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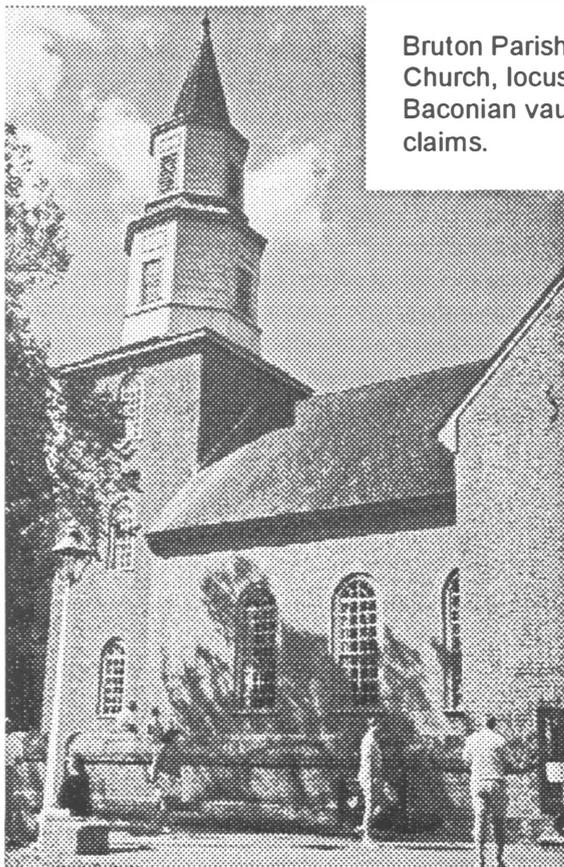
Vaultarama II: The Dig

By Elena M. Watson

If English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon--who, incidentally, has been dead since 1626--really did possess the secret to Utopia and world peace, he must have taken it with him. In any case, what he did *not* do is bury it in a vault under Williamsburg's Bruton Parish churchyard, contrary to the claims of several New Age mystics (see *Skeptical Eye*, vol. 6, no. 1, and the profile of Bacon on p. 13 of this issue).

This rather unsurprising conclusion is the result of a three-week excavation conducted by a team of Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists, and two days of geological investigation by William and Mary geology professor Gerald Johnson. Digging in the mud of a 20 x 20 foot site, before an audience of gawking tourists, the archeological crew went down as far as 6 feet at the deepest point, still

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Bruton Parish Church, locus of Baconian vault claims.

NCAS Exclusive Skeptic investigates, discovers:

Tabloid Tells Tall Tale!

By Kevin Tucker

Kevin Tucker, a zoologist with a consulting firm in Washington, D.C., listened skeptically as a recent NCAS speaker described how easily most people, using a few straightforward guidelines, can investigate interesting extraordinary claims (see "Past Life Reporting," elsewhere in this issue). Ever true to the philosophy that NCAS promotes, Tucker decided to find out for himself: he volunteered to check out a tabloid article cited at the meeting. This is his story.

The *Weekly World News* prominently announced the following in its September 1, 1992, issue (pp. 46-47):

"American scientists reporting from the jungles of Vietnam have just announced the most astonishing scientific discovery of all time: A Stone Age family who look and live exactly as Neanderthal man did 50,000 years ago!

"The discovery of the primitive humans capped previous reports of several new species of mammals, fish and birds that have been found in the isolated region, including flying eels, gigantic, long-necked turtles, and a unicorn-like horse that has a single horn in the middle of its head."

Taken at face value, the discoveries by "American biologist Clifton Reid" and his colleagues would indeed be astonishing, so the claims are certainly extraordinary. They are also interesting because it is possible, at least in theory, to determine if the story is false. Perhaps anticipating that some of its readers would be skeptical, the tabloid evidently felt the need to offer its readers something more than the word of its writers. It reproduced part of another article with enough information to imply that the other article was a source for its claims, but not quite enough to locate the source article readily. The supposed source article was from the *New York Post*, although the exact date was unclear. It began:

continued on page 6



encourages critical and scientific thinking

serves as an information resource on extraordinary claims

provides extraordinary evidence that skeptics are cool

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Letters

Women Skeptics

Editor:

I'm writing in response to the comment in the article "Euroskeptics" by Grace Denman (*Skeptical Eye*, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 5) about the skeptical movement being male-dominated in the United States. In my own idiosyncratic view of the world, I see many parallels between the skeptic movement and the early feminist movement. I hypothesize several factors which would make it hard for a woman in our culture to label herself as a skeptic:

1. Women aren't supposed to be confrontational. We are supposed to smooth over differences of opinion and seek compromise. We are also supposed to be trusting of men, especially men in authority positions. However, it's quite masculine to be confrontational, so an American man would not have a role conflict if he becomes a skeptic.

(I keep picturing a single woman in a bar who is approached by a man who postures and tells her how wonderful he is. How can she be desirable and skeptical of what he says at the same time? If she doesn't just nod and smile, if she instead questions him further and points out the inconsistencies in his story, wouldn't she be a "bitch"?)

2. Women in our culture are supposed to be emotional and follow an idiosyncratic logic (e.g., Gracie Allen, Lucille Ball). To be logical and skeptical would be to appear masculine ("Why can't you think like a man?"). Perhaps there is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy here also--perhaps many women don't believe they *can* be skeptical, just as many don't believe they can be good at math or computers.

3. (This last one is really out on a limb...) Men are better able to compartmentalize their thinking, whereas women tend to be generalists. Perhaps a man in our culture can be skeptical at work, and when he reads the paper or watches the news, and that's it! No temptation to examine the tenets his life is based on, no skepticism applied to his personal life. A woman, on the other hand, would be too tempted to apply skepticism to her personal relationships first (e.g., what is friendship, really? Are my friends really friends?) and this might be much too threatening. But if this seems far-fetched, ask why don't more women do breast self-examinations? Why do so many women resist the idea that we live in a male-dominated society when there is very real gender bias at work, in the court system, among medical professionals, and so on?

Toni Tumonis
 Silver Spring, Md.

Congratulations

A new name appears in the box at left, but the people remain the same. Pam Kogan took the name O'Neill following her marriage to Seán.



Prez Sez

Let It Snow

By Chip Denman

The Washington area has a tradition of mid-February snows. Accordingly, NCAS is making plans to get out of town.

On February 13-14 NCAS will be hosting its first week-end-long workshop in critical thinking. For nearly six years NCAS has offered public lectures on a host of topics, from the possibility of extraterrestrial intelligence to the politics of creationism to the outspoken wit of James Randi. All of these programs have been free and open to the public, supported entirely by your membership dues and the efforts of numerous volunteers. The February program is an experiment--the beginning of an effort to supplement our commitment to public understanding of science and clear thinking.

Often skeptics are seen as primarily debunkers, and certainly debunking is an important tool. But this workshop is not about debunking. It is about thinking. We often talk about the scientific method and indeed many NCAS members are professionally involved in the sciences, but part of the NCAS message is that "scientific thinking" is *not* the exclusive domain of the lab coat set. This workshop is for anyone--from high school age and up--regardless of background, who wants to sharpen critical thinking skills. And if you are a teacher yourself, the program will give you ideas and resources to bring to your students.

For the last four years I have taught a course in "Science vs. Pseudoscience" at the University of Maryland. Freshman and sophomore Honors students get a taste of the history and philosophy of science, while learning to critique claims, formulate testable hypotheses and consider sources of evidence. I'll be bringing my course experiences and demonstrations to Harpers Ferry. The final exam is like no other.

Joe Himes recently showed an NCAS audience (see page 22 of this issue) how anyone with common sense and a little determination can successfully evaluate claims that at first seem untouchable. He'll conduct a similar session.

Pam O'Neill, librarian with the Fairfax County School system, will help participants identify ways that skeptics can

best utilize libraries and other sources for information.

Seán O'Neill, counselor and registered hypnotherapist, will discuss beliefs and the way our minds arrive at them and defend them.

Steve Shore is the driving force behind this weekend. He will talk about some damn thing or another.

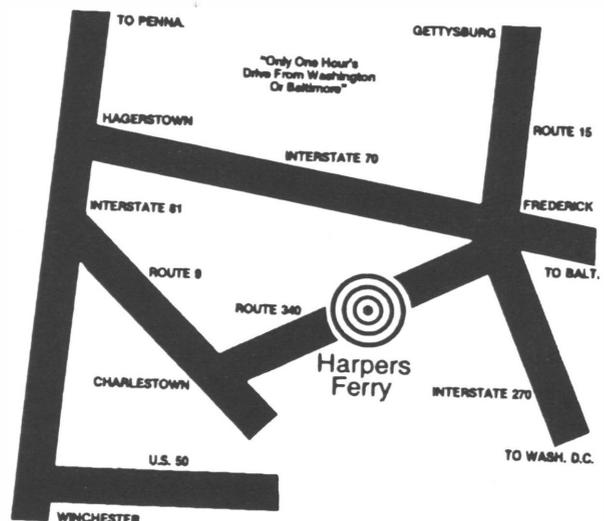
And magician Jamy Ian Swiss will challenge your perceptions with his own deceptions, in ways that might even fool a parapsychologist.

We want the weekend to be more than a series of passive, head-nodding lectures. Come prepared to challenge, critique, and otherwise contribute to the sessions. We expect that you all have thoughts, ideas, and information to share. And the schedule will make time to enjoy the setting and historic area nearby. There will even be an optional "ghost tour" conducted by an expert in the local history for those who want to explore the village on foot--don't forget your proton packs!

The weekend we chose is a three-day one for many. Our program will be Saturday and part of Sunday, leaving time to visit, play or just head for home before the work week begins. Friday night is for strictly informal chit-chat, and maybe a card trick or two.

The Cliffside Inn is right on Route 340, one mile west of Harpers Ferry. The drive is under 90 minutes from the Washington Beltway. Access is easy in snowy weather, and the Cliffside even offers an indoor pool.

Use the flip side of this page to register. And this is a good opportunity to invite friends who would like to see a positive approach to skeptical thinking. □



Announcing the first NCAS weekend workshop

**Within Reason:
Tools and Applications of Critical Thinking**

**Saturday and Sunday, February 13-14
Cliffside Inn
Harpers Ferry, West Virginia**

Beginning with an informal get-together on Friday evening, February 12, this workshop focuses on practical sessions in critical thinking skills presented in a relaxed, friendly setting. Featured speakers:

- Chip Denman**, Statistics Laboratory, University of Maryland College Park
- Joe Himes**, physicist, Nuclear Regulatory Agency
- Pam O'Neill**, librarian, Fairfax County School System
- Seán O'Neill**, counselor and registered hypnotherapist
- Steve Shore**, astrophysicist, NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center
- Jamy Ian Swiss**, internationally known magician

Registration is \$25 for members, \$30 nonmembers, \$20 full-time students, and includes all materials. After January 23, all registrations are \$40. Registration fee is nonrefundable. Write or leave a message on the NCAS Skeptic Line for information.

