

Volume 7 Number 2
March/April 1993

The Skeptic



The Myths of Meditation

Also in this issue:

The Cyril Burt Affair
Equine Pseudoscience
All That Glisters Is Not Gold

£1.85

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery

If, on a certain night in June, 1871, you had been walking in the quarter of London which separates Highbury from Holborn, and had chanced to look up into the skies, you would have seen a somewhat unusual sight: a rather large lady, in her indoor *déshabillé*, flying through the air in a southerly direction. Unfortunately, if any witnessed the spectacle, none reported it, so we have no eye-witness account of the aerial transit itself. However, as to the fact itself, there can be no doubt, for we have the first-hand testimony of a Mr H.Y., described as 'a Manchester merchant of high respectability'—and as all the world knows, respectability does not go much higher than that of a Manchester merchant.

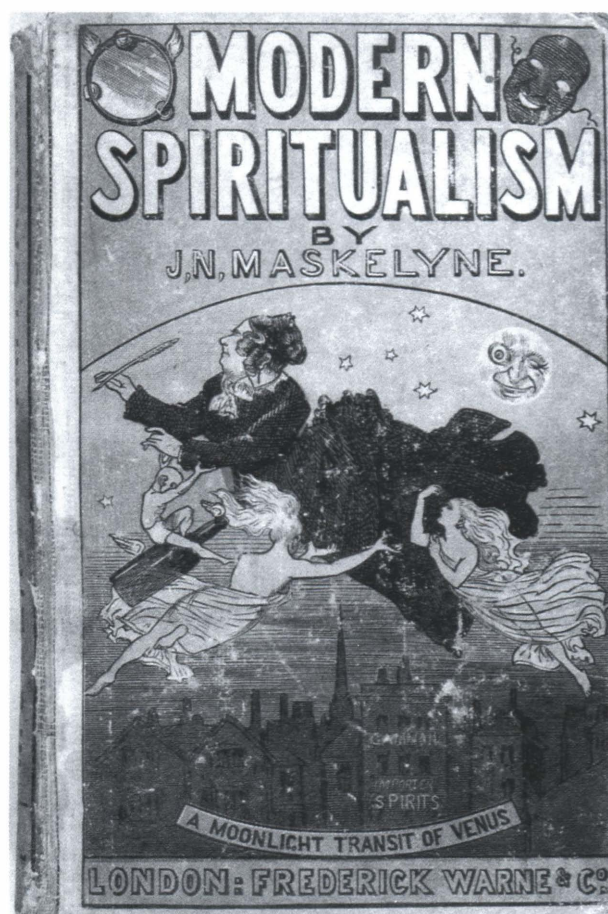
Mr H.Y. was one of eight gentlemen and three ladies attending a spiritual séance chez Messrs Herne & Williams, two well-known practitioners of the spiritualist arts. The doors being locked and the room darkened, a Mr Harrison suggested to 'Katie', the control, that she should 'bring Mrs G'—referring to Mrs Guppy, another well-known medium of the day. Another said, 'Good gracious! I hope not; she is one of the biggest women in London'; but 'Katie' enthusiastically exclaimed 'I will! I will! I will!'.

'We were all laughing at the absurdity of the idea, when John's voice called out "Keep still, can't you?"'. In an instant somebody called out, 'Good God! there is something on my head,' simultaneously with a heavy bump on the table and one or two screams. A match was instantly struck, and there was Mrs G, standing on the centre of the table, with the whole of us seated round the table, closely packed together, as we sat at the commencement. Both doors were still locked. Mrs G appeared to be in a trance and was

perfectly motionless. Fears were expressed that the shock would be injurious to her, supposing it to be really Mrs G, and not some phantom in her image. She had one arm over her eyes, with a pen in her hand, and an account-book in her other hand, which was hanging by her side. When she came round, she seemed very much affected, and began to cry. She told us that the last thing she could remember was that she was sitting at home, about



Mrs Guppy



three miles away, making up her week's accounts of household expenditure. The ink in the pen was wet, and the last word she had half-written—'pickles'—was smeared and scarcely dry. From the joking remark about bringing Mrs G, to the time she was on the table, three minutes did not elapse. The possibility of [so large] a lady being concealed in the room is as absurd as the idea of her acting in collusion with the media.'

This was not the only occasion on which Mrs G was levitated: it was quite a frequent feature of her séances—but those were under her control, or at any rate her Control's control; whereas the Highbury-Holborn volitation (which may, of course, have involved volatisation) was not of her volition.

Two years later, Herne confessed, in a general way, to cheating at his séances; though his assertion that every other medium in London was equally fraudulent was roundly rejected by the indignant editor of *The Medium*. And indeed, no one has ever proved that Mrs G's flight did not take place.

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Sorry if we've missed anyone out! Please keep the clippings coming!

Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

World news

Just after writing *Hits & Misses* for the last issue, in which I bemoaned the declining quality of the *National Inquirer* magazine, I made a major discovery at the checkout of a drugstore in the Chicago area. I picked up another magazine entitled *Weekly World News* which is definitely worth buying just once as it makes the contents of our own *Sunday Sport* look like hard-hitting investigative journalism. The major innovation of the *Weekly World News* is apparently to use computer graphics techniques to modify illustrations so that stories with headlines such as 'Werewolf Battles Cops in Alabama' and '200,000-Year-Old Baby Found In Moon Rocks' come complete with (almost) convincing black and white photographs. Of course I could be wrong—maybe Bill Clinton really did meet an alien last year.



This publication, amusing though it may be, does however raise a serious concern with regard not only to still photographs but also video footage used by the broadcast media. It has long been possible to touch up, or even completely modify, newspaper photographs but the equipment required to fake ciné film or videotape has, until recently, been expensive and the results were not always stunning. (See any pre-Spielberg science-fiction film if you don't believe me). But all this has changed, and as I write, I have beside me a cheap home computer and some fairly inexpensive video equipment with which it is possible (with a modicum of skill) to produce convincing video footage of UFOs, Loch Ness monsters and other strange phenomena using a combination of filmed and computer-generated images. It is my guess that fairly soon a high-tech version of a crop-circle hoaxer will use this technology to produce footage, for the picture-hungry news media, of a variety of paranormal phenomena. Remember, you read about it here first.

Chinese medicine

A major study of traditional Chinese medicine is soon to take place in the UK, organised by skin specialists from the Great Ormond Street Hospital. According to the *Mail on Sunday* on 31 January, herbal prescriptions for eczema and other similar skin conditions will be tested on patients attending the Chi Centre, a private clinic in Putney—liver tests will also be carried out to monitor possible side-effects. Meanwhile, back in China, according to the *Guardian* on 23 February, the country's legislature has recently passed a consumer protection law that allows the death penalty for makers of false medicines or products that cause deaths. No law has yet been enacted to protect the population against governments that cause deaths.

Calling Venus

Television viewers in the Pennine town of Sedburgh have had their evenings disturbed recently by sudden bursts of communication, aimed off-planet, issuing from their TV sets. Phrases such as: 'Hello, Venus. Earth calling. Is there anybody there?' did not seem to fit easily into the plot of ITV's *The Bill*, leading viewers to believe that an amateur interplanetary scientist was at work somewhere in the area. According to the *Guardian* on 4 February, Sedburgh generally has poor TV reception in bad weather but this is the first time that interplanetary communications have caused problems. The messages stopped when a well-known local inventor, Hilary 'Catweazle' Bullock, left the area but the report does not say whether he left by bus, car, train or flying saucer.



Tim Pearce

False testament

A recently-completed study, that has been underway for fifteen years, has concluded that the first ten books of the Old Testament are almost certainly fiction and were written between 500 and 1500 years after the events they purportedly describe. According to the *Independent on Sunday* on 28 March, the study—which was carried out by Professor Thomas Thompson, one of the world's foremost authorities on Biblical archeology—is regarded as a work of meticulous scholarship by other scholars. Thompson believes that there is a complete absence of archaeological evidence for many of the events portrayed in the bible. In particular, he claims that the Israelite exile in Egypt, the Exodus and the conquest of the promised land never took place and that Kings Saul, David and Solomon did not exist. Of course to many Christians and some Jews, the historicity of the Old Testament may not be an important element of their faith but one would imagine that these findings could pose problems for many fundamental believers. I suspect, however, that most will agree with Rabbi Julian Jacobs, a member of the Chief Rabbi's cabinet, who explained: 'The Bible, being of divine origin, can stand on its own two feet and does not require supportive evidence'.

Conspiracy theory

They say that even paranoids have enemies and nowhere was this more evident than at *The First International Conference that Exposes an International Deception* held at Wembley Arena on 10 and 11 January. The event was widely (and it has to be admitted, fairly skeptically) reported in a number of newspapers, with many carrying prominent articles in the week before the conference. Yet despite this tremendous publicity, only about 400 participants turned up to hear the catalogue of astonishing facts exposed by speakers at the meeting instead of the 12,000 that the organisers had hoped for—clear evidence that 'certain powerful people' did not wish these facts widely disseminated and had interfered with ticket sales.

The wonderful thing about this particular conference is that it apparently enabled many different conspiracy theorists to weave their disparate threads into one enormous, all-encompassing, (albeit slightly fuzzy) Grand Unified Theory that incorporates everything from Kennedy's assassination, through UFOs and Satan's involvement with the world economy, to the joint Japanese/German manned landing on Mars in 1942. The real problem though, is the secret world government—dedicated to devil worship—that reaches into every sphere of human activity and whose lineage stretches back 5,000 years to the Canaanites and the cult of Bael, the god of fertility. This elite group, the 'Illuminati' has manipulated the world throughout the centuries in pursuit of absolute power and will, over the next decade or so manoeuvre humanity into creating a single world government under their control. The triggering factor for the move towards world unity will be the perceived threat to the planet from UFOs. I'm still trying to work out how the privatisation of British Rail and the restructuring of the higher education system fits into the Grand Plan.

