s). In the occultist tradition the Batons will be called Wands, and Coins will become Pentangles. The suit cards are collectively called the 'Minor Arcana'.

The term 'Major Arcana' is given to the remaining 22 cards. One card is un-numbered and shows the Fool. The subjects most usually depicted on the remaining twenty one, numbered, picture cards are as follows:

Traditional name	Occult name		
I the Bagatto (Mountebank)	Magician		
II the Popess	High Priestess		
III the Empress			
IV the Emperor			
V the Pope	High Priest/Hierophant		
VI Love (or the Lovers)			
VII the Chariot			
VIII Justice			
IX the Hermit			
X the Wheel of Fortune			
XI Fortitude			
XII the Hanged Man			
XIII Death			
XIV Temperance			
XV the Devil			
XVI the Tower			
XVII the Star			
XVIII the Moon			
XIX the Sun			
XX Judgment			
XXI the World			

Artistic licence is often employed and the designs used in modern occult packs may be of different subjects altogether.

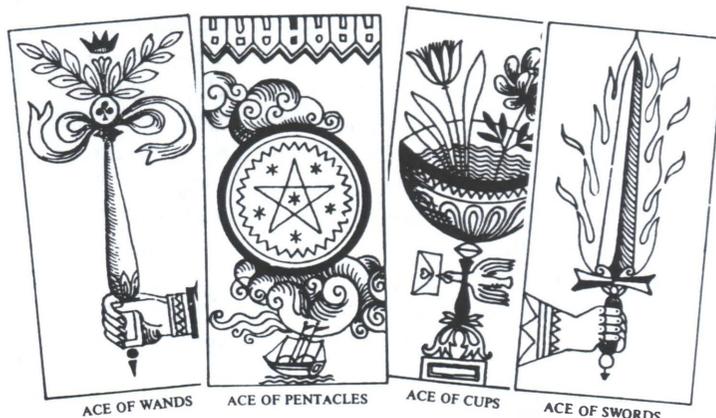
Variations of the game of tarot flourished in various northern Italian cities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, among them Milan. As a result of the French occupation of Milan the game spread to France and Switzerland and was extremely popular in France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The principal standardised set of designs is those originating from Milan but called *Tarot de Marseille* since that town became one of the major manufacturers of the pack. From the late fifteenth century the triumphs were numbered. The French manufacturers added the inscriptions at the bottom sometime during the eighteenth century.

pack's subsequent mythology. He calls the pack the 'book of Thoth' and gives a different, equally spurious, etymology to the word 'Tarot'. His major contribution is to introduce the association of Tarot cards with fortune-telling. He ascribes this practice to the ancient Egyptians, without offering any evidence, and describes a method of divination using the cards which purports to be a method used in ancient Egypt. Further, he associates the Gypsies with the Tarot pack and its dissemination throughout Europe. The Gypsies did not originate from Egypt, but when they arrived in Europe they had given themselves out to be a group of persecuted Egyptian Christians, and they were generally accepted as such until their Indian origin was established by a philological study of their language.

These absurd conjectures would have been as quickly forgotten as the rest of de Gébelin's works had it not been for a professional fortune-teller calling himself 'Eteilla' (his real name was Alliette). Eteilla practised his trade in Paris from 1770 until 1791. Fortune-telling, particularly by means of playing-cards, began to achieve a vogue in Paris during the period preceding the Revolution and continued during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. Eteilla published various works (in 1770, 1773 and 1782) describing his method of fortune-telling using a 32-card piquet pack. It was he who (inspired by de Gébelin) invented in 1783 a method of cartomancy involving the use of the Tarot pack and published extensively on it between 1783 and his death in 1791.

From 1783 onwards Eteilla offered for sale a 'corrected' Tarot pack, the first in a long line of Tarot packs designed specifically for cartomancy. And in 1788 a society for Tarot cartomancy was formed (Société Littéraire des associés libres des interprètes du livre du Thot). Eteilla's work laid the foundation of a tradition which survived well into the second half of the nineteenth century.

Various practitioners carried on after Eteilla's death, all of whom could not resist publishing their own interpretation of the cartomantic Tarot pack. And so it was that the tradition started by Eteilla took on an independent life. The designers of these various cartomantic Tarot packs did not go back for their inspiration to the traditional Tarot cards which Eteilla had 'corrected'. Instead they based their interpretations on the cartomantic significance of the cards or on their own imaginations to give a Biblical, Egyptian or mediaeval flavour to their cards. Those who bought the cards were probably not aware of the traditional use of the Tarot pack for play, nor of the romancing poured out by



Etteilla in his publications. Without Etteilla it is possible that no one would have decided that the Tarot pack was a suitable tool to use for divining the future.

### New impetus for the use of the Tarot pack

The association of the traditional Tarot pack with the occult received a new impetus with the publication in 1855 of *Le Dogme de la haute magie* by Alphonse-Louis Constant using the name of Eliphas Lévi. In 1856 he published *Rituel de la Haute Magie*; from these two books (and the stream of related books he followed up with) the whole of the modern occultist movement has its roots. Lévi's business was magic. His thesis was that the classic works of occult literature state, in symbolic language, the existence of a universal agent he called 'magnetised electricity', which 'profane science' has investigated under four of its manifestations—heat, light, electricity and magnetism—but which has other manifestations, in the form of magical phenomena. This agent is elsewhere called by Lévi 'the Great Magical Agent' and 'the Astral Light'. It 'has a direct action on the nerves', and can conversely be directed by the will. This is the explanation of all the classical magical phenomena: by operating on the Astral Light, the adept can call up apparitions of the dead, render himself invisible by making others unable to see him, predict the future, convert base metals to gold, revive the recently dead, cure illnesses, control the will of others, etc., etc.



Why did Eliphas Lévi achieve a success far beyond any of his predecessors? Perhaps because his options were easiest. One wasn't required to become a Freemason nor join any other of the various secret orders. One did not have to participate in esoteric religious rites. Magic was not presented by Lévi to his readers as a mystery which he could only partially disclose and they would be able to penetrate only with difficulty—for the most part he claims to have discovered all and to be revealing all. He didn't require that those accepting his teachings changed their life-styles or abandon their religious belief. Lévi's magic was 'all in the head'. The emphasis was on the theory, not on the practice; the theory sounded grandiose, but amounted to little that would commit one to any definite belief or course of action.

Lévi's magical symbolism and doctrines are borrowed from the standard sources of European occultism since the Renaissance; the Cabala, alchemy, the Hermetic books and astrology. At the same time he passed by existing scientific and historical knowledge, since he was completely uncon-



Antoine Court de Gébelin

cerned with rational considerations; no attempt at all was made to square the current state of knowledge of science and history with those elements forming the basis of his doctrines. To this mish-mash, Lévi added one new ingredient—the Tarot. He took over from de Gébelin and Etteilla the theses that the Tarot pack was of immense antiquity and embodied a symbolic representation of a body of profound and ancient wisdom. He dated the Tarot as belonging to long before Moses, from the time of Enoch. And since the 'Egyptian Tarot' designed by Etteilla had been debased by being taken over by professional cartomancers it was necessary to return to the traditional Tarot pack. Since he was unaware of the history of the Tarot pack (modern techniques of historical research are now applied to playing-cards as to other printed ephemera but results of this work has been published only from the 1960s onwards) his idea of the 'traditional Tarot pack' was the Tarot de Marseille (described in box).

Lévi was not primarily concerned, like Etteilla, to promote the use of the Tarot pack for fortune-telling or to set himself up as a cartomancer. They could be put to this use, but it was a secondary one. 'An imprisoned person with no other book than the Tarot, if he knew how to use it, could in a few years acquire universal knowledge, and would be able to speak on all subjects with unequalled learning and inexhaustible eloquence.' For Lévi, the Tarot was a source of magical doctrine and symbolism, like the works of the Cabalists and the Hermetic writings: more, it was the key to these, the 'universal key of magical works'. This key, lost for centuries, Lévi himself had recovered, and thus had been



## An Explanation of the Symbols Shown?

One extremely plausible explanation for the composition of the triumphs is that the name refers to the characters depicted taking part in a triumphal procession. Such processions were a favourite entertainment in the courts of Renaissance Italy; the floats would bear figures derived from classical mythology or representing abstractions such as Love and Death. The poem *I Trionfi* (the Triumphs) by Petrarch (1304–1374) took the idea a stage further. Each successive personified abstraction triumphs over the last; love triumphs over gods and men, chastity over love, death over chastity, fame over death, time over fame and eternity over time. It is possible that similar ideas give rise to the characters traditionally depicted in the Major Arcana and their relationship with each other.

