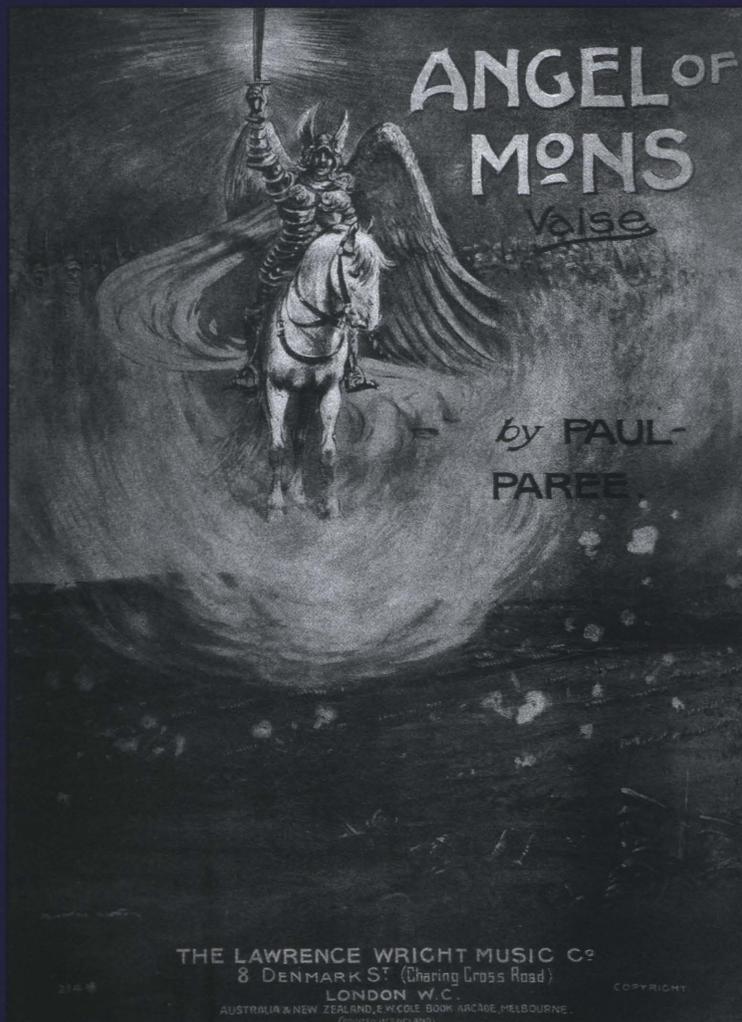


Volume 18 Number 1  
Spring 2005

# The **Skeptic**



## **The Angels of Mons and Elsewhere: Part One – The Bowmen and Other Legends**

*Also in this issue:*

**The Pam Reynold's Story: Part One  
In Search of ET  
Overcooked**

**Plus: News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour**

## Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery

LA TRIBUNA ILLUSTRATA



*Un diavolo ricacciato all'inferno... — Un ricco contadino della provincia di Kaunas (Lettonia) stava solo nel suo tinello contando gli incassi della settimana, quando si vedeva comparire davanti un diavolo rosso che gli intimava minacciosamente di consegnargli il danaro se non voleva essere precipitato tra le fiamme infernali. Rimessosi dal subitaneo sbalordimento, il contadino afferrava un grosso bastone e ne vibrava un gran colpo tra le corna del... diavolo, mandandolo a cadere riverso precisamente tra le fiamme... di un grande camino. Accorsa gente, si scopriva che il diavolo altro non era che un ladro così camuffatosi nella speranza di spaventare il contadino superstizioso. Il malfattore tramortito ed ustionato veniva consegnato alla polizia.*

(Disegno di VITTORIO PISANI).

### A BLOW FOR SKEPTICISM

A well-to-do farmer of Kaunas province in Latvia was just counting the week's takings when suddenly the figure of a scarlet Devil appeared before him, threatening him with immediate consignment to hellfire unless he purchased his salvation with a substantial cash donation to the infernal revenue. But even superstitious peasants are not so easily intimidated. Rapidly recovering from his surprise, the farmer seized a sturdy stick and knocked the demon down, sending him flying into the open fireplace where his supper was cooking over an open fire. When the intruder cried out in pain, the farmer realised this could not be the Devil, for whom flames are the natural habitat. Nursing his injuries in a police cell, the would-be thief had time to reflect that he had seriously underestimated his fellow-countryman's ability to distinguish fact from folklore.

Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, 59 Tranquil Vale, London SE3 OBS.



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Editorial enquiries to  
**The Anomalistic Psychology  
Research Unit**  
Department of Psychology  
Goldsmiths College  
New Cross, London SE14 6NW  
United Kingdom

Subscriptions/sample issues  
**Mike Hutchinson**  
10 Crescent View  
Loughton, Essex IG10 4PZ  
United Kingdom

Email: [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk)  
Web: [www.skeptic.org.uk](http://www.skeptic.org.uk)  
AOL Keyword: **skeptic**  
Tel.: 07020 935 370  
Fax: 020 7919 7873 FAO Chris French

Editors  
**Victoria Hamilton**  
**Chris French**

Editorial Assistance  
**Wendy M Grossman**  
**Steve Donnelly**  
**DLF Sealy**  
**Julia Santomauro**

Founding editor  
**Wendy M Grossman**

Webmaster  
**Phil McKerracher**

AOL Area  
**Liam Proven**

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**Gareth Cowlin**

Special Consultant  
**Cyril Howard**

Graphic Design  
**Christopher Fix / Lisa A Hutter**

Illustrations  
**Mary Evans Picture Library**

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# Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French



**HELLO AND WELCOME** to issue 18.1 of *The Skeptic*. In this issue we see both Gerald Woerlee and Scott Wood present their first part of two-part articles on near-death experiences and The Angels of Mons respectively. In part one of *An Anaesthiologist Examines the Pam Reynolds Story*, Woerlee presents evidence as to why he is a staunch sceptic of paranormal phenomena, summarising why he believes the evidence shows, unequivocally, the non-existence of paranormal perceptions. We're sure many of our readers are familiar with the debate on researching paranormal phenomena. Once again, the argument goes that many researchers are unable to produce evidence for the paranormal when tested under strictly controlled conditions (despite, as Woerlee suggests, its supposed, albeit probably latent, prevalence). Of course, the alternative argument is that it tends to be 'sceptical' researchers who are unable to produce these effects, and that perhaps we have not yet identified the best means with which to research these phenomena. In part two, Woerlee will examine the incident which led him to evaluate the evidence for paranormal perceptions, and develop his now very sceptical beliefs about the paranormal. We hope you look forward to it!

In Scott Wood's two-part assessment on The Angels of Mons, he begins by looking at their possible origins, and illustrates the way these tales can snowball to become 'truths'. Despite Machen, author of *The Bowmen*, declaring that his was a fictional tale,

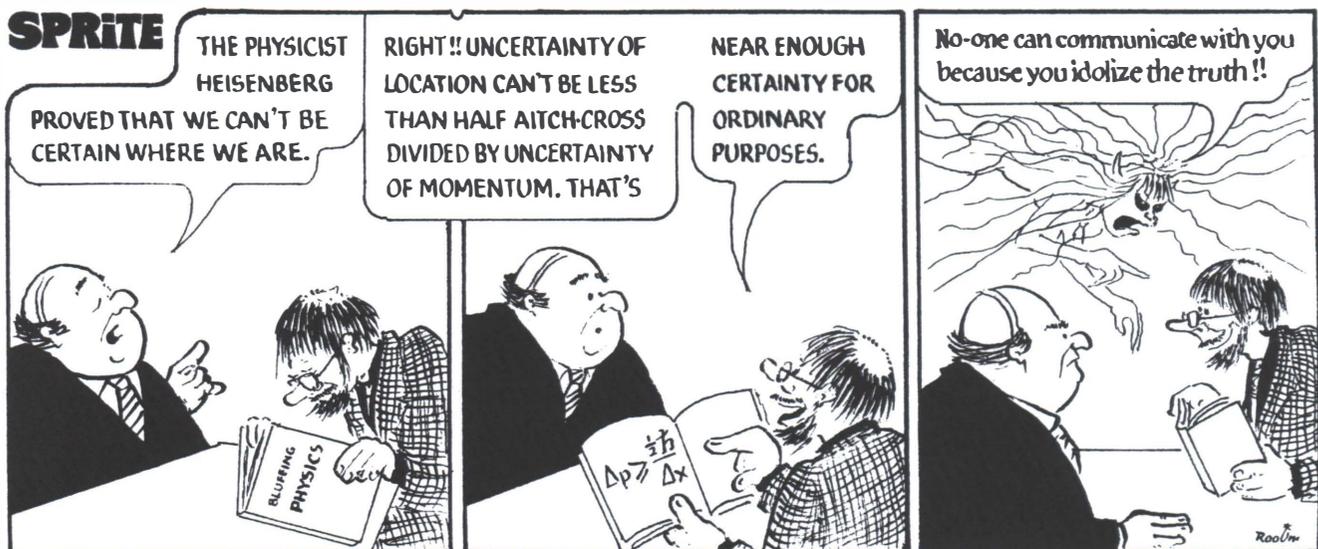
it proved difficult to keep it so. Wood considers the reasons for this, raising the political and social climate, and the desire to believe in greater forces as protectors. However, exactly where or how the story that angels or warriors protected British forces at Mons arose is still murky. In part two, Wood will lead us deeper into the evolution of mythmaking.

Meanwhile, Dene Bebbington asks us if there is any point to search for intelligent extraterrestrial life on other planets. Just how far should we go in our search? Bebbington looks at the pros and cons of SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) and lets us know whether or not he believes it is all worth while.

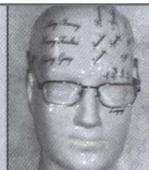
Closer to home, Martin Parkinson succinctly impugns Tony Buzan's approach to memory and learning, and suggests that the rich and complex way we learn can be enhanced, but is not something that can or should be wrapped up extravagantly as a commodity. If it was, our education system would be well and truly revolutionised by now!

We also have our letters page, book reviews, cartoons and regular columns to keep you busy. We appreciate contributions from our readers, and would like to encourage you to send in your clippings for Skeptical Stats – the perfect source for useful and sometimes not-so-useful (but always interesting!) bits of trivia!

With best wishes until the next issue, Victoria and Chris



## Hits and Misses



### Ig Nobel awards 2004

The 2004 Ig Nobel awards for “achievements that cannot or should not be reproduced” included one sort-of-British winner: the Coca-Cola Company of Great Britain. Coke’s UK subsidiary won the Chemistry prize for converting mains tap water into a “transparent form of water” known as Dasani, which was later temporarily cleared from UK shelves when it was discovered that the water was contaminated with the cancer-causing chemical bromate. Other winners included the Vatican, which received the Economics prize for outsourcing prayers to India, where priests undertake work the United States’ declining numbers of clergy can’t complete themselves, such as remembrances of dead relatives and other ‘intentions’. Daisuke Inoue of Hyogo, Japan, was awarded the Peace prize for inventing karaoke, “thereby providing an entirely new way for people to learn to tolerate each other”. The Health prize went to Steven Stack and Jim Gundlach, of Wayne State University and Auburn University respectively, for their work studying the link between country music and suicide rates. The winners were fêted with paper airplanes and told, “Better luck next year”. The Ig Nobel awards are presented annually by Marc Abrahams, editor of the *Annals of Improbable Research* ([www.improbable.com](http://www.improbable.com)). The next Ig Nobel tour of the UK and Ireland will take place 11-20 March 2005.

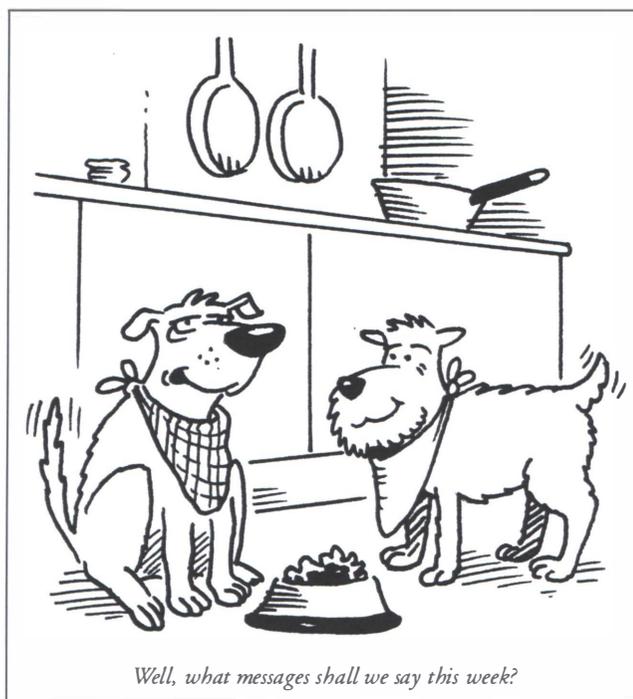
### Belgian bravery

Some months back, 23 Belgian Sceptics decided to mount a mass suicide to protest against the decision by major Belgian insurers to cover 20% of the costs of homeopathy in the range of treatments they covered. To this end – and, of course, to garner maximum publicity – they decided to commit suicide by drinking lethal poisons: arsenic, snake venom, belladonna (deadly nightshade), dog’s milk, petrol, and cockroach. To maximize the toxicity of these poisons, they bought 30C homeopathic dilutions of these substances. Making a 30C dilution involves diluting to a 1:100 solution, then shaking – “succussing” – the dilution 30 times in succession. After Willem Betz gave a brief lecture on the workings of homeopathy, the group drank their selected poisons under the watchful eye of Belgium’s media, whom they had invited to witness the death agonies of the sceptics. They didn’t die, but they did get a lot of media coverage.