Ungodly aliens

I am getting increasingly concerned about the quality of alien with whom (which?) we share this particular neck of the galactic woods. Take UFOs for instance: the drivers of these vehicles take no notice whatever of air corridors and the like, they sometimes buzz fighter pilots, refuse to land at airports and generally fail to behave as responsible members of a galactic federation should. Worse still, as pointed out in *The Oldie* on 19 February, animal mutilations, often involving removal of genitals, have occurred since Roman times and seem to be increasing in frequency and yet have never been explained, although UFO-nauts have, in recent times, often been principal suspects. In *The Skeptic* 6.6, I included a photograph of a crop-formation that, with hindsight, was obviously made by the same aliens that are responsible for the animal mutilations, and quite frankly, I worry about the state of a galaxy in which this kind of dastardly behaviour is allowed to occur. Fortunately, an article by Bernard Levin published in *The Times* on 16 November holds out some hope that this situation may soon be rectified. Apparently the Roman Catholic Church is planning a search throughout space to find extraterrestrial beings and to bring them into the Christian faith. The Vatican Observatory is getting together with astronomers in Tucson, Arizona and together they will scour the skies for aliens who may never have had a chance of salvation because of their lack of knowledge of the gospel (a theme which was explored a number of years ago in a science fiction novel by James Blish, if I remember correctly). The sooner these misguided creatures are made to see the light the better, as far as I'm concerned.



Tim Pearce

Nostradamus

Anyone contemplating joining the Encounters book club (recently advertised in Sunday supplements) and hoping to find enlightenment by means of the books on offer should probably avoid buying the book 'Nostradamus. The end of the Millenium' for £1.99. One of the predictions on the front page is: '1992 George Bush re-elected'.

Steve Donnelly is a physicist and a reader in electronics and electrical engineering at the University of Salford.

Vicious Circles

Robin Allen

A closer look at three recent books about crop circles

P. Delgado, *Crop Circles: Conclusive Evidence?* (Bloomsbury, £14.99, hbk)

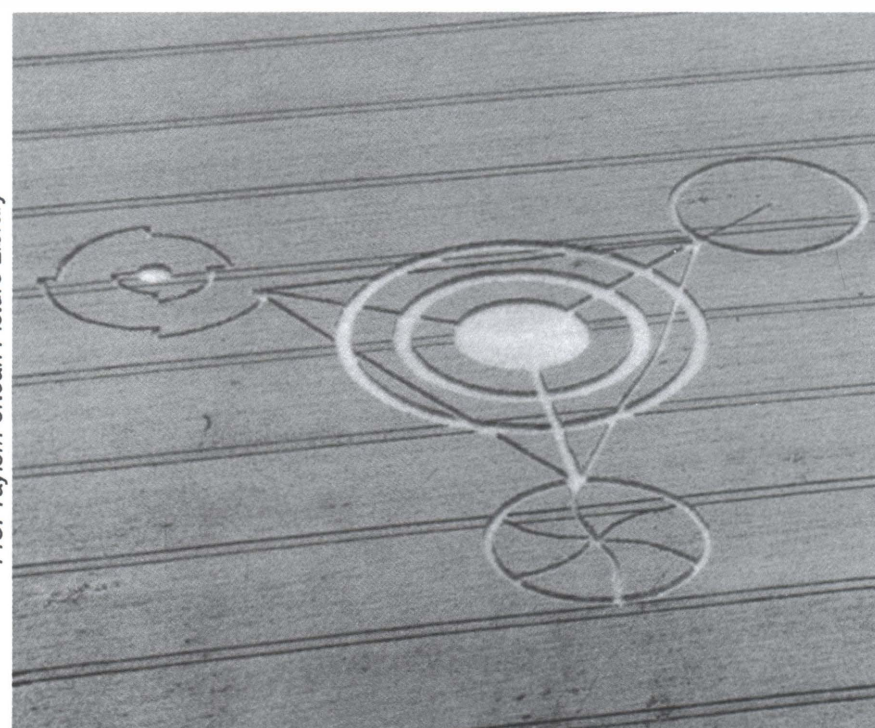
A. Collins, *The Circlemakers*, (ABC Books, £4.95, pbk)

A. Bartholomew (Editor), *Crop Circles: Harbingers of World Change* (Gateway Books, £9.95, pbk)

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, the greatest mystery of the twentieth century is not how crop circles are made, but how crop circle researchers ever contrive to change a plug. It is not that the manual dexterity or technical awareness required for the task is beyond them; that would not be mysterious. Rather, it is the fact that changing a plug must present the alert investigator with such a constellation of unexplained events that he would never get as far as changing the fuse for bewilderment with what he had experienced.

Let me elucidate. Most cerealogists—at least, those with whom I am familiar—are little more than human anomaly-detectors, whose passion in life is seeking out things they cannot explain, declaring whatever they might find to be of Great Importance, and announcing to all and sundry the initiation of a Scientific Research Programme to study it. This endeavour would almost be honourable if it were not

for the fact that, all too often, the mysteries are trivial, having been generated by overzealous study of prosaic phenomena, and the analytical tools brought to bear by cerealogists on their mysteries are precisely those least likely to lead to a solution. A consistent employer of cerealogical method really ought to be thrown into confusion by changing a plug. Consider: The metal and wires in the plug will bear all sorts of strange marks and scratches. Now, some of these might be due to manufacturing peculiarities and to previous occasions on which the plug was fixed, but even if you could show that these arose in such a way—which you probably could not, nyaah, nyaah—it would not logically follow that all marks were so made. Assiduous analysis of the structure of the marks would inevitably reveal ‘significant’ patterns (perhaps involving sacred numbers and ratios, or related to Sumerian culture). No doubt molecular oddities—or, to use conventional circlespeak, ‘anomalies’—would be discovered if appropriate scientific tests were performed. And how would you explain the tangled way the strands of the neutral wire are arranged? The odds against just such an arrangement can be set at millions to one against. And then we have weird events occurring to the cerealogist. His nose unaccountably requires itching just as he pulls the earth wire free. He feels light-headed whilst anticipating changing the plug, or whilst doing it or sometime after completion. He hears strange noises all about; some are identified—the fluorescent light in the kitchen, the neighbour’s radio—but others are not, and remain unexplained. Experts will be able to pen technical tracts on how their dowsing rods detect anomalous energy fields running parallel, or perpendicular, or in no relation, to the wires. And when one allows for the really profound mysteries—why did that sparrow alight on the washing line just as I clipped the live wire?—you can see that there is more than enough here for a letter to the



F.C. Taylor/Fortean Picture Library

(*Fortean*) Times and a boxed set of videos. I repeat: It is truly remarkable how, given the research strategies of cerealogists, they ever manage to change plugs; or fix cars and take baths.

If you do not believe me, perusal of these three volumes will set you on the road to enlightenment. But more than that, it will ensure that you receive at

least a rudimentary education in the wider processes of cerealogy, an education surely as character-building for the modern skeptic as Classics was for scholars of old. Cereology is a discipline that appears to have arisen to satisfy the needs of those who think that conventional scientific method—the careful analysis of sound data, consideration of competing hypotheses, rigorous argument, openness to criticism, and all that—makes being a scientist too hard, and that it ought to be replaced by something that has all the social fringe-benefits but is less effort-intensive. This should not precipitate a declaration of ‘anathema!’ and mutual humphing amongst practitioners of Csicoppery; quite the contrary. A round of applause might be more appropriate. It seems to me that, just as a detective

can admire the exquisite talents of the burglar who pulls off an ingenious heist, so the scientifically sophisticated can set aside considerations of academic propriety and stand in awe of the researcher who, with the odd appeal to authority and some carefully careless analyses, turns a mountain of meaningless information into convincing evidence for an anomaly. Certain cerealogists are masters of this technique and their writings, when unaccompanied by any palpable whiff of insincerity, are a joy to behold. Unfortunately, I must report that the books under review here, penned by the intellectual cream of circles research, owe more to bricking an oldie for her pension book than to Raffles; seasoned veterans who relished the scientific pretence of *Circular Evidence* and authoritarian bluster of

The Circles Effect and Its Mysteries can only lament the passing of the salad days of cerealogy, when experts were experts, circles were unhoaxable and the press was interested.

Of the three, the least sophisticated (in my opinion) is Pat Delgado’s book, *Crop Circles: Conclusive Evidence?*. Mr Delgado reminds me of Dan Quayle; he exhibits some signs of tutoring in the rhetorical arts of his trade, but fails to realise that such tricks are only of any real value if one is not seen to be employing them. For example, if one disclaims any intent to persuade the reader of the validity of one’s own circular Weltanschauung, or asserts that one’s aim is to present the evidence and let the reader make up his own mind, then one ought not to offer him facile dismissals of conventional explanations (hoaxing, meteorology), a Ripleyesque catalogue of ‘weird’ happenings (even if these