Special rates have been arranged at the Cliffside Inn in Harpers Ferry: \$58/night double room, \$52/night single. A daily meal plan is available for \$30/person. Recreational facilities are available, and the Harpers Ferry National Park is nearby. Please call the hotel directly at 1-800-782-9437 to make reservations for lodging and meals.

Harpers Ferry is less than a 90 minute drive from the Washington area. If you need or can offer a ride, please let us know. We will try to put people in touch.

Tools and Applications of Critical Thinking

Names of those attending:

Member \$25 / Non-member \$30 / Student \$20
after Jan. 23: \$40

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

Address: _____
_____ State _____ Zip _____

total enclosed: _____

Phone: _____

please make checks payable to NCAS and mail to:
NCAS, 8006 Valley Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910

I ___ need / ___ can offer a ride.

EYE ON LOCAL GROUPS

By Mike Epstein

The focus of local skeptics groups in recent months seems to have been on religious visions and miracles. This may be a result of the upswing in the number of Marian-related apparitions and miracles occurring in this country. Since the first reported Marian apparition to St. Gregory Thaumaturgus in the third century, there have been thousands of visions, although the Roman Catholic Church recognizes only a handful as authentic. Reports of visions that draw thousands of worshippers come from Conyers, Georgia; Marlboro, New Jersey; Bayside, New York; Bella Vista, Arkansas; Lubbock, Texas; and Denver, Colorado.

Besides our own forays into weeping statues, holy blood, and secret vaults (see the *Skeptical Eye*, vol. 6, no. 2), some rather interesting and significant investigations have been carried out by local groups. For example, Dale Heatherington (1992) of the Georgia Skeptics recently reported an explanation for the "Golden Door" in the sun that has been seen in instant photographs taken at religious sites, such as at Medjugorje and Conyers, Georgia. According to an AP report (*Fate Magazine*, 1988), a member of Congress was quoted as having seen such a photograph and marveling at how it could not possibly be faked, since it was taken with an instant camera. Heatherington showed that the iris in a Polaroid One Step Instant Camera is shaped like a door. When a bright point source of light is centered in the field of view, an image of the iris is projected onto the film. In other words, the door leads to the camera, not to heaven.

Other Georgia skeptics successfully reproduced crop circles that appeared to be "genuine" (Johnson, 1991) and followed up on reports of the face of Jesus in a forkful of pasta on a Pizza Hut billboard in Atlanta (Viele, 1992) and the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Conyers (Long, 1992).

In California, physicist Shawn Carlson of the Bay Area Skeptics recently appeared on the CBS program "48 Hours" (July 22) as an expert on weeping and bleeding icons. That presentation on miracles documented one child's heartbreaking trip to seek a cure from the healing powers of the water of Lourdes. It was perhaps the best of a spate of summer specials on religious topics, which included the notorious "Ancient Secrets of the Bible" (May 15), a program that stirred up quite a controversy by taking a largely young-earth creationist viewpoint of human history. Carlson (1992) also reported on experiments carried out in 1985 on astrology.

The Rocky Mountain Skeptics investigated the apparitions at the Mother Cabrini shrine near Denver, Colorado (Galipeau, 1992), and found many people in search of healing. They related the sad story of a mother who suffered permanent eye damage from staring at the sun while praying for a miracle cure for her crippled child.

In Florida, the Tampa Bay Skeptics continued an investigation of the "mentalist" Kreskin (Posner, 1992) that NCAS began last year (see the *Eye*, vol. 5, nos. 1 and 2). The Tampa Bay group has also set up a computer bulletin-board system at (813) 831-5706, up to 2400 baud. The sysop is Mike Kleineschay.

And speaking of Kreskin: he recently hosted "TALKLIVE" on CNBC (cable) and interviewed Betty Brennan, a self-described discerner of spirits, and Father Lawrence Gesy, a cult consultant for the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Baltimore. A lively discussion on exorcism ensued, followed by a not-so-lively Kreskin card trick. Some things never change.

References

- Carlson, S. (June, 1992). Astrology. *BASIS*, vol. 11, no. 6.
Fate Magazine (April 1988). Congresswoman Sees "Unusual Things" on Pilgrimage, p. 72.
Galipeau, A. (Jan./Feb. 1992). A Holy Vision Reported in the Rocky Mountains. *Rocky Mountain Skeptic*, vol. 9, no. 5.
Heatherington, D. (May/June 1992). The Mystery of the Golden Door. *The Georgia Skeptic*, vol. 5, no. 3.
Johnson, L. F. (Nov./Dec. 1991). Atlanta Crop Circle Mystery Solved. *The Georgia Skeptic*, vol. 4, no. 6.
Long, B. (March/April 1992). The Conyers Apparitions. *The Georgia Skeptic*, vol. 5, no. 2.
Posner, G. (Spring 1992). The Incredible Gall of "The Amazing Kreskin." *Tampa Bay Skeptics Report*, vol. 4, no. 4.
Viele, L.. (March/April 1992). The Pasta Jesus. *The Georgia Skeptic*, vol. 5, no. 2.

Note: For more information on any of these topics, send electronic mail to Mike Epstein at the CompuServe address: 76640,1540, or send requests to NCAS. □

Tabloid, from page 1

“WASHINGTON (AP)--A ‘lost world’ teeming with new species of birds, fish, and an unknown dagger-horned animal has survived a half-century of war and expanding civilization in remote Vietnam, wildlife experts say.”

That is suspiciously weak support, but however doubtful I might have been, I still wondered if someone would go so far as to completely invent and print such claims with names, places, and quotes. I was to find that they will indeed do so. I will relate here how I proved to my own satisfaction that the article in *Weekly World News* is completely misleading. You may be surprised by how easy it was.

September 19, 1992

I begin my research right after the NCAS meeting, conveniently held in the Bethesda Library. Following the suggestion to verify the simplest information first, I decide to locate the “American biologist Clifton Reid,” who from his picture looks to be about 30 to 40 years old--old enough to have published at least a few times in the scientific literature. Between Bethesda and the much larger University of Maryland libraries I can find no trace of him in *American Men and Women of Science*, in the university’s computerized card catalog, or in a national database for journal articles. It seems that I am tracking the original quiet man. Similarly, I find no trace of the other researcher named in the article, “French anthropologist Rene Dupont.”

September 21, 1992

My next goal is to find the complete *New York Post* article that supposedly served as a source. Though the date is obscured in one photo, it appears to be “TUESDAY, JULY” in another, a significant help. There were four Tuesdays in the most recent July, which proves to be the right year, and I find the article in the last of those issues (for July 28, 1992). The article states that a World Wildlife Fund expedition really did go to the Vu Quang nature preserve in Vietnam and that the expedition really did find a goatlike “dagger-horned mammal” which might be a new species, a “small parrot-billed bird” which also might be a new species, a “sunbird that could be a new species,” and “at least one new fish.” The article also notes that the expedition was led by “British scientist John MacKinnon.”

What the *New York Post* article doesn’t state is also interesting: There is no claim of Neanderthals being found,

and no mention of flying eels, turtles with six-foot necks, or other amazing critters described by the *Weekly World News*. And sometime between July and September, the dagger-horned mammal must have metamorphosed from an animal locally called a “forest goat” (with two horns) into a “unicorn-like horse.” *Weekly World News* author Carl Keener is indeed talented. But expedition leader John MacKinnon, perhaps less talented or more cautious, in the *New York Post* says only that “the horns are quite unlike those of other goats previously recorded”--hardly the words or tone of someone who has just found a unicorn.

September 22, 1992

If the expedition leader was John MacKinnon, then who are Clifton Reid and Rene Dupont, both quoted by the *Weekly World News*? The *New York Post* does not mention either of them, nor does it include any of the quotes attributed to them. On the other hand, John MacKinnon does appear as a book author in the library card catalog. *Weekly World News* author Keener (if he really exists) will not respond to my calls for clarification, but the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), sponsor of the expedition, has a convenient office in Washington that will send me a press release about the expedition.

October 7, 1992

A spokesperson at the WWF office had earlier told me that no one in the office knew of a Clifton Reid and that they did not think he was associated with the expedition. Today I speak with a member of the WWF group who was in Vietnam with John MacKinnon and the rest of the expedition. Clifton Reid’s name does not “ring a bell,” he says, and claims of ape people, “winged eels...and...birds with alligator jaws” (*Weekly World News*) are totally unsubstantiated. He confirms that the “unicorn-like horse” was actually a two-horned goat. Furthermore, the fact that no live specimens were found adds another dimension to Keener’s story. Goats shot for trophies by local hunters were the only specimens. The sponsor of the expedition does not support the claims made by Keener in the *Weekly World News*.

Conclusion

I could find no evidence to support the headline and other extraordinary claims in the *Weekly World News* article, nor could I find any evidence that the scientists quoted in the article exist anywhere except in the author’s

“I documented everything I did to show that anyone can investigate a claim...Anyone who is reading this could have done what I did.”

imagination. When I first began looking into the article, I thought that there was a biologist named Clifton Reid associated with the expedition; that the article was based on the implied source and real quotes; and that, at worst, the claims were an exaggeration at least partially based on fact. I was wrong. About the only fact I found was that an expedition to Vietnam did indeed take place. The rest of the important details seem to be inventions, not exaggerations.

I documented everything I did to show that anyone can investigate a claim, and that it is not very difficult to do. This is an important point. Anyone who is reading this could have done what I did. You need no special qualifications, only a car or bus money, a telephone, and an interest in asking whether or not what somebody says is corroborated by their sources. If you have a computer and modem, so much the better: you can save time and energy by dialing into various databases for information.

Perhaps a good test of whether you should believe something is whether you would buy it if it were a product. Would you buy pictures of these Neanderthal people for, say, \$25 each, from Keener, or would you be doubtful of their authenticity? Would you pay \$100 for one of the horns from the "unicorn"? Although we may be quite skeptical when risking our own money, we often seem less skeptical when we are asked to risk the credibility of our beliefs, a more precious resource by far.

I urge you to try an investigation yourself; it's educational, and it's fun. And if you happen to hear from Keener or his unicorn, please let us all know what you find out.

Sources

Public Libraries

University of Maryland libraries:

301/405-9257 (McKeldin)

301/405-9286 (Hornbake)

University of Maryland computer number for modems:

301/403-4333

("telnet victor" gets you to the card catalog; select "Uncover" to search the journal database)

Library of Congress, current periodicals room:

Madison Building, Room 133 (take the Blue/Orange Metro line to Capital South)

World Wildlife Fund: 202/293-4800

Carl Keener, *Weekly World News*: 407/540-1001 □

Vault, from page 1

finding only undisturbed dirt--an indication that nothing was buried below. Colonial Williamsburg archaeologist Marley Brown III concluded (*Newport News Daily Press*, September 3, 1992), "Based on the archaeological evidence, I can say there's no evidence for a vault."