### Dogs for Bush

Sylvester Stallone’s mother, Jackie, isn’t one to shrink from the limelight, and toward the end of September she announced that her “psychic” dogs were predicting a 15%

victory for incumbent George W. Bush over the Democratic candidate John Kerry. A believer might focus on the prediction that Bush would win, but back then a lot of people were predicting victory for Bush, who was ahead in the polls until a late surge favouring Kerry in the last week or two before the election. We prefer to focus on the fact that Bush won by 2%, not 15%.



The United Press newswire, which ran this story, noted that, “Jackie Stallone has said her dogs channel messages from the spirit world and send them to her telepathically”.

We would like to predict now that one of Ms Stallone’s dogs’ other predictions will be wrong: the US will not get through a Constitutional amendment to allow foreign-born, naturalized citizens to stand for President in time for the Republican party ticket in 2008 to be Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Edwards. But it could be that we’re eating the wrong kind of dog food.

### The lack of power of prayer

*Skeptical Inquirer* scored a coup in reviewing the Columbia University prayer study, which claimed to have demonstrated that infertile women who were prayed for by Christian prayer groups were twice as likely to get pregnant as those who did not. The study, authored by Kwang Cha, Rogerio Lobo, and Daniel Wirth, was published in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, and made headlines only a few weeks after

the September 11, 2001 attacks, a time when the US particularly needed a miracle to believe in. Bruce L. Flamm, a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of California, Irvine, reported that of the study's three authors, Cha has left Columbia and refuses to comment; Lobo claims he did not know about the study until six to twelve months after it was completed, and Wirth, along with his assistant, was indicted for fraud in 2002, finally pleading guilty in May 2004. The study itself, he notes, was marred by a complicated and confusing design that left many possibilities for error and possibly, given the third author's history, may never have even taken place.

Flamm reserves special bile for Columbia University and the *JRM*, arguing that both are at fault for submitting and publishing such a study. Faith healing, he writes, has no place in the domain of science. Peer review, which is supposed to save us from such things, failed in this case. It was not, after all, careful examination of the study that caused its retraction, but newspaper reports of Daniel Wirth's trial for fraud. As we keep saying, science is a process, and on this occasion the process didn't do its job.

### Pardoned

Halloween 2004 was a big day for the Scottish town of Prestonpans, which took advantage of the occasion to pardon 81 local people executed for witchcraft in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Often, the evidence was minimal: perhaps they owned a black cat, or were in the habit of concocting homemade remedies. Alternatively, as in the Salem, Massachusetts witchcraft trials immortalized by playwright Arthur Miller in *The Crucible*, there were witnesses who claimed they felt the presence of evil spirits or heard voices. The last execution for witchcraft in Scotland was in 1727. In 1735 the Witchcraft Act made it a crime to pretend to be a witch, but outlawed such prosecutions. The pardons were granted by Gordon Prestoungrange, the 14<sup>th</sup> baron, just weeks before his feudal court was abolished.

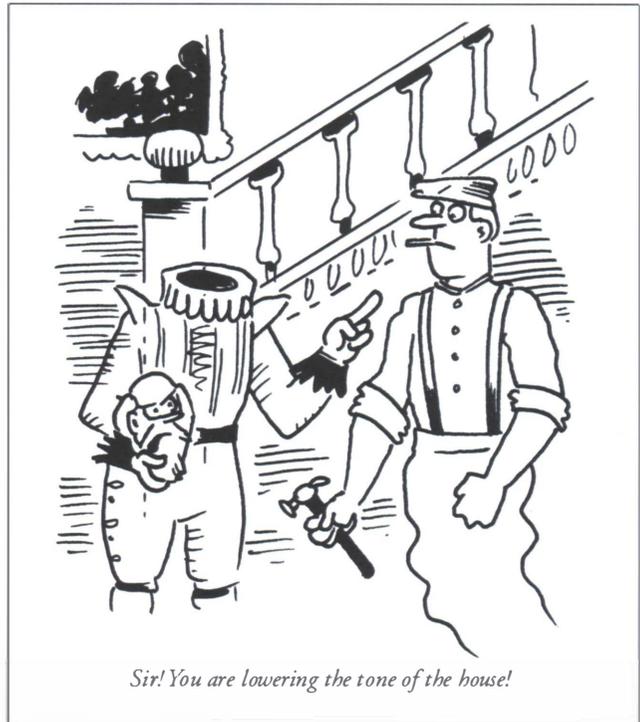
Overall, approximately 3,500 Scots, mostly women and children, as well as their cats, were killed in Scottish witch hunts, with the area of Prestonpans being one of the most prolific. Fifteen local descendants were invited to the ceremony, and Witches' Remembrance Day will now become an annual Prestonpans event every Halloween.

The court also pardoned the relevant cats.

### Haunting for profit

Is a ghost good or bad for business? According to the *Telegraph*, it all depends. If you're buying or selling real

estate, for example, ancient ghosts may add value to the property, especially if they're mostly harmless, but the ghosts of more recently deceased folks are more likely to bring the price down. The actress Joanna Lumley said she was forced to sell a house when a ghost dressed as a workman demanded that she leave. (The *Telegraph* doesn't say whether she was half asleep when this happened.) For this reason, buyers and real estate agents are unlikely to inform prospective buyers if a house is haunted.



Now, we know what you're going to say. You're going to say, "Well, of course not, because the house *isn't* haunted. It's probably got a creaky staircase, or faulty draft excluders, or weird optical effects, or something". But for agents it nonetheless came as a relief in 1999, when a Derbyshire couple lost in court when they claimed to have withheld the last payment on a house they had bought because, they argued, the seller should have informed them that it was haunted when they agreed to buy it.

This could be the next lucrative property service: scanning houses for ghosts on behalf of prospective owners. And then, we suppose, exorcising them on behalf of prospective sellers. Meantime, if you'd like to own a ghost, Magdalene Chapel in Arrat near Montrose was (at the time of the *Telegraph* article) for sale for £179,000 including a ghostly horseman. A steal, really.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Stuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News, and Phil McKerracher.** The Skeptic would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p.3, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out.

## Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



### Cheese Whiz 'Ribit'

ONE OF MY favourite Looney Tunes cartoons is "One Froggy Evening" in which a construction worker demolishing a building finds a singing, dancing frog inside the cornerstone. Dreams of wealth flash through his head as he watches the frog sing "The Michigan Rag" and other songs in a mellifluous voice while dancing with a cane. He advertises a performance. An audience flocks in.

The frog sits in a lump on the stage and goes "Ribit". As soon as the audience leaves, the frog starts performing again. I've been thinking about this cartoon ever since I read that *GoldenPalace.com* is planning to take a toasted cheese sandwich on a 12-state US tour. I guess at least audiences won't be disappointed when the sandwich doesn't say "Ribit".

The sandwich's claimed history is this. One day about ten years ago, a woman named Diana Duyser in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, made a toasted cheese sandwich, took a bite and saw the face of the Virgin Mary staring up at her. As you do. Displaying remarkable foresight, she immediately stopped eating, stuck it in a plastic bag, and kept it. Ten years went by. The internet went mainstream. eBay was invented. The mass public started using it as a way to auction off everything from car parts to kidney stones.

Cut to 2004. The owner put the sandwich, still in its plastic box, up for auction on eBay. To quote from the description posted on eBay by Duyser (in its original form, including all errors), "I would like to point out there is no mold or disingration, The item has not been preserved or anything, It has been kept in a plastic case, not a special one that seals out air or potential mold or bacteria, it is like a miracle, It has just preserved itself which in itself I consider a miracle, people ask me if I had blessings since she has been in my home, I do feel I have, I have won \$70 000 (total) on different occasions at the casino near by my house, I can show the receipts to the high bidder if they are interested, I would like all people to know that I do believe that this is the Virgin Mary Mother of God" (sic).

On November 22 it sold for \$28,000 to *GoldenPalace.com*, the last of 27 bids starting at \$3,000, with the bids vetted to keep out crackpots.

There are miracles here. First: the lack of mold on a ten-year-old sandwich. Second: that buying a sandwich for \$28,000 might be a good investment. Third: that someone who could pick up \$70,000 in casino winnings would want to sell the sandwich for as little as \$28,000. (Florida press reports hint at difficult personal

circumstances: her husband of 24 years has emphysema and walks with a cane.)

There's also a fourth: that no one questions the story that the sandwich is ten years old. The Microsoft-owned web site *Slate.com* actually ran an analysis explaining how such a sandwich could avoid getting mouldy. (Never mind mouldy, what about stale? In pictures the sandwich looks like a sandwich, not a wizened, cement-hard scrap.) *Slate's* explanation was fairly simple. Americans usually make toasted cheese sandwiches by taking two pieces of bread and slathering the outsides with margarine or butter, putting a piece of cheese in between, then grilling them in an ungreased frying pan on the stove. *Slate* assumed Duyser used margarine, a substance the fungi that grow on bread don't particularly like because it is rich in trans fats. The acidic nature of cheese and the calcium it contains, *Slate* hypothesised, might also have acted as mould retardants. I'd have thought it would depend on the cheese. A lot of Americans make this type of sandwich using Kraft American cheese, which is basically pasteurised, processed glue in which it's hard to imagine anything growing. But you'd think the Virgin, while she was miraculously appearing, could have obligingly provided a date stamp. And maybe a fifth: that people can be so sure the face the pattern of toast markings seem to show looks like the BVM, whom no one living has ever seen. In pictures, the markings certainly do look like the face of a female.

But none of that is why the sandwich fetched \$28,000 on eBay. That is much more because the sandwich is the latest in a series of Internet stars which have included a phone booth in the Mojave Desert, a Turkish man named Mahir, a bunch of animated hamsters whose souped-up gibberish song made it briefly to number one, and a coffee pot at Cambridge University's computer lab. The coffee pot was the only technological breakthrough of the bunch: in the very early days of the Web someone pointed a webcam at it so anyone wanting a coffee could tell whether there was any left without making the trek to the common room. The rest all spun out of people forwarding the news to each other until the mainstream media took notice and amplified the thing to death.

And that's what happened with the sandwich. We all passed the web address of the eBay listing around, giggled, and forgot about it. Now it's a star. I'd say we knew it then, except that no one seems to have heard of it before a month ago.

 **Wendy M Grossman** is founder and former editor (twice) of *The Skeptic*, and author of *From Anarchy to Power: the Net Comes of Age*. Wendy M Grossman also writes for *Scientific American*. Her web site is at <http://www.pelicancrossing.net>.

# The Angels of Mons and Elsewhere

## Part One: The Bowmen and Other Legends

Scott Wood begins his two-part assessment on the fabled Angels of Mons by unearthing their origins

EXTRACTS FROM *The Sunday Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1914:

Regiments were grievously injured, and the broken army fought its way desperately with many stands, forced backwards and ever backwards by the sheer unconquerable mass of numbers of an enemy prepared to throw away three or four men for the life of every British soldier.

We have to face the fact that the British Expeditionary Force, which bore the great weight of the blow, **has suffered terrible losses and requires immediate and immense reinforcement. The British Expeditionary Force has won indeed imperishable glory, but needs men, men and yet more men.** (My emphasis)

After reading the above, describing the retreat from Mons, Arthur Machen wrote the story *The Bowmen*. It appeared in the *London Evening News*, issue of 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1914, and told of a British soldier, a 'Latin scholar', caught in the carnage of Mons. He remembers an inscription *Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius* or "May Saint George be a present help to the English". Delirious, he starts crying the motto out at the top of his voice while firing wildly into the German lines. All of a sudden ghostly archers appear before him shouting "St. George for Merry England" and "Knights of Heaven aid us". Only the scholar can see the bowmen, yet when they shoot their arrows, the Germans fall to the ground dead but unmarked.

A few days after publication, both *The Occult Review* and *Light* (*A Journal of Psychical, Occult and Mystical Research*) contacted Machen asking him what the truth was behind the story. None, Machen replied, and the subject, he felt at the time, was left at that (Machen, 1915).