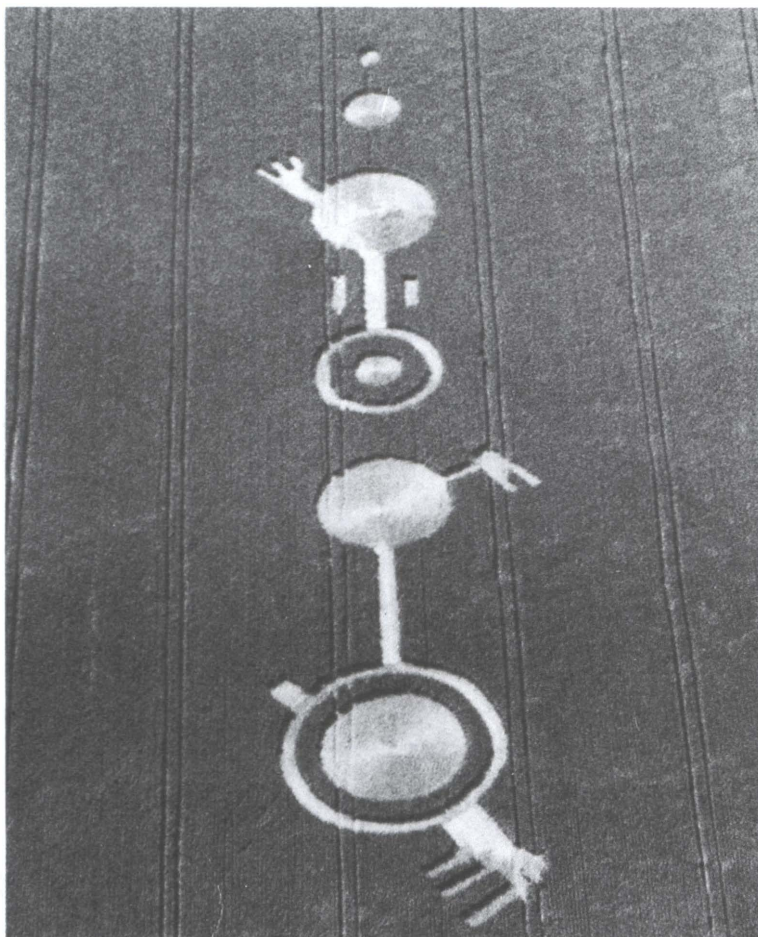
do typically fail to transcend the level of nosetapping about the trivial) and sundry ramblings about spirituality. Furthermore, if one has pretensions to being scientific in approach, it is advisable not to pepper one’s work with logical fallacies, to strive to get one’s facts straight, and to familiarise oneself with the rules of evidence. Such artless behaviour on Mr Delgado’s part brands him a novice at cerealogical persuasion, despite a decade of involvement in the field, but the disappointment this engenders is tempered by the fact that, as always, there is nary a whiff of cynicism in this gentle researcher’s work. When he attempts to denigrate dissenters and berate hoaxers, his words lack the genuine spleen of some of his snottier brethren. Nietzsche was cynical enough to get away

with philosophising with a hammer; Pat Delgado is, to put it bluntly, too nice to get away with practising pseudoscience with a steamroller. Should you seek the book out? Yes, for what it reveals about the mind-set of a leading cerealogist and if you find the 1991 circles pretty. But get it from the library. If you spend money on it, you will only encourage Mr Delgado to write another one.

Then we have *The Circlemakers*, the debut of cerealogical neophyte Andrew Collins. Lest Mr Collins appear to be an anagram—perhaps related to Colin Andrews, a famous circle pundit—let me assure you that he does have an independent existence. This is a

Good Thing, as it will enable me to test my hypothesis that when Mr Collins grows up, he will be Pat Delgado. He is engaging, like Delgado; he sees mystery wherever he looks, like Delgado. And like Delgado, I find him impossible to take seriously.

What can one say? Andy is one of these fortunate people who, in best Dungeons-and-Dragons-cum-Hollywood fashion, goes on psychic quests for mysterious artifacts ... and finds them. When such a fortunate man bestrides the cerealogical stage, things happen. In *The Circlemakers*, a breathless hybrid of speculation and autobiography, Andy shares with us his theory that Orgone energy sits at the heart of the phenomenon, and relates the fascinating things that have happened to him and his mates whilst engaged on the wizard wheeze of cerealogy. The narrative flits from a schoolboyish excitability of the Five Go Circling variety to



Alton Barnes, Wiltshire, July 1990

affectations of significant revelation which, whilst clumsy, hint that Andy is losing the innocence of cerealogical convention that makes his work so endearing. Mind you, it is when Andy strives to be serious that he is at his funniest. His description of a deep conversation he has with his pals whilst sitting in a pub reads like a Fry and Laurie skit, and an outrageously melodramatic nose-tap about the possible physical dangers accompanying visiting circles had me in stitches.

Should you buy it? Definitely, if only because it is destined to become the *Plan Nine From Outer Space* of the crop circle literature, and every collector should have it. Given that you have bought it, should you read it? It depends. If you seek insight into the causes of circles, then it will be of as much value as most other circles books; it is devoid of scientific merit, and its power to convince depends on the impressionable nature of the reader. On the other hand, whatever one thinks of Andy's beliefs, he clearly is enjoying himself, and his book has the saving grace of actually being funny, however unintentionally.

Book number three, *Crop Circles: Harbingers of World Change*, is not funny, is uncommonly brave in neglecting to place an interrogative after its title, and was written before the 1991 hoaxing debacle and 1992 competition gave (some) cerealogists a rude shock and all but did for public interest in circles. It is also the only one of the three volumes to expound classical cerealogical method with any subtlety; if not aplomb. The book purports to be a collection of essays on a profoundly important phenomenon penned by its insightful leading investigators; as such, it will appeal only to those who make circles research very seriously. Others will be stunned by the beautiful photographs, but probably bored by the opinionated prose that fills the spaces in between. *Harbingers* opens with an extraordinary introduction by the editor, Alick Bartholomew, in which faith in the special nature of circles is reaffirmed for the benefit of desperate post-1991 circlephiles, and proceeds on a magical mystery tour from apocalyptic visions of imminent planetary demise to the relevance of ancient symbolism in circles research—with a quick stop at the Yellow Brick Motorway Cafe to enquire what the Hopi Indians think of it all—and onwards ad absurdum. Whilst the cerealogical tyro will find useful procedural tips here (particularly on how to take himself very, very seriously), the connoisseur of ersatz academia is likely to find the book disappointingly drab. *Harbingers* is not so much an attempt at a scientific evaluation as a coming-out party for cerealogical mystics; scientific method is subordinated to going with the flow. But the book is not just a recitation of personal opinions, typically content-free and immune to criticism; there are meatier assertions which only have the latter property. The occasional hints at a massive establishment conspiracy to hide cerealogical truth from the masses (a paranoia that appears to be moving from the fringes of cerealogy to the mainstream) are fairly entertaining, as are the quaint (if somewhat hackneyed) psychological profiles of the sad, humourless materialists who do not see the contributors' points of view. But if anything will send the voyeuristic skeptic's Schadenfreude glands into overdrive, it will be the confidently haughty denunciations

of the hoax hypothesis; to be read with relish, and hindsight, and shown to one's friends as a prophylactic against scholasticism. (As regards the quality of mysticism in this volume, I am hardly qualified to comment; however, I suspect that if the reader is impressed by the profundity and depth of wisdom contained in this volume, then he probably considers Shirley Maclaine to be the natural successor to St John of the Cross.)

To date, whenever mainstream cerealogy has discovered something of genuine, rather than apparent, value about circles, it has usually either stumbled across it through dumb luck, or been shown it by someone else. Historically, circles research has resembled a hebephrenic episode punctuated by expressions of surprise. This is an inevitable consequence of cerealogical method, which owes more to the devotional practices of the mediaeval theologian than the ruthless disconfirmatory strategies of the ideal scientist. The upshot is that the circles literature offers everything to those who relish the failings of arrogant pseudo-academia, and nothing to those who are interested in whether or not all circles are artificial. Those in the latter class will perhaps only be put out of their misery if and when unequivocal filmed evidence of circle formation appears on the evening news. In the meantime, those in the former class and those who, like this reviewer, straddle both classes, can only hope that the glut of circle books in 1993—assuming there is one—will see a renaissance of cerealogical method. Otherwise, a rich source of aesthetic intellectual experience will be lost to the skeptical community. Anyway, if you will excuse me, I have to go and change a plug. I might be gone some time...

Robin Allen is a member of the Wessex Skeptics and occasional hoaxter of genuine crop circles.

The Independent UFO Network Presents UFOs: Fact, Fraud or Fantasy? An International UFO Conference

Venue: Sheffield Polytechnic, Main Building, Pond Street, Sheffield (100 yards from the Sheffield Library Theatre) on 14 and 15 August 1993. Speakers at this year's only major UFO event include:

Budd Hopkins	Linda Moulton Howe
Jenny Randles	Hilary Evans
Cynthia Hind	Dr Sue Blackmore
Paul Devereux	Dirk Van De Plas
Ole Jonny Braenne	Rev Donald Thomas
Dr Serena Roney-Dougal	Edouardo Russo

The conference features a 400-seat fully air-conditioned lecture theatre, refreshments, and stalls selling books, magazines and memorabilia. You'll have a chance to meet the speakers and generally have lots of UFOlogical fun. Be there or be square!

For further details and booking forms for the conference please contact: **Stu Smith, 15 Rydal Street, Burnley, Lancashire, BB10 1HS, 0282 24837**. Please enclose a stamped addressed envelope.

The Cyril Burt Affair

Ray Ward

Re-evaluating the claims of Burt's fraud



Mary Evans

WHEN SIR CYRIL BURT DIED IN 1971, aged eighty-eight, he was Britain's most distinguished psychologist, loaded with honours including the first knighthood conferred on a psychologist. Five years later he was accused of gross scientific fraud: inventing figures, research, and even collaborators to support his ideological views.

From 1913 Burt was psychologist to the London County Council, and collected a vast amount of data on schoolchildren. In 1932 he became Professor of Psychology at University College London, and achieved great renown and many distinctions. He retired in 1950, but remained busy, writing, reviewing, examining, lecturing and editing the *British Journal of Statistical Research*.

Burt was best known for his work on intelligence, which he believed to be innate and largely inherited. His main evidence came from separated identical twins. Since they are genetically identical, differences could only be environmental, and the finding that separated pairs are almost as alike as those brought up together was a strong indicator that heredity played by far the greater part in intelligence determination. This, of course, has enormous political and social implications and towards the end of his life Burt became a controversial figure as it became fashionable to maintain that children were of equal natural endowment and their huge observed differences were mainly due to social inequalities rather than inherent differences. Burt responded with typical energy and combativeness, including contributing to the 'black papers', which criticised modern educational methods and called for a return to more traditional ones.

