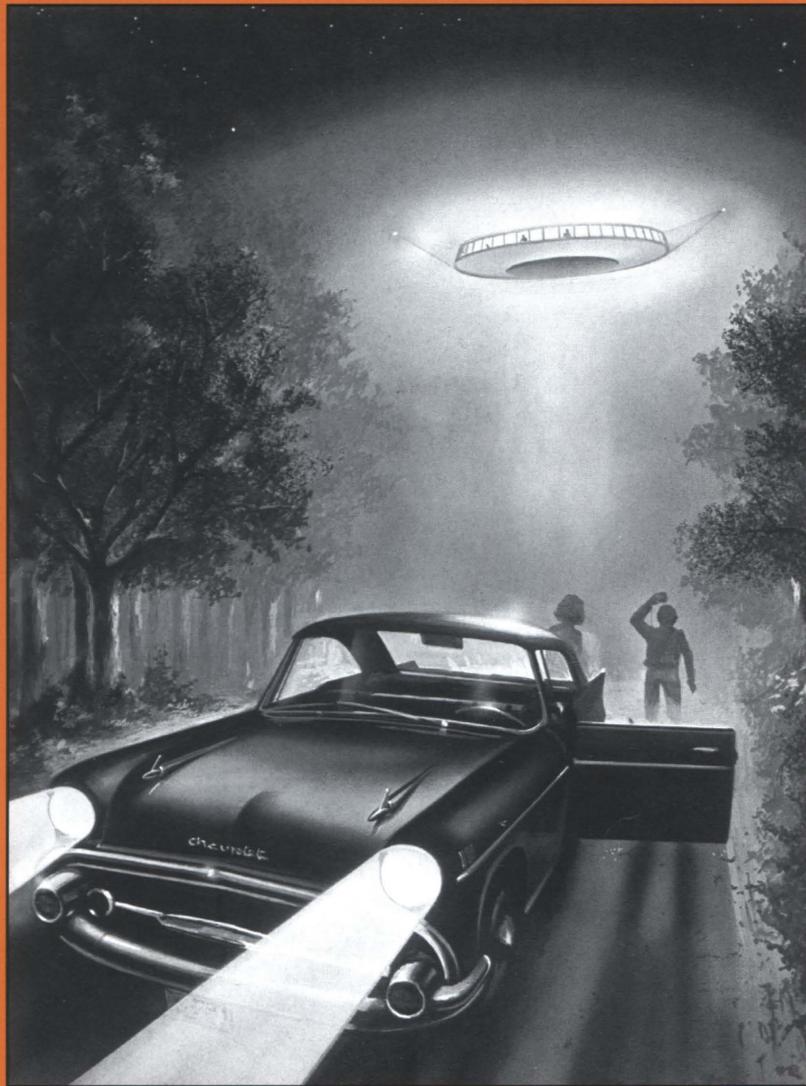


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The **Skeptic**



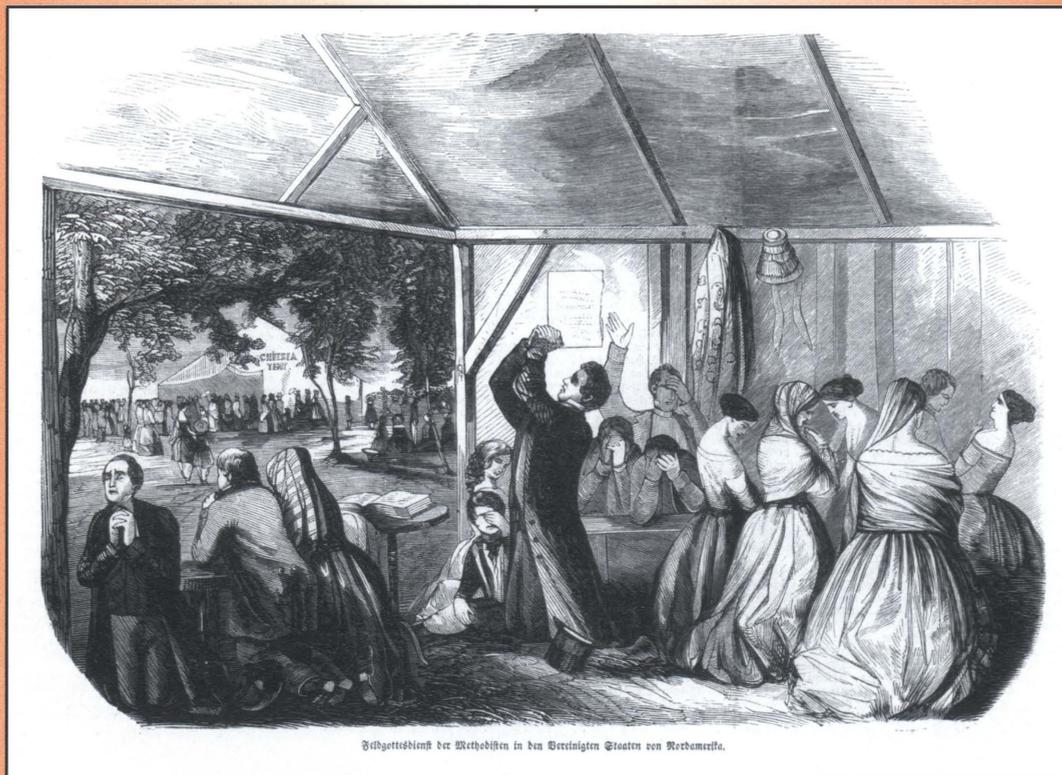
Making UFOlogy History

Also in this issue:

**The Recovered Memory Debate:
False Memories of the Memory Literature?
Profits of the New Age**

Plus: News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



FERVOUR AND FAITH IN THE FOREST

In the benighted days before radio and TV, Americans in remote rural areas, far from churches, were in danger of being starved of religion. The solution was to take the churches to the people, in the form of camp meetings held in forest clearings or on the shores of rivers. Gatherings such as this 1852 meeting drew immense crowds who arrived in their wagons, pitched their tents, and gave themselves up to days and nights of fervent worship. Prayer turned into howls of ecstasy; worshippers fell by the score writhing on the ground, or convulsed in 'jerks' which spread through the congregation by contagion.

(Engraving in the *Leipzig Illustrirte Zeitung*)

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Editorial

Lindsay Kallis and Chris French



AS WE GET closer to re-launching your longest running UK sceptical publication, we have been doing a lot of thinking about what it means to be a sceptic, and in the last issue we asked readers to share with us what being 'a sceptic' meant for them. While we may have different ideas about specifics, we seem to all agree that scepticism is nothing to do with an established set of facts; rather, it is a method. Scepticism does not have a doctrine of belief: thou shalt not believe in aliens nor practise astrology, dowsing, facilitated communication, etc. Nor is scepticism nihilistic. Rather, it is a method of critically examining and explaining what we can about humans and our sometimes rather bizarre beliefs about the world we live in.

For example, our research unit at Goldsmiths College, University of London, the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit (APRU), isn't driven by a desire to disprove the existence of the paranormal, but rather to apply the scientific method to these aspects of human experience. We look to uncover the psychological and neurological underpinnings of such phenomena in order to explain as much of the variability of ostensibly paranormal experiences as possible. Through the application of Occam's razor, our working hypothesis is that much of this variability can be explained in non-paranormal terms – and our empirical research strongly supports this position. However, it is important to note that we do not rule out the possibility that some paranormal phenomena may be genuine. It is simply that we do not find the currently available evidence in support of such claims compelling.

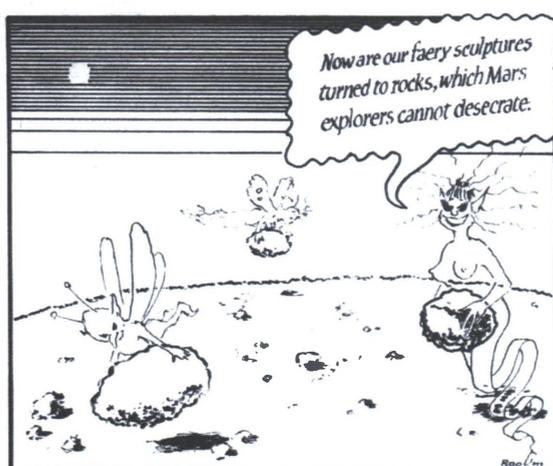
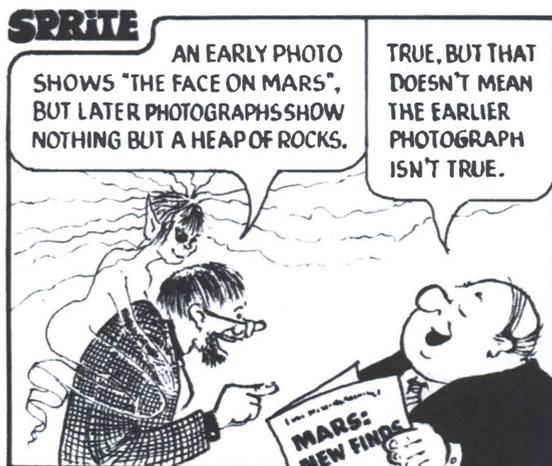
One important area of research at the APRU has been in the psychology of false memory. We've all had those moments where we are confident that we remember a situation clearly and accurately, only to have someone else remember the same event differently, but with just as much confidence that their recollection is correct. And when we look back at our childhood memories, the line between actually remembering an event as we experienced it, and

falsely attributing an event as our own memory after having been told a story about what happened, is quite murky. The nature of memory seems to be somewhat deceptive; we rely on it to know who we are, what we believe, and what we've experienced, and yet, it has the ability to fool us. In paranormal research, it is important for us to understand how humans construct reality because when people have ostensibly paranormal experiences (such as a psychic reading, or an encounter with a UFO) we are quite often dealing with their memories of such events not directly with the events themselves, and the nature of memory is an important variable that we must take into consideration. In this issue, we have an article written by memory expert Dr James Ost on false memory research (pp. 15-20), and what we can and can't know about how our minds mis-remember.

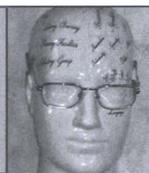
We also have a comprehensive review of three books dealing with classic UFO cases (pp. 8-13) written by Dr David Clarke, one of Britain's leading UFO sceptics, and a report from our 'sceptic in the field', Jon Cohen, on what happens when a sceptic enters the unearthly mists of a 'Mystic Fair' (pp. 21-22).

The excitement growing around *The Skeptic* is wonderful to see, and we've had a wave of new subscribers, and so if this is your inaugural issue, we'd like to extend a sincere welcome to the magazine and we welcome you to share your thoughts, ideas, and opinions (because we know you have them!) on the magazine with us at edit@skeptic.co.uk. We'd also like to thank everyone who completed our online survey. Our new website is up and running (<http://skeptic.org.uk/joomla>) and we've uploaded details of our archived issues along with some of the full articles that we've published in the past. But don't worry if an article you're interested in reading isn't online, you can always order full copies of our past issues through the 'subscriptions' link on the site.

With best wishes,
Lindsay and Chris



Hits and Misses



Reagan, Clinton, Bush, Plait

In recent times, the qualifications required for US politicians and political candidates have notoriously come under question. Certainly, with airtime given to Barack Obama's breakfast preferences and whether those expensive Italian shoes really make John McCain any less 'American', popular political discussion seems to be increasingly vacuous.

There is little doubt, however, that a certain newly elected President is actually very well suited to his new role, despite a penchant for t-shirts and baseball caps. At least one online (admittedly spoof) news portal declared the "Phil Plait Phenomenon" in full swing, and it only seems fitting to recognise the latest appointment to the ranks of the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF).