*Light* received a visitor the next year. A military officer asked to see the issue that mentioned Machen's story. He said that some troops at Mons had seen a cloud that had saved the British from the Germans. "[T]his legend of Mons is fascinating," said *Light*, 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1915, "we should like to hear more of it."

A letter claiming to describe actual supernatural intervention at Mons appeared in the Catholic newspaper *The Universe*, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1915. British soldiers, trapped by German fire, decide to try and rush the Germans. They yell, "St. George for England!" and as they leave their trench they are joined by a large company of men with bows. After defeating the enemy, they notice that many of the fallen Germans are unmarked. Unlike in *The Bowmen*, there is an addition to the story. A captured German officer asks the author of the letter who the offi-

cer on the great horse was; they could not hit him in spite of him being such a conspicuous target.

The popularity of *The Bowmen* spread across the country. Machen's editor was allowing the story to be printed in parish magazines and when one priest had sold out of copies of his magazine he asked if he could reproduce the story as a pamphlet. He asked if Machen would write a preface explaining the origins of the story. Machen replied that there were none, but the priest told Machen that, no, the story was true, and he had merely added his own fictional flourishes to an actual event (Machen, 1915).

**A military officer asked to see the issue that mentioned Machen's story. He said that some troops at Mons had seen a cloud that had saved the British from the Germans.**

The *Church Family Newspaper* of July 1915 reprinted a letter that first appeared in the *All Saints, Clifton Parish Magazine* from a Miss Marrable. She had talked to two officers about the angels at Mons. One officer, expecting to be wiped out, saw the angels and was amazed to also see the Germans standing in a daze long enough for the British to escape. A soldier present, previously not religious, became so, after witnessing the angels.

*Light* carried numerous reports, both sent to them in letters and taken from other publications. A correspondent called 'Scota' supplied three accounts to the 8<sup>th</sup> May issue of *Light*, describing how the German cavalry charge was checked by a luminous cloud containing bright, moving objects.

The same issue of *Light* reprinted an account of the Angels of Mons by A. P. Sinnett from *The Occult Review* entitled *Meteorites and the World Crisis*. In it the British are about to be overwhelmed but the German army halts. Those with 'superpsychical' sight see a row of shining beings between the armies. When asked why they halted, captured Germans claim to have seen massive reinforcements coming to the aid of the British.

The following is from *Bladud, The Bath Society Paper*, for 9<sup>th</sup> June 1915, by Rev. M.P. Gilson of All Saints Church in Clifton:

The first is an extract from an officer's letter: 'I myself saw the angels who saved our left wing from the

Germans during the retreat at Mons. We heard the German cavalry after us and ran for a place we thought a stand could be made; we turned and faced the enemy expecting instant death. When to our wonder we saw between us and the enemy a whole troop of Angels'.

From another source I heard that many prisoners were taken that day who surrendered when there was no call for it. [...] Some of these German prisoners were asked afterwards why they had surrendered, 'for there were many more of you than us; we were a mere handful,' they looked amazed and replied 'but there were hosts and hosts of you.' It was thought that the angels appeared to them as reinforcements of our ranks'.

In 1915, Arthur Machen released, or at least gave permission to be released, *The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War*, an anthology which included *The Bowmen*. In the introduction, Machen took the opportunity to put the record straight about the mystery of Mons, as he saw it. His theory was that the public, priests and soldiers writing from the front had taken his story and through a number of retellings, lost the elements of St. George, the British being, he felt, uncomfortable with such Catholic ideas as saints. The word "shining" to describe his ghostly Bowmen was transformed into the "shining warriors" and "angels" that were now being reported as real. He went on to name some of the bishops, deans and others he felt had spread the 'angels' story and attacked the "second, third, fourth, fifth hand stories told by 'a soldier', by 'an officer', by 'a catholic correspondent', by 'a nurse', by any number of anonymous people" (Machen, 1915, p. 86).

Phyllis Campbell was a writer who claimed to have been a nurse at the front and had written under the name Phil Campbell in *The Occult Review*, August 1915, about the visions at Mons. As a parting shot Machen mentions her, and her conviction that "[E]verybody who had fought from Mons to Ypres saw the apparitions". If that be so, it is again that nobody has come forward to testify first hand to the most amazing event of his life" (Machen, 1915, p. 86).

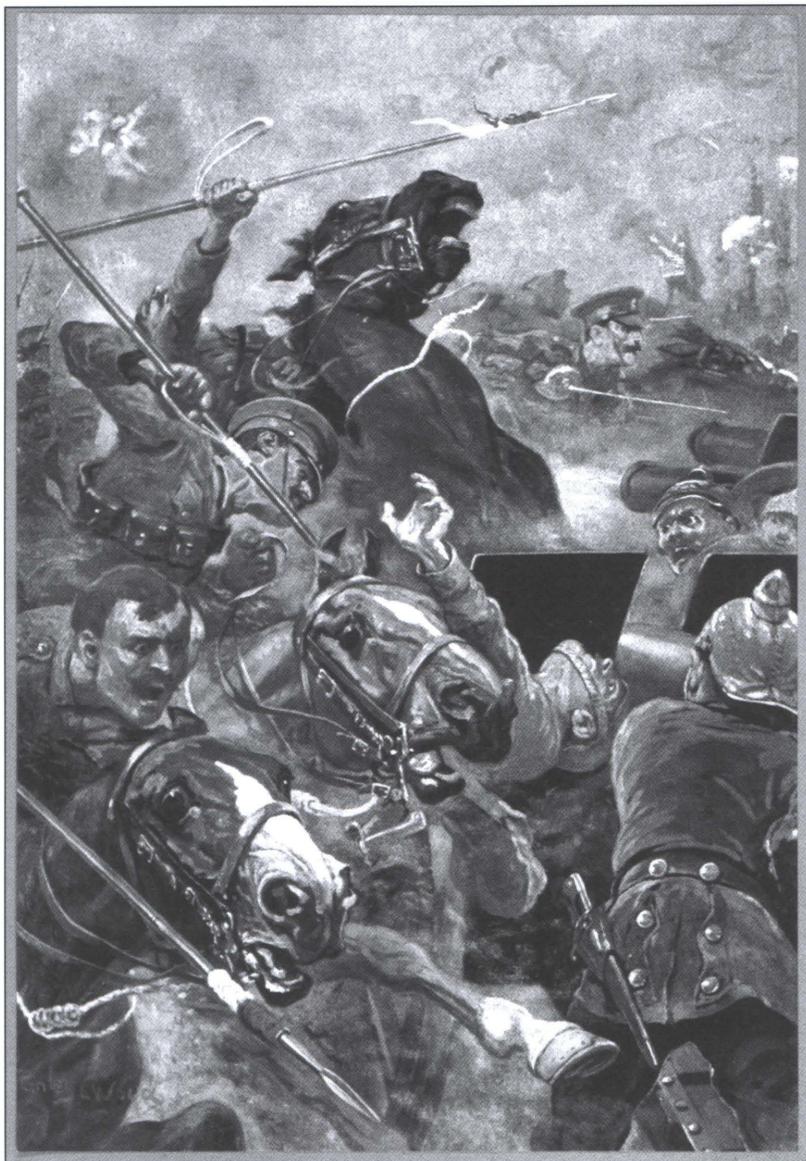
### On the Side of the Angels

Shortly afterwards, Harold Begbie, a popular writer at the time, published *On the Side of the Angels: A Reply to Arthur Machen*. Begbie reprinted articles from *Light* and *The Occult Review* and elsewhere. He had little new to say, but his book stoked the debate.

In answer to Machen's challenge, a letter appeared in the *London Evening News* for 29<sup>th</sup> September 1915,

from a 'distinguished Lieutenant-Colonel' describing ghostly horsemen marching alongside the British as they retreated from Mons.

In the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) enquiry into the Angels of Mons (see section 3, below), the Lieutenant-Colonel's account was juxtaposed with a letter that appeared in the *Evening News* from a named

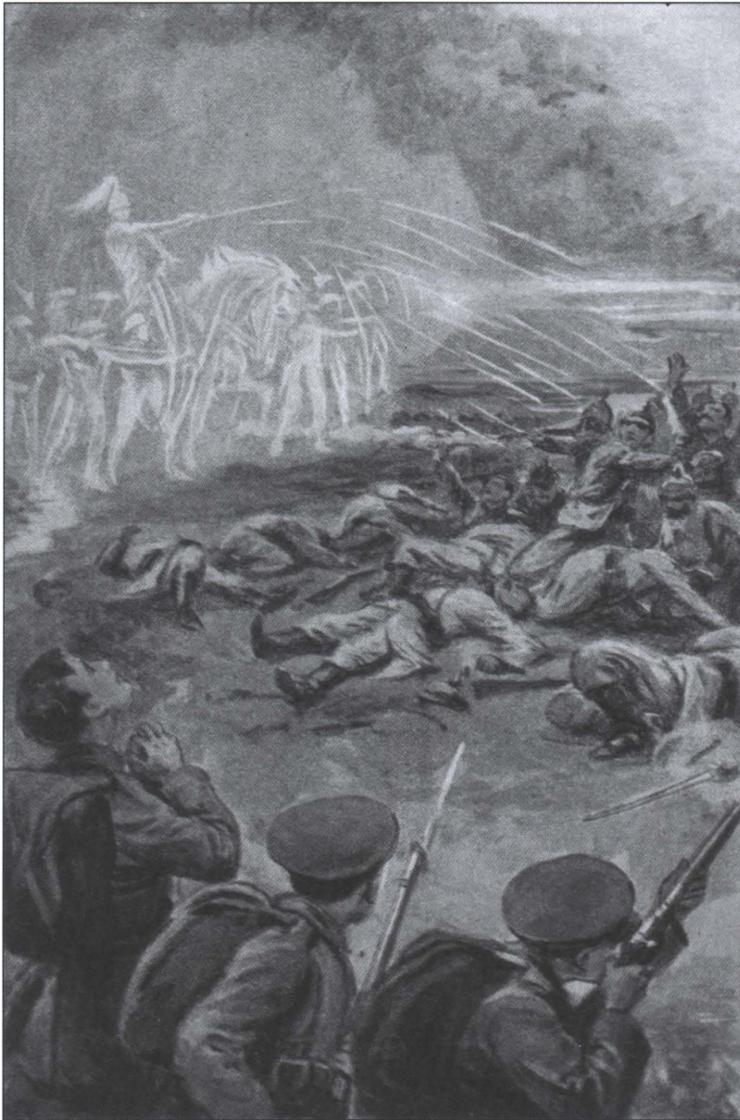


During the retreat from Mons, English Lancers charge German artillery positions.

source, Lance-Corporal A. Johnstone, late of the Royal Engineers, which described how he and his comrades had mistaken mist-shrouded shrubs and bushes for the French Cavalry (McClure, 1994).

Advertisements for 'Mounted Colour Pictures of the Angels of Mons' appeared in the *London Evening News* in October, sadly not photographic evidence but paintings inspired by Machen's and Begbie's books. The Angels of Mons featured as a subject in a book of songs about the war, and as the years and the war rolled on further letters, pamphlets and books were produced. Ralph Shirley published *Angel Warriors at Mons*

(Newspaper Publishing) and Phyllis Campbell wrote the pro-Angels book *Back of the Front* (Newnes) in 1915. *Dreams and Visions of the War* by R Stuart (Pearson) was published in 1917 and contained pro-Angels accounts of Mons, as well as stories from Ypres, Neuve-Chappelle, Loos and other battles. Meanwhile, in the *London Evening News*, Machen continued to claim that the Angels of Mons were a fiction of his own invention. He must have been tearing his hair out.



*The Bowmen of Mons come to the aid of the British and cause havoc among their enemies*

### Angels and Sceptics

The SPR conducted their own investigation into the Angels of Mons:

In the main, the result of our enquiry is negative, at least regards the question of whether any apparitions were seen on the battlefield, either at Mons or elsewhere. Of first hand testimony we have received none at all, and of testimony at second-hand we have none that would justify us in assuming the occurrence of any

supernormal phenomenon" (McClure, 1994).

Private Cleaver of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cheshire Regiment was willing to sign an affidavit before Flint County Justice of the Peace George Hazlehurst to the effect that he had seen "the Vision of Angels with my own eyes". It consisted of "a flash, nothing more" (*Daily Mail*, 24 August 1915). However, after some enquires to Cleaver's regiment it was found that he had not arrived with the British Expeditionary Force until September and so could not have been at the retreat from Mons (*London Evening News*, 2 September 1915).

A hoaxed story appeared in *The Daily News*, 17th February 1930, claiming that the angels were merely footage of soldiers, projected on "screens" of foggy white cloud banks" by the Germans. The intention had been to scare the British troops but the projections had produced the opposite effect (the hoax was exposed in the paper the next day; McClure, 1994).