Some doubts were expressed about his work soon after his death by two very different American psychologists: Arthur Jensen, who was much vilified for saying that programmes intended to boost black and working-class children had produced no significant improvements and were a waste of time and money, and Leon Kamin, whose book *The Science and Politics of IQ* (Penguin, 1977) is a bitter attack on intelligence testing from a left-wing viewpoint. The event which really opened the floodgates, though, was the publication on the front page of the *Sunday Times* of 24 October 1976 of an article by its medical correspondent, Oliver Gillie, beginning: 'The most sensational charge of scientific fraud this century is being levelled against the late Sir Cyril Burt, father of British educational psychology'. The suggestion arousing the most interest was that the names Howard and Conway appearing on items in his journal were Burt inventions. Gillie reported his fruitless search for the 'missing ladies', and later said 'Fudged statistics might

make a newspaper story, but non-existent people, invented in order to perpetrate a fraud, really catch the popular imagination ... this began to look like a big story'.

Professor Leslie Hearnshaw of the University of Liverpool had meanwhile been invited by Burt's sister to write his biography. 'At this time' he said, 'my assessment of Burt and his work was almost wholly favourable'. When the accusations burst forth the nature of his work changed dramatically. 'Gradually, as evidence accumulated...I became convinced that the charges...were, in their essentials, valid...', says Hearnshaw in *Cyril Burt, Psychologist* (Hodder, 1979), and it did indeed seem to establish this beyond all reasonable doubt. The British Psychological Society held a symposium at which it was treated as proven fact: it was entitled 'The Burt Scandal', and the report of the council meeting which decided to hold it mentions Burt's 'fraud', 'falsifications', 'deceptions' and his long-time colleague Charlotte Banks was discouraged from attending by the President himself, apparently for fear of offending Gillie, who was invited to speak despite not being a psychologist or a BPS member.

Burt's reputation declined dramatically, and some said he had always been a villain and all his work must be discarded as worthless. Hearnshaw, however, had not gone anything like so far, saying that only the later work of a long and productive life was suspect. Burt's guilt became generally accepted and has often been asserted as established fact. The first substantial suggestions that Hearnshaw's conclusions might after all be questionable came from 1987 onwards in articles by Ronald Fletcher, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Reading. He wrote a book, which a publisher accepted but 'sat on' for fear of litigation.

Then a British psychologist, Robert B. Johnson, produced *The Burt Affair* (Routledge, 1989), demonstrating that Hearnshaw's work is deeply flawed and cannot be relied on. He checked Hearnshaw's statements about Burt's allegedly false accounts of his early works, said to be intended to enhance his own role and diminish others', and found the allegations ill-founded. He then examined the whole case, and summarises his conclusions thus: '...the evidence which has so far been presented is insufficient to support the accusations which have been made ... the gross misbehaviour of which [Burt] has been so widely accused has not, in my opinion, been established. A grave injustice has been done'.

Hearnshaw's case certainly seems overwhelming: as one reviewer, Maryson Tysoe, in *New Statesman and Society*, said: 'Every time Joynson recounts a particularly damaging charge, the reader wonders, how the hell is he going to talk

Burt out of this one?' But his explanations fit the facts and demonstrate that the case cannot be regarded as proved.

There now seems no doubt that the 'missing ladies' existed. They and others probably collected data for Burt at the LCC and University College. But during the wartime evacuation much was misplaced, and when Burt tried to work the data into publishable papers he found a lot was missing. However, useful material was sometimes rediscovered, and Burt, not wishing to ask his secretary to type a paper implying she had mislaid it for years, used to without mentioning its loss and recovery and, having promised to credit those who collected it, added their names. It is common for academic papers to bear the names of people who did no actual writing; indeed, Hans Eysenck wrote up the data of a research assistant who was dead, perfectly properly putting her name to it with his own.

Joynson demonstrates that parts of Hearnshaw's book are an appalling mess of distortions, wrong and misunderstood references, and total misunderstanding of what Burt was saying. The prize exhibit is a passage presented as a direct quotation from a newspaper. No such item can be found, and when Hearnshaw was asked he replied that it came from a secondary source, he could not remember what it was, and could find nothing relevant in his files. As Joynson says, he had not bothered to check: 'It was not merely second-hand evidence...It was third-hand evidence...Yet he had quoted it as if he had seen it himself. If Burt had done this...what would the critics have made of it?'

Fletcher's book was eventually published as *Science, Ideology and the Media: the Cyril Burt Scandal* (Transaction, 1991). As the title suggests, Fletcher is mainly concerned with ideological and media influences on scientific controversy. He was spurred into action by the Horizon programme, *The Intelligence Man* (1984) which took Burt's guilt for granted and included dramatisations depicting him as devious, dishonest, overbearing, dogmatic and egocentric, totally at variance with the testimony of people who knew him well. The book is in legalistic form: putting the case, asking questions of Burt's critics (Hearnshaw, alas, cannot reply; he died in 1991), and inviting one to return a not guilty verdict.

One of the first matters queried in Burt's work was 'invariant correlations'—where Burt reported identical or almost identical agreement between results despite sample size increases, which is considered virtually impossible. The implication is that Burt believed this would give his conclusions a spurious stability and consistency. But if Burt had so believed he might have been expected to draw attention to the invariances; he didn't, and it seems that no-one noticed them until after his death. In any case, he would have been incapable of any such belief: he was extremely well-informed on statistics and would have known that, far from strengthening his case, they would have looked very suspicious. Also, they predominate in *physical* measurements—height, weight, etc.—not those of intelligence.

Having decided Burt was guilty, Hearnshaw suggested that his actions resulted from mental illness, and lists a number of 'blows' which, he believed, tipped him over the

edge: the loss of research material to enemy bombs; a failed marriage; a dispute with his old department; fierce attacks on his views; ill health; and the loss of his editorship of the *British Journal of Statistical Research*. But the loss of material probably wasn't as serious as suggested; he lost the editorship when he was 80 and, if Hearnshaw was right, already far gone in deceit; although no doubt foolish to try to interfere in his old department after retirement, he had good reason to feel aggrieved; the old often have poor health; and they frequently find their views have become unfashionable.

As for the parting with his wife, Joynson says that for all we know Burt may well have been glad to see the back of her—causing one reviewer, Tom Wilkie in *The Independent*, to say in shocked tones that his 'extraordinary tirade on matrimony left me open-mouthed'. He was missing the point. It's possible that the marriage failure *was* a bitter blow, as Hearnshaw maintains; Joynson's point is that we *simply don't know*. As it's just as possible that he was indeed relieved when it ended. Here as in many other places Hearnshaw simply chooses the interpretation which suits his case and ignores other possibilities.

Also, it's just as easy to compile a list of successes: the knighthood and many other honours; popularity with students and colleagues who on retirement gave him the biggest party the college had ever catered for; huge audiences at his lectures; important broadcasts; and general fame and renown. Hearnshaw also suggests that at a rough London school Burt developed a defensive 'gamin' temperament which reappeared much later. Behind the facade of the polite conventional academic was a naughty schoolboy delighting in defeating his enemies. This is pure speculation: we know very little of his early childhood, not even which school he attended.

The Burt affair is significant for the study of paranormal beliefs for two reasons. It is an excellent example of how thorough research can totally demolish conclusions which appear to be established beyond all reasonable doubt; and, much more important, it is a classic case of the way in which people who form a conviction have no problem in finding evidence to support it and ignoring all contrary evidence. Hearnshaw decided Burt was guilty, suggested mental illness as an explanation, and found causes for it. But his list of 'blows' was compiled solely for that purpose. If no-one had ever questioned Burt's probity, would anyone then have solemnly listed them and asked how he stayed sane?

Joynson's and Fletcher's books total over 700 pages, and overlap little. I think any fair-minded person who reads them can only conclude that the smashing of Burt's reputation was a bitterly tragic injustice.

Ray Ward, a librarian, became interested in the Burt case through his membership of Mensa, of which Burt was president. (He joined after Burt's death, and never made personal contact). An article by him appeared in the October 1990 *Mensa Magazine*, and he gave a talk on the subject to the London Student Skeptics in 1992. He is acknowledged in Ronald Fletcher's book for help with research.

What Hath Carlos Wrought?

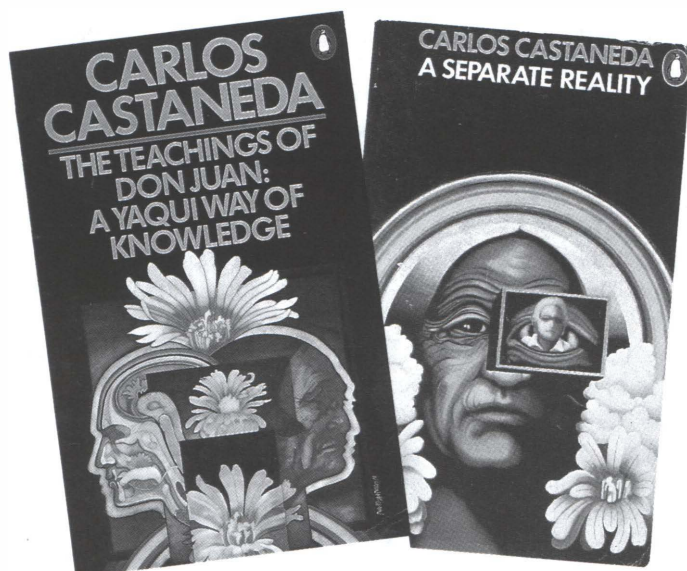
Robert McGrath

Carlos Castaneda and the Don Juan caper

THOSE DEFINITELY WERE THE DAYS. I remember it well: in the Spring of 1972, my first real college seminar. The topic was 'Contemporary Issues in Anthropological Theory'. Present were one professor, a half-dozen seniors and graduate students and one precocious sophomore—myself. One of the readings was the controversial new book, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, by Carlos Castaneda. In my paper, I firmly declared the book to be fiction. The more mature scholars were less certain and more cautious. My judgement that day was based on general skepticism and, I would like to think, good taste in literature. Imagine my pleasure years later when I discovered that I was absolutely correct in my estimate, and that it would be shared by many. Enough brilliant guesses like that and people will think I'm a genius!