Since JREF's foundation in 1994, James Randi has been at its helm in the role of President, figurehead, and general sceptical icon. The JREF press release issued on the 4th August, however, marked an end to this reign and a movement "up-and-sideways" for Randi, to the position of "Founder and Chairman of the Board". Meanwhile, Phil Plait adopts the vacated presidential position. Plait (a familiar name to many sceptics) runs the website *Bad Astronomy*, founded the blog of the same title in 2005, and recently rose to interstellar notoriety with an asteroid bearing his name.

Randi stated that the changes to the JREF structure

would provide "the time and opportunity to finish my next two books: *A Magician in the Laboratory*, and *Wrong!*", though in the edition of SWIFT on March 19th 2004, he wrote: "I lose no opportunity to get to my keyboard and record my thoughts before the inevitability of time catches up with me. I estimate that I have two more books in me. Perhaps quantity will substitute for scholarship". Thankfully, with these latest offerings following a publication in 2005, that estimate is already *Wrong!* and I hope this paves the way for many further publications from Randi's hand.

Denver, the most inviting place on Earth

We now know that aliens not only exist, but are also exempt from criminal prosecution in America, or at least those are the implications of an article in the *Denver Post*. The reported story rests on an alleged alien visitation to Denver, in which a stereotypically grey, inverted pear-shape head, appeared at the window of a man who coincidentally happened to have a video camera pointing in the same direction with the belief that local deviants had been peering into his house at his young daughters.

Obviously it is easy to mistake a pervert for an alien, but the resulting worldwide attention given to the videotape goes to show precisely how frenzied the media can become when armed with a poorly taken video, an endorsement of authenticity, and a healthy imagination.

Validated by a film editor also from Denver, a reconstruction of the videotape was looped over and over on news channels while its owner, Stan Romanek, described his thoughts of the images. Details of the preliminary investigation and precisely how the tape was proven to be authentic are seemingly unreleased, but more interesting hoaxes have been uncovered in the past.

The Cottingley Fairies, for instance, started life in 1917, long before international media. They were a private joke between relatives but photos were soon endorsed and validated by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Harold Snelling (an expert in 20th century fake photography) rendering them as a unique mystery. After debate lasting for 64 years, four of the five photos were eventually revealed as fakes through a confession from their creators. They were made using paper cut-outs and hatpins, though the authenticity of the fifth photo was always maintained.

In the Denver case, however, the story becomes wonderfully farcical with Romanek's claim that he has encountered aliens on over 100 other occasions. To keep allegedly authentic video evidence of an extraterrestrial visitation hidden for years is implausible for so

many reasons, but to remain silent about countless other incidents including abductions and torture, suggests a completely different motivation than the promotion of public awareness, especially when the incidents are later revealed to the media.

A news conference was organised for Romanek and the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) by Jeff Packman, a local resident. Around 30 journalists attended with at least 12 further TV cameras present. At the conference, Packman suggested that the city develop an Extraterrestrial Affairs Commission that would handle alien encounters.

What seems evident from the Denver case, the Cottingley Fairies, and countless other examples, is the impressively low threshold of evidence required for a vaguely inventive hoax to gain international awareness and become part of our culture. The perpetuation of poorly supported claims in the face of common sense and fundamental questioning paves the way for future dubious thought.

One thing is certain: if aliens genuinely were peering into Denver homes, no prosecutions would be brought for breach of privacy or trespassing. Their existence would become a worldwide news story and justifiably so. Rather than media sensationalism and willing liberal acceptance as a default position, what is perhaps required is a little reflection on the nature of claims and the suspension of belief until the discovery of robust evidence.

The end of the world is pretty

With this issue of *Hits and Misses* taking a decidedly extraterrestrial turn, it seems an appropriate time to mention developments with the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at the *Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire* (CERN).

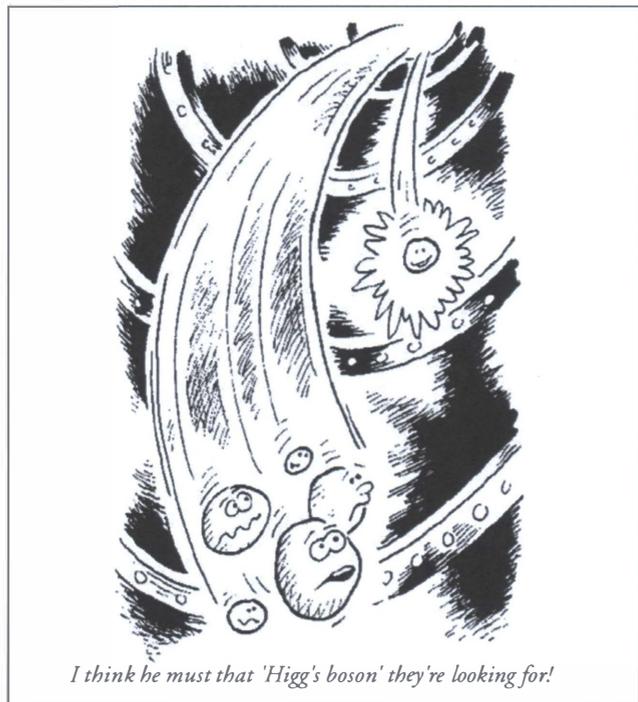
Crudely explained, the LHC is a ring of evacuated piping, buried 100 metres under the Franco-Swiss border and surrounded by 9300 powerful, superconducting magnets, forming the world's largest cryogenic facility. Inside the 'beam pipes', protons are accelerated to speeds approaching that of light, travelling 11,245 times around the 26.6 km ring every second before intentional collisions between the particles are created. The energy and particles created as a result of the collisions are under study in an attempt to better understand high energy events and interactions.

Presuming the current tentative schedule is met, the LHC is due to begin testing and collecting data this September. It will be six to seven years, however, before any results can be analysed. The reason for this is that the particle events under investigation will only occur in a minority of the interactions and, even then, their presence will be masked by 'noise' generated from other interactions. The events are also very short-lived, lasting

only for fractions of a second. As a result, data of sufficient statistical power will take the best part of a decade to collect.

At its core, it is hoped that the data from the LHC will support the existence of the Higgs boson, the only particle identified within the most accurate theoretical physical model (Standard Model) which has not yet been observed. Consequently, without the Higgs boson, our current understanding of physics would need revising.

Throughout the development of the LHC, controversy has existed about its safety, not least due to the fact that it is the most powerful particle accelerator ever developed. While physicists would likely consider the annihilation of Earth to be resounding proof of their hypotheses, such an event, though unlikely, would



I think he must that 'Higg's boson' they're looking for!

inevitably cause difficulties disseminating results in a peer-reviewed format. Trips to the CERN complex can be booked at its website, through which a frightening array of quite colourful equipment can be seen, so if nothing else, the end of the world is pretty.

Little Atoms

The Skeptic now has an official podcast; *Little Atoms* is "a show about ideas", and its hosts, Neil Denny, Padraig Reidy, and Anthony Burn, converse weekly with a guest about "freedom of expression, free inquiry, empirical rationalism, skepticism, the scientific method, secular humanism and liberal democracy". With past guests such as Christopher Hitchens, Jon Ronson, and James Randi, you can be guaranteed there is never a dull moment on-air! *The Little Atoms* podcasts can be accessed via our website and also on iTunes.

Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



Spot the Ball

IT'S WIMBLEDON Final's day as I write, and among the usual entertainments there have been disputes over line calls. The electronic line-calling gizmo Hawkeye ended all that, right?

Not so much. A paper by University of Cardiff research professor Harry Collins and senior lecturer Robert Evans published shortly before the Championships claimed that Hawkeye should not be relied upon. The paper set off a flurry of press coverage and a debate with the manufacturer, Hawk-Eye Innovations.

Collins and Evans' first problem: Hawk-Eye Innovations does not make available the details of its system's inner working. They relied on public sources such as press accounts, patent applications, and Web discussions for the data they needed.

As far as they (and we) understand the device, it feeds the data from up to six cameras tracking the flight of the ball to a computer. When a player challenges a call, the computer reconstructs the ball's flight by analysing the pixels in each frame of the footage and feeds it into a model of the court and the game's rules. Based on its simulation, the machine decides whether the ball landed in or out. The output is shown to TV viewers and projected on screens inside the stadium.

The problem that interested Collins and Evans is that the reconstruction looks authoritative. Viewers, they argued, are being misled into thinking that the images shown are real reality instead of what they actually are, which is virtual reality. This issue was correctly predicted by Robert B. Waltz, who writes and edits the pro tour news side of *Daily Tennis*, but ignored by everyone else in the tennis world.

There have been several incidents where players have begun arguing with Hawkeye. The most notable occurred in the fourth set of the 2007 Wimbledon final, when Hawkeye called a ball good that Federer, Nadal, TV viewers, and the umpire all thought was out. Federer, who opposed Hawkeye from the start, got quite angry, as the *Telegraph* reported: "So a system which was introduced to prevent McEnroe-style rants at officialdom actually left one of the sport's gentlest champions fuming."

Hawk-Eye Innovations puts the mean error in the position of the tennis ball as measured by its system at 3.6 mm. In the Federer-Nadal match, Hawkeye called the ball in by 1 mm. Besides the obvious problem, as Collins and Evans point out in their paper, the real world does not have the clean, perfect edges of the virtual world. The fuzz on the ball and the fuzz on a grass or clay surface make accuracy to 1 mm impossible no matter how you're calling it.

Many tennis watchers shrug and say that all that matters

is that Hawkeye is more accurate than human line judges and umpires. Collins and Evans take a different view; they suggest that in the interest of changing the game as little as possible, automated line-calling systems should be designed to emulate the rate of human error as closely as possible.

But the fact that Hawkeye is not perfectly accurate isn't necessarily the point. Audiences worldwide seem to like the technology. It adds a new element of drama to the game. A ball is close. Will the player challenge? Who will be right if he does?

On the other hand, it also takes away an element of drama. Players in general do not now go on arguing with the umpire if the challenge goes against them. There have been exceptions, most notably Roger Federer, who, as stated, appealed to the umpire to overrule one of Hawkeye's calls during the 2007 final. Federer was probably right; TV viewers, the commentators, and the umpire all saw the ball out. But the rules in games and sports are not meant to be rational. They are meant to be the constraints that make the game interesting. If the rule is that Hawkeye's calls are the ultimate arbiter, then even if Hawkeye is wrong, it's right.

The bigger problem with Hawkeye – and the reason Collins and Evans decided to study it – is that it gives the general public an erroneous impression about the accuracy of the technology. Of course, today's fictional TV shows like *24*, *CSI*, *Bones*, and *Las Vegas* do this, too. How many times have you seen someone pull up a fuzzy digital photograph from, say, a CCTV camera mounted in the ceiling, zero in on a tiny portion of it, and say casually, "Enhance that"? Bingo, the fuzzy, low-res picture is replaced by a crystal-clear image so sharp that you can now read the name of the manufacturer off the pills in a person's hand. This is fantasy technology; if the data is not there, no matter how good the computers are, no amount of enhancement can create it.

In the interests of improving public education, Collins and Evans would like to see Hawkeye's reconstructions shown with markings that indicate the margin for error and a percentage indicating the system's confidence in the call. They would also like commentators to be able to show both the Hawkeye reconstruction and the TV replay so viewers can assess Hawkeye's accuracy for themselves.

So far, Hawk-Eye Innovations is arguing with Collins and Evans' results while refusing to disclose additional information that would help them improve upon their work. The interests of commerce conflict with those of science – again.