In spite of this, geologist Johnson, using a hand auger, bored 12 holes going down 21.5 feet. He too found nothing but undisturbed soil. He told the *Daily Press* (September 12), "This stuff is so compacted it's been here forever." What Johnson did discover, however, was ancient deposits of undissolved sea shells that could account for the variations found in underground electrical resistance tests that had been conducted on the site in the mid-1980s. Those test results had been read as indicating that a large object was buried at the site. The excavation also uncovered the remnants of some eighteenth-century graves.

The dig, first announced August 14, began on August 18. It was an effort by the Bruton Parish rectory to quiet New Age speculations about the alleged seventeenth-century vault. These speculations were widely publicized last year after New Age Christian Marsha Middleton and her husband Frank Flint, both of Santa Fe, New Mexico, slunk into the church cemetery late in the night of September 8 and dug a large hole. The church then considered the option of an archaeological dig, but later the rectory voted against it. Middleton, Flint and a third vault seeker returned to New Mexico following their dig.

Around the same time, Marie Bauer Hall of Los Angeles, the 88-year-old Christian mystic who originated the vault claim back in 1938, traveled to Williamsburg and made the rounds locally to whip up support for her belief in a Bacon vault.

A court order failed to keep Middleton away, as she returned to Williamsburg to promote interest in the vault. The result was a media circus, with Middleton's followers, "The Ministry of Children," often in the center ring, praying and chanting near churchyard grounds.

In spite of the October 29 court order preventing Middleton and followers from entering Bruton Parish churchyard, they did so on November 27, once again digging for the elusive vault. In early December warrants were issued charging Middleton and company with two counts each of trespassing and two counts of destruction of church property. Once again, Middleton fled the state. Bruton Parish Church rector Richard May likened those events to "the opening of Al Capone's tomb" (*Washington Post*, August 23, 1992). He hoped that the excavation would put an end to the circus, telling the *Post* optimistically that "all we have to do is dig a hole and it will all be over."

Extraordinary claims aren't so easy to put to rest, however. Even before the dig was completed, some Baconians were denouncing it as "misguided, in the wrong place, not deep enough, and a 'coverup'" (*Washington Post*, August 23).

continued on page 8

Vault, from page 7

Looking for Vaults in All the Wrong Places

Middleton and Flint returned to the area early last fall to watch the end of the excavation. This they could view only from outside the church grounds: the couple had been arrested at their hotel on September 8 and released on \$500 bonds after promising to stay out of the churchyard. Later, at the end of the month, Middleton and Flint pleaded guilty to trespassing and paid fines of \$100 each. Under a plea agreement each received a 12-month suspended jail term, and in return a second trespassing count and a charge of destroying church property against each were dropped (UPI, September 25, 1992).

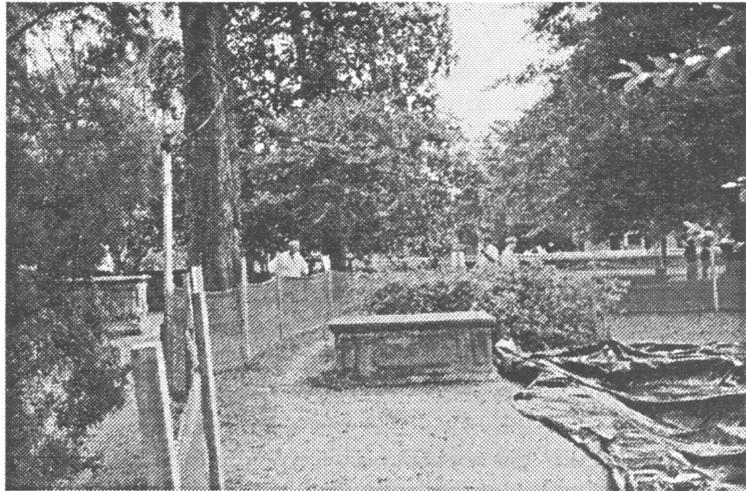
Previously, the couple had freely criticized the dig, in spite of their churchyard restriction. Flint complained that the scientists had looked in the wrong place. He told the *Daily Press* (September 12, 1992), "There's still a good chance it's elsewhere." He further stated that he only approved of one of Johnson's bores. "They really did only one hole as far as we are concerned. We never expected it to be in the other area." However, 5 of the 12 holes Johnson investigated were next to or in the hole dug illegally by Flint and others.

Also critical of the dig was another self-described Christian mystic, Nanette Crist, a representative of a group called the Council on Original Records. "We're not convinced," she told the *Daily Press* (September 3). Crist argued that a tunnel dug to bury the vault could have gone deeper than Johnson's bores and said, "We're trying to open the minds of the archaeologists to that possibility." She later organized a meeting of Baconians on September 12, and was still proposing her tunnel theory. Archaeologist Marley Brown, however, said that colonists would not have had the technology to build a tunnel under the water table, which is 20 feet down (*Daily Press*, September 12).

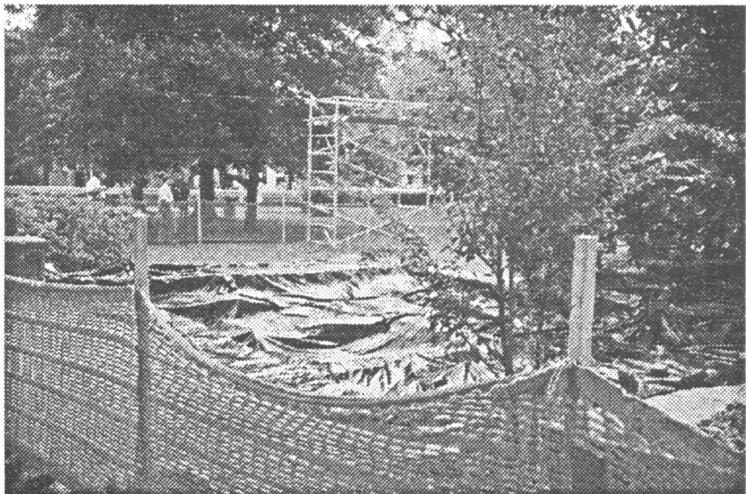
Only for Unbelievers

Strangely absent from the proceedings this time was mystic Marie Bauer Hall. She claimed to have discovered the vault's location by decoding a 1635 book by George Withers, Shakespeare's plays, tombstones in the Bruton Parish cemetery, and the writings of Francis Bacon himself. In her 1938 attempt to dig up the alleged vault she succeeded in uncovering the foundation of the original brick Bruton Parish church, built in 1683. (That structure was replaced by the present church building in 1715.) She and her diggers went about 9 feet deep and found some sort of box with brass tacks. After this the church stopped her dig, as they believed the object was the remains of a casket (such tacks were sometimes used to ornament coffins of that period).

In a telephone interview with the *Daily Press* (August 20), Hall explained that she did not need to visit the current excava-



A temporary fence of orange webbing marks the site of the vault excavation; black plastic covers the dig.



tion site because she already knew what was in the vault: the writings of Francis Bacon, which she referred to as “The Second Coming of the Love Principle” (meaning universal understanding and enlightenment). These writings, she said, were to guide the unbelievers and were not intended for Bacon scholars like herself. The vault would provide proof “for people who don’t believe something unless they can put their feet or hands on it,” according to Hall.

Hall seemed genuinely surprised at the church’s decision to conduct an excavation. “It’s got me awestruck,” she said. “The time is ripe. But I’ve hoped that so often. Whatever is determined upstairs and however it connects to downstairs, it’s all right by me.” Hall also admitted she was glad she had not found the vault in 1938 because “I was very frustrated then.” Hall believes that the contents of the vault would have frustrated her own philosophical writings and that the vault documents would have been forgotten with the onset of World War II.

The other reason Hall gave for not returning to Williamsburg was that she was attending what she called the murder trial in the death of her second husband, New Age mystic and occult lecturer Manly Palmer Hall. He died in 1990 at the age of 89 and was the founder in 1934 of the Los Angeles Philosophical Research Society. Hall’s obituary (*Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1990) states that the occult philosopher died in his sleep of natural causes, but that this fact had been kept private for 72 hours at his wife’s request, because of his religious beliefs. A memorial service was planned at the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, as Hall was a thirty-third-degree Mason. The Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot* (August 22, 1992) stated that Marie Hall was suing several men whom she believed had suffocated her husband. But no murder charges had been filed.

He Buried It Himself--In Another Life

Another familiar figure from last year’s proceedings who was conspicuously absent this fall was Williamsburg’s Fletcher Richman. The president of Tudor Graphic Systems, a public relations organization, Richman made some of last year’s most outrageous claims about the alleged vault, and spent much of this year promoting it. He is the one who claimed that similar vaults were buried throughout the area, including St. Luke’s Church in Smithfield, and Bacon’s Castle in Surry. Both Hall and Middleton later distanced themselves from Richman, and Hall also distanced herself from Middleton (*Virginian-Pilot*, August 26).

Perhaps Richman’s most bizarre claim was chronicled in *The Wall Street Journal* (January 27, 1992). Reportedly he professed to have buried the vault himself in 1674, while in a previous incarnation as Nathaniel Bacon the Younger, a descendant of Sir Francis. He claimed that in addition to Bacon’s writings the vault also was housed the missing crown jewels of Queen Elizabeth, the original manuscript of the King James Bible and early versions of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution--all written by Bacon. Richman revealed his plans for organizing a letter-writing

campaign to convince the Bruton Parish rectory to host an excavation.

Later, Richman planned a mid-September invitation-only conference in Williamsburg to once again promote interest in the vault. He believes that it was the scheduling of this conference, and the pressure it would generate, that convinced the church vestry to sponsor the excavation. Although he was not at the site, on August 18, in a telephone interview he told the *Daily Press*, “People in the know told me that we will see the vault at the end of August.” He also expressed concern that church officials would try to take the vault to the Smithsonian, if found, so he appointed people to watch the dig and ensure that this would not happen.

The next Tuesday Richman had scheduled a news conference that was never held. About a dozen reporters gathered outside the church, expecting to hear Richman and Alan Paul Christenson of Pittsburgh, the leader of the Sir Francis Bacon Research and Historical Society of America, criticize the dig. Neither man showed up (*Virginian-Pilot*, August 26). Richman also canceled his mid-September conference. But Nanette Crist was quick to pick up where Richman left off, organizing her own makeshift meeting of Bacon scholars at the Days Inn in Williamsburg on September 12. Many of those who had planned to attend Richman’s conference were in the colonial capital already, thronging the dig site.

For example, Lawrence Gerald, the founder of the Francis Bacon Society of New York, spent the day videotaping the dig. He told the *Daily Press* (September 12) that even if the vault wasn’t found there was still plenty of evidence that Bacon was the author of the plays attributed to Shakespeare. He referred to the Virginia flag, which shows Athena “shaking” a “spear” (get it?), and noted that Francis Bacon helped charter the state.