The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge, by Carlos Castaneda [1] and its many sequels claims to be a report of the experiences of an anthropologist who, during the early 1960's, established himself as the student of a shaman. 'Don Juan', the shaman, is said to be a Yaqui Indian from Sonora, Mexico. The narrative is presented in dialogues and first-person reports of the anthropologist's experiences. And such experiences! As an apprentice shaman, 'Carlos' is introduced to magic rituals and the entire world view of Don Juan. The rituals included smoking powdered hallucinogenic mushrooms, the experience of which is vividly recounted. Besides drug trips, Don Juan teaches much 'ancient wisdom' of the 'warrior's way', about 'power', 'stalking', 'enemies', 'luminous beings' and other wonders to be encountered in 'non-ordinary reality.' If the narrative is to be believed, Don Juan has access to realms of perception and action unknown to Western science.

If this book were presented as fiction or as allegory it would be a remarkable document. However, it is said to be based on actual anthropological observations, and field notes are supposed to exist documenting the story. Furthermore, Castaneda was awarded a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) for this work. With the seeming scientific validity of the story, the book has been hailed by college students and the counter-culture, and also saluted and praised by the establishment media. Many anthropologists and other scholars have embraced the book, it has been cited and used as a textbook, and the Goddess only knows how many theses and term papers have been written about the book and its



sequels. They have sold millions of copies in the 'Anthropology' section of bookstores, and are catalogued in libraries under 'Yaqui Indians—Religion and Mythology.'

But, there have been skeptics. There are *always* skeptics. In particular, many anthropologists are skeptical of the work, especially those with knowledge of psycho-pharmacology, the Sonora Desert, or the Yaqui Indians. These skeptics found Castaneda's work incorrect, impossible, and derivative.

One of the most convincing skeptical studies of the 'Carlos Castaneda' affair is *The Don Juan Papers*. Edited by Richard de Mille, this is a collection of essays and commentary on the Don Juan books, the hoax that they represent, and its implications. About half the book is written by de Mille himself and the balance by other authors. If this book had simply debunked the Don Juan tale as a scientific hoax, it would rank as one of the great books of skeptical inquiry ever. But de Mille has done much, much more than that. He investigates not only the Castaneda books, but Castaneda himself, how and why the hoax was successful, the nature of skepticism and belief, the relation of religion and science, the psychology and sociology of science, and, I regret to say, a case of serious scientific misconduct.

Let's begin at the beginning. *The Teachings of Don Juan* (and the books which followed) is presented as a report of ethnographic field research. However, the raw field notes have never been published, nor have they been made available to other investigators. Nor, indeed, were they ever seen by *most of the members of Castaneda's doctoral committee*.

The contributors to *the Don Juan Papers* show conclusively that the field notes have not been seen because the field work could not have occurred. The evidence is overwhelming that Castaneda's 'field work' was done in the stacks of the UCLA library. The description of the desert, its wildlife, and even the mushrooms that figure so heavily in the story are all flat *wrong*. 'Don Juan' knows few words of Yaqui (and misuses those) and the teachings are a mishmash of Zen, Wittgenstein, and other philosophies that have nothing at all to do with any Native American culture, let alone the Yaquis. In fact, de Mille traces dozens of sources used, including real ethnographies, works of social science, philosophy, metaphysics, occultism, and Edgar Allen Poe.

If Castaneda had simply produced a collage of borrowed texts, the story would end there. But he is no simple plagiarist. For one thing, he cleverly twists his sources to slightly disguise them. For another, his books are artfully constructed to look just like a real ethnographic report, and they have been taken as such by many. Castaneda's books are not parody, they are allegory. De Mille claims that there is *not one single word of truth in the books*, that there is no kernel of fact, and that they are pure artifice. They are, if de Mille is correct, an elegant and exquisite anthropological hoax, perhaps the biggest since Piltdown Man.

To understand the Piltdown hoax one must understand the paleontology, anthropology, and nationalist rivalries of the time. To make sense of the Don Juan hoax it is necessary to have a similar background of academic social science and popular culture of the 1960's and 70s. *The Don Juan Papers* provides part of this understanding, but as a nearly contemporary response to the hoax some of the story it tells may be difficult to follow if you weren't 'there' yourself. Besides providing the crucial debunking of the fake field work, the contributors to *The Don Juan Papers* discuss the credulity and outright misbehaviour (de Mille calls it 'Sonoragate') of Castaneda's publishers, and his academic and popular supporters. The collection contains some 'conversion' documents—comments by people who once believed Don Juan and his teachings were literally true and now realise that

they were fooled. These documents are interesting because they provide insight into why people believed Castaneda so easily, and fascinating for the fact that so many still value the teachings even after admitting that they are a blatant and dishonest fraud.

Another vital contribution of *The Don Juan Papers* is the 'debunking' of Castaneda himself. Not only are his books fabrications, but his entire life is concealed behind lies. This in itself is not that unusual, but Castaneda's lies are of a special sort: he is amazingly adept at mirroring back a person's expectations, so that each one who talks to him see only their own conceptions 'reflected' back to them. de Mille has called Castaneda 'the Rorschach man', after the ink blot test. *The Don Juan Papers* documents what little is known about Castaneda's 'real' life and builds a (somewhat sad) profile of the psychology of a master hoaxer. This part of the story is, for me, even more interesting than unmasking the hoax, and *vastly* more interesting than the Don Juan books themselves.

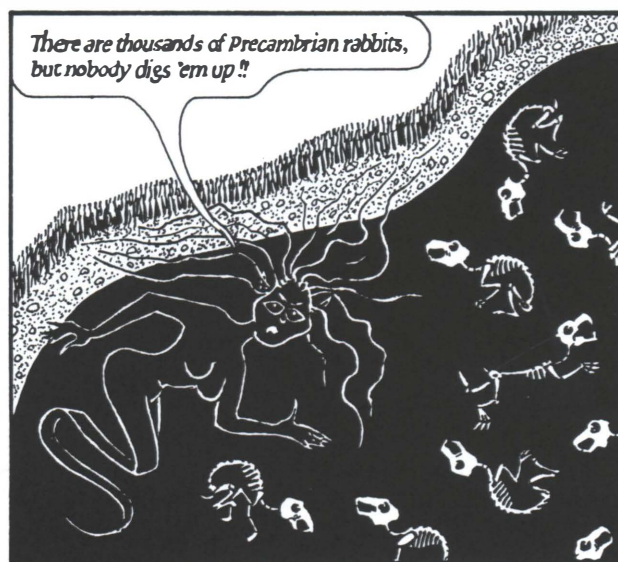
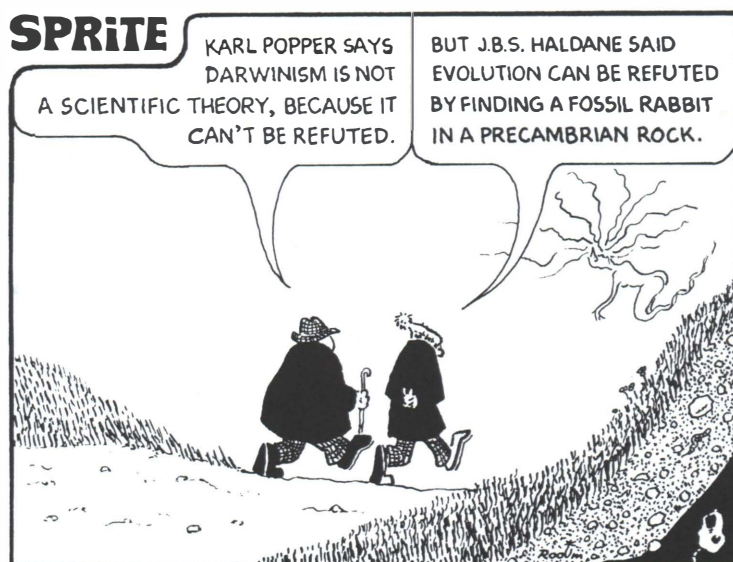
The Don Juan books were a founding influence on the 'new shamanism' [2] and are much beloved of poets, neopagans, and many New-Agers. Spin-offs and rip-offs have sprung up. I have even read that there is a man who 'channels' Don Juan, producing new teachings never heard by 'Carlos'. What, indeed, hath Carlos wrought?

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Robert McGrath has undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Anthropology and Psychology, and is a computer programmer in Urbana, Illinois, USA.

SPRITE



All That Glisters Is Not Gold

Paul Munro and Dave Mitchell

A scientific investigation of a metallurgical miracle

SIGHTINGS OF THE MADONNA, usually in bucolic areas of impoverished countries that profess a rabid faith in Catholicism, used to be popular, providing a shot in the arm for the local tourist trade, and eventual beatification for the illiterate urchins benefiting from such an audience. Observations of this nature are inevitably followed by the proclamation of miracles, particularly from those eager to boost the authenticity of such shrines.

Lourdes is perhaps the best known of such locations, Fatima in Portugal and Knock in Ireland also support a healthy traffic in pilgrims, but readers of *The Skeptic* will be familiar with Medjogorje in Yugoslavia, where the Mother of God allegedly appeared to, the now obligatory, peasant children in the 1970's.

Medjogore, when not playing host to civil strife, has been slowly building a reputation for miraculous events, with a concomitant increase in tourism. Not least of these is the apparent transformation of the links in rosary bead chains from silver to gold when brought into the shrine.

Several sets of such 'transmuted' Rosary bead chains were presented to our laboratory for verification of this 'miracle'. The investigation involved placing links of the chains into a scanning electron microscope (SEM). This instrument uses a beam of electrons to image the specimen, just as light is used in an ordinary optical microscope. In addition, the electron beam generates X-rays when it hits the specimen. The energy of the emitted X-rays is highly dependent on the specimen composition. Each chemical element present in the specimen will emit X-rays of a characteristic energy, which act like a fingerprint, enabling the chemical composition to be determined very accurately. The analytical technique which relies on this effect, is called energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS), and was used here to establish whether or not the chain links contained any gold.