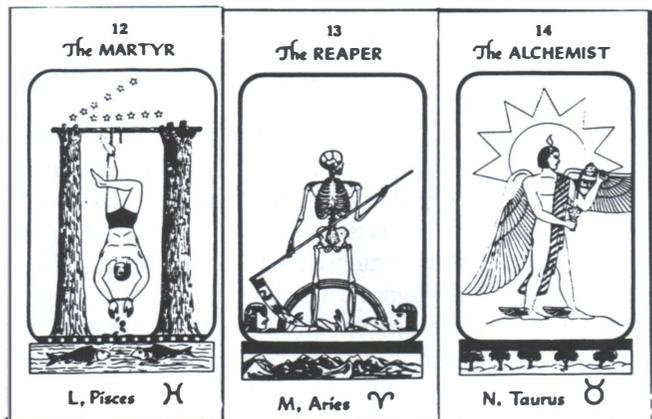
able 'to understand the enigmas of every sphinx and to penetrate all sanctuaries'. Lévi referred to the Tarot throughout all of his writings—the Renaissance theorists of magic would have been amazed to see a mere, and familiar, pack of cards elevated to this rank, but to Lévi (another Parisian) as to de Gébelin this pack was not a familiar one.

Lévi's work struck a note with the public and initiated a boom in occultist writings. The result was a wide dissemination of his neo-occultist teachings and of his school.

### The occult Tarot In Britain

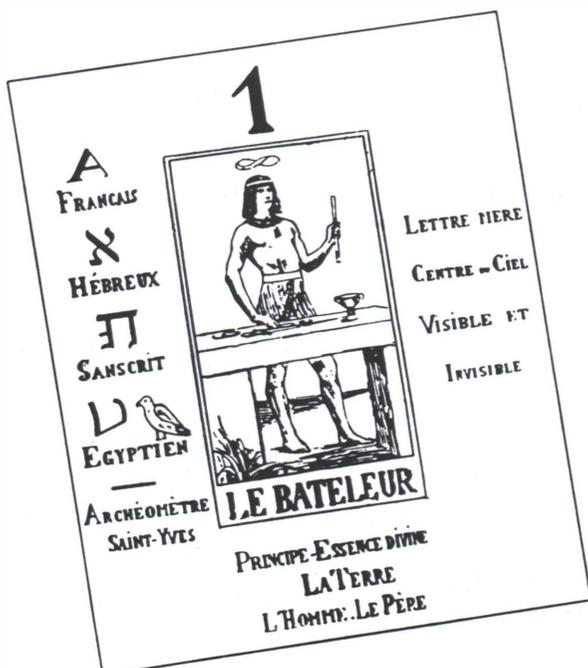
The transmission to Britain of French neo-occultism and, with it, the Tarot mystique, took place during the period 1886–1911. In other Western countries, with the possible exception of Italy, the phenomenon belongs strictly to the twentieth century. The introduction of Tarot occultism into Britain is largely bound up with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. This order was set up by Dr Wynn Westcott (1848–1925), a doctor and coroner and a magician in his leisure time using a manuscript written in alchemical cyphers and some German letters ostensibly from the *Orden der goldenen Dämmerung* as authority for doing so. All the documents were later proved to be forgeries perpetrated by Westcott or someone else.

The brand of magic to which it subscribed was that of Eliphas Lévi and his followers—the familiar blend of Hermeticism, the Cabala and the newly created Tarot mys-



tique. The Order purported to be in the direct line of succession from the original Rosicrucian brotherhood, and Rosicrucian symbolism was prominent. It established temples in London, Bradford and Weston-super-Mare and, later, Edinburgh, Paris and Chicago. The Tarot symbols played a large part in the teaching, rituals and practices of the Golden Dawn.

A.E. Waite, a prominent member of the Golden Dawn, translated sections of the work of Lévi and published it in London in 1886 under the title *The Mysteries of Magic*. The first original publication in Britain concerning Tarot occultism and cartomancy was by S.L. Mathers (1854–1918) who had no career outside magic and appears to have supported himself principally by sponging from others. Mathers refers to de Gébelin, Etteilla, Eliphas Lévi and others and borrows ideas from all of them; his original contribution was to establish the occultist nomenclature of the Tarot cards in English (see box). He referred to the Batons suit as 'Sceptres' (later 'Wands' would overtake this in popularity) and the Coins suit 'Pentangles'. The use of the term Pentangles is interesting since there was, at that time, no pack existing with a suit consisting of five-pointed stars. Lévi had been fond of the word *pantacle* meaning an occult symbolic design or emblem and since he followed Etteilla in regarding the Coins as representing magical talismans, he sometimes applied the word *pantacles* to the cards of that suit. In his translations from Lévi, Waite simply left *pantacles* unaltered as 'pantacles'. Lévi had not meant by *pantacle* a five-pointed star (he used *pentagramme* when he did) but Mathers seems to have misunderstood the word 'pantacles' in Waite's translation of Lévi and used 'Pentangles' instead. Thus it



was that the five-pointed star found its way into cartomantic Tarot packs.

Mathers took over leadership of the Golden Dawn upon the death of Dr William Robert Woodman (the third founder of the Order along with Mathers and Westcott), and moved to Paris. In 1900 the society fragmented due to the wranglings which resulted from Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) being refused admission to the inner orders by the London temple but being granted it by Mathers at his Paris temple. Further wranglings and scandals led to mass resignations and further fragmentation of the Order. It all became rather sordid and silly; when two leading women quarrelled with each other they conducted a magical battle with each other the chief weapon in which appears to be the manifestation of demonic cats.

During these upheavals Arthur Edward Waite continued his career as a writer on occult subjects, and came to be the principal British exponent of the Tarot mystique. In 1910 he wrote *The Key to the Tarot* to accompany a pack in *art nouveau* style designed to his instructions by Pamela Coleman-Smith. This pack has suits of Wands and Pentangles; pentagrams appear on the latter suit sign—he had perpetuated the mistake which his erratic translation of Lévi had been unintentionally responsible for. Many of the cards incorporate quite unwarranted occultist features into their design. For example, the Wheel of Fortune loses completely its original symbolism, which had already been obscured in the Tarot de Marseille; instead of four men, one at the nadir of his fortunes, one ascending, one at the zenith, and one descending, as the Wheel revolves, we now have a sphinx perched at the top of a wheel not obviously in motion, with the serpent Typhon on the left and the dog Anubis at the right, and at the four corners of the card are the symbols of the four Evangelists.

In 1944 Aleister Crowley published (under the name of Master Therion) a book entitled *The Book of Thoth*. This book contained plates of very florid Tarot designs made to his instructions. This book, in common with most of the others discussing the occultist Tarot pack, attempts to throw light on the question of which Hebrew letter should be attributed to each of the Major Arcana and in which position the Fool should be ranked in among the other members of the Major Arcana. It is worthy of note that each author disputes the findings of all others; there is no consensus. We will end our look at modern Tarot writers with Mr Crowley, who you will be glad to know achieved his ambition of

attaining the highest rank in his Order. Since there was no one of suitable rank who could initiate into this exalted grade, he initiated himself; the ceremony which made him a Magus involved the baptism, crucifixion and subsequent eating of a frog.

Many other writers have contributed to the subject of the occultist Tarot since. In fact, in the popular consciousness, it now appears that the Tarot pack belonged to the occultists from the beginning. Walk into any bookshop for remaindered books today and you are almost bound to find a book explaining the 'Mysteries of the Tarot' and how Tarot cards

may be used for their true purpose of divination. You will be told how the origins of the Tarot have been traced back to the Egypt of the Pharaohs. No proof will be offered of these assertions, none of the careful methods of current historical research will be deemed necessary to be applied. There will be no searches of proclamations banning their use (taking care to return to the original documents and retranslating them), no careful perusal of contemporary written and oral traditions for mention of them, no careful sifting of inventories forming part of wills or taxes, no careful dating of artwork illustrat-

ing their use, no perusal of the records of the manufacturers, no look at the revenue raised by tax-stamps. And yet playing-card historians are doing all of these things and increasing our knowledge yearly. Eliphas Lévi has truly left us a most dreadful legacy—that of ignoring any facts inconvenient to the theory you wish to put your trust in. It is hardly surprising that the cartomantic Tarot pack is popular with 'New Age' thinkers.

This article could not attempt to give more than a outline at the theories of the occultist Tarot writers in the space available. Nevertheless, it should have become apparent that occultist theories of the Tarot are simply inconsistent with the ascertainable facts about the history of the cards.

#### Notes

Anyone wishing for an excellent introduction to this fascinating topic is urged to read *The Game of Tarot* by Michael Dummett (Duckworth, 1980, ISBN 0-7156-1014-7) upon which this article draws heavily.

