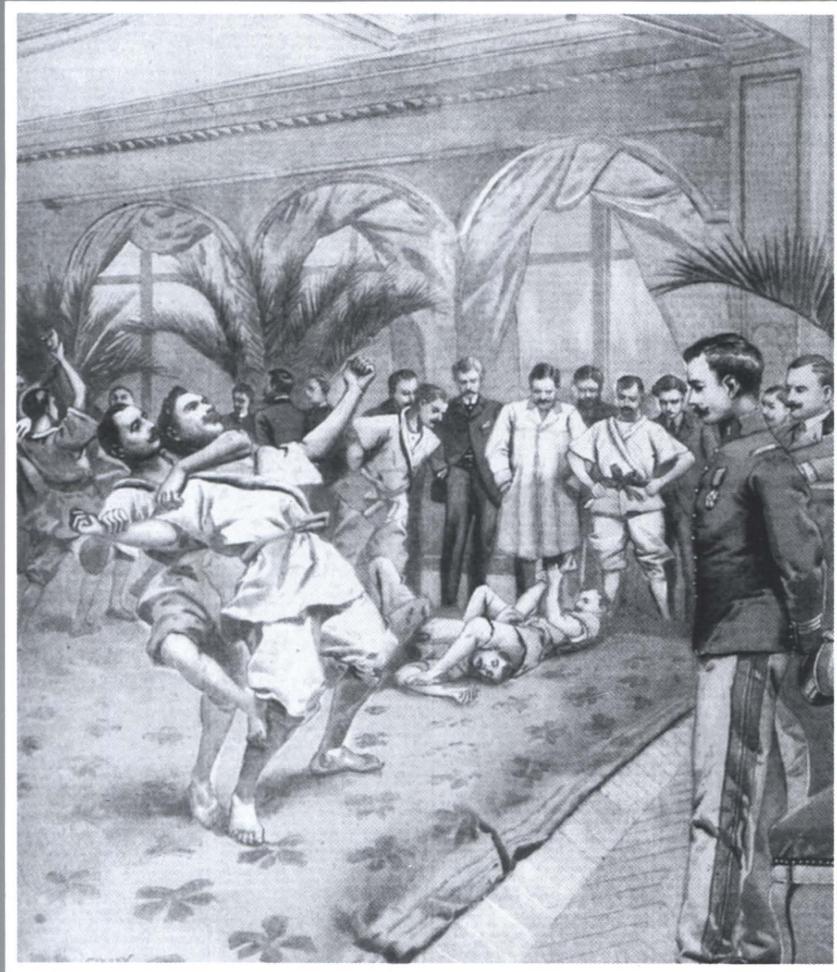


Volume 8 Number 4

# *The Skeptic*



## *Mysterious Energies and Martial Arts*

Also in this issue:

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*A Plea for Religious Understanding*  
*Psychometric Testing of High IQs*  
*High-voltage Healing*

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# Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



## *Mary and Marie: two interesting materialisations*

### *Part One: The return of Mary Queen of Scots*

Sooner or later, most famous people are prevailed upon to make a guest appearance in the séance room. For Mary Queen of Scots, it occurred in the 1870s, at an unnamed spiritualist circle in London. It is interesting to see that she had abandoned the picturesque but somewhat impractical clothing worn by queens and such in the 16th century, adopting instead the more practical garments habitually worn by the dead when revisiting earth. (Whether they wear them back where they come from is something we shan't know till we in our turn get there.)

Surprisingly, while earthly fashions swing from bustles to hot pants, morning suits to T-shirts, gentlemen and lady spirits alike continue to come draped in long white robes which conceal the body, and wraparound headgear which hides the hair and most of the head—to such a degree, you might wonder if they don't want us to see any more of them than the bare minimum essential for purposes of recognition. (Mind you, would you recognise Mary Queen of Scots if you met her?)

*Part two of this article will appear in the next issue.*

*Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, 59 Tranquil Vale, London SE3 0BS*

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

# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

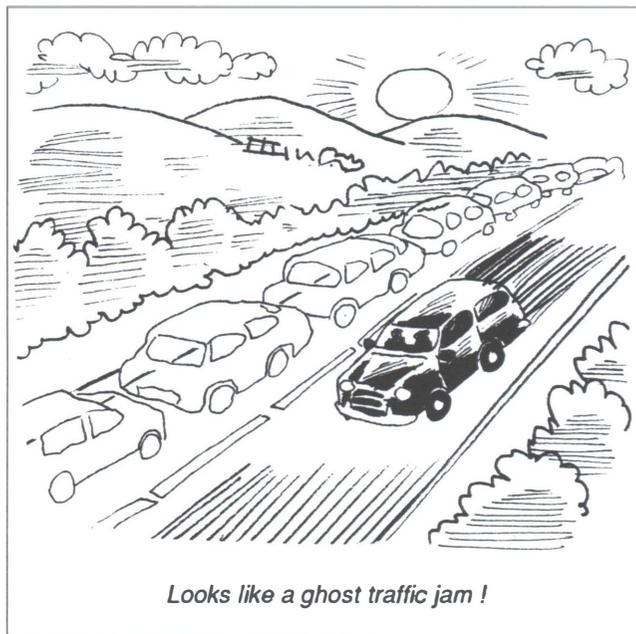
## Bottled memories

Technically, it could be described as aromatherapy, but although based on smells, 'Reminiscence Therapy' differs greatly from the anointing of parts of the body with scented oils. Its inventor, Fred Dale started his career removing troublesome odours from restaurants and hotels but now has built up a collection of 130 different smells many of which evoke the past. According to an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 8 May, Mr Dale's 'reminiscence pack', which has recently been used by a group of pensioners in Clifton Hospital's Rehabilitation Unit in Blackpool, consists of bottled smells from an old fever hospital, First World War Christmas cake and the soot of a black fire range. The smells are used to trigger off reminiscences in elderly people whose memories are perhaps not what they used to be. Mark O'Donnell, a consultant physician at Clifton hospital is delighted with the beneficial effects on his patients' memories: 'Smell is particularly potent in evoking memory because it is controlled by a very primitive part of the brain. So it produces much stronger recall than photos or old records. While this doesn't offset conditions such as Alzheimer's, it stimulates the memories that are left. It brings people out of their shells and gets them to interact. It's very helpful'. Mr Dale previously created the smell of a Viking latrine for the Jorvik Viking museum in York, the stench of the trenches for Eden Camp wartime museum in Yorkshire and the fragrance of Joan Collins' dressing room for the Granada Studios tour in Manchester.

## Vanishing vehicles

A hitherto unrecorded paranormal phenomenon (at least to my knowledge) was highlighted by Peregrine Worsthorne in his column in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 24 July. He refers to an experience (which I have to admit I have also had) in which a vehicle that he has seen in his rear view mirror, when driving his car, disappears from view when he looks again 'in circumstances which absolutely rule out any obvious explanation—i.e that they have turned off onto another road or something'. In his column two weeks later he reports that 47 readers wrote in with details of similar experiences, which in several cases occurred on single-lane, winding mountain roads when the car behind had definitely not stopped—as the writer had stopped to check—and where the road was too narrow to turn round. He muses on whether there may be ghost cars as well as ghost humans. However the explanation may lie in other areas of the paranormal, as a well-known UFO sighting on the East Lancashire road a number of years ago involved (from memory) two women being tailed by a large black car that subsequently turned into a UFO and took off into the heavens. Perhaps all people

with such experiences should be hypnotically regressed to determine whether they have been abducted and interfered with in any way.



Looks like a ghost traffic jam !

## Ouija jury

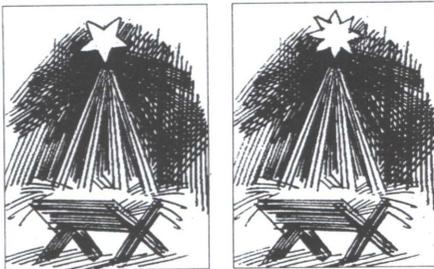
Several papers in May and June reported on an attempted appeal by a convicted double murderer to have his sentence quashed following claims that three or four jurors consulted one of the murderer's victims using a Ouija board during their deliberations. According to the *Daily Telegraph* on 24 June, three Appeal Court judges ordered an investigation by a Treasury solicitor and a senior police officer into claims forming the basis of an appeal by Stephen Young against his conviction for the murder of Harry and Nicola Fuller. According to an anonymous note purportedly written by a juror, the Ouija board was used to contact Mr Fuller who identified Stephen Young as his killer. It is not clear from the articles whether evidence via a Ouija board would be admissible in a British court of law but presumably legal protocols were breached when the deceased communicated directly with members of the jury rather than presenting his evidence in the witness box in the normal manner.

## All a hoax

The Apollo moon landings were all an illusion—that's the opinion expressed by 9% of Americans surveyed in a poll according to the *Independent* on 22 July. But it gets worse: Charles Johnson president of the Flat Earth Society (yes, it still exists—honest—but I'm not sure how many members

it currently has) predictably has a theory on this. He believes that the hoax was effectively exposed in the 1978 film *Capricorn One* in which the US government fakes a manned mission to Mars. Further, one of the actors in *Capricorn One* was O J Simpson who is being prosecuted for two murders in a court case that has preoccupied the American news media for many weeks. According to Charles Johnson the film 'proved the entire government space programme is a hoax. They're finally going after O J because he helped unmask the space hoax'. Other actors in the movie be warned.

## Satanic star



A five-pointed star on a poster that forms the centrepiece of an advertising campaign by Britain's main churches has caused upset amongst evangelical Christians. According to the *Daily Telegraph* on 16 August, when the picture appeared on the front page of the *Christian Herald*, readers complained that the star of Bethlehem shown over the crib (see illustration) looked like a satanic pentagram. The artist, Tom Hewitt, who had won a nationwide competition for the design of the poster, thought the whole thing was 'rather silly' but did not comment on whether he had entered into some kind of Faustian pact in return for making the crib appear to be 'under the curse of Satan'. The extra three points added to the star before printing the picture on cards, car stickers, handbills and posters have apparently successfully removed any satanic influence.

## Angelic workshop

Meanwhile, on a more positive (or at least less diabolical note), readers may perhaps like to note that 'Archangels are power stations; nodes of high energy in the universal life force or current of divine power'. This information comes from a pamphlet advertising a series of workshops on the subject of 'Discovering Angels' that took place mainly over the summer (although there is one scheduled for November in Oxfordshire if any reader is eager to attend). Although I pointed out in *Hits and Misses* in issue 7.6 that angels were increasing in popularity as evidenced by the publication of a number of recent books on the subject, I am nonetheless astonished that people may be prepared to spend £21 (for a one-day workshop) or £98 for a weekend session exploring '...the way the Archangels can assist in healing' or '...ways to access their energies through creative visualisation'. The angel specialist who is hosting the events is Theolyn Cortens, a poet and teacher who has been exploring inner kingdoms since a powerful angelic encounter in 1974. I believe that the time of the fairies will come again soon. A large amount

of anecdotal evidence for fairies was accumulated by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle between 1917 and 1921 and, as far as I know, this evidence still stands. In my view, fairy sightings can be explained as demagnified mirages of distant angels.

## Lucky deposit

You can't help wondering when confronted with workshops on angels whether the gullibility of western society knows any bounds. A recent communication from Harry Edwards, Chair of the Australian Skeptics depressingly leads to the conclusion that the answer to this question may well be 'No'. In August, a letter from Harry concerning his tame pet chicken was published in the *Manly Daily* in Australia. In his letter Harry explained that the chicken 'answers to its name, cheeps like a canary and perches on my shoulder like a parrot'. This latter pursuit results in the chicken leaving 'a calling card' on Harry's shoulder which 'according to meticulously kept records... has proved to be a precursor of good luck'. Harry goes on to claim that this remarkable substance has given rise to his winning a lottery, having money returned to him about which he had completely forgotten and receiving a large order for a recently-published book. Similar good fortune has also been experienced by his son on whose shoulder the pet chicken also perches and defecates. The letter continues '... I had the chicken's feathers read by a palmist, checked its horoscope and consulted a past lives reader who confirmed that it was a reincarnated philanthropist and that I should spread the good luck around by selling the product.' The letter then offers the 'lucky chicken crap' for sale for \$10 for 5g with the price including instructions on where the product should be applied. Three days after publication, he received an order with an accompanying \$10 cheque. I should be happy to hear from any *Skeptic* reader who keeps chickens and is interested in entering into a new business venture.



Tim Pearce

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# Mysterious Energies and the Martial Arts

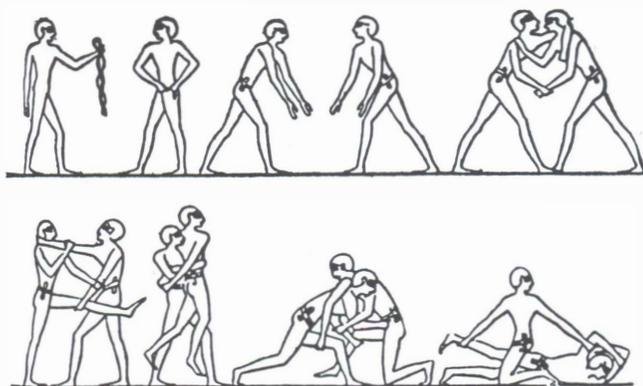
Andrew Brice

## *Myths of secret powers*

**T**HE MARTIAL ARTS have long been surrounded by an aura of mystery and the esoteric. It is therefore not too surprising to find that many martial artists profess to a belief in mysterious energies, outside the understanding of Western science. Many martial artists talk about 'chi' (in Chinese martial arts) or 'ki' (in Japanese martial arts), a mysterious energy that allows those who have mastered it to achieve miraculous feats not possible by physical prowess alone. But real evidence for the existence of this mysterious energy is thin on the ground or non-existent. So why do so many martial artists apparently believe in mysterious energies? In this article I will attempt to explain why many martial artists choose to believe, without any real evidence.

