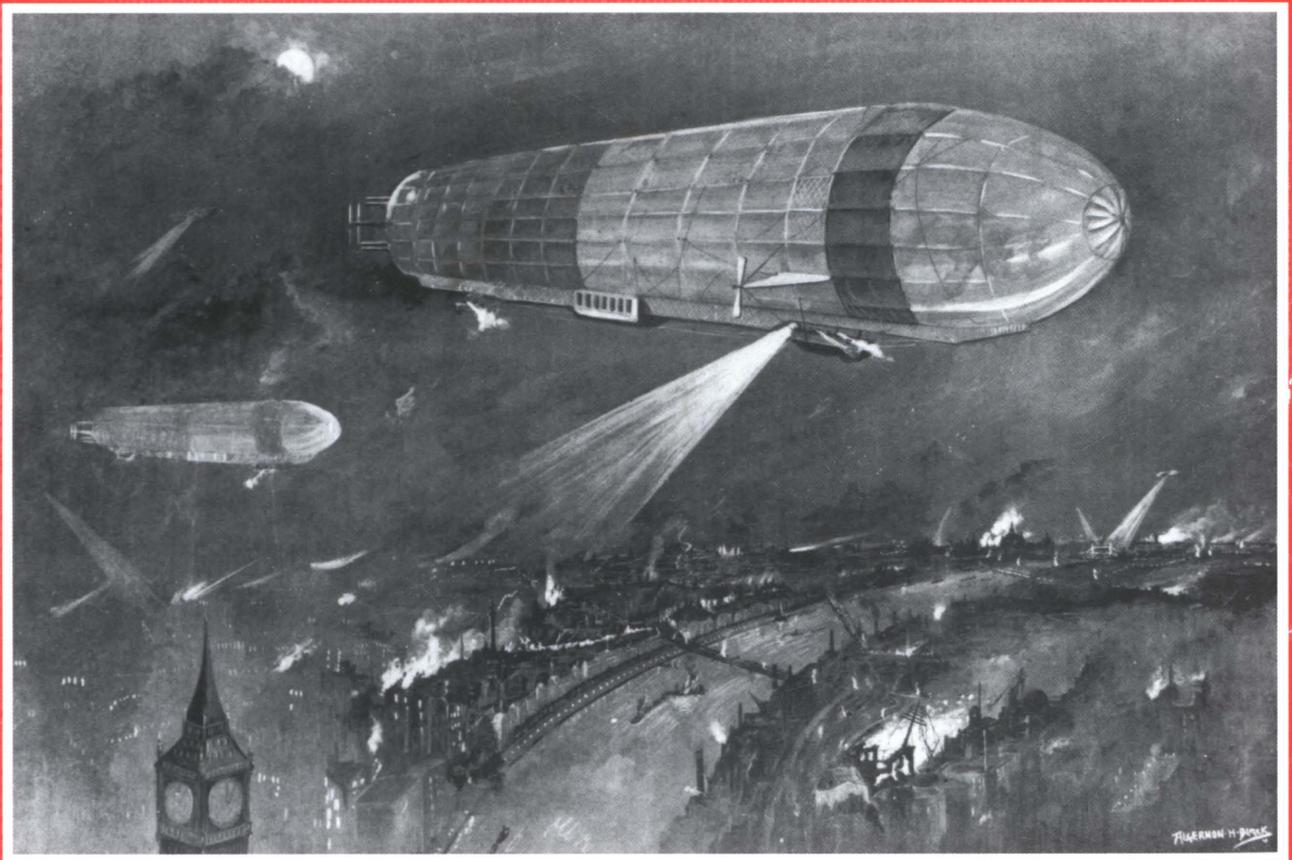


The

Volume 11 Number 3

Skeptic



Unidentified Flying Airships

Also in this issue

Scientific analysis of an alien implant

Feng Shui – Phooey!

Skeptic under a spell

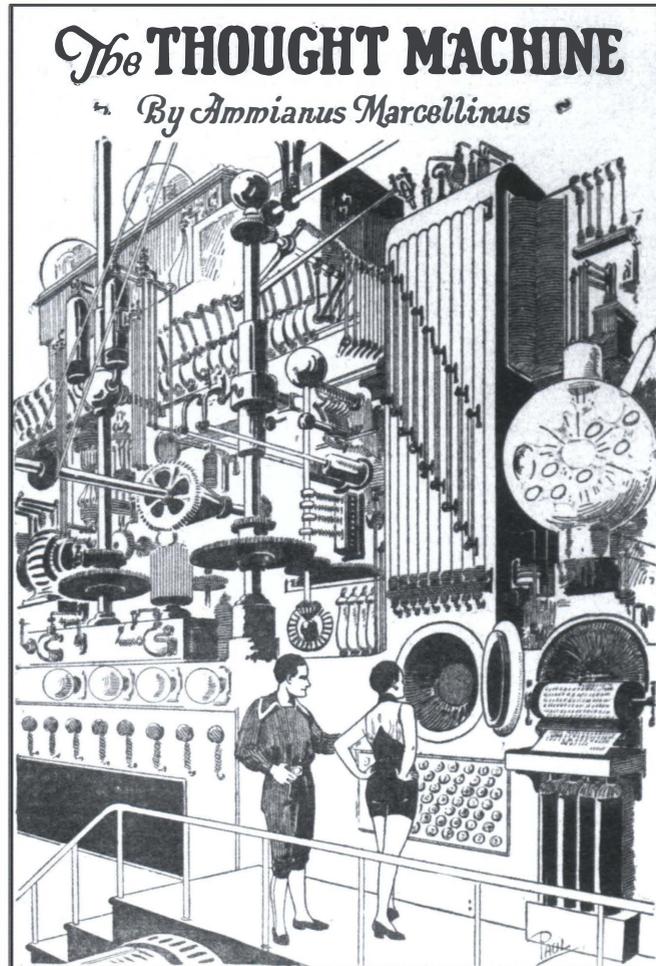
In defense of Humanism

The Piri Re'is map

News • Book Reviews • Comment • Humour

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Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



IT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA at the time (1927). Look, said the Professor, the Office Clerk of the Future. Stores your data, processes them for you, correlates, calculates – in a word, *computes* them. The Professor demonstrated his prototype. It was big, it was fast, it was handsome enough to grace any office, to do the work of fifty clerks . . .

Hold on, they said, can't have that! Human scab labour's bad enough, but let machines take the place of a single clerk, we'd have the entire workforce called out!

Why don't you go away and think of something *really* useful. Something handy about the house . . . (continued on page 27)

Source: illustration by Frank Paul for 'The Thought Machine' by Ammianus Marcellinus, in *Amazing Stories*, February 1927.

Contents

Editorial

We'll begin in traditional fashion, by apologising for the lateness of this issue.

Regular readers will know that the magazine has been somewhat irregular in its production schedule recently, due to those mysterious 'circumstances beyond our control' we so often hear about.

But we hope this is the last time you will have to suffer such an apology, because this is a time of major change at *The Skeptic*.

After ten years in the editorial seats, we're handing over editorship of the magazine to Wendy Grossman, who founded the magazine in 1987, and has been one of our most stalwart supporters ever since.

Because of the pressures of our professional lives – surviving in the UK University system is getting more difficult yearly – producing the magazine on a regular basis, and keeping the level of production quality high, has been an increasingly difficult task.

Faced with the prospect of being forced to close the magazine, we asked Wendy if she'd be prepared to take over as Editor-in-chief. To our delight – and relief! – she agreed. She has spent the last few months assembling a new team, mostly based in London, and the future for the magazine looks bright. (Note that there will not be an issue 11.4 – the next will be 12.1 – but all subscribers will, of course, still receive the number of issues for which they have paid.)

This will, therefore, be the last issue of the magazine produced with us as editors although we hope to remain as associate editors for the foreseeable future.

Steve Donnelly & Toby Howard

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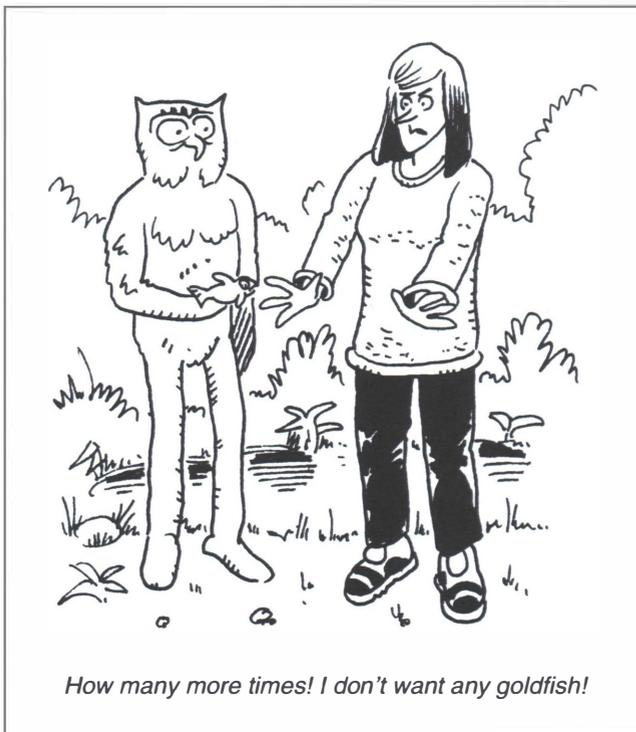


Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

What a hoot

It is always good to add a new entry to the list of strange creatures that are sighted around the world. It would be possible to fill a (crypto-) zoo with just those creatures, generally unknown to zoology, that human beings—presumably often after indulging in one or other reality-altering substances—report to their local tabloid newspapers. A new one to me, the Owlman of Mawman, was described in the *Daily Mail* on 26 September. This creature is five foot tall, half owl, half man and has purportedly been appearing regularly to adolescent females in Mawman in Cornwall. (Note that in Catholic countries, it is usually the Virgin Mary who appears to adolescent females). Although the Owlman never speaks or hoots, he is nonetheless terrorising the inhabitants of Cornwall by occasionally ‘crackling like static electricity’ and, most savagely, stealing goldfish from local garden ponds.



Tim Pearce

How many more times! I don't want any goldfish!

Professional forecasting

In this New Labour, post-Dearing era of lifelong education, it is pleasing to see that important areas of human activity such as forecasting and prediction are no longer being ignored by educational institutions. That well known higher educational organisation (possibly soon to become a university?) Streetwise Marketing of Rotherham

in South Yorkshire is sending out, to selected households, a glossy leaflet advertising its diploma home study course in professional forecasting and prediction. I repeat to you the question posed in the accompanying letter:

‘Did you know that an exclusive group of “ordinary” men and women are quietly making an excellent living in the fascinating field of fortune telling and prediction?’

You may have imagined that to be able to predict the future you needed to be the seventh son of a seventh son, or be descended from a long line of gypsy seers but this is simply not true: ‘... the techniques and skills of forecasting and prediction whether it be astrology, palmistry, numerology, Tarot or a host of other branches can be learned by anyone . . .’ — or at least anyone who can spare ten easily managed monthly payments of £19.95.

Enrolling on the course also entitles you to a free gift: a booklet entitled ‘Twenty Businesses Related to the Unexplained You Could Start Tomorrow’ which gives detailed advice on cashing in on haunted houses and UFO sightings and on ‘how to make big profits from astrology, with no astrological training whatsoever!’

I predict that this course will be very successful.

Of mice and men

The purported effect of electromagnetic (EM) fields on humans and other animals is one of those marginal areas that are difficult for skeptics to deal with in that there are apparently well-performed trials that seem to show various types of effect. On the other hand, so much scare-mongering rubbish is published on this subject that trying to get at the truth is not a trivial matter. For instance, in his *Electric Shock Book*, Michael Shallis discusses a woman who is supposedly so sensitive to electromagnetic fields that a nearby person crossing his hands or legs can perturb the field in her vicinity sufficiently that she passes out. On the other hand, as well as this type of anecdotal nonsense, the book reports on genuine scientific trials that do appear to have shown links between EM fields and various types of ailment. I suspect that the debate on this issue will continue well into the next millennium.

Research in 1996 on rats subjected to microwave radiation indicated a possible link between mobile phone use and the development of Alzheimer’s. (Actually, having frequently, on trains and elsewhere, been obliged to listen to loud, inane conversations between pin-stripe-suited, mobile phone users and their spouses or secretaries, I suspect that there may well be a link between mental disorders and mobile phone use). However, according

to an article in the *Daily Mail* from last July, this is no longer a problem. For only £95 you can now buy a pendant containing a microprocessor that creates an energy field that will protect the wearer from mobile phone radiation. Worth every penny, I'd say!

Unfortunately, now that other indispensable piece of 20th century technology—the computer games machine—has also been indicted for its emission of EM fields. According to the *Sunday Telegraph* on 29 June, a senior scientist working for the National Radiological Protection Board here in the UK claims that mice exposed to fields typical of those experienced by frequent users of games machines learn new information more slowly than control animals. Dr Zenon Sienkiewicz, who reported his results in the journal *Bio Electro-Magnetics*, is keen to carry out trials on humans to determine whether similar results will be obtained. He claims that results on mice are often applicable to humans and is concerned that anyone who spends many hours in front of a computer monitor may also be at risk.

In Dr Sienkiewicz's experiments, 24 mice were exposed to an electromagnetic field for 45 minutes and were then placed in a so-called Radial Arm Maze which consisted of eight arms with food at the end of each arm. The animals that had been exposed to the field made more mistakes in finding food and, in particular, took longer to remember which arm they had already eaten from, compared to mice that had not been exposed. Although the levels of electromagnetic field used in the experiment were 1000 times greater than those experienced by the average Playstation fanatic, Dr Sienkiewicz, nonetheless, feels that tests should be carried out so that safety guidelines can be drawn up.