For more detail, you can find the original paper and links to follow-up discussion on the University of Cardiff Web site: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/contactsandpeople/harrycollins/expertise-project/hawk-eye-debate.html>



Wendy M Grossman is founder and former editor of *The Skeptic*. Her web site is at www.pelicancrossing.net.

Making UFOlogy History

David Clarke reviews three books on classic UFO cases published 60 years after the birth of UFOlogy

Witness to Roswell: Unmasking the 60-Year Cover-Up, by Thomas J. Carey and Donald R. Schmitt. Franklin Lake, NJ: New Page Books, 2007.

Encounters at Indian Head: The Betty and Barney Hill UFO Abduction Revisited, edited by Karl Pflock and Peter Brookesmith. San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books, 2007.

Captured! The Betty and Barney Hill UFO Experience: The True Story of the World's First Documented Alien Abduction, by Stanton Friedman and Kathleen Marden. Franklin Lake, NJ: The Career Press, 2007.

The Roswell Incident

THE 60th ANNIVERSARY of the birth of UFOlogy has come and gone and the truth remains, as always, still out there. Proclamations about “the death of UFOlogy” are premature as the subject continually regenerates itself either by the creation of new sub-myths (e.g., crop circles, ancient astronauts) or via the injection of new generations of eager believers inspired by new TV programmes and films. It would be more accurate to say that public interest in UFOs tends to wax and wane in response to media coverage. Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of the UFO industry, classic cases such as Rendlesham now appear to be a thing of the past. As a result, the discourse of UFOlogy – today largely conducted online – is focussed upon the obsessive re-examination of a tiny number of historical cases that are regarded by proponents as being most evidential in terms of providing proof of extraterrestrial visits.

Last year’s anniversary provided an opportunity to resurrect two key pillars of the UFO legend – alien abductions and government cover-ups. Six decades have passed since Kenneth Arnold’s sighting in June 1947 ushered in the age of the flying saucer, but it was the event that occurred in New Mexico just days afterwards that has since been crowned “the most important case in UFO history.” Since it was ‘rediscovered’ in the 1970s, the Roswell incident has spawned an entire cottage industry and its various elements now dominate UFOlogical discourse, particularly in North America.

2007 was for many UFO diehards the 60th anniversary not of Kenneth Arnold’s sighting but of Roswell. This opportunity has provided a handy vehicle for two of the case’s stalwarts, Tom Carey and Donald Schmitt, to publish the fruits of their research. Their book, *Witness to Roswell*, subtitled “unmasking the 60-year cover-up” was published to coincide with the carnival that has become an integral part of the little town’s economy. As the title suggests, this book is a com-

pendium of testimonies from people who say they witnessed some aspect of the saucer crash and its aftermath. The authors claim all these stories describe a flying saucer and alien bodies; none of them talk about a Mogul balloon. What they fail to mention is that they date not from 1947, but from a period after 1980. It was then that the Roswell base intelligence officer, Jesse Marcel, came forward with his version of the story. Another key participant, USAF Capt. Sheridan Cavitt, who was present at the crash site with Marcel, told an air force investigator in 1993 the objects he collected were part of a balloon trail. But to conspiracists like Carey and Schmitt, Cavitt’s evidence is worthless. He is painted as a Government stooge and as such his story is all part of the cover-up. Jesse Marcel’s account is, in contrast, a UFOlogist’s dream. It appears that in 1947, in the aftermath of the flying saucer craze, he came to believe the wreckage he saw came from a spaceship.

The stories that have emerged since 1980, including those that describe alien bodies, have all been influenced by Marcel’s account, hyped by the vivid imaginations of UFOlogists

The stories that have emerged since 1980, including those that describe alien bodies, have all been influenced by Marcel’s account, hyped by the vivid imaginations of UFOlogists. The ‘new’ testimonies are not contemporary evidence or ‘oral histories’ as Carey and Schmitt would have us believe. They were mostly collected between 30 and 60 years after the events they purport to describe and as such are examples of contemporary legend. One typical example, chosen at random, begins:

... after the *Unsolved Mysteries* [TV broadcast on Roswell in 1989] ... a former cancer ward nurse from the St Petersburg Hospital in Florida came forward to describe the final testimony she personally heard from one of her patients. The nurse was Mary Ann Gardner, who worked at the hospital from 1976 to 1977. The patient, a woman

(Gardner couldn't remember her name), had been alone in the hospital. Feeling concern for her because she had no visitors, Gardner spent as much time as she could listening to the woman's stories – especially the one about the crashed ship and the 'little men' she had seen...

In the absence of any *real* hard evidence, Roswell's promoters rely upon this type of second- and third-hand testimony along with death-bed confessions, many extracted literally from beyond the grave, as living witnesses who actually remember the incident are now scarce indeed. With each passing year 'new' witnesses have to be found to keep the Roswell bandwagon on the road. Chief among them is the testimony of

his oath of silence. If they waited long enough, they might find what they wanted, and so it has turned out. In 1993 Haut signed an affidavit to the effect that although he had not personally seen the Roswell debris, he had become "convinced that the material recovered was some type of craft from outer space". This implies his sincere belief was based not upon what he knew was fact, but what he subsequently heard from others, such as Jesse Marcel and the assorted UFOlogists who befriended him. Carey and Schmitt save what they appear to believe is their trump card until the end of this book. In 2002 an elderly Haut signed a second affidavit that his family stipulated was not to be made public until after his death. Haut died in 2005 at the age of



Artist's impression of ranchers examining debris – from a crashed flying saucer or a balloon used in Project Mogul?

Walter Haut, the press officer at Roswell Army Air base in 1947. It was Haut who, on the orders of the base commander, Col. William Blanchard, sent out the famous press release that announced to the world how the US Army Air Force had recovered a flying saucer from a remote desert ranch. The initial excitement was dampened within hours by the announcement that the 'flying disc' had been identified as a lowly weather balloon. For some, this is where the cover-up began, or where the seeds of a modern myth were planted.

UFOlogists have pursued Haut and other surviving Roswell veterans for decades. When Haut insisted he knew nothing, they concluded he wasn't ready to break

83. The 'new' statement, published to coincide with the 60th anniversary hype, contradicts the earlier account. In 1993 he was clear that he had not personally seen any wreckage. But in 2002 this story had changed. Now he had personally handled the debris at a meeting attended by Marcel, Blanchard and his boss Brig. Gen. Roger Ramey, where the cover-up was first hatched. Furthermore, despite the extreme secrecy and 'need to know' that surrounded the crash Blanchard took Haut – a mere press officer – for a peek at the saucer and the bodies of its occupants hidden inside a hangar. The famous press release was a Pentagon-inspired tactic to divert attention from a second crash site, where the

clean-up operation was taking place.

For those who buy into the Roswell conspiracy, Haut's story has provided more grist to the mill. But a number of UFOlogists who believe a flying saucer did crash in New Mexico have cast doubt upon the authenticity of the new affidavit. UFO pundit Frank Warren has revealed how in 2000, when an elderly Haut agreed to be interviewed on video, he was confused and contradicted himself frequently. He could not remember where he did his basic training, or even where he was

ing under oath. Rather it was "prepared, it [was] based on things that Walter told us in confidence for a number of years" and when he felt ready to do it "his doctor, had given us the go-ahead that he mentally was totally competent." Schmitt added that Haut read the document a number of times, then signed it with three witnesses present. So rather than providing the 'smoking gun' sought by the UFOlogists, the Haut affidavit turns out to be just another dead end.

Despite such shaky foundations, Roswell retains its



Irving Newton, Met. Officer at Roswell USAFB, New Mexico, holds debris of supposed flying saucer found by rancher Mac Brazel, stated by USAF to be a weather balloon

stationed during the war. To Warren, this was clearly an elderly man who was exhibiting signs of dementia. On four separate occasions during the interview Haut says he "didn't see anything" and he "just wrote a press release." On another occasion, when asked by interviewer Larry King on national TV if he "had ever seen any of the wreckage", Haut replied "No."

Yet we are now asked to believe that a couple of years later this same man was capable of writing a meticulously clear, concise account of handling the wreckage of a spaceship, to the extent that he was able to recall the approximate time of staff meetings and phone conversations. More details emerged when one of the *Witness to Roswell* co-authors was interviewed for an internet podcast. During the discussion, Don Schmitt revealed that Haut did not personally write the affidavit, which is usually a sworn statement made in writ-

central position in the UFO mythology. For many the future credibility of the subject now rests entirely on the evidence for this one case. Carey and Schmitt justify their obsessive interest by claiming it is the only UFO incident that can provide physical proof of ET visitations, if only the cover-up could be exposed. Unfortunately, based upon the contents of this book they are chasing a chimera of their own construction; one based upon self-delusion and self-deception. Those who believe the US Government has successfully concealed wreckage and bodies from a crashed flying saucer for 60 years will accept nothing less than total disclosure of what they see as undeniable fact. For them, the Roswell incident *cannot be disproved*, only proved. One outcome of the anniversary is clear: belief in Roswell is now a matter of faith which puts the alleged 'facts' beyond all rational discussion or examination.

The Story of Betty and Barney Hill

Of more interest to the general reader are two books that seek to throw new light on that other foundation stone of the UFO mythology – alien abductions. Public fascination with the abduction craze is now in decline after reaching its high-water mark during the 90s. A number of its proponents have since moved on or found new outlets for their interests in channelling, contactee cults and New Age beliefs. The lack of any convincing proof and a number of devastating, carefully-argued academic studies, such as those by Susan Clancy, have taken their toll on the credibility of the abduction industry. In ten or twenty year's time, I predict we will be looking back upon alien abductions as just another UFO fad, which had its day and came and went.

One outcome of the anniversary is clear: belief in Roswell is now a matter of faith which puts the alleged 'facts' beyond all rational discussion or examination

Nevertheless, the 60th anniversary of the birth of the modern UFO enigma provided an opportunity for a collection of authorities, representing all parts of the spectrum of belief and disbelief, to revisit the seminal account that sparked the modern obsession with extra-terrestrial kidnappings. The story of Betty and Barney Hill, a mixed-race couple from New Hampshire, has been picked apart in thousands of books and articles. For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the details, it began one night in September 1961 when the couple were returning home from holiday in Canada. Whilst driving through the deserted White Mountains they saw a brightly lit UFO that appeared to follow them. At one stage Barney, who was driving, stopped the car and watched the UFO through binoculars. Behind a row of windows he saw a group of humanoid figures watching him and, believing they were about to be captured, he drove off in a panic. Soon afterwards the couple were confronted by the UFO and its occupants who were now blocking the road. The next thing the Hills consciously recalled was an odd beeping noise; they were aware of being on a road 35 miles further south and eventually returned home two hours later than expected. Betty subsequently experienced a series of disturbing dreams where she and Barney were abducted by the crew of the UFO. In 1964 they were both hypnotically regressed by a Boston psychiatrist, Dr Benjamin