Crist, however, was more interested in searching for a collection of tunnels that could lead to a vault. “There’s still a lot of possibilities,” she said, proposing that soil boring should be done in more of the churchyard. Archaeologist Brown, who found no evidence for a vault or tunnels, responded to this by saying, “It’s pretty hard to resist this evidence. But you can resist many things. The mind can resist many things” (*Daily Press*, September 12).

This Is It

Meanwhile, Rector May acknowledged that some people would not be satisfied by the archaeologists’ conclusion. But he believed that the church officials had made a good-faith effort in allowing the dig. “So, yes, it was worth it,” he said. “We’ve done all we could reasonably be expected to do.” But he made it clear that this was the end. Neither he nor Colonial Williamsburg will be listening to any more vault stories. “I’m not going to play around with this for the next five years. We did this to lay it to rest,” he told the *Daily Press* (September 12).

Or as he told the *Virginian-Pilot* (September 12), “The fat lady has sung; this is it.” □

A Skeptical Thinker in the Seventeenth Century

By Walter F. Rowe

In an earlier essay (“Lucian and Alexander: Debunking in the Classical Style,” *Skeptical Eye*, vol. 5, no. 2), I explored the ancient origins of skeptical writings in the vein of James Randi and Martin Gardner. This type of writing then largely went out of fashion until the Renaissance, when Desiderius Erasmus included a short piece entitled “The Spectre” in an augmented edition of his *Colloquies*, a work primarily intended for the teaching of Latin grammar and prose style. “The Spectre” described some skeptics playing upon the superstition of an ignorant parish priest by staging a series of ghostly apparitions. Quite a contrast to the typical modern school textbook!

Bacon’s “Diseases of Learning”

Nearly a century later Francis Bacon touched upon what he called vulgar errors in his *On the Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, an ambitious survey of the state of human knowledge at the beginning of the seventeenth century. (For more on Bacon, see the “Skeptic’s Response” by Elena Watson, elsewhere in this issue.) Bacon closed his arguments for the virtues of learning

with an oblique glance at what he called “diseases of learning.” He identified three principal maladies. The first occurs “when men study words and not matter”; the second, when a too-subtle argument produces “cobwebs of learning, admirable indeed for the fineness of the thread, but of no substance or profit”; the third, when there is “delight in deceiving and aptness to be deceived.”

Bacon concluded the work with a detailed program for the further advancement of learning. He made a list of projects entitled “The Coast of the New Intellectual World; or, a Recapitulation of the Deficiencies of Knowledge, Pointed out in the Preceding Work, to be supplied by Posterity.” Among the projects was a “Calendar of Doubts; or natural problems, to be continued through all ages, along with a calendar of vulgar errors.” This part of Bacon’s program was soon taken up by Sir Thomas Browne.

A Skeptical Physician

In 1605, the year that saw the first production of *King Lear* as well as the publication of Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*, Thomas Browne was born in St. Michael’s, Cheapside, London. The son of a London merchant, he was educated at Winchester and Pembroke College, Oxford. After obtaining his master’s degree from Oxford, Browne practiced medicine for a time and then traveled in Ireland. He studied on the continent at Montpellier and Padua, and at Leiden, where he took his degree as a doctor of medicine. Eventually Browne returned to England, settling in Norwich, where he practiced medicine, raised a family, and wrote a series of remarkable works.

The tumultuous age in which Sir Thomas Browne lived is indicated by the events that occurred contemporaneously with the publication of one of his major works, *Religio Medici*, or *A Doctor’s Faith*, published in 1642: In that same year the English Civil War began, Galileo died, and Newton was born.

Browne’s beautifully written works defy easy categorization. *Religio Medici* and the posthumously published *Christian Morals* are works of theology and religious inspiration, but they also contain much acute medical and botanical observation. *Hydriotaphia: Urne-Buriall* is an anthropological survey of ancient and modern (for Browne’s readers, that is) burial customs, combined with descriptions of his own archeological researches and his meditations on the vanity of human hopes. *The Garden of Cyrus* is a semimystical treatise on the quincunx—the lattice pattern consisting of the four corners of a rectangle and its center point.

My original interest in Browne was largely professional, arising out of my work as a forensic scientist and focusing on Browne’s discussion of human remains in *Hydriotaphia*. I also have a long-standing interest in the witchcraft mania in seventeenth-century Europe, another issue to which Browne turned his attention.

In 1664 Browne appeared as an expert witness for the crown at a witchcraft trial at Bury St. Edmunds. Browne was firm in his belief that witches really existed. Indeed, in *Religio*



Sir Francis Bacon

Medici he defended the proposition that disbelief in witches was likely to lead to disbelief in God. In the case at Bury St. Edmunds, Browne gave his opinion as a physician that the child victims' fainting spells were the result of hysteria ("the mother," to use the medical terminology of Browne's day), although heightened by the power of the Devil and the malice of witches (Dunn, 1950).

To some critics, Browne's appearance as a witness in this trial seems extremely discreditable. His testimony, however, probably had little impact on the jury's verdict. Lord Chief Justice Matthew Hale, who presided over the trial, displayed extreme credulity throughout, as well as a disposition to convict the accused on virtually any evidence whatsoever. One expert on the Salem witchcraft trials in America has credited Browne with a very perceptive diagnosis of the origin of the witch mania--if one lays aside the supernatural elements (Hansen, 1969).

A Catalogue of Errors

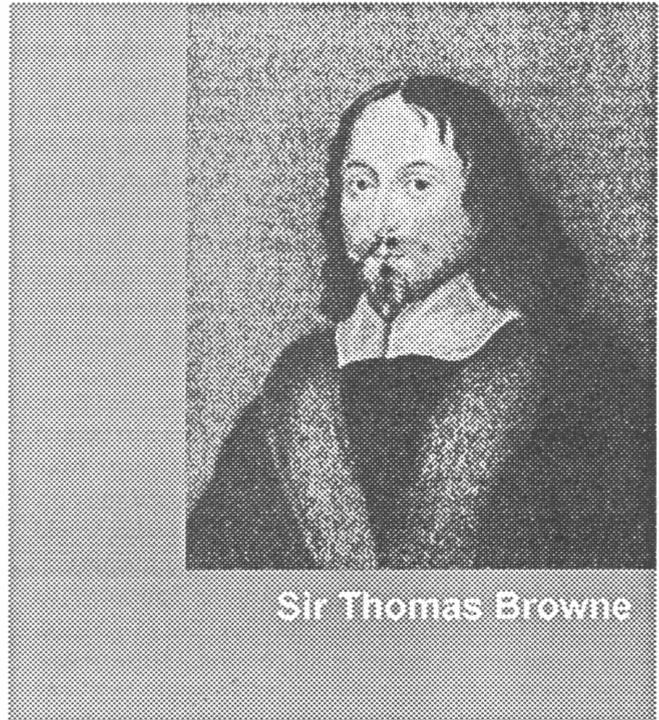
The work of Sir Thomas Browne that places him securely in the skeptical lineage that stretches from Lucian of Samosata to CSICOP is his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. This was Browne's best selling work, going through six editions during his lifetime (Huntley, 1962). In it Browne attempted a comprehensive exposure of what he called vulgar errors. The encyclopedic breadth of the *Pseudodoxia* is indicated by the topics of its seven books: Book I: Causes of common errors; Book II: Beliefs concerning minerals and plants; Book III: Beliefs concerning animals; Book IV: Beliefs concerning man; Book V: Questionable pictorial representations; Book VI: Beliefs concerning cosmology and history; Book VII: More historical beliefs.

Browne lists several causes of common errors. These include the Fall of Man ("The first and father cause of common Error, is the common infirmity of humane nature...."), the erroneous disposition of the common people, misapprehension, fallacious deductions, credulity, supinity, adherence to antiquity, tradition and authority, and finally the work of Satan. Save for the first and last items, his list is probably not much different from that of a modern skeptic.

As an example of misapprehension Browne cited Servius's account of the origin of the legend of the Centaur, the mythical creature that was half-man, half-horse: "when some young Thessalians on horseback were beheld afarre off, while their horses watered, that is, while their heads were depressed."

Of credulity, Browne commented, "This is a weaknesse in the understanding, without examination assenting to things, which from their natures and causes doe carry no perswasion; whereby men often swallow falsities for truths, dubiousities for certainties, fesibilities for possibilities, and things impossible as possibilities themselves."

Supinity--or to give it its modern name, laziness--is another source of vulgar errors: people are content to "live in doubts of things whose satisfaction is in their own



power." As will be seen, supinity was not one of Browne's vices.

Argument and Experiment

Pseudodoxia Epidemica can be viewed as an extended treatise on method. Browne's dissections of vulgar errors regularly proceed from three different starting points: authority, reason, and experience. Browne's appeal to authority is made with critical awareness of the authority's strengths and weaknesses. Aristotle he regarded as correct on some aspects of biology but on other matters less authoritative than moderns, such as William Harvey. Browne remarked with some asperity that Pliny's *Natural History* was responsible for three-quarters of the vulgar errors then current.

When Browne deploys reason against a wrong notion, he marshals carefully wrought and often ingenious arguments. For example, in considering the phoenix, he argues that one cannot assert the existence of such an animal for a variety of reasons. First, no ancient author who described the phoenix ever claimed to have actually seen it. Moreover, the ancient authorities could not even agree among themselves on the beast's habitat, some placing it in Ethiopia, others in Arabia, yet others in Egypt or India. Finally, many writers who mentioned the phoenix did so poetically or symbolically, and their writings should not be taken literally.

The *Pseudodoxia* describes many experiments conducted by Browne to test widely held notions. He examined

continued on page 12

the poisonous nature of certain spiders, the effect of swallowing broken glass, and the properties of spermaceti. On occasion Browne extended his experimental methods to what we would now call psychic or paranormal matters. At the time there was a widespread belief in the efficacy of so-called sympathetic needles as a means by which distant friends or lovers might communicate. Two needles were first touched by the same magnet and then suspended over identical circular alphabets. Turning one needle to point at a particular letter was supposed to cause the other to point at the same letter. In this way messages could supposedly be painfully spelled out letter by letter.

Browne procured a pair of needles and prepared them in the proper manner. He then was able to demonstrate that when one needle was moved, there was no response from the other. "Of these two, whensoever I removed the one, although but at the distance of half a span, the other would stand like *Hercules* pillars....Now as it is not possible that any body should have no boundaries, or Sphear of its activity, so it is improbable it should effect that at distance, which nearer hand it cannot at all perform." Browne also pointed out that the magnetized needles would repel one another, so that if one needle were moved from A to B, the other would move from A to Z. Finally, he pointed out that persons attempting to communicate over distances using the needles would have the insuperable difficulty (for the seventeenth century) of synchronizing their clocks.

Browne viewed human credulity with a generally sympathetic eye. If a belief is the occasion for a humorous sally, his humor is good-natured rather than malicious. He seems to have held ambiguous feelings about many of the beliefs that he demolishes. He probably would have preferred a world where phoenixes, griffins, and basilisks really existed.