Of course, it is not only computer gamers who are potentially at risk — so are those of us who sit in front of a computer screen for most of the day and then return home at night to spend further hours immersed in EM fields whilst writing columns for magazines. Although one imagines that it could pose one or two problems (as

light is a form of electromagnetic radiation) one solution would be to install one of those screens which according to advertisements, "block all electromagnetic radiation".

One in nine million

Things are looking up. I have just learned from a clipping taken from the *Daily Mail* on 30 August that people with the astrological sign of Aries (which includes yours truly) are more likely to win the National Lottery than people born under other signs. If the article is to be believed, then an Arian's chances of winning the jackpot are only 9 million to one against instead of the normal 14 million to one. The article does, however, include the skeptical warning that the statistics contain a major flaw, in that they have been compiled from winners who go public—only one quarter of the total, suggesting that the figures may be skewed towards more outgoing personalities (such as those born under Aries). They contain an additional flaw—they only apply to Arians who purchase lottery tickets.

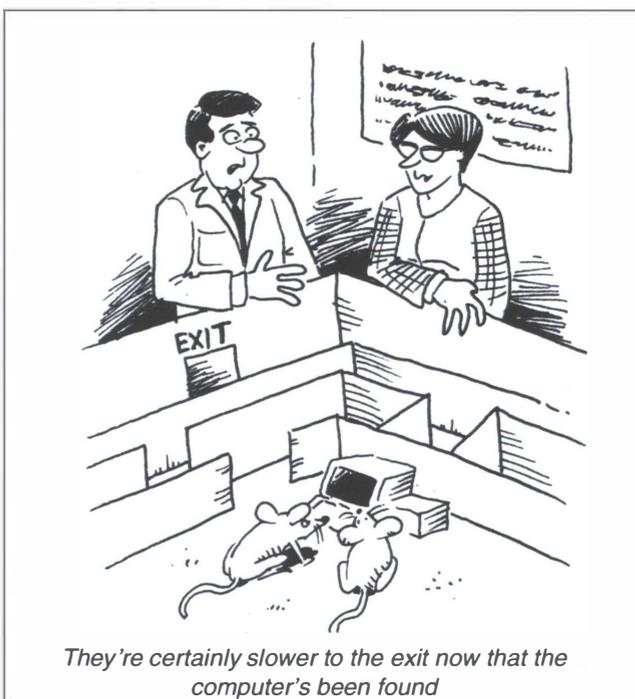
Religious interest

Even if it is due to occur at the end of the Millennium, as many believe, the second coming will be too late for the Good Lord to receive income from the estate of the late Ernest Digweed. Mr Digweed, a religious recluse who died 21 years ago, left a will stipulating that income from his estate was to be invested and made available to the Lord Jesus Christ on his return—on production of satisfactory ID. Mr Digweed's will stipulated that this state of affairs would only last for 21 years following his death, after which the income would revert to the Treasury. According to an article in the *Independent* on 23 September, there have been many claimants to the bequest, including an American door-to-door salesman whose claim to being the son of God was based on the response of his customers when he knocked on their doors: 'Jesus Christ, not you again!'. All is not yet lost, however. The remaining estate itself will be available to any successful claimant for another 51 years but unfortunately some members of Mr Digweed's distant relations successfully challenged his will in the early eighties and there are now only a few thousand pounds remaining. Enough to buy quite a few loaves and fishes, though!

Steve Donnelly is Professor of Experimental Physics at the University of Salford.

A big thank-you to all our clippings contributors, who for this issue include:

Tom Ruffles, Ian Saunders, Gillian Sathanandan, David Rydeheard, Paul Blackwell, Simon Brody, Steuart Campbell, Brian Carter, Jock Cramb, Charles Dietz, Edzard Ernst, Dorothy L Forrester, Earnest Jackson, Ken Johnson, Yilmaz Magurtzey, David Martin, Patrick Marwham, Stephen Moreton, Austen Moulden, V S Petheram, Alan Remfry, Donald Room, Neil Rosen-Webb, Mike Rutter, Alma Simmonds, H Sivyer, Brian Slade, J Thompson Jnr, Chris Torrero, J G Watson, Chris Willis.



Analysing an 'Alien' Implant

Susan Blackmore and David T Patton

Is the trade in human organs myth or reality?

JAMES BASIL is an "abductee". In 1992, at the age of thirteen, he had a terrifying experience in which he reached out in his bed and found he was touching another hand — a smooth lizard-like hand with curled fingers. After this he began to remember other experiences including being floated across the hallway into a UFO outside his bathroom window. He later found himself back in bed with two aliens, one male and one female, standing by his bed. Subsequently he had many other memories of abduction by aliens.

In March 1997 he came to interview me (SB) for a student media project. He asked for my views on alien abductions and sleep paralysis, and then revealed that not only had he experienced sleep paralysis, but was also an abductee — and in his opinion the two experiences were quite different. He also thought he could prove his experiences were real because the aliens had implanted a small object in his mouth, which he had subsequently removed. He asked me whether I would be interested in seeing the implant and possibly analysing it to find out what it was.

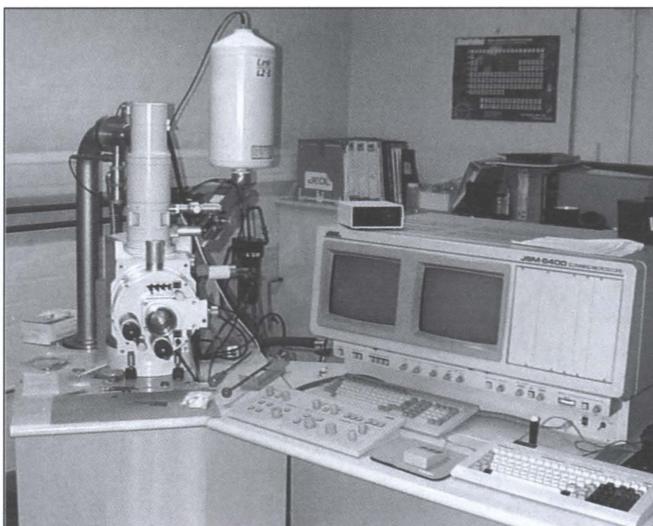
Physical evidence of abductions is extremely rare. Hopkins (1981) described the insertion of small "implants" into abductees' noses, legs and other body parts. Mack (1994) reported several abductees who claimed to have 'tracking devices' inserted into their bodies by the aliens. Some abductees claim that the aliens do not want the implant removed or subjected to X-rays or scanning. Some of the implants have reportedly been removed from abductees' bodies but they usually mysteriously disappear (Jacobs, 1993). Mack reports one implant that turned out to be 'an interesting twisted fibre consisting of carbon, silicon, oxygen, no nitrogen, and traces of other

elements' (Mack 1994, p 42) and others that were clearly of normal biological material. He concluded that '... it may be wrong to expect that a phenomenon whose very nature is subtle ... will yield its secrets to an epistemology or methodology that operates at a lower level of consciousness' (p 43). Many would not agree. This seemed like a unique opportunity to investigate putatively alien material.

The 'implant' is about 2 x 3 mm and dullish grey. Little can be discerned with the naked eye. After all, dullish grey metal could cover miniaturised alien technology — or more dullish grey metal. The obvious next step seemed to be electron microscopy but that is expensive and not available in the psychology department! So, with some trepidation, I sent out an e-mail to everyone in our faculty asking for help. Within one hour I had already had three replies offering help and advice, and by the following day several more. The consensus seemed to be that the best non-destructive method would be to use the scanning electron microscope (SEM) and the attached X-ray microanalysis system which would give an analysis of the elemental composition. So on April 9th last year James and I visited Dave Patton.

First we examined the object through a stereo light microscope which revealed irregular edges and surface detail and colour. Part of the surface was covered with yellow-brown material which we assumed to be dried organic matter from Basil's mouth. The object was then mounted on a SEM holder using double-sided sellotape and viewed using a 'Hitachi s-450' scanning electron microscope.

The object had a rough irregular appearance (Fig 1a, scale bar=0.5 mm). James was particularly interested in



Scanning Electron Microscopy

In a scanning electron microscope, electrons that are emitted or reflected when a very fine beam of electrons is scanned and rastered across a specimen (usually in vacuum) are collected to form a television-type image of the specimen. These microscopes can give very high magnifications, sufficient to resolve features as small as one millionth of a millimetre in the best instruments.

In addition to producing a magnified image, the beam can be focused onto one spot and X-rays, that are also emitted when the electrons strike the specimen, can be collected, analysed and used to provide an accurate 'fingerprint' of the elements present in small regions of the specimen.

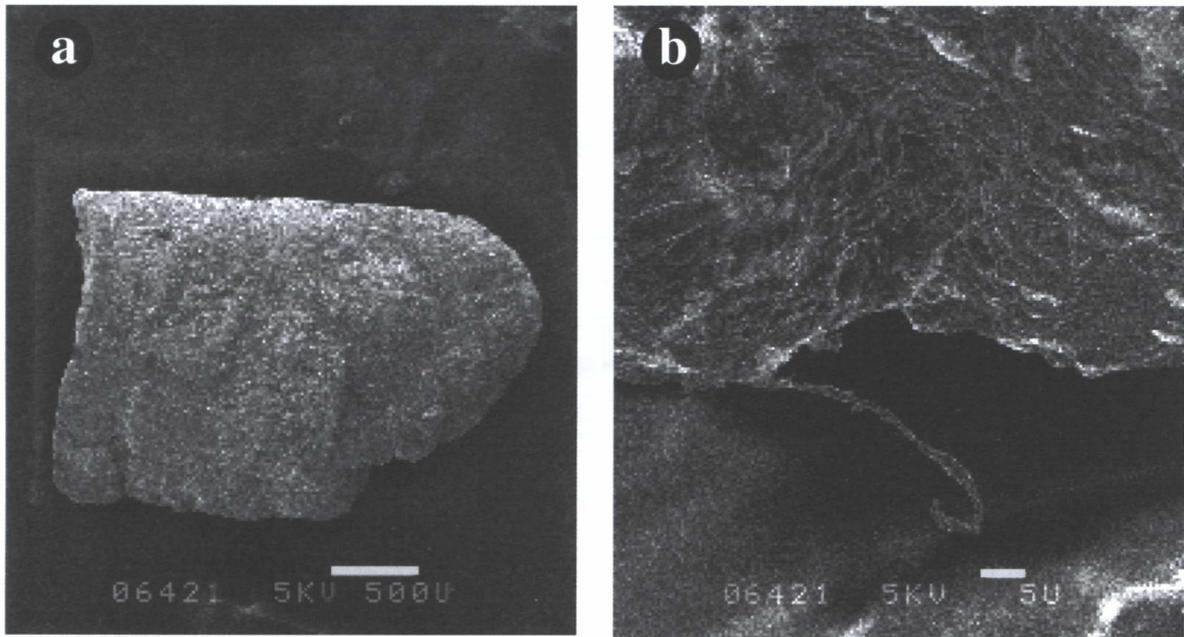


Figure 1 Scanning electron microscope images of the material 'implanted' in James Basil's mouth. a) low magnification view of entire 'implant' — scale marker indicates 0.5 mm. b) Higher magnification view showing small fibre —scale marker indicates 0.005 mm.

looking for fibres because of reported fibres on previous implants. A possible fibre is shown in Figure 1b. It is very small, about 2µm in diameter and somewhat irregular.

We spent about an hour just examining the surface at various magnifications (see Fig 1b). We saw several fibres and small rounded features on the surface which James compared with other alien implants he had heard about. Nothing we saw looked like miniature technology or mechanical components, but then of course alien technology might be unrecognisable to human eyes. The final step was therefore to use Energy Dispersive X-ray Microanalysis (EDX) to determine the object's composition. Potentially this might reveal a combination of elements unlikely to be found on earth.

EDX was performed using an 'EDAX PV9100' system. The composition of the "alien implant" is given in Table 1. This provided the answer we needed. Dental amalgam varies considerably in its exact composition but is typically 50% mercury with the other 50% being silver

Element	Implant % by weight	Amalgam % by weight
mercury	40.5	50
tin + silver	46.3	50
others (Ca, Cl and Si)	10.7	—

Table 1 Composition of James Basil's 'implant' as determined by EDAX compared with the composition of standard dental amalgam.

and tin, usually in the proportions 73% to 27%.

Our conclusion is that the 'implant' was a displaced dental filling coated with dried organic material. The fibre shown in Fig 1b could possibly have been initially on the surface and been partly detached during specimen mounting. The rounded objects could be dried organic, possibly cellular, material. Since the object was in James' mouth for about two weeks it seems likely that these features are organic and derived from him.

This investigation raises many interesting questions. First, how far should scientists be prepared to go in using their time and expensive equipment to test extraordinary claims? Obviously there must be a limit, but in this case we believe it was well worth the effort. If we are not prepared to help, the believers in UFOs and the conspiracy theorists are given more cause to claim they are being unfairly treated and that the "scientific community" is biased against them. Judging from the very positive response, many other scientists at the University of the West of England agree. Also, we might have found the first ever piece of alien technology on earth.

As James pointed out afterwards, the real question now concerns all those other implants.

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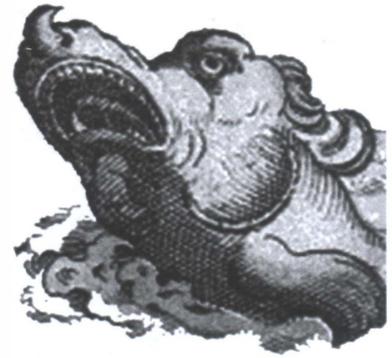
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Susan Blackmore and David T Patton are both in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

Here Be Penguins

David Hambling

Ancient civilisations and the Piri Re'is map



GRAHAM HANCOCK'S 1995 bestseller *Fingerprints of The Gods* gave me a distinct feeling of déjà vu. Not because I lived in Atlantis in a previous incarnation, but because this Von Däniken-style tale of lost civilisations recycles some old astro-archaeological chestnuts that have long since passed their sell-by date. Tackling the whole book would be a wearisome task, but we can look at his first chapter which he presumably believes to be a strong start.