Daf Tregear is a system manager in the Department of Computer Science, University of Manchester, with an interest in playing-card history.



# A Healthy Dose of Sarsaparilla

Jerome Cosyn

*Snake oil for the nineties*



**H**ANGING IN MY LIVING ROOM is an American advertising poster from sometime in the late nineteenth century. It hangs in my house largely because of the wonderful artwork: a lovely, angelic, round-cheeked young girl, with blue eyes and curly blonde tresses and rosebud lips. A vision of virginal Victorian virtue, the epitome of youthful innocence and beauty, a paragon of health and rectitude, she gazes serenely into the distance, head turned slightly to profile in a posture that conveys wonder and hope and a guileless and immaculate strength. A slight flush of rose in her cheeks reveals her energetic enthusiasm for life, for this child faces each new day with eager confidence. Her eyes betray no hint of worry or fear; she has never known disease or suffering. In this painting is encapsulated everything a loving parent could possibly hope for his children. The artist—totally unknown, of course—had an enormous talent: the ability to distil the dreams and hopes and grandeur of a proud and growing culture from a palette of oil colours onto canvas.

The portrait, naturally enough, takes up most of the poster: near life-size head and shoulders of the girl centred against a neutral background. Across the top, in tastefully bold-faced letters drawn in an eye-pleasing, jaunty calligraphy, not too large, not too bold, not too gaudy, is the name of the now-defunct American product: Ayer's Sarsaparilla. In the upper right and upper left corners, in slightly smaller, more sedate print, are the phrases 'Makes the Weak Strong' and 'Improves the Complexion, Purifies the Blood'. Across the bottom is the slogan:

*'How fair she grows from day to day.'*  
*She Uses*  
**AYER'S SARSAPARILLA**

How quaintly absurd we find such claims today, for a simple beverage of mere flavoured water once dispensed as a 'tonic'. The sophisticated citizen of today would of course scoff at such pretensions, even if truth-in-advertising laws let them slip through. We know better than to place our faith in wild claims of health and vigour from ordinary foods and beverages, and would no more believe that a common soft drink 'Purifies the Blood' than that *Irn Bru* is actually made from girders. We can smile at the naïve charm of those

simpler times, seeing through such transparent attempts to manipulate us as easily as a modern ten-year-old dispels the myth of Father Christmas. Nowadays we would never be taken in by snake-oil incantations and absurd assertions from fast-talking medicine show hucksters. Today, people are vastly more aware, more perceptive than those simple minded bumpkins of yore. We're seasoned, sharp and cynical, educated, worldly. We know about health and medicine and nutrition because there are thousands of books and magazine articles, talk show interviews and free government pamphlets, concerned co-workers and relatives and even complete strangers on the street to explain it to us. We can't get through a day without being told a dozen times what's truly healthful and what to avoid; we're bombarded, lambasted, inundated with endless volleys of wellness programmes and organic vegetables, workouts and skin care, vitamins and minerals and high-fibre, low-sodium alternatives.

We monitor our intake of caffeine and calories, sugar and sodium, and we scrutinise our cholesterol level; we abhor MSG and eschew carcinogens. We aerate, chlorinate, and fluoridate; we exercise and aerobicise. In even the smallest towns can be found a cornucopia of organic bean curd, hydroponic tomatoes, hand-made marmalade and high-protein low-fat tofu. In short, we are the most health conscious, medically aware, biologically in-tune society that mankind has ever produced, and no one could ever be deceived by so obvious a canard as 'Purifies the Blood'.

These days when advertisements proclaim that seemingly ordinary products will enrich our lives and ensure our health, we know that they can be believed, because clean-cut, smarmy, bespectacled men with straight white teeth and conservative ties and white smocks stand before us, clutching clipboards like stone tablets handed down from the mount by the god of scientific scrutiny, with actual factual objective reports that prove it to be so. Television advertising is awash in a veritable Sargasso Sea of graphs and charts and diagrams and reports, from medical experts, dental authorities, trained nutritional specialists and ubiquitous independent study teams, demonstrating to us with unimpeachable testimony that the products offered to us are blessed and beneficial. Keen scientific minds are diligently and tirelessly at work performing elaborate research, writing books, giving interviews, and providing a steady, life-giving stream of facts and statistics to keep us healthy and

prolong our lives. A bowl of bran breakfast each day will add years to your life. The right facial cleanser will actually slow the aging process. Mothers who care about their kids would rather die than feed them the wrong brand of peanut butter. A simple shot glassful of cough syrup will eradicate a multitude of symptoms. Chicks dig guys who use tartar control toothpaste. The nutritionally correct choice of bread will build your body in a baker's dozen ways. Just one of these pills will cause your body to burn away as many calories as if you'd run a marathon—and it's COMPLETELY SAFE! Indeed, you take your life in your hands if you use a product that isn't doctor tested, clinically proven, medically effective, nutritionally beneficial, dentist approved and scientifically validated.

Before the advent of television, it was easy for advertisers to dupe an unsuspecting public because reality could be

modified or even fabricated by professionals who specialised in creating specific images. The angelic young girl on my antique sarsaparilla poster is an artistic creation, an idealised representation brought into existence solely for the purpose of selling a product. But today, the electronic marvel of television brings us visible reality, people who actually exist and who have clearly known the amazing benefits of the products they offer us. The faithful scrutiny of the camera brings the truth into our homes.

Yes, gone are the days of primitive hucksterism and those quaintly transparent claims of health and vitality from ordinary food and hygiene products. Health awareness has come of age. 'Purifies the Blood' indeed!

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**Jerome Cosyn** is a freelance writer and satirist, living in Wooster, Ohio, USA.

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# A Test for Reincarnation

Val Dobson

Some time ago, I was browsing through John Grant's 1984 work *Dreamers: A Geography of Dreamland*, and came across a fascinating aside about the historical novelist Joan Grant (to whom Mr Grant is not related). Joan Grant claimed that all books were actually straightforward biographies of her many previous lives, which she had been remembering since childhood. According to John Grant, she was so ignorant about sex that for much of her life she believed it was some sort of disembodied etheric process that took place while both parties were asleep. Why, he asked, didn't she remember anything about love-making from her previous lifetimes?

This story bought to mind a TV programme about reincarnation that I had seen around 1984, and which featured a London man who claimed to be a reincarnated Lancashire farm-worker who had fought in the Napoleonic wars. The programme-makers brought this man to his (claimed) regiment's HQ in Preston and presented him to a bunch of regimental historians who were amazed at the amount of detailed historical knowledge he displayed. I, on the other hand, was amazed at the credulity.

For a start, the man's 'Lancashire' accent was clearly derived from watching many episodes of *Coronation Street*, where the prevailing accent is a sort of modified Mancunian. Lancashire labourers would have been about as intelligible to modern Southern ears as Glaswegian Scottish is today. (This at least proves that the man wasn't a conscious fake, as 'Lanky' dialect dictionaries are fairly easy to find). Finally, why didn't the historians invite the man to prove his military credentials by taking up one of the antique muskets on display and demonstrating how it was loaded, fired and cleaned?

At the moment, anybody who claims to have clear memories of previous lifetimes is required to prove it merely by

reciting large amounts of facts, figures and anecdotes. Nobody concerned seems to realise that any archives that are available to historians are also available to writers of historical fiction, which is where most 'reincarnators' undoubtedly pick up their knowledge. My proposal is that such people should be required to demonstrate practical skills which they would have used in their previous lifetime, but not in this. For instance, somebody claiming to be a Victorian seamstress would be handed a roll of linen, scissors, needles and thread and asked to produce a hand-sewn Victorian-style shirt, somebody claiming to have been a 10th century Saxon farmer would be handed a live pig and requested to turn it into sausages and cured ham; a 'mediaeval musician' would have to convincingly play some mediaeval tune on a sackbut. And so on.

An obvious drawback to this plan is that many 'reincarnators' claim to have been queens, emperors, chief high priests etc. And for that sort of job you don't really need much in the way of practical qualifications. You would, I suppose, put the 'monarch' on to horses, get them to lead a cavalry charge and see how well they resemble Charlton Heston. And a Chief High Wotsit could be put into funny robes and told to proceed in a stately manner whilst simultaneously chanting and swinging a thurible. But none of that would be terribly convincing as proof—anybody who really wanted to could think themselves into behaving like Charlton Heston or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

But I think I have the answer to that problem. One of my hobbies is home-brewing, and I am especially interested in old brewing recipes—the older the better. Every civilisation from the year dot seems to have evolved some sort of mind-blowing hooch from any local grains, pulses or fruits available. In most historical periods, virtually every household brewed its own ale or wine. Brewing was so commonplace that even emperors and High Chief Wotsits would have witnessed the procedure. So, an infallible proof of reincarnation would be for the reincarnator to provide the recipe for whatever their local brew had been then make a few gallons of the stuff. If an expert is needed to supervise the results, I shall be delighted to take on the task. Cheers!

