

The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics



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Have you been brainwashed?

by John Blanton

This is the title of a small pamphlet from the Institute for Creation Research (ICR). The ICR is located in the community of Santee, California, just outside San Diego [see *The Skeptic*, November 1995] and is arguably the preeminent, young-Earth creationist organization in the Western Hemisphere. The author of *Have you been brainwashed?* is Duane Gish, Vice President of the ICR and one of its chief spokesmen. Dr. Gish holds a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of California at Berkeley and worked as a research scientist at Cornell University, at UC Berkeley and in industry prior to joining the staff of the ICR. Since that time Dr. Gish has written many books and other works supporting creationism and has become famous as a debater for the creationist cause.

Brainwashed is a shirt-pocket sized cartoon book that tells the story of students on a university campus, confused about the subject of evolution. Fortunately Duane Gish is scheduled to speak on campus, telling the whole story. The remainder of the pamphlet shows Gish lecturing and explaining why creationism beats evolution hands down.

Up front Gish explains to the students that science teachers have refused to "consider creation as a possible explanation for the origin of all things" He states "This situation could be remedied by taking a closer look at *both* creation and evolution." What follows is a fairly good summary, in cartoon format, of Gish's and other creationists' arguments against evolution. Much of this argument is based of famous actual or supposed embarrassments of mainstream science. For example, Figure 1 shows his recounting of the Nebraska Man and the Piltdown Man, both of which turned out not to be human fossils at all. In fact, the latter turned out to be a fraud perpetrated by a respected scientist. Gish would like the readers (and his student audience, as well) to believe that such embarrassments undermine theories of human evolution. His statement "I think this is a case where a pig made a monkey out of evolutionists" reflects the tone of much of the young earth creationists' attack on evolution. My own experience is that this approach plays well with the audience at creationists' lectures.

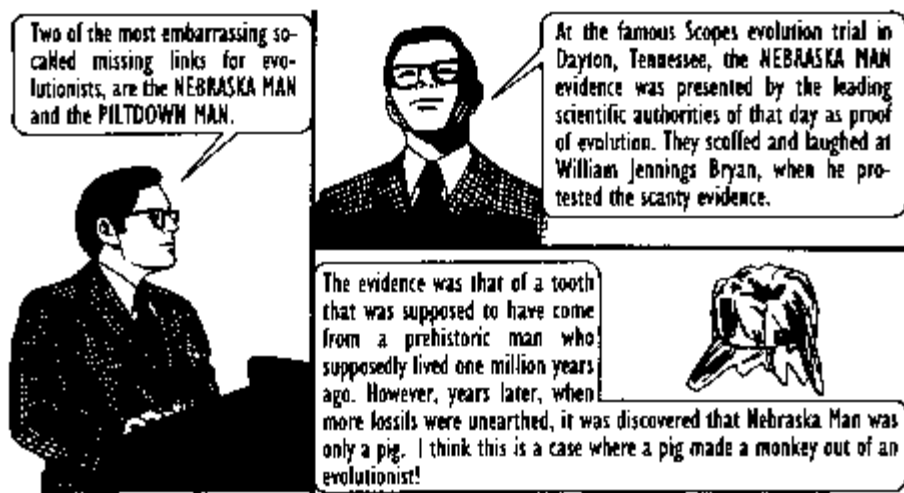


Figure1. Duane Gish discusses the Nebraska Man and the Piltdown Man.

Actually, and this is a minor point, Gish is mistaken in saying that Nebraska man was presented as evidence at the Scopes trial. Although I can find no reference to Nebraska man in the few accounts of the trial I have, it is likely that Nebraska Man was discussed during the trial, since the tooth discovery was only four years previous and the true identity of the fossil had not yet been determined. The fact is that no scientific evidence was actually presented at the trial. The judge did not allow it.