Most of the martial arts we practise today came originally from the orient where belief in supernatural spirits and energies was, and is, very strong. In fact it is almost impossible to disentangle the history of some of the older martial arts from the mythologies of the countries in which they developed. It is therefore hardly surprising that this belief in the supernatural should have suffused the martial arts. Also, the techniques of the fighting arts were, until very recently, jealously guarded secrets. An opponent knowing your techniques could easily have made the difference between life and death in an encounter. Inevitably wherever there is secrecy, rumours and wild stories abound. It is human nature to exaggerate—breaking an inch of pine with a punch can easily become breaking 10 inches of pine with a touch after 'Chinese whispers' have taken effect. Claiming to be able to teach not just fighting ability, but mystical powers as well must also have been a big help for instructors looking to recruit students. They were hardly likely to have discouraged such stories.

So why do many people continue to believe in these stories in the late 20th century? Firstly, because their instructors tell them to, and the instructor is a figure of considerable authority in most clubs. These assertions may be backed up with demonstrations. The complexity of human psychology and physiology allows for many 'tricks', such as the instructor making himself/herself 'heavier'. The usual form this takes is for a student to lift the instructor using their hands under the instructor's armpits or elbows. The instructor will then make himself/herself 'heavier' and the student has a lot more trouble lifting him/her on the second occasion. This can look quite impressive,



but it is hardly a rigorous test. I believe it is attributable to simple physiology and psychology. Since the lifts are repeated in quick succession, the student is more tired the second time. Relaxing the shoulders also makes the upward force more difficult to apply. There is also a strong element of suggestion (in fact one skeptical instructor claimed that he had duplicated this feat by suggestion alone), since a test on your own student is hardly a fair test.

Laying claim to esoteric knowledge increases the instructor's standing. His senior students may be stronger, suppler and faster, but they don't have as much esoteric knowledge. Who can resist making themselves more important? Martial arts instructors are only human after all. Students also have their own reasons for believing in mysterious energies. If they exist, then there is the possibility for an average person to become an immensely powerful fighter without a great deal of strenuous training (I wish!). One only has to look through some martial arts magazines with their endless reviews of wish fulfilment chop-sockey videos and adverts to 'build big muscles fast' and 'be successful with women' to realise that the martial arts have an almost irresistible pull for the credulous. Mysterious energies promise a short-cut to a much desired end. If mysterious energies don't exist then this means that victory is likely to go to the man (or woman) who is the biggest, strongest, fittest and has trained the hardest. People want to believe in the irrational, and usually these beliefs are completely sincere. One only has to look at the popularity of crystal healing, tarot, horoscopes, psychic surgery, miracle diets, 'end of the world' cults, the Bermuda triangle and UFOs to see this. Martial artists are no exception to this phenomenon. In fact, if they have been drawn to the martial arts by its mystical lure they are likely to be especially susceptible.

Belief in mysterious energies could also be seen as part of a trend towards more and more 'flowery' techniques in some martial arts. As the martial arts become divorced from their original drastic purposes and become more of an end in themselves, techniques lacking in substance are less and less likely to face the harsh reality of combat. It is interesting to note that belief in mysterious forces seems to be inversely proportional to the competitive nature of a martial art. I hear little reference to chi from judoka, kickboxers and others who are forced to face the true effectiveness of their technique against uncooperative opponents. I have a hunch that proponents of even 'soft' arts (those that have minimal reliance on physical force) that are competitive (for example, tomiki aikidoka and tai-chi practitioners who push hands competitively) talk about chi a good deal less than those who practise only on co-operative colleagues.

Beliefs also have their own momenta. The more of yourself you invest in a belief the harder it is to change. A friend who practises judo told me an amusing story that illustrates this well. A practitioner of one of the more esoteric martial arts (which it would be invidious to name, so I shall refer to it as 'X') told him that 'X was better than judo' so he suggested they put this to the test. After a few minutes, the X exponent staggered off rather battered and considerably the worse for wear mumbling 'Well I still think X is better!'. If you have spent years developing mysterious energies, then admitting they do not exist means admitting you have wasted a lot of time, this is very difficult. In fact it is often easier to ignore contrary evidence than it is to change your beliefs (this is given the grand term 'cognitive dissonance' by psychologists). Beliefs have a habit of entrenching themselves.

So if mysterious energies don't exist why hasn't the myth been dispelled by now? Can't I disprove the existence of chi? Not really. If I could show that a particular feat could be explained without any need for chi a believer could easily say 'Chi doesn't work on sceptics', or 'Just because that martial artist doesn't have chi doesn't mean no-one else has', or 'He was having a bad day', and so on. This is a game we are probably all familiar with and the skeptic can rarely win.

Few would deny that the opening up of the martial arts and improved understanding of nutrition and physiology have allowed martial artists to make great strides forward over the last few decades. I think it is high time that some of the claims made for mysterious energies were subjected to similar rational analysis. I am not suggesting for a second that all those who profess a belief in mysterious energies are charlatans or that they are not good martial artists. However, they might become even better martial artists if they spent less time 'developing their chi'. Martial artists can perform extraordinary feats, but we don't need metaphysics to explain them. It is time that mysterious energies were relegated firmly to martial arts mythology along with 10 metre jumps into the air.

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**Andrew Brice** is a software engineer with a black belt in ju-jitsu.

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## London Student Skeptics (LSS)

### *Programme of events for Autumn Term 1994*

**Monday 31 October: The case for holistic/natural medicine**, Dr Brian Kaplan (Harley Street).

**Monday 14 November: Parapsychology: a skeptical perspective**, Dr Richard Wiseman (University of Hertfordshire).

**Monday 28 November: Report on the 6th European Skeptics Conference in Ostend**, Alan Bradley (London Student Skeptics).

**Monday 12 December: The Benveniste experiment**, Dr John Foreman (University College London).

All meetings will be held in Room 3D, University of London Union Building, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HY, and will start at 7.30pm (doors open 7pm). Entrance is free to members of the LSS. Non-members are also welcome, and will be charged an entrance fee of £2 at the first meeting they attend. This fee includes membership of the LSS for the academic year, and all subsequent meetings will be free. For further information, contact LSS Convenor Bill Harman (see Skeptical Contacts, below).

## SKEPTICAL CONTACTS

### **U.K. Skeptics**

**Committee:** Susan Blackmore, Steve Donnelly, Wendy Grossman, Ian Rowland, Chris Nash, Mike Howgate, Richard Mather, Michael Hutchinson.  
10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ.

### **London Student Skeptics**

**Convenor:** Bill Harman  
21 Manville Road, London, SW17 8JW.

### **Wessex Skeptics**

**Secretary:** Martin Hempstead  
Optoelectronics Research Centre  
Southampton University, Highfield  
Southampton, SO9 5NH.

### **Electronic Mail/World Wide Web**

For information on skeptical information by Email or for subscription, back issues, or other magazine enquiries please contact Toby Howard: [toby@cs.man.ac.uk](mailto:toby@cs.man.ac.uk).  
*The Skeptic* now also has World Wide Web pages, at <http://www.cs.man.ac.uk/aig/staff/toby/skeptic.html>.

# Paranormal IQ Scores?

Andrew Colman and David Stretch

*A look at assumptions underlying psychometric tests*

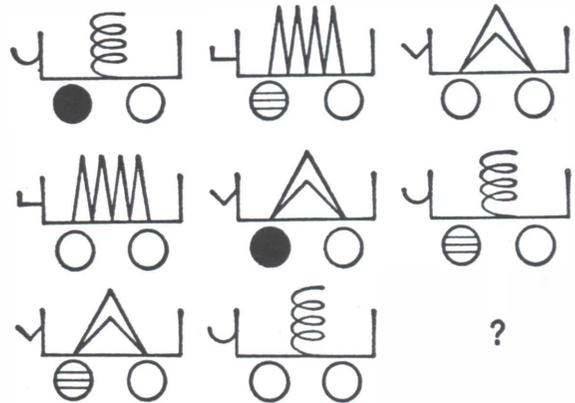
**I**N A RECENT ARTICLE in *The Skeptic* [1], an argument was put forward that 'the world's highest IQ' of 228, claimed on behalf of the American writer Marilyn vos Savant, is so improbable as to be unbelievable, and that the claim can therefore be refuted on purely logical (or mathematical) grounds. The argument hinged on the modern statistical conception of IQ, according to which IQ is, by definition, a normally distributed variate with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Marilyn vos Savant's alleged IQ of 228 falls 8.53 standard deviations above the mean, and the probability that a sample of a little over 5 billion (the world's population, approximately) drawn from this distribution contains any scores of 228 or above was shown to be less than one in 20 million, which is effectively zero.

Criticisms of this argument have appeared in letters to *The Skeptic*. It is worth reminding readers that the onus clearly falls on those who make or support extraordinary claims to prove these claims, but both letters to *The Skeptic* tried to shift the burden of proof on to the writer who questioned the claim. The specific criticisms could be answered quite briefly in a letter, but we believe that they rest on debilitating though widespread misconceptions that have more general implications in all areas of psychometrics and deserve more thorough examination.

## Ratio and Statistical Conceptions of IQ

Hugh Farey [2] criticized the argument against the IQ of 228 on the grounds that the score was derived from an older conception of IQ as the ratio of mental age to chronological age expressed as a percentage (that is, multiplied by 100): 'Miss vos Savant achieved the score expected of a 23-year old (almost) when she was ten, giving a quotient, as it was then defined, of  $22.8/10 \times 100 = 228$ '. Farey's formula is mathematically ambiguous; for the sake of clarity it is worth pointing out that what he presumably meant was  $(22.8/10) \times 100$ , and not  $22.8/(10 \times 100)$ , which yields an IQ very close to zero and indicates profound mental retardation rather than genius. Farey also reported that Marilyn vos Savant was subsequently tested on a different IQ test and achieved a score equivalent to an IQ of about 175. He concluded that Marilyn vos Savant's claim 'is perfectly acceptable' and the criticism of it 'merely meretricious'.

It is always a pity when writers descend into *ad hominem* attacks on people who present views with which they disagree. The word *meretricious*, which means 'befitting a harlot' (from the Latin *meretrix*, a harlot) is, in any event, misleading since no money was paid for the article, and it



unfortunately tends to distract attention from the ideas themselves. The ideas are worth examining, although we shall show that they do not stand up.

The linchpin of Farey's argument is the suggestion that Marilyn vos Savant's extraordinary score was derived from the old *mental age divided by chronological age* conception of IQ, 'as it was then defined', when she was ten years old. But it is quite wrong to say that IQ 'was then defined' in that way. In fact, the statistical definition was introduced in 1939, before Marilyn vos Savant was born, in an extremely influential monograph by David Wechsler [3]. Farey asserted that after 1939 'for children, the original definition continued, and I believe continues, to be widely used', but he did not disclose on what evidence his belief was based.

To operate with two completely different conceptions of IQ, one for children and another for adults, would be extraordinarily bad science (or, more accurately, pseudoscience) unless of course some evidence came to light that child and adult intelligence were two qualitatively different phenomena. We are not aware of any evidence for such a belief.

## Child and Adult IQ

Although it seems a priori improbable (to say the least), let us suppose just for the sake of argument that child and adult IQ are indeed qualitatively different phenomena, and that it is reasonable, as Farey suggested, to define children's IQs using the old ratio formula and adults' IQs according to the modern statistical definition. In that case the claim that Marilyn vos Savant's IQ is 228 collapses, because all that can be claimed is that she *had* an IQ of 228 when she was ten years old, not that she *has* such an IQ now.

On this point, Farey supplied empirical evidence that effectively demolished his own conclusion that 'her claim is perfectly acceptable' when he revealed that she more recently achieved a score equivalent to an IQ of 175 on a

different test. This is strongly suggestive of what statisticians call *regression to the mean*, arising from measurement error, and such a large regression to the mean can often arise from the original IQ score having low reliability. Since the scores of 228 and 175 cannot both be valid, unless Marilyn vos Savant has suffered a catastrophic fall in intelligence, probably unprecedented in the absence of any severe neurological disorder, common sense encourages us to accept the lower IQ, which is at least within the bounds of statistical possibility.

In summary, the assumptions and facts on which Farey based his argument are ultimately self-defeating, because even if they are accepted they show that Marilyn vos Savant's IQ score of 228 is unworthy of belief.

### The Distribution of IQ

Martin Hempstead defended Marilyn vos Savant's IQ from a different angle [4]. He criticized the very basis of the statistical definition of IQ: 'you can tailor an IQ test to give a normal distribution, you cannot *define* it thus, and you can only tailor it to an accuracy given by the sample size being used for adjustment' (italics in original). He went on to assert that 'the IQ distribution cannot be normal, anyway, because IQ results are bounded from below, by zero, and from above, by the maximum test score, unlike the normal distribution'. Finally, he proposed a model in which one in a billion people are geniuses, 'perhaps due to genetic mutation', their IQs being drawn from a normal distribution with a mean of 210, not 100; 'such a population component would never show up in mass testing'.

There are several fundamental misconceptions in Hempstead's argument. First, IQ tests do not have to be tailored to give a normal distribution; on the contrary, it is impossible to stop them doing it. It is a remarkable fact of nature that IQ scores, like many other psychological and physical characteristics that are attributable to multiple causes, are approximately normally distributed. The explanation for this is provided by a theorem in mathematical statistics due to Lindeberg [5] called the *central limit theorem* (see [6] for an exposition of the relevant version of the basic theorem and its implications). According to the central limit theorem, provided that certain minimal conditions are satisfied, the sum of a sequence of mutually independent random variables approaches a normal distribution as the number of random variables increases—and in most cases the rate of approach is quite rapid.

If we assume that a person's IQ score is determined by numerous independent random variables, some no doubt determined by genetic inheritance and some by environmental or purely chance factors, then the central limit theorem applies and the cumulative effect of these causal factors will be approximately normally distributed. As one leading authority expressed it, 'the central limit theorem explains why many biometric characters, like height, exhibit an empirical distribution close to the normal distribution' [7].

Hempstead asserted that the IQ distribution cannot be normal because, unlike the normal distribution, IQ scores are bounded from below by zero, and from above by the maximum test score. This is to confuse an underlying variable with the instruments that are used to measure it: it is

logically equivalent to saying that temperature is bounded below by the freezing point of mercury and from above by its boiling point. Temperature does not have to be measured with a mercury thermometer, and physicists have devised different measuring devices to measure lower and higher temperatures. As with IQ, the underlying variable is not bounded by the limitations of any particular measuring instrument. Temperature is, in fact, bounded from below by absolute zero, but this has nothing to do with the limitations of the measuring instruments, and IQ, in its statistical conception, is theoretically unbounded from below and above, despite the limitations of current IQ tests.