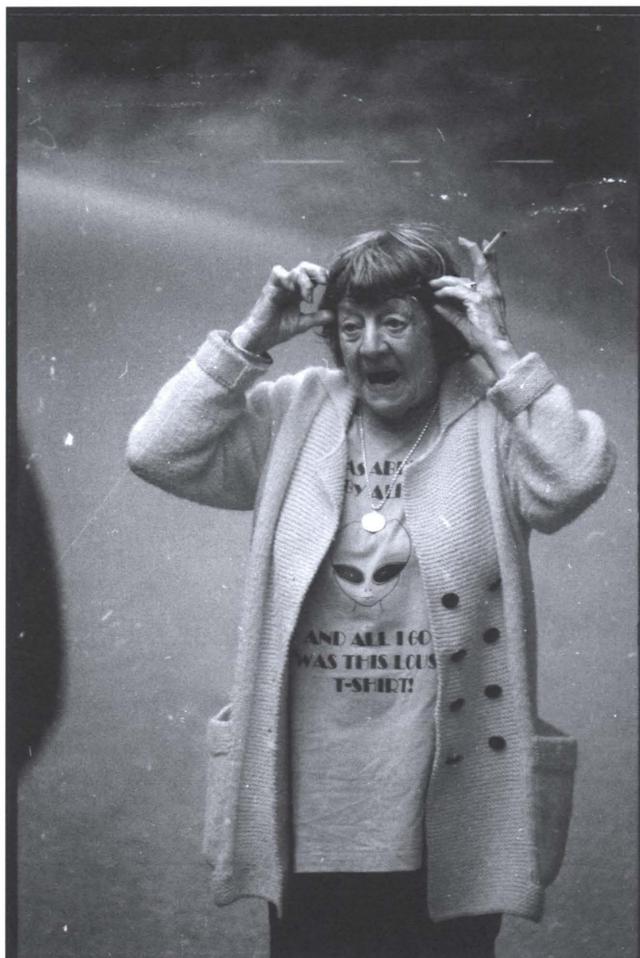
Simon, and their stories recorded. Their accounts of what transpired during the period of 'missing time' appeared to match Betty's dreams in significant places. Details emerged of a medical examination and a lengthy conversation between Betty and the 'leader' of the alien crew. In 1966 the story was published by journalist John Fuller in his bestselling book, *The Interrupted Journey*, that was widely syndicated. The Hills became overnight celebrities and their narrative – with its key motifs of 'missing time', abduction and medical examination – became the template for all future alien abduction stories.



*The Hills photographed in 1966, five years after their claimed abduction; they hold John Fuller's book *Interrupted Journey* which tells their story*

If you only have the patience to read one of the two new revisitations of the Hill's story, *Encounters at Indian Head* should be your choice. It is by far the superior work. Scholarly in tone and reflecting a range of informed viewpoints, it will become the key text on the case for future generations of researchers. The book is an edited collection of papers prepared following a private symposium that was held in September 2000 at Indian Head, New Hampshire, close to the rural area where Betty and Barney's encounter with their UFO occurred in September 1961. Editors Karl Pflock and Peter Brookesmith shared a long-term fascination with the Hill story, whilst holding diametrically opposed views on its reality status. While Brookesmith, along with Hilary Evans and Martin Kottmeyer take a sceptical, psychosocial approach, Pflock – the author of a devastating deconstruction of the Roswell myth – appears to play devil's advocate. He believes only a literal interpretation of the Hill's story, where the couple are kidnapped by aliens from Zeta Reticuli, fits all of the known facts.

The strength of *Encounters at Indian Head* is that hidden somewhere within this polarity of viewpoints, readers can ultimately divine their own version of the 'truth'. In an appendix, Martin Kottmeyer puts the finishing touches to his argument that the Hill's experience was a product of the human imagination fashioned from the raw materials of popular culture – the



Betty Hill, almost 40 years after the event, describes how she was taken on board an alien spacecraft on 19 September 1961 and subjected to a physical examination

books and films the Hills had seen and absorbed, consciously and unconsciously, before their 'experience'. All the contributors bring something new to the table, but the consolidated version of the case compiled by Dennis Stacy's literature search makes it clear the story is actually far stranger than the standard account repeated in the UFO literature. The sociologist and veteran anomalist Marcello Truzzi chaired the symposium and contributed an insightful analysis of contrasting approaches to the Hill's experience.

Both Truzzi and Pflock died before the book was completed, so it stands as a monument to their and Betty Hill's input. Barney Hill died in 1969 and Betty went on to become a serial UFO spotter; she died from lung cancer in 2004. Despite her slow transition to cult leader and contactee, she had little time for the amateur abduction researchers who were busily finding new 'victims' of the nefarious greys. As we have seen in the case of Roswell, the UFO industry is reluctant to let go of its sacred cows. It was inevitable that Brookesmith and Pflock's erudite re-examination of the Hill case would provoke a reaction from those who see the Hill abduction as a central pillar of their beliefs and careers.

In contrast to *Encounters, Captured!* comes across as largely a vehicle for Stanton Friedman and assorted friends to defend this particular UFO Alamo to the last. Sadly, Friedman's presence here ruins what would have been an intimate and largely neutral insight into the Hill's private lives by Kathy Marden, Betty's niece and the trustee of her estate. Marden was a teenager when the Hill's experience occurred and she has grown up alongside her aunt's increasingly weird stories. As an adult she became a UFO investigator herself and as such she is clearly not the most objective person to assess the reality, or otherwise, of the story she does her best to chronicle here. Marden is billed as co-author but much of the content of this book appears to be written by her. Her unique collection of papers and correspondence, some of which are reproduced in a lengthy appendix, add a mass of new information to what is known about the Hill's ordinary lives and the extraordinary events that transformed them.

Friedman's role seems to be to provide a celebrity name and selling point. His contribution is fortunately confined to a boorish and poorly-argued chapter that attacks 'noisy negativists' who appear to include just about anyone who does not accept his literal interpretation of the Hill's experience. This comes across as a hectoring polemic that is badly out of place in the context of Marden's careful and, in places, uncomfortable examination of Betty Hill's strange life.

While neither book provides the reader with a complete answer to what happened to the couple that fateful night in September 1961, both provide valuable contributions to the literature of this complex and intractable case. We may never find a satisfying and comprehensive solution to the Hill's experiences, but these books demonstrate how we are finally beginning to ask the right questions about their ultimate meaning.

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Skeptical Stats

1. Length of the year 46 BC, nicknamed *Annus Confusionis*: **445 days (to ensure the Julian calendar was aligned with the spring equinox)**
2. Number of unwitting individuals from an unidentified European country who were tracked through their mobile telephone signal, in a University study into human movements: **more than 100,000**
3. Number of condoms delivered to an American research base in the Antarctic for use by the 125 scientists and staff during the winter months: **16,500**
4. Length of time a 58-year-old homeless woman spent living covertly in a cupboard belonging to a bachelor who, after believing he was the victim of repeat burglaries in which food was stolen, installed CCTV cameras in his home: **one year**
5. Amount of money discovered by police who raided a prisoner's Brazilian prison cell on suspicion of drugs: **\$172,000 (in addition to a plasma TV, DVD player, two refrigerators and at least two guns)**
6. Barbie's™ body measurements (in inches), if she were life-size: **33-18-33**
7. Steve Jobs' (*Apple* CEO) annual salary since 1997: **\$1**
8. Victory margin claimed by the Mayor of the Romanian village of Voinesci, who died during elections but was not withdrawn as "the law does not foresee such a situation": **23 votes**
9. Cost of a mail order ghost in a bottle, "captured from a reported haunted establishment": **\$20.00**
10. Concentration of hydrogen cyanide (the gas often used for delousing and also employed at Auschwitz) which is fatal to humans: **1.9% of the concentration which is fatal to lice**
11. Number of live animals transported to slaughter houses every week: **over 1,000,000,000**
12. Furthest WiFi connection, made between two mountains in Venezuela: **237 miles**
13. Temperature of the world's most powerful laser: **10 million Celsius**
14. Number of CCTV cameras in London: **around 10,000**
15. Approximate percentage of UK households which participate in the *Nectar* card scheme: **50**
16. Mean number of *Nectar* cards swiped every second of the day: **19**
17. Estimated number of animals within America alone, which are needlessly euthanized every day: **26,301 (9.6 million each year)**
18. Percentage of America's reported homeless population who are male: **69**
19. Percentage of the American population that, in 1980, believed that television evangelists were trustworthy: **41**
20. Number of incidents in French hospitals, nursing homes and long-term care centres during 2005, which involved "entrapment in beds due to inadvertent activation of an electric footswitch": **24 (six of which resulted in fatalities)**
21. Percentage of deaths related to the use of beds (as reported to Health Canada), which resulted from entrapment events: **65**
22. Approximate percentage increase in sales, experienced by American stores which provide an ATM dispensing \$20.00 notes: **8**
23. Average number of women with whom the average British female has experienced intimate homosexual contact: **1.61**
24. Average number of men with whom the average British male has experienced intimate homosexual contact: **7.46**
25. Projected number of people who will possess a biometric record by 2015: **over 1 billion**

Sources

1 East Carolina University; 2,13 BBC News; 3,5 Reuters; 4 *Telegraph*; 6 Student Nutrition Action Committee, University of California; 7 *Guardian*; 8 *Telegraph*; 9 <http://aghostinabottle.com>; 10 Federal Aviation Administration; 11 www.handlewithcare.tv; 12 Engadget; 14 This is London; 15,16 Select Committee on Home Affairs Fifth Report; 17 American Humane Association; 18 Homelessness Resource Exchange; 19 *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No 3; 20,21 Health Canada; 22 The ATM Connection; 23,24 Times Online; 25 Privacy International.

► *Skeptical Stats* is compiled by **Mark Williams**, with suggestions for this copy from **John Roberts**. Both *Hits & Misses* and *Skeptical Stats* depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please do send any interesting articles or opinions to mark.williams@gold.ac.uk, post a comment in our blog at ukskeptic.livejournal.com, or send in by post to the address on the masthead (p. 3). Contributions are gratefully received and cited with your names.

The recovered memory debate: False memories of the memory literature?

James Ost analyzes and critiques a body of false memory literature

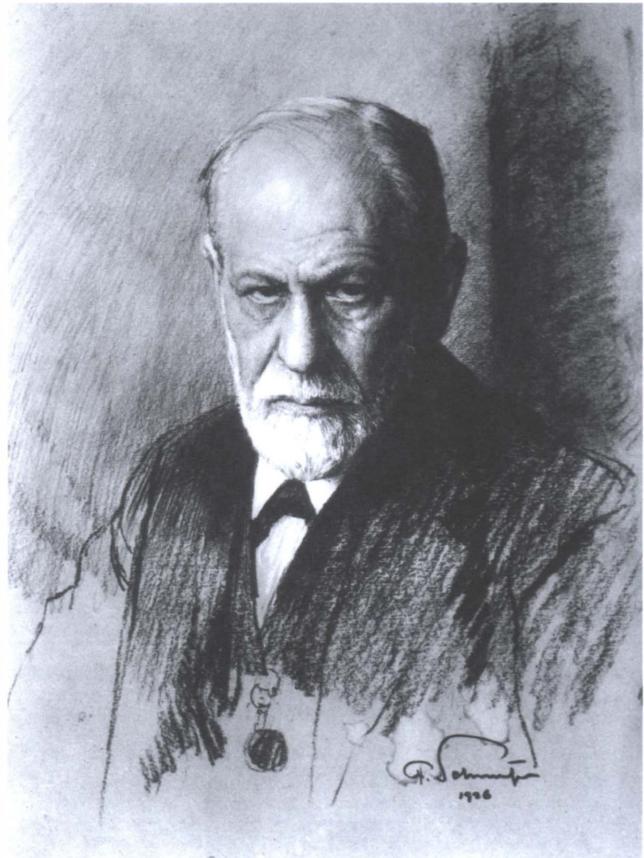
Introduction

MEMORY IS NOT like a video camera, accurately recording everything and storing that information in pristine form to be recalled at a later date. Rather, remembering is a process of reconstruction; we take pieces of information we have about the past and weave them together in the present to form a coherent story of what probably happened. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in the wave of cases that first began to attract headlines during the late 1980s and early 1990s in North America. These cases were made by adults who claimed that they had recently become aware that they had, as children, been victims of sexual abuse. The circumstances in which some of these new memories emerged appeared to have been unduly suggestive. Indeed some of the claims (e.g., of satanic ritual abuse) were so bizarre that they were highly unlikely to have been based on events that actually occurred. In the early days, psychologists and other professionals were ill-equipped to answer questions about the veracity of these claims. Can people 'repress' memories of trauma? Can people come to falsely believe, or falsely remember, events that did not happen? Research over the last 15-20 years has enabled psychologists to provide answers to some of these questions, but there is evidence that some of this evidence is being overlooked, or even falsely remembered.