Creationists such as Gish like to make more of the Nebraska man issue than mainstream science will accommodate. Jim Foley, writing in the talk.origins FAQ archive has this to say:

For example, in his two-volume "Human Origins" (1924), George MacCurdy dismissed Nebraska Man in a single footnote: "In 1920 [sic], Osborn described two molars from the Pliocene of Nebraska; he attributed these to an anthropoid primate to which he has given the name *Hesperopithecus*. The teeth are not well preserved, so that the validity of Osborn's determination has not yet been generally accepted."

This indicating that mainstream scientists of the day were not so enamored with Nebraska Man as the creationists would have us believe.

The story of Piltdown Man is a different matter. Here was a case of outright fraud by an evolutionist, and it went far too long before being brought to ground. Creationists are going to use this to whack evolution for a long time to come.

Of course, the creationists have their embarrassments, as well, and this little pamphlet has been one of them. As reported by Chris Stassen in the talk.origins archive (<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/gish-exposed.html>) Ian Plimer debated Gish in Australia in 1988, and the topic of *Brainwashed* came up. Stassen quotes from a video tape of the debate. His transcript has Plimer talking about the pamphlet:

There is a diagram there that says, "precambrian: void of fossils." That is a lie. The Precambrian is not void of fossils; the Precambrian is extremely rich in fossils. He [Gish] has come to the country where there are many Precambrian fossils going back to 3 thousand 3 hundred million years ago.

Gish responded to this attack when his turn came to speak. From the transcript:

Now, since that time, as I described in my debate, there are many published reports of micro-fossils in Precambrian rocks. And furthermore, the Ediacaran which I did describe in my talk, is supposed to be Precambrian. I discussed all of them in my book, "Evolution: The Challenge of the Fossil Record," which was published two years ago.

[Note here that Gish is saying that he knows now that there are Precambrian fossils, and that he has known it for at least a couple of years.]

Why didn't Dr. Plimer consult this book? [crowd noise] Why didn't he see what I had written that is up to date? To accuse me of lying is terribly, terribly wrong. I stated the facts as I knew them then, as Preston Cloud and others have stated. In this edition [waving book], 1985, 15 years later, I have published what I described in my lecture. Dr. Plimer completely ignored what I said in my lecture, and what I said in my book, to try to accuse me of lying.

When Plimer's turn came he had a surprise:

This little book seems to have caused a little trouble with our friend. It was written 17 years ago and he refuted it. Why is it I could buy it outside, 20 minutes ago?

Stassen, writing in 1994, goes on to note:

And the ICR is still selling it without correction or disclaimer. Gish got hammered for distributing the pamphlet in 1988. He admitted that he knew no later than 1985 that some of the claims in it were false. **Why is the ICR still selling it?** [emphasis in the original]

This gaff on the part of Gish apparently caused the ICR enough anguish that they finally made a correction. My copy, which is listed as revised in 1994, has Gish saying:

Now let's look at the actual fossil evidence. There is a sudden appearance of fossils of a vast array of invertebrates in Cambrian rock strata. And the billions of fossils found there are all of highly complex forms of life with no evidence of these complex forms gradually developing from a simple form of life. According to evolutionists several billion years elapsed before single-celled, microscopic animals suddenly evolved into these complex animals. [ellipses and underscore in the original]

Following, there is a block note that states:

There are many reports in scientific literature of the discovery of single-celled, soft-bodied, microscopic bacteria and algae in Pre-Cambrian rocks. Then, we certainly ought to be able to find transitional forms between these creatures and the Cambrian animals if any ever existed.

This quote is not in a balloon, so it is not apparent whether Gish is speaking these words or whether the ICR has added this without intending to attribute it to Gish. In any event, *Brainwashed* now acknowledges Pre-Cambrian fossils. Never giving an inch, however, the ICR challenges mainstream science to show the connection between these fossils and those in the Cambrian.

Skeptics of creationism should have a copy of this book. It presents in compact form many of the principal creationist challenges to evolution. If you can't address these issues flat-footed, then you shouldn't attempt to debate creationists in the classroom or on the street. I picked up my copy free (one to a customer) at a recent meeting of MIOS, the Metroplex Institute of Origin Science. You can order yours from the ICR: 10946 Woodside Avenue North, Santee, CA 94071. Twenty-five cents each or \$15 per 100. Just phone 1-800-628-7640.