### Ptolemaic Epicycles

Finally, Hempstead proposed that one in a billion people 'who would never show up in mass testing' are geniuses whose IQs are drawn from a normal distribution with a mean of 210. This is a classical example of an *ad hoc* hypothesis designed to accommodate an errant observation. It is strikingly reminiscent of Ptolemaic epicycles, which were postulated to explain the observed deviations of the orbits of some celestial bodies from perfect circles before Copernicus introduced a heliocentric astronomy in the 16th century. There is not a shred of evidence for any intellectually elite population component that falls outside the normal distribution in which the rest of us languish.

In any event, if these postulated geniuses never show up in mass testing, then the standardization of IQ tests has not taken them into account and the tests may be quite likely to be invalid for measuring their IQs. This means that even if Hempstead's *ad hoc* postulate were to be accepted, far from justifying Marilyn vos Savant's claimed IQ of 228, it would provide yet another argument to undermine it.

### Conclusions

1. A claimed IQ of 228 is sufficiently improbable to be described as extraordinary.
2. In an earlier article, Colman [1] argued that there were grounds for disbelieving the extraordinary claim.
3. In reply, two critics have attempted to shift the burden of proof away from those making the extraordinary claim and on to the commentator raising doubts about it.
4. Additionally, *ad hominem* arguments were introduced into the debate.
5. Arguments that were advanced to bolster the extraordinary claim involve a mistaken identity relationship between a measurement method and the underlying concept being measured; an unsupported assertion that two completely different methods of deriving IQ scores are used for children and adults (which leads to a later inconsistency); and a further suggestion, with little supporting evidence, that there exists a population subgroup of genetically determined geniuses that would make the claimed IQ understandable.
6. The arguments advanced showed inconsistencies and often incorporated further, unsupported elaborations designed to shore up the extraordinary claim. Indeed, some of these provided yet further grounds for doubting the extraordinary claim. Consequently, the extraordinary claim should continue to be viewed with suspicion.

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# Alien Abductions

## Susan Blackmore

**H**AVE YOU EVER been woken in the night by a pale grey, huge-headed, four foot high alien, who wanted to take you to a spaceship and make you part of an alien breeding programme? Well, according to a recent Roper poll nearly 4 million Americans have.

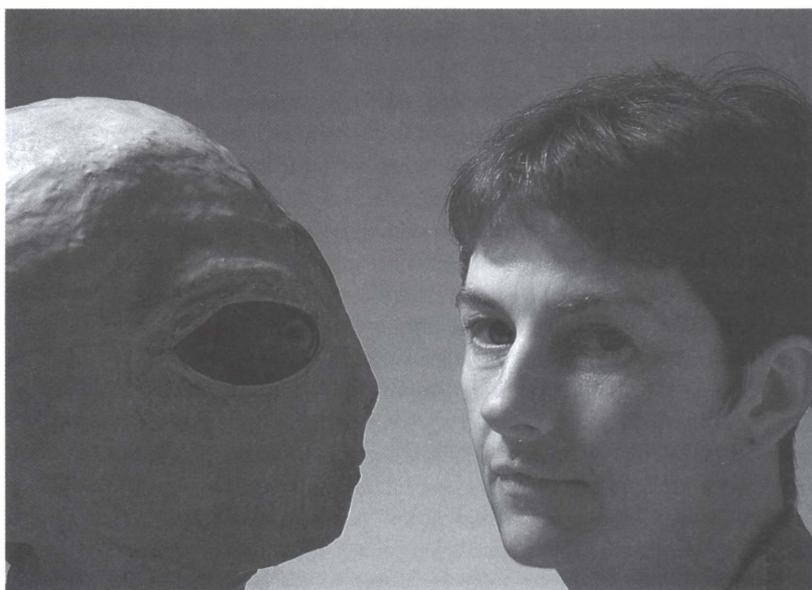
This may not seem like the BBC's idea of science but recently *Horizon* gave me the chance to investigate, and make a documentary, about alien abductions.

The abductees were extraordinarily convincing. From Rusty who was once taken from a hotel room at 2 a.m. to Wendy who is regularly abducted with her two children, they all described similar events. First are inexplicable or odd lights. Then small and grey aliens with huge black eyes transport their victims up into the bottom of a ship which is misty and oddly lit, and strap them to tables. After mental effects, staring and medical procedures the abductees are returned to where they came from but with a chunk of missing time to explain.

By the time I had talked to a dozen or so I could see that they were not mad and did not seem to be making it up. Clearly they believed the aliens were real, and so did Harvard psychiatry professor, John Mack, historian David Jacobs and artist Budd Hopkins. But could I agree with them?

Some abductees, like Rusty, only 'recalled' their experiences under hypnotic regression. However, many spontaneously remember all the gory details without hypnosis, which suggests that implanted false memories is not the entire story. I suspected some core experience on which the hypnosis, and our cultural expectations, could build.

Could this core experience be some kind of sleep paralysis? The body is paralysed during dreaming sleep and sometimes one can be mentally awake at the same time. This is an unpleasant, though common, experience and many cultures have traditions surrounding it—such as the 'Old Hag' of



Newfoundland and the 'Grey Ghost' of the Mung people from Laos. Psychological research shows that people who have more extreme abduction experiences are more likely to suffer from sleep disturbances. So this was clearly a hopeful line of inquiry. However, sleep paralysis does not have all the features of abductions such as being manipulated, travelling and seeing lights.

The pieces began to fall into place, though, when I visited the laboratory of Michael Persinger, in Ontario. I was put into a darkened chamber, lay back on a reclining chair and had a motorcycle helmet placed over my head. In the sides of the helmet were solenoids to produce a varying magnetic field across the brain designed to set off firing in the temporal lobes just above the ears. The idea was to test Persinger's theory that temporal lobe activity can produce abduction-like experiences. He shut the double door and left me in silent darkness.

Well, I'm running out of space and perhaps I'll just say, if you want to find out whether I was abducted or not you had better watch *Horizon* on BBC 1, November 28th.

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Susan Blackmore lectures in the School of Psychology at the University of the West of England

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# Sitting in the Dark

Chip Denman

## *Tinseltown's fascination with Spiritualism*

**H**ANDS ARE JOINED as the lights go out. The sitters drop their voices and wait anxiously for images to appear. A faint strain of music floats through the air. People sit as if their feet are glued to the floor. A modern séance...Yup, a Friday night at the movies.

Anxious audiences have been sitting in the dark waiting for ghostly visions to appear long before the first popcorn was spilled. Very few of us have attended a 'real' spiritualist séance, yet thanks to the movies, we have a clear image of what such a séance might look like. Séances and mediums have been featured in films since the earliest days of celluloid, sometimes spookily, sometimes skeptically, and often farcically. Many depictions have grossly exaggerated the mechanical trickery and effects. Spiritualist themes have been stirred into a great stew of spooks, demons, and haunted castles. From *Hamlet* to *Ghostbusters*, disembodied spirits have haunted the cinema, but usually not in the fashion conjured by the Spiritualists.

Ghost stories seem to have been with us always. But the religious, scientific—and above all else, populist—movement called Spiritualism can be dated precisely. On the chilly evening of 31 March 1848, little Kate and Maggie Fox called their god-fearing mother into the dark bedroom of their frame house in Hydesville, New York. A bumping sound would not let them sleep. As Katie snapped her fingers, the sound seemed to respond. Soon a breathless family was conversing with a spirit who told of his murder when, as a peddler, he had called upon the house many years before.

First the neighbours and then visitors from all over flocked to the little house to marvel at the young girls' ability to summon the spirit at will. The crowds disrupted life in rural Hydesville, and eventually Maggie was sent to live with elder sister Leah in Rochester. Oddly, the spirited spirit travelled with her. Soon Leah persuaded her little sister to seat people around a table for a visit with the spirits—for a small fee. On 14 November 1849, the sisters, reunited with Katie, rented the largest hall in Rochester, the Corinthian, and charged the handsome sum of \$1 a head for the chance to hear the girls summon messages from the realm of Summerland.

It did not take others long to others to discover their own psychic gifts. Within a few years messages from beyond the vale were rapped, knocked, thumped, scrawled in chalk, and spoken in hushed tones in parlours across North America, England, and Europe. The U.S. Senate in



*Margaretta, Kate and Leah Fox, from an 1852 daguerrotype*

Mary Evans

1854 was presented with a petition signed by 15,000 persons demanding an official investigation of these phenomena.

Many from the growing ranks of mediums took pains to emphasize the religious nature of their revelations—here was physical proof of the hereafter. Séances began as serious—and tedious—affairs. Like a mystic telegraph, messages arrived as a coded series of rapping sounds as people sat quietly together. As the spirits became more theatrical, the séance rooms got darker and darker and darker. Rapping noises gave way to messages on slates. Bells and trumpets and even mediums seemed to float. By the 1870s, mediums such as Florence Cook were materializing not just spirit apports such as flowers, but full walking figures—provided that the chamber was dark enough and the medium was guaranteed sufficient protection from disturbance.

Through numerous exposures of frauds and changing tastes of the public, Spiritualism as an organised movement went through various waxings and wanings through the Victorian era and into the 1920s. By the 1925 media circus surrounding Harry Houdini's investigations of the Boston medium 'Margery' (Mina Crandon), Spiritualism's era as a growth industry was over. Séance evolution was nearly complete and the public image was set.

The movie industry, itself only a little younger than Spiritualism, shares a common history of evolution of special effects. The Fox sisters themselves were barely in the grave when George Méliès, pioneer of the narrative film, drew upon his background as a magician to create film fantasies. In his short films he literally invented trick photography such as stopping and restarting the camera as a means of showing impossible appearances and disappear-

ances. Beginning in 1900 Méliès produced shorts which are the earliest attempts to simulate séance effects on film: *Spiritisme Abracadabrant* (1900), *Le Portrait Spirite (The Spirit Photographer)* (1903?), *A Spiritualistic Meeting* (1906). I have never seen these films, but if they are in keeping with Méliès' other fantastic work they no doubt portray miracles far beyond even the claim of the most outrageous Spiritualist.

Other early French film entrepreneurs followed Méliès' lead. Charles Pathé's film company produced several films exploiting spiritualist themes. In *Spiritualist Séance* (1908) a scientist confers with the spirits, thus echoing the history of leading physical scientists such as Sir William Crookes who were drawn into psychic investigations. A skeptic is plagued by spirits in another Pathé short in 1911. Leon Gaumont, another French innovator, produced a more skeptical—perhaps cynical—*Séance de Spiritisme* (1910) in which a man hiding under a table does the dirty work of fooling sitters at a séance. *Spiritualism Exposed* (1913), directed by Charles Raymond, suggests a skeptical treatment by its title. *The Medium's Nemesis* (1913) tells the tale of a man who is confronted by the 'spirit' of the victim whom he believes he has murdered.

These shorts, all but the last under 10 minutes, were little more than excuses for camera tricks. They were creations to delight audiences accustomed to magic lantern shows and the live spook illusions such as 'Pepper's Ghost'. As film making matured and stories became more sophisticated, spiritualistic themes must have seemed for a while too thin. Even Houdini in his attempts at film making stayed away from overt spiritualism, while exploiting other just as fantastic themes. His nearly unwatchable *The Man From Beyond* (1921), for instance, cast himself as a man implausibly brought back to life after years frozen in a block of ice.

The many public exposures and fraud trials had a lasting effect. In the 30s and 40s if séances appeared in the movies at all, they were typically depicted as outright scams and relegated to B-movies with lurid or tongue-in-cheek stories. The Charlie Chan series, over 40 films in all, featured at least three with séance-related plots: *Charlie*

*Chan's Secret* (1936), *Charlie Chan at Treasure Island* (1939) in which a magician played by Cesar Romero assists Chan's exposure of a phony psychic, and *Charlie Chan and Black Magic* (aka *Meeting at Midnight*, 1944). In the last, murder ensues at a séance conducted by a medium using two confederates and an absurd assortment of technological tricks that no real phony would ever have needed! *The Phantom Thief* (1946), from the Boston Blackie series, starts with a stabbing at a phony séance. The amazingly titled *The Amazing Mr X* (aka *The Spiritualist*, 1948) featured Turhan Bey as a phony medium in cahoots with a husband who wants to convince his wife of his death. Even the Bowery Boys got into the act of exposing fake mediums with *Ghost Chasers* (1951).

In 1947, *Nightmare Alley* paired Tyrone Power and Joan Blondell in a film which never quite found its niche. Darker and more cynical than typical A-movie fare, it is distinctly more than a B-movie cheapie. Power plays Stanton Carlisle, a carnival barker who learns a mind-reading act from Blondell and eventually finds mere showbiz success too unsatisfying. He uses his Kreskin-like tricks to set himself up as the mediumistic head of his own religious movement. True to Hollywood, if not reality, he cannot get away with playing god for long before being utterly broken. The film is particularly interesting to skeptics for its relatively accurate portrayal of mind-reading tricks and universal cold-readings.

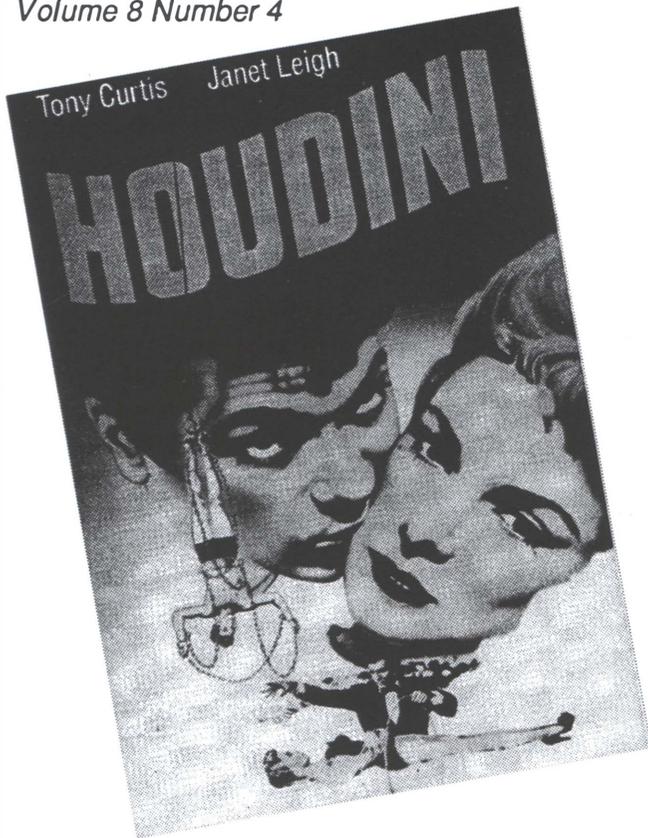
*The Medium* (1951) is another kind of an outlier. A film adaptation of an English-language opera by Gian-Carlo Menotti, it tells the story of a phony spiritualist who finds her life touched by an unknown force. Menotti also directs.