Can people repress memories of trauma?

The work of Sigmund Freud is usually credited as the source of the idea that the mind is somehow capable of blocking out memories of threatening, emotional and traumatic events, banishing them to some dark recess of the mind. Freud's term *repression* is commonly used to explain why trauma survivors might have no memory for the events that they allegedly experienced. However, despite continuing efforts to marshal evidence in support of such a mechanism (e.g., Erdelyi, 2006), there remains a complete lack of evidence for its existence (Hayne, Garry & Loftus, 2006; Kihlstrom, 2002). A second mechanism, dissociative amnesia, is also often cited to explain why people might not remember traumatic events. Initially credited to Pierre Janet (who later retracted the idea), the traumatic nature of the event leads people's consciousness to 'split', essentially keeping the memory of the trauma out of conscious awareness. Some clinicians argue that, in extreme cases, this can lead to Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly Multiple Personality Disorder) where these 'splits' in consciousness develop into full blown alter personali-

ties. In this situation the 'core' personality would have no memory for the traumatic events which were stored in the 'alter' personality. However, rigorous critiques strongly point to the iatrogenic character of the disorder (Merckelbach, Devilly & Rassin, 2002) as well as the culture-bound nature of the notion of dissociative amnesia (Pope, Poliakoff, Parker, Boynes, & Hudson, 2007).



Sigmund Freud is generally regarded as the originator of the notion of repression.

Whilst the existence of these two mechanisms is controversial at best, they nevertheless continue to have considerable influence in explaining alleged memory loss in survivors of trauma (Brown, Schefflin, & Hammond, 1998). This was exemplified in a booklet published by the Scottish Executive in 2005. Entitled, *Yes you can! Can of worms: Working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse*, the booklet aimed to provide much needed guidance to the 27,000 or so professionals in Scotland who work with clients where a history of sexual abuse may be an issue. Despite these laudable aims, the booklet contained serious misunderstandings

about the relationship between trauma and memory. On page 10 the reader was told that “[c]hildhood amnesia is abnormal and may indicate abuse.” In fact, psychological research has shown that most adults cannot recall memories from before the age of three. This phenomenon – known as infantile amnesia – is probably due to changes in brain structures as children develop which mean that earlier memories are either not encoded, or are no longer accessible (Usher & Neisser, 1993). There are reports of adults who are able to ‘remember’ elements of certain kinds of key events

Read & Lindsay, 2000). Yet, on page 10 of *Can of Worms*, the reader was again told that amnesia is a common response to trauma which “is considered uncontroversial in respect of other traumas such as war horrors or major disasters”. This claim is in almost diametric opposition to the psychological literature that indicates that people tend to remember such events all too well (McNally, 2003, 2006). So why is the notion of amnesia for traumatic events so widespread? How have such false memories of the memory literature developed?



Thanks to modern psychological research, literally dozens of psychology students have false memories of getting lost in shopping malls during childhood...

from before the age of three to four years – for example, the birth of a sibling (Eacott & Crawley, 1998). However, it is impossible to establish whether these are genuine ‘memories’, or whether the participants are simply remembering family stories that they have been told. Surveys have also found that a considerable number of adults report “significant gaps” in their memory for childhood events after the age of five years (Read, 1997). Importantly, Read (1997) found that participants were no more likely to report having forgotten emotional or traumatic events (e.g., sexual abuse or parental discord) than any other kind of event (see also

One possibility, as McNally (2003) argues, is that an *unwillingness* to report trauma has been confused with an *inability* to do so. We know that individuals with documented histories of trauma sometimes do not report, even when directly questioned, that they remember those events years later (e.g. Goodman et al., 2003). Yet research strongly suggests that not *disclosing*¹, rather than an *inability to remember* is the most parsimonious explanation of such cases (Kihlstrom, 2002; McNally, 2006; Porter & Peace, 2007). If the non-disclosure of known trauma victims can be accounted for in terms of relatively ‘ordinary’ explanations (like child-



... as well as wrongly believing that certain picnic foods made them sick as children

hood amnesia, or an *unwillingness* to report), then there is simply no reason to posit the existence of 'extraordinary mechanisms' of memory loss like repression or dissociative amnesia. However, the claims made in *Can of Worms* indicate that 'extraordinary mechanisms' are still popular notions within therapeutic folklore. The result is that individuals (therapists and their clients) may begin searching for evidence of such memories with the *a priori* conviction that they must be there to be discovered². As psychological research has shown, this runs the risk of creating false beliefs, or memories, of events that have never occurred.

Can people falsely remember events that did not happen?

Psychological research has shown that people are susceptible to a range of memory errors (Schacter, 2001). One of the easiest to demonstrate is the DRM effect; when presented with a list of semantically-associated words (e.g., *ire, wrath, fight, hatred, mean*), participants will often later claim that related, but non-presented, words (e.g., *anger*) were on the original list (Roediger &

McDermott, 1995). Classic research has shown repeatedly that eyewitnesses can be misled by suggestive questioning to report that they remember non-existent details of events they have seen (Loftus, 1979). Recent research has also shown that participants will claim to remember non-existent films of highly publicised news events, including aviation disasters (Crombag, Wagenaar, & van Koppen, 1996), assassinations (Jelicic et al., 2006) and terrorist attacks (Ost, Granhag, Udell, & Roos af Hjelmsäter, in press; Wilson & French, 2006). But these experiments only tell us about the fragile and reconstructive nature of memory in general. They do not tell us whether an individual could develop a 'rich' false memory, like having being the victim of sexual abuse as a child (Loftus & Bernstein, 2005). That question is, of course, impossible to address directly. To do so would require psychologists to breach ethical principles and attempt to suggest to a non-abused participant that they had been sexually assaulted as a child. Whilst that study, quite rightly, will never be conducted, psychologists have conducted studies which show that it is possible for individuals to

come to falsely remember other kinds of, sometimes traumatic, childhood events.

This was first demonstrated in a case study reported by Loftus and Pickrell (1995). In this study, a 14-year-old boy (Chris) was asked to recall details over five days regarding four events involving family members; one of the events was false, and three of them were true (as verified by the family). Chris was interviewed in the presence of a sibling (who was a confederate of the investigators) about these events. The sibling provided verbal corroboration that all the events (including the false event) had taken place. Over time, Chris began to report more about the four events, even rating the false event (becoming lost in a shopping mall as a child) as more likely to have occurred than all but one of the three true events. Loftus and Pickrell (1995) replicated this effect with a larger sample of undergraduate students and found that after three weeks, six out of 24 participants (25%) erroneously believed *part or all* of the false event. Pezdek, Finger and Hodge (1997) demonstrated that an event that was lower in plausibility (receiving an enema as a child) was less likely to be implanted than the 'lost in the shopping mall' event. Research has also shown that therapeutic techniques that are sometimes used to help people remember childhood events (e.g., use of photographs) can also lead people to claim to remember events that did not happen (Garry & Gerrie, 2005; Ost, 2006).

But because these studies rely on asking participants' relatives about events that did or did not happen to the participant as a child, critics argue that it is not possible to be absolutely certain that the false events, or events similar to them, did not occur (Goff & Roediger, 1998). Partly as a result of this criticism, Loftus and Pickrell's findings have been replicated several times using more unusual and traumatic childhood events (e.g., knocking over a punchbowl at a wedding; Hyman, Husband, & Billings, 1995 or being attacked by an animal; Porter, Yuille, & Lehman, 1999). The result of these experiments is that we now know that between 25-65% of participants, when questioned repeatedly about childhood events that did not occur, will claim to remember such events.

Psychologists have also developed novel methodologies that do not rely on obtaining information from outside sources, and studies that have used these methodologies have shown that it is relatively straightforward to lead participants to develop false beliefs about events which did not occur.

One such methodology was devised by Garry and colleagues. Garry, Manning, Loftus, and Sherman (1996) asked participants to complete a Life Events Inventory (LEI) which asked them to indicate the *likelihood* that a list of 40 events (e.g., "got in trouble for calling 911", or "broke a window with your hand") had happened to them before the age of ten. Participants were asked to provide a rating for each event on a scale from 1 (definitely did not happen) to 8 (definitely did happen). Two weeks later, participants were asked to

imagine some of the events (including some that had been given a rating of "definitely did not happen") and answer questions about them. These events were referred to as 'critical items'. Participants were then asked to complete the LEI again (on the pretext that the original had been lost). Garry *et al.* (1996) found that the *likelihood* ratings were more likely to change for critical items compared to those that had not been imagined. Garry *et al.* concluded that the mere act of imagining a false event increased participants' subjective confidence that it had occurred.

Can people come to falsely believe, or falsely remember, events that did not happen?

This is known as the *imagination inflation* effect and it appears to be robust; it occurs when participants imagine recent events (Goff & Roediger, 1998) as well as implausible and bizarre events (Mazzoni, Loftus, & Kirsch, 2001; Pezdek, Blandon-Gitlin, & Gabbay, 2006; Thomas & Loftus, 2002). For example, in a recent experiment, participants were asked to either perform, or imagine performing, familiar ("check the Pepsi machine for change") or bizarre ("propose marriage to the Pepsi machine") actions during a campus walk. Two weeks later, some participants mis-remembered performing both familiar and unfamiliar actions that they had, in fact, only imagined themselves doing (Seamon, Philbin, & Harrison, 2006). However, critics question whether the changes in likelihood ratings are because participants have developed genuine false beliefs, or whether they are the result of regression toward the mean. Regression toward the mean is a statistical artefact where extreme scores on a measure (i.e., "definitely did not happen") are likely, by chance alone, to become less extreme (i.e., "possibly might have happened") when that measure is taken a second time (Pezdek & Eddy, 2001; Garry, Sharman, Wade, Hunt, & Smith, 2001).

A second innovative paradigm is called the *false feedback* method (Bernstein, Laney, Morris, & Loftus, 2005; Laney, Morris, Bernstein, Wakefield, & Loftus, *in press*). In *false feedback* studies, participants are asked to complete a questionnaire about their food preferences. This questionnaire is then fed into a computer for analysis, but the results of the analysis are, in fact, bogus. When the results of the questionnaire are interpreted, the experimenter tells the participant that the computer analysis indicates that, as a child, the participant got sick after eating too much of a certain food (either eggs or dill pickles). Bernstein and colleagues

found that participants who were given this false feedback were more confident that this event had indeed happened than control participants (Bernstein *et al.*, 2005).