Other than that, the accounts of Mons have stayed in two camps. The books *Angels* by Hope Price (Pan, 1994), *Angels A to Z* by James R Lewis & Evelyn Dorothy Oliver (Visible Ink, 1996) and *The Book of Miracles* by Stuart Gordon (*Headline*, 1996) hold with the pro-angels side of the story. *Sorry, You've Been Duped!* by Melvin Harris (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986) and *An Encyclopaedia of Claims, Frauds and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural* by James Randi (St. Martin's Griffin, 1997) not surprisingly go with Machen's version of events. *The Guinness Encyclopaedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (Guinness Publishing, 1994) and *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Cassell, 1989) dispute the existence of the Angels, while Gustav Davidson's *A Dictionary of Angels including the Fallen Angels* (First Free Press, 1971) simply records the phenomena.

### A Story Going Strong

There have been a number of recent developments and additions to the story of the Angels of Mons. Kevin McClure published *Visions of Bowmen and Angels* in 1994, which gathers together most of the different Mons accounts.

It includes the following letter:

Then there is the story of the 'Angels of Mons' going strong around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, of how the angel of the Lord on the traditional white horse, and clad all in white with flaming sword, faced the advancing Germans at Mons and forbade them further progress. Men's nerves and imagination play weird pranks in these strenuous times. All the same the angel at Mons interests me. I cannot find how the legend arose. (Charteris, 1931, in McClure, 1994).



*The Angels of Mons halt the German advance.*

Brigadier General Charteris' book *At G.H.Q.* (1931) dates the letter as 5 September, over three weeks before *The Bowmen* was published in the *London Evening News*. Assuming that the date is accurate this letter provides compelling evidence for the Angels of Mons. However, Dr David Clarke, in his article *Rumours of Angels: A Legend of the First World War* in 2002 points out that a further letter in the same volume is dated 11 February 1915, yet discusses an account of the Angels of Mons that was not published until May 1915 (Clarke, 2002, p. 164). In conversation, Dr Clarke told me that there is no account of the Angels of Mons among Charteris' original letters, making *At G.H.Q.* an uncertain source. Dr Clarke goes on in a *Fortean Times* article, and a subsequent lecture at the 2003 *Fortean Times UnConvention*, to suggest that Charteris actually instigated the rumours of angels with the press to boost British morale after the battle of Ypres and the first use of gas in the war (Clarke, 2003, p. 38).

As with all of the history of the Angels of Mons, an answer to Dr Clarke's article in *Folklore* appeared in the next issue, dated April 2003. Jacqueline Simpson disputes his dismissal of Charteris' book and wonders if military historians hold Charteris to be an unreliable source. My own theory on Dr Clarke's Charteris conspiracy angle is discussed below.

A stranger development occurred in 2002 when Danny Sullivan claimed to have film footage of the Angels of Mons. *The Sunday Times* ran with the story

and Sullivan's claim that he had sold the film to Marlon Brando. Sullivan, looking as if he wished to learn more, posted an appeal on his website for any information

**Meanwhile, Machen continued to claim that the Angels of Mons were a fiction of his own invention.**

**He must have been tearing his hair out**

about the angel. When Chris Morris investigated the claim for the Radio 4 program *The Making of an Urban Legend*, Sullivan confessed to making the story up in an attempt to sell a book of local mysteries. Since the Sullivan story, the Angels of Mons have been referred to more often in the singular, Angel of Mons.

Chris Morris's program also contained a recording of a BEF soldier who was at Mons, John Ewings, describing a man that appeared in the sky with "a flaming sword" who caused the Germans, surrounding John and his comrades, to flee. This footage could be the actual, first-hand evidence so many have longed for. The Angels of Mons debate is not over.

### 'All Day Long We Marched'

The *Sunday Times* article quoted at the beginning of this article is false. A journalist appalled at seeing the British in such disarray wrote it, and the official censor, F.E. Smith, saw it as a recruiting opportunity. Instead of toning the article down, as expected, he rewrote it to emphasise the need for fresh recruits (Farrar, 1998) and urged the newspaper to print the story as a patriotic duty (Tuchman, 1962). The quotes that are in bold in the report at the beginning of this article are the censor's additions (*Times Newspapers*, 1914, pp. 222-223).

During the retreat the BEF took 1,600 casualties, the Germans around 5,000 (Keegan, 1998). Over 14 days, the BEF had 15,000 casualties compared to the French army's 210,000 over the same period. *The Sunday Times* article certainly didn't hinder recruitment, which peaked around the same time as the retreat from Mons (Fergusson, 1998). The myth of the defeat at Mons was created.

The BEF were one cavalry and four infantry divisions up against 14 German divisions. However, the smaller British forces were made up of many Boer War veterans who had learnt from the Boers valuable lessons on rapid trench digging and using cover. The British were so well dug in that the Germans felt they faced "an invisible enemy" (Keegan, 1998, p. 110). The BEF did not retreat to escape a bloodbath or because of depleted numbers, but to meet up with the French army who were withdrawing due to heavy losses (Keegan, 1998).

The BEF had been marching for days during the retreat. One veteran wrote:

August 25<sup>th</sup>. We'd started off about 5am still retiring, and so far we had had no food since Sunday the 23<sup>rd</sup>. All day long we marched. (Denmore, 1997, p. 3).

The angels are variously described as appearing glowing within a cloud (*Light*, 8 May 1915), in a yellow mist (Begbie, 1915, p. 56), in a clear, cloudless sky (*Daily Mail*, 12 August 1915), as well as being responsible for the dark cloud that hid the British from the Germans (*Light*, 15 May 1915). The diversity of the accounts would point away from the view that they are genuine reports of the supernatural, and instead, toward myth-making at the front by tired soldiers and at home by anxious civilians. The varied stories would also suggest the story of the angels did not derive from a single source such as John Charteris spreading moral-boosting myths. "The First World War was the first media war" (Fergusson, 1998, p. 212) and a nation that was uneasy about a war just across the Channel was looking for any sign of hope. This was certainly provided by the Angels of Mons and any story coming from the front soon became confused and meshed with sermons, myth, *The Bowmen* and commercial and emotional exploitation.

In part two, I intend to show that the Angels of

Mons did not evolve from any First World War origin, but from stories far older.

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## Skeptical Stats

1. Price Uri Geller charges for a personally signed and dedicated 12.75 in plate of his own design and artwork: **£75**
2. Number of accused witches executed in 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland: **3,500**
3. Number of new video games in which the heroes develop paranormal powers: **2**
4. Number of years since the founding of CERN: **50**
5. Year by which lunar scientist Bernard Foing, of the European Space Agency, says humans could be living on the Moon: **2024**
6. Ratio of speeds at which which the Arctic is warming compared to the rest of the planet: **2:1**
7. Amount of prize money earned in 2004 by the male number 100 professional tennis player: **\$235,411**
8. Amount of prize money earned in 2004 by the female number 100 professional tennis player: **\$126,122**
9. Multiple by which native speakers of Mandarin Chinese are more likely to have perfect pitch than native-born Americans: **9**
10. Price of a 20-minute nap in one of New York firm MetroNap's eight adjustable chairs: **\$14**
11. Likelihood of a tortoise being born with two heads: **about 1 in a million**
12. Frequency with which two-headed tortoises make the news: **about once a year**
13. Cost of a four-month online course of homeopathy, supplied from India: **\$120**
14. Weight of each Mars Exploration Rover sent up by NASA: **174 kg**
15. Number of Britons thought to be following the Atkins diet: **3 million**
16. Amount the Securities and Exchange Commission has accused Lord Conrad Black and deputy David Radler of stealing from Hollinger International, owner of *The Daily Telegraph*: **at least \$85 million**
17. Minimum investment amount for an individual management account with the Astrologers Fund: **\$1,000,000**
18. Year that "Pet Psychic" Sonya Fitzpatrick began appearing on Animal Planet: **2002**
19. Amazon.com ranking of Sonya Fitzpatrick's book *What the Animals Tell Me*: **10615**
20. Date on which an unidentified sonic boom was heard over Norfolk: **November 8, 2004**
21. Number of "white substances" the Hallelujah diet bans as harmful to the human body: **5**
22. Final cost, excluding infrastructure costs, of the Athens Olympics: **\$11.6 billion**
23. Cost of security at the Athens Olympics: **\$1.39 billion**
24. Amount of time saved on housework by those who own five or more labour-saving appliances compared to those who don't, according to an Australian study: **zero**
25. Number of cutlery items found in a spoon bender's suitcase challenged by security guards at Dublin Airport: **hundreds (and they still let him on the plane)**

### Sources

1 [www.urigeller.com](http://www.urigeller.com); 2 CNN/Associated Press; 3 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/3727768.stm>; 4 CERN press information; 5 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3161695.stm>; 6 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4008761.stm>; 7 WTA Tour; 8 ATP Tour; 9 University of California, San Diego study; 10 [http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,65669,00.html?tw=wn\\_tophead\\_4](http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,65669,00.html?tw=wn_tophead_4); 11 12 expert correspondence; 13 <http://www.e-homoeopathy.com/online.htm>; 14 NASA; 15 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4012659.stm>; 16 Reuters; 17 [www.afund.com](http://www.afund.com); 18 Animal Planet; 19 Amazon.com; 20 *Eastern Daily Press*; 21 [www.hacres.com](http://www.hacres.com) – white fat (meat), pasteurized milk, salt, sugar, white flour; 22 23 *San Francisco Chronicle*; 24 *The Sunday Times*; 25 *Edinburgh Evening News*

Both Hits & Misses and Skeptical Stats depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please send contributions to [news@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:news@skeptic.org.uk) or via post to the address on the masthead (p. 3). Thanks for assistance to Rachel Carthy.



Skeptical Stats is compiled by **Wendy M Grossman**.

# An anaesthesiologist examines the Pam Reynolds story

## Part 1: Background considerations

In his two-part analysis of Pam Reynolds's near-death experience, **Gerry Woerlee** considers the evidence for the paranormal

EVER SINCE IT was first reported by the cardiologist Michael Sabom, the near-death experience of Pam Reynolds has been held by many to be definitive proof of the paranormal and the reality of a life after death (Sabom, 1998). Her story has been told and retold, assuming almost mythic proportions. Finally, here was a person who returned from "clinical death" to tell of the reality of an existence beyond the veil of this earthly life. Proof at last, according to many!

It is true that the report of Pam Reynolds is a story of a wonderful experience which must have had a profound effect upon her. What Pam Reynolds experienced was not just an ordinary hallucination. She really did "see", feel, and undergo all she described. She really did undergo a wondrous, seemingly inexplicable, life-changing experience – an experience possibly giving her much spiritual comfort by confirming deeply rooted socio-cultural expectations about a life after death, as well as the nature of the universe. And it was certainly an experience whose details seemingly prove the reality of a life after death. But is this true? I decided to examine the reality of the proof offered by this experience.

Pam Reynolds is the pseudonym of a woman 35 years old in 1991 when a diagnosis of a large aneurysm of one of the arteries of her brainstem was made. An aneurysm is a balloon-like weakening of an artery, and in the case of Pam Reynolds, this was a large aneurysm of the main artery providing her brainstem with blood. A large aneurysm of a brain artery is like a time-bomb. It can burst at any moment, causing enormous bleeding within the head, depriving the parts of the brain normally fed by that artery of blood. Pam Reynolds' aneurysm was very likely to burst, so depriving her brainstem of blood. Sudden bursting of this aneurysm would suddenly stop the blood supply to her brainstem, causing her to die immediately, because the brainstem is that part of the brain generating consciousness, controlling breathing, and many other vital body functions. So an operation was planned to remove this aneurysm.

The planned operation technique was complex. Pam Reynolds was brought under general anaesthesia. Her skull was opened and the aneurysm exposed. This was too large to treat safely, so her doctors connected blood vessels in her left groin to a heart bypass machine to cool her body down to 15 degrees Celsius

(60 degrees Fahrenheit). Her heartbeat was then stopped, the blood drained from her head, and the aneurysm carefully removed. Subsequently, her body was warmed up again, normal heartbeat and blood circulation restored, the head, and all other wounds closed, after which she was allowed to awaken slowly in the recovery room. After recovering the ability to speak, she told of a truly amazing experience undergone while apparently unconscious under general anaesthesia and low temperature cardiac arrest.