The third eye

By Pat Reeder

Thanks to a couple of contributors offering wonderfully lengthy articles, I haven't had to crank out one of these columns in several months. But now, the writer's greatest motivator has struck: we're short of material. And so, I grudgingly return from my three-month vacation, just so this newsletter won't end up looking like an unused Big Chief tablet. Luckily, during my long absence, lots of goofy news piled up, so let's waste some space by plowing through it!

You might not have noticed, but back on August 8, which was the 8th day of the 8th month, at 8 p.m. Pacific Time,

three planets aligned for eight minutes. (Granted, this would be more impressive if it had been eight planets, or if I didn't point out that no matter when it happened, it would have been 8 o'clock in at least two time zones). This obviously significant juxtaposition inspired a Santa Barbara, California, spiritualist group called the Tonglen Foundation to urge everyone to harness the "Power of Eight." During the planetary alignment, all were encouraged to stop whatever they were doing and to think a single positive thought "in the name of healing" for eight minutes. Such great New Age prophets as Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson and Kenny Loggins joined in. I haven't noticed any effect (I hurt my wrist three weeks ago, and it hasn't healed yet), but I think we can all agree that anytime we can get these three people to clam up for even eight short minutes, it has to be a good thing.

Deepak Chopra particularly has become a real bone in my craw lately. As long as he was cranking out dimwitted philosophy books for self-worshipping yuppies, his blather was easy enough to ignore. But then he started routinely stinking up one of my favorite TV shows, ABC's "Politically Incorrect." Every irritating appearance is the same: First, he yammers on, in a voice that sounds amazingly like Apu the convenience store clerk from *The Simpsons*, about how there is no right or wrong, and nobody has the right to judge anyone else's behavior or beliefs (no wonder yuppies eat this stuff up). He then spends the rest of the show shouting at the top of his lungs, condemning anyone who might disagree with him, from the Pope to the Justice Department to host Bill Maher (who once calmly responded to one of Chopra's diatribes by saying, "That is the type of ridiculous psychobabble that's ruining this country.") You'd have to flip over to C-Span to find a bigger hypocrite than our man Deepak.

Speaking of crackpot religious gurus, Scientology is in the news again. Various intellectual giants of Hollywood have been engaging in a PR blitz against Germany's crackdown on the "church" as nothing but a brainwashing, money-grubbing cult. As if to prove that brains have nothing to do with Scientology, John Travolta came to Congress recently to push for American intervention (your tax dollars at work), while Lisa Marie Presley dedicated a new Scientology center in Memphis and credited it with keeping her sane. Bear in mind, this is the woman who married Michael Jackson.

As long as we're talking about celebrities promoting nonsense on TV, Dan Aykroyd recently appeared on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, and as usual, took the opportunity to promote paranormal piffle. As if his syndicated show *Psi Factor* weren't doing enough to lower America's scientific literacy, he strongly urged viewers to subscribe to Mufon's magazine (the best UFO investigative journal in America, according to Aykroyd) and to buy Bud Hopkins' latest screed, whose name mercifully escapes me. Aykroyd even brought the book to hold up on TV, as if he were getting a commission on sales, and said it was a detailed account of the most startling and irrefutable UFO abduction case ever, in which a woman was levitated out of the window of her New York City apartment to a UFO that then plunged into the East River, in full view of dozens of witnesses, many of them respected professionals and UN diplomats.

Ah, it does warm my heart to see how this little urban legend has grown through the years! Why, I remember when Phil Klass first investigated it, 'way back when there were only two alleged witnesses, both of whom turned out on closer examination to be virtual clones of Lenny and Squiggy. But now, it has been embellished and embroidered all the way to book length, and the witness list has expanded into a virtual platoon of Nobel Prize candidates! It's amazing how tall a story can grow with just a little help from an uncredentialed hypnotist with a literary agent. And, of course, a healthy application of fertilizer.