Optical examination of the links from these chains did indeed suggest a gold colouration in parts, while other regions were silver. However, the owners of the beads did not notice any dramatic increase in the chain's weight. If the chain were to spontaneously change from silver to gold, it would be expected to almost double in weight, owing to the high density of gold compared with that of silver. Images obtained of the silver regions showed the surface to be quite spongy, and made up of many small metallic crystals (grains). This layer was not very uniform, as holes penetrating to a smoother region beneath were evident (Figure 1). Analysis of the X-rays generated in the spongy surface layer revealed the presence of one element only, silver (Figure 2a), but analysis of the smoother regions at the base of the holes indicated the presence two elements, copper and zinc (Figure 2b). These two elements are the constituents of the alloy brass. Figure 2b shows where peaks due to gold would be expected. However, this element was not detected on any of the specimens provided. Examination of the gold coloured regions on the chain links revealed the absence of the spongy

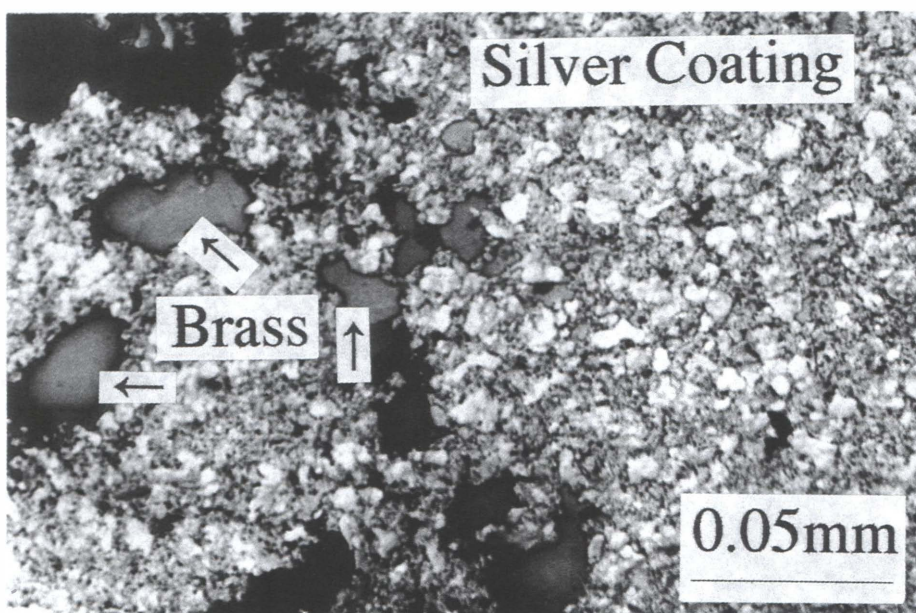
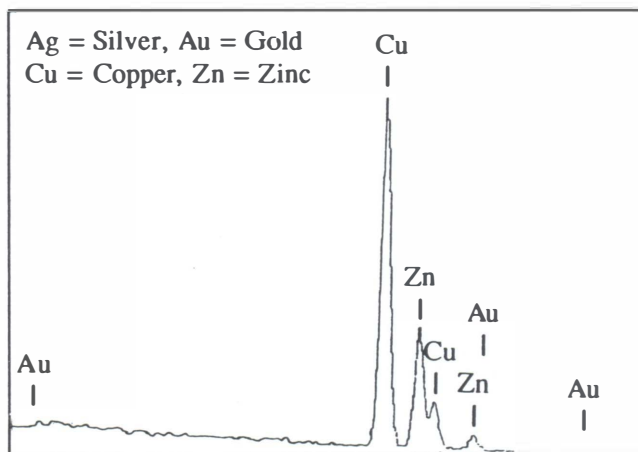


Figure 1 SEM image of a Rosary chain link, showing areas where the silver coating has fallen off to reveal the brass beneath it.



2a. Coated area.



2b. Area where coating has fallen off.

Figure 2 EDS analysis of region shown in Figure 1.

layer, and only copper and zinc were detected using EDS.

The examination showed that the chain links were made from brass, plated with a thin layer of silver. In the light of this, it is reasonable to suppose that the gold colouration assumed by the chain is associated not with deity-induced alchemy, but merely with detachment of the silver plate, to reveal the brass beneath. The remaining mystery therefore, is to explain why the alleged sanctity of Medjogorje induces thin layers of silver to detach from religious artifacts.

When two metals with different chemical properties, such as silver and brass, are placed in contact, the more chemically reactive metal can undergo much more rapid corrosion than when it is in isolation. This phenomenon is termed 'dissimilar metal corrosion'. In the case of a thin

metal plating on top of another metal, this will occur most rapidly where the metals touch, causing the coating to slough off. The question then, is why should this occur within the shrine? The answer is most likely that exposure to cool damp conditions provides the ideal corrosion environment, particularly when augmented by salt and abrasion from devout and perspiring palms. Therefore it seems most likely that dissimilar metal corrosion in the hands of pilgrims, rather than the hand of God, plays a leading role in this particular miracle.

Paul Munro and Dave Mitchell are research metallurgists. The measurements reported in this article were carried out in Sydney, Australia.

FORTEAN TIMES

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Skepticism—1895 Style

Tom Ruffles

A medium tries to convert the skeptics

SKEPTICISM IS NOTHING NEW, and an amusing newspaper report from the end of the nineteenth century describes how one reporter challenged a medium at peril of his life.

The front page of an American paper, *The Herald*, for 22 July 1895 carried an article by journalist Harry A Warren. The previous day he had attended the annual camp meeting of the Southern Californian Spiritualists' Association which was being held at Santa Monica. He claimed that he bore no prior feelings of animosity towards the subject, and had been instructed to give a fair and impartial account of the proceedings.

These began with a flag-raising ceremony and patriotic songs, after which the Association's president gave an uplifting speech. He was followed by more speakers, one of whom acknowledged that there was much fraud in spiritualism. Then Dr Louis Schlesinger was introduced to the audience (the report consistently misspells his name as 'Schlessinger'), around whom succeeding events revolve.

Some biographical details of Dr Schlesinger are given. He was born in Liverpool in 1832, and had emigrated to the US at the age of 16. He was Jewish until middle age, when he became a spiritualist. He was a wealthy businessman (the implication perhaps being that he was not in mediumship for the money). Harry Warren had met him before, and Dr Schlesinger had expressed the desire to give him a personal demonstration.

The medium said that his role was to substantiate the philosophy expounded by the preceding speakers. Indeed, spirits were present who had 'come to greet the skeptic.' One of the spirits communicated to a particular lady, giving family information which was accepted by her. The procedure was repeated with other members of the audience. Schlesinger stated that he would convert eight skeptics, so there seem to have been a good many present. This would be done by means of 'special tests in an adjoining tent.' Warren was asked to be one of the company in this endeavour. The group moved next door, and Warren and a Mrs Templeton were ushered into a separate enclosure some distance away. Schlesinger then performed his speciality, the 'Living and Dead Test.'

In this test a person writes down the names of five individuals, one of whom is dead. The paper is torn into slips, each with one name on, and these are placed in a hat. Mrs Templeton went first, and her deceased nominee was correctly picked out. At this point Schlesinger informed her

that spirit wished to speak to her privately, and she obligingly left (this begs the question of how necessary the medium was to the communication).

It was now Warren's turn to write out some names. Schlesinger handed him one of the slips, and asked him if 'Harry McKnight' was deceased, to which Warren replied affirmative. This seemed to be another hit. As a variation on the standard test, Warren was requested to write out three slips bearing the names of a city and a disease, one of which stated the city in which, and the disease by which, McKnight had died.

These too went into the hat, but this time the doctor was wrong twice. 'Let's try it again' he said, and the pieces of paper went back into the hat. Warren noticed that the third one, which had to contain the required information, had its corner turned down. Schlesinger unsurprisingly picked the correct slip. Warren returned to the main tent.

Schlesinger must have smelled a rat, because shortly afterwards he came in, and again asked if McKnight were dead. Warren said that in fact that gentleman was very much alive. At this a hum arose from the assembly. Schlesinger grandly announced that Warren had come with a falsehood, and had received a falsehood, being thereby defeated in his subterfuge. Warren clearly did not agree, and pointed out that the spirits should have been able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. (Why he said this is not clear—it is possible that the spirits *had* informed Schlesinger of the deception; perhaps he was implying that they should have done so at the time).

After that the proceedings degenerated into farce. Warren was confronted by a woman who berated him over a spiritualist scandal he had investigated. A lady had been involved who was known to Warren's accuser, to which he replied that it did the latter no credit. Her husband promptly challenged him to a duel, and the journalist had to warn the aggrieved spouse to take care in the presence of ladies. Warren stressed that he had not come to cause dissension, but as far as he was concerned the Life and Death Test had been a failure. At this some 'excitement' ensued, but it soon died down, and Warren took his leave.

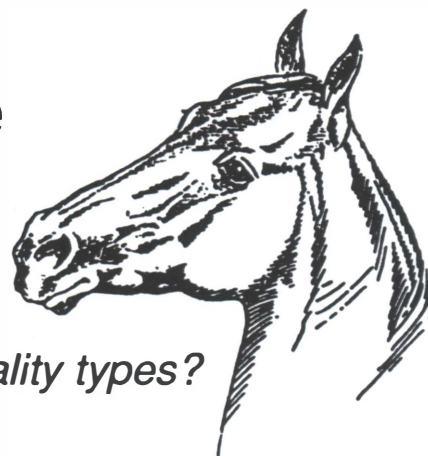
Perhaps 20th century skeptics can take some comfort in the fact that the biggest hazard they are likely to face, in the course of an investigation, is merely a lawsuit rather than pistols at dawn.

Tom Ruffles is a freelance writer living in Norfolk.

Equine Pseudoscience

Russell Dear

Do horses really have a distinct set of personality types?



THERE ARE TIMES when I think all taxonomy is pseudoscience. It certainly seems to have a predisposition that way. For example people have been classified by their star signs, the pattern of whorls and loops on the skin of their finger tips, the birthplace, shape of head, colour of skin, handwriting and so on. Some of these are without doubt useful in given situations, but others seem arbitrary to say the least.

When it comes to classifying species we have a workable system based on evolutionary principles. It is well understood despite at times being difficult to apply. However how do we fare classifying individuals of species other than our own?