**This is a fantastic story.  
Wondrous even.  
Superficially it appears to be  
definitive proof of an afterlife**

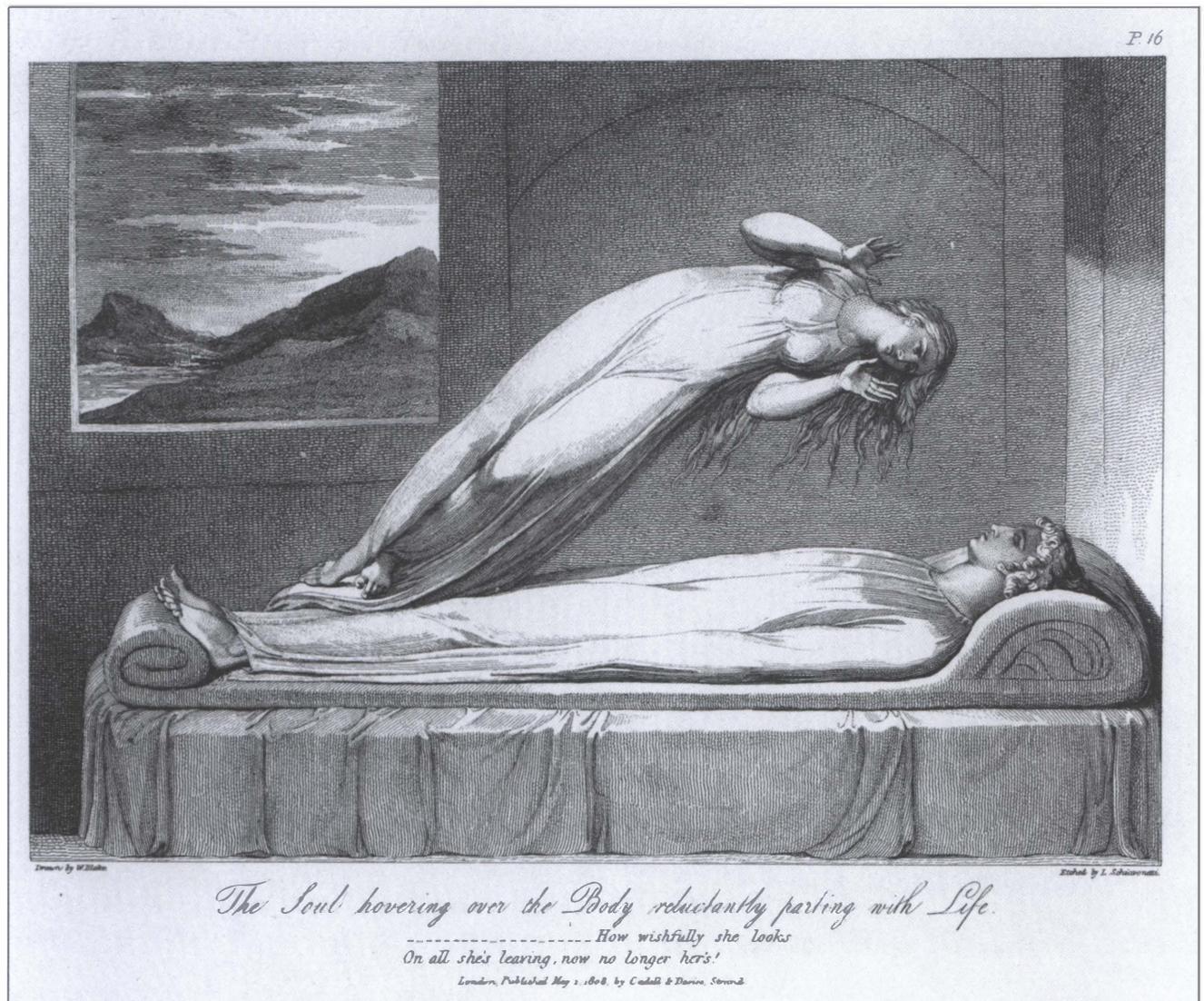
She told of awakening and undergoing an out-of-body experience during the initial phase of the operation. She found herself in a position from which she observed the neurosurgeon at work, and where she could "see" and describe the pneumatic saw used to open her skull. She heard the cardiac surgeon say that the blood vessels in her right groin were too small. Subsequently, she passed through a black vortex to arrive in a world of light where she met with her deceased grandmother and uncle, as well as other deceased relatives. They helped her, "fed" her, and finally returned her to her body, after which she finally awoke in the recovery room (Sabom, 1998).

This is a fantastic story. Wondrous even. Superficially it appears to be definitive proof of an afterlife. But this is not the case. As an anaesthesiologist hardened and scarred by more than twenty years busy clinical experience, combined with a personal fascination in the ways the functioning of the body can generate apparently paranormal experiences, I know this experience to be a product of the way the body and mind of Pam Reynolds reacted to her situation and anaesthesia.

I will begin with a quick discussion of the reality of the paranormal. The reason for this approach is that

many people attribute the observations of Pam Reynolds to paranormal perceptive abilities. But after believing in the possibility of paranormal perceptions for nearly all my adult life, I have finally come to the conclusion that there is absolutely no evidence for paranormal perceptions. Not only this, but I find that people possess absolutely no paranormal perceptive abilities at all! So what are my reasons for such an absolute and rigid-sounding statement? I will summarise the evidence (Woerlee, 2003, see chapters 7 & 8):

departments have conducted paranormal research for more than 50 years. Private institutions have also performed much paranormal research. Yet despite intensive, well conducted, and methodologically outstanding research performed during 120 years, no convincing and reproducible evidence for the reality of paranormal perceptive abilities has ever been found. And here we are speaking about an ability that may be present or latent in 25-85% of all people! Jessica Utts summarised this sorry state of affairs at the end of an



*Is it possible that the soul leaves the body at the moment of death?*

According to polls conducted with many thousands of respondents in many countries, about 25-85% of all people have experienced at least one or more “unexplained” or paranormal experience.

This means a large proportion of the world population has latent or actually manifest paranormal perceptive abilities.

The Society for Psychical Research was founded in London in 1882, and similar societies were founded almost simultaneously in other countries. University

article written in 1991. She stated that there is no real convincing evidence for paranormal perceptive abilities, but there may well be “something”, even though this may not be paranormal. No change has occurred in this sad state of affairs since 1991.

Nonetheless, paranormal perceptive abilities may not be manifest in experimental situations. Studies of tens of thousands of spontaneous paranormal perceptions and events reveal that 50% of these reports occurred during dreaming. Humans dream 4-6 times each night, spend-

ing about 2 hours per night dreaming, which means that 50% of all paranormal perceptions occur during a situation occurring during 1/12 of each day. So dreaming appears to be a state of mind conducive to paranormal perceptions. Careful dream research never yielded conclusive results. Pharmacological enhancement of the neurotransmitter predominance during dreaming sleep is an effect of many medicines commonly used in normal medical practice. In the past this was done with Reserpine, a commonly used antihypertensive drug in the 60s. Rebound REM sleep occurs after stopping antidepressive drugs such as amitryptaline (a drug which is still commonly used). Yet no-one ever reports, or has ever reported, amazing paranormal abilities manifested by people experiencing these effects from these drugs. Strange ...



*If paranormal powers existed, shouldn't this show up in statistics from casinos?*

Dream reports are said to provide evidence of paranormal perceptive abilities. In such situations people rake up the tired old story of Mark Twain's dream of the sad demise of his brother Henry. My first reaction is that this is a dream reported more than 100 years ago! And the author said that he had recounted it many times before it was finally published 100 years ago. Aren't there any more recent 'veridical' dreams? If you calculate how many dreams are dreamed by each individual during a human lifetime, and by the world population, you quickly come to the conclusion that nearly all dreams have no relation to events in the

future and are quickly forgotten, some dreams have some relation to the future and are remembered, and an incredibly few dreams are an exact report of a future event. And this last category of dreams is certainly remembered, and such dreams assume almost mythical proportions and are reported for more than 100 years.

Blind and deaf people develop their remaining senses to compensate for the loss of these senses. Epidemiological data from the USA population extrapolated to the living world population reveal that worldwide there are more than 7.7 million totally blind people on this world, more than 4.2 million totally deaf people, and more than 0.5 million totally blind and deaf people. In the past there have been countless millions of such people. If these people develop paranormal perceptive abilities, then there would be popular knowledge and beliefs about blind and deaf people indicating their possession of paranormal perceptive abilities. But there is no popular belief

**Gambling casinos are wonderful laboratories for testing the reality of paranormal perceptions. Casinos do not have to cheat to earn money – simple statistics means they always earn money by being scrupulously honest**

saying that blind and deaf people are paranormally gifted. No-one goes to a blind and deaf psychic with the expectation that these people are more gifted with paranormal abilities than those with normal sight and hearing. No-one is jubilant upon hearing that a loved relative has become totally blind and totally deaf, even though these people could be expected to develop paranormal abilities which would more than compensate for their loss of sight and hearing. No-one expects blind and deaf people to cross busy roads using paranormal sensory abilities – everyone would call blind and deaf people wanting to do such a thing suicidal and foolish. All the training of blind and deaf people is oriented towards the use of their remaining physical abilities, never towards the development of paranormal perceptive abilities. In fact, all people ever expect from the blind and deaf is that they are just that – blind and deaf – even though about 25-85% of blind and deaf people supposedly have latent or manifest paranormal abilities. All these things mean that blind and deaf people possess no paranormal perceptive abilities.

Gambling casinos are wonderful laboratories for testing the reality of paranormal perceptions. Casinos

do not have to cheat to earn money – simple statistics means they always earn money by being scrupulously honest. Furthermore they are legally obliged to monitor the randomness of their gambling machines scrupulously. To make matters even better, gamblers are superstitious and really do want to win, and about 25-85% of gamblers supposedly have latent or manifest paranormal perceptive abilities. So many millions of people visit and gamble at casinos, that even if only very few people had paranormal perceptive abilities, this would be conclusively proven by the statistics from gambling casinos. Yet the numbers churned out by roulette wheels and slot machines are truly random, and the earnings of casinos with slot machines and roulette wheels are precisely what the statistics of chance indicate they would earn. Absolutely no evidence for paranormal perceptive abilities is to be found in these figures. Paranormal perceptive and psychokinetic abilities are not manifest in casinos, even though a significant proportion of gamblers should possess such abilities.

The totality of all these separate pieces of evidence clearly indicates that paranormal perceptive and psy-

chokinetic abilities simply do not exist. Paranormal abilities are no more than a fantasy nestling in the human psyche; a wishful fantasy of fantastic powers fulfilling some deep desire nestling within all of us.

Having dealt with this fantasy, it is then possible, in part two, to deal logically with the perceptions of Pam Reynolds. This does not mean the experience of Pam Reynolds is in any way lessened. For to the woman called “Pam Reynolds” this was a profoundly meaningful experience. Even so, this does not preclude the fact that her experience was rooted in changes in the functioning of her body.

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**Gerald Woerlee** was born and raised in Western Australia, but has spent more than twenty years in the Netherlands where he works in medical practice as an anaesthiologist. This article is a product of a year-long fascination in the ways natural laws and human body function can generate all manner of paranormal and spiritual beliefs. His contact email address is: [mortalminds@hotmail.com](mailto:mortalminds@hotmail.com), or via the website [www.mortalminds.org](http://www.mortalminds.org)

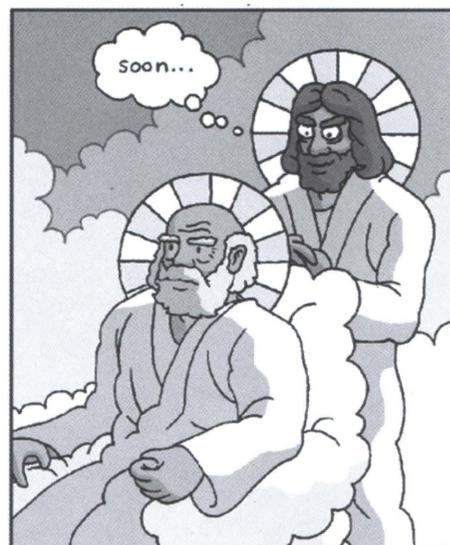
## THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



When the aliens made formal contact with Earth, it was hailed as the single most important event in history. Then, both sides realized that they had absolutely nothing in common. After a few awkward conversations, the aliens left again, much to the relief of both sides.



Quiet ambition

**Speakers:**  
TBA

Skeptics in the Pub is an evening held once a month (in a pub, strangely enough) for anybody who has an interest in, or is sceptical about, the paranormal. Each month an invited speaker gives a talk on their chosen specialisation. The talk is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. You can find out more about the meetings on The Skeptic website: <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>. This includes directions and maps to the Old Kings Head pub in Borough, where we meet. Alternatively, please contact Nick Pullar: 07740 450 950, [nickp@coleridge.co.uk](mailto:nickp@coleridge.co.uk). The meeting begins at 7:30 pm and there is a suggested donation of £2.00.

## SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

# In Search of ET

Dene Bebbington asks whether the search for life on other planets is likely to be successful

NEAR THE BEGINNING of the film *Contact* (which is based on the novel of the same name by Carl Sagan) a young girl asks her father if he thinks there are people on other planets, to which he responds: "If it is just us, it seems like an awful waste of space". It's easy to sympathise with that comment, the unimaginable scale of the universe – billions of galaxies containing billions of stars – intuitively makes the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) seem like a worthwhile endeavour. But is it?