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**Val Dobson** is a housewife living in Preston, currently trying to master the word-processor.

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# Tunnel Vision

Brian W. Haines

*Is the 'near-death experience' just an illusion?*

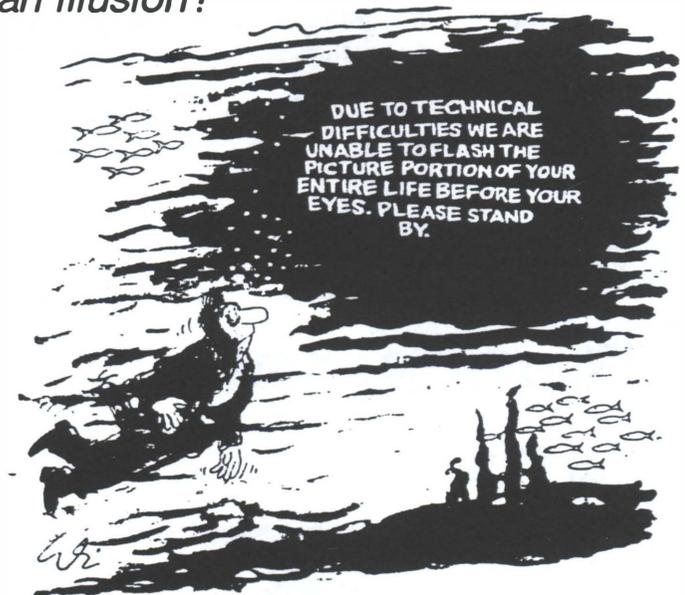
**I** PROMISE I WILL NOT REFER to anything by acronym nor will I introduce references by way of support. My brain cannot support searching my memory banks during reading to interpret groups of initials, nor do I like to interrupt the flow of argument by reference to minuscule print. It is my belief others have a similar mental mechanism, and it is indeed upon this premise I base my interpretation of the world about me.

The near-death experience is much in vogue at the moment. It is what is termed 'flavour of the month'. The reason for such experiences to be so named is somewhat obscure. It is very difficult to understand how anyone can know with any degree of certainty they are near death unless they have experienced the actual event. Death being by its nature and definition completely irreversible, there can be no-one who is available to testify as to the state of mind a few moments prior to the event.

Conventional folk wisdom has it that at the moment of death there is a flash of all life's events passing through the conscious memory. This seems to be confirmed by the many people who have been in fear of their lives during moments of peril.

For myself, and I offer my own experiences as valid to authenticate my first hand examination of the subject, I have been in such situations. I have suffered the effects of heavy bombing, I have been caught in mid-pacific on a burning liner, I have clung to a mountain-side by my finger tips, I have been frozen in the wastes of Canada and burnt in the heat of desert sands in Australia. And yes I have been in car crashes and I have been dragged across country for emergency operations. I think I well qualify as one who has faced death on innumerable occasions. I have impeccable qualifications for the subject. But the plain fact is, I have never yet died!

So the first question is, have I ever been at the point of death? When the bombs fell and I was blasted across a fence, when I saw the vivid flash and was surrounded by debris, or when I was blinded by the headlights of the oncoming car, in that moment when I thought the end had come, was it truly a moment of near death? From a logical point of view it obviously wasn't because I am still here. On these occasions of immediate danger everything happens so quickly. I saw no tunnels of light or dark. I had nothing other than an instinct of self preservation and the immediate apprehension of total catastrophe. When rubble was flying around my head, and I heard the grinding noise



of bones crunching against the solid mass of metal, my dominant thought ceased to be fear—it was a reasoned acceptance that this was the end. I cannot believe I am unusual in this.

It is all very well trying to analyse the experiences of others. Until you have been in the position of facing death you cannot know what actually happens. And this folk wisdom adds nothing, nor do all the reports collated ne'er so well bring any extra factual knowledge to a situation that is at once immediate and personal to the particular individual.

Death is not a progressive process. You are either dead or you are alive. There is no in between. We have today the situation of people in hospital on life-support machines. The Courts are called upon to decide whether support machines should be turned off. The term 'clinical death' is used to sanction acts that otherwise would be termed 'killing'. This does not mean anyone has truly found a test for death. The real test in such situations must be whether it is possible by the use of such machines to reactivate such bodies after the machines have been switched off and all signs of life have disappeared. There will be some who will say it is possible to reactivate apparently dead bodies. They however are talking of minutes, not hours and days. Death is an unknown

## Calling contributors old and new!

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quantity. All evidence suggests it is irreversible.

Before I move on let us have a look at this life story tradition. Can it be true that every single episode flashes before your eyes just before you die. First of all comes the obvious questions, why should they? Surely this is bound up with traditional religious concepts of guilt and punishment. The continuing image of the book held in the hands of the Angel Gabriel at the gates of heaven which holds your sins laid out in explicit detail. You have a mental review of all your sins which up to this moment you have kept hidden. Now could this be the source of this belief?

Setting aside the idea of time, there is another problem. How is it possible to instantaneously assimilate everything that has happened to you in life? This must include all your education, the books, films, television and plays you have seen. The details of all the people you have met plus all those incidental experiences of life which go to make up your place in society. Is it seriously contended all this runs through your mind in order you can consciously assess it for the sole reason you are about to die.

In my experience, and I must remind you that I have had plenty of opportunity to study what happens at these critical moments of danger, such does not take place. Oh yes, I have had the quick flash-back to some isolated high point when I enjoyed a brief emotional experience. When the danger has been great and threatening ultimate extinction I have had the moments of regret at neglected opportunities—each item shooting up unbidden into my consciousness like cameo shots in a film. But whole sequences, never.

And we come to this amazing tunnel; to the people who under the power of anaesthetic, or in some form or another lie unconscious and to all outward appearance dead. Well I've had that too. The amazing dream which explains the meaning of life, and the bright lights somewhat reminiscent of a migraine attack. Not once have I had any revelation of some other world or reason for living which was not based firmly in terms of my experience in this world. From what I have read all descriptions of an entry into the after-life follow the paintings and imagery of the major religions.

This all suggests to me that there is little to be gained by this form of study. It is all internal and subjective. These are

common experiences by reason of the common heritage of conditioning and common physiology.

As a person who is very tall and living in a cottage which is very small I keep banging my head. In passing I can verify the Pavlovian reaction does not apply to humans, only dogs. In twenty years I have never managed to remember the beams are unduly low. Each time I bang my head I experience pain and a flash of light. Sometimes it is like an explosion and a great ball of white power rolls down from the point of impact. All memories are blotted out, then I remember, I have hit my head again.

I attribute nothing to the lights inside my head except to conclude my understanding of the behaviour of electricity can produce similar results. I know what I see inside my head is not seeing at all. It is meaningless in terms of the mental process. One fine day I could crack my skull and kill myself. I cannot accept these lights are the forecast of an entry into another plane of life, nor that in the timeless void between life and death I will have revealed to me what lies in store or what I have done.

There is a curiously mistaken assumption that what is seen is what is there. What is seen is only the eyes as sensing devices interpret what is there is accordance with learning and conditioning. There is no film screen inside the head upon which a replica image of the world is placed. Seeing tunnels, bright lights or anything else is no more than illusion. Another part of the brain translates that illusion into some coded message that the brain endeavours to turn into some form of sense for the individual in terms of known experience.

For those who are firmly rooted in a tradition of an afterlife anything out of the ordinary can be interpreted by the brain as evidence for the belief. Tunnel vision is very comforting. Seeking a mystery in mundane experience is equally a form of tunnel vision, it perpetuates that desire to find niches in the world of learning. There are many mysteries in this world worthy of exploration, but the near-death experience is not one of them. The mystery is why anyone should think we are not all near death all of the time.

Brian W. Haines is a writer living in London



# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

*Going for a pong*

**H**ERE I SIT in an aromatic haze. Not rough shag, I hasten to add, nor Old Holborn, a fine cheroot, nor even one of those mysteriously legal marijuana substitutes which lurk in the personal ads. No, my noxious companion is bergamot aromatherapy oil, simmering in a clay burner. (It worries me that I may be the first contributor to *The Skeptic* to write under the influence of aromatherapy.)

Bergamot oil is made from the rind of the fruit, and has a strange odour (at least to my nose) which is half citrus and half wood. It is far from unpleasant, and the brochure that comes with the bottle states that it is 'good for the skin, with a warm and balancing effect on the emotions'. This calls for a scientific evaluation. I observe that since my skin is still intact and I feel fairly cheerful, it must work. Yet another alternative therapy ratified.