Take horses for example. Why horses? Well, for me they are an ever-present factor in the equation of life. My partner and three daughters are besotted with the creatures. On any non-working day they can be found washing them, grooming them, dressing them, undressing them, riding them, talking to them (or about them), or any combination of the aforementioned. Consequently there are a lot of horse books in our home. Recently I picked up one entitled Professor Beery's *Illustrated Course in Horse Training: Book 2, Disposition and Subjection* (published in 1962). What a load of ... pseudoscience! It begins with a classification of horses into four types by disposition: 1) Teachable, kind, 2) Stubborn, wilful, 3) Nervous, ambitious, determined, 4) Treacherous, ill-tempered, resentful.

Now there's a nice piece of anthropomorphism. Apparently, according to Professor Beery, each kind of disposition is indicated externally by certain lines of the head. Type 1 is characterised by a kind eye, a deep forehead and plenty of room between the ears. Type 2 is recognised by a bulge below the line of the eyes and a heavy jowl. Horses of type 3 have their eyes set far out to the side and forward, and are favoured with forehead furrows. Type 4 have a prominent forehead (indicating treachery), a dished face, small eyes, and long narrow ears which are hairy inside. Some of these descriptions sound more like people I've met, but that's another story.

Professor Beery assures us that Type 1 horses are worth of the utmost confidence when trained and make family horses. The Type 2 variety take a long time to train and have

no feelings when their senses are aroused (whatever that means). Type 3 act through fear and are liable to shy, or run away. They surrender unconditionally. Type 4 resist like bulldogs and are liable to kick, bite and bolt. The impact of the theory is somewhat lessened by a strong implication that through good training a horse can overcome these natural tendencies. After all as, Professor Beery says,

Because a horse has certain natural inclinations there is no reason why he should be spoiled or vicious. Many a man has become a public benefactor who would have been a criminal, if he had allowed his natural desires to govern him.

Horses are not seen as being of one type. They may combine characteristics of two or more types. They can be described as being, for example, 3-2, a combination of types 3 and 2 with 3 predominating. An added complication is the fact that the lines of the head may not be immediately obvious, the eye can deceive. In many cases, a horse's true disposition can only be ascertained by running a hand down its face. No head can be fully read from any one angle. The book describes many combinations of types viewed from the side, top, front and bottom of a horse's head. Apparently some characteristics can only be discerned when lying flat on your back scrutinising the underside of the horse's jaw.

An interesting paragraph tells how to classify mules, the majority of which are said to be 3-2 types, all having a smattering of 4. Professor Beery exhorts us to 'Never allow a mule to get the better of you'.

Knowing that Arab horses have typically a dished face, I was intrigued to see how the author would handle their classification. He tells us not to let this one characteristic cause us to misjudge the horse's disposition. Apparently, only an exaggerated dished face indicates that the Arab is treacherous, ill-tempered and resentful.

This is not a review and I am not recommending that you buy the book (although it is available from the Beery School of Horsemanship, Pleasant Hill, Ohio, US). It's just that a lot of the style seems familiar. What do you think? All those in favour say 'Yes'. All those against say 'Neigh'.

Russell Dear is a writer living in Invercargill, New Zealand.

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The Myths of Meditation

Arthur Chappell

OM is not where the heart is

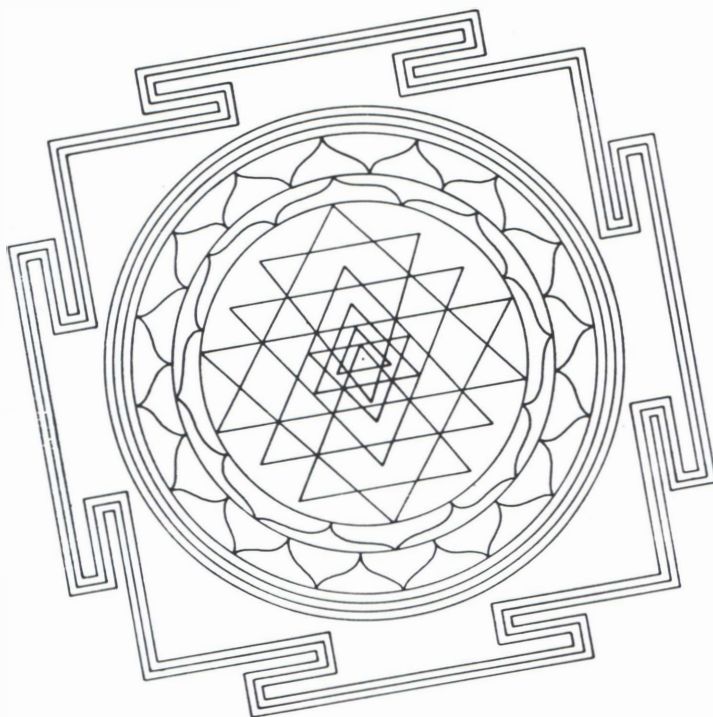
'MY SON HAS TAKEN UP MEDITATION—at least it's better than sitting doing nothing' [1]. Comedian Max Kaufman is wrong of course, though he is not alone in assuming that meditation is a total non-activity. Meditation may not be much to look at, but a great deal is happening on the inside.

The other great myth is that there is just one meditation technique, when in fact there are hundreds, not all of which are used in New Age cults, and many of which have a very ancient tradition within the major religions of the world. The word 'meditation' itself means to 'centre' and relates to the focussing of mental energy. This is not strictly the same as concentrating on a good book. The aim of meditation is to stifle the questioning, rational mind. Meditation is the opposite of cogitation. It is anti-reason. Meditation cults drawn from the Hindu faith, (Divine Light Mission, TM, ISKCON, and so on) have a great dislike, and mistrust, of the human mind. Animals don't have minds, and seem content with their lot. People think, and are dissatisfied, and so the mind is looked upon as a curse on mankind for some offence against the gods. Contentment means silencing the mind; and if it proves difficult to do that, then we are to fear the mind which is looked upon as a perpetual questioning machine, distracting us from finding the one supposedly true mystical truth we need.

Guru Maharaji has said [2]: 'Man, I have to smarten up sooner or later. Because I know that yes, there's a little machine that generates all my questions. And then maybe there comes a time when all my questions have been satisfied and yet I have nothing. I have gained nothing whatsoever.'

'The thing about meditation', two members of the TM movement explain, 'is not to concentrate, but to take the reins off your mind and let it run anywhere it wants.' Meditators must 'avoid concentrating on anything in particular. Concentration holds the mind at one level and will not allow it to submerge into a deeper level of consciousness.' [3]

The cult member who questions and doubts must be shown to the group to be giving in to his evil, Satanic mind, and not meditating enough, so he or she and the group as a whole will feel the desire to meditate more, and will become increasingly unhappy with their own completely natural, and unarmful thinking processes. In some meditation cults



the meditation itself has to fragment. If you start to see a pattern emerging, you have to look away from it so that the images, thoughts, and reflections lose any rational coherence, putting you in harmony with the flux state of the cosmos. This is peddled as 'Enlightenment'.

The methods used in the various meditations are surprisingly uniform. The main techniques involve visualisations, Yantras, Mantras and regulated breathing exercises. Visualisation involves creating a mental picture, such as a candle flame, or of a more complex idea like Heaven. Having created this entirely imaginary image, you go into it, make it real, maintain it, sustain it, and flesh it out in detail. This all goes on in the head, and involves creating a picture there that is as clear as if it is seen with the eyes, and which is audible, touchable, and accessible to all the senses. The visualisation has to be metaphysical and imaginary. The idea is to conjure up a world that seems more real and coherent than the material world around you. The real world can then be made, through cult indoctrination, to appear less real, and more intangible. The imaginary demons of the meditated world can be said to threaten to come and punish the cultist in this reality. Pleasant visualisation imagery may be held up as the reality and Heaven awaiting the conforming, obedient cultist.

Visualisation creates a dissatisfaction with material reality and can lead to hallucinations, delusions, and nightmares, as the visualised world may come back to mind when you don't want it to. The effect may well be compared to

that of the blowback experienced by many people taking hallucinogenic drugs, and some cults may encourage their followers to use drugs as an aid to their visualisations, and/or give them drugs in food and drinks, without the recruit realizing it.

Many occult groups also encourage visualisation exercises, as these are said to open up the psychic powers, which are often no more than intense visualisation reactions. Visions and portents come to those who have their minds locked for so much of the time on the metaphysical realm of the imagination. We effectively create our own Twilight Zone through meditation. It is the intensity of the experience that makes its visions seem all the more real.

Many visualisations involve sitting in the dark, with your eyes closed, but others involve visual aids in the form of Yantras and Mandalas. These are complex geometrical designs incorporating circles, triangles and squares in various intricate patterns. Meditators will be encouraged to look at a focal point in the design, and go with the images it conjures up. As the design oscillates on the eye, the mental pictures conjured up can be very elaborate indeed.

The often torturous postures of Yoga are little more than an aid to meditation, but the most common Hindu meditations practised in the Western World involves the use of Mantras—one or more repetitive words or phrases used in order to prevent the mind focussing on anything else. The Mantras you are most likely to have heard of are 'Aum' (Om) and the Krishna Mantra; 'Hare Krishna Hare Kryshna Krishna Kryshna Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare'. It has been argued that mantras might involve any old words, such as 'Ere we go, ere we go', or 'Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola', but practitioners recognise that the Mantra involves words of some occult or religious significance. Krishna/Rama, for example, are the names of major Hindu deities. Chanting these names is effectively an invocation of pagan gods, as evangelical fundamentalists often insist on reminding us, believing arcane meditation practices to make us vulnerable to demon possession.

Repeating a phrase over and over tends to numb our minds to the real significant meaning of the words invoked, and the more we use our minds for one thing only, the harder it becomes to use them for anything else. Minds can atrophy just like limbs do, if they are not used for a wide range of purposes. Many meditation cultists have complained of difficulty doing simple arithmetic, and remembering names of close friends, after prolonged use of the kinds of meditation

described here. The effect is rather like that of Newspeak's obliteration of the English language in Orwell's *1984*. The less there is to think about, the less chance there is of revolutionary discontent, and religious doubt setting in. Stifling the mind like this makes us very open to so-called hypnotic suggestion and subliminal commands from the cult leaders.