Tony Curtis plays the title role in *Houdini* (1953), barely a biography. The film does introduce Houdini's real-life obsession for ghostbusting; here he tears apart a séance complete with a cheesy ghost in drag and a hidden phonograph. The 'ghost' seems absurdly over-the-top Hollywood silly, but it compares favourably with the cheese-clothed figures captured in pictures taken in 'real' séances from the Victorian era through the 1920s. In other respects, the film is less than accurate. In a liberty that—if anything could—would bring Houdini back to haunt the film makers, the psychic call of his dead mother saves Houdini from certain doom. And inexplicably, the film ignores the truly theatrical circumstances of Houdini's death on Halloween 1926 and substitutes a totally fictitious demise in a failed escape attempt.

Bogus mediums in film were generally portrayed without much sympathy. *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* (1964) took a different take on the subject. Kim Stanley plays a sadly deranged would-be medium who pulls her hapless husband, played by Richard Attenborough, into a kidnapping plot. Attenborough finds it easier to commit a terrible crime than to confront his wife's delusions. Several scenes portray typical modern séances in which the imaginations of the attendees are more important than any physical phenomena. This is a rare cinematic study which accurately depicts sincere, yet thoroughly non-supernatural, spiritualism.

Hitchcock's final film *Family Plot* (1976) goes





more for humour rather than chills, but manages to have a ring of truth. Barbara Harris plays a modern—and quite phony—medium who relies on Bruce Dern’s amateur detective work to impress her clients.

A recent moneymaker which involved a medium as a supporting character was *Ghost* (1990). Whoopie Goldberg plays a storefront medium who knows what a sham she is. Her version of a séance, with its shortage of physical phenomena, would never have played in the Victorian heyday. The ghost effects created for Patrick Swayze’s character are the best-looking part of the film. Advertising hype suggested ‘You will believe!’. I don’t think so.

Other films, from *La Dolce Vita* to *Roshomon* to the shock-o-rama films of William Castle have touched upon spirit themes. Even *The Exorcist* (1973) uses a familiar Spiritualist tool, a Ouija board, although it soon becomes clear that a demon from hell rather than a kindly spirit from Summerland is calling the shots. And speaking of friendly spirits, Rocky and Bulwinkle’s immortal incantation ‘Eenie meanie, chili beanie... the spirits are about to speak!’ will forever be part of my séance lexicon.

The countless movie ghosts and hauntings in horror films have little to do with Spiritualism as it flourished at the turn of the century. Spiritualism offered itself as an optimistic religion with affirmation of the hereafter. Even the films which overtly draw upon the Spiritualist bag of tricks mostly overlook the fact that in its day many serious-minded intellectuals and scientists took it quite seriously. But Spiritualism was already in decline by the time that the movie industry was hitting its stride. The movies were there to mostly reflect public skepticism and cynicism. It is all too tempting to look at these movies and smugly congratulate ourselves on how we would never be so silly. Don’t believe it for a moment.

**References**

In addition to many bleary-eyed hours of movie watching, two sources proved to be particularly useful for specific film listings: Microsoft’s *Cinemaniam Interactive Movie Guide on CDROM* (1992 edition), and *Horror and Science Fiction Films: A Checklist* by Donald C Wills (The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ, 1972).

Much has been written on the history of Spiritualism. Consider the following as starting points: *The Spiritualists* by Ruth Brandon (Prometheus Books, 1984), *A Magician Among the Spirits* by Harry Houdini (reprinted 1972 by Arno Press Inc.), and *The History of Spiritualism Vols 1 and 2* by Sir Author Conan Doyle (reprinted 1975 by Arno Press Inc.).

Further Viewing: Readers who would like to see how Hollywood conjures a ghost are advised to look into the following films: *Blithe Spirit*, *The Haunting*, *The Uninvited*, *Thirteen Ghosts*, *The Legend of Hell House*, and for you Ed Wood Jr. fans, the worst séance ever committed to celluloid: *Night of the Ghouls*.

**Chip Denman** originally wrote this article for *Skeptical Eye*, the newsletter of the National Capital Area Skeptics, Maryland USA, from which it is reprinted with kind permission.

**Crossword Solution**

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Congratulations to C I Ward, of Stroud, who is the winner of our Prometheus Books Prize Crossword competition in issue 8.3 of *The Skeptic*. We have projected a stream of ectoplasm towards Stroud, which will soon condense on the Ward household’s bookshelves, in the form of the prize book, Joe Nickell’s *Missing Pieces*.

**Prometheus Books** specialises in books about pseudoscience and the paranormal. For a free catalogue, contact Prometheus Books, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ, U.K. Telephone: 081 508 2989 Email: 100023.2355@compuserve.com.

# A Matter of Faith

Jean Dorricott

## *A plea for understanding*

**B**ERYL REID, the actress, pictures God as a kind-hearted man in a tweed suit, 'knocking his pipe out or sitting on a river bank putting bait on a fishing line'. He's someone very real who helps her through life's difficulties. Her nightly prayers are just like a conversation and she doesn't believe in hell [1]. For Mike Walsh, he's a vicious old cynic who spends his time planning how to torture his creation. He is thin, pink and completely hairless, apart from a couple of isolated patches and demands continual praise from humans or he'll burn them in hell [2].

Religious or agnostic images like these have nothing to do with serious theological thought, and it is unfortunate that a number of *Skeptic* contributors appear to believe such low-grade perceptions are a valid representation of any religion. Professor Gilbert Shapiro makes the throw away remark, 'part of the problem is that pseudo-scientists usually know what they want to conclude, and they set about working toward that conclusion no matter what the evidence. This attitude smacks of religious belief...' [3]. John Clarke openly classifies religions as stupid in his otherwise interesting article 'Dissecting the Soul' [4]. In the same issue, Wendy Grossman, on smoking reclassified as a religious practice, describes religions as ignorant, unscientific, aggressive and money-grabbing [5].

Let's examine some of the evidence against God, then. I will not underrate readers' intelligence by including such straw gods as: 'God can't exist because he's not up in the sky, and we won't find him fishing' (Beryl Reid) or standing on a snowy cloud in his heavenly office (Mike Walsh).

We all know perfectly well that scientists too use visualisation techniques to describe say, the atom to non-scientists. If the analogy isn't helpful, then discard it and look for a better one.

More sensibly we can claim there's no room for him within our scientific understanding of the universe—past, present or future. No gaps left for God to fine-tune the creation. No point in a God who lights the Big Bang touch-paper and then stands back. Secondly, after more than a century's study of the paranormal, most scientists would agree there is no real evidence for spirits, life after death, ESP, miracles and the whole bundle of tricks. Thirdly, human needs for a God are best explained by natural fear of casualties, bereavement, death and sickness.

Such evidence seems good. So is religious faith a matter of believing against the evidence? Consider, perhaps during your next period of meditation... (sorry, Arthur



Chappell!)... consider the vast array of material complexity from the great vistas of galaxies to the minute gyrations of quarks. And then realise that we, made of the same particles as stars, are able to reflect on our presence in the universe and also observe and understand some of its mechanisms. How is it, that from the laws of necessity and chance, creatures have evolved which can meditate on the universe? We may deride past religious theory which placed humans in the centre of a hierarchical universe, responsible for other living material things with a spiritual link to angelic beings, above which God reigned supreme. Scientific advance has erased the spirits, but humans keep that central importance in the scientific interpretation as being the most complex adaptive system we know—an IGUS (information gathering and utilising system) with consciousness and self-awareness, as Murray Gell-Mann describes us [6]. Equally remarkable is our ability to make and keep moral laws. Those laws may spring from our social inheritance, shared with other apes, but our ability to refine them to meet new conditions far exceeds theirs. Unlike the majority of other living things we can show compassion to other species as well as our own, and we approve those who act with kindness towards all creatures. Furthermore we are able to love beauty, to delight in discovering the way the world works, to create music, art, literature, to admire honesty in thought and action, to laugh and make jokes. At this point you make your act of faith.

The humanist choice is that it is all due to chance, organised chaos. We know a good deal about the interactions of elementary particles. We also appreciate there is a well defined arrow of time. In fact three are recognised by Stephen Hawking, all pointing in the same direction [7]; thermodynamic (increasing entropy), psychological (our memory for times past) and cosmological (expanding universe). The relationship between particle interaction and time can explain the development of the universe, while

the input of the sun's energy produces order out of disorder in our solar system. Continual evolution of living things follows, some species experiencing increasing and others decreasing complexity. The overall effect is that complexity increases and the environment itself is altered (increase of oxygen in the earth's atmosphere for example). Learning and thinking humans develop societies that learn and adapt—and even invent computers that learn. There is no need whatsoever to posit a Creator.

Or, accepting all this, you may still feel 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God', with Hopkins. Your act of faith may be that something somewhere, greater than all we have discovered about the universe, has endowed the universe particles with the potential to produce minds, personalities and societies. This idea is further discussed as the weak anthropic principle by Paul Davies and John Polkinghorne [8]. How will you describe such a being? Not as Spirit, because of the connotation with ghosts and poltergeists. Not as Mind because we have no experience of mind without brain. Religious minded scientists and theologians discuss this issue at length, even though at church level you will find minimal understanding. One possibility is God as top-down Causation, as explained by Arthur Peacocke, one time physical biochemist and now an Anglican priest. He explains that consciousness is causal in a top-down manner, since it is a real property of the brain which causes things to happen (for example, thought causes the firing of neurons, affecting muscles and causing the raising of an arm). 'In biological systems... 'top-down' causation happens in evolution so that selected evolutionary processes may properly be regarded as the cause of changes that are established in the DNA of living organisms' [9]. Such a God would be greater than the whole System but also part of it, yet he/she/it would not tinker with it in an unlawful way.

Miracles then? Thoughtful people have long disregarded the miracle-reversing-law-of-nature scenario. Miracles are seen as the realisation of the presence of God within an ordinary situation, a realisation many people feel quite powerfully at times. The work of the Religious Experiences Research Unit in Oxford is interesting here [10]. Such a miracle may actively affect health, since there is some evidence that different moods affect the activity of immune cells [11].

Religions understand the depth of our pain and anxiety by taking seriously our hopes of a life after death where earth's wrongs are righted, and human need for help in times of distress. If you dismiss faith as mere childish dependence, then I would say, again with Hopkins, 'O the mind, mind has mountains: cliffs of fall/Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap/May who ne'er hung there'.

Though valid deductions about the loving care of God and the positive value of pain can be made from our present scientific understanding of the universe, problems remain. The second step of faith is that God is caring and trustworthy in spite of these and the Christian understanding is that God is present within the pain sharing our griefs. Thus today we still have grounds for believing that as one female saint said in the fourteenth century 'all manner of thing shall be well... in his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for

love and he will never let us go' [12]. What that may mean in terms of eternal life I don't pretend to know. Perhaps nothing, as John Clarke sees it [4]. But further discussion of these issues are included in references [8] and [9].

Finally, it is true there are religious people who dishonour the ideals of their religion, but if you think there are no disreputable scientists you are wholly naive. It is not helpful to judge either the religious or scientific enterprises on the basis of their worst aspects. As a sceptic where much of the paranormal is concerned I make the plea that we emulate Dr Susan Blackmore's approach and learn to understand before we jeer. Why antagonise religious minded readers with sometimes offensive articles? We can surely work together whether our faith is no-God or God-exists. There is plenty for us to do trying to warn our scientifically illiterate public against charlatans and rogues who deal in paranormal dishonesty.

### References

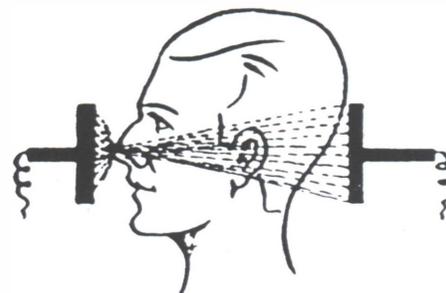
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Jean Dorricott is a part-time teacher with a biological degree, heavily committed to educational work with the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, and mother of three scientists.



# Shock Horror Probe!

David Langford



*Discovering bakelite marvels from the past*

**O**UTDATED TECHNOLOGY has a certain bizarre charm. I can't bring myself to part with my collection of things like old slide rules.... Remember slide rules? Or the 1950s *Astounding Science Fiction* cover for Murray Leinster's 'The Pirates of Ersatz', showing a kerchiefed space-pirate swarming through the airlock with a slide-rule clenched between his teeth? Ah, nostalgia: the big scientific rule with log-log scales, the miniature circular one, and best of all the telescopic helical model that squeezed out an extra decimal place of accuracy by wrapping a five-foot-long scale around a cylinder...

For those wondering what proto-yuppies used to carry before cellphones and electronic personal organizers, the Langford collection has the answer: the Swiss Precision Mechanical Pocket Calculator. Actually it was made in Liechtenstein, but for sales purposes the words 'Customs Union with Switzerland' establish the jewelled Swissness of the enterprise. It's a matt-black tube, looking rather like an expensive camera lens with hordes of adjustable slides and a handle on the end. You set up figures on the slides and... *add them...* by a mere turn of the handle. Subtract by turning the handle the other way! Multiply by turning it ... yes, you're ahead of me there.

There are some nifty adjustments, too, for decimal places: as Erich von Däniken might have phrased it, it's hard to

believe such things were known to the primitive, cave-dwelling craftsmen of 1966. One imagines techno-freaks of those pre-Internet days rushing each other breathlessly excited postcards about how with appropriate hacking the miniature Babbage Engine could be persuaded to extract square roots.