As a writer, Browne is an important figure in the development of the English language. It was characteristic of his style to frequently create new words or phrases. As the great lexicographer Samuel Johnson wrote in the eighteenth century, "in defence of [Browne's] uncommon words and expressions, we must consider, that he had

uncommon sentiments, and was not content to express in many words that idea for which any language could supply a single term." Among the coinages in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* are the following: *antediluvian*, *electricity*, *hallucination*, *incontrovertible*, *literary*, *medical*, *precarious*, and *retrogression*.

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Science Fair Judges Needed

Every spring NCAS awards special prizes at local area science fairs. Volunteers typically spend a few hours on a Saturday morning, reviewing projects and talking with students. If you would like to help give special recognition and encouragement to young scientific thinkers, contact Walter Rowe during the day at 202-994-1469.



A Skeptic's Response

This feature of the *Skeptical Eye* is designed to provide skeptics with brief, logical answers to questions that may arise in conversation. Do you have a question--or a response--that should be shared with other skeptics? Send it to the Eye.

Bacon Bits

By Elena M. Watson

Los Angeles mystic Marie Bauer Hall is hardly the first person to claim that the plays of William Shakespeare were really written by Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626). This particular piece of Bacon lore is several hundred years old and, ironically, has been out of fashion for some time. The so-called "Anti-Stratfordians" (those who believe someone other than the historical Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him) now prefer the earl of Oxford as their prime candidate for true authorship.

Both the Bard and Bacon have long been the subject of numerous legends and rumors. In Shakespeare's case this seems to be the result of a simple lack of information. Because only six genuine signatures of the poet have ever been found, and there is considerable variation in them, many have speculated that William Shakespeare, the actor, was illiterate. Therefore, someone else must have been responsible for his works (Hamilton, 1985). Many names have been considered over the years in this guessing game, most notably Sir Walter Raleigh, the earl of Oxford, Christopher Marlowe, even Queen Elizabeth, and of course Bacon. Some speculate that in the post-Romantic era the plebeian man from Stratford no longer fit the public ideal of a poet. Instead, Lord Byron was the prototype; creating a secret identity for the true author of Shakespeare's works could satisfy this public image (Bentley, 1974).

The first hints that Sir Francis Bacon was this secret author go back to 1769 with Herbert Lawrence, and to 1785 with Rev. James Wilmont. But it wasn't until 1856 that the idea was really made public, by an American writer, Delia Bacon. Her book, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* (1857), became the Bible of the Baconians (Hamilton, 1985). However, even though she is often considered the first Baconian, she believed that Sir Francis did not write the plays alone. Rather, she said, he directed a stable of writers (Bentley, 1974). By 1885 a sizable Bacon cult had grown up and in that year the Bacon Society was founded (Hamilton, 1985).

Of the many Baconians who flourished in that era, perhaps the best known today is Ignatius Donnelly, the so-called "U.S. Prince of Cranks" (Gardner, 1957). In 1888 in his book, *The Great Cryptogram*, he "revealed" complicated ciphers that were said to prove that Bacon had authored not only the works of Shakespeare but those of many other writers as well (Bentley, 1974). Donnelly's obsession with finding a secret cipher in the works of

Shakespeare was one of three passions pursued by the Minnesotan politician. A self-educated radical reformer, Donnelly was also consumed by beliefs in the mythical Atlantis and in the notion of a giant comet catastrophe. His book *Atlantis* (1882) is still popular in certain circles today. Donnelly also wrote another book on the Bacon/Shakespeare controversy, entitled *The Cipher in the Plays* (Gardner, 1957).

Rivaling Elvis in the mystique that has continued to surround him, even three centuries after his death, Bacon has become a bit of a cult figure himself. Some of the incredible stories about him were summed up in an article on the Bruton Parish vault (see the story of the vault excavation on p. 1 of this issue) that appeared in the September 1992 issue of *Virginia Pathways* (formerly *Coastal Pathways*), an "alternative" New Age/holistic publication. According to this article the vault was alleged to have been buried in the seventeenth century by "members of Colonial Freemasons many of whom were to become America's Founding Fathers." The vault was thought to have been connected by secret tunnels to the outside world, and "to have served as a study center for higher initiates of these Freemasons." Francis Bacon, leader of these "British mystics," led them in creating a "visionary blueprint of a new form of government," which their descendants brought to the New World, and which directed and inspired the nation's founders.

It is a fact that many of the founders, such as George Washington, were Masons. Many Masonic ideals, such as that of tolerance, were the products of the Enlightenment and surely influenced our early government. However, the Masons' connection with Bacon is questionable. No Masonic lodge in America predates 1730, and the Williamsburg lodge wasn't established until 1750. Francis Bacon died nearly a century before the Grand Unified Lodge in London appeared in 1717. The mystical influence on Freemasonry was a later trend, dating to the second half of the eighteenth century--far too late to have been led or even influenced by Bacon (MacKenzie, 1967). In fact, there is only slim evidence to indicate that Bacon himself was an occultist.

In spite of this, according to *Virginia Pathways*, Bacon was not just a leader of the Freemasons, he was also founder of the Rosicrucians, another secret society. Actually, the Rosicrucians, said to have been founded in Germany in 1614, via an anonymous pamphlet, may really never have existed. The pamphlet, the first of several, told of a sage by the name of Christian Rosenkrantz, who also may never have existed. The true author of these writings may have been a student by the name of Johann Andrea, and his true motivation may have been political. Some authors speculate

that it could have been a joke. But once again there seems to be no Bacon connection (Cohen, 1985).

Undoubtedly the most bizarre story about Bacon is that he became the comte Saint-Germain, an eighteenth-century figure who was most certainly a charlatan, but who is still regarded as a mystic and "ascended master" by many present-day occultists. [Editor's note: Saint-Germain, along with Rosicrucians and many other mystical and occult groups, figures in the 1989 novel *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco, an incomparable send-up of occultism.] Saint-Germain's claim to fame was that he supposedly possessed the "Elixir of Life" and was actually hundreds or thousands of years old. Using his charm and personality he was able to live for years off his rich Parisian friends, teasing them with hints of immortality but always stopping short of making any testable claims. He was once arrested as a spy in London. It has been suggested that he may have really been a Portuguese Jew, born about 1710. He died in 1782, although the mystical crowd prefer to think he just moved on (Cohen, 1985).

Another Bacon legend cited in the *Virginia Pathways* article is the speculation that Sir Francis was the "secret son" of Queen Elizabeth I. This is intertwined with the Shakespeare legend. Several early Anti-Stratfordians had suggested that the true author of the Shakespeare works was, in fact, the illegitimate son of the Virgin Queen. But opinions differed as to whether this was Bacon or another, non-Stratfordian man, also named William Shakespeare (Bentley, 1974). In about 1895 the Baconian argument was taken up by a Dr. Orville Owen, who spent much time searching for evidence to back up his claim. He never found any, however (Hamilton, 1985).

In light of this, Marie Bauer Hall's claims lose much of their originality. Her discovery of the alleged vault was based on secret codes and ciphers--an unreliable technique favored by cranks of all persuasions and already promoted by Donnelly in the late nineteenth century. Likewise, the proclamation of Sir Francis Bacon as the true Bard was old news even when Hall made it back in 1938. It was outdated, even among Anti-Stratfordians, by the middle of this century (Bentley, 1974).

In the Newport News *Daily Press* (August 19 and 22, 1992), Hall contended that Bacon's son Nathaniel brought the Bacon manuscript to Virginia to escape persecution by King Charles, and then buried it in Jamestown, only later to have it reburied at Bruton Parish in 1674. However, Catherine Drinker Bowen's 1963 biography of Bacon clearly states that he had no children. Virginia colonist Nathaniel Bacon, to whom Hall may have been referring, was born in 1647, twenty-one years after the death of Sir Francis. His father was a Sir Thomas Bacon, of Suffolk, England.

Handwriting expert Charles Hamilton (1985) finds the case for a non-Stratfordian Shakespeare rather tenuous. He demonstrates, through example, that there is no reason to believe that the historic Shakespeare was illiterate. This contention is often based on the variations among the six genuine Shakespeare signatures. But Hamilton claims that these variations are not unusual.

In fact, modern scholars have now documented much more of William Shakespeare's life and work than was previously known (Bentley, 1974), making speculations about authorship altogether obsolete.

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Elena M. Watson is an NCAS member and the Eye's official Tidewater columnist. Her "Remote Viewing" column is a regular feature of the Eye. □

The Skeptic Tank



HICKORY SMOKED

SUGAR CURED

Reduced Salt

THICKER Cut

The NCAS file of plausible Baconian claims.

“Fairness, Fraud, and Feminism”: Report on the 1992 CSICOP Conference

By Elena M. Watson

Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, was the site of the sixteenth annual CSICOP conference, held in mid-October at the Harvey Hotel, conveniently located near the airport. Hosted by the North Texas Skeptics, the conference was titled “Fairness, Fraud and Feminism: Culture Confronts Science,” and proved to be less controversial than last year’s conference featuring the Amazing Kreskin. There were a few surprises, however, including the keynote address by Richard Dawkins, noted author of *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Selfish Gene*.

The first surprise was the weather. The night before the conference began, a huge Texas “gully-washer” hit the area, complete with hail, lightning, and flash flooding. Many flights were delayed at the airport, but fortunately mine was not one of them. I was cozily inside the Harvey before the rain hit. However, not all of the Harvey was equally cozy: the roof in the conference’s book room soon began to leak. Luckily fast action by both the CSICOP and Harvey staffs saved the books. Saturday morning brought yet another surprise; an early-morning fire alarm. Those of us slow to evacuate the building were delighted to find out that this alarm was false.

Multicultural Approaches to Science

On Friday, October 16, after a few opening remarks from CSICOP chairman Paul Kurtz on the need for skepticism in science and the importance of critical thinking, the first session began. Moderated by Eugenie Scott, executive director for the National Center for Science Education, “Multicultural Approaches to Science: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly” dealt with the effects of the deconstructionist and political correctness movements on education. As Scott pointed out, neither of these approaches acknowledges objective reality, instead viewing all knowledge as relative. Political correctness in particular influences a multicultural approach by teaching the most positive views of history, rather than what really happened. In the long run, Scott argued, this will hurt minority students when they learn they have been lied to.

Diana Marinez, a professor of biochemistry at Michigan State University, then spoke of the importance of getting minority students interested in science by using a positive multicultural approach, not dependent on political correctness. Using Chicanos as an example, she showed through statistics how few minority students go on to higher education. The tragedy of this is that in the future jobs will be much more science-based. Using real examples, such as the nutritional benefits of the Mexican diet and the Mayan mathematical system, Marinez suggested how multiculturalism could be usefully incorporated in the classroom to interest Chicano children in science.