The gist of it is that a Turkish map dated at 1513, the Piri Re'is map, shows features of Antarctica that have been buried under the ice sheet for millennia. He says there must have been an unknown, advanced civilisation several thousand years ago which mapped Antarctica. It's an amazing claim; how good is the evidence?

The map itself seems genuine enough. Admiral Piri Re'is was a historical figure who fought the Venetians at Lepanto. He is overshadowed by his uncle, Kelam Re'is, a famous pirate. A piratical uncle was not necessarily a disadvantage, since Turkish pirates were like 18th century privateers — government-approved buccaneers with a licence to prey on enemy shipping. Piri Re'is himself was an authority on nautical matters, and the map that bears his name is the prize display in the Maritime Museum in Istanbul.

On inspection the map is not as accurate as commentators have made out. The landmass at the bottom could be Antarctica, but the Drake Passage, the 700-mile-wide gap which separates it from South America is missing. The landmass is at least 3,000 miles North of Antarctica's true location, and the coastline as a whole bears no strong resemblance to either the Antarctic coast or the ice sheet.

No ice sheet is shown on the map. Mr Hancock says

this means it must date from before the ice was laid down. I would suggest that it is simply because the map is wrong. Deer and lion are shown on the (non-existent) isthmus connecting it with South America, and a tropical snake is coiled on what would be Queen Maude land. A penguin would have been a more impressive indicator of knowledge.

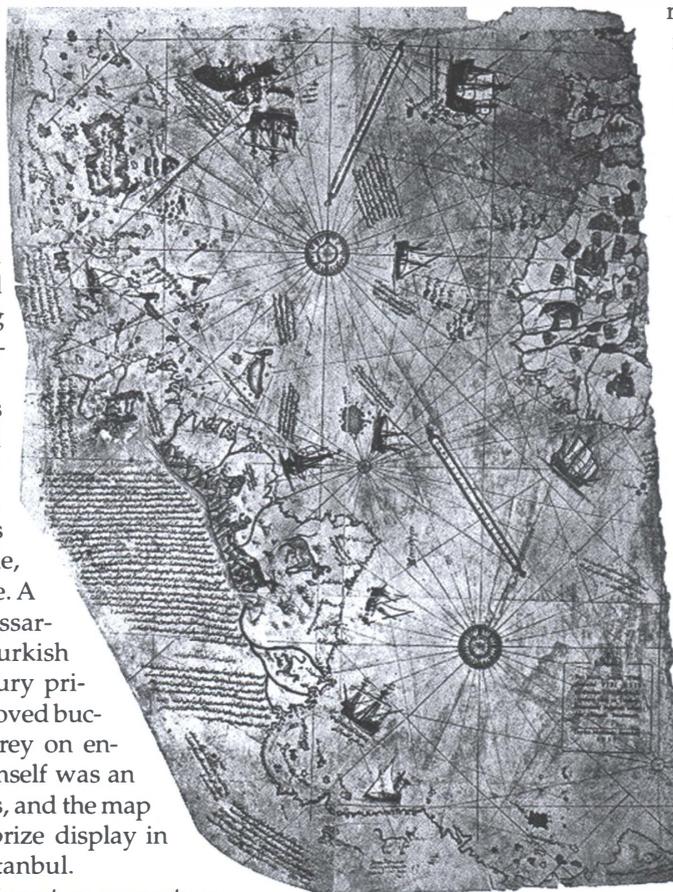
The map shows the area around the Brazil and the Caribbean with some accuracy. At first this was thought

remarkable, because the Turks never sailed to the New World. A German study of the map found marginal notes saying that part of it was based on sketches made by Columbus. This is plausible, since the maps from his 1498 expedition were in the possession of a Spanish sailor when he was captured by the Turks in 1501.

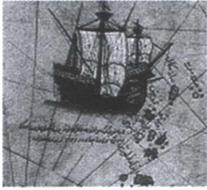
The rest of the map is hopeless. North America is unrecognisable, Florida is missing and the Caribbean is notably short of Cuba and a few other major features.

Very well then, say the Atlantis theorists and flying-saucer fans, but the map does show a continental landmass hundreds of years before it was officially discovered. How could they have known it was there unless the knowledge was passed down by an ancient civilisation?

A look at other maps of the period gives some clues. Schoener's *Mappa Mundi* of 1520 shows a Southern continent, called *Brasilia Inferior*, which is very different to the Piri Re'is version. The Contarini map of 1506 gives another equally fanciful rendering, this time called *Terra Crucis*. So does the Ryush map of 1507. The original inspiration for all of them came from the ancient Greeks, who divided the Earth into quarters and for symmetry



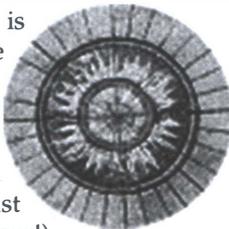
put a continent in each quarter — Europe and Asia in the North, Africa and the Antipodes in the South.



Medieval theologians were divided on whether the world was round. St Augustine decided that it was, but since the Southern continent was cut off by the vastness of the ocean, its inhabitants could not be descended from Adam. The Beatus Map in Old Castile, dated 1086, shows an extra southern continent, inhabited by Sciopods: monstrous beings with one foot which they use to shade themselves from the sun. In Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320) the far side of the Earth is the site of Purgatory.

Everyone assumed there must be something there, filling the gap with their imagination. In the eighteenth century, Captain Cook was looking for the missing continent which simply had to exist in order to balance the weight of land in the Northern hemisphere. If this seems simple-minded, remember that modern physicists believe that every new subatomic particle must have a corresponding anti-particle. The idea that nature might not be symmetrical is not acceptable to them; similarly the ancients believed a southern continent was a necessity of nature.

Graham Hancock's trump card is a statement from the US Air Force that 'the geographical detail in the upper part of the map agrees very remarkably with the results of the seismic survey of 1949.' Erich Von Däniken claimed that the map must have been made from space (of course!).



However, the statement indicates that the USAF were only impressed by a small part of one section of the map. Given the number of versions of Antarctica in old maps, the odds of some part of one of them being accurate are pretty good — particularly if you are willing to ignore a displacement of several thousand miles. The USAF were perhaps being rather charitable, since they also forgave several non-existent islands.

The Piri Re'is map is interesting because of what it tells us about the 16th century Turkish view of the world. Notes in the margin warn that the discoveries in the New World will cause the balance of power to shift against the Ottoman Empire. It has been thoroughly studied, and is not considered anomalous for its era; we do not need lost civilisations to account for it. The map's makers were doing their best to draw an accurate picture of the world. They had good reasons for putting in an extra landmass; but we have no excuse for creating non-existent ancient cultures.



I am reminded of a quotation from Voltaire:

"Man, who cannot create a fly, will create Gods by the score."

Civilisations too, it seems.

David Hambling works in IT and is a freelance writer and researcher.

The Skeptic's Dictionary

Robert Todd Carroll

The Mystery of Atlantis

ATLANTIS: A LEGENDARY ISLAND in the Atlantic west of Gibraltar, said by Plato to have been a utopia which sank beneath the sea during an earthquake.

Some controversial theories have equated ancient Thera with Atlantis. Thera is a volcanic Greek island in the Aegean Sea which was devastated by a volcanic eruption in 1625 BCE. Until then it had been associated with the Minoan civilization on Crete.

The man who gave us the Bermuda Triangle and Noah's Ark (*The lost ship of Noah : in search of the Ark at Ararat*, New York: Putnam, 1987) has also given us Atlantis: Charles Berlitz. The reader might want to check out Berlitz's *Doomsday*, 1999 A.D. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981). It comes complete with maps and drawings by J Manson Valentine. But the serious investigator of the myth of Atlantis must read Ignatius Donnelly's *Atlantis: the Antediluvian World* (1882). He starts with the claim that Plato's myth is true history and 'does little more than enumerate supposed evidence...'. Nevertheless, Donnelly still has a following. Some of them have written to me telling me that this is the greatest book ever written on Atlantis. Others, such as Kenneth L Feder, (*Frauds, Mysteries and Myths*, ch. 8, Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1990) have ripped it to shreds. Naturally, we recommend the latter.

Atlantis is not just a lost continent. According to some, it was a place of advanced civilization and technology. Lewis Spence, a Scottish mythologist who used 'inspiration' instead of scientific methods, attributes Cro-Magnon cave paintings in Europe to displaced Atlanteans (Feder, p. 130). Helena Blavatsky and the theosophists of the late 19th century invented the notion that the Atlanteans had invented airplanes and explosives and grew extraterrestrial wheat. The theosophists also invented Mu, a lost continent in the Pacific Ocean. (Feder, p. 131) Then, of course, there was Edgar Cayce, who claimed to have psychic knowledge of Atlantean texts which assisted him in his prophecies and cures. And now there is JZ Knight's channeled spirit from Atlantis, Ramtha.

Unfortunately for the New Age Atlanteans, there is no archaeological or geological evidence for either Atlantis or Mu. To paraphrase Whitehead, the belief in Atlantis, the ancient and great civilization, is just another footnote to Plato.

Robert Carroll teaches philosophy at Sacramento City College, California. © Robert Carroll 1994–1996. For the full text of the *Skeptic's Dictionary*, visit <http://dcn.davis.ca.us/~btcarrol/skeptic/>

Britain's Zeppelin Hysteria

Robert Bartholomew and Philip Cole

A classic illustration of the UFO myth

VALUABLE INSIGHTS into the illusionary nature of the widespread modern myth that extraterrestrial space vehicles are traversing our skies, can be gained from examining the historical pattern of "UFO" and "flying saucer" sightings. In this article, we travel back in time to the United Kingdom during the early part of the twentieth century, in order to document the events and circumstances that fostered a similar mass delusion. Examining this wave which occurred so long ago, can help "believers" in the UK come to the realisation that present-day UFO sightings are part of a larger myth. We believe that once the circumstances of the episode are scrutinised, there are just too many unanswered questions for anyone to place their faith in alien visitants.

An Open Challenge to UFO "Believers"

A common reaction by UFO enthusiasts in explaining the UK Zeppelin sightings between 1912-13, is to argue that they were actually alien spacecraft, but were misinterpreted as German Zeppelins during a period when people expected to see Zeppelins. However, it is highly conspicuous that of the tens of thousands of eyewitnesses during the 1912-13 wave, not one press report of the period unambiguously described the objects as saucer-shaped! They were reported to have been Zeppelin-like or distant, vague light sources. Not once during the episode was ground residue found that could not have been produced by the technology of the era. In recent years, if we are to believe some UFO researchers, it seems as though most of the population has been abducted by aliens at some time or another. While most of these claims are purportedly determined through regressive hypnosis, many others report conscious abductions. And then there are "contactees," who almost always claim conscious, ongoing contacts with aliens. Why is there not a single documented case during the 1912-13 UFO wave or before this time, in which even one person claimed to have been taken aboard a saucer-shaped object and medically examined—something which is a typical present-day abduction scenario? Why were there no contactee claimants back then? Why would aliens even want to fly across the British countryside at night with bright conspicuous lights? While Britons may have been seeing alien space vehicles back then, there is no credible evidence to suggest this was the case. In short, the alien hypothesis does not make sense. A plausible, simpler explanation holds that they were seeing neither Zeppelins nor aliens, but were misidentifying a variety of stars and planets, as a reflection of their social and cultural

expectations. It also stands to reason that at least some portion of claimants were hallucinating or outright lying. However, we think most witnesses were simply misperceiving.

In this article, we will describe a classic case of "mass hysteria" that occurred in the United Kingdom between 1912-13, in the midst of a war scare, involving the widespread sightings of phantom Zeppelins. To understand what happened, we will first examine the historical context of the episode, and then look at the actual sightings as reported in the British press. The sightings were clearly a result of the war hysteria in Britain at the time.

The War Hysteria

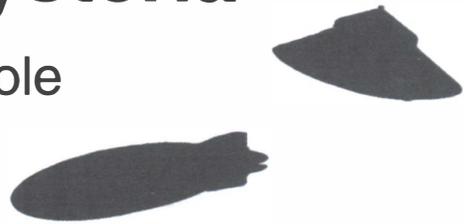
Between October of 1912, and March of 1913, tens of thousands of UK citizens claimed to see Zeppelins in the sky, almost exclusively at night. During the episode, it was widely believed that the Zeppelins were on spy missions as a prelude to invasion. In the years prior to the episode, anti-German sentiments rose steadily. The period between 1907 and the start of World War I was characterised by a great public fear over the ascendancy of the German military, especially Zeppelin airships and Dreadnought naval vessels, and the perceived weakening of the British navy in relation to Germany.

In 1909 Britain's vulnerability to an aerial attack was recognised and long-standing complacency as the unrivalled sea power suddenly questioned.¹ There was a mood of "hysteria germanica"² which waxed and waned until the beginning of World War I.³ Anglo-German relations in 1909 are summarised in the following passage:

The Admiralty in these circumstances feared that Germany might, by a sudden spurt in shipbuilding, overtake the British superiority in Dreadnoughts. Technical experts in every Navy in the world believed that victory or defeat in the next war at sea would turn upon . . . ships of this class or type.