Aromatherapy has been on my mind of late, because this part of Manchester seems to have been bombarded from all sides with mind-altering smells. Our local sewage works apparently sees its principal function as generating an indescribably disgusting smell, scheduled to coincide with tea-time. One wonders about the plan to house the Olympics here. If Manchester does succeed in its bid, my advice would be to invest heavily in Consolidated Noseplugs.

The bergamot oil has certainly helped with the sewage works, and we've all felt smooth-skinned and contented. The only one to turn his nose up at the bergamot is Bounce, a dog we've been looking after for friends. He took one sniff and made a swift exit, preferring instead to eat something horrible he'd found underneath the freezer. Later Bounce made his definitive statement on the matter by misbehaving during his walk and running onto the forbidden territory of the golf course, where he relaxed in a stagnant pond. Back at home, he steamed smugly, overpowering the bergamot with his own, less pleasant, contribution.

Recently, the aromatherapy business has been growing rapidly, and there is an increasing crossover between its status as an 'alternative therapy' and a handy source of nice smells which are (by and large) not tested on animals. For many, it makes a refreshing change from the acrid clouds one associates with the self-styled white-coated 'aroma technicians' stationed at department store cosmetics counters. I had always believed that aromatherapy was basically harmless, when used sensibly, but I began to have doubts when I read a recent self-help book advocating the use of aromatherapy, often in conjunction with homoeopathy, to treat a variety of conditions including depression, cystitis, eczema, shingles, haemorrhoids, sunburn and whooping cough. Maggie Tisserand's *Aromatherapy for*



*Women* (Thorsons, 1990) is typical of many of the books in the area. Although I have no doubt that books of this kind are written with the highest of motives, and there is no suggestion of charlatanism or unethical practice, what comes across most strongly is the question of 'attitude'. One of the strongest attractions that people feel for so-called alternative therapies is that they offer a person-centred approach, instead of the traditional Western doctor-centred system. But the blame for modern dissatisfaction with the G.P.'s surgery surely lies with the medical community itself, not with the fundamental principles of the system. The doctor who starts writing the prescription as soon as you enter the surgery, and then gives you all of three minutes of his valuable time is the worst advertisement for traditional scientifically-based healing. Naturally, the friendly face in the aromatherapy shop, who's happy to chat for hours, and to be *interested* in you, is a welcome alternative.

As Maggie Tisserand says: 'when we are sick we have to put our trust in someone or something, and that someone can be a doctor, a pharmacist, or yourself, and that something can be a doctor's prescription, an over-the-counter drug, or aromatherapy. The choice is yours.' She's absolutely right. Making a choice is easy. The trick is to make the right choice, and to stay healthy. Bounce trusts his nose, and he never goes wrong. But then he's a dog.

Toby Howard is a lecturer in computer graphics at the University of Manchester.



# Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

*The power of the publisher*

**Y**ESTERDAY, I HAD LUNCH with a couple of executives from the marketing department of a publisher we'll call Universal Books (I trust there isn't actually a publisher with that name). Their business is the computer books the company publishes; nonetheless, they quite naturally take an interest in the rest of the company's output.

Well, they told me, when they went to a marketing seminar run by the company to present its upcoming releases and a speaker announced a book on spontaneous human combustion, they thought it was a joke. Apparently, the whole place rolled on the floor with laughter. Except it wasn't a joke, and they're now responsible for making the sales force feel enthusiastic about selling it. I won't go into details about this book, but judging from the name of the author, this is very unlikely to be a book saying there's nothing supernatural about spontaneous human combustion.

You have to understand: I've reviewed this company's computer books, and they're generally sound, well put together, technically oriented books. But other sections of the company are responsible for some of the best selling examples of what a lot of us skeptics like to call 'tripe'.

The conversation quite naturally drifted from there into the question of publishers' responsibility generally. Lots of people will tell you that book publishing these days has nothing at all to do with disseminating information and everything to do with marketing and what will sell. Judging from my conversation with these folks, this is pretty much true. Oh, they have the odd pang of conscience about it all—they were certainly interested in seeing copies of Joe Nickell's discussion of SHC (if you want to read it, it's in Nickell's *Secrets of the Supernatural*, published by Prometheus). But on the whole it seemed to them perfectly reasonable that after all, the company has to make a profit.

This is, of course, something we've been hearing about for years. A number of the more visible skeptics think that one of the reasons New Age beliefs have become so respectable is the heavy promotion by major, often respected publishers. On the other hand, publishers do those books because they sell. Which came first? Is it right just to tell people—through books—whatever they want to hear?

Talking about that raised the issue of censorship. I'm against that. At the same time, it's frustrating to see the same myths perpetuated while hard evidence gets ignored. Universal is also publishing a creationist book which has already been torn to shreds by reputable scientists. My co-



lunchers, who are by no means stupid people, admit that they're not well enough educated in or knowledgeable about science to assess the claims made in such a book. Of course, they said, the publisher's New York headquarters will have sent the book out to a scientific reader. But I'd say they're guessing hopefully; they don't really know.

The upshot of all this—as they told me quite plainly—is that skeptical books won't get published, at least by them. Who's going to buy a book that lays out the evidence in favour of evolution? Where's the controversy in that? I quoted them a passage from one of Shirley MacLaine's books, the one that Henry Gordon made fun of in the *Channelling Into the New Age* (Prometheus), about crystals amplifying thought waves and emotions just as the crystal in your radio set amplifies the sound. This was a sort of test. They failed. They sort of thought crystals were no longer in radio sets (they were right), but didn't know that crystals don't amplify anything.

They were even less clear on the creationist arguments and their rebuttals. They had seen Richard Dawkins' demolition of Richard Milton's book on creationism, but were in no position to assess Dawkins' arguments.

Now, I'm not too clear on a lot of those details myself—when I have to write about those things I look it up. In a book. And I trust the publishers of the book to make the book accurate. Except, as is patently obvious, you can't trust any such thing. These were marketing people, not the people who make the editorial decisions, granted. But these days in most publishing companies, a lot of editorial decisions come from the marketing department. I mean, there we were, talking about skeptical books and computer books, and they're thinking in terms of what will sell, and how. That's their job, and you can't fault them for doing it.

But that's the central problem: they don't know. Like most people, they're not particularly well trained in science or in thinking skeptically. They quite clearly have doubts about this stuff—but since they don't really know, they say, as most reasonable people would, 'Well, it could be true.' Faced with a case argued with lots of details, they can't come up with the information to refute it.

That's where we come in. We can't—or at least I won't—advocate censorship. But we can argue for education so that the people who control what information is made available to the public can make informed decisions.

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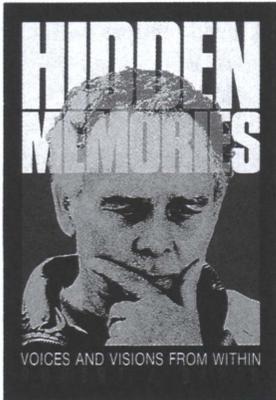
Wendy Grossman is a member of the UK Skeptics, and a writer and folksinger. Her Compuserve ID is 70007,5537.

# Reviews



## Memory Tricks

Robert A Baker, *Hidden Memories: Voices and Visions from Within* (Prometheus, 1992, 375pp, hbk, £17.95)



We know that the mind sometimes plays tricks, but usually treat our senses and memories as reliable guides to events in the outside world. However, under certain conditions, fantasies generated in the unconscious mind, based on 'hidden memories' (cryptamnesia), may present us with visions and voices that *seem* to come from outside us, but are in fact hallucinations. The brain is constantly interacting with the

body via the nervous and hormonal systems, and these mainly unconscious interactions occasionally give rise to hallucinatory phenomena.

In *Hidden Memories*, a fascinating book and the sequel to his *They Call It Hypnosis* (Prometheus, 1990), Baker uses cryptamnesia to account for many popular New Age ideas, from Trance Channelling, Crystal Gazing and Glossolalia to Out-of-body Experiences. Baker stresses that these phenomena are in no way a sign of mental illness, although they may be brought on by fatigue, high blood pressure, physical or breathing exercises, and the use of drugs. They may also, he adds, be simulated by fraud.