Joseph Dunbar, a physiology professor from Wayne State University, then gave examples of a bad multicultural approach, that of the “melanin scholars.” These individuals take the politically correct approach to the extreme by appealing to African-American students on the basis of skin color alone. The premise of the “melanin scholars” is that a high level of melanin, or skin pigment, is positive because of its remarkable properties. These include claims that melanin is an energy converter that can convert energy to light and sound, sunlight to knowledge; that it will protect against mutations; and gives one ESP and the ability to communicate with plants. Dunbar discussed each claim in detail, explaining how scientific studies were both misinterpreted and misapplied in support of this extraordinary premise.

The next speaker, Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, a professor of anthropology at Wayne State, continued in a similar vein as he discussed the *Portland Baseline Essays*, a melanin-influenced, Afrocentric approach to teaching science. He prefaced this by stating that the problem with any “centric” approach is that it denigrates everyone outside a certain group. Two further problems with the pseudoscientific *Portland Baseline Essays* are that they could spoil the potential for all multicultural approaches, and that they are teaching scientific illiteracy. The essays themselves claim that ancient Egyptians were black and that they discovered everything first.

Showing examples, Montellano revealed how the essays promote a paranormal, religious approach by crediting the ancient Egyptians with using a superior “transmaterial” science in place of Western material science. Egyptian belief in a divine being is also endorsed. The essays further claim that the Egyptians employed professional psi engineers and that they flew around in glider planes, the latter speculation based on a small bird carving that is said to be a model glider. Thus, Montellano argued, a political agenda can distort even simple facts. Like the session’s previous speakers, he was deeply concerned that teaching this sort of nonsense will hurt minority students the most.

Gender Issues

The second session of the day, “Gender Issues in Science and Pseudoscience,” proved to be even livelier than the first. Moderator James Alcock of York University opened the session by reminding the audience that parapsychology can be traced back to spiritualism and the Fox sisters, and that many of the most famous spiritualists, mediums, and more recently channelers have been women. The question he left us with is, why?

Carol Tavris, psychologist and author of *The Mismeasure of Woman*, then began the session with her own question: “If man is the measure of all things, where does woman fit in?” Traditional science, she contends, operates from a male point of view. A sexual dichotomy is often set up. And although science is intended to be

CSICOP 92, from page 15

objective, it can sometimes be used to confirm a bias. Currently there are two such gender biases, according to Tavris: the chauvinist, or “normal,” view, which sees women as the problem, and the feminist view, which states that women are different from men, but better. For example, the chauvinist view holds that women have low self-esteem, not that men are overconfident. But the so-called “ecofeminist” view is just as distorted. There is no evidence that women are more peace-loving, or earth-loving, than men. But studies that emphasize the differences between men and women get attention, while studies showing evidence of gender similarities are ignored. Tavris asks, Just who benefits from such polarization?

British psychologist Susan Blackmore, of the University of Bristol, brought the discussion home by asking, “Why are so few members of CSICOP women?” Although she admitted that this low representation of women was general to all science, she added that proportionally speaking there are even fewer women skeptics than women scientists. The common stereotype would say that this is because more women are believers. But examining actual surveys, Blackmore says, shows that this is not always the case. Sometimes the answer depends on the way the question is worded.

Perhaps, she suggested, CSICOP’s approach simply does not appeal to women. In her view, hard science is stereotypically masculine. The purpose of such “masculine science” has traditionally been to conquer, to be objective, to control, to be predictive, and to establish dichotomies. Conversely, “feminine science” is interested in discovery, subjectivity, participation, and understanding and is continuous.

In conclusion, Blackmore pointed out there are problems whenever we set up dichotomies. In

A Personal View

Since this year’s conference had gender issues as a topic, and the word *feminism* in its name, I feel compelled to give a brief “woman’s perspective” on the event. The question of why so few women were present did come up in one session, and while I don’t have an answer, here are a few subjective observations.

I attended the conference with my sister. She has been in the workforce for about the last twenty years. Before that, she was in college, and as a drama major she was not required to study science. She is now, however, going back to school, studying sociology and social psychology, and enjoying it immensely. For Christmas I had given her a subscription to the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and she liked the publication so much that she was eager to attend the conference.

We noticed, however, that as two women together, we were in the minority. Often we were mistaken for members of MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), who were also meeting in the Harvey. My sister was surprised at the reaction she got from our table companions at the first night’s dinner after she revealed her occupation. The way she put it was, “I know from the looks on their faces they were wondering, ‘Just what is she doing here?’” What does she do that is so heinous? She’s a flight attendant for a major airline.

At the awards banquet, she did not reveal her occupation to our companions. Instead it was I who was a bit shocked, as I could not help but overhear two young white male college professors loudly discussing and laughing about certain female students who offered to do “anything, just anything” to pass a class in which they were failing. The implication was that these young women were offering sexual favors. When I questioned that assumption, I was dismissed as being hopelessly uninformed. Perhaps I am. But is the fact that a young female college student is willing to trade sexual favors for a passing grade really a laughing matter? In public?

--E. W.

Skeptical Magazine

One of the most enjoyable aspects of a CSICOP conference is the opportunity to meet and talk with other skeptics from across the country and around the world. One of my dinner companions on the first evening of the conference was Michael Shermer, director of the Skeptics Society of southern California. He was brandishing copies of the society’s new quarterly magazine, *Skeptic*, now in its second issue. Issue no. 2 has a special section on cryonics and asks the question, “Can Science Cheat Death?” The front section of the magazine features lots of short newsy pieces, plus a “Skeptics Forum.” Many of the longer articles have a philosophical bent; the magazine also includes book reviews. Subscriptions (\$30 per year) include membership in the Skeptics Society. Anyone interested may contact the society at 2761 N. Marengo Ave., Altadena, CA 91001 (phone/fax 818-794-3119).

--E. W.

science we have to be open to results we don't like, a point she made by discussing recent parapsychological research using the Ganzfeld technique.

The last speaker of the session, Steven Goldberg, author of *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, began by stating that science is neither good or bad, but empirical. The commitment is to the truth. The reason people focus on differences, he said, is because they are more interesting than similarities. In 1932, for example, Margaret Mead wrote about a tribe in New Guinea who supposedly displayed opposite sex roles. But this was really an exaggeration, as Mead herself admitted. Many years later, however, textbooks still cite this as the "opposite sex role" tribe. After discovering this fallacy in many textbooks, Goldberg searched for truly matriarchal societies. He found none. Instead he found that (1) all societies are patriarchal; (2) what is given higher status in a society is masculine, as males are drawn to high status; and (3) male dominance is prevalent because men have greater aggressiveness. Societies, says Goldberg, take direction from biology. Social environment is a dependent, not an independent, variable.

"Mind Viruses"

That evening, Richard Dawkins, of Oxford University, gave the keynote address. He began by describing how the human child is shaped by evolution to learn quickly--an advantage in learning one's culture, but a disadvantage in that it leaves young brains gullible. Dawkins then introduced an analogy between a computer virus, and a human "mind virus." He defined the latter as information that is spread from one human to another, but does nothing useful except get passed along. Characteristics of such a "mind virus" are that the information feels true, even when there is no evidence; faith without this evidence is seen as a virtue; and mystery is considered a good thing, not a problem to be solved.

These characteristics could describe many pseudoscientific beliefs, but Dawkins surprised some listeners by applying them to religion, generally using the Roman Catholic Church as an example. The next evening at the awards banquet he confessed to having been chided for using that example, as CSICOP usually doesn't deal with issues of religious faith, unless scientific claims are made for them. He then spoke of the importance of bringing the romance of science to the public, for it is that sense of wonder that lures them into such nonsense as ufology.

Saturday sessions dealt with topics as diverse as science fraud, crashed saucer claims, and the paranormal in China. Walter Stewart of the National Institutes of Health presented the liveliest talk of the first session--one that he had previously given in an NCAS program (see "Past Life Reporting," *Skeptical Eye*, vol. 6, no. 3). The other talks will be covered later in the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

Elena Watson is an NCAS member and Eye's Tidewater columnist. This was her first CSICOP conference. □

Future Foretold by Sage from Ancient Past

Three thousand years ago, an Indian astrologer and his disciples set down in writing the future of every individual who would ever live, anywhere in the world--an accomplishment that makes the prophecies of Nostradamus look like peanuts!

John Ward Anderson, of the *Washington Post* foreign service, reports (November 23, 1992) on his recent visit to the "latter-day disciples" of Sage Agasthiyar at the "thatched-roofed branch office in Tiruchchirappalli in southern India," where for a fee of \$25 he learned the details of his past and future lives. "My present is being complicated by the extremely poor behavior I exhibited in my previous life," he notes ruefully. According to Agasthiyar, Anderson in previous lives stole money from temples and deceived women--activities he's paying for in this life.

It seems that Agasthiyar and his disciples wrote down his predictions on palm leaves, in a script that only the present-day disciples are still able to read. A consultation involves paying the fee and answering a couple of hundred questions about your present-day life, personal and professional. Then the disciple finds the appropriate palm leaf and translates the inscription for you.

Agasthiyar didn't just write down predictions, he also thoughtfully provided "penance plans" for individuals. In Anderson's case, that means visiting nine temples in various regions of India, lighting lanterns, feeding sacred animals, and giving gifts of beds, pillows, rugs, gold, and silver to the priests. That done, in his next life he'll be a Sri Lankan doctor named Thyagarajan, and maybe even "achieve release from this cycle of births and deaths," the sage said.

Anderson comments, "It is hard not to become curious about astrology when you are surrounded by 700 million Hindus who believe in a cycle of births and deaths in which actions in this life are affected by the previous life and will determine what happens in the next...The ideal is to improve steadily over a series of lives until the cycle of death and rebirth is broken and salvation is achieved.

"With so much at stake, it seems that almost everyone in India...consults the stars--if not on a daily basis, then at least on important occasions."

Modern-day Indians consult astrologers for all sorts of reasons: to plan marriages, choose a day to sign a contract, or find out how to cure an illness. Anderson quotes the newspaper *Indian Express* on the ubiquity of astrology in India: "Clearly astrology has come to represent one of the greatest preoccupations of a society torn by the pressures of modern-day living...Like the traditional family doctor, today almost every family has a family astrologer, despite any skepticism regarding the veracity of the predictions." □

Scientific Exploration: The 1992 Meeting of the SSE and a Visit to the PEAR Lab

By Mike Epstein

The Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE) was founded in 1980 to advance the understanding of anomalous phenomena and provide a forum where scientists with differing belief systems can meet to exchange ideas concerning phenomena that appear to contradict existing scientific knowledge. Sure, Reverend Ian Stang in his *High Weirdness by Mail* describes the SSE as “repulsively academic...just what eggheads, long-hairs and career college students have been looking for.” But what do you expect from the Sacred Scribe of the Church of the SubGenius™ who also refers to skeptics as “party poopers”? In reality, the SSE is a dynamic organization of almost 400 members (one of whom is, or was, Paul Kurtz) that publishes the peer-reviewed quarterly *Journal of Scientific Exploration* and holds an annual meeting. This group is definitely no CSICOP, since many SSEers also belong to the Parapsychological Association and the American Society for Psychical Research. It is a forum where all kinds of views can be heard, as I can attest after returning from my first SSE conference.