These anxieties were intensified by the novelty of the situation. No one in authority had any genuine experience of this kind of arms race. When the idea of German acceleration found its way into the German popular Press a national panic was the result.⁴

The relative suddenness of the situation contributed the mood. Despite a general acknowledgment of Germany's naval challenge and increasing military strength between October 1906 and 1909, there was no great concern over



Britain's immediate security relative to hostile German intentions.⁵ In 1906, Sir C. Hardinge clearly foresaw no immediate German naval threat, concluding that "it is not likely to be made for some years to come."⁶ From this period until 1909, although Anglo-German relations were unfriendly, most major British political figures believed that a German challenge to long-held naval superiority was in the distant future.⁷

Anglo-German tensions and mistrust had been steadily heightening from 1907 to the start of World War I in 1914, but in 1912, "the naval race" between the two powers was especially daunting, and by late April, "London and Berlin were as far apart as possible."⁸ With news of a German plan to construct three additional battleships, the British Admiralty became concerned with the large increase of German battleships on active service. This led to a vigorous debate when the Admiralty considered ordering its remaining large ships from the Mediterranean,⁹ provoking "a furious row throughout the rest of the year over whether Britain was still an 'imperial' power or merely a North Sea one."¹⁰

Through the first half of 1912, there were several well-publicised attempts by the British to achieve a German arms agreement, but all efforts failed to reach a compromise. Tensions escalated further in October 1912 with the outbreak of the first of three Balkan wars, which had an adverse effect on Anglo-German relations at this time.

During November 1912, the month of the first documented Zeppelin sighting of the episode, so concerned were Britain and France of the possibility of a German war, that the Grey-Cambon exchange was agreed upon, morally obligating Britain to aid France in the event of a Franco-German altercation.¹¹ This agreement heightened Belgian distrust of Britain and fuelled concerns that Belgium, a French neighbour, might side with Germany. Between February 1909 until the German intention to invade Belgium on August 2, 1914, fears of a secret German-Belgian agreement were reported in Britain.¹² During the period of the Zeppelin sightings through 1914, the distance between Anglo-German national interest perceptions was "as wide as ever,"¹³ and the political mood in Britain in the period prior to World War I was filled with anxiety.

The Rise of Aerial Technology

Rapid advancements in aviation technology during this period, in which Germany was the unquestioned world leader with its Zeppelin airships, heightened invasion fears, lending plausibility to rumours of a potential aerial invasion of Britain. The British preoccupation with a German aerial invasion was expressed in various science fiction novels during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁴ The main theme of these books was to

argue for "higher budgets and a stronger war machine."¹⁵ However, with rapid progress in aerial technology during the early years of the twentieth century, many magazines and non-fiction books expressed concern over Britain's poor standing in this field, and the potential of this technology to result in unprecedented destruction.¹⁶ It is within this context of intense concern over the widely perceived threat of a British invasion by Germany, and rapid aerial progress, that the Zeppelin sightings occurred.

The Zeppelin Reports¹⁷

The Zeppelin episode began with an incident at Sheerness on October 14, 1912, when several witnesses claimed to hear an aerial noise at about 6.45 pm, at which time some of whom saw a distant aerial light which was assumed to emanate from an airship. The incident did not receive widespread publicity until November 21 when Member of Parliament Mr Joynson-Nicks inquired about the rumoured Zeppelin sighting that was to become popularly known as "the Sheerness Incident," asking Mr.

Churchill if Britain had airships "equivalent in size and power . . . capable of travelling at the rate of 60 miles an hour, and Mr. Churchill replied in the negative."¹⁸

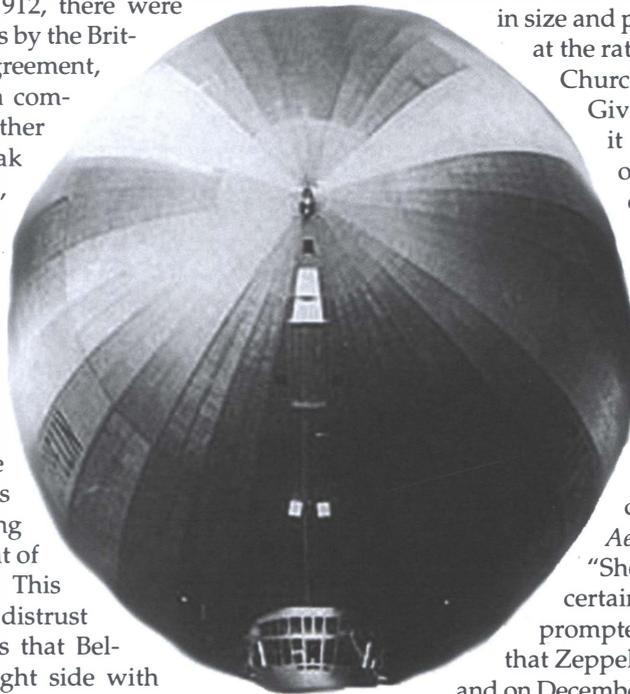
Given the socio-political climate, it was popularly believed the observation was of a Zeppelin on a reconnaissance mission as a prelude to an invasion. An examination of the minutes of the 120th Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence held on December 6, 1912, revealed that despite public denials, Churchill privately believed the sighting was of a Zeppelin.¹⁹ Several days later, the editors of *The Aeroplane* concluded that the "Sheerness incident" was almost certainly a Zeppelin.²⁰ This story prompted intense press speculation that Zeppelins were overflying England,

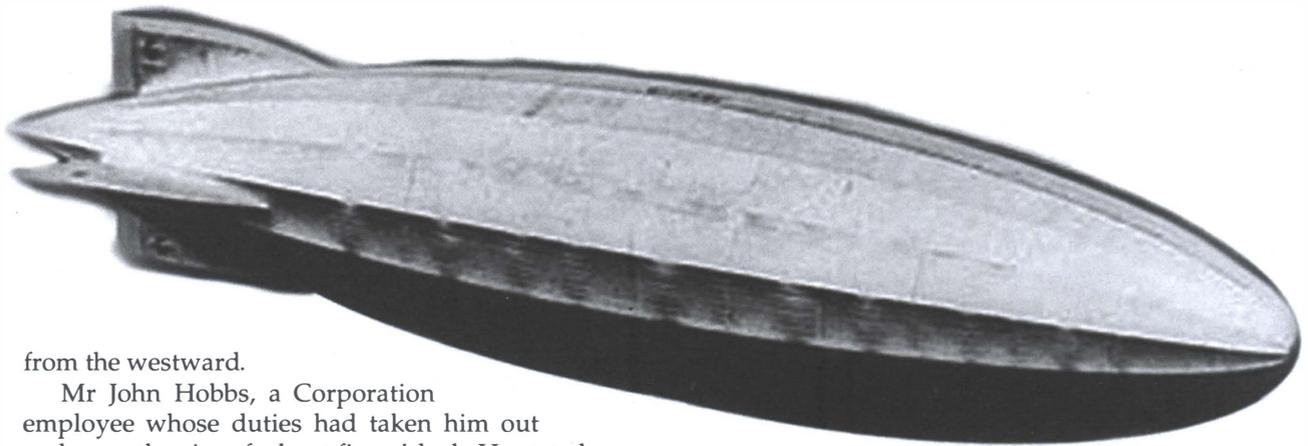
and on December 3rd, an airship was reported near Portsmouth.²¹ With continued press coverage of the issue, a deluge of reports soon began to pour in across the country.

Just before daybreak on January 4, 1913, road inspector John Hobbs reported observing a bright light over Dover, that he assumed to be an airship, and which several newspapers described as fact. The following is typical:

MYSTERIOUS AIRSHIP FLIGHT OVER DOVER

Mystery attaches to the identity of an aircraft which flew over Dover in the early hours of Saturday morning. It was not sufficiently light at the time to distinguish the shape of the flying machine, but owing to the noise of the engines, and the fact that a light was carried, it is believed to have been an airship, and not an aeroplane. It came from over the sea, and appeared to be going in a northeasterly direction. The wind was blowing nearly half a gale





from the westward.

Mr John Hobbs, a Corporation employee whose duties had taken him out early saw the aircraft about five o'clock. He stated yesterday that his attention was first attracted by the noise of the motors—a well-known sound at Dover, where there has been so much flying. On looking in the direction of the sound he saw a light travelling at a great speed coming from the direction of the sea. The drone of the engines as the machine passed over the town was very distinct.

The noise made by the airship was also heard by Mr. Langley, a local tradesman, and Police-constable Pierce, with whom Mr Hobbs was afterwards in conversation. It could only have been a powerfully engined aircraft to have flown in such a wind, and daring airmanship was also involved in the flight.²²

At dusk on January 18, the Glamorgan Chief Constable, Captain Lionel Lindsay, claimed to distinguish an airship emitting a trail of black smoke, although conditions were so foggy and poor "that one could not define it."²³ While the *Yorkshire Post* cautiously stated that Captain Lindsay saw "what he believes to have been a large aircraft,"²⁴ ²⁵ many press accounts described this fleeting observation as an airship.²⁶ Over the next several days, numerous residents came forward claiming that they too had seen the airship light that evening.

AIRSHIP MYSTERY.

ANOTHER WITNESS OF FLIGHT OVER CARDIFF

The statement of Captain Lionel Lindsay to the effect that he observed an airship over Cardiff just as darkness was falling an evening or two ago is confirmed by a Cardiff man, named John Wilkey, son of Mr. G.M. Wilkey, newsagent, of Frederick-street. He states that on Saturday evening he saw in the sky a trail of smoke. On closer examination he saw an aircraft and exclaimed to his father, "There's an aeroplane." His father, however, paid little attention to the lad's remark but when he saw Captain Lindsay's remarks on Tuesday the youth's exclamation he asserts must be true.

It is also stated that Miss Francis, of Bonvilstone, saw the airship at just about the same time, and going in the direction described by Captain Lindsay. Mr. H.J. Marshall, of Eaton-crescent, Swansea, states that he saw either an aeroplane or an aircraft of some kind coming from the direction of Llanelly on Tuesday morning. It was travelling from west to east at a fairly good speed, and the light was a

peculiar reddish warm colour.²⁷

In the wake of these reports, Mr. Joynson-Hicks told a reporter of his belief that "foreign dirigibles are crossing the English Channel at will," displaying alarm at the state of British defences.²⁸ The sightings continued virtually unabated with reports of airships almost nightly until March 7, when they suddenly abated.

The sightings in the vicinity of South Wales were mystifying as it would have had to have crossed the Channel in daylight, yet there were no corresponding sightings in England.²⁹ This prompted speculation in some quarters that the mysterious vessel was actually an airship that was being secretly developed by a local inventor,³⁰ or more likely by the War Office in response to the Zeppelin threat.³¹

As the sightings continued, what had earlier been described as a possible or actual airship of unknown origin, was increasingly referred to as a hostile Zeppelin. Cardiff aeronaut E.T. Willows made headlines when he suggested that it could have been one of several Zeppelins capable of making the journey.

There is increasing confirmation of the statements of Captain Lindsay, the Glamorgan Chief Constable, and Mr. H.J. Marshall, of Swansea, as to an airship having been seen over West Wales during the past few days.

Mr. E.T. Willows, the well-known Cardiff airman, in conversation with a Cardiff pressman on Wednesday on the subject said:

"From some of the letters I have seen it is evident that a moving object in the air was seen from several places in South Wales late last Friday afternoon. The weather conditions were eminently suitable for a long flight to be made by an airship, except that it was somewhat misty, which, however, would be only a disadvantage from the point of view of the observer.

"In view of the evidence it is difficult to tell whether the object seen was an aeroplane or an airship, but the 'long oval shape' referred to by one or two observers suggests that it may have been a dirigible balloon.

"The two big airships of the British War Office, the Gamma and the Delta, are capable of a journey all over South Wales. The Gamma has a speed of about 50 miles an hour, and she is now in the new

envelope which I made for her last year to enable her to undertake long trips. The Delta is also capable of doing a long trip, but at the present time she is out of commission, undergoing alterations.

"The smaller airship, the one which I made for the Navy authorities, is at present being used at Farnborough for training the officers and men of the naval wing of the Royal Flying Corps."

Mr. Willows added: "It is possible (in reply to a question) for some of the German airships of the Zeppelin [unreadable] types to make a trip as far as South Wales. Germany has now seven or eight large vessels capable of a speed of 40 or 50 miles an hour, and they can thus keep this up for 35 or 40 hours. This would mean between 1,800 and 2,000 miles, and of course brings the South Wales coalfield well within range of the destroying powers of these German aircraft working from the new naval bases at [unreadable] and Heligoland and points on the north-western portion of the German border.

"Of course, we have nothing in this country at present to in any way equal this type of airship, and the only attempt made so far has been the one at Barrow, [unreadable] I personally have been working upon plans of a similar nature, which in the near future may materialise; but upon these points I must not say any more at present."³²

On January 23rd, a Knowle resident expressed fear of the possibility that a man-o-war airship was recently seen over Bristol.³³ A Manchester man expressed displeasure with the government for allowing Britain's perceived state of aerial defensiveness, stating: "The country will not be satisfied with a reassurance that the Admiralty has the matter in hand."³⁴ A former naval officer wrote a letter noting the enormous advantages of a foreign power knowing the nocturnal geography, and suggested bolstering coastal defence.³⁵ A British press correspondent in Germany warned of the German world superiority in airship technology, noting ominously that "England's maritime superiority [had] lost its whole significance, as superiority in the air [now] brings mastery of the world."³⁶ A technical editor of the leading aviation journal *Flight*, Mr A.F. Berriman, expressed his conviction that Zeppelins were capable of making long-distance voyages over England.³⁷

Sceptical press reports also grew more common as the wave progressed, especially after the first week of February. One common explanation for the sightings was the misidentification of Venus which was prominent in the evening sky during the episode. A skeptic of the period was Joseph M. Elgle, F.R.A.S, and M.B.A.A., who authored the book *The Night-Skies of a Year*. He attempted to allay Zeppelin anxieties in the following press article.

What is the meaning of that mysterious light which is so perplexing . . .

The celestial body, I would suggest, is none other than the planet Venus, to whose appearance in the western sky reference has been made in the *Evening News*. It may seem odd that a planet could possibly be mistaken for the headlight of an airship, owing, for one thing, to the great difference in the movement of the two objects.

THE SHINING STAR

. . . What, to begin with, is the evidence to support the airship theory? It seems to be generally agreed that there was a brilliant light in the sky, and that it moved. It seems to be not so generally agreed that the outline of an airship could be distinguished, and observers are still less in agreement that the hum of engines could be heard.