The phrenological bust on the mantelpiece is suspected to be a modern replica: 'You wouldn't have got it for £25 if it was *real*,' sneered an arts-and-crafts expert. My wife christened it Oliver after the great Oliver Wendell Holmes, who put the boot into the phrenologists with a knockabout lecture featured in his *The Professor at the Breakfast Table*: 'At last comes along a case which is apparently a *settler*, for there is a little brain with vast and varied powers—a case like that of Byron, for instance. Then comes out the grand reserve-reason which covers everything and renders it simply impossible ever to corner a Phrenologist. "It is not the size alone, but the *quality* of an organ, which determines its degree of power."'

According to Oliver the most prominent bump on my head seems to indicate Acquisitiveness—presumably in the sense of Unsuccessful Acquisitiveness, but since it's a movable lump (a cyst) I can always push it up a bit towards Sublimity. Now there's glory for you.

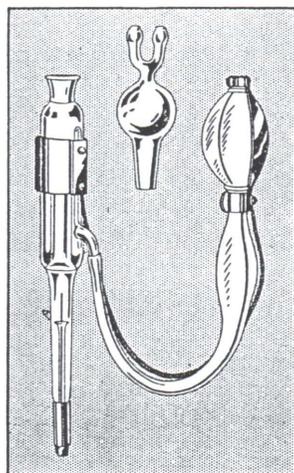
The collection's place of honour goes to the Ediswan

High-Voltage Healing Box, vintage 1933, enabling you to commit high-frequency healing in the privacy of your own home. Its case is covered in imitation leather and opens to show a nostalgic vista of bakelite, with exciting knobs (one indicating cosmopolitan ambitions, since it switches between '100-125' and '200-250' volt supplies), a socketed handle that pulls out on a lead, and strange glass electrodes held by clips in the velvet-lined lid.

What you evidently do is to slot your favourite electrode into the handle's socket, turn on, and press it relentlessly against the Afflicted Part. I have offered this opportunity to all my friends, who dived under tables and out of windows in a gently diplomatic way. The lonely experimenter thus had to test the device on himself.

Switching on produces a hellish racket from what is presumably an induction coil inside, and twiddling the Intensity knob then

## EDISWAN OZONE INHALER



This attachment has been designed for use with any of the standard High-Frequency sets.

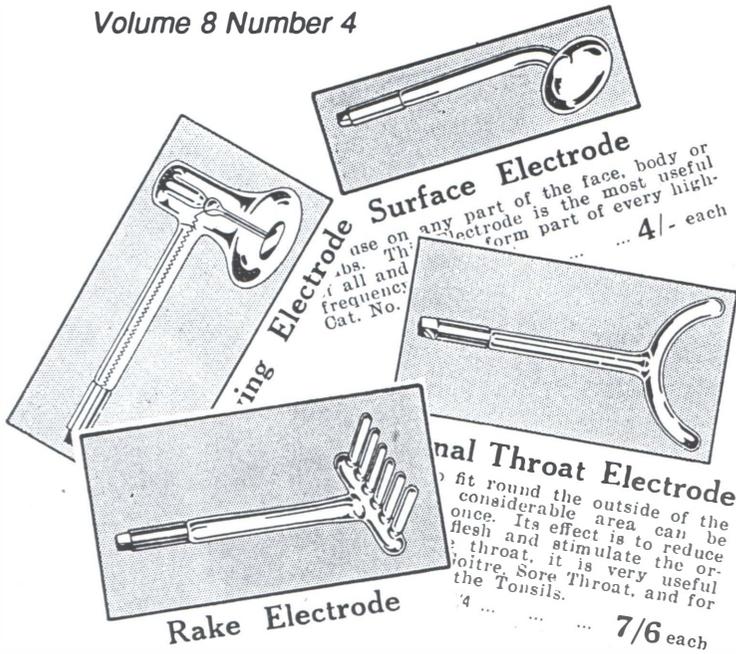
This Inhaler will be found to give instant relief to all sufferers from Bronchitis, Nasal Catarrh, Asthma, Hay Fever, Influenza, and in fact all Bronchial complaints.

### DIRECTIONS FOR USE.

Take the glass nasal piece of the Inhaler and fill it loosely with cotton wool.

Saturate this cotton wool with a quantity of the inhalent sufficient to be absorbed by the loosely packed wool, and replace the nasal piece carefully into the main portion of the Ozone Inhaler. Insert the plated end of the Inhaler into the Applicator Handle of the High-Frequency Set, turning it gently until it is felt to engage in the square socket.

Grasp the applicator handle as low down as possible and turn on the current.



leads to an eerie violet glow in the glass electrode and a prickle of tiny sparks where it touches the aforesaid Afflicted Part. This fizzy sensation, accompanied by a paralysing reek of ozone, must have persuaded users that jolly beneficial things were happening. My wife was less convinced: 'Stop! Stop! It's going to do something awful!'

Clearly 1930s punters were not so timorous, and the Edison Swan Electric Co Ltd (Ediswan House, 23/25 Constitution Hill, Birmingham) did good business in those days. The Box comes with a whole catalogue full of tempting offers—thirty-one specialist electrodes to cover all medical contingencies. My basic kit only has four, alas: the puny four-shilling Surface Electrode, ending in a flattened glass bulb 'for use on any part of the face, body or limbs'; the appropriately-shaped Rake, 'very effective for Falling Hair, Dandruff, restoring natural colour and invigorating the hair growing system generally'; the Metal Saturator, a chromed tube that cuts out the usual path through gas-filled glass to zap the patient directly with 'a very strong current which gives powerful tonic effects'; ... and, most fearsome and science-fictional of all, the Fulguration Electrode. This uses

the principle of electric discharge from a sharp point to generate showers of vicious little sparks 'of strength sufficient to deal with corns, warts and similar growths'. Like Bumps of Acquisitiveness? Having tried this briefly on a handy wart, I've come to suspect that 'similar growths' may include fingers.

Luxury extras begin with the Roller Electrode, ideal for use when the Surface Electrode sticks or jerks in its passage over terrifiedly sweating or carbonized flesh. The Double Eye Electrode has twin cups allowing both eyes to be simultaneously convulsed ('excellent tonic effects on the eyeball and optic nerves'). Particularly elaborate is the Ediswan Ozone Inhaler at a hefty thirty-five shillings: 'a mixture of pure Ozone and Pine Vapour is driven right to the back of the nose and down into the lungs', which sounds fairly, er, breathtaking.

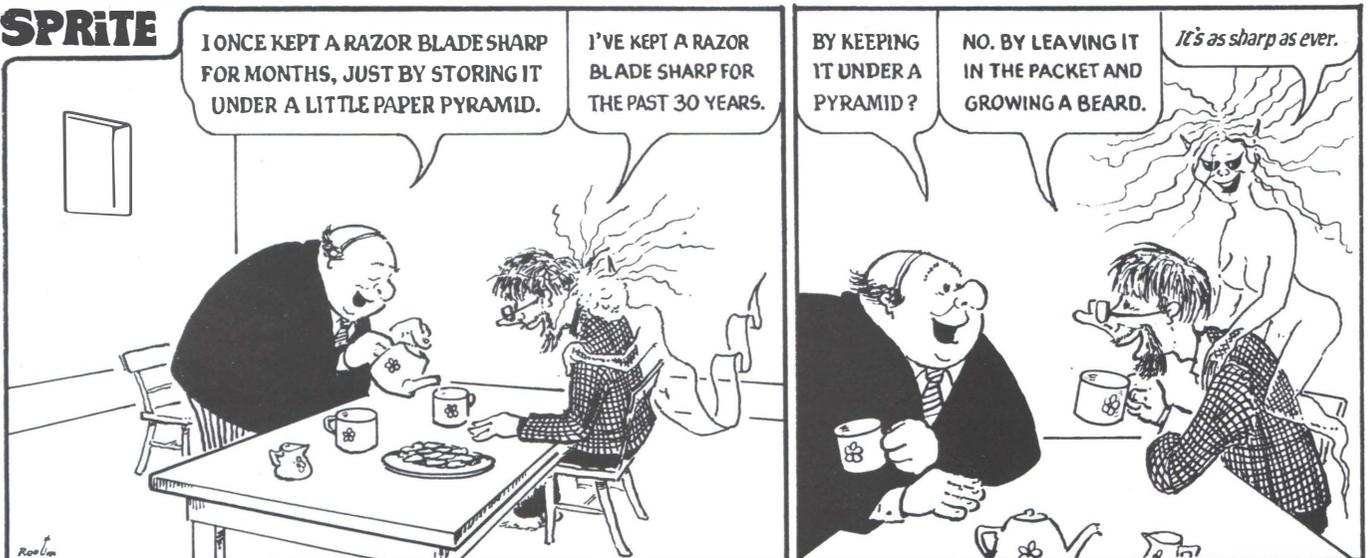
And some of the specialist electrodes I'd rather not go into, or indeed vice-versa; it is left as an exercise for the reader to imagine the Nasal, Urethral, Vaginal, Rectal, Prostatic and Dental Cavity models plying their trade. Not for nothing did I keep remembering a long-ago *New Scientist* headline competition: ALTERNATIVE HEALER USED BARBED ELECTRIC ENDOSCOPE—SHOCK HORROR PROBE.

A four-page Chart of Instructions explains how the Ediswan Box will cure everything from Abscess to Warts, including Alcohol and Drug Habits ('apply over liver, solar plexus and to the spine. For Cocaine users a mild current applied to arms, legs and soles of feet, until the skin is reddened') and continuing through Brain Fag, Deafness, Dropsy, Female Troubles, Hardening of the Arteries, Obesity and Stiff Neck. Cynics might wonder why the magic current, so good at making boils, goitre, piles and warts shrink quietly away, has an entirely opposite effect when applied to Breast Development or Impotence.

Funny you don't seem to see this on sale any more...

**David Langford**, a freelance writer of all sorts of things, is currently Science Fiction critic for *The Guardian*, and in 1994 received his ninth Hugo award for writing about SF.

**SPRITE**



# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

*Read all about it*



EVERY DAY, like many people, I take a daily newspaper. Mine is *The Guardian*, that liberal snuggly organ where the design changes so frequently you may begin an article in Times and end up in Helvetica. But on Thursdays, I take two more newspapers. The first is *The Orcadian*, published weekly from Kirkwall in Orkney. It's an encapsulation of the slightly skewed version of 20th century life they live up there, in an enchanting archipelago with enough ancient monuments to send your dowsing sticks into a frenzy. And home of the true drink of the Gods—Highland Park whisky.

My other Thursday newspaper is *Psychic News*. After taking it for years in the eighties, I grew weary of the tightly focused coverage: although the belief in an afterlife, and the ability of select individuals to eavesdrop, was taken as given, articles with headlines like 'More proof of survival this week in Ashton-Under-Lyme' appeared with depressing regularity. The scene was going nowhere, and not fast, so *Psychic News* and I parted company.

Out of the blue, a few weeks ago, I re-subscribed, and when the first issue arrived, I was astonished. First, there was, as they say, 'an imaginative use of typeface'—if not quite *The Face*, then certainly the tabloid section of *The Guardian*. The *Psychic News* I remembered was a dusty, almost audibly creaking newspaper that was prone to rapid yellowing, with one foot in 1880 and the other in 1980. The paper I rediscovered was itchy, and rather self-consciously, 'nineties'.

As I write, *Psychic News* is up to issue 3,250, and at one issue per week, that's a lot of years—a testament to the longevity of the spiritualist community in the United Kingdom. But it is a slim publication. If you remove the 4-page 'Psychic Press' advertising supplement, you are left with 8 pages of the week's 'psychic news', of which more than two and a half are advertisements. In contrast, the modest 974 square kilometres of Orkney manage to provide a packed 36 pages of terrestrial news every week.

I cannot help but be skeptical of the *Psychic News* world. The constantly detectable underlying current of sadness, the aching to cross the Great Divide, the spirit communications offered through 'Lone Bear', 'Red Feather' and the rest of the Sioux or Apache crowd. I'm as afraid of dying as much as the next person, but God help me if I end up in a fragrant foggy world in a white suit trying to make a connection to a 'psychic' on a chilly stage somewhere north of Manchester.

But, *Psychic News* has changed. In this week's issue, there are two pieces that would not be out of place in *The Skeptic*. The first is by Tom Haigh, in his column 'In Touch'. In an article gravely entitled 'No faces are seen', he describes a visit to a meeting at the International Spiritual Awareness Centre (in Harrow) at which Swindon's Graham Bishop 'gave what purported to be a demonstration of experimental transfiguration'. Skeptical stuff? You bet. Mr Haigh was not impressed with Mr Bishop's performance/experiment/demonstration: 'His guide, a Prussian Doctor'—it certainly makes a refreshing change from Red Eagle and Black Moose-Catcher—'told those present ... that he and his team would attempt to build "the mask"'. This refers to a process where the medium's face is covered by a mask of ectoplasm which is then used by those on the Other Side as a sort of paranormal Plasticine, in which they can create an impression of their own faces. You'd think the dead could build a bridge between this world and the next without resorting to psychic Play-Doh, but apparently not. Mr Haigh reports: 'Mr Bishop sat in a specially constructed cabinet motionless, face impassive, with absolutely no sign of a transfiguration taking place'. But several people in the audience were sure they saw something happen, shouting: 'His face is getting thinner, he's got a moustache, I can see an old man, I can see a young man, I've just seen Clement Atlee/Stephen O'Brien/Margaret Thatcher [sic]'. However, Mr Haigh himself saw no such manifestations, and was not impressed by subsequent attempts by Mr Bishop's spirit guide to heal him of complaints he did not have. He concludes: 'On the strength of last Saturday night, audiences be aware this might lead to evenings where psychic phenomena are conspicuous by their absence.' This is *Psychic News*, don't forget. And there's more: the back page of the same issue features an article on noted parapsychologist and skeptic Susan Blackmore, *Skeptic* contributor and member of the UK Skeptics. It's a sympathetic piece, and charts Sue's experiments and interests over the years.

So what has happened to *Psychic News*? I remembered it as a bastion of nonsense. Now that they seem to be taking a more 'balanced' view of the scene, I found myself rather disappointed, and almost considered unsubscribing. But not quite. Thursdays wouldn't be the same without *The Guardian*, *The Orcadian*, and *Psychic News*, three unlikely bedfellows that go together rather well.