The meeting, held June 11-13 at Princeton University, was attended by nearly 100 participants listening to 26 invited and contributed papers. A few examples illustrate the breadth of topics: author/publisher and Forteanist William Corliss on geological anomalies; folklorist Hilary Evans on how environment can be a contributing and even determining factor in anomalous occurrences; PEAR Lab researcher Roger Nelson on the development of a pendulum device to test man-machine interactions; Ian Stevenson on the correlation of birthmarks and wounds on corpses; Harold Puthoff awash in a sea of quantum energy; Dean Radin on geomagnetic field effects on human performance; Robert Jahn on the search for anomalies in human/machine interactions; George Egely with videotape highlights of ball lightning observations and destruction in Hungary; and Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos on UFO abduction reports in Spain. Some of the more controversial topics/speakers included: Zechariah Sitchin on implications of alien-induced creationism; Richard Blasband’s orgone energy phenomena; and James Martin, who monitored the heart rate of full-sibling chicken embryos

(i.e., eggs) prior to destruction (i.e., dropping or cooking) in search of biological responses to precognition of disaster. But weirdest of all was this guy Epstein talking about investigating miracles (see the *Skeptical Eye*, vol. 6, no. 2).

A highlight of the meeting was an opportunity to visit the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) Laboratory, where Robert Jahn heads a group investigating anomalous man-machine interactions. I arrived a skeptic and left two hours later, still skeptical, but impressed by the quality of experimental design, instrument construction, and data collection. Studies involved correlating prestated human operator intentions with shifts from random results using various random-event-generating (REG) apparatus. One such device was a “Random Mechanical Cascade,” which allows 9,000 polystyrene balls to drop through a matrix of 330 pegs, scattering the balls into collecting bins with a population distribution that was approximately Gaussian. The operator “intention” was to shift the mean of the distribution. Another device was a random binary generator driven by a microelectronic noise diode. Other studies were conducted with analog devices, such as a pendulum, with “intention” to influence the swing velocity. I was impressed with how the PEAR staff modified the crude optical design of one diffraction experiment that was presented during the conference. The design changes were identical to changes I envisioned during the talk.

The results from intention-influenced runs using these devices have shown significant differences from control experiments with no intention influence, but the effects do not seem to be straightforward. Intention in one direction may have an effect, while intention in another direction does not. The crucial problem is separating out all possible sources of bias, other than operator intention, that might influence experimental results. The results are certainly very interesting, whether or not they are influenced by operator intention. □

NCAS Archives

As part of its mission to serve as an information resource on extraordinary claims, NCAS maintains print and video archives. Members in search of information--or just a missed lecture--can call Mike Epstein (print) at 301-831-7992 or Gary Stone (video) at 301-470-1530.

we watch this stuff so you don't have to

Cold Fusion: The Movie

By Steve Shore

Did you ever wonder, when the electrolytic solutions were bubbling away in academic and national laboratories around the world, what was the industrial response to the announcement of cold fusion? Now you can find out, in a video produced by the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI) and distributed by the Edison Electric Institute. Entitled *Cold Fusion*, this video consists of a lecture by Joe Santucci of EPRI's Nuclear Power Division on the initial results from the Pons-Fleischmann experiment and a host of others during the first few months after the March 1989 press conference (see "Skeptic's Response: Cold Fusion," *Skeptical Eye*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 6).

What makes this tape so interesting is that it is one of the few examples on record of the industrial response to an extraordinary scientific claim, and it is--pardon the pun--most illuminating. The first portion of the lecture outlines the basic claims of the Utah experiments. The presentation is as dry as you might expect from an industrial briefing, but it is also quite detailed and complete. In fact, the outline is better than any provided by either Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann of University of Utah or Stephen Jones of Brigham Young University, the principal players in the initial claims.

Interestingly, the phenomenon is called electrolytic fusion rather than the more colorful and now more widely known term, "cold" fusion. A good example of the immediate attraction of the claim to chemists, and an oft-repeated joke, follows. After outlining the cost and complexity of standard fusion research, Santucci shows a large fusion reactor, the Princeton tokamak, and then the kitchen-sink version of the Pons-Fleischmann cell in order to emphasize the attraction of the claim. Of course, the same slides could have been used to demonstrate how outlandish the whole idea is, but this is yet another example of how enticing apparent simplicity can be. Santucci adds, however, that the experiments are very delicate and require a lot of technique, and says, "I don't want to mislead you that the experiments are simple because they're not."

As described in the lecture, at the time of the Pons-Fleischmann-Jones announcements, EPRI was already involved with the participants. It was funding Jones for some of his work on muon-catalyzed fusion. This is a real phenomenon that makes use of the substitution of a muon for an electron in the deuterium atom to promote fusion at a very low level. It served as the basis for Jones's original idea of metal-induced fusion. EPRI was also funding Pons for his work on electrochemistry. As Santucci says, both men were well known at EPRI. Santucci lists the various groups involved in the early cold fusion work: Texas A&M University, SRI (known to skeptics for Targ, Puthoff, and

Price, and a fellow named Uri Geller; also a prominent scientific consultant for the Department of Defense), Stanford University, and Case Western Reserve University. He says that they are receiving support from the Office of Naval Research and the CIA ("I believe").

It also turns out that one of the Texas group members was an ex-EPRI employee. EPRI was funding some electrochemistry work at Texas and was able to redirect that work "within 48 hours of the announcement." Santucci also states that IBM and Rockwell, among others, were mounting cold fusion experiments. Some foreign reports, one from Italy and one from Hungary, are presented but essentially dismissed without the groups or investigators being named. This is a similar reaction to many of the polywater reports: although the initial report of polywater came from the Soviet Union, nationalism played a role in the acceptance of claims.

The bulk of the summary concentrates on a few groups specifically funded by EPRI to study different aspects of cold fusion. At EPRI, the management structure for research was mobilized rapidly. A team of 14 scientists and managers was assembled, and several parallel experiments were started. Faster than you can say "electrolyte," several group members were hard at work generating patent applications.

EPRI was not alone in this effort. You may recall that the Utah group refused to release all of their samples or results because they were also anticipating patent applications.

Santucci does issue a few cautions. In the Texas A&M neutron detection experiments, the emission occurred in bursts at four or five times the background level, but these were comparatively rare. (Santucci provides no analysis of how this fared statistically, given the amount of time that the cells were running and given problems with background counts.) And in the tritium detection experiments, the detected amount was far in excess of the neutron flux. However, it was in line with the detected heat production. Nothing seems to rule out the effect, a typical aspect of any "jealous phenomenon."

Toward the end of the lecture, Santucci says that "the most crucial step is for the national labs [i.e. Sandia, Los Alamos, and Oak Ridge] to reproduce the results." Both Los Alamos and Yale University eventually reported the definitive negative results. It would be interesting to have a similar record of the reaction at EPRI to the end of the episode, but we are lucky to have this record of the first reactions.

Aside from its uniqueness, this video is interesting because it shows clearly the response to a claimed extraordinary phenomenon. As such, it is a wonderful document of the real scientific method at work.

We are always told that science works by replication and by falsification. However, there are clear instances in the history of science where hypotheses can cover failures for a period of time and where there is no real way of replicating the experiment. Pons and Fleischmann did not supply sufficient information in their press briefings, their talks, or their one refereed paper to permit detailed replication. Also, there were contradictory claims that required very different

experimental arrangements to check them. Some groups reported gamma rays, others neutron excesses, and others excess heat generation. Eugene Mallove's book on cold fusion, *Fire from Ice* (New York: Wiley, 1991; reviewed in *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 16, no. 3, spring 1992, p. 301), lists many of the early claims. His tables show that few groups reported overlapping phenomenology.

In the face of contradictory behavior, it is clear that a multiple-working-hypothesis approach can be fruitful. In fact, what was actually happening in the case of cold fusion was that the failure on one front was not taken as dissuading evidence for the phenomenon, but instead merely limited its scope. Eventually, as the claimed phenomena connected with cold fusion were discarded, the whole thing vanished. But if it had worked, "Better Living Through Chemistry" might have been the electric company's motto.

Note: A copy of the video, *Cold Fusion: Edison Electric Institute Library Grant Program, Northern States Power Company Technology Update*, featuring Dr. Joe Santucci of the Electric Power Research Institute's Nuclear Power Division, is available through the NCAS Video Archive. I want to thank John Ptak, of Science Books in Georgetown, for providing this video.

Steve Shore is an astrophysicist at NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center and an NCAS board member. □

Edgar Cayce Update

When we last left our hero, the Sleeping Prophet, who has been dead since 1945, Edgar Cayce had been immortalized by having his story dramatized on TV's "Unsolved Mysteries." Apparently, that was only the beginning of the latest round of Cayce-mania. For now there is Edgar Cayce the play, possibly to be followed by Edgar Cayce the movie.

Not only that, but last April the Association for Research and Enlightenment (ARE), which is devoted to the study of Cayce and houses all of his psychic readings, announced an expansion in its publishing ventures. In recent years the ARE Press has been issuing only five or six books a year. The press now hopes to expand that to 50 books and tapes a year, within the next three years, according to editor-in-chief Joseph W. Dunn, Jr., as reported in *Coastal Pathways*.

Meanwhile, in May the ARE presented the Virginia premiere of Granville Wyche Burgess' play about the famed psychic, entitled *The Freak*. The play is set in Cayce's hometown of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and takes place in the years 1910 and 1911. The plot concerns Cayce's doubts about his own healing powers and whether or not to heal his own ailing son. The son, Milton, dies because Cayce refuses to treat him, fearing his "powers" could be evil. A local drama critic, while praising the acting and direction, found too many conundrums in the story and questioned its authenticity.

The same playwright is also reported by the *Virginian-Pilot* to be working on a script for a Cayce movie, "Signs and Wonders." The plot will be similar to the play, and is to be produced by an independent Seattle company, Film Zend. The budget is to be about \$10 million.

Production company head Rodger Spero has been offered exclusive rights to the play through 1995, as well as help in research. If and when filming begins, the ARE will receive \$25,000, plus 5 percent of the net profits. Just think how rich the ARE might be if Cayce had been right about Atlantis. □

Electronic Directory

An increasing number of NCAS members have electronic mail addresses. If you would like to have your e-mail address included in the NCAS member directory, please send e-mail to Gary Stone at CompuServe address 74435,175

Board members with e-mail addresses:

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Patti Maslinoff	CompuServe 71052,2772
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A Vain Pursuit

By *Elena M. Watson*

The brochure promised "Ghosts, Ghosts, Ghosts..." And the possibility that scenic Occoquan was haunted did intrigue me. When it comes to ghosts, you see, I'm a bit of a romantic. I'm not really sure why--maybe it was all those "Topper" movies I watched as a kid. That or the "Casper" cartoons. Anyway, I was curious about "Historic Occoquan," a sleepy little northern Virginia town near Lake Ridge.