Now, as to the light itself, could anything be more lustrous in the night sky than Venus is at present? Moreover, the planet is comparatively low down in the west, say by seven or eight o'clock in the evening.

That circumstance, combined with the effect of [unreadable] which irradiation gives it, might very easily make Venus have the appearance of hovering in the air at no great distance above the ground. One report, I observe, estimates the height at about three hundred feet.

Impossible that such a mistake should be made! some *Evening News* readers may exclaim. But has not the mistake been made before—and in Wales, too?

HUM OF THE ENGINES

Who does not remember the Welsh revivalist scenes of only a few years ago?

Well, memories are short if it not remembered in connection with that revival how strange lights were observed in the sky, how thousands became terror-stricken at these alleged manifestations, while others regarded them of divine significance, and others still saw in them the presence of a mysterious craft which threatened to swoop with the swiftness of eagle flight on the doomed heads of the Welsh people.

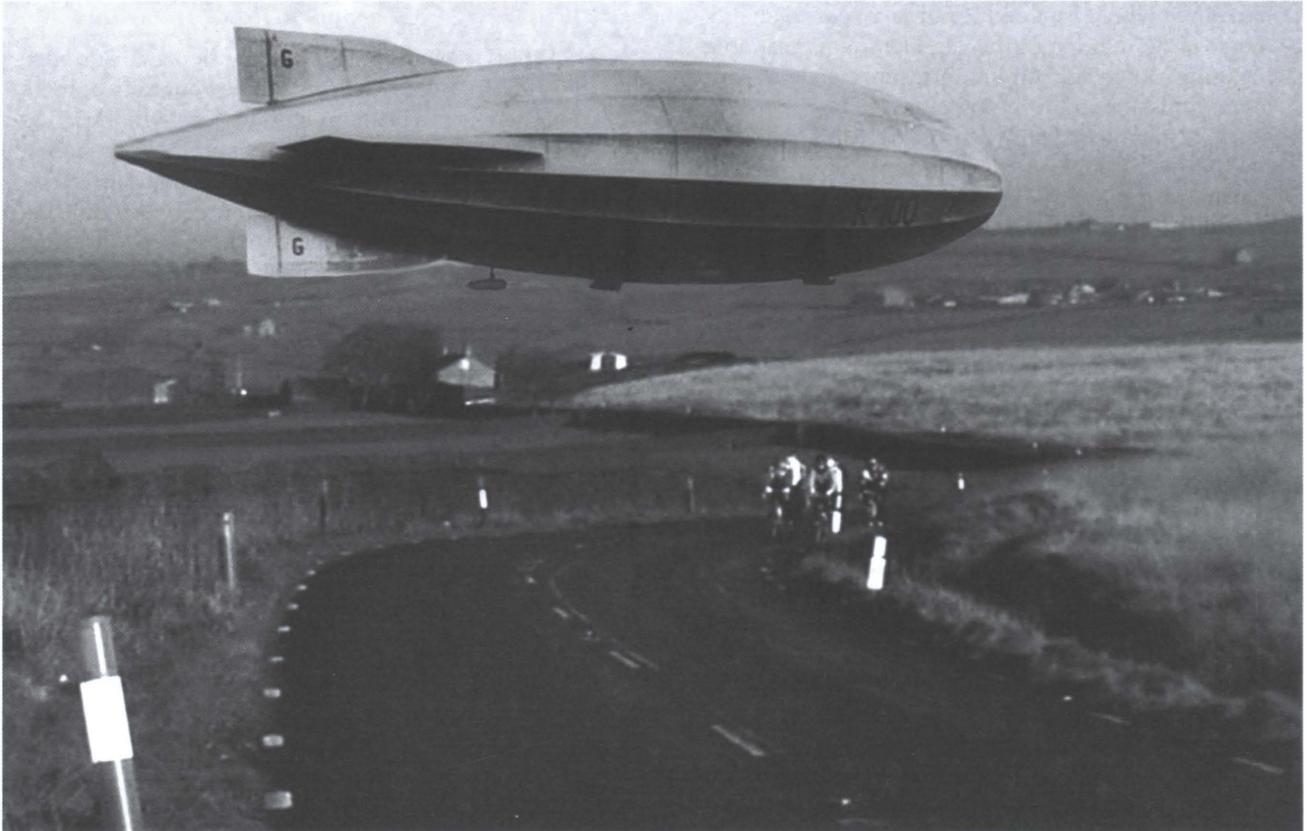
Who does not remember, also, the sensation which these same so-called mysterious lights created on the north-west coast of France? Yet, alas! for human credulity, the lights and the mystery together disappeared when the starry reign of Venus was over, for Venus was at that time as brilliant, if, indeed, not more brilliant, than she is now.

So, then, we have the fact that Venus is liable at times to become an object of mistaken identity, and my own supposition is that she has probably suffered in the present instance from a similar fate.

But, it may be asked, what about the hum of the airships' engines said to have been heard at the village of Machen? And what about the "faint, bird-like shape" that is reported to have been there distinguished?

In the first place, let me acknowledge that I am no airship expert. The only aerial craft of the kind I ever saw in my life were some returning from the French Army manoeuvres a year or two ago, but if I remember rightly they were anything but "bird-like." My impression, indeed, is that they were not so much [unreadable] as like a Brobdingnagian cigar more or less pointed at both ends.

At any rate, it is possible that the villagers of Machen having settled it in their own minds that



the dazzling light they saw was the light of an airship, it would—knowing how the imagination can trick us—be an easy step to the hum of the engines and the “faint, bird-like shape.” A cloud as we all know, can often assume familiar forms even by day, but in the early night

ANOTHER EXPLANATION

In consideration of these possibilities of the object being celestial rather than terrestrial it may seem difficult to account for the statements that the light was seen from Newport and Neath to be travelling “westward across the Bristol Channel.”

Truth to tell, that circumstance gave me a momentary pause in my elucidatory reflections, but it was only momentary, for it, too, seems capable of explanation. On the night of the observations, we will take it, there was a good deal of cloud driving up from the southwest and allowing of only intermittent glimpses of Venus.

Now, as the clouds sailed towards the northeast, and Venus kept coming out at intervals from behind them, her brilliant flight would have the appearance of moving in the opposite direction to that of the clouds, namely, towards the southwest.

Let anyone test this illusion by watching a bright meridian moon when broken clouds are flying across it to the west. Ten to one our satellite will give the impression of travelling just as rapidly away from them towards the east.

These, then are some of the points which make me incline to the belief that the Welsh observers have been badly tricked by Venus.³⁸

Another popular explanation was that of fire balloons as they were found or suspected as the stimulus for several

sightings.³⁹ More novel explanations included the theory that a local aeronautical expert had anchored a small model airship to a moving motor car,⁴⁰ and rubber balloons with an attached battery and light used by to determine wind direction.⁴¹ Some residents hypothesised that the noise often associated with the aerial light may have been flocks of birds.⁴² Unusual atmospheric illusions⁴³ were also considered.

Actions by the British Government during the episode only reinforced the belief in Zeppelin aerial incursions. During the second week of February, Parliament passed a bill giving officers the right to fire at any mysterious aircraft. As the bill was approved with virtually no discussion, it was assumed that “naval and military authorities had received confidential reports which assured them that the airships of foreign powers [Germany] were making reconnaissances . . .”⁴⁴ At a meeting of the Aeronautical Society, Major Sykes of the Royal Flying Corps declared of the sightings: “Great Britain is no longer an island. Since Nelson defeated the united fleet at Trafalgar, Great Britain has held the mastery of the sea . . . [and] invasion was always improbable, if not even impossible. But the aeroplane has destroyed the inviolability of the English air.”⁴⁵ Major B. Baden-Powell warned of the possibility of German airships carrying bombs that could be dropped on London, drawing parallels to H.G. Wells’ book, *War in the Air* in which London was destroyed by an aerial attack.⁴⁶

The phantom Zeppelin sightings were a symbolic projection of the prevailing socio-political climate in Britain just prior to World War I as the skies became a projected Rorschach Ink Blot Test of the collective psyche. Zeppelins they expected to see, and Zeppelins they saw. It was within this social climate that a variety of ambiguous, almost exclusively nocturnal aerial stimuli, circumstances

and events were redefined. For over a century prior to the episode, Britain's status as the world's naval leader was never seriously unchallenged. This long-held complacency was suddenly shattered with the advent of rapid aeronautical advancements. When modern-day UFO researchers examine these reports, they must consider their historical context, before jumping to wild speculations about alien visitants.

NOTES

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19. Watson, 10.
20. *The Aeroplane*, November 28, 1912.
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32. *South Wales Daily Post*, January 23, 1913.
33. *Bristol Times and Mirror*, January 25, 1913.
34. *Manchester Guardian*, February 27, 1913.
35. *The Aeroplane*, January 30, 1913, p. 111.
36. *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 25, 1913.
37. *London Daily Express*, February 25, 1913.
38. *The Evening News* [London], February 8, 1913.
39. *Manchester Guardian*, February 28, 1913; *London Daily Telegraph*, March 1, 1913.
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41. *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 28, 1913.
42. *London Daily Express*, January 27, 1913.
43. *Manchester Guardian*, February 27, 1913; *Manchester Guardian*, March 1, 1913.
44. *London Daily Express*, February 25, 1913.
45. *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 27, 1913.
46. *London Times*, February 27, 1913.

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Advertisement

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Copy deadline for the next issue is June 15.

Feng Shui Fooey

Neville Goodman deconstructs a popular nonsensical fad

Superstition or scientific fact? Well, consider that many big name businesses, such as Orange, Virgin and Marks and Spencer have already employed feng shui consultants.

— Bernadette Jones in *Forte* magazine

MANY LARGE COMPANIES also use graphology, the interpretation of handwriting, when selecting staff. There is no scientific basis in graphology [1], so the obvious parallel is that feng shui is superstition. It's a superstition I wish I'd thought of. Sadly, I'm too late, because feng shui is the 3000-year-old ancient art of placement. Its modern rediscovery in these days of uncertainty is lining authors' and publishers' pockets, as common sense about what to do with interior decor is transformed into mysticism.

My enlightenment came from 'Eastern harmony', written by Bernadette Jones in *Forte* magazine, one of those glossy journals that lie about in hotel rooms and airports, filled with heavy paper and light stories, and carrying advertisements showing that the people who read them are not from my world: 'Electronic solutions for privacy protection and corporate security: TTD1A handheld room, telephone and carrier current bug detector'; 'Truth phone: digital read-out alerts you to possible deception' – which might be useful when the feng shui salesperson comes to call.

The key to fresh profits, to that upturn in fortune, you see, is to arrange the items in your office according to the laws of feng shui. In common with just about every other system lacking a basis in the known laws of physics, feng shui works by maximising beneficial energy or *chi* flow. Not surprisingly, maximising *chi* 'can positively change your life'. (This may be a cunning piece of syntax. Wanting to promote feng shui, I would have written 'can change your life positively'. By stressing 'positively' before 'change', Jones may be pointing out rather subtly that you'll sure as hell notice the change, but it's not guaranteed to be a good one. But I doubt it.)

There is an organisation called Feng Shui Network International, whose director, Gina Lazenby, used another favourite exercise in illogic: the proving of a general principle from a specific example, cunningly ignoring that the specific example is faulty. She is quoted as saying that doctors now accept 'that acupuncture works by freeing energy channels in the body and, in the same way, feng shui shows how energy moves around the spaces we inhabit'.

First, doctors are not convinced that acupuncture works at all, never mind that it frees energy channels. Second, even if acupuncture did work and did work in that way, why should energy moving through a human body be evidence for energy moving through an office?



Analogy is useful for explaining things that are difficult to understand, but is proof of nothing.

Feng shui has much more going for it than acupuncture, because stripped of the mysticism much of it is sensible. Sitting in line with the door is a bad position. Reasonable hypotheses for this (energy channels aside) are that being able to see out of or through the door is distracting for you, allows those outside to spy on you, or means you'd be sitting in a draught. There should be no strong artwork behind an executive's desk as it will distract visitors. Does that really need an explanation in terms of energy channels? Your desk should be large enough to allow both a work surface and available store area, but small enough so everything is within easy reach. This is dangerously seductive: surely such common sense must be worth pursuing? You should not use a mirror where the rubbish bin is reflected in it, because tired or dead energies will be reflected back into the house.

Feng shui practitioners, Bernadette Jones writes, 'believe that one of the biggest obstacles to the free flow of energy is rubbish'. Well, feng shui certainly fits in there. Perhaps not in the sense intended, of discarded furniture or redundant computer files, but in the sense 'absurd ideas or suggestions; nonsense' [2].

Who reads *Forte* magazine? Does this article matter? As Professor Richard Dawkins said in his recent Richard Dimbleby lecture (BBC2), it is the slow drip, drip of irrationality that is so dangerous and such a threat to clear thinking and progress.

These and similar articles are everywhere, masquerading as fact, presented with a high 'Gosh!' factor. We know more now in science than we have ever known because science is cumulative. So much of this newly

discovered ancient wisdom (which is anything but wisdom) is static; it hasn't changed in thousands of years, and that is taken as self-evident evidence of worth.

If you want more information about feng shui, you could contact their Network at PO Box 2133, London W1A 1RL. I'm sure they will be only too happy to arrange for a 'bagua' session, in which a grid is fitted 'over a plan of your house or office and positioned so that the front door falls within the knowledge, career or relationship area. Any potential problem, such as a missing area, can then be identified'. Apparently, if there are no rooms within the wealth area there could be financial problems.

Far be it from me, a mere novice, to suggest that studying your bank balance may be a more certain method

of discovering financial problems, but then I'm not charging for the advice.

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Dr Neville Goodman is a Consultant Anaesthetist at Southmead Hospital, Bristol. He does not use homoeopathic remedies, crystals or pendulums to induce anaesthesia. On the other hand, neither he nor any other anaesthetist knows how anaesthetics work. But they do.