So where do these visions and voices come from initially? The mind has recorded all sorts of overheard conversations, pictures, and stories from books, films and TV, which are now 'forgotten', but which mature in the unconscious mind and emerge disguised as fully-elaborated memories, either of this life, or a past one. Another contributing factor is 'confabulation', which refers to the mind's ability to fill in the blanks of memory with creative imagery, which is then taken as accurate and realistic. This activity is often based on suggestions and hints given by therapists, or leaders of New Age groups. In this way apparently standardised reports of past lives, Satanic abuse, or UFO abductions may be received from apparently independent subjects. In all such cases, the person concerned may be quite convinced that the images and messages arise from some outside source (such as God, the 'Collective Unconscious', a friendly spirit, their own 'Higher Self') although in fact the real source is their own unconscious mind. Of course, some people, such as some trance mediums, may really be faking the effects quite consciously.

Is cryptamnesia really the explanation for these phenomena? Baker describes how various investigators of 'past life regression' first took hypnotized subjects back to a past life, and then on a later occasion re-hypnotized them and asked them where they first heard of the characters and events of their presumed previous incarnations. In many cases, the 'past life' was traced to a mundane source—a book, film or anecdote—which had been worked up creatively by the subjects' unconscious minds. Some of the characters described proved to be entirely fictitious, and had never existed in reality. In another instance, concerning the 'past lives' of a woman known as 'Jane Evans', definite evidence was found that one 'life' could not have occurred as described, and two others had been derived from books available in recent years. Baker gives another (amusing) confirmation of the cryptamnesia theory, concerning 'planetary voyages', where a person is transported, either via hypnosis or a trip aboard a UFO, to other planets. Before space probes described their lifeless surfaces, Venus, the Moon, Mars, Jupiter and so on were all held to possess vegetation, intelligent life, and advanced civilisations. Today, however, such journeys are restricted to other solar systems and galaxies which remain mysterious!

Although I enjoyed this book, and highly recommend it to both skeptics and New Agers, I was concerned that Baker's treatment of cryptamnesia and unconscious phenomena was almost uniformly negative. Many artists, and indeed scientists, have commented that inspiration often strikes out of the blue, even perhaps within a dream (admittedly after a lot of conscious work beforehand), so the unconscious mind seems to have a genuinely creative and helpful side, which presumably somehow goes wrong in the cases discussed. In this connection, Jungian psychotherapy uses dreams and imagery ('active imagination') to contact the unconscious for therapeutic purposes. Baker ignores such ideas completely, although he cites the case of Barbara O'Brien who was apparently helped through a period of great personal stress by hallucinatory figures generated by her unconscious.

Many occult and New Age practices involve imagery, coupled with suggestion, for healing, personality change, life enhancement, or enlightenment. Hypnosis also seems to rest on suggestion and imaginative involvement which, since Mesmer and Coué onward, have been used to treat psychosomatic conditions, and are now used increasingly by contemporary therapists to help with various psychological problems. It has been suggested, however, that all such methods make use of the placebo response. I should like to see the ideas presented in Baker's book extended to a view

of the mind which explores the possibility of communicating with the unconscious, via dreams, imagery, and other traditional techniques, with a view to greater health, happiness and self-understanding for the human race. Such an enterprise might make a fruitful rapprochement between skeptics and New Agers which, heaven knows, is sorely lacking at the moment!

—Mike Rutter

## Skepticism, Belgian style

Marc Hallet, *Les Science Paralleles, ou la Sagesse des Fous* (Centre d'Action Iaique, Campus de la Plaine c.p. 236, Boulevard du Triomphe, 1050 Bruxelles)

If we are to become Europeans, it is as well that we should know what skeptics on the mainland are thinking and doing. Some of us have the time and financial resources to attend conferences in exotic continental locations: the rest of us have to do as best we can.

If so, we can hardly do better than a book just published in Belgium by the author Marc Hallet, who has written extensively on UFOs and visions of the Virgin, though rarely to their advantage. His new book, *Les Sciences Paralleles*, takes us on a selective tour through the mazes of 'parallel sciences', from pyramidology and catastrophism to UFOs and Martian artifacts, by way of spiritism and Od, aura-viewing and fire-walking. Covering so much ground, he can do little more than touch lightly on each of his subjects in his 187 pages. But he wastes little time on the 'philosophy' of skepticism on which so many skeptical authors are apt to elaborate at rather tedious length: instead, he quickly gets down to cases, and manages to pack a great deal of information into his pages. I picked up a good many scraps of information on subjects with which I consider myself reasonably well acquainted.

I like Hallet's no-nonsense approach. Often, it takes the form of pointing out the obvious: If there were giants on the earth at one time, he asks, why has no one ever turned up a giant's soup-plate or a giant's comb? At other times he takes a wider view: why, he wonders, do so many commentators on, say, the Bible, feel the need to work out elaborate 'scientific' explanations for phenomena, such as many of the miracles allegedly performed by Jesus of Nazareth, when even Christian theologians are ready to regard them as myth?

Speaking personally, I was unable to go all the way with Hallet's thorough-going skepticism. I do not think the case for ESP can be dismissed as easily as he would like to dismiss it: and I think he rather misses the point of Charles Fort's idiosyncratic game-playing. Fort was on the one hand very American (which is a way of saying that he was very simple-minded in his approach to the anomalous), and on the other hand very much a man of his time, which—it is easy to forget—was before the Golden Age of Nonsense in which we have the questionable fortune to be living. Unless one judges Fort in this context of place and time, he is apt to seem more mysterious than I think he was.

A more serious defect—and a rather surprising one, in an author whose reading is evidently so wide-ranging as

Hallet—is the arbitrariness of his references, some of which are meticulously cited while others are casually omitted. Too often, too, his references are to secondary sources; but I suppose this may simply be because many English-language texts are unavailable to a European author.

But this in itself points the need for more and closer contact and co-operation with our fellow-Europeans. Credulity and charlatanism are worldwide, and as the world shrinks, it becomes progressively easier for credulity and charlatanism to encompass the globe. Today, the 'stars' of the West's occult circuit are being enthusiastically welcomed in Eastern Europe, finding an eager audience for their contaminating teachings: at the same time, we in the west extend open arms to the likes of Marina Popovich, the former Soviet air force colonel who has found that a good way to obtain hospitality in Los Angeles is to preach the gospel of extraterrestrial visitation, to the extent of suggesting that Gorbachev himself may be an extraterrestrial front man.

Nobody gives skeptics free lunches for saying that Gorbachev may be as human as you and me: Marc Hallet's book won't sell as well as von Daniken's (or Popovich's—for you can be sure that some enterprising American publisher has signed her up by now.) But let's hope it encourages a few readers to question what Hallet calls 'the wisdom of the crazy'.

—Hilary Evans

## Life after life

Ingrid Vallieres, *Reincarnation Therapy* (Ashgrove Press, 1991, 192pp, pbk, £7.99)

Ingrid Vallieres is a practising reincarnation therapist, and her stated intention is to use this book to show that by means of Reincarnation Therapy (RT) it is possible to heal body, mind and spirit. RT is based on the principle that problems in the present life are caused by events in past lives. RT attempts to find the past lives and the events in them which have caused traumas and to work through them, enabling the client to understand the problem and possibly modify his/her behaviour.

The author states that it is not her intention to attempt to prove that reincarnation occurs. However, she cannot resist saying 'One senses the inadequacy of this statement, which implies that there is no difference between plant, animal and human death' when commenting on the view that death is the ultimate end of a living organism. She also contradicts herself later on when she tells us that some of her clients recall past lives as plants and animal—to me this implies that there is no difference between plant, animal and human death.

Vallieres expounds a similar notion of karma to Buddhist philosophy. Basically, karma means 'action' although this is widened from its normal use to include speech and thoughts. The law of karma states that actions have consequences. Thus, if a person behaves badly, he/she will at some time suffer the consequences of that bad karma. With respect to reincarnation, the theory is that after death the soul assesses the previous life and seeks a new life in which to address

problems and resolve karma from previous lives. The author claims that when deciding on a new life the soul also decides which experiences it should undergo in order to extend the scope of its experience and to develop its potential. Besides meaning that if you get mugged your soul decided in advance that you would, it also implies that future events are predetermined. If this is the case then presumably some inter-soul communication occurs to coordinate activities—after all if one soul gets mugged another must do the mugging.

Another controversial claim is that from conception onwards the fetus is aware (but not self-aware) of its surroundings and of the thoughts of its mother. Thus if the mother does not want the child or someone says something about the child in the mother's hearing, the fetus will 'remember' this and it will subconsciously affect the child's behaviour when it is born.

The book contains numerous examples from the author's own clients and there is a chapter devoted to longer case histories. The lives recalled are varied, including priests, slaves, soldiers and 'witches' burned at the stake, as well as more normal lives. One of the clients attempted to verify his remembrance of a past life by checking records from the second world war—which did at least show that an officer who matched the remembered details had existed. Interestingly, there appears to be no special procedure to induce clients to remember past lives, and the author actually states that anyone can do this by asking 'a few simple questions'. The most important thing appears to be to avoid making suggestions and value judgments.