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

# Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

## Media madness

I'M ASSUMING THAT WHEN you read this we'll all still be here: this is the week that Sister Marie Gabriel is predicting that a collision on the far side of Jupiter will destroy the planet. She ran a quarter-page ad in the *Independent* a couple of days ago, saying that there were precautions we could take to make sure we survive—and if we all call her hotline and send her money, she'll be able to afford to run even bigger ads in all the papers to tell us what they are. One of the paper's science correspondents, Steve Connor, wrote an open letter to her the next day explaining the science involved and why she was wrong ... but failed to note that her ads aren't about science and that astronomy is irrelevant to what she's actually doing.

She's copying Oral Roberts and all those other American TV evangelists. That's their whole game: we're here on TV and we've got something of Great Importance to spread. Send us some money so we can go on more TV and tell more people we've got something of Great Importance to spread and they should send us money... Those who remember the boy on the bottle holding a bottle with a picture of a boy on the bottle holding a bottle with a picture of a boy...

This is also the week when the *Evening Standard* ran a two-page spread: 'Robert Cowan provides a guide to classical recordings that suit the inner, astrological you'. You will be fascinated to hear that one-twelfth of the population should be listening to the Bach B Minor Mass. Actually, I agree with that, but I doubt that teenaged Aquarians, whose heroes are more likely to be Pearl Jam and Guns N'Roses, will. Actually, Aquarians scoop the sound waves in this spread, since they also get Beethoven's Ninth.

I've been trying to work out what the *Standard's* game is here: presumably the choice of classical music only was demographically dictated. But why link it to astrology? I note that it's the first day of the Proms, so that might have something to do with it. But the credit at the bottom of the piece indicates that this is only a teaser: 'Music and the Zodiac will appear in the August edition of the *BBC Music Magazine*'. Aw, shucks... you mean, there's more?

This is also the week that the BBC terrorized all dental cowards even further by running a *QED* to the effect that we are all being slowly poisoned by the mercury in our amalgam fillings. Are we? It's hard to tell from the program, since although it's unquestionable that mercury is poisonous, it seemed unclear exactly what they think will happen to us metal-mouths over time. Like most people, I was unimpressed with the reaction of the British Dental Association honchos and their apparent lack of interest in or awareness of the research highlighted in the program, but can one say with certainty that the coming bans on the stuff in



Germany, Austria, and Sweden aren't in the same class as the US's ban on the pesticide alar?

Nonetheless, I came away from the program feeling a little smug: I remember asking my dentist when I was only about 12 how they could use a poisonous metal like mercury in your mouth, and being told that it's inert in the amalgam they use. The moment that schoolgirl blew into the tester before and after chewing, and the amount of mercury vapour in her breath went up dramatically was, in that limited way, very satisfying. I said that to someone here, though, and his reaction was: I didn't even know they used mercury in fillings until I saw that show. Erp. You'd think people would ask this sort of question, wouldn't you? But I'm glad they're working on alternative materials. I mean, what the hell? Some of my fillings are 27 years old, and so my dentist likes to torture me by saying, due to wear out any year now.

The question is, can you trust a TV network on mercury amalgam fillings if it also promotes itself and the music it broadcasts using astrology to do so? The same question arises even more urgently over the *Sunday Times*, which has been campaigning for some time now against the notion that HIV causes AIDS, primarily in articles written by Neville Hodgkinson. How can one seriously trust any of the rest of the paper's science coverage?

Hodgkinson has recently left the paper, and it remains to be seen if the campaign will now survive; it may well be that the paper will discreetly withdraw from this stance. But it all brings up again the question of how far it's reasonable to go in presenting an 'alternative' or 'balanced' view, and how far the newspapers and other media are responsible in influencing their consumers. If some people read Hodgkinson's articles and decide all this 'safe sex' preaching is just scientific opportunism and are infected with HIV as a result, should Hodgkinson be liable? Should the *Sunday Times*? Or do people get the media they deserve?

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Wendy Grossman is a member of the UK Skeptics, and a writer and folksinger.

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# Reviews



## Rare mediums

Gordon Stein, *The Sorcerer of Kings* (Prometheus, 1993, hardback, £19.50, 140 pages)

Modern Spiritualism began with the Fox sisters in America in 1848, and rapidly spread to the United Kingdom. Mediums channelled the departed and other spirits, produced physical and voice phenomena, and ultimately manifested 'full-form' ectoplasmic apparitions. Many were frauds or simply deluded, but a few were tested by scientists and pronounced genuine. This book details the careers of Florence Cook and Daniel Home (the 'Sorcerer' of the title), and Sir William Crookes, the eminent physicist who proclaimed them genuine.

Florence Cook associated with mediums later exposed as fakes and was occasionally exposed herself. She manifested the (very substantial) phantom of 'Katie King', often in company with Mary Showers' 'Florence Maple'. Observers noted the resemblance between the ghosts and their living mediums, who were at no time available for simultaneous inspection. As Mary was later caught cheating, Florence was presumably also fraudulent.

Crookes was drawn to Spiritualism after the death of his brother, and may have hoped to make the subject scientifically respectable, perhaps even condoning false mediums in the name of the greater cause. It has been suggested that Florence was his lover, although of course this could not apply to Home or others whom he endorsed.

Home falsely claimed the middle name 'Dunglas' and a connection with the Earls of Home which enabled him to move freely in high society (his two wives were from aristocratic Russian families). Endowed with considerable charm, he lodged without charge at the homes of his wealthy admirers (who frequently gave him expensive presents of jewellery) and carefully vetted sitters at his seances. Home was never publicly caught cheating, although in his own writings he often exposed the trickery of others. However, private accounts describe how he was caught with a vial of luminous oil of phosphorus (to be used for glowing manifestations), and how he faked 'spirit hands' with either bare feet or wax models (he was an accomplished sculptor).

Robert Browning wrote unfavourably of 'Mr Sludge', a parody of Home. In addition, Home was legally convicted of improperly obtaining large sums of money from a wealthy widow, Jane Lyon (at her late husband's instigation, according to Home).

Gordon Stein uses his knowledge of stage conjuring to show how Home's various effects, including his famous levitations, could have been produced by natural means, given his undoubted personal charisma. He gives reasons

for taking both mediums to be fakes, and shows why Crookes' testimony is unacceptable.

This book is quite brief, and the facts are often presented in a compressed fashion, with many references to the works of other authors (for example, Trevor Hall and Ruth Brandon), that may confuse readers who are new to the subject. Also, several discrepant accounts of the famous Ashley Place levitation are offered, suggesting that skeptics don't always have the correct answers either. However, these are minor points, and the book is a fascinating and well-argued study of two of parapsychology's most famous (or notorious) characters.

—Mike Rutter

## Healthy herbs?

Barbara Griggs, *The Green Witch—A Modern Woman's Herbal*, (Vermilion, 1993, 168 pp., large format pbk, £9.99)

*The Green Witch* is divided into three sections, each one providing a lively introduction followed by a seemingly endless list of the hundreds of permutations available from the world of plants. There are also many interesting and amusing historical references used throughout each section which neatly mingle with the recipes and remedies.

Any reader with access to a herb garden, a well-stocked health store and the necessary 'dash of thyme' will be delighted with the culinary details provided in the 'Home and Kitchen' section. The use of herbs and spices to enhance the taste of food is a daily occurrence and I feel little comment or criticism is required on this section—particularly as no major disasters seem likely from an overdose of mint, rosemary or parsley. However, I still prefer to make my infusions with tea-leaves as I thoroughly enjoy the caffeine kick that herbal teas fail to provide.



The value of any cosmetic preparation is undoubtedly a personal judgement but, encouraged by glossy advertising, free gifts and promises of eternal youth, users (not just woman, by the way) fritter away millions of pounds each year on synthetic treatments. The 'Beauty Care' section is all about total self-indulgence and relies heavily on the availability of fruits, herbs and vegetables (and the creativity of the reader) to formulate some glorious concoctions. Interestingly, the writer prefers to buy her own cosmetics rather than make them (it is often faster and more convenient) but for anyone simply wanting to feel and smell good, this section is certainly recommended.

Although nearly half of *The Green Witch* is devoted to 'Remedies', this is the point at which one must exercise a degree of caution and scepticism. The writer clearly states that she is not a trained practitioner (whatever a trained practitioner might be) and therefore does not presume to offer advice for 'serious' conditions. Presumably, just as with orthodox treatments, wrongly prescribed herbs can also yield unpleasant side effects. The advice given in the book is however, commendably, always to seek professional guidance on the choice of treatment (although sceptics may disagree with the author as to what constitutes professional guidance). Personally, I need immediate relief from a throbbing headache or other minor ailment and seem inevitably to be away from home when these occur. So for the moment, the products available over the pharmacist's counter will suffice for me.

Overall, my advice is to buy this book, enjoy its wealth of information on the use of herbs, fruits and vegetables for smells, food, drink and cosmetics and perhaps even experiment with some of the herbal remedies for minor ailments. But I would treat statements such as 'ginger is a general tonic for the heart and circulatory system' or 'prickly ash is the perfect remedy for those suffering from chronic rheumatism' with the scepticism that they deserve.

—Angela Cernoculski

## Great essays

Martin Gardner (Editor), *Great Essays in Science* (Prometheus Books, 427 pages, paperback, 1994, £14.50)

The exact provenance of the anthology 'Great Essays' is unclear to me; however, it is described as a reprinted paperback edition (presumably unaltered) of *The Sacred Beetle and Other Great Essays in Science* and this was apparently an updated version of a 1957 volume with the same title as the present one. It's possible, therefore, that many Gardner fans will not need to avail themselves of this particular incarnation of the book. However, it may be new to others.

As Gardner makes clear in his preface, his intent is not to teach the reader science or to report on the latest trends and discoveries:

'Rather, the purpose of this book is to spread before the reader, whether his or her interest in science be passionate or mild, a sumptuous feast of great writing—absorbing, thought-provoking pieces that have something to say about science and say it forcibly and well.'

There are 34 'essays' (not all written as such but nearly all unedited) with vignettes of a paragraph or two scattered amongst them. Each essay is introduced by a page or two of Gardner's biographical commentary on the author. The original sources of the essays aren't always spelled out, which seems a pity, though I think they could all be traced with the aid of the copyright acknowledgements.

The essays cover a wide range, although omitting, Gardner notes, medicine and the social sciences. Along with contributions from likely sources such as Sagan, Gould, Asimov *et al*, there are also some pretty unexpected ones, such as G K Chesterton on logic and Robert Louis Stevenson writing about disorder in the world. Some essays are fiction, and H G Wells and Bertrand Russell are distinguished by featuring twice. Gardner notes that the rule that a great essay must be beautifully written has been violated in one or two instances, but doesn't confirm one's ideas about which.

I found the selection strange at times on several counts. For instance, Freud's 'Dreams of the Death of Beloved Persons' seems to me to have rather little to do with proper science. Also, in a volume devoted to science the chapter from Laura Fermi's biography of Enrico seems oddly chosen since it deals with the essentially technological episode of the first operation of a nuclear reactor.

Although I was somewhat disappointed by the choice of material overall, the value of a collection like this is pretty subjective, and there is certainly plenty worth reading in it.

—Dave Love

## Head trip

Terence McKenna, *True Hallucinations* (Rider, 1994, hardback, £14.99, 237 pages)

I found this book bizarre, intriguing, but almost totally unreadable. The author, an habitué of Berkeley, Esalen, Kathmandu and other countercultural locales, describes his attempts to find enlightenment, the millennium, or just good sex through various hallucinogenic drugs, including the famous LSD and the less well-known dimethyltryptamine (DMT).

In 1971 he and some colleagues went to the Amazon Basin to investigate the concoctions favoured by the local shamans, for example the DMT-containing ayahuasca (yage) and the marvellously named Oo-koo-he of the Witoto. In the end, though, he settled for the revelations of the psilocybin-containing mushroom *Stropharia cubensis*, which he now sees as the missing link in the development of human consciousness and language.

This mushroom is praised as a 'transdimensional doorway', linked to 'the transformation of life on the planet' (page 42), and is later described as an alien, 'intelligent entity' able to 'communicate its personality' to shamans during trance (page 43). Strange lights seen in the fog are taken to be intruding UFOs, and a genuine flying saucer (a 'machine rotating slowly, with unobtrusive, soft, blue and orange lights', going 'whee, whee, whee!') appears briefly on page 158. Science Fictional imagery shows the future collaboration of humans and fungi in an inspired synthesis, with the mushroom a wise partner in the evolution of life on

this planet and elsewhere (chapter 19, *passim*).

There is much talk of mystical ectoplasmic violet fluids, UFOs as a 'hyperspatially mobile psychic vortex' (page 5) and a cosmic sound which represents the 'Electron Spin Resonance of the psilocybin alkaloids within the mushroom' (page 81). We are told, without any evidence whatsoever, that the 'enzymes active in insect metamorphosis' are controlled by the 'psychoactive tryptamine in their bodies' (page 143).

No rational explanations are sought for the visionary experience produced by taking psychoactive agents. The roles of suggestion, expectation and cryptomnesia (as investigated by Robert A Baker, for example) are not considered, nor are empirical grounds for any of these peculiar assertions offered. Skeptics will probably find this book hard going, to say the least.

I found references to the shamanic quest, little men ('elf chemists'), synesthesia and mystical visions rather tedious, although I was impressed by the suggestion that Tibetan religious art (both Buddhist and Bon) may owe some of its unearthly quality to the ritual use of psychedelics—as, nearer home, may Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (for example, the dancing oriental mushroom shapes) and *Alice* (the hookah-smoking caterpillar).

Perhaps fortunately, this book has no index. There is, however, a Reading List, which comprises folklore, druglore, mysticism and general New Agery—but (unsurprisingly) contains no mention whatever of any remotely skeptical books or publications. The text contains frequent references to Karma, Tantra, Tibet, Plato, Julian Jaynes, the right hemisphere of the Brain, Jung, the I Ching, DNA, Cosmic Evolution, Gnosticism, Alchemy, and the Philosophers' Stone. I saw nothing of (but may have overlooked) material on Atlantis, the Rosicrucians, and Shirley Maclaine.