Bewitched and bewildered

Lovell Brown on a close encounter of a kind she'd sooner forget

LAST YEAR got off to a bad start when I got hexed. OK, I've been cursed *at* before – I've learned a lot of interesting new words from taxi drivers since I've been cycling to work – but to actually have a curse put *on* you is quite scary. It began like this.

On Twelfth Night I met a few friends for a meal. My heart sank when I realised that along with my friends was – well, we'd better call her Elvira – a rather strange, frighteningly intense woman who I'd met several times before and had hoped never to meet again. By the time I arrived, Elvira was well into the white wine and disposed to be somewhat over-affectionate (to put it politely). Leaping towards me, bottle in hand, she informed me she'd been longing to see me and she must buy me a drink to celebrate. Celebration wasn't exactly my view of the encounter, but I thanked her and said I'd like a mineral water. Oh dear! From the expression on her face I could tell I'd committed a social sin of hideous proportions.

'No, no!' she cried. 'You *must* have some wine! You can't let me drink alone!'

I resisted the urge to remark that according to what I'd heard, that was precisely what she'd been doing for the past ten years. Instead, I politely explained that I couldn't drink because I'd got to cycle back.

'That's no excuse!' she sulked. 'I'm sure you can ride a bike when you're drunk.'

This was undeniably true, but I apologetically pointed out that as I would be going back across the middle of London after dark, at approximately pub chucking-out time, I thought I'd better keep all my wits about me. From her contemptuous reaction it was obvious that 'I don't drink because I'm a big wussy' would have been a more acceptable excuse. To my relief, she soon went off in a huff, and was next heard venting her wrath on some poor soul who wasn't drinking because he was on antibiotics.

The evening wore on, and I perfected the art of Elvira-avoidance as far as possible, trying to ignore her glaring at me across the table. It was getting late by the time we finished the meal, and someone jokingly remarked that

we were all courting a year's bad luck because we wouldn't be home in time to take our Christmas cards down by midnight.

Elvira suddenly stood up and fixed me with her wild, staring eyes. (I think she was having trouble with her contact lenses.) A cold shiver ran down my spine.

'I can tell you that *you'll* have bad luck,' she intoned, her voice dropping several octaves. 'I *know* you'll come off your bike in the next year.'

As she began to detail dreadful road accidents, the people either side of her tried to shut her up, and I headed rapidly for the door, muttering, 'That's *not* funny'. Not that I'm at all superstitious, you understand . . . well, not very . . . not usually. However, I was a little disconcerted, especially as a friend had warned me that Elvira was 'a real witch'. I think the word was 'witch'.

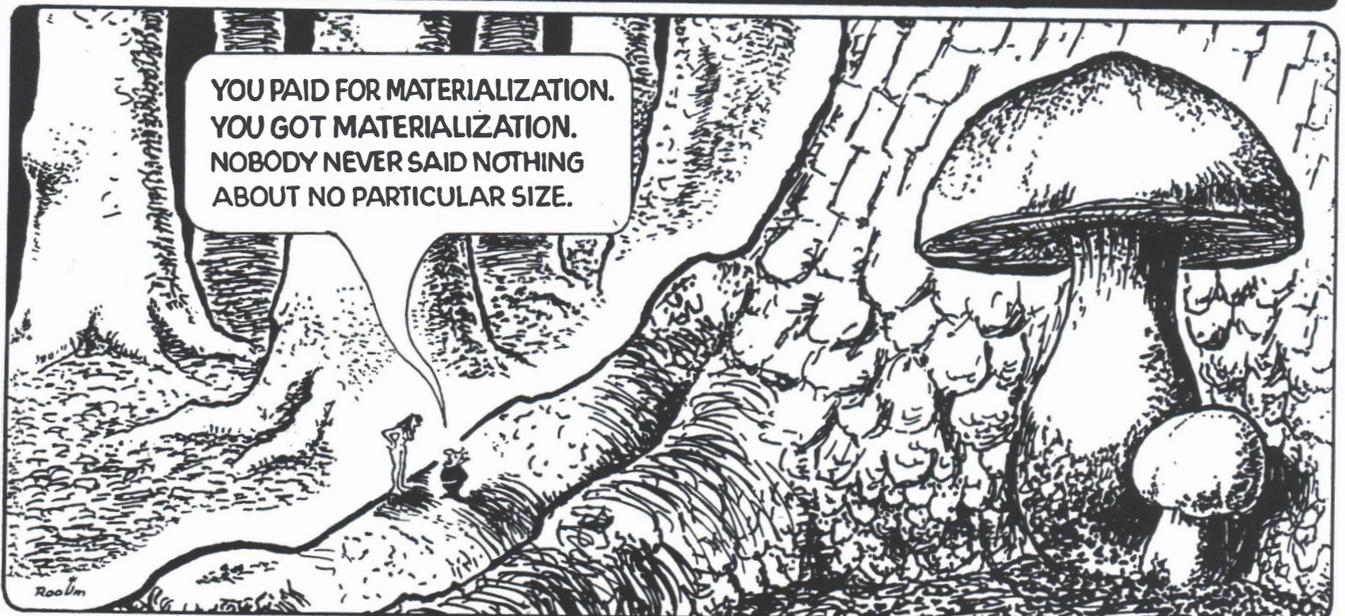
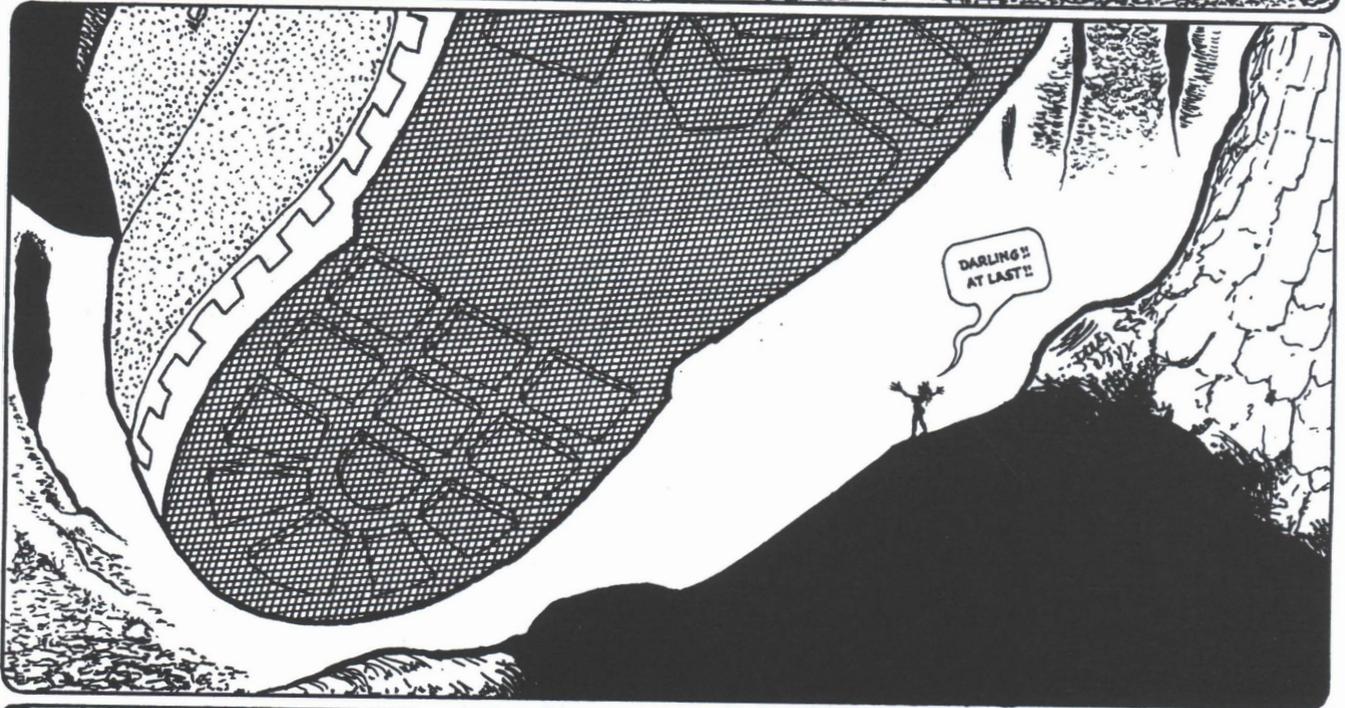
I got home safely, but as predicted, I didn't get my Christmas cards down before midnight. Did this mean Elvira's curse would come true? Did it hell! I decided to just forget the whole thing. The only trouble was, cycling to work in London does tend to be pretty hazardous, and every time I had a narrow escape from a homicidal car driver or a suicidal pedestrian, Elvira's words came back to me. I almost began to understand why our local so-called clairvoyant does such a good business in lifting curses at a few hundred pounds a time. I even began to wonder if Elvira was in league with her.

My friends got sick of the subject as it became a point of honour to me to prove Elvira's hex wouldn't come true. I cycled to work even in the worst weather, declaring, 'I'm not superstitious!' as I skidded along icy roads getting alternately windblown and soaked to the skin.

Sure enough, when the next New Year came along, I'd had a totally accident-free year — a rare event for any London cyclist. What's more, and rarer still — I was much fitter and had lost half a stone. So, Elvira, thanks for the curse — it worked wonders!

Lovell Brown is a skeptical writer and thick-skinned champion of metropolitan cycling.

SPRITE



In Defence of Humanism

In our last issue, Mike Walsh was highly critical of Humanism. **Arthur Chappell** begs to differ.

AS SECRETARY of the Manchester Humanists, I must challenge Mike Walsh's assault on Humanism (*The Skeptic*, 11.2). Humanism is a non-religious, secular belief, and far from dogmatic. We don't set 'rules by which we should live our lives'. Morality for Humanists is ethically situational, rather than based on absolute conditions.

Walsh dislikes our support for pacifist principles. This is not an absolute condition imposed on Humanists. I think of myself as a cowardly pacifist, but I'd fight if I felt there was just cause. To stop a deranged gunman killing innocent people, I'd shoot him. Gandhi believed that the Nazis would cave into pacifist resistance, but I think Hitler would have exploited that stance to conquer his enemies more quickly. There are times, regrettably, when fighting is needed. For example, I would have refused to fight in World War 1. That Walsh has seen some Humanist journals advocating pacifism doesn't make us all total pacifists.

Humanists often take contrasting views on various issues. In many ways, it is the diversity of opinions that makes Humanism exciting and dynamic. In a religion, unquestioning acceptance of dogma is common. Humanists, whose primary uniting feature is disbelief in anything supernatural, are as likely to disagree with one another. It's healthy to do so. The death of Princess Diana, for example, has provoked many contrasting conflicting views, because some Humanists are not republicans. The range of Humanistic thinking is vast, and no single view should be taken as typical of all Humanists.

The word 'Humanism' is itself problematic. There is no copyright on its usage, and at least one cult calls itself 'The Humanist Movement', while following a self-proclaimed Argentinian messiah called Silo [1]. The Web site reference Walsh said he had lost for his mention of the naïve 'week without war' campaign, refers to a Siloist project they often plug, which is in no way supported by mainstream Humanists. I've written articles drawing Humanists to awareness of this sect. Siloists have also parasitically called themselves 'Greens' and 'The Green Party', and even put Green candidates forward in elections alongside the real Green Party environmentalist candidates, causing confusion and losing votes for the real Greens [2].

Humanism as a word has existed since Cicero's academy of the 'Studia Humanitas' was established to show 'The art of living well and blessedly through learning and instruction in the fine arts'. The Humanities were a specialised study field, along with 'Studia Divinitatis'

(Divinity studies). The two were neither opposed nor mutually exclusive. Most Humanities students were deists. Only in the 19th century did Humanism become secularised.

The Ethical societies founded in Europe and America in the late 19th century to promote the Kantian moral philosophy of objective goodness existing independently of religion and divinity, also played a crucial role. The British South Place Ethical Society has its root in Unitarian ministries, and soon became overtly Humanistic. The dismissal of Jesus and the Holy Ghost from the holy trinity lead many Unitarians logically to dump the first leg of the tripod too. Even today Unitarians are close in spirit to the thinking of Humanists as we understand the term. Mainstream, respected Humanist organisations include the British Humanist Association (to whom Manchester Humanists associate) the International Humanist and Ethical Union, the Rationalist Press Association, the South Place Ethical Society, and the Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA).

Walsh attacks mainstream Humanists by criticising *The Freethinker* editor's article on Cuban social politics. The point of the article cited is that it presents Cuba in a more positive light than many first hand experience commentators dare, preferring their clichéd sleaze, corruption and ant-imperialist propaganda. No doubt there is just cause for seeing either view. Walsh then argues that readers of *The Freethinker* read this and didn't write back to criticise it, so therefore must accept the author's word for it. Walsh read it, so why didn't he reply to air his views if he felt so strongly about it? I do it all the time. Humanists always challenge each other's views. If we didn't, I'd leave. *The Freethinker's* Letters page is called 'You're Telling Us', and the articles are often angry responses to the deliberately provocative features of previous issues. It's incredible that Walsh has misread that obvious fact in the year he spent reading the magazine. That the Cuban article didn't provoke a reply is unfortunate, but hardly to be exploited for a claim that no such Humanist comment provokes our criticism.

People do utter the name of Jesus as a swearword, which I regard as more acceptable to cursing the name of Gordon Bennett, who definitely existed. I have no problem with using humour and satire directed at religion, which can illustrate and highlight the problems of a church that is trying to use blasphemy laws to protect itself from undue criticism. Surely, the use of humour to show the absurdities of (literal) belief to those who would ram their born again convictions down our throats is not

wrong. A creationist recently told me that I can't possibly originate in a cosmic explosion and evolution from an ape. I replied that I certainly didn't descend from a man who fornicated with part of his own rib cage. Humanistic humour serves the same purpose as any political satire. Religion is not above the right to be laughed at. It's no more intolerant to call Jesus 'namby-pamby' than for Walsh to call me naïve and arrogant (as he calls Humanists). I can live with someone thinking that about me.