If you do not believe in reincarnation (personally I'm trying to keep an open mind on the subject) this book will probably not convince you, but then that is not the purpose of this book. However, it makes for a reasonably interesting read. One last point: some of the author's clients remember lives in alien civilisations. So if you believe in reincarnation you had better believe in extra-terrestrials too.

—Dave Snowden

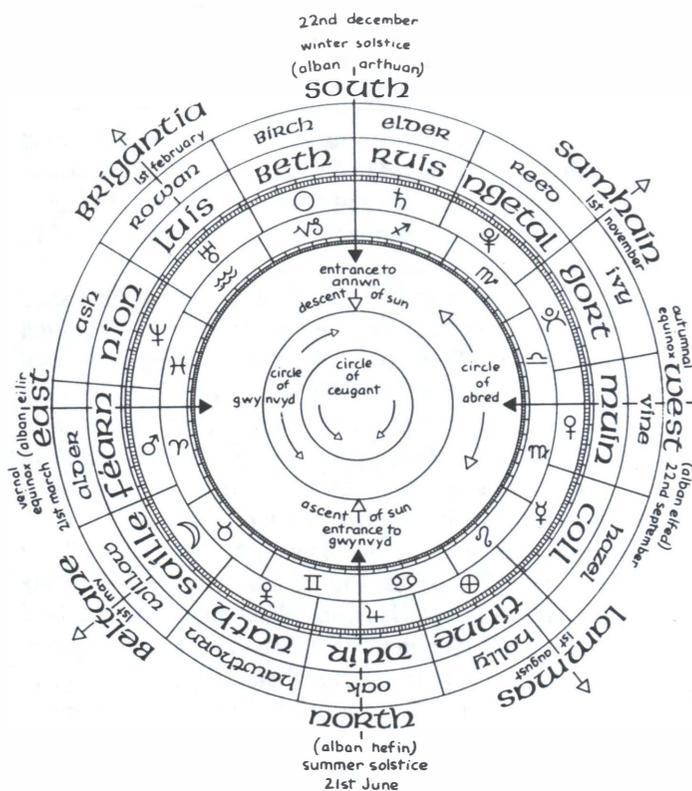
## Once around the Zodiac

Helena Paterson, *The Celtic Lunar Zodiac: How to Interpret Your Moon Sign* (Rider, 1992, 160pp, £18.99)

This zodiac 'does not negate the significance of the solar zodiac, but complements it by providing a more rounded picture of the personality'. 'Complement' is a weasel word which wriggles round the awkward fact that a lot of New Agery is actually conflicting and mutually negatory. 'For people who have never felt at ease with or been convinced by their traditional sun sign, the Celtic lunar zodiac may provide an alternative guide.' Paterson also uses the 'is said to' ploy ('If held in the hand, rock crystal is said to induce serenity').

She has swallowed whole both Madame Blavatsky and Iolo Morganwg, who created modern Druidism out of the whole cloth in the 18th century (she just says his works are 'disputed'). Her readings of legends resemble those of 19th century anthropologists who reduced everything to a 'solar myth'. And here come the Atlanteans—her reading has at

last dragged her into the 20th century. There's not much defensive rationalising. She refers those who find the Celtic zodiac 'insufficiently authenticated' to Robert Graves and the *Book of Leinster*. 'I can only add that, as a practising astrologer of many years, I found overwhelming evidence...' Is she going to share it with us? She is not. She plays the 'feminine logic' card—who wants to think of themselves as rigid? 'The lunar-orientated zodiac is perhaps another 'irrational' equation of feminine logic that has always existed to counter the rigid thinking of men.'



What's the first thing you look for in a zodiac book? I am Nion/Ash (The 13 houses are called after trees). My gem is coral and my flower the wood anemone. I'm vulnerable and sensitive, yet pragmatic. How true. 'Their power of prayer reflects deep faith'. Hmmm. 'Highly adaptable, they bounce back easily'. I wish. 'Easily influenced, lack self confidence, and often have a beautiful singing voice'. How did she know? Sounds very like dualistic old Pisces, who is utterly wet and a weed.

As a professional astrologer, she should be used to constructing bland character descriptions that leave out human characteristics like greed, flattery and venality. In common astro speak, no-one is deliberately wicked. Bad qualities are due to misdirected motivation, a blind spot, being too trusting, setting standards that are sometimes difficult to live up to. All the Celtic signs are clever and creative. She defines an intolerance for authority as 'controversial', but is carefully non-judgmental. Rowans hate conformity and laugh at serious things. Perhaps this is an indication that they are space aliens?

However, she includes human evil, and is unusually definite. Hazels are clever, but can 'become hypercritical, argumentative and cynical' (there's a moral there for us all).

Ivies can be 'extremely manipulative' and Reeds can become insanely jealous and may be involved with illegal transactions. Elders can be heartless and cruel and may become embroiled in public scandals. They also 'saunter away from disastrous relationships'. But how do you feel if you're an Elder and this doesn't describe you at all? Should you change accordingly? (I wasted several years trying to be wet, weedy and creative.)

The illustrations are good, but in the soppy New Age style (stars, unicorns, Celtic wiggles). The beautiful flower/jewel borders represent the best art in the book. If you like myths and fairy stories, there are some good ones here, not badly summarised. But the *Mabinogion* is cheaper.

—Lucy Fisher

## Cross my palm

Roz Levine, *Palmistry: How to Chart the Lines of Your Life* (Rider, 1992, pbk, £9.99)

A somewhat inappropriate book for review in a skeptical magazine: as palmistry does not dwell on empirical support for its subject matter, simply assuming the validity of hand-reading and instructing the reader on its practise, it is worthless to anyone seeking an evaluation (except of their own, through personal experience).

Skeptics in search of material for (cold) readings will find a wealth of Barnum material here, covering the usual topics of character, health, love and money, directions for reaching one's potential and so on. Few are original; most are generated through mnemonic algorithms that strike me as inferior to those of the Tarot and astrology. Although the physical contact encouraged in palmistry gives it some edge over other reading systems, I will stick with Fenton and Hone for lines. I do not know whether this book will be appreciated by those it is aimed at. I will have given it to one for Xmas and will see.

—Robin Allen

## Events

### A romp through the story of PSI

A lecture by Ian Rowland at Goldsmith College, London University on 1 December 1992.

I have always said that when a psi lecture was being given, you didn't even need to go in to know whether the speaker was James Randi: just stand outside and listen to the bursts of laughter. But now I've lost my easy criterion. On 1 December 1992, the same identifying sounds broke out from a London University audience who had come to see just such a lecture at Goldsmith College.

The word 'lecture' is far too solemn and restricted a term for this high-spirited canter through the history of psi. Our guide throughout this entertainment was Ian Rowland—a member of the committee of the UK Skeptics, so he knows whereof he speaks. He is able to fuse his serious research with his life-long interest in devising and presenting the kind of effects you would normally only see on the platform of a professional wonder-worker. The result was a some-

times hilarious series of demonstrations, on the surely correct assumption that an audience is really thinking 'Show me' and not merely 'Tell me'.

Members of the audience were invited to take part in all the 'experiments': among them, telepathy, the intervention of spirits, channelling, precognition, psychic surgery, and psychometry (in which any participant who guessed right had the chance to walk away with a cheque for a thousand pounds).

Some of the effects were explained: others were left to be puzzled over by a baffled audience. Ian Rowland had billed himself as a '100 per cent fake psychic'. Still... was any explanation possible for some of these effects except psi? It was all great fun, with a judicious salting of serious comments at key points.

This particular show (and it's better described as a show than a lecture) was at the invitation of the Psychology Society. Ian's previous performance was for the Psychology Department of London University's Birbeck College. But he by no means restricts himself to academic environments. You may already heard him on radio (Ireland's RTEI, Radio Birmingham, Radio Thamesmead, London's GLR and LBC), or seen him on television (Sky News, London Tonight). And he's due to give the works to tarot and cold reading in the February issue of the magazine *New Woman*.

If you're thinking of booking someone with a difference for your next private party, don't say I didn't steer you in the right direction. It could be the most fun (or indeed the only fun) you've ever had with psi. You can get in touch with Ian Rowland through the Skeptics' number: (081) 508 2989.

—Lewis Jones

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## Letters

### Allen responds

Mr Keen is not the only person to have chided me for my uncharitable view of the Crop Circles competition (Letters, *The Skeptic* 6.5). Rupert Sheldrake has written to me privately, gently accusing me of being 'humourless', 'mean-spirited' and of reinforcing the negative stereotype of skeptics. Strong criticisms!