Project Phoenix is the SETI Institute's search for signs of alien life, using large telescopes to scan stars for transmissions in certain parts of the microwave spectrum. Specifically, they are looking for carrier type signals that would likely be used by aliens to call attention to their presence. Contrary to what people might imagine about SETI, any message being sent couldn't necessarily be extracted from the signal until larger instruments were made to demodulate the signal's content. So far, if ET is out there, he's been cosmically silent. Having said that, back in 1977 a candidate signal, ever since known as the 'Wow!' signal, was detected on a frequency prohibited for ground- or satellite-based transmitters, but unfortunately it was never picked up again. It's not known if it was a genuine signal from an extraterrestrial intelligence or something else (maybe noise). To consider whether SETI is a waste of effort we need to examine the factors involved in the likelihood, or otherwise, of intelligent life existing elsewhere in our galaxy, and the universe as a whole.

The renowned physicist Enrico Fermi gave rise to the so-called *Fermi Paradox* by asking "Where are they?" after doing some analysis (apparently at a lunch table with colleagues!) and concluding that there should be many civilisations in the galaxy. Following on from this, there have been some models (for example, Crawford, 2000) which take certain assumptions and conclude that in just a few million years our galaxy could be colonised by a spacefaring civilisation.

Clearly the *Fermi Paradox* needs to be taken seriously, but the problem with models of how spacefaring populations could colonise a galaxy is the assumptions they are based on. Not surprisingly, counter arguments have been put forward to answer Fermi's question, indeed, the matter has even received book-length treatment. In passing I should mention that UFO buffs would doubtless argue that extraterrestrials are already here. As there is no convincing evidence that UFOs are spacecraft from other worlds, and because UFOs can more plausibly be explained as natural phenomena, hoaxes, or optical illusions, there's no need to take that idea seriously.

The first issue arising from the *Fermi Paradox* is the possible number of civilisations in the galaxy. There is no definitive answer to that, and probably never will be, but there have been attempts to come up with a figure. The seminal work in this regard is the Drake equation (Drake

& Sobel, 1994), named after Frank Drake who founded SETI. The equation is:

$$N = R \times f_p \times N_e \times f_l \times f_i \times f_c \times L$$

Where  $N$  is the number of detectable civilisations in space,  $R$  is the rate of star formation,  $f_p$  is the fraction of stars that form planets,  $N_e$  is the number of planets hospitable to life,  $f_l$  is the fraction of those planets on which life emerges,  $f_i$  is the fraction of planets on which intelligent life evolves,  $f_c$  is the fraction of planets with beings capable of interstellar communication, and  $L$  is how long that civilisation is detectable.

The question then is what values should be plugged into the Drake equation? Some of the figures will always be little more than educated guesses, typically based on what we know of life on Earth. Drake has derived an estimate of between one thousand and one hundred million advanced civilisations in our Milky Way galaxy (Drake & Sobel, 1994). Over time this estimate will likely change as detection of planets outside our solar system improves. Even if Drake's estimate is far too high, if we are not alone in the universe, it would only take one planet to have harboured intelligent life in each galaxy to mean the universe has been home to billions of civilisations.

Over a hundred extrasolar planets have now been discovered, which demonstrates that planet formation is actually quite common. However, those extrasolar planets are mainly gas giants orbiting their star closer than Jupiter is to the sun – not the kind of planets on which we'd expect to find life. In time we may develop technology to detect smaller rocky planets which are more amenable to supporting life. At least we now know that planet formation is not a rare occurrence.

One answer to the *Fermi Paradox* could be that even though life is common in the galaxy, intelligent life isn't. Here on Earth, life started fairly early on, around 3.5 to 4 billion years ago (White, 1999; Davies, 2003) with the Earth estimated to be about 4.5 billion years old. It is only in the last few million years that humans evolved, and much more recently that we've developed technology that can make our presence known across outer space.

The evolution of beings like ourselves was by no means inevitable; evolution is affected by many contingencies – such as the event(s) that led to the demise of the dinosaurs which had 'dominated' the Earth for over a hundred million years. The possibility of at least simple forms of life on other planets (or moons) is taken seriously now; there is even a scientific discipline called Astrobiology to study it. A hypothesis known as 'Rare Earth' (Cramer, 2000), suggests that complex intelligent life is very rare because on Earth a fortuitous combination of factors came together to allow the evolution of humans. This isn't a totally new argument since for some time Creationists and others have argued that the Earth is special because

many factors (such as the distance from the sun) are just right for it to support life.

We can look at factors influencing the lifespan of intelligent life here on Earth, although it's a sample size of one and therefore extrapolating from it is possibly no better than divination. Until now, space exploration has been limited to our solar system, and manned missions haven't been further than the moon. It's early days for manned space exploration in particular, as the technology has only been around for a few decades. The costs may come down to a point in the future so that it is a more attractive proposition for governments faced with more pressing claims on their finances. As I write, the Chinese have just put their first man into space, and they may even send a manned mission to the moon, but it's all probably more to do with national pride and geopolitics than serious space exploration.

Will humans be around long enough to progress to colonising outer space? That's a difficult question to answer. However, there is a statistical argument known as the Doomsday argument (Bostrom, 2003) that claims we're likely to be near the end of humanity's lifespan. Using Bayesian statistics, the claim is that if you take your birth rank in comparison to all people who have ever lived, it is more likely to be the case that humanity will become extinct sooner rather than later. I'll explain this by a commonly used example first. Imagine two urns containing numbered balls. One urn contains ten balls and the other a million. If you take a ball from one of the urns and it's numbered six then it's much more likely to have come from the urn containing ten balls. Now, take your birth order against all the people that have ever lived, this will be in the region of 60 billion. The probability of your birth order being 60 billion is much higher if humanity goes extinct soon than if the total number of people that ever lived reaches, say, trillions. I am not knowledgeable enough in statistics to give a strong opinion either way on the Doomsday argument, but it is taken seriously – academic papers have been published to refute it and defend it.

If other advanced civilisations exist in the galaxy there are many reasons why they won't have colonies beyond their own planet. Space exploration is not a big priority for humans at the moment, though that might change in future, so why should it be for aliens? Also, the technology to send manned missions outside the solar system seems to be a long way off, and producing unmanned probes that could replicate themselves is only the stuff of science fiction at the moment. One day we might attempt to colonise planets orbiting stars other than the sun, but that is dependent on the vicissitudes of politics, economics, the environment etc.

The last variable in the Drake equation is the length of time a civilisation remains detectable. This will be influenced by the lifetime of the civilisation and how advanced their technology becomes. If the Doomsday argument has merit then we are entitled to wonder if other civilisations will also have a short lifespan. It is possible to come up

with many good reasons to argue either way about the longevity of civilisations, but ultimately it's little more than conjecture. We also need to bear in mind that the existence of suitably advanced extraterrestrials will need to coincide in certain ways with SETI – there's a 'window of opportunity' for us to detect any signals sent not too long ago. Consider this: if a planet ten thousand light years away was home to an advanced civilisation that became extinct a million years ago, then their final signals would have passed Earth too long ago. Similarly, any signals being sent for the first time from anywhere more than a few tens of light years away wouldn't have reached us yet.



Sadly we may never know if humankind is the only intelligent life to have inhabited the galaxy or universe. There are good grounds on both sides of the argument for the existence of extraterrestrial life, so after asking if SETI is a worthwhile project, the answer surely has to be yes, if we want to try for an answer to a most profound question: are we alone?

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# Overcooked

Martin Parkinson gives a curious example of something sensible deliberately dressed up to look like nonsense

IN HIS ONLINE *Skeptic's Dictionary* Robert Todd Carroll offers a list of subjects he is considering for future entries and I was surprised to see our very own Tony Buzan included, misspelt as Buzon. I was surprised because my recollection was that although Buzan's books on memory, speed reading, study skills and general learning tricks may be a bit stylistically embarrassing, they did not contain anything that is actually incorrect or pseudoscientific. Furthermore, his books did contain stuff that I found personally useful: so I took another look. A *bit* embarrassing did I say?

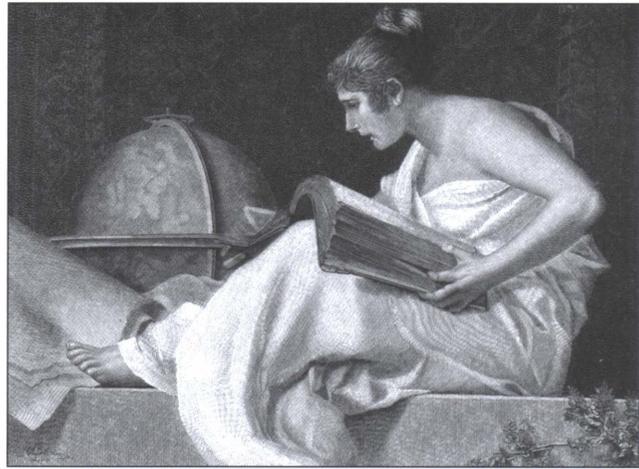
The Mentally Literate human is capable of turning on the radiant synergetic thinking engine, and creating conceptual frameworks and new paradigms of limitless possibility. (Buzan, 1995, p.287)

Errr yes. So what are we talking about here? This quotation comes from *The Mind Map Book*. 'Mind mapping' is a graphic technique that can be used in many kinds of note-taking and planning. It has the advantage that it avoids the linearity of normal prose and therefore clarifies connections between non-adjacent points and enhances understanding of overall structure. I use the method myself and have found it to be, for me, the only satisfactory way of taking lecture notes. More sober books on study skills include mind maps as a useful option; except that mind maps are actually Mind Maps™, so they have to call them 'spidergrams' instead. What we are talking about here is a humble but useful product which is ludicrously over-packaged and hyped.

Some of the oversell is doubtless caused by the fact that Buzan has to make a living in a noisy marketplace and so must make his mental-improvement products appear unique. Briefly stated, any mnemonic technique exploits the 'stickiness' of memory. Using a mnemonic actually increases the amount of memory work you have to do, but the extra work is of an enjoyable kind (personally relevant, amusing, sensual etc.) and so the mnemonic information is easily acquired and sticks effortlessly onto the target information. (One might call this kind of thing 'cognitive gearing'.) None of this is at all new, or secret, or difficult, though it is very well worth repeating.

But Buzan also says things that seem slightly odd and which might indicate that he has a rather naive model of the relationship between memorising and learning. In *Use Your Memory* he refers to Shereshevsky, the man of seemingly limitless memory famously described by the Russian neurologist Luria. Buzan holds up

Shereshevsky as a wonderful example to whom we could all aspire, yet an implied theme of Luria's *The Mind of a Mnemonist* is the importance of forgetting. Shereshevsky's life seems to show that his faultless memory was of no great advantage to him and may even have been a mild handicap; this is certainly the message that most readers seem to get. Did Buzan actually read the book properly? Or is this a demonstration of the disadvantages of speed-reading above a certain point?



Does speed-reading have disadvantages when taken to extremes?

However, it seems quite wrong to dump Buzan into the same category as alien abduction and astrology, and inaccurate to put him in the same bin as homeopathy and crystal healing. I'm very interested in areas that contain something genuine mixed in with the nonsensical, mistaken, or overblown, and would like to propose that the Buzan-type genre of self-help is best categorised as *overcooked*. I propose this metaphor because food which is overcooked may be edible to some degree and is of some nutritional benefit. It just doesn't look very appetising and seems like a waste of good ingredients. No wonder Robert Carroll would rather just have the salad, thank you.

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## Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

### Top Down

I WAS FORTUNATE enough to be able to attend the fifth World Skeptics Congress in Italy at the beginning of October, and a very enjoyable and informative experience it was. In fact it has led me to thinking about a couple of different things and I thought I'd share these thoughts with you. Firstly, I had the wonderful experience of one night dining in the company of (amongst others) Richard Wiseman, Ian Rowland and Ray Hyman, all of whom are first-rate conjurers and who amazed everyone around the table with their 'magical' powers. This set me to thinking that it is (literally) amazingly useful for a sceptic to have this ability as it enables him or her to demonstrate phenomena that would seem to be entirely beyond the understanding of science. But following up a magic trick by a clear statement that it was carried out by trickery and not using paranormal powers is a powerful way of demonstrating that things are not always as they seem. So one outcome of attending the conference is that I have spent the last few weeks honing my fairly low-level sleight of hand techniques which I last used to entertain (or more likely bore) my parents' dinner guests when I was 11–12 years old. Beyond that age it seemed that learning to play the guitar would be a more useful skill for impressing the girls than conjuring and I let the latter drop.

As well as the conjuring, there were a number of talks at the congress that discussed this idea that reality is not always as we perceive it, with stunning examples of, respectively, how our visual system can let us down from Richard Wiseman (Daniel J Simons' basketball clip (Simons, 2003)) and the effect of 'top-down processing' on our interpretation of auditory information from Chris French (apparent backward masking in the Led Zeppelin song "Stairway to Heaven" (Milner, n.d)). This latter example set me musing on how something analogous to this top-down processing effect can manifest itself in scientific research.