And what's wrong with a Gay and Lesbian movement, such as GALHA? Walsh assumes that as gay men won't seduce lesbians and vice versa there is no cause for a united movement to link them. The similarities in the kinds of religious prejudice both face makes a united front essential [3]. The Bible frequently denounces same gender sex as an abomination and even calls for gays to be stoned to death. By throwing bestiality and child molestation into the mix Walsh also makes the existence of homosexuality itself sound perverse. Same gender consenting sex is just two men or two women being happy together. It's not unnatural GALHA has strong support from the non-gay Humanist community as from gay members themselves.

Being pro-abortion is not 'mandatory for Humanists' despite Walsh's assertion otherwise. Humanists generally support a woman's right to 'choose' whether or not to abort a foetus. In the Manchester Humanists discussions on the subject some members clearly took an opposing view. We encourage such debate, which often gets fierce.

We do have regular 'meetings', but then, so do many societies, including some Skeptics groups. A meeting isn't a mass is it, Mr Walsh? So why imply otherwise? Our (Manchester) meetings have covered the lives of Darwin and Thomas Paine, we've touched on Ancient Egypt, Humour, Voluntary Euthanasia, Capital Punishment, Science Fiction, and Skepticism (with a memorable talk by *Skeptic* co-editor Steve Donnelly). The diversity of Humanist opinions and the range of discussions and debates are among its greatest assets for me. Humanists are not always intolerant. We have been involved in many multi-faith activities alongside Christians and members of other religions.

Births, marriages and – especially – deaths are much more than excuses for a party, despite Walsh's most pathetic assertion of all [3]. We would not wish to just dismiss the death of a loved one by dumping the body in the nearest skip before going back to work, would we? The funeral is a crucial part of the mourning experience, and the point at which the emotional distress of the death of a loved one is at its most intense. Christian funerals often involve so much talk of an afterlife that the deceased is seldom mentioned, and priests get the names wrong. A Humanist funeral ceremony involves a trained, accredited officiant visiting the bereaved relatives of the deceased to prepare on their behalf a suitable tribute to the dead, based on their most pertinent memories and feelings. Suitable music for the ceremony is often chosen by the families rather than by the officiants, and some poetry may be read out too. There is usually also a moment's silence, which officiants always say is an opportunity for mourners who do have beliefs to say silent prayers. Humanist funeral ceremonies are dignified and very re-

spectable. I'm having one (but hopefully not soon). Many officiants receive letters even from priests saying that a Humanist funeral was the best they have attended.

Weddings? For those not wanting a Church wedding or the dry sterility of a registry office, such a ceremony has tremendous potential, in which the tributes and words can be exchanged between bride and groom, and their families can be brought to a greater union to one another because there isn't a lot of religion getting in the way of the expressions of deep love and tenderness that really matter.

I agree that a non-theistic religious meditation ritual sounds daft, but such are rare, and I don't see why Humanists can't provide them for those who feel that the ritual ceremony does mean something in their lives.

Thanks, but I'll stick with Humanism, and give Walshism a miss.

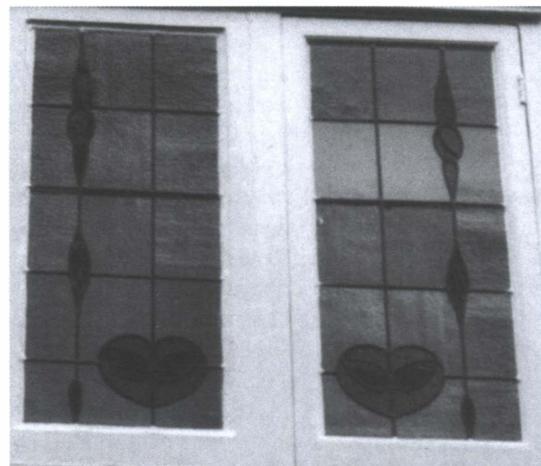
References

1. Siloists are mentioned in the *Greater Manchester Humanist*, issues 13 and 14; *Diversecity*, (The Siloists own Manchester-based publication) plugs their 'week without war 2,000' project, and the *FAIR NEWS* cult monitoring journal mentions them (1990) as does the *Ealing Gazette*, 16 February 1990).
2. See Nicholas Walter's *Humanism: What's in the Word* (Rationalist Press Association, 1997).
3. *Leviticus* 20:13, 'And if a man lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death, their blood shall be upon them'.
4. See the British Humanist Association handbooks on ceremonies written by Jane Wynne Wilson (one each on weddings, funerals and baby namings).

Arthur Chappell is Secretary of the Manchester Humanists, and co-edits their magazine *GM Humanist*.

Skeptical sights

Our thanks to reader John Leslie for this unnerving, incontrovertable photographic evidence of alien infiltration in Stockport, Cheshire.





Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

Magnetic madness

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE IMMORTAL? Alex Chiu can fix it for you. Wear one of his Eternal Life Foot Braces and live forever. It's as simple as that.

Mr Chiu publishes a Web page entitled **NEW INVENTION ALLOWS HUMANS TO LIVE FOREVER**. He is clearly one of those secret initiates who likes to speak in capital letters. And at <http://www.alexchiu.com>, there are a lot of capital letters. Mr Chiu is nothing if not earnest:

Please believe me. Everything you read is true and is important. Now people do not have to age anymore.

According to Mr Chiu, the fingers and toes are the negative and positive terminals of your body. Attaching suitable magnets to these points results in smoother blood circulation, and stronger metabolism, he says. His suggestion is to wear rings containing magnets on your fingers, and magnets fitted to straps which fit across each foot. The benefits of this simple procedure are astounding: the wearer stays physically young forever, and diseases are cured.

Aware that some might find this hard to swallow, Mr Chiu has another Web page on which he lists testimonials from satisfied customers, going so far as to publish full names, addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses. Mr Chiu has applied for a patent for his invention, and presents the full details of his application on yet another – rather incomprehensible – Web page.

Interestingly, Mr Chiu doesn't insist that you purchase the wonder-devices directly from him. He provides detailed instructions for constructing your own, recommending cobalt or rare-earth magnets. But "watch out for polarities!" he warns, "If you put the rings on with wrong polarity, you could get sick within hours!"

Actually, an acquaintance of mine wears magnets on either side of her ear-lobes to help lose weight. I'd better warn her about the polarity danger.

In America the Food and Drug Administration has the job of policing claims for alternative therapies, and Mr Chiu is well aware of their quack-busting activities, confiscating equipment and closing down businesses: "Look at the danger I am facing in order to bring you this product" he says, playing the Persecuted Inventor card.

I wanted to state that I guarantee that The Eternal LifeDevice definitely lets you stay physically young forever! But a few of my friends told me not to claim it. They said that such a claim can get me into big trouble. I am pretty sure, though, that it DOES

make you stay physically young forever! I can only say that it is believed to let you stay physically young forever or turn you younger, AND I am PRETTY SURE of it.

And I am PRETTY SURE that Mr Chiu's Eternal Life device is . . . well, I'll leave you to complete the sentence.

Mr Chiu's place in the Independent Thinkers Hall of Fame is assured, when one considers the other strings that twang in his bow. They include a teleportation machine, a new theory of something-or-other he calls "Alex Chiu's New Darwinism", a new theory of gravitation, a new theory of how animals think, and his invention of a computer mouse with a built-in calculator.

"Email me", says Mr Chiu on most of his Web pages, so I did. He's never replied. But since he'll be living for ever, I'm sure he'll get around to it eventually. I'll just adjust my magnets and wait for him.

Toby Howard is a lecturer at the University of Manchester, and a freelance writer.

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Skeptic at Large

Wendy Grossman

Laughing along with science

I FEEL IT incumbent upon me to report that British scientist Harold Hillman of the University of Surrey was awarded the Ig Nobel Peace prize for his research report "The Possible Pain Experienced During Execution by Different Methods," published in the journal *Perception* 1993. Hillman was not present to receive his award, a lighted white plastic tube dressed in silver tinsel, attractively displayed in a plastic shopping bag containing a pair of brown shoelaces, a tin of brown shoe polish, a pair of odour-free foam rubber shoe inserts, and a copy of the new book *The Best of Annals of Improbable Research*, whose publisher co-sponsored the event.

For those who aren't familiar with the Igs, these are awards given annually for scientific achievements "which cannot, or should not, be reproduced" by the humorous science magazine *The Annals of Improbable Research*.

Hillman was one of ten winning research teams from six countries. These included Richard Hoagland (Astronomy), for identifying artificial features on Mars and the moon; T Yagyu and colleagues from Prague, Zurich, and Tokyo (Biology), for measuring people's brainwave patterns while chewing different flavours of gum; cold fusion researcher John Brockris (Physics); and the inventors of the Tamagotchi (Economics), for "diverting millions of person-hours of work into the husbandry of virtual pets." The Communications prize went to the Internet's most prolific and therefore most despised junk emailer, Sanford Wallace; his name was universally booed and hissed by the audience.

Of course, they could just send out a press release. But AIRheads, as they like to call themselves, like ceremony, and so the Igs are presented annually in front of a chaotic and loudly appreciative paper airplane-throwing sell-out crowd of about 1,000 people. Past winners of the seven-year-old award include Nick Leeson and his bosses at Barings Bank (Economics, 1995), Scientology founder L Ron Hubbard (Literature, 1994), homoeopathy researcher Jacques Benveniste (Chemistry, 1991), and Don Featherstone (Art, 1996), for bringing lawn furniture into the financial reach of ordinary folk by inventing the pink, plastic flamingo. Featherstone seems to have taken to the event; this year, he was on hand to sign his products, which appeared as part of the stage decoration.

The event is actively supported each year by at least four genuine Nobel Laureates. This year, performing in the world premiere of the opera *Il Kaboom Grosso* as subatomic particles, were Dudley Herschbach (Chemistry, 1986), Sheldon Glashow (Physics, 1979), Richard Roberts (Medicine, 1993), William Lipscomb (Chemistry, 1976)

and newcomer Robert Wilson (Physics, 1978). Lipscomb, a long-time crowd favourite who was decked out in a bow tie with flashing lights, played jazz clarinet, was given away in the Win-a-Date-with-a-Nobel-Laureate contest, and, along with Herschbach, donated a plaster cast of his left foot to be auctioned off to benefit Cambridge public school science programs.

"Science needs to be more accessible," said Wilson, who won his Nobel prize for discovering cosmic background radiation, in explaining his participation, while Herschbach said, "A scientist is a child at heart."

Nonetheless, the event does have its detractors even among people who have not been unlucky enough to win one of the prizes. After British scientist Robert Matthews won in 1996 for proving that toast really does fall buttered side down, science advisor Sir Robert May complained to *Nature* that the Igs risked bringing serious research into ridicule. His letter to the event's organiser, Marc Abrahams, demanding that the Igs be stopped, was celebrated this year in the mysteriously short "Ode to Bobby May."

Abrahams is editor of *The Annals of Improbable Research*, and a few months ago the editor of the rival *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, of which Abrahams is a former editor, sued Abrahams for \$4.2 million, alleging trademark violations over the term "Ig Nobel Prize," unfair business practices, conspiracy to defraud, racketeering, and other offences. Of the suit, Abrahams said only, "If you feel you deserve to win an Ig Nobel prize, there are proper ways to campaign for it." He has, however, announced a Strategic AIR Defense fund with the support of Nobel Laureates Herschbach, Roberts, and Lipscomb.

Newcomers to the Igs always assume everything has to have been made up. But except for the suspected fix regarding the Win-a-Date contest, nothing is: the fund is real, the suit is real (although the trademark claims have been rejected by the US Patent and Trademark office), and even this year's Entomology winner, University of Florida scientist Mark Hostetler for his forensic study of insect remains, *That Gunk on Your Car*, is real. Equally real are the delegations from organisations such as the Museum of Bad Art, Non-Extremists for Moderate Change, Boston Mensa, and the Society for the Prevention of a Better Tomorrow. The laughter is also real; but it's with science, not at science.

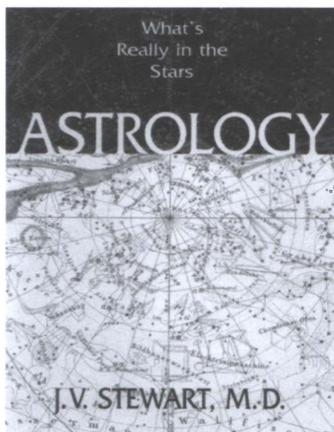
Wendy M Grossman is founding editor of *The Skeptic* and a writer and folksinger.

Reviews



Moonshine

J V Stewart, *Astrology: What's Really in the Stars* (Prometheus Books, £16.99)



Stewart's book is divided into two parts. The first tackles the early history of astrology from its origins in Mesopotamia through its occurrences in the Greek and Roman world with a special look at the work of the astronomer Ptolemy.

The second part is called 'Errors, Discrepancies, and Questions', and repeats some of the

material from the first section – but it seems mainly to be based on articles on astrology from *Skeptical Inquirer*, and on personal observation and opinion.

Stewart's writing is awkward and amateurish and he does not appear to be the master of his subject. The history of Mesopotamia as we know it from the third millennium BC onward is complicated and confusing. It needs clear explanation if readers are to set the development of astrology into some kind of context.

But Stewart has no gift for explaining the complex and alternates between tedious over-detail and breathless summarising. Thus the early evolution of state and religious leadership is described as follows: Eventually military leaders separated from temple leaders. A hodgepodge of rulers appeared. Some military leaders became kings. Priest, king-priests, junior priests, and priestesses emerged (page 24). And that's it.