I had hoped to convey reasons enough for my cavils to deflect charges that they were due simply to prejudice. Clearly, I failed! To repeat: Circle authentication is highly subjective. In the issue of the *Cerealogist* following the competition, the chairman of the judges praises the hoaxers, but emphasises that none of the hoaxing teams produced circles with a 'crunchy' feel underfoot, supposedly characteristic of 'genuine' circles. This sounds like a distinctly subjective measure. What if the judges had not known they were in a hoaxed circle? On the question of motives: whilst cerealogy has sincere exponents like Mr Keen, it also has many prepared to accept devious strategies to minimise the damage caused by authenticating hoaxes; and the field does not have the reputation for being respectful to those hoaxers who expose the fallibilities of its practitioners. The treatment of the *Today* artists has been disgraceful, and as someone who has also been on the receiving end of the cerealogical truncheon, I think I can be excused for doubting the ability of cerealogists to assess hoaxing in a balanced fashion. Paranoia? Not entirely. *Pace* the judge who declared the circles to be 'not a patch on the real thing': such a judgment, sweeping and completely at odds with those of other more experienced researchers, smacks of an imperative to denigrate the hoaxers' handiwork. It is also surprisingly self-assured for an expert who has been fooled by at least one crude hoax in the field (not the only

judge for whom this was true). And what of the inferential abilities of the judges? One judge described in the *Oldie* how she refused to accept a hoaxer's contention that the occasional standing stalk in his circle arose accidentally; the trivial can be rendered profound even in known hoaxes! Instances such as this surely constitute at least a partial validation of my suspicions.

Having said this: I will concede that my implied wholesale denunciation of the motives and attitudes of *all* those involved with the competition was unjustified and inaccurate. Many of the impressions I formed on the day have not been borne out by the subsequent cerealogical publications, and I apologise to those organisers whose genuine intentions I rejected. Some of the judges were effusive in their praise of the competitors and I was way off in my estimation of their receptivity. Still, if this cerealogical humility extends to occasions in which researchers are caught out by hoaxers in the field, I will not bemoan the taste of humble pie!

Other points: I did not give the official line on the event as I considered this to be obvious enough for readers to figure out for themselves. I can find no implication in my article that the *Guardian* funded the event. In describing the achievements of the competitors, 'supremely well' was my choice of phrase, not the judges', and its acceptability depends on one's perspective; I consider it appropriate. Mr Keen's assertions concerning the levels of noise and light contradict what I was told by an observer on the day: whatever the truth, his attempt to relate the levels generated by twelve teams in front of expectant observers to a real hoaxing situation strikes me as quite meaningless. I would laugh... but for fear that this would be labelled the derision of a bigot!

My ribbing about the press being the scientific literature of cerealogy is out of date, and I retract it.

Cerealogists now promote their own claims almost exclusively in (their own) magazines and books, on videos, and in lectures to the public. I am sorry if such 'sneering' distresses Mr Keen; I will desist from it when circles researchers desist from using such outlets to tout as a Scientific Anomaly almost any unimpressive, and unreplicated, deviation from chance revealed by the poorly-controlled multiple-analyses of soil and crop-stems that have typified serious cerealogy so far.

I have no quibble with Mr Keen's closing statements, except to wonder why he included them.

Although I consider what causes circles to be an open question, I cannot contemplate the phenomenon with the *gravitas* of most cerealogists. Even so, I rarely sneer: when I do, it is because I believe that the antics of cerealogists, serious or otherwise, merit no other response. Mr Keen is quite free to take this as evidence of my shortcomings rather than those of him and his colleagues.

Robin Allen  
Southampton

### Goodness Gracious!

Call me a skeptic if you must, but I don't believe your exclamation marks!

The purpose of these is to denote an exclamation like 'Help!', 'Get your finger out of my eye!' and 'Your trousers are on fire!'. Stuart Campbell ('Great Balls of Fire', *The Skeptic*, 6.6) aided and abetted by *The Skeptic* thinks they have an altogether different function, as in the remarks: 'We all tend to see what we want to see!' and 'I found a marble below the window!'. If exclamation marks are to be used to spice up the text, why not be even more generous with them?

Yours!

Stephen Tyndale-Biscoe!  
Leeds!

## Wrong way up

With regard to 'Alien Communication' (Hits & Misses, *The Skeptic*, 6.6), may I suggest the picture is being viewed the wrong way up? And that it depicts something very clearly defined on a local landmark: the Cerne Abbas Giant. The crop circles design shown is obviously a warning to earth of the dangers of sexual activity.

S G Hughes  
Dorchester

## Attitude problems

Concerning Tad Clements' article 'Skeptics and Scoffers' (*The Skeptic*, 6.6): shouldn't that have been 'Inquirers and Inquisitors'? Or perhaps 'Fact-Finders and Witch Finders'? I refer to the amazing suggestion that a good dose of James 'The Amazing' Randi is just the thing to cure the overly credulous of their irrational beliefs!

I wonder who Professor Clements would recommend for calming down over-zealous Muslims—Salman 'The Amazing' Rushdie, perhaps? How about Matthew 'The Amazing' Hopkins for fixated Wiccans?

You may have gathered by now that I agree with Professor Clements friend about Randi's attitude; I agree with at least 95% of his conclusions, but his attitude sucks! Mr Randi conducts his researches not to find anything out (he already knows that he is right), but to demonstrate how stupid many other people are to believe what they do. To my mind, there is an important difference between pointing out to someone that they are probably mistaken, and patiently explaining to them precisely why they are a moron. This serves no constructive purpose whatsoever; Mr Randi's audience are all in on the joke, and have come to see the freak-show; any 'freaks' who wander in to see what's happening could be forgiven for not finding it all that amusing!

By all means let's have a bit of humour to liven up the often rather dreary business of skepticism—but not this kind of arid, condescending sarcasm, springing as it does from an

attitude as dogmatic as that of any UFO contactee. Skepticism is not a religion, and I hope that Randi and friends never succeed in turning it into one.

Yilmaz Magurtzey  
Edinburgh



Werner Burger's Photograph

## Burger snap

With reference to Steuart Campbell's article 'Great Balls of Fire' on the subject of ball lightning (*The Skeptic*, 6.6), I was surprised to see no mention of the photograph taken by Werner Burger (above) in 1978 at Sankt Gallenkirch, Vorarlberg, Austria. A long article on this photograph was published in the *Journal of Meteorology* (Vol 17 no 167, March 1992), and was presumably seen by Campbell, since he cites the *Journal* in his references.

In order to ensure that his survey of the evidence for ball lightning is comprehensive, perhaps he could supply you with an analysis of this photograph. I assume that he does not accept it as valid evidence, since he says there is none, but it would be interesting to read what he has to say about it, nevertheless.

Janet Bord  
Clwyd

## Mind and physics

Alan Jones' criticisms of Eugene Wigner's view that (in quantum mechanics) it is consciousness that collapses the wave-function are both incisive and perceptive (*The Skeptic*, 6.5). It is indeed difficult to believe that as arguably incidental a phenomenon as human consciousness can really be responsible for collapsing the wave-function of the entire universe—Big Bang, dinosaurs and all!

But the comparison he draws between this view and solipsism is surely rather imperfect for, according to Wigner's argument, any conscious observer would be able to collapse the wave-function. Consequently, one's own consciousness is not unique and all important, as it would have to be in any view approaching solipsism. Indeed, Wigner's argument is predicted on the assumption that the observations made by another person (conventionally referred to as 'Wigner's Friend') result in as definite an outcome as do Wigner's own observations, i.e., on an explicitly anti-solipsistic premise. In any case, the argument is really about when and how physical attributes take on definite values, not when and how physical systems come into existence, as Jones perhaps implies. (A cloud is a fuzzy and indefinite object, but this does not mean that it is unreal). Nevertheless, I (along with most Physicists) happen to share Alan Jones' scepticism regarding this particular proposed solution to the conceptual problems of quantum mechanics. But I also feel that Wigner's ideas should not simply be dismissed out of hand, for these problems are profound and in my opinion are not easily resolved. The philosophically disturbing character of Wigner's interpretation—like that of the 'many worlds' interpretation, or of John Wheeler's 'participatory' interpretation (which does in fact incorporate effects somewhat reminiscent of the backwards causation Jones objects to, though without invoking consciousness), or of the various other interpretations of quantum mechanics—simply reflects the genuinely extraordinary nature of the theory. And there is of course every reason to take that theory very seriously indeed, no matter how strange its philosophical implications might be. However, the fact remains that—in spite of these implications (and contrary to the opinion of several parapsychologists)—such interpretations provide little if any support for telepathy or psychokinesis, or other 'paranormal' phenomena.

Tim Axon  
London

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