I kept asking myself if this was just an arcane leg-pull, a spoof designed to take in the gullible reader—a bit unlikely, but you never can tell. If you like magic mushrooms, I suppose this may be the book for you—just watch out for little men in flying saucers! I think on balance I'll stick to Carlos Castaneda, who at least manages to write a good story.

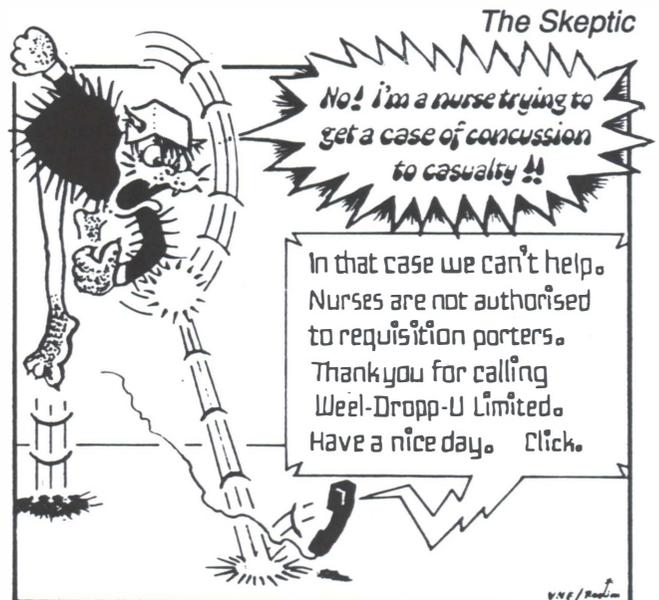
—Mike Rutter

## Questions of health

Donald Room and Victoria N Furmurry, *Health Service Wildcat* (Freedom Press, Angel Alley, 64b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7QX, paperback, 100 pages, 1994)

Donald Room is a long-time contributor to *The Skeptic*, and as the hand behind 'Sprite', regularly pokes fun at many of the silly ideas of the 'New Age'. But Room's skepticism extends far beyond the marginalised world of 'the paranormal'. For many years he has published 'anarchist comics' in which, through his characters, he asks direct and unsettling questions about the way our society works.

Here, Room draws the scripts of his collaborator 'Victoria N Furmurry', and together they have produced a wonderful book of cartoon strips which, like others in the *Wild-*



*cat* series, manage to combine scathing social and political comment with a marvellous sense of subversive visual humour. There is plenty of bile, anger and frustration in these pages, but above all there is a deep skepticism of the motives of those in authority in general, and our present government in particular.

The subject of this book is the Health Service, and the dreadful things our government is doing to it. As the anarchist cat Wildcat shrieks at the beginning:

This book is dedicated to the daft doctrine that people trained in making profits can provide a better health service than people trained in caring for the sick.

It is sad that new clauses in NHS employment contracts threatening dismissal for 'bringing the service in disrepute' have forced 'Victoria N Furmurry' to shelter behind her nom de plume (just as in a recent BBC2 *Newsnight* discussion, where some NHS staff appeared only in silhouette, as if they were criminals). There is certainly much to be sad about in these pages, but the beautifully drawn and hilarious antics of Wildcat and her friends simultaneously sweeten the medicine and make it more potent. Room's grotesque images of champagne-swilling hospital managers exchanging golden handshakes may be gross exaggerations, but the insidious shadows of the Gods of Profit and Destruction lurking over our nation's health care, are surely not.

This is intelligent, honest skepticism at its best, and Wildcat deserves a wide audience. Buy two copies: keep one, and send the other to Downing Street.

—John Yates

## Ghosts and Guinness

Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (Guinness Publishing, 1994, 374 pages, £11.99, paperback)

Did you know that a 'domovic' is a Russian household spirit that lives behind the stove? Or that a 'spunkie' is a Scottish trickster ghost that takes special pleasure in getting travellers lost? Or indeed that in Assyrian legend an 'ekimmu' is the evil ghost of one who was denied entrance to the underworld? Neither did I, but after browsing through this immensely readable book I soon did.

The best thing about such collections is that they are ideal for dipping into every so often, and you are always bound to discover some entertaining fact or two (apparently, James Dean nicknamed his supposedly cursed car 'Little Bastard') or find your memory refreshed about a certain issue or person that has tickled your interest. Typically, in such works there is the inherent frustration of not finding as much about something as you would have liked (it always seems to be the case that the most interesting and juicy tales are skipped over), and one often has to wade through acres of dreary tosh to find some juicy morsel. To the credit of this book however, the coverage is often extensive and entertainingly written, and as encyclopaedias go, it isn't half bad, with a wealth of material covering the ghostly, spiritual, ethereal and downright spooky.

A further feather in the book's cap is that many of the entries are followed by brief references allowing the reader to seek out more information on their favourite topic. This is rare for a book of this type, and should be encouraged. On the down side however, most of the references tend to be either badly out of date, or of gullible parentage. For example, the sections covering NDEs, ESP, moving coffins and clairvoyance would have greatly benefited from the inclusion in their 'further reading' lists of Blackmore, Hines, Nickell and Randi respectively.

What I did find most annoying about the book was that it tends to suffer from a lack of any firm identity, appearing often to have been cobbled together by two people, one possessing some degree of rational thinking, and the other not. Typically, when the author concentrates on topics of a ghostly nature, she demonstrates a refreshing touch of common sense, and so the entries concerning such as the 'Ammityville Horror', 'Borley Rectory', and the medium Florence Cook are presented from a moderately skeptical viewpoint, and bandy around words such as 'hoax', 'supposedly', 'controversial', and 'fraud'—words that no-one should feel ashamed of using on a regular basis.

However, when the compiler's spotlight falls on other topics, there is less rational thinking. In general, clairvoyance, mediumship (apart from poor old Flo), and the various elements of parapsychology, are presented as factual and proven, an attitude which is in stark contrast to that shown towards some of the other entries. For example, Daniel D Home is described as a 'medium' possessing 'paranormal ability', the 'Enfield Poltergeist' demonstrated 'evidently genuine phenomena', and 'Psychokinesis' is 'a paranormal phenomena in which matter can be affected at a distance'. Some would beg to differ!

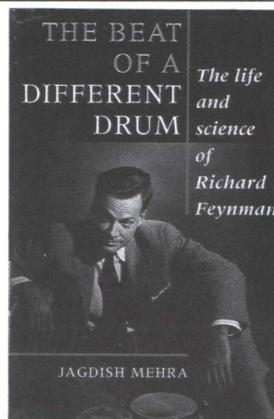
I may only be quibbling of course, but I do like to know where I stand. I felt that the book was shifting its position from entry to entry and couldn't decide which side of the skeptical fence to come down on. Such inconsistency became irritating after a while.

However, despite these failings, this *mélange* of spooks, ectoplasm, haunted houses, poltergeists, goblins and other great pieces of folklore both ancient and modern, is an enjoyable and interesting read and will not disgrace the shelves of anyone's bookcase.

—Nick Neave

## A fine man

Jagdish Mehra, *The Beat of a Different Drum—The Life and Time of Richard Feynman*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, 630pp, hbk, £25.00



When Richard Feynman died on 15 February 1988, the world lost an outstanding theoretical physicist and I lost the hero who many years previously had replaced Superman in my affections. *Skeptic* readers may already be familiar with the autobiographical writings (mainly the transcripts of tape-recorded conversations) published

in the volumes *Surely You're Joking Mr Feynman* and *What Do You Care What Other People Think?* Mehra's book is a rather more serious work than either of these although, as any biography of Feynman must inevitably do, it contains its fair share of humorous anecdotes.

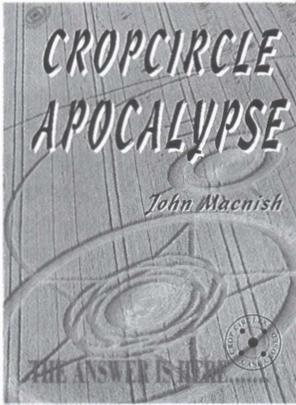
Jagdish Mehra, was trained as a theoretical physicist at the schools of Werner Heisenberg and Wolfgang Pauli and knew Feynman personally for thirty years. He also had the opportunity of spending many hours talking to Feynman about his life and his physics in the years before his death. *The Beat of a Different Drum* is very much a theoretical physicist's account of the life and works of a fellow theoretical physicist and, as such, perhaps gives a more perceptive account of the interplay between Feynman's personal life and his work than could be given by any non-physicist. Mehra clearly understands Feynman's work, surely a prerequisite for understanding the character of a man whose life was so involved with his physics, and the book contains numerous graphs and equations—clearly the publisher did not share the view of Stephen Hawking's publisher concerning the effects of equations on book sales. In its 630 pages, the book gives a very complete and detailed picture of Feynman's life and work and if the writing sometimes seems slightly uneven and occasionally almost amateurish (surprisingly as Mehra has previously written biographies of Heisenberg, Pauli and Dirac) this is an acceptable defect given the wealth of information contained in the volume.

The book is fully indexed by subject and name and each chapter is followed by a *Notes and References* section. Mehra's book is thus really a scholarly rather than a popular work and should perhaps be avoided by anyone likely to be intimidated by mathematical equations for whom James Gleick's earlier biography may be more suitable. However, for anyone wishing to gain an insight into the personality, life and physics of the man who, as well as being a 'scientific magician capable of transcendental leaps of the imagination', was also a superb teacher, a pretty mean bongo player and a rather curious character in many ways, this is the book on Feynman that should grace your bookshelf.

—Steve Donnelly

## Really quite ordinary claims — requiring extraordinary evidence

John Macnish and Jayne Wilde, *Crop Circle Apocalypse* (paperback, 248 pages, £15, 1994); *Crop Circle Communiqué II* (video, 60 minutes, £15), published by Circlevision, PO Box 36, Ludlow, Shropshire, SY8 3ZZ)



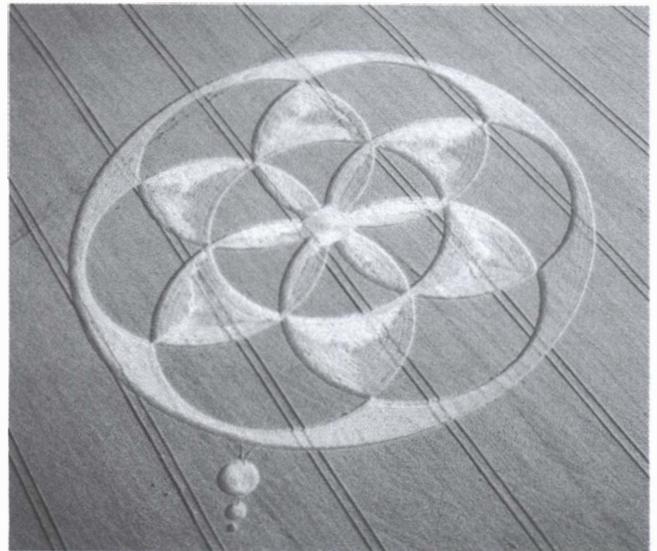
The bottom line: It is very, very easy to make a genuine crop circle. It really is. Anyone can do it, it doesn't typically take very long, and the chances of detection, much less apprehension, are minimal. Unhoaxable layering of stems, huge designs quite beyond the abilities of humans to manufacture, attendant UFO sightings, miracle healings, transcendent experiences, scientific anomalies

unearthed in the LAB—all a cinch. Half an hour with your stomper and you too can have the experts agog. It's true, I swear it. 'Genuine' circles are being made, in large numbers, by people. The Sun will rise tomorrow. The Pope is Catholic. Bears shit in the woods. The Earth is round. It really is.

But some people believe the Earth is flat. Others consider the Pope the Antichrist. Still others deny the circlemaking abilities and activities of people. These latter now rule the cerealogical roost, and like the flat-earthers and the 666 brigade the main reason they hold the beliefs they do is because they have their heads up their arses.

Really. I can see no other accounting for the reaction of contemporary cerealogy to the offerings under review here. *Crop Circle Apocalypse*, a book, and *Crop Circle Communiqué II*, a video, come to us from Circlevision, an independent video production company based in Ludlow. Together they constitute the strongest case to date for the existence of widespread, effective human circlemaking. Circlevision, run by John Macnish and his partner Jayne Wilde, has been involved with circles for many years; its first public offering was the video predecessor to *Communiqué II*, released in 1991. The contents of *Communiqué I* reflected Macnish's then status as a rapt believer in the phenomenon: it espoused no particular line on the cause of circles, but strongly marginalised hoaxing. However, in the wake of the hoaxing revelations of 1991 Macnish's disillusionment with cerealogy's expert culture grew, as did his determination to get to the bottom of things for himself, and 1992 found him tracking down and gaining the trust of various hoaxing groups, and eventually, armed with an image intensifier, filming them *in flagrante stompo* to see what they could achieve. In *Crop Circle Apocalypse*, John Macnish tells the story of this entertaining sojourn, from the naive Colin-Andrews-is-a-Scientist days of the eighties until the end of 1993, by which time a hard-bitten, but entirely appropriate cynicism had set in.

Together with its selective, but effective, examination of many of the claims and personalities in the field (particularly Doug'n'Dave), *Apocalypse* is a significant publication, and well worth a look, but be warned: the book is self-published, and as often happens with this genre, it is plagued by typos and production errors. *Crop Circle Communiqué II*, on the other hand, is as professional a product as one could wish for. It inverts the emphasis of its predecessor, taking a detailed look at the phenomenon of hoaxing and hoaxers, and treats the viewer to some wonderful footage of circlemakers at work. Tasty morsels justifying an investment in this delicious product include time-lapse footage of Doug and Dave making one of the pictogrammatic highlights of 1992, at East Meon; of the two circlemaking in broad daylight at Whitchurch in Hampshire, enabling Circlevision—and any would-be circlemakers—to get a clear view of their technique; a sequence detailing Doug and Dave's inundating Circlevision throughout 1992 with advance notice of imminent formations; film of sundry reprobates winding up ufowatchers with the aid of helium balloons and torches; and, as always with Circlevision, beautiful aerial shots of some cracking formations. Only this time, we know how they got there. For sure.