There are also outright errors. For example, Alexander, he tells us, succeeded in spreading Greek culture to other centers such as Alexandria and Antioch (page 72). Alexander did not just 'spread culture' to Alexandria; he founded it – something Stewart admittedly seems to be aware of in another passage. But here he makes it sound like Alexander was some sort of cultural ambassador. Antioch, on the other hand, was not founded until 300 BC, 23 years after Alexander died. His ghost did the spreading, no doubt.

The book would have benefited considerably from a good editor and the advice of a professional ancient historian. At least the worst of the gaffes with which this book abounds would have been avoided.

The second part of the book adds nothing that has not

been better said in *Skeptical Inquirer* and *The Skeptic*. There are certainly no new insights into why astrology has re-emerged as such a potent force in our society.

In the end, I can only say: good subject, shame about the book.

— Marjorie Mackintosh

Gut feelings

Laura Day, *Practical Intuition* (Random, £7.99)

This book presents readers with a series of exercises that are designed to 'harness the power of your instinct and make it work for you'. Most of these exercises encourage readers to ask important questions about their lives (for example: Are you really happy? What is your ambition?) and then produce 'intuitive' answers by, for example, overcoming analytical thoughts, recognising the importance of symbolism and engaging in holistic thinking.

Most will agree that these sections of the book could prove helpful in encouraging people to view their lives and problems from novel perspectives.

However, skeptics will probably take issue with those parts of the book which suggest that people can also use their intuition to gain access to hidden information. Indeed, a large chunk of the book is given over to telling people how to produce personal readings for friends, answer questions in sealed envelopes and predict the future. For example, one chapter present readers with a list of race-horses and asks them to intuitively guess which horse will win the race. They then turn the page to discover whether their intuitions were correct.

My intuitive feeling is that this latter section is somewhat difficult to swallow and casts a negative light over the rest of the book. In short, not really recommended for a skeptical audience.

— Richard Wiseman

What is a miracle anyway?

Cassandra Eason, *Miracles: A Collection of True Stories Which Prove that Miracles Do Happen* (Piatkus, £8.99)

The trouble with miracles is that there are no rules, and thus there is no way to know when a miracle has occurred. Don't look to Cassandra Eason for a definition, because she doesn't have one.

She tells us many interesting stories: some are truly unusual events, but none is impossible. She recounts cases of persons having remissions from terminal cancer, or surviving deadly disasters. Her stories are interesting, most are short, and not all rely on religion for an explana-

tics is mostly pure art. In other words, it is extremely subjective'. He is not anti-statistics, of course. It is just that there is 'little appreciation for how difficult statistical studies really are and how misleading seemingly good results can be'.

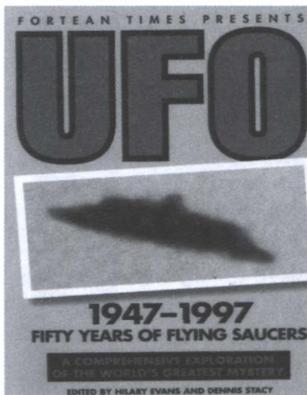
Risk assessment is notoriously irrational. 'Airplanes kill hundreds of people [in the US] every year but nuclear reactors have never killed anyone . . . In spite of this, we don't find demonstrators trying to shut down Boeing Aircraft or American Airlines'. If there is one main message that Fennick wants to get across above all others, it is that a single study is practically useless. 'Ignore all studies for at least several years, then get *interested* only if all the results have been the same'.

This is a readable and commonsense book on how to face up to the number-merchants. Fennick's final, comforting, and deliberately non-technical advice on the subject of health: 'if you're healthy and happy, keep doing what you do.'

— Lewis Jones

Happy anniversary

Jenny Randles and Peter Hough, *Alien Contacts and Encounters* (Piatkus, £6.99); Hilary Evans and Dennis Stacy (eds.), *UFO 1947-1997: Fifty Years of Flying Saucers* (John Brown Publishing, £16.99)



Inevitably, the fiftieth anniversary of Kenneth Arnold's classic sighting and the famous Roswell incident was bound to produce a flurry of books about UFOs. This review compares and contrasts two such books. Although I enjoyed reading both books, be warned: neither is particularly skeptical.

The paperback by Jenny Randles and Peter Hough (henceforth, R&H) is clearly aimed at a general readership. Naturally, any book with a title like *The Complete Book of UFOs* is not going to live up to its title. Instead, what we get is 36 chapters averaging around ten pages each. The book is divided into nine parts, ranging from one to ten chapters in length, arranged in chronological order which each deal with different periods in ufology's history. Hence the coverage is wide but somewhat superficial, exactly what one would expect from a general introductory text.

It is claimed that the book is a fully updated edition of the bestseller published in 1994, but I would dispute this. For example, the only place where John Mack's name appears is in the booklist at the end of the book (which has been updated). Perhaps understandably, the publishers were not going to let the fiftieth anniversary of flying saucers pass by without cashing in.

R&H seem to want it both ways with respect to the hypothesis that UFOs are evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence (and its more exotic variants, such as transdimensional beings or time travellers). Throughout the book various cases are presented in such a way that if

the reader took them at face value they would inevitably conclude that some type of controlling intelligence was in operation. But on page 360 the authors unambiguously state: 'But we do *not know* whether any UFOs are alien craft or visitors from another place'. I agree wholeheartedly but that is not the impression I would have taken away from the rest of the book if this had been my first dip into ufology. On the same page, R&H state that they believe that modern technology, such as the almost ubiquitous camcorder, must inevitably lead to the production of indisputable evidence of alien craft '*in the very near future*' – if they really do exist. I suspect this claim may come back to haunt them.

In contrast, the more expensive hardback edited by Evans and Stacy (henceforth E&S) is aimed at a completely different readership, that of the already well-informed. Its 29 chapters are also divided into groups corresponding to different chronological periods, plus an introductory chapter and a miscellaneous group under the general heading of 'Aspects'.

There is no real attempt in this volume to give a general overview of ufology. Instead the editors have gathered together pieces from various authors, including many of the most famous names in the field (such as Arnold, Pflock, Moseley, Clark, Swords, Vallee, Olmos, and Randles). Their contributions include many detailed analyses of individual cases or UFO flaps (for example, the Belgian wave), but a wide range of other interesting topics too (from an overview of UFOs in Africa to a discussion of public opinion polls and UFOs). Most of the authors are not card-carrying skeptics, but what they have to say should still be of interest to readers of this publication.

It was instructive to compare the presentation of various topics in E&S's book to that in R&H's. To give but one example, the Trans-en-Provence case is presented by R&H as having been thoroughly investigated by highly qualified experts and as constituting evidence which continues to baffle modern science. The analysis by Maillot and Scornaux in E&S's volume tells a very different story, concluding that this case was almost certainly elevated to its classic status as a result of the initial investigators wish-to-believe and sloppy procedures. It might be objected that it is unfair to pick on individual cases where there is disagreement within ufological circles as a means of raising doubts about the entire field.

But in fact, as informed sceptics are aware, there is not a single case in the whole field which all ufologists accept as indisputable evidence of alien intelligence. This is despite the fact that the public is constantly being told that the evidence for the ET hypothesis is overwhelming.

Does this not suggest that it is at least possible that the whole shaky edifice of the ET hypothesis is built upon shaky foundations?

— Christopher C French

Seeking Book Reviewers

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Letters



Donut be fooled

Martin Bridgstock, in his review of Frank O'Neil's *The Mammoth Book of Oddities*, repeats the oft-told canard that Kennedy's famous 'Ich bin ein Berliner!' translates as 'I am a jelly doughnut!'. This rumour began in 1988 and has since been retold so many times that it has assumed the mantle of truth.

The former professor of German and dialectologist, Reinhold Aman, debunked the Kennedy doughnut myth in his irreverent journal, *Maledicta* (vol. 11): 'Ich bin (ein) Berliner means "I am a Berliner" or "a male person/native of Berlin" and absolutely nothing else'.

Simon Jones
Reading

The Humanism debate

Mike Walsh's article on Humanism (*The Alternative to Religion?*, *The Skeptic*, 11.2) generated a great deal of correspondence from readers. We include here some representative letters.— The Editors.

I agree with much of what Mike Walsh says about rituals, but in an imperfect world of imperfect beings there are needs which before were satisfied (to some extent) by one or other of the organised religions.

As a humanist officiant (don't you love that word?) I provide just one alternative. If you can cope with simply registering the death of a loved one and instructing the Funeral Director on disposal of the body, fair enough. And it's quite legal – you don't have to have a funeral. If not, you might like to say a few words about the person or get someone like me to do it for you – on your behalf.

John Bosley
by email

Mike Walsh had some interesting and justified remarks to make about

Humanism. I too share his negative attitude towards *The Freethinker* magazine – my subscription to this lapsed some time ago when I got fed up with many of the things in it that he criticises. But the suggestion that the letter by a doctor advocating execution of petty criminals is something that tells us a lot about Secular Humanists, is downright absurd.

I have some recollection of that letter, and as I recall the doctor's view was not widely shared. Unfortunately though, Mr Walsh's criticism of Humanism eventually lapsed into little more than petulance. For atheists he seems to think that for celebrating milestones in life (birth of a child, marriage, death etc) legal formalities and a party should be enough. Having Humanist ceremonies for such events is not arrogance: a desire to mark certain life events is not peculiar to religious people only. On top of this, and unsurprisingly at this stage, out came the old standby remark that at least religions have tradition behind them, as if this somehow matters.

Dene Bebbington
Reading

I enjoyed Mike Walsh's attempt to begin to explore humanism but I think he misses one central point. By rejecting religious doctrine, one is forced to think for oneself (the very concept of 'freethought') and we don't all come to the same conclusions. Thinking things through is never easy but some thought before writing his article might have helped.

For example, he asks 'what on earth have gay men and lesbians in common that allows a 'Gay and Lesbian' movement to exist?' Then on the following page, he derides the concept of humanist weddings: 'all he or she needs is the licence followed by a good party'. Not if you're a gay or lesbian couple, you can't. Just one of many prejudices

that gay men and lesbians do have to deal with in common.

Chris Condon
London W3

I sympathise with Mike Walsh's experiences with humanism. Perhaps he should try reading *Free Inquiry*, which is edited by Paul Kurtz, also chairman of CSICOP. It can be a little heavy going at times, but I think suffers from less wide-eyed idealism and dogma than some of the other humanist publications.

However, there is one passage in the article that I can't let pass without comment. Mike writes 'but what on earth have gay men and lesbians in common that allows a "Gay and lesbian" movement to exist? You might as well have a gay and paedophile movement, or a lesbian and bestiality movement'.

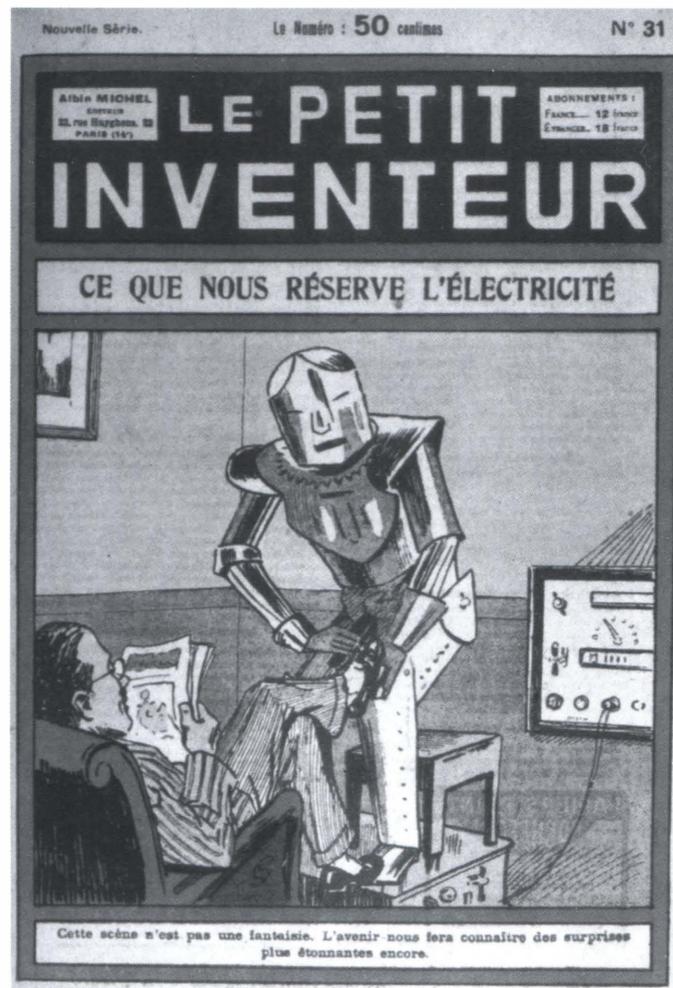
While it is interesting to speculate on what the group dynamics of a 'gay and lesbian' disco would be like, it is obvious that these two groups do have a lot in common – both groups feel similarly alienated and discriminated against in a predominantly heterosexual culture.

Mike's flippant comment seems to equate homosexuality with paedophilia and bestiality in some way. I am sure this will enrage gay or lesbian readers. This comment seems particularly inappropriate after berating humanists in the previous paragraph for 'unnecessarily offensive remarks' directed at believers.

Andy Brice
by email

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Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



(Continued from page 2)

IT SEEMED LIKE ANOTHER GOOD IDEA (two years later). Look, said the Professor, the Servant of the Future. Shines your shoes, walks your dog, fixes your cocktail. The Professor demonstrated his prototype. It sounded like the can section of the bottle bank, but it fixed a mean Screwdriver (and if it didn't, a screwdriver would fix it).

Thank you, dear, said the Professor's Wife. I'm sure you mean well. But I *like* shining your shoes, walking the dog's the only exercise you get, and you drink enough as it is. And if we have a servant, I like one I can gossip with in the kitchen. Why don't you go away and think of something *really* useful. An Atom Bomb, for instance, that might come in handy . . .

Source: unnamed artist, cover for 'Le Petit Inventeur', No. 31, 1929.

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