Limitations and concerns in false memory research

There are, of course, some obvious limitations with false memory research. The first is that it difficult be sure whether we are really implanting false memories in laboratory studies. The difficulty is that any number of intervening processes could produce the same output (in this case a claim to 'remember'): it could be due to a report bias – a tendency to say 'yes'; it could be due to increases in subjective confidence – being more confident that an event *could have* occurred; it could be due to holding a genuine belief that the event occurred – in the absence of a clear memory of the event (Ost, 2003);

... although the number of studies referring to 'false memory' increased, the proportion of them dealing with memories of entire events... has remained low

or it could be due to having developed a clear, yet inaccurate memory of said events. There is certainly evidence that some individuals will embellish suggested false beliefs with details from their own autobiography (see Bernstein *et al.*, 2005), and there is also evidence that participants develop fairly detailed false recollections of events that are suggested to them (Bernstein *et al.*, 2005; Ost *et al.*, in press). One current challenge then, is to investigate which of these processes are responsible for a given output, and the manner in which these processes are related – in other words, how does a belief become a fully-fledged memory (Ost *et al.*, 2008; Scoboria, Mazzoni, Kirsch, & Relyea, 2004)

The second, related, concern centres on the likely consequence of false beliefs or memories (Smeets, Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Jelicic, 2005). Whilst there is evidence that recovering abuse memories has serious and negative impacts on people's lives (Loftus, 1997), it is difficult to establish whether participants in psychological experiments continue to hold on to the implanted beliefs or memories once they have left the laboratory. As Smeets and colleagues (2005) point out, one measure of how much someone has truly accepted a suggestion is the extent to which they would be prepared to change their behaviour as a result of that suggestion. Recently psychologists have begun to tackle this question. In the Bernstein *et al.* (2005) false feedback study, participants were given a questionnaire about an imaginary barbecue that asked them to indi-

cate which kinds of food they would be likely to eat. They found participants who believed the false feedback about becoming sick as a child after eating too many eggs or pickles, indicated that they would be less likely to choose to eat those foods, than those who did not believe the feedback. Thus, this experiment demonstrates that false feedback about the likelihood of past events can influence later behaviour but, importantly, only for those participants who *believe* the feedback. In a novel twist, Laney, Morris, Bernstein, Wakefield, and Loftus (2008) found that the same kind of false feedback could be used to positively convince participants that, as a child, they really enjoyed eating a healthy food – in this case, asparagus.

Finally, there are concerns over the definition of the subject matter. The research body on false memory has grown almost exponentially over the past few years. Pezdek and Lam (2007) analysed the literature and demonstrated that, although the number of studies referring to "false memory" increased, the proportion of them dealing with memories of entire events (i.e. 'rich' false memories) has remained low (13%). The highest proportion of studies referred to as "false memory" in fact deal with the DRM word list paradigm (42%) (see also DePrince, Allard, Oh, & Freyd, 2004). Pezdek and Lam questioned whether these DRM experiments are really studies of "false memory" in any meaningful sense, or whether they should be referred to instead as "memory flaws" (see Wade *et al.*, 2007, for a rebuttal).

Conclusion

Although such qualifications and caveats are, understandably, of little interest to non-psychologists, they are important. Professionals' recall of the scientific literature is not immune to the reconstructive effects of remembering (Vicente & Brewer, 1993). In a field that has been fraught with misunderstanding, care therefore needs to be taken to ensure that findings are communicated as clearly and as accurately as possible. If they are not, then the consequences can be far-reaching and – as the *Can of Worms* example discussed at the outset of this article demonstrates – we run the risk of encouraging false memories of the memory literature itself.

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¹ For example, for reasons of embarrassment, lack of rapport with the interviewer, consciously trying not to think about the events, or ordinary processes of forgetting (Goodman *et al.*, 2003; McNally, 2006).

² Bizarrely, one self-help book even claimed that the absence of a memory of abuse was evidence that a person had been abused (Blume, 1990).

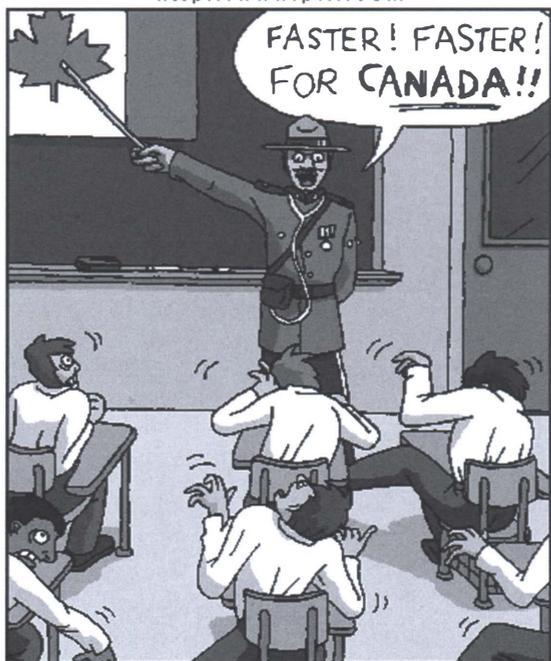
Dr James Ost is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Portsmouth and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the British False Memory Society. He has published widely on the topic of false memories and social influences on memory. He can be contacted at james.ost@port.ac.uk



THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



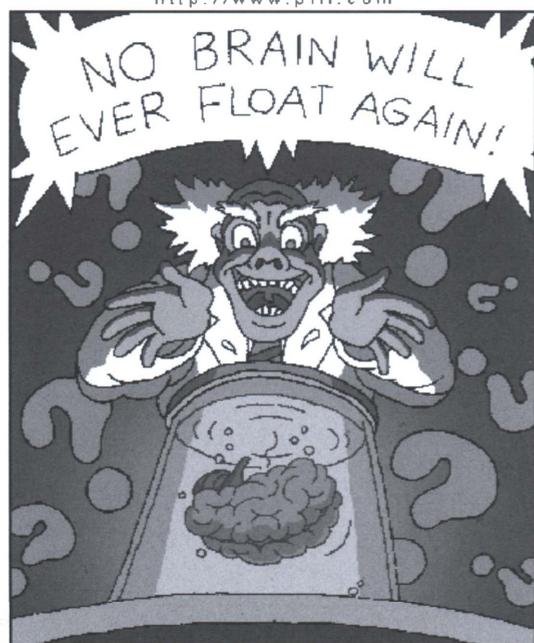
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The Mystery of the Amazing Sinking Brain:
Can YOU solve the puzzle in time?

Profits of the New Age

Jon Cohen reports on a sceptical day spent at *The Mystic Arts Exhibition*, 2008.

THERE IS a particular brand of intolerance that is the preserve of those with deeply entrenched beliefs; it is an intolerance of those who would dare to question those beliefs. It has nothing to do with the manner of questioning, or the context in which such enquiry may be made, it is the very fact that there is questioning itself which is sufficient to rattle the believers' collective cage.

A sceptic may often find themselves on the end of such hypersensitivity, and so it was not altogether surprising that when the organizers of *The Mystic Arts Exhibition* at Olympia heard that *Skeptics in the Pub* were planning a visit to the event, security staff at Olympia were briefed to be on the look out for "militant sceptics planning to disrupt the fair".

This is actually a rather revealing reaction; were they imagining that we would turn up with pitchforks, stakes, and Molotov cocktails? Why should anyone assume that the only reason sceptics would attend the event was to cause disruption? I couldn't help but notice parallels between this reaction, and the accusations of extremism and fundamentalism regularly levelled at Dawkins, Harris, Dennet et al. Why is it considered extremist to express the view that the evidence for someone else's beliefs does not convince you? The funny thing is that a quick look at the program for *The Mystic Arts Exhibition* revealed a number of different, and mutually exclusive, belief systems. One can be certain that the crystal sellers are not in accord with the Scientologists, who in turn disagree profoundly with the Angelic Reiki practitioners. However, they all abide by the universal sacred commandment of the New Age: *Thou shalt not mention thy differences*. It would seem that any belief is better than no belief at all.

It's also worth pointing out an asymmetry in the way that believers and sceptics react to each other. I know from experience that sceptics generally welcome discourse and dialogue with believers. This is either because they enjoy the exchange (it can feel like sport sometimes), or because they are genuinely open to hearing evidence that might change their views on something. This is the beauty of scientific thinking; notions are held tentatively, and theories are provisional. All ideas should be amenable to revision in the light of new evidence. Conversely, the true believer is simply not interested in hearing about opposing evidence. He is quite happy where he is and will often interpret sceptical inquiry as closed-minded judgementalism.

And so on to our sceptical fieldtrip. A band of eleven of us headed down to Olympia on the first really hot Saturday of the year (now *that's* dedication!) to sample the delights of *The Mystic Arts*. Walking into the exhibition hall, we were immediately assailed by the thick fog of incense and the sound of New Age commercialism at full throttle.

My first stop was at the stand of *Shambhala Healing*

Tools. The head of this organization is an American who claims to be no less than "the reincarnation of God on Earth" (at least they're not making grandiose claims). Here I discovered that I could purchase a wide variety of what appeared to be quartz crystals surrounded by copper wire woven into various shapes. These astronomically priced trinkets (some cost several hundred pounds) are called *etheric weavers* and I was told are very useful for "personal and planetary healing". My favourite feature of the *etheric weaver* was that it "does not require cleaning since it constantly transmutes negative energy and self-cleans". I wonder if I can get my car to do that?

A reluctance to define what they actually mean by what they say, combines with unbridled misappropriation of scientific terminology to create a beast which is at once obviously spurious, yet hard to pin down

Moving on, I met a very nice lady who wanted to sell me a copy of *The Secret*. This book and DVD have done huge business worldwide selling millions of copies in less than two years. So what is the secret? Apparently, I can get anything I want just by thinking about it and I was told that "we create our own reality through our thoughts". This idea is known as *The Law of Attraction*. "So..." I asked, "if I want a shiny new Macintosh computer, I don't have to work hard to make the money to buy one, I just have to wish really hard? ... Kind of like asking Santa?" To my amazement, my wry sarcasm was greeted with total agreement and disturbing enthusiasm: "Yes. Whatever happens in your life, you create through the power of positive thinking!" When I asked if this principal applied equally to air crashes, tsunamis and childhood leukemia the response was some extremely banal, limp justification that was so vacuous, I can't even remember what it was.

The next stop on the Choo-choo train of Woo was the *AuraWorld* stand where I could have photographs taken of my aura. I was told that the aura is "an energy field that surrounds all living things." Ok... That's good. Energy field. Yes I remember doing fields in physics, Faraday, Maxwell's equations, all that good stuff. So... exactly what type of field is this aura? Magnetic? ... Electric? ... Nope. Apparently auras are

“Life force energy.” The aura photographer seemed unimpressed with my suggestion that he might win the Nobel Prize in physics for demonstrating the existence of a new type of force. “No,” he said, “it can’t be detected by science.”

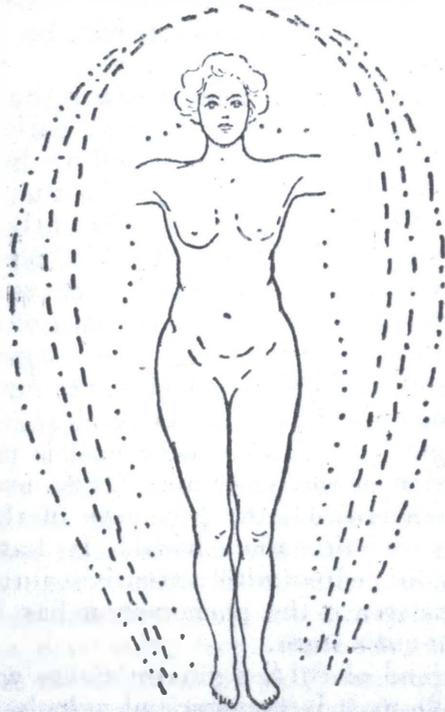


Fig. 19.

- Inner aura.
- - - - - Outer aura, when not well.
- — — — — Outer aura, in good health.
- · · · · Outer aura, after electrifying positively.

The human aura: undetectable by science – but willing to pose for the camera for a small fee (we used a drawing to save money!)