On the subject of compost, the Dallas *Observer* recently published its bulging "Best Of Dallas" issue, and a new category this year was "Best Psychic." I won't reveal the winner's name here (divine it yourself), but I would like to know why a paper that it is so smug about its journalistic integrity would descend to promoting stuff like this. Hey, guys, how about an award for "Best Antidote to Paranormal Mind-Rot?" I hereby nominate this newsletter for the 1998 award. Nominate yourself early and avoid the rush, I say. I learned that from Al Gore.

Al Gore's name reminds me of Tennessee, where some people are a tad miffed at the Universal Life Church of Modesto, California, a remarkably egalitarian sect that will let virtually anyone become a minister by mail order with nary a background check. Consequently, their list of ordained holy men now includes death row inmates, dead people and dogs (who mostly baptize fire hydrants). Because of this, the Tennessee attorney general declared that marriages performed by their ministers are not legal, and state authorities are being deluged with calls from couples wanting to know if their marriages are invalid. Here's a hint: if your marriage was performed by a schnauzer, it's invalid.

Too bad Tennessee officials are not as scientifically advanced as those in Clark County, Nevada. They were swamped with calls from people who had come to Las Vegas, gotten drunk and couldn't remember if they had been married at a quickie wedding chapel. So they put the answers on the Internet. Just go to their "Am I Married?" website at

<http://www.co.clark.nv.us/PUBCOM/marry.htm>,

and you can access all the Las Vegas marriage records. Not only can you find out whether you're married, you can find out whether Siegfried and Roy are married.

As long as I'm discussing goofy uses of technology, this might be a good time to prove that proponents of the paranormal don't have a corner on wackiness. Some people in the legitimate sciences can also be delightfully askew.

For example, there's NASA administrator Daniel Goldin, who recently decided that it was okay to send astronaut David Wolf to the Mir space station, because that rotting bucket of bolts in the dark, cold vacuum of space poses no serious safety threat. Unless, of course, you happen to be *in* it. Or standing under it when a piece falls off.

Then, there are the droll scientists at Scotland's Roslin Institute, who announced that they are planning to put Dolly the cloned sheep into a breeding program to see if she can reproduce the natural way...or as one straight-faced researcher announced it to the world, they will put Dolly and a male sheep out in a field and let them "get on with it." I can hear the male sheep now: "Hellllllo, Dolly! Say, are there any more at home like you?"

Finally, some butterfingers workers at the Museon museum in the Netherlands dropped a crate containing a 75-million-year-old dinosaur skeleton, which broke into 188 pieces. Two Canadian scientists who had spent two years gluing it together tearfully gathered up the pieces and headed back to Canada to start all over again. And this time, they're using Super Glue.

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The touchy-feely, "think with your heart and not your brain" 1990s are a bad time to be a skeptic (at a recent White House forum that purported to inform people on "global warming," skeptical scientists were specifically excluded from the guest list), but at least this is the one month when skeptics are sought out by reporters. True, we're only sought out for a one-line quote in Halloween ghost stories, so that we can be quickly poo-pooed as the churlish killjoys we obviously are before they get on to the haunting anecdotes (in newspaper parlance, "the good stuff"), but at least it's something.

Just like all other modern news, this year's ghost stories have a celebrity angle. A Belgian psychic named Frans Hurbain claimed that deceased Who drummer Keith Moon told him he loved the afterlife because he can drink all he wants without getting a hangover, and that he was celebrating his birthday in September by having a drinking contest with Brian Jones, Janis Joplin, Dennis Wilson and Errol Flynn. Personally, my money would be on Richard Burton, were it not for the fact that he's too busy to attend. According to the Mexican paranormal mag *El Espirito*, at least six witnesses claim to have seen Burton's shade walking the streets of Puerto Vallarta (which he once visited with Elizabeth Taylor), spouting Welsh poetry, pining for Liz, and trying to bring young lovers together. But he's not very good at it. Out of the six people who claim to have seen him, two have suffered broken engagements, and one got divorced. That'll teach them not to take marital advice from a dead alcoholic actor, especially from one who married Liz Taylor *twice*.