The reaction of contemporary cerealogy to this? Those open-minded enough to have taken it's implications seriously either quit the field or retired to the sidelines long ago. The enlightened modern cerealogist is not in the least bit perturbed by Macnish's valiant efforts. He knows exactly what is going on. With a smirk, a tap on the side of his nose and a conspiratorial wink, he will let you in on the secret: *Macnish's footage is probably faked; computer graphics, you know. Even a novice can do it. The bottom line? We only have Macnish's word for all of this!* And there you have it, problem solved. The once-favoured Macnish is now dirty, a traitor, to be lumped in with Doug and Dave, MI5, Schnabel, MBF Services, the Vatican, the Wessex Skeptics, Uncle Tom Cobbley and all. It all makes sense. At least, it does if you have your head up your arse.

—Robin Allen

# Events

The 11th Membership Meeting of the International Society for Cryptozoology, Illinois, USA, 11 June 1994.

The International Society for Cryptozoology (ISC) met at the campus of Illinois State University, in Normal Illinois, USA, ('the first Normal meeting ever', quipped ISC secretary Greenwell). The meeting included formal papers and informal discussions of Cryptozoology and related topics. The morning program featured surveys of vertebrate species discovered in the twentieth century; the afternoon session had research papers on three ongoing research topics, the 'megamouth' shark (first discovered in 1976), the Eastern Puma of North America (widely reported but not recognized by science) and video footage of an unidentified animal in a large lake in New Britain. The meeting was notable for the combination of rigorous standards of evidence and argument with good natured and open-minded consideration of unorthodox questions. This is typical of the ISC.

The ISC defines cryptozoology to be the study of 'hidden animals', including animals of unexpected form or size, or unexpected occurrence in time or space. This includes:

- Living examples of fossil animals
- Unusually large or small sub-species.
- Animals known from folklore, but not recognized by science.
- Completely new species.

The ISC is dedicated to rational investigation of such animals, embracing the methods of zoology and ethnology, and requiring careful scholarship and field research. The Society publishes a peer review journal, *Cryptozoology*, although one wonders where they find 'peers' to review some of the more unique submissions! The membership is world-wide, and includes professional zoologists, anthropologists, explorers and enthusiasts of many backgrounds. This odd mix of people and strange mix of topics blend through some alchemy to produce a congenial and exciting atmosphere of intellectual exploration.

The 1994 meeting opened with four papers by professional zoologists surveying the vertebrate species discovered in the twentieth century. There are hundreds of thousands of species of plants that have not been studied by science, and similar numbers of micro-organisms and insects. The discovery of new or unexpected forms of plants or insects is common and unsurprising. But many people think that fish, reptiles, birds and mammals are well known. The speakers showed, however, that this is scarcely the case. Some 1300 new species of frogs have been discovered since 1961 alone. Hundreds of new species of fish are reported each year, and about 2 species of bird are discovered annually.

Underneath the formal theme, each speaker sang a subplot recounting the excitement of exploring the far reaches of the Earth. Professor Tim M Berra of the Ohio State University

told of his studies of a strange fish that lives in seasonal pools in the desert of Southwest Australia. Professor Aaron M Bauer of Villanova University told of discovering new species of gecko in New Zealand and Madagascar. Professor Angelo P Capparella of Illinois State University told of new species of birds found on rough treks in the highland 'cloud forests' of the eastern Andes. And ISC Secretary J Richard Greenwell has sought many mysterious animals in jungle, mountain, and desert. The spirit of exploration lives in the work of these scientists!

The climax of the meeting was Dr Roy Makal's presentation of his recent research. Roy Makal is a towering figure in Cryptozoology and the ISC, who has pursued the Loch Ness monster and related beasts all over the world for many decades. He has proposed one of the few scientific hypotheses which could account for the existence of large aquatic animals in Loch Ness, Lake Champlain, Lake Okobago, and the open ocean. He has mounted many expeditions to seek evidence of such creatures (see his book, *The Monsters of Loch Ness* (The Swallow Press, 1976)) In recent years he has explored the Congo jungle, looking for evidence of Mokele-Mbembe, an animal known from African folklore. Analysis of the folk stories suggests that the animal might really exist, if it does, it might be a living sauropod dinosaur! Hollywood spectaculars aside, Makal has examined the evidence and finds it to be much more than an idle fantasy (see his book, *A Living Dinosaur: In Search of Mokele Mbembe* (E J Brill, 1987)).

Dr Makal's latest expedition was to the island of New Britain, in the nation of Papua New Guinea. Armed with excellent Japanese technology (and Roy Makal) a Japanese TV crew mounted an expedition to the extremely remote Lake Dakataua. The explorers returned with video footage of something that might be a large unknown animal! A few seconds of this video was shown at the conference. (Unfortunately it was embedded in a somewhat cheesy 90-minute 'documentary' without English subtitles). The video shows something on the surface of the water, but it is very difficult to determine what the object(s) in the video is (are), how far from the camera, or how large. Makal did not rule out the possibility that the video was a hoax, although he had no evidence that it was. He interprets the image to be a large 'sea serpent', similar to what he believes lives in Loch Ness! The video and his hypothesis were, of course, discussed far beyond the actual merits of the evidence presented. No conclusion is really possible, but it certainly seems worth further investigation.

In the past the ISC has heard papers about evidence of the Loch Ness monster, and one might have expected much discussion of recent stories that the 1935 'Surgeon's Photo' was a hoax. In fact, most of those present in Normal confessed not to know whether the 'toy submarine' story is to be believed or not. The press reports are not impossible, but they are not powerfully convincing, either. There have been many hoaxes at Loch Ness, and this could be a hoaxed hoax! True or false, the 'toy submarine' story certainly does not solve the mystery of the Loch Ness monster as far as the ISC is concerned.

—Robert E McGrath

# Letters



## Scrolls update?

What *has* happened to the analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls? I'm not a Christian, nor any sort of believer, but I did at one time imagine they might force a re-think. Then they vanished into limbo, then one heard vaguely that publication of part had been forced, then—nothing. Is there a status report lay people can get hold of? Even of what they had to be shamed into revealing?

**John Brunner**  
South Petherton, Somerset

## Disinterested tourists

Can I really be the first person to offer the hotelier's objection to stories of abductions by aliens—namely, that it is quite simply unbelievable that any substantial number of tourists, whether voluntary or otherwise, would fail to bring back or, it seems, even to try to bring back, any souvenirs.

**Anthony Flew**  
Reading

## Animal rights

I utter an horrible ululation (which frightens my wife) whenever I read about 'rights'. We lawyers never deal with rights; we deal with duties.

I do not have a right to be alive: you have a duty not to kill me. Non-human animals do not have rights: we human animals may have duties to them, which duties are defined by the law and ethics of the society we live in at any given time. The mouse does not have a right not to be killed by a cat, nor does the cat have a duty only to kill the mouse humanely. I may have a duty only to kill a mouse humanely.

Law and ethics evolve: think not only of how the attitude to hunting for sport has changed but of the ethos of a book like Ballantyne's *The Gorilla Hunters*.

Legally proper behaviour depends, ultimately, on force. If you fail to observe your duties to me, I may be able to ensure that you are imprisoned. Legally proper behaviour must also depend on the ethos of the majority of society, because, otherwise, it cannot be enforced: when was the last prosecution for blasphemy? Behaviour out with the current law must not be allowed to be imposed by force. What 'Animal Rights' activists too often do is to substitute their view of what the duties of humans to other animals are, for the duties imposed by law and by the ethos of present society, and try to impose that view by force (or terror). Let the activists persuade society (if they can) that the law needs to be changed, that society's ethos about animals needs to be changed but, putting bombs under researchers' cars is pure anarchy.

'He prayeth best who loveth best all creatures great and small.

The *Streptococcus* is the least; I love him best of all.'

**M V Evans**  
Dunfermline

## Animal nonsense

Having read your excellent publication for the last six years and derived great pleasure and amusement from it, I was dismayed to read the appallingly dismal article by Lynn Williamson ('Vivisection: the Case Against', *The Skeptic*, 8.3).

To catalogue each of her inaccuracies would be tedious and involve a letter longer than the original article, but risible statements such as 'the cancers of humans (mainly sarcomas)' should surely not make it past the most basic editing procedure. Similarly, to claim that 'countless drugs are removed from the market each year' because of their adverse effects on humans is just an

outright lie. How Ms Williamson believes that banning drug-testing on animals will make drugs safer for humans escapes me for the moment. To state that 'the discovery of insulin, penicillin, antibiotics and anaesthetics all owe nothing to animal experiments' shows a dazzling ignorance of medical history. I recommend readers turn to Paton's *Man and Mouse* for information about the role of vivisection, rather than Vernon Coleman's latest tabloid scare-mongering.

In my experience, your average vivisector is not a wild-eyed sadist who gets kicks from inflicting pointless cruelty on fluffy animals, but a dedicated professional working on one of the most powerful weapons we have in the war on disease. Epidemiology and tissue culture may have important roles to play, but they can never substitute for the study of the intact animal response to a drug or disease process. The fact that this response is not always perfectly mimicked by the human response means that we should work on the development of better animal models, not throw in the towel altogether.

Find enclosed a renewal of my subscription, parted with after much thought. I trust your magazine not to repeat its error in printing such misleading offensive garbage.

**Dr Christian Potts**  
John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford

## Animal worries

It is not often that the opening sentence of an article has me reaching for the pen, but it did when I read Lynn Williamson's article on vivisection. *Of course* there are times when one might consult a vet, particularly if there is a suspicion of parasitic infection or some sort of skin rash or

allergy you feel might have arisen from contact with farm animals or pets. I suspect that many doctors would ask a vet's opinion about some things, after all they are medically very well qualified.

But this was not the end of it. Vivisection in my Oxford Dictionary says it is dissection of live animals or experiments on live animals; emotive stuff indeed, conjuring up Frankenstein like images of writhing animals! No mention of anaesthesia. The 3 million animals experimented on are not, as is implied, vivisected; taking a blood sample counts as an experiment, or even just watching an animal.

I am no expert in drugs, but I assumed that it was common knowledge that Thalidomide had the devastating effect it did because it was *not* tested thoroughly on animals. (It was not tested on *pregnant* animals). Because of this its two effects (due to the two isomers) were not noticed.

I feel that a stronger case could have been made if the article concentrated on animal experiments in fields other than medicine (cosmetics etc.), and the ritual slaughter of animals for food, abandoning of cats and dogs, goldfish in hot, stale water, coarse fishing and other blood sports etc. etc.

A S Edwards  
St Andrews, Fife

## Rosary facts

Regarding Hilary Evans' articles on Lourdes (*The Skeptic*, 8.2 & 8.3): Bernadette Soubirous, describing her meeting with the vision of the Virgin Mary once wrote:

I put my hand in my pocket, and I found my rosary there, I wanted to make the sign of the cross... I couldn't raise my hand to my forehead... The Vision made the sign of the cross. Then I tried a second time and I could. As soon as I made the sign of the cross, the fearful shock I felt disappeared. I knelt down and said my rosary in the presence of the beautiful lady. *The vision fingered the beads of her own rosary*, but she did not move her lips. When I finished my rosary, she signed for me to approach but I did not dare. Then she disappeared. [My emphasis]

This passage is tantamount to Bernadette confessing that she did not see what she claimed to have seen. The apparition according to the girl '*fingered the beads of her own rosary*', yet the practice was not adopted until the 3rd century by Eastern Christian monks. Although the origin of the rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary is not certain, it has been associated with St Dominic, founder of the Dominican order in the early 13th century. It was not until 1520 however, that Pope Leo X gave the rosary official approbation.

Harry Edwards  
St James, NSW, Australia

## Life in the stars?

There is much emphasis on the 'Mars Effect' in connection with the sporting world. I wonder if investigation will ever take place into the possible correlation of planets and other professions—renowned actors, generals, lawyers, communicators, scientists *et al*?

I have a reluctantly open mind on the subject, having been alarmed by the accuracy—warts and all—of a birth chart drawn up for me. And that of a friend too, was quite remarkable in its description of *his* virtues and failings. There were *not*, I must point out, interchangeable.

Vivien Gibson  
Ealing, London

## Circle questions

A most disturbing fact about Cerealogy is that it occurs only in the UK and Canada (maybe USA? Australia?). France, with its vast fields of wheat, and other continental European countries, not to speak of the rest of the world, are totally spared. If they are works of superior extraterrestrial intelligence, why do they work only in those regions? Besides, how do they spend their time in the winter season? Must be boring!

Another remark on Andrew Collins' argument that 'it does not matter if all circles are fakes, as hoaxers are being driven by the

Goddess'. So, the hoaxers are the unwilling tools of the Goddess. Is Andy Collins another tool? Where does the power of the Goddess reach? Editors of *The Skeptic*? Why Goddess instead of God? Does a superior being have a sex, as we do? Do they procreate? Couldn't they have five different sexes to be superior to humans? Is there an end to stupid questions?

Lassi Hyvärinen  
Le Vésinet, France

## The saucer mystery

Martin Kottmeyer (*The Skeptic*, 8.3) touches on a topic, the reported shape of 'flying saucers' of some interest, and one which I have discussed with in my recent book (*The UFO Mystery Solved*, p. 185).

The commonly reported discoid shape of most UFOs does demand an explanation. However I am not convinced that the use of the word 'saucer' by the press is sufficient. There are many reports where serious and sober witnesses, usually people who had no interest in the subject and who had not seen previous reports, have reported seeing an object 'like two soup plates stuck together' (the Trindade photographs even show such an object). It is naive to believe that such reports originate merely in the imagination and that the shape derives from the word 'saucer'. I have shown that there is a natural phenomenon (but not the one seen by Arnold) capable of creating the very shape reported.

There is a UFO myth and many of its characteristics do derive from imagination. However there is also an objective stimulus for very many if not most reports.

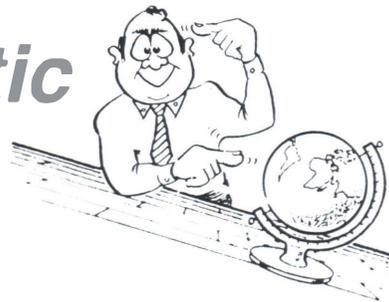
Stuart Campbell  
Edinburgh

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