The trouble with experimental research is that generally it is not carried out in a vacuum. (Actually, a great deal of my research does take place in a vacuum but I'm speaking metaphorically here.) In other words, experiments are normally carried out to test someone's hypotheses – often one's own – and this means that without a great deal of care being taken, theoretical expectations can inadvertently influence the experimental results – something fully understood by psychologists but less well by physicists.

The example that comes to mind is that of a physicist colleague, many years ago, who was attempting to replicate the experiments of a colleague prior to publication in a scientific journal. Without boring you with

too much technical detail, the experiments consisted of firing a pulse of laser light at a particular material and looking at the light subsequently emitted by the material. This was measured using a spectrometer that gave an almost instantaneous display of the light intensity across a range of wavelengths in the form of a graph on a computer monitor. However, the signal obtained was a very weak one which was mixed in with a great deal of noise and interference coming from a variety of sources. A normal procedure with such weak signals is to average the results of a number of identical experiments by adding successive spectra together. When this is done, the troughs and peaks in the random noise tend to cancel one another out whereas the true underlying signal is reinforced, resulting in (for instance) a clear peak in the data. However, to avoid problems with 'spiky' interference resulting from, for example, someone switching on a light switch in a nearby room, the researcher inspected each individual spectrum before allowing it to be added into the overall data. If a spectrum didn't seem to have approximately the 'right' form (in this case a single central peak) then it was rejected as having been affected by such interference. And, unsurprisingly, the expected result was obtained consisting of a single peak in the 'right' place. This methodology only came to light when my colleague added in ALL the data – even the 'spiky' runs – and obtained a final spectrum which contained noticeably more noise. However, rather than containing a single peak as expected, it actually contained two peaks. To cut a long story short, the discovery of the two peaks forced the scientists to reconsider their theory and gave rise to a minor but significant advance in this area of physics.

Of course, the original methodology was unacceptably poor, and the researcher should have known better – but self-delusion rather than fraud was at play here and I'll bet that many such examples have occurred in a range of scientific examples.

The moral, I suppose, is that all physical scientists should think long and hard about avoiding subjective bias in their experiments in the way that psychologists do. Perhaps they also should try to attend the next World Skeptics Conference – and start practising their sleight of hand.

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## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

ONE OF THE adjectives that most naturally attaches itself both to reason and logic is 'cold'. These common collocations, however, are laughable in the context of how real devotees to reason and logic behave. In my experience, there is nothing cold about the ratiocinations of philosophers and other intellectuals. Rather, their intellectual disputes are red in tooth and claw.

For example, I've just finishing editing an exchange between two writers and academics which, in print, looks like the epitome of civilised, calm discourse. In reality however, one party was spitting blood at what he saw as the unreasonable personal nature of the others' missive, while that correspondent in turn was so appalled at what he read that he considered not replying at all. There was nothing cold about this debate. Indeed, it got both participants very hot under the collar.

The warm-blooded nature of intellectual engagement is not something champions of reason are too keen to emphasise. Although a wider acknowledgement of the reality would help humanise the rather abstract ideal of rationality, it would also threaten to occlude what is distinctive about it. After all, isn't reason's unique selling point precisely that it rises above partisan passions?

The deeper issue, however, is what exactly needs to be acknowledged. Is it that reason really is cold, but that 'reasoners' rarely are? Or is that reason itself never is or never can be as cold as its reputation suggests?

The first explanation is the most comforting for those with a ratiocentric world-view. On this view, it is a lamentable weakness of human beings that we find it very hard to rise to the high standards of rational discourse. But the failure lies with us, not the ideals of reason we strive before. Just as the moral failings of bishops do not disprove the correctness of the moral code they teach, so the rational failings of thinkers does not undermine the rational principles they maintain.

However, it does raise the sceptical doubt that living according to rational principles is an unattainable ideal. If humans really can't avoid bringing their emotions into their thinking, then "as rational as possible" becomes not that rational at all. What is worse, there is the risk that those who think they can "follow reason" and set their feelings to one side might be living less in accordance with the truth than those who take a more jaundiced view of reason's power.

The second possibility is even more disturbing. If reason itself is never really cold, but always warmed through with the thinker's emotions and prejudices, then perhaps we are wrong to give it the exalted position we do.

Of course, such doubts about the "power of reason" are not new. But sometimes the familiarity of a problem is mistakenly seen as a sign that it can be safely ignored. Such, I think, is the case with the so-called problem of evil in theology: if the universe is ruled by a good God, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? The question has been asked so many times, believers tire of it, believing it is old hat. Well it is old hat, but that doesn't mean there is any good answer to it.

What then is the right response to these concerns about rationality? I'm not entirely sure, but whatever it is, I think it must fully embrace the imperfection. To maintain the possibility of pure reason in human affairs is, I think, to put one's head in the sand. Furthermore, we need to accept the historic lesson that placing too much faith in rational principles leads to social disaster.

There is a graphic example of this in *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang's remarkable story of three generations of Chinese women. Her mother's husband, a senior official in the communist party, rigorously applied his communist principles as equally to his family as he did everyone else. From a rational point of view, he was being nothing less than fair and consistent, doing what reason demanded. But what his human relationship with his wife needed was something softer and more humane. By letting reason totally rule, he lost something vital to human contact.

A more amusing, but no less truthful example, comes in an episode of *The Simpsons*, where the local Mensa branch finds itself temporarily in charge of Springfield. One of the rules they implement – inspired by the Vulcans – is that breeding shall take place only once every seven years. As Comic Book Guy explained, "For many of you this will mean much less breeding. For me, much, much more!"

Accepting the limits of reason allows us to champion its merits without fear of losing our sense of realism. For it remains true that in most arenas of human life, whether you take as your ultimate judge "The Truth" or just "What Works", reason is much more effective than any other resource we have. Those who wish to debunk reason need to ask what they would replace it with. Superstition? Hunch? Instinct? Authority? No other candidate comes close.

Reason is not perfect, it is certainly not cold and it is not enough to govern all of human life by itself. But when it comes to figuring things out and solving problems, it's the best single tool we've got.

Comments welcome to [julian@julianbaggini.com](mailto:julian@julianbaggini.com)

Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* ([www.philosophers.co.uk](http://www.philosophers.co.uk)) and author of *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press) and *What's It All About? Philosophy and The Meaning of Life* (Granta). See [www.julianbaggini.com](http://www.julianbaggini.com)

## ASKE News

From the chairman of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry, Michael Heap



THE FIFTH World Skeptics Congress (<http://www.cicap.org/congress/program.html>) took place in Albano Terme, near Padua in Italy, from 8-10 October 2004. My wife and I attended. I represented ASKE at the Board meeting of ECSO (the European Council of Skeptical Organisations), which met on 7 October 2004.

The Congress was hosted by CICAP (the Italian Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) in association with CSICOP. There was a good attendance, boosted by a healthy contingent of Italian sceptics. Unfairly for them, but out of expediency, nearly all of the papers were presented in English and translated through headphones into Italian. One can only admire the translators' skill in keeping pace with the speakers and, in particular, those asking questions.

It was a thoroughly enjoyable and informative congress. Many of the international luminaries in the field of scepticism were present, including Paul Kurtz, Joe Nickell, Barry Karr, Ray Hyman, Amardeo Sarma, Barry Beyerstein, Willem Betz, Wally Sampson, Massimo Polidoro, and of course James 'the Amazing' Randi. I have yet to mention the British speakers, but sadly one absentee from the UK was Professor Robert Morris who died recently. Bob was Professor of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh. His place was taken by one of his colleagues, Caroline Watt, who gave an abridged, but spirited defence of parapsychology as a science.

Randi was the hero of the Congress. Massimo Polidoro hosted a tribute to the great man on the second night of the Congress. He answered questions from Massimo about his exploits as an escapologist and magician and his later work involving the James Randi Foundation. Randi, who is the most humorous and entertaining of speakers, regaled his audience with anecdotes about claimants of his \$1,000,000 award for demonstrating paranormal ability. There were appearances by Ray Hyman, Joe Nickell and Richard Wiseman. One thing Richard did that set me thinking when I returned home was to ask for any two-digit number between 34 and 99 and to construct a 4x4 magic square based on that number.

One of the problems of a conference of sceptics is that when you have attended one or two you then tend to hear the same information. This conference was no exception. However, in addressing a well rehearsed topic, namely the assassination of President J.F. Kennedy, Massimo Polidoro's presentation revealed something I was hitherto unaware of and which is of relevance to my own professional work. The talk

focused on the eye-witness testimony of a lady who was standing very near to the President's limousine at the time of the shooting. The lady in question (no pun intended) became a celebrity, enthralled audiences for years with her account of what she had observed. Yet much of this was confabulation, and in some details outrageously so.

The UK was well represented on the list of presenters. No prizes are awarded for guessing two of the names – Richard Wiseman and Chris French. Both gave entertaining expositions of their work, in Richard's case his investigations of paranormal claims. He was able to present his recent study of mediums, demonstrating that their alleged powers vanish in the absence of visual and verbal cues from their clientele. This research was widely reported in the media, adventitiously prior to a three-part series on British television that took an uncritical look at the world of modern mediumship. Chris's presentation was an account of the science and psychology of anomalous phenomena, complete with his favourite *grand finale* demonstration: alleged Satanic messages embedded in the reverse playback of Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven'.

Another UK presenter, known to us all, was Edzard Ernst, who spoke, of course, on alternative medicine. And one more was Sergio della Sala, Professor of Neuroscience at the University of Edinburgh, who illustrated some themes of interest to sceptics by reference to an unusual neurological disorder known as 'anarchic hand' (or the Dr Strangelove Syndrome). Patients with this disorder cannot control the purposeful activity of one of their hands, which insists on sabotaging whatever they are trying to do. Finally, Ian Rowland gave a special demonstration of magic and mentalism.

I mentioned earlier the ECSO Board meeting. This was attended by representatives of many of the sceptical societies in Europe. Some societies are thriving, some are dormant or moribund. One of the success stories is the recently established Irish Skeptics Society, whose representatives, ASKE members Paul O'Donoghue and Nóirin Buckley, were present at the meeting. With membership in the hundreds, they hold regular meetings in Dublin, and just prior to the Congress organised a presentation by Randi. They also have a fantastic bimonthly newsletter, 'The Skeptical (*sic*) Times'. The Irish Skeptics are organising the 13<sup>th</sup> (*Oh dear!*) European Skeptics Congress in Dublin in 2007. (The 2005 Congress will be held in Brussels from October 7–9, 2005.) Visit their website at [www.irishskeptics.net](http://www.irishskeptics.net) or email [irishskeptics@eircom.net](mailto:irishskeptics@eircom.net) for further information.



**Michael Heap** is the Chairman of ASKE and a clinical and forensic psychologist in Sheffield. ASKE email address = [general@aske.org.uk](mailto:general@aske.org.uk)  
ASKE website = <http://www.aske.org>



# Reviews

## TRUST ME, I'M A SPIN DOCTOR

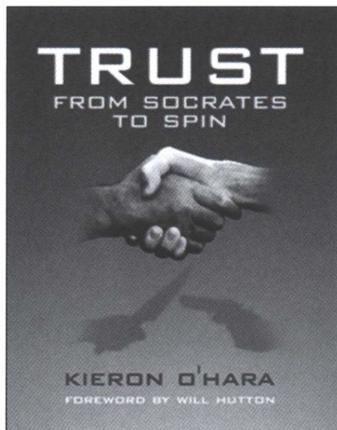
**Trust: From Socrates to Spin**

by Kieron O'Hara

Icon Books, £12.99, ISBN 1 840446 531 X

Trust, as the author points out, is a universal component of human life, from the individual to multinational business and world government. Without it we simply could not function. We have to assume that most people will generally do what they say, even though all too often this is a matter of the triumph of hope over experience. (How many people told me, *apropos* the election of 1997, "This time it will be different"?)

Yet there are increasingly problems, O'Hara argues, resulting from too much or too little, or misplaced, trust. For example, the way in which one rather dubious report has had drastic effects on trust in the MMR vaccine, despite all the evidence to the contrary. These, and possible solutions, are O'Hara's theme. He draws mainly on philosophy (especially Plato), sociology, recent history (e.g. an informative account of the Enron affair), and intelligent observation. He does not claim to offer a comprehensive account. That would need, at least, much from anthropology, economics, ethology, history, law and perhaps especially psychology.



Despite the universality of trust, one might suggest that occasionally the term is stretched too far. For example we are told that we trust the man on the Clapham omnibus, if we sit next to him, not to pick our pocket. Surely one makes a reasonable assumption – not many people pick pockets, and the bus is not a good place to do so - while still, probably, keeping the wallet in an inside pocket.