Can't be detected by science? How then is he able to peddle photographs of this mysterious undetectable force? (I'm sorry but you can't have it both ways!) *Auraworld* sell an Aura Photography system that connects to your laptop so you too can sell people aura photos. According to the website, it's "The business in a box."

That says it all. Really.

Other exhibitors at the event included a workshop on how to channel your own dragon so you can “sense its relation to the elements” and thereby “... increase your happiness, fortune, wisdom and success”. The programme describes this workshop as “an opportunity to work with dragons in a safe place”. (I want to know what happens if you work with dragons in an *unsafe* place). There was also the usual assortment of astrologers, tarot readers, mediums and supplement sellers, as well as a double-size stand manned by Scientologists with E-meters in hand, offering their free stress tests whilst they themselves stressed that Dianetics is *not* Scientology. Yeah, right.

The New Age movement is truly a slippery and elusive quarry. A reluctance to define what they actually mean by what they say combines with unbridled misappropriation of scientific terminology to create a beast which is at once obviously spurious, yet hard to pin down. This has proved to be a highly adaptive survival mechanism for New Age culture. The *Mystic Arts Exhibition* was evidence of this, with the sound of cash tills ringing out above the chanting and singing bowls all day.

I've often remarked on the seemingly innocuous coincidence of ideas amongst believers. Why should it be, for example, that someone professing belief in astrology is also likely to believe in homeopathy, when the two subjects have nothing at all to do with each other? Someone who believes that aliens regularly visit our planet is unlikely to adopt a sceptical position on the existence of ESP or crypto-zoology. This conjunction of beliefs is suggestive of a certain mindset (perhaps one which is less critical of evidence).

The common mindset behind *The Mystic Arts Exhibition* is definitely money. Beneath all the touchy-feely tie-dye energy balancing lies the balancing of cash-books. The astrologers are as concerned with consulting their accountants as their star charts. This is a trade fair like any other; it's all about the business.

Some have said that the New Age replaced the traditional God with that of the individual. If the event at Olympia was anything to go by, the new prophet is profit itself.

Jon Cohen is a successful record producer. However, his main passion is scepticism, which he discovered after reading Sagan's *The Demon Haunted World* in his early twenties.

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

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, science and/or religion. 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 Penderel's Oak pub, where the London branch meet up. You can also find details there of the meetings for the Leicester branch. Alternatively, please contact Sid Rodrigues: 07818 443 735, pub@skeptic.org.uk. The meeting begins at 7:00 pm and there is a suggested donation of £2.00.

Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini



THERE'S A WONDERFUL *South Park* episode in which the eight-year-old kids are forced to go to "Tolerance Camp", where Gestapo-style guards tell them sternly, "You will make a painting that shows people of different races and sexual orientations getting along." It's a satire on the dream of an inclusive society where the only thing not tolerated is intolerance.

South Park, of course, tests the limits of toleration all the time, pushing at the boundaries of decency and good taste. But it's also clever stuff, and it sadly is true that tolerance has its limits.

In the UK, we've been struggling with these limits in the ongoing debate about embryo research, which has illustrated how, despite the many things that unite us, there are some fundamental issues where the nation is divided. Worse, there seems little hope of bridging that gulf.

From a secular and scientific viewpoint, all proposals currently on the table for embryo research seem harmless. There are not even any plans to permit the creation of hybrid embryos, where an animal egg is fertilised by a human sperm, or vice versa. The creation of other types of interspecies embryo, where animal or human cells are mixed in more controlled ways, is being proposed and all such embryos would have to be destroyed after 14 days.

Whatever an embryo is at 14 days, it is not a cute little baby. To see the death of such an organism as a tragedy seems perverse when three-quarters of fertilized eggs die in the womb without anyone even knowing. These are cell-clusters, no more and no less, and if they can be used to help develop cures for terrible diseases, there is no reason not to do so.

However, a large chunk of society does not see things in that way at all. A letter signed by leading church leaders when the bill to permit the limited use of interspecies embryos said that "[t]he idea of mixing human and animal genes is not just evil. It's crazy!" A Catholic spokesman also said "when you combine an animal embryo and a human embryo that is by definition monstrous."

So we have a stand-off; both sides believe they have

right on their side, and they couldn't be more diametrically opposed.

The optimistic, liberal view is that when people disagree in a democracy they come together to resolve their differences in respectful dialogue. In this case that seems impossible, because each set of views is built on fundamentally different foundations.

The modern, secular worldview starts with evidence from the physical world, which suggests human beings are no more, but no less, than very intelligent mortal animals. There is no magic point in which we become 'ensouled'; we simply grow gradually from microscopic cells.

How different this idea is from the worldview of Cardinal O'Brien, as described in his last Easter Sunday sermon. For him, "every action is indeed in some way or another a preparation for our new life in Christ." The whole process of life and death thus has a sacred significance from the very moment of conception. This is not strictly an anti-scientific view, but it is certainly one which takes theology first, and biology second.

O'Brien's foundation is a specifically Catholic one, but many religious believers have their own grounds for making sense of life, and these are just different to those of secularists. That means they cannot just do what good democrats are supposed to do and shrug their shoulders when society takes an opposing view. Sunday trading is one thing, but infanticide is another, and this is exactly what many think the killing of any fertilised human cells is.

Is there any hope for a reconciliation when people approach this debate from such divergent directions? I have to say that I'm pessimistic. My one hope is that none of the sacred texts have anything accurate to say about the biology of conception and early life in the womb. The opportunity for the religious and the secular to talk constructively about this issue can only come when the clergy accept that a twenty-first century theology of the sanctity of life has as much to learn from the insights of science as it does from the Bible or Qu'ran. Sending both sides to Tolerance Camp is not, alas, enough.



Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* (www.philosophers.co.uk) and author of *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten and 99 Other Thought Experiments* (Granta), *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press) and *The Meaning of Life* (Granta). Julian's latest book is *Welcome to Everytown: A Journey into the English Mind* (Granta). See www.julianbaggini.com.

Comments welcome to julian@julianbaggini.com

Through a Glass Darkly

Michael Heap



WHEN I WAS an undergraduate, a fellow student told me of how he and a friend once constructed a small object that looked like a 'flying saucer' and left it on a riverbank. Among the contents of this contraption was an old Ever Ready battery. Within a day or so, the local newspaper carried the story that a mysterious object resembling something from outer space had been found. Soon afterwards, someone contacted the newspaper to report that he had actually seen the object descend from the sky.

I was grateful to my friend for telling me this story because it made me think about human life, its richness, complexities and absurdities. It must surely follow that I am grateful for him and his friend for perpetrating their hoax in the first place. But it was *a hoax*; people were deliberately deceived. Isn't there something wrong about this?

Well, there are hoaxes and there are hoaxes, and if this were a learned treatise I would now be attempting some kind of taxonomy of hoaxes. At the moment I can only illustrate what I have in mind by reference to certain hoaxes, the sole aim of which was to encourage people to believe in some extraordinary phenomenon. Celebrated examples are: the Surgeon's Photograph of the Loch Ness Monster, the photographs of the Cottingley fairies, the Patterson-Gimlin film of Bigfoot, crop circles, and innumerable sightings of UFOs and ghostly apparitions.

The stories told about such hoaxes are instructive and are often used in sceptical literature to illustrate important aspects concerning the nature of unusual beliefs. An obvious revelation is the readiness with which people are willing to believe in the authenticity of unlikely events and the tenacity with which they do so. This applies also to 'the experts', who not so uncommonly elbow their way forward and pronounce the evidence to be authentic beyond doubt. I well recall a television documentary some years ago in which 'an expert on crop circles' firmly declared his certainty that one particular example was genuine, only to be immediately confronted by the people who had constructed it. I also recall watching a television interview of either Elsie or Frances (the original photographers of the Cottingley fairies) who told a marvellous story about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was in no doubt that the fairies were real. On observing that one of them had a small bump on its abdomen, he grew very excited and declared that

fairies had navels and therefore reproduced like humans. The bump was in fact caused by the hat pin the girls had used to secure the cut-out of the fairy.

There are common features in the life histories of some hoaxes, notably those perpetrated by children. I recently read about a UFO hoax in Sheffield in 1962 when three lads claimed to have seen five 'flying saucers' in the sky. One of the boys, Alex Birch, claimed to have captured them on camera. The photograph was declared by 'experts' to be authentic, but ten years later Alex called a press conference and said that the photo was a simple cut-and-paste fake. Interestingly, in 1999 he again announced that the photo was genuine and that he had previously proclaimed it to be a fake when he became fed up with the publicity. However, one of his old pals continues to insist that it *is* a fake (<http://www.uk-ufo.org/condign/casehoax7.htm>).

There are parallels between this story and one concerning 'UFO' photographs taken in 1954 by another schoolboy, Stephen Darbyshire (see the above website) and with the saga of the Cottingley fairies. Another example is the story of the Fox sisters whose antics led to the development of the modern spiritualist movement; this also includes another example of a retraction of a confession of faking (by Margaret Fox).

So why do people hoax? Why do they carry on insisting in the claim's authenticity? Why do they eventually confess, or why don't they at all? And why do they sometimes retract their confession? All interesting questions.

Is hoaxing always wrong? I don't think so. Two illuminating examples are the spoof paper 'Transgressing the boundaries: Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity', which physicist Alan Sokal managed to have published in the postmodernist journal *Social Text*, and the petition in the US to ban the 'dangerous chemical' dihydrogen monoxide. Clearly a hoax must have a serious purpose and not be intended merely to embarrass or humiliate people. An important consideration is how long it is acceptable for a hoax to be perpetrated before the person admits the truth. But the ethics of hoaxing are not easy to define. In his book *Flim-Flam!* (Prometheus Books, New York, 1982), James Randi adopts a rather unsympathetic attitude towards Elsie and Frances of Cottingley fame. But how much of that wonderful story would have been lost to us if they had told the truth as soon as they were challenged?

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

Reviews



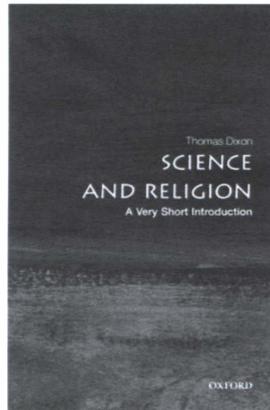
THIS ONE WILL RUN AND RUN

Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction

by Thomas Dixon

Oxford University Press, £7.99 (pb), ISBN 978-0-19-929551-7

The author is a historian, and he promises “an informative and even-handed account of what is really at stake” between science and religion. In 150 pages, it is informative and on the whole even-handed. But it is an introduction to some of the well-known controversies, rather than to basic issues between science and religion. Nowhere does he tell us what he understands by these terms. Religion in particular covers a large range of activities, not all shared by all creeds. It is effectively limited here, as he acknowledges, to Christianity and Islam, which differ from many others. The main controversies dealt with are Galileo, how God interacts with nature, if at all, evolution, creationism, and morality. Dixon rightly stresses that there is never a simple fight between the scientific goodies (or baddies) and religious baddies (or goodies). And that the controversies are invariably entangled with social, political, economic and other factors. He is also right that they are likely to continue.



Even-handedness can lapse into relativism. For example, in his conclusion Dixon says: “From within a particular world view or ideology, certain maxims will seem fundamental and unalterable: for a Muslim, the truth of the Quran; for a Christian, the fact of the resurrection; for an atheist, the purely human nature of all moral codes”. But “seeming” is not all there is to it. And Occam’s razor, I suggest, separates the first two from the third. There is ample evidence that moral codes exist and that humans make them. There is no equivalent evidence for the other two, or for an additional non-human source of morality. Atheism is not another belief, but an absence of belief.