The brochure in question is actually titled, "A Spirited History of Historic Occoquan," and was published by the Occoquan Merchants' Association in 1988. The brochure explains that Occoquan, once a busy mill town, has remained a living community from its colonial origins through the Civil War to the present. Unlike Colonial Williamsburg, it is not a restoration, and its historic buildings now house over 120 shops and restaurants. The ghost stories are said to be "authenticated by local legend and town gossip."

The stories themselves are nothing to lose sleep over. Mostly just store owners reporting mysterious footsteps or whispers. At Kitchen Cousins the resident spirit has been said to switch the heating to air conditioning, or vice versa. The story with the oldest history comes from the Occoquan Inn, which was the site of a tavern or inn back when colonists and Indians lived together in town. Eventually the newcomers drove out the Indians, except for one. He is said to have been a tall man with long black hair and a dignified face. And he occasionally appears today in the upstairs restroom mirror.

So, one lovely fall day I decided to visit Occoquan and ask about the ghosts. I began at the information center. There I noticed that the "ghost" brochure was not even on the racks, although when I asked the woman behind the counter about ghosts, she produced a copy of it. However, she also admitted she didn't know anything about the ghosts herself. She didn't even know anyone who had ever seen them. Her suggestion was that I ask at the museum, located in the Mill House, which is all that is left of the original mill after a fire in 1924.

On my way to the Mill House I happened by the Occoquan Inn. I asked the manager about the Indian ghost. He admitted that he had never seen the apparition himself, but maintained that the old fellow was often seen in the upstairs ladies' room mirror. He further said that one of the waitresses used to talk about the ghost all the time, but since she had left, about two years before, no one had seen him. Maybe he went with her!

The only personal experience the man from the Occoquan Inn could relate was that once he had misplaced his glasses for three days and then found them on his desk. None of the staff admitted to putting them there. Gee, I've misplaced things for three years, before finding them on my desk!

Unconvinced, I continued to the museum. Once there I asked the older man working at the counter if he knew anything about ghosts. He said all he knew was in this brochure and produced a copy of "Ghosts, Ghosts, Ghosts..." He laughed heartily when I asked him if he thought the ghost angle brought in tourists. When he caught his breath, he said no. But, he admitted, people do sometimes ask about the ghosts.

Having had enough ghost hunting for one day, I returned home. But I was still curious about that ghost brochure. The folks at the Information Center and Museum seemed less than enthusiastic about promoting Occoquan as a ghost town. So whose idea was it? Referring to the brochure, I discovered it was illustrated by June Ball of Two Sisters Gallery. I wrote and asked her about it. She wrote back to say that the merchants had been hearing tales of Occoquan ghosts for years and asked the occupants of the historic buildings to "pass on information about what they had heard of the presence of ghosts." She added, "Also they informed us of any happenings that occurred while they were occupants."

Ms. Ball said they thought the stories were interesting enough to share. She also reported taking photographs to use in making her sketches. She used a Leica camera, which she claims does not permit double exposure. But the developed photograph of the Country Shop did feature a double exposure, showing a figure in the window! But the window had been empty when she took the picture. I immediately wrote back asking if I could see the photograph or a copy of it. She never responded. Somehow, I wasn't too surprised. Evidence for ghosts, like the spirits themselves, often proves to be ephemeral in nature.

Later I discovered that the Occoquan art colony had its beginnings in the basement of an old funeral home on Mill St. in 1977. So hearing ghost stories coming from the artists of Occoquan isn't too surprising. In fact, I would be surprised if you could put artists in the creaky old basement of a funeral home and *not* get ghost stories. Actual ghosts, however, are a different matter. □



Past Life Reporting

Capturing the Spirit of NCAS Events

Secrets of Skeptical Thinking

The NCAS September program was a different kind of event—as mini-workshop in critical thinking, led by physicist and NCAS board member Joe Himes. Using examples drawn from the *Fairfax Journal*, *Fortean Times*, and *Weekly World News*, Himes led the audience through a series of steps to decide whether a report of a strange or unusual claim is worth following up. He encouraged, and received, lively participation from the audience. One audience member came up with the “Hundredth Tabloid” phenomenon, analogous to the notorious “Hundredth Monkey”: in this version, “as soon as a story appears in 100 tabloids, everyone believes it.”

The claims examined included a report of a present-day “Stone Age” family (see the follow-up article on this claim, elsewhere in this issue of the *Eye*), a story of strange noises coming through a radio, and an article on so-called “hairy children.” Himes advised that when you see a “strange” article, such as these, you should first ask whether the strangeness is there deliberately. Then check for the presence of the paranormal in the claim. Is it implied or explicit? Third, check whether the claim is falsifiable. “If the answer to all these questions is yes, then the claim is probably worth investigating,” Himes said.

To examine a claim, Himes suggests the following procedure: check for repeatability (rule out coincidence), objectivity (consider the simplest explanation), predictions (what new things should be observed), and evidence (verify completeness and simplest data first). Be alert for personal observations and testimonials, which are likely to be biased and invalid; ad hominem arguments, since no authority is infallible and even nonauthorities may have valid insights; and the tendency to jump to conclusions.

Mind Control and Cults

Mentalist Bob Fellows gave an illuminating presentation on mind control and cults at an NCAS program on October 3. An accomplished magician, Fellows used mentalist routines, such as “mind reading” of birthdates and of a word from a book, along with humor to make his points entertainingly. He began by posing the question of whether people who participate in cults are less intelligent than most people. Remember, he cautioned, that illusions are designed to fool *intelligent* people. Manipulation is central to cultism, he pointed out: people join such groups, and afterwards wonder why they did it.

Fellows provided a mnemonic for summarizing the characteristics of a cult: “Meet the Police Department” (MEETPD), in which M = manipulation, E = exclusivity, E = exploitation, T = totalitarianism, PD = psychological damage.

He asked the audience to characterize the kind of person most likely to become involved in a cult. The audience suggestions included: idealistic, naive, freethinking, lacking information, lack-

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ing critical thinking skills, having low self-esteem, economically comfortable, educated, middle-class, looking to external authority, and able to fantasize. These were "very close to the list experts have identified," Fellows said, and then added a few more: under stress, leaning toward dependency, possibly in a transition in life, intolerant of ambiguity, experiencing cultural disillusionment, desiring spiritual meaning, and lacking an understanding of the mind-body dynamic. The most important thing to remember, he said, is that "anyone at all can be at a point in life where we exhibit some of these characteristics."

People often believe they're acting out of free choice when in reality they are being manipulated. Anyone can be put in that victim position, Fellows emphasized. "Understanding the dynamic of how we do what we don't want to do--even when we're making a free choice--can help us. Try being on the other side of the trick--the magician side, not the victim side," he suggested. "Mind control is not water dripping on your forehead or flashing white lights. It's these subtle skills to get people to do what you want."

Other stuff

Just in time for Halloween, NCAS president Chip Denman was interviewed by the *Baltimore Sun*. Queried on topics ranging from 19th century Spiritualism to modern ghosts and weeping statues, Denman stressed the importance of good thinking skills in a world which depends heavily on science and technology. The Sun cited NCAS's efforts to promote skepticism through its public programs and the *Eye*.

NCAS's sleight of hand artist Jamy Ian Swiss urged New Yorkers to be skeptical of deals that seem too good to be true. As part of a New York City government effort to smarten up citizens against the age-old street con "Three Card Monte," Swiss demonstrated the illegal card "game" for the benefit of the press. The *New York Times* and the Associated Press on November 11, cited Swiss's efforts in this high-profile campaign in street-skepticism.

In December, Swiss spoke on deception, perception, and seeming extra-sensory perception at a meeting of the New York Area Skeptics. □

In Search of:

NCAS would like to find possible facilities for future events. Can you suggest locations? Rooms of different sizes are sought which could accommodate 75-500. Metro accessibility, parking, audio-visual equipment, and weekend availability are all factors which need to be considered. Please phone Joe Himes at 703-280-2503.

Keep Your Eye Open

Send your articles, letters, and original artwork for future publication in the *Skeptical Eye*. Contributions should be short (500-1000 words maximum, or two to four double-spaced pages) and typed, not handwritten. If you use a computer, please send hard copy along with your floppy disk (5.25" or 3.5", WordPerfect or ASCII). Please be sure to include your name, address, and telephone number. Send all contributions to *Skeptical Eye*, 8006 Valley Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

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The Last Word

Tales from the Vault

By Lys Ann Shore

Last September's fruitless search for the Williamsburg vault and its mythical cache of Baconian documents, related by Elena Watson elsewhere in this issue, was followed about a month later by an excavation at the site of St. Mary's City, Maryland, in which archaeologists hoped to locate the coffins of some early members of the notable Calvert family. Unlike the Williamsburg case, the St. Mary's City excavation didn't involve extraordinary claims. Still, the results were at best inconclusive, since the excavated coffins contained no identifying markers to indicate who the occupants might be.

Together, these vault stories bring irresistibly to mind a vault story from an earlier era. The tale goes back to the Middle Ages and concerns St. Mary Magdalen. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Mary Magdalen was a popular saint, around whom an elaborate legend had grown up. She was believed to have traveled to southern France after the death of Jesus, where she lived as a hermit in the desert. Mary eventually went to heaven, but her body remained in southern France, and a shrine to her was established at the abbey of Saint-Maximin in Provence.

The shrine of a popular saint was a major asset to a church, so it's not surprising that a church in northern France, the abbey of Vézelay, began to proclaim that *its* vault held the bones of the saint. In the twelfth century,

Vézelay was enjoying an economic boom as a major stopping point on the most popular pilgrimage (read tourist) route in Europe (the route to the Spanish shrine of St. James of Compostela). With the bones of Mary Magdalen as a drawing card, Vézelay attracted huge numbers of pilgrim-tourists.

But in the thirteenth century the southern French monks realized what an opportunity they were missing and began to challenge the northerners' claim. How could the monks of Vézelay validate their claim so as to preserve their shrine's reputation (and income)?

Dig they must.

One day in 1265, the excavation took place in the presence of several bishops and other official witnesses. Soon, the shovels struck the hard surface of a coffin. The workers cleared away the debris and raised the casket with great care. Finally, they prepared to open it. Indeed, the coffin did hold a woman's bones and hair. But was it the body of St. Mary Magdalen? How could they tell?

The monks of Vézelay were luckier than the archaeologists at St. Mary's City: along with the remains, the coffin contained a certificate written in Latin, undated but signed by one "King Charles" (Charlemagne?), attesting that here indeed was "the body of the most blessed Mary Magdalen."

The nineteenth-century historian who recounts this story remarks drily: "To be sure, this certificate is not exactly reassuring...I fear that, as sometimes happened in such cases, someone may have prearranged the discovery."

A certificate can lie, and the lack of one isn't a negative proof. Extraordinary claims, whether centered on the past or the present, still demand *solid* evidence. □

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