O'Hara says rather little of those who abuse trust, consciously or not, or of the gullible, both of which might be of particular interest to *Skeptic* readers. But he gives us a very readable, interesting, and (within its limits) informative discussion. The solutions he tentatively offers in the final chapter, while perfectly sensible, are perhaps rather of an "easier said than done" nature. But his last word can surely be endorsed, that it is really up to us as individuals "to attempt to be trustworthy, to the best of our abilities".

John Radford

## CULTS AND THE CORTEX

**Brainwashing: The science of thought control**

by Kathleen Taylor

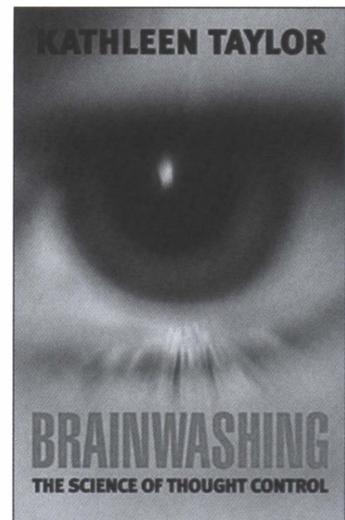
Oxford University Press, £18.99, ISBN 0-19-280496-0

This is a book of three parts. In the first section, Taylor outlines the history and social psychology of brainwashing, presenting a clear description of research into cults, charismatic leaders, military mind control, and the like. So far, so good. Part two then attempts to understand brainwashing within the context of recent advances in neuroscience. Taylor presents a clear description of neurons, membranes and the like, and then attempts to explain how neuroscience may help to explain brainwashing.

Unfortunately, many of the arguments are far from convincing. Although it is obvious that dramatic alterations in self identity and episodic memory will be associated with changes in the cortex, it is not clear that this is the best level to understand brainwashing. For example, Taylor spends time examining vision, tracking this complex process from eye movements to the processing of visual information in a part of the brain known as the posterior parietal cortex. However, it is unclear how this helps us to understand why some people join new religious movements or the effects that such groups have on their behaviors.

In the final part, the author considers the implications of viewing brainwashing from a neuroscience perspective. Much of this section builds towards what the author refers to as FACET – that is, the need for Freedom, Agency, Complexity, Ends-not-means and Thinking. It is a rather confusing end message that fails to provide a strong sense of closure. In short, although this book does provide some interesting information about brainwashing, I suspect that the general thrust of the argument (i.e., that the phenomena can be understood from a neuro-science perspective) will fail to have a significant impact.

Richard Wiseman



## NO GHOST IN THE MACHINE?

### Mortal Minds: A Biology of the Soul and the Dying Experience

by G.M. Woerlee

De Tijdstroom, 25 Euros, ISBN 90 5898 057 X

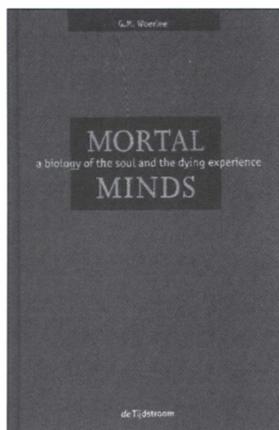
Gerry Woerlee is an anaesthesiologist with many years of clinical experience. He has written an ambitious book in which he tries to answer the following three questions: What is death? What do people experience as they die? Is there life after death? In attempting to answer these questions, he considers a range of issues and phenomena that will interest readers of *The Skeptic*. These include the concept of the soul and the properties claimed for it, alleged paranormal abilities, human auras, the out-of-body experience, and the near-death experience.

Along the way, Woerlee offers some novel explanations for many of the phenomena he discusses, many of which are open to empirical testing. To give but one example, he offers a new explanation of the experience of passing down a dark tunnel towards a bright light, commonly reported as part of the near-death experience. Woerlee argues that this experience is best explained in terms of the effects of oxygen starvation upon the functioning of the visual system, and in particular that it is a direct consequence of the differences in blood supply to central vs. peripheral areas of the retina. In other words, he considers the tunnel experience to be primarily an effect arising at the level of the retina rather than an effect due to abnormal functioning at the cortical level as argued by Blackmore (e.g., 1993). Clearly, the two theoretical positions make different predictions regarding the possibility of the tunnel experience occurring in individuals with different types of blindness. Blackmore's theory would predict that typical tunnel experiences could occur in individuals with damaged retinas whereas Woerlee's would not. It would be of considerable interest to see which account (if either) is favoured by the currently available data on NDEs in the blind.

In case you were wondering, Woerlee concludes that true death occurs when the brainstem ceases to function; that the experiences of dying, for most people, are based upon the effects of oxygen starvation to the brain; and that, sadly, there is no life after death. Overall, this is an interesting and provocative book that will provide much food for thought on some of the most profound issues that we all must face.

#### Reference

Blackmore, S. (1993). *Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience*. London: Grafton.



Christopher C. French

## SOUL FEUD

### The Problem of the Soul: Two visions of mind and how to reconcile them

by Owen Flanagan

Basic Books, \$16.95, ISBN 0465024610

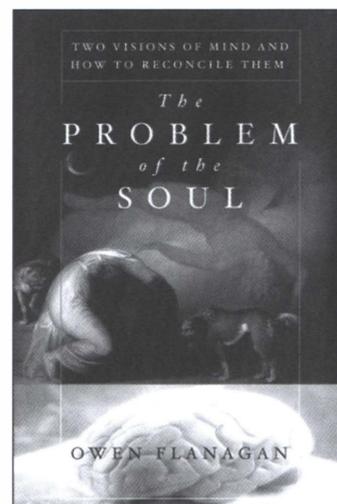
This philosophical report on where the soul stands, in the light of scientific research, will not be an altogether happy read for those who would prefer to cling on to their souls, perhaps in the hope of some kind of eternal harp recital, or the company of subservient virgins.

For such people, including, apparently, 60% of scientists, the news is of course grim. As Flanagan says in his preface, "Supernatural concepts have no philosophical warrant...There are simply no good arguments – theological, philosophical, humanistic, or scientific – for beliefs in divine beings, miracles, or heavenly afterlives." He explains and defends the position of physicalism, the view that all mental events are, ultimately, brain events. This idea has moved from being a hypothesis to being "a constitutive truth in mind science."

Given that the brain is a natural object, a corollary would seem to be that what the brain does is subject to causal regularities. However, given the immense complexity of neural processes and personal history, we are nowhere near able to provide a comprehensive causal account of someone's decision-making. So it may seem that one of the constitutive elements of the soul – free will – may be safe from scientific abolition.

Flanagan espouses neo-compatibilism, the view that rational choice is compatible with causation, and explains how we must disentangle explanation from prediction, how we shouldn't get too excited by free-will arguments based on indeterminacy (who wants free will to be the result of random causation?) and how we may retain much that we value in our image of our own species. He offers a naturalistic account of the self, and concludes with a view of ethics as a kind of human ecology, an empirical field.

Sceptical readers may find this a useful source of arguments and ideas for making sense of a soul-free universe, and, given that the often chatty tone is somewhat less belligerent than Daniel Dennett's, the book could also be a suggested read for believers.



Paul Taylor



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# LETTERS

## Achieving "Enlightenment"

This is the story about how I attained the so-called 'higher level of awareness' as an accidental by-product while studying for the Ph.D. preliminary examination. No drugs or psychoses were involved. Because achieving 'enlightenment' does not occur to all students (even candidates for higher degrees at first-rate schools), this erratic achievement must be considered irreproducible, and thus suitable for publication here.

This accidental ascension to 'higher awareness' occurred purely as a side effect of intense mental concentration on graduate school studies. This experience began several hours after finishing the second day of the comprehensive written and oral Ph.D. preliminary examination, when I found that colours were becoming brighter, sound intensity was apparently increasing and, when eating, food was becoming more flavourful. All of my senses had become more sensitive. Within a day, it appeared as if the world had become more deeply three-dimensional; for example, each individual, deeply green, leaf was easily discernible from its adjacent leaves, as if each leaf was outlined with a black border. My vision was similar to viewing a TV set with the picture colour intensity increased. At all times I was in control of my actions, and my outward behaviour was apparently unchanged. Gradually these exaggerated sensations subsided. By the end of the third day, the intensified per-

ceptions of my surroundings had diminished to the usual normal level. Because of the exceedingly prolonged duration of this experience, hypnagogic, or half-asleep dreaming can be eliminated as its cause. This drug-free experience of an 'heightened awareness' incident produced no adverse side- or after-effects. Only the sensory receptors were involved; not the pleasure centres, which we are all aware can be easily stimulated by aural and visual inputs, as well as by various drugs – many of the latter are familiar to the legal and penal systems.

As a chemist, I am certain that these exaggerated sensations were due either to excess release of neuronal chemical transmitters induced by this intense mental concentration, desensitized (less inhibited) neuronal receptors, or both a larger quantity of chemical transmitter released to simultaneously more sensitive receptors. Simply stated, I suggest that this (psychosis- and drugs-free) episode happened to a person, whom my objective wife considers to be a sane and normal realist and sceptic, because of normal brain chemistry operating on 'overload'. It's ironic that prolonged and intense concentration on 'Western' chemistry resulted in a so-called 'Eastern' transcendental experience. No regimens involving meditation, mortification of the body, physical isolation or drugs were needed to obtain this glimpse of the 'ineffable'. Concentration, it appears, may enable anyone to climb the astral ladder of success. No reliance on the mystical is

needed to briefly enter and enjoy Nirvana here on Earth.

**Joel Kirschbaum,  
New Jersey, U.S.A**

## Updating Youens

In his 'investigation' of the Jacqui Poole case and the parts played in it by police officer Tony Batters and medium Christine Holohan (*The Skeptic*, 17.2-3), Tony Youens seems not to have discovered that Montague Keen's and my 17-page article on the case appeared in the January 2004 issue of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*. This was, incidentally, 'peer-reviewed' by no less than five of our peers.

Montague Keen and Tony Batters will not be replying to Youens's letter since they died in January 2004 and December 2003 respectively. Nor will I, in case I confuse him with facts, which seem to make him uncomfortable. Reading his tendentious post-hoc ramblings, I am reminded of the country bumpkin who is taken to a zoo for the first time, contemplates a camel for a few minutes, and is heard to mutter as he turns away:

"There ain't no such animal".

**Guy Lyon Playfair,  
London**

## Rendlesham

I refer to James Easton's claim ('The Truth about Rendlesham', *The Skeptic*, 17. 2-3, Summer and Autumn 2004) that Ian Ridpath had claimed that the witnesses

had been deceived by the Shipwash floating light (lightship), as well as by Orfordness lighthouse. I was the first person to suggest Shipwash as the light reported by Col. Halt, first in an article 'Throwing light on Rendlesham' (*Magonia* 21, 1985), repeated later in my book (*The UFO Mystery Solved*, 1994). Ridpath has always rejected Shipwash, ignoring the evidence in Col. Halt's tape recording that the direction of the winking light he saw was 110° (Shipwash) and not 95° (Orfordness). Ridpath persists in believing that the witnesses were deceived by the Orfordness light; an explanation I reject as naive and implausible. Apart from being in the wrong direction, the characteristics of the light Halt reported are consistent with Shipwash and not with Orfordness. However, I do not reject the idea that some of the officers involved that night, or the previous night, did not get

distracted by the light from Orfordness.

What I find odd, is that Easton makes no mention of the discovery by Ridpath that the whole incident can have been stimulated by sight of a bright fireball (large meteor) which was seen over the North Sea to the east of Suffolk and Kent on the night in question (Jenny Randles does note this in her article). The Woodbridge patrolmen probably assumed, as many observers do, that it was an object falling in flames a short distance away – into Rendlesham Forest. That is why the Forest was later explored. Nor does Easton note the suggestion by both Ridpath and myself that some of the lights reported by the witnesses near the end of their sortie were astronomical objects (these can have included the bright stars Deneb, Vega and Sirius and the planets Jupiter and Saturn, then in close conjunction). As I obs-

erved in my book, it is disturbing that the defence of the West was in the hands of people who could not recognize various astronomical objects and believed in alien spacecraft. Worse, they used their equipment inappropriately and misread it, regarding innocent and harmless readings as sinister and dangerous.

I welcome Jenny Randles' late acceptance of the part superior mirages (*via* temperature inversions) can play in explaining UFO reports. I proposed that this effect contributed to what Halt and his team saw on their expedition. Indeed, I have proposed it as the explanation of last resort for many otherwise inexplicable UFO reports (in the book mentioned above). I also welcome her increasing scepticism, which undermines much of her earlier writing.

Stuart Campbell,  
Edinburgh

## THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



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Little-Known Fact #685: The Biblical Fall was about sex: God never forgave the human race for choosing heterosexuality.



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When Crash Orphan-15 was adopted by humans, the Grey Hive chose not to interfere...but when the boy was taken to "Sunday School" to learn "Creationism," they realized their mistake. Earth and its ignorant savages all died screaming.

Please send your letters to: **The Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW** or e-mail [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk). Email communication is preferred. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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