I suggest also that neither science nor religion is an agent. There are scientifically or religiously disposed people, who may be opposed or in agreement or, very often, confused. And insofar as science and religion are entities, they are not the same kind of entity. Such issues need to be sorted, if only briefly, before describing particular conflicts. Otherwise we cannot understand what is “really at stake”. The book ends with ten pages of suggested further reading. In short: good, but could be better.

John Radford

AVANTI BLACK T-SHIRTS!

The Satanic Scriptures

by Peter H. Gilmore

Scapegoat Publishing, \$15.95 (pb), ISBN 13:978-0-9764035-9-3

The content is not what the casual reader might expect from the title and look of the book. Peter Gilmore is no Mocata, providing instructions on sacrificing virgins and summoning up Beelzebub. There would be no point as far as he is concerned because we are our own gods, and despite the theatrical religious trappings, Gilmore propounds a secular creed.

Magus Gilmore is the heir to Anton LaVey, founder of The Church of Satan (CoS), and the *Scriptures* comprises a collection of essays mostly reprinted from *The Black Flame*, the newsstand Satanic magazine which Gilmore founded. The result is somewhat unstructured and repetitive, but entertaining.

Many of the essays are devoted to fending off misapprehensions by aspiring Satanists of what the CoS actually is and how one should live the lifestyle. A key topic is whether Satanism is related to Fascism. It is nothing like it (despite using a Fascist-style system numbering years from the foundation of the Church in 1966), because Fascism subordinates the individual to the collective, whereas Satanism is individualistic.

In fact, a herd mentality is anathema to Gilmore. His epicurean philosophy is based on an egotistical view of the world in which “rational self-interest” is the foundation of the Satanist’s actions. Ultimately he is a right-wing libertarian and it is not surprising that Ayn Rand is name-checked. There is a photograph of him with LaVey in leather jackets and sporting guns – Gilmore’s is bigger, oddly – looking like a pair of wannabe survivalists.

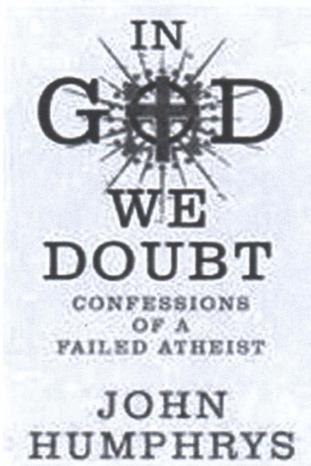
However, despite the attitude of fearless non-conformity there is something comfortingly suburban about Gilmore’s doctrine of enhanced self-esteem. He comes over as a nice chap, a musicologist and animal-lover. Clearly there is no biting the heads off chickens in the Gilmore household. He expounds a way of life attractive to teenage boys with large collections of heavy metal CDs and black T-shirts, but no girlfriends. Mums may worry about what is going on upstairs but society is never going to be under threat.

Tom Ruffles

DOUBTING JOHN

In God We Doubt: Confessions of a Failed Atheist
 by John Humphrys
 Hodder & Stoughton, £18.99, ISBN 978-0-340-95126-2

John Humphrys, fierce political interviewer and questionmaster of *Mastermind*, interviewed representatives of the three main monotheistic religions, the Chief Rabbi, the Archbishop of Canterbury and a Muslim academic, in the radio series *Humphrys in Search of God*. The huge response got him thinking, and this book is the result. He tells us that he was brought up a Christian and prayed every day for most of his life, began to doubt, but cannot shake off the idea that there is Something There – hence his title and sub-title (the latter raised fears that it was an I-was-wicked-but-found-God story, so I was glad to find it isn't). He raises questions of the kind which have troubled people for centuries, in his case from Aberfan to Beslan, asking why God let them happen – the dreadful difference being, as he says, that while Aberfan was an accident, Beslan came about through deliberate action.



The recent spate of anti-religion books by Dawkins, Hitchens et al. gives him much to chew on, and he chides the fiercer critics of religion who insist that all religious belief is delusion, quoting Archbishop William Temple: “If you talk to God you are praying; if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia”. Cargo cults, Pascal’s wager, Bertrand Russell’s teapot and the problems presented to Christians and Jews by the repellent parts of the Old Testament appear, as in Dawkins. Believers’ sometimes baffling logic gets some stick. Humphrys was assured that God alleviated the suffering caused by the 2005 Kashmir earthquake by holding off the snows; why didn’t he simply prevent the earthquake? Similarly, Dawkins asked why, if Our Lady of Fatima saved the Pope’s life after the assassination attempt, as he said, she didn’t simply stop the attempt. Humphrys tells of attending a Billy Graham meeting with a friend. The car broke down on the way. He lightly suggested God didn’t want him to go, and his friend said it was the Devil. The Mensa study showing an inverse relationship between intelligence and belief, and the fact that few members of the Royal Society believe in a personal god, are more significant than Humphrys maintains.

Humphrys’ statement that “by any civilised standards many Sharia punishments are barbaric” is particularly appropriate since I read it at the time of the fuss over the Archbishop of Canterbury’s suggestion that some aspects of Sharia might come to Britain. Humphrys is witty, with some nice jokes about discoveries of the Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark, Jesus’s bones or

tomb, or “that he had a brother or a son who played in defence for Bethlehem United”. And he says Tony Blair may have converted to Catholicism by the time his book is read – the man’s a prophet! Someone should tell him that the alien in *Alien* burst out of John Hurt’s chest, not Sigourney Weaver’s, that there is no actor called Leonard DiCaprio, and that Kate Winslet played a first-class passenger in *Titanic*. And this book’s (highly reputable) publishers should be ashamed for omitting an index.

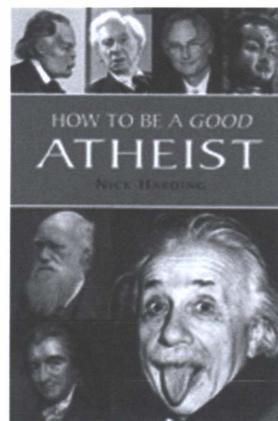
Ray Ward

JUST SAY NO
How to Be a Good Atheist

by Nick Harding
 Oldcastle Books, £10.00, ISBN 978-1-8423-237-2

The title of Nick Harding’s book *How to Be a Good Atheist*, could mean morally good or effective. What is offered covers what ‘atheism’ means, a brief history of it, a justification, and an attack on religion. It is a short (160 pages) addition to the current spate of anti-religious books by Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, etc. It is very clear and readable, though there are some stylistic and grammatical slips.

He seems to agree with the view of some writers, that there are five subsets of atheism: dogmatic, sceptical, critical, philosophical and speculative. I would rather see a spectrum, ranging from mere absence of belief in God or gods, to either a denial of their existence, or the view that since there is neither evidence nor logical argument in favour, and rather good reasons against, a negative result is the only tenable conclusion. There is a chapter on “What is wrong with religion?” – essentially, that it relies on faith – although Harding points out that some religions have no gods. His history of atheism is clear if necessarily very condensed. There is a spirited defence of atheism against the usual silly attacks, e.g. it is just another faith, lots of bad people like Hitler have been atheists (he wasn’t, and in any case it is irrelevant), atheists cannot be moral, if we lose religion we lose all our finer qualities, love, art, music, etc., we all “really” believe in God but atheists won’t admit it, and so on.



The book ends with some famous atheists, a glossary, and twenty-odd ‘must-have’ books for atheists, inevitably leaving out many favourites. A short list of useful addresses sadly omits *The Freethinker* (“the voice of atheism since 1881”). It’s often a pugnacious book, throwing punches in all directions, but a lot of them score. It ought to be in every secondary school. Fat chance.

John Radford



LETTERS

Einstein, Darwin and Religion

The recent revealing of a letter written by Einstein, stating that he thought religion was childish, will not stop evangelists pushing the idea that the great man was a believer in god. Indeed many have stated, and will continue to do so, that he used the term *god* throughout his life, ignoring the fact that he was using it as a metaphor.

In a similar vein, the nonsense of Darwin's so called conversion to a faith, despite his denouncement of Christianity, propagated by Flew and others, is in many respects a dead argument. In fact, in Darwin's autobiography he wrote, "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."

The point to be made is that it is irrelevant to both quantum physics and evolution if both Einstein and Darwin had happened to have been religious. Nor would it have mattered if Einstein had converted to Islam or Darwin to Buddhism. It does not alter the facts that both men's scientific breakthroughs changed humanity's egocentric view of its position in the universe and pointed us in the right direction. So if Flew and others want to bang on about Darwin's conversion, let them. And indeed, so what?

Evolution has blown religion out of the water and turned it into a vacuous and empty set of ideas. Ultimately, it wouldn't have made any difference if at any moment Darwin had denied evolution – it has since been proven *ad nauseam* to be fact. Likewise quantum physics has taught us more about

reality than any so-called oxymoronic 'theistic-truth'. By delving into the fabric of nature itself, quantum physics has discovered that god is conspicuous by his/her/its absence.

Theists can take the great scientists and attempt to make them their own but in the end they are wasting their time. Humans have many failings but the science they uncover speaks for itself. It does not speak for a god.

Nick Harding
London

Sceptical Journals

My feeling about most sceptical journals is that they contain too much general stuff about how great it is to be a sceptic (which surely anyone who subscribes to such a journal might be supposed to have thought out for herself) and not enough about scepticism as it works in practice. My personal favourite among the sceptical journals I take is the Australian one, which offers a good proportion of hard cases. I also like their tone of voice, which combines being very outspoken with the genial laid-back approach we expect from our antipodean cousins. It gives the feel of a gathering of like-minded friends, whereas *Skeptical Inquirer* tends towards a holier-than-thou attitude which sometimes verges on we-know-best intolerance. The (American) *Skeptic* is a great journal, but suffers from an over-devotion to Randi and Sagan (goodness, how Americans do love their heroes!) and is over-concerned with social issues, but perhaps that is necessary in so religious a nation as the USA; it does contain good stuff though.

Of course I wouldn't subscribe to any of them if I didn't, by and large, share their views and enjoy their debunking. Needless to say, I at least skim everything in the (British)

Skeptic, but while I enjoy the comments and views of Grossman, Baggini, et al., I have to say that it is only when the journal gets down to cases that I get really interested, e.g., the exposure of Alcoholics Anonymous (*The Skeptic*, 20.4 and 21.1).

What keeps me interested in the field of anomalous experience is the fact that otherwise intelligent people so often espouse unintelligent ideas and beliefs. You might think it a good idea to open debates on the lines of "Why I believe/disbelieve in Christianity"? As I approach my 80th birthday, my mind is made up on most subjects, but I hope I am always open to suggestions that I might be wrong (my Inner Angel might materialise at any moment and reproach me for not believing in him/her...). My writings tend to be on topics on which I am not entirely satisfied that I know the answer (e.g., my book on ghosts and the encyclopedia Robert Bartholomew and I are about to publish which looks at a whole range of instances of 'extraordinary behaviour' and seeks to untangle the truth from the hype). And I would think that that's the attitude of many of your readers; they want to know whether or not the full moon does or doesn't affect behaviour, whether dowsing works or doesn't, whether people are deceiving themselves when they say homeopathy helps them. I'd dearly love to know the answers to those three questions!

Oh god, I could rattle on for ever... let me just end by saying that I think your – no, correction, our – journal is already doing an excellent job. Of course it could do with improvement, what can't? What we really need is the same, only more so.

Hilary Evans
London

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. Email communication is preferred. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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