Even my local paper, the Waxahachie *Daily Light*, got into the act by running a front page article on the Catfish Plantation, the "haunted" restaurant which has been covered many times. It's a fine restaurant, and I eat there frequently (try the fried yams), but I've never seen a ghost (as I've said before, not even a ghost of a catfish). I wondered why it merited front page coverage, and it turned out there were two bits of news: 1. The owners say there has been an exciting upturn in paranormal manifestations, including a levitating table. 2. They are tired of the restaurant business and would like to find a buyer. Far be it from me to suggest that these two stories are in any way related. I'm only reporting this to let you skeptics know that a golden business opportunity awaits someone who has no fear of ghosties.

Speaking of people who have no fear of spirits, Hollywood is launching a double-barreled assault on the reputation of Harry Houdini. I've already discussed Columbia's dreaded upcoming biopic, for which the screenwriter enlisted "research" aid from a San Francisco psychic and turned out a script that will allegedly slander the godfather of medium debunkers as a closet believer in the supernatural. But now, something equally yucky this way comes. I refer to the oxymoronically-titled *Fairy Tale (A True Story)*, a soon-to-be-unleashed children's movie based on the Cottingly Fairies hoax from the early 1900s.

For those of you unfamiliar with it, it all started when some little girls in England used the then-new technology of snapshot photography to make some photos of themselves cavorting in the garden with little fairies. These fairies were obviously two-dimensional paper cutouts from a picture book, as is readily apparent to today's more sophisticated viewers, but to people unfamiliar with photography they were pretty convincing. They so convinced the gullible Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that he wrote an embarrassing book about the miracle, entitled *The Coming of the Fairies*. Not the high point of his literary career.

Well, 100 years later, the Cottingly Fairies are making a comeback of sorts. First, Monty Python's Terry Jones put out a wickedly funny Victorian picture book of fairies apparently smashed between the pages, like crushed flowers. Then comes this movie. Thanks to the subtitle ("A True Story"), I had high hopes that it would be a witty and accurate depiction of how young hoaxsters can fool supposedly rational adults, a still-timely topic, as any falsely-accused day care center worker can attest.

Imagine my disgust to read the advance review in *Variety*. In the film, Houdini (Harvey Keitel) and Doyle (Peter O'Toole) are shown arguing the validity of the paranormal, which would make a terrific basis for a screenplay. But according to the reviewer, the film soon devolves into a kiddie fantasy in which the fairies are real, and the whole family ends up magically flying around the house via pixie dust (no, that's not a drug). And they peddle this to kids as "A True Story?" No wonder kids think adults are a bunch of liars.

I still think this story would make for a very entertaining movie, but I guess it'll have to wait until I get around to writing it myself. If you'd like to see it, please submit lots of articles to this newsletter and insure that I have plenty of free time.

The End is Near

by John Blanton

As you may know, approximately 400 years ago the Irish prelate, Bishop James Ussher, computed to the best of his ability the exact date of the creation of the universe. That turned out to be October 23rd in 4004 B.C.

This month we mark the 6000 anniversary of that important event and the consequences associated with its anniversary. According to our best references this marks the expiration date of the operating license for the universe.

Now, we of the NTS may be skeptical of a lot of things, but, given sufficient authority, we will accept some things at face value. Therefore we are planning a celebration of the birthday of the world and the end of it all. We will meet at my house on the evening of Thursday, the 23rd of October to toast the universe and all of its accomplishments. You are cordially invited to come, bring a friend, and enjoy our company for what, we are told, will be our final gathering.

NTS will provide food and drinks, but feel free to bring something if you want. Dress is casual. After all, who wants to do laundry on the last day of the universe. You must let me know how many are coming so we can buy enough food. Call 972-306-3187 for directions. We apologize for the end of the world coming on Thursday this year, but we don't make this stuff up.

23 october 6:30 p.m. until it's time for me to go to bed

Contacting the NTS

If you have questions or need assistance in the area of skepticism, or otherwise would like to contact The North Texas Skeptics, use the phone numbers and/or Internet addresses below:

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