Mantras, like visualisation exercises, can be used privately, by the independent practitioner, or in group exercises. Krishna followers in ISKCON make their chanting a public demonstration, hoping to affect others with the enchantment, and for all the monotony of it, they often succeed. Chanting Mantras is a kind of prayer. Many cultists are led to believe that a mantra can be used to gain them money, or material goods, for donation to the cult, or for themselves. An example is the Nicheren Shosho cult's Mantra 'Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo', which is taught on the basis that once we have had enough of receiving cars, cash and more cash, we will finally start chanting for religious enlightenment. The problem with this philosophy, of course, is that most people can't get enough of a bad thing.

The most famous meditation group is Transcendental Meditation, or TM, and many assume that all meditation is Transcendental. It is, with a lower case 't', in that all meditation aims to induce an altered state of consciousness. This should not be taken as a higher plane of consciousness, but merely as a different way of seeing this one—rather like wearing rose-tinted glasses.

TM, as promoted by the Maharishi Maheshi Yogi, is a mantra meditation. Each practitioner believes he or she has a unique secret mantra which is to be shared with no one else at all. In fact, TM has only twelve mantras, and which one you get depends on your age. Mine would be 'SHIRM' [4]. Other aspects of TM are more bizarre: they practice yogic hopping—sitting cross-legged and jumping in the air to land with the legs still crossed (ouch!) [5]. This is not strictly meditation at all, and neither is it a sport, although TM'ers aim to have it promoted as an Olympic event. TM also teaches that if enough people chant mantras together the crime/death/suicide rates will go down statistically as a direct result. This was a major element of the TM Natural Law Party political manifesto at the last general election. Of course, this theory is simply ludicrous. If crime goes down on the basis of that logic, it might just as well be said to go down because such and such a percentage of pig farmers eat porridge on Thursdays, or something equally unprovable.



*Sanskrit symbols for the mantras
'om' (top) and 'krim' (bottom)*

Meditation helps or hinders the meditator alone, and no one else.

Breath control can also be employed as a meditation, and also in conjunction with the other meditations. Breathing deeply and hyperventilatively floods the brain with oxygen. Shallower breathing may lower the heart rate and make us more relaxed, mentally and physically. The medical effects of this can vary. TM in particular makes a great deal of presenting medical reports that are favourable towards meditation [6]. The problem with the tests, when they are conducted by objective observers, is that they often study the physical effect (the effects of Kaufman's 'doing nothing') and ignore the social and psychological contexts in which the meditation is practised, as an attempt to achieve an altered state of consciousness and see God. Sadly, many presenters of test results are far from objective. Cults attract their fair share of doctors and scientists, just as they attract members from all professions. TM books are full of personal statements by doctors singing their praises, but if you look at the small print, you'll see that these champions are not only carrying MDs and PhDs, but these are also titles bestowed on them by the meditation cults they endorse. Recently, it was reported that two doctors who championed TM were struck off the medical register for their claims that it not only lowers blood pressure but also cures AIDS [7].

To meditate is to put your mind on a diet. Make sure you don't starve it or overfeed it. On the whole, you'll find life

satisfying enough without it. You've breathed well enough on your own for this much of your life without having to have lessons now. Meditation involves artificial, contrived breathing, posture and mental exercises. It makes you unhappy with this world by making a different one inside you. Meditation for you also usually means money and power over you for someone else in the world outside your head. I shall leave the final word with India's finest poet, Radrinth Tagore, and his poem 'Against Meditative Knowledge' [8]:

Those who wish to sit, shut their eyes, And meditate to know if the world is true or lies, may do so, it's their choice, But I meanwhile, With hungry eyes that can't be satisfied Shall take a look at the world in broad daylight".

Notes.

1. Max Kaufman, quotation in *The Dictionary of Religious Quotations*. p285, Andre Deutch, 1989.
2. Guru Maharaj Ji. Rome discourse 30 October 1981. (See also my article 'Brainwashing a Skeptic', *The Skeptic*, 6.2.
3. Burell, Maurice C., *The Challenge of the Cults*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1981, p99.
4. OMNI, January 1984. 'Transcendental Truth'.
5. OMNI, May 1989. See also, *The Independent*, 4 April 1992.
6. Anderson and Stevens, *Feel Great With TM*. Golden Arrow, 1988.
7. *News Of The World*. 12 April, 1992.
8. Tagore, Radrinth, *Against Meditative Knowledge—Selected Poems*. Bloodaxe Press, 1991.

Arthur Chappell is a writer living in Manchester.

Prometheus Books Prize Crossword

by Skepticus

Across

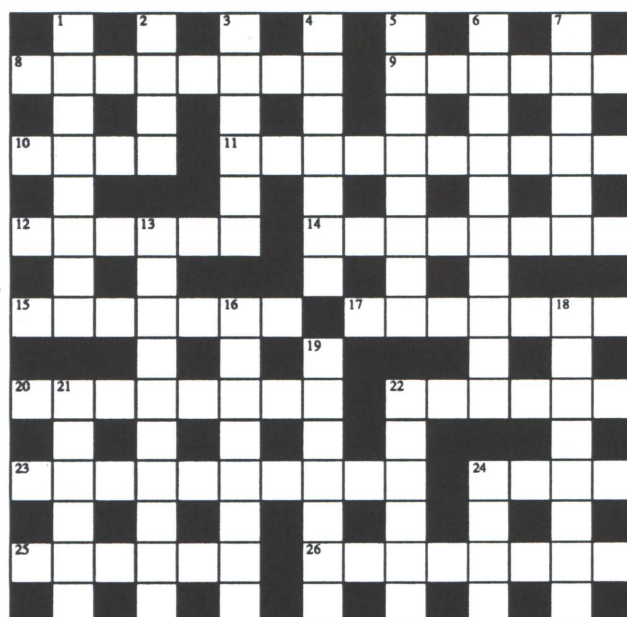
8. State of Gods and the living dead, but I'm subject to death (8)
9. Alp ESP reveals red objects, perhaps (6)
10. Reside with bad back (6)
11. He dispenses with accuracy (10)
12. In place for a horse which is not rocking (6)
14. Common belief (8)
15. A 17, offering blood transfusion (7)
17. 15, for example, sucker for blood (7)
20. Bleating about being graspable (8)
22. Monkey's blood? (6)
23. Upsets basket, or Mr —, author of 15 (4, 6)
24. Return of sound from Aztec horror (4)
25. Former mixed-up sinners repent (6)
26. Search among refuse for veg and canes (8)

Down

1. Exasperate, but I'm better, confusingly (8)
2. Ergo, nasty bloodshed (4)
3. Basic food in broken plates (6)
4. The heads cut off two calves, a green growth is obtained (7)
5. Blind Date hostess carries limb for Countess Karnstein, female 17 (8)
6. Revelation mixes up Calypso with ape (10)
7. Out of Easter comes this poser (6)
13. Game? Or two kinds of bacon? (10)
16. Brain operation (and Toby messes about with loom) (8)
18. Circa? Just indigestible fibre (8)
19. The feeling of slight hunger from the pick she stews (7)
21. I bred a strange sleeping place (6)
22. Go over the page again? Reader confused (6)
24. Topless wood cutter's pitcher (4)

The sender of the first correct solution to appear in the lucid dreams of *The Skeptic's* editors will win a Prometheus Book prize. Send your entry to *The Skeptic* (Crossword), PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH, to arrive no later than 18 May 1993.

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Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

Home sweet gnome

IF I WERE A GARDEN GNOME, I am not sure I would like to be referred to as 'an item of garden furniture'. But this is, it appears, the correct police terminology. Detective Inspector Gordon Mutch of Didsbury CID, Manchester, recently appealed to the local community to keep a keen eye on their 'garden furniture' in the wake of a startling increase in gnome-napping. As a local newspaper put it: 'Gnomes roam from homes'. Apparently, someone, or something, is prowling around the streets of Manchester stealing garden gnomes. Trying to fathom the motive for such activity is hard, but certainly no harder than worrying about why people have them in their gardens in the first place.

Gnomes, elves, fairies, goblins—collectively 'the little people'—have an important place in European folklore. Not so long ago, it was common in some districts for people to leave saucers of milk outside their doors for the fairy people. Consider the vast number of people who wished to believe in the ridiculous Cottingley Fairies hoax. But if there is a direct link from the suburban garden gnome to the folklore of the little people, then we have an interesting reversal here; traditionally, it is the little people that do the kidnapping.

Folktales tell of the little people and fairies abducting a human child, leaving a fairy child in its place. And adults too: Robert Cook, a 17th century Scottish clergyman and author of *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* was commonly believed not to have died a natural death, but to have been abducted by the little people and held under a fairy hill. There are stories of the little people abducting human midwives, to assist at the birth of fairy-human hybrids. If a human entered a fairy hill, or an underground lair, their sense of time would be distorted. These are, of course, exactly the same ideas as we see in the reports of modern UFO abductions. I don't believe in either as physical reality, but I do believe in both as genuine folk beliefs worth investigation.

To discover the basis for these motifs is hard. We might ask whether there were at some point in our history real 'little people', perhaps a result of tribal in-breeding. There is some historical evidence for believing that such groups did exist. One example is the 'trows', the fairy people from the Shetland Islands, who are said to have been forced by a preacher to flee to the Faroes. Indeed, one of the islands off the Shetlands is called 'The Little Isle of Pygmies'.

Perhaps we are seeing in the abduction of the garden gnomes a kind of 'folk revenge' for the long history of fairy abductions! More likely is that the phenomenon has a lot in



Mary Evans

common with crop-circle hoaxing. As Robin Allen makes clear elsewhere in this issue, it is now widely accepted that the vast majority of crop circles are the work of intelligences which are firmly terrestrial in nature. Still, the question of who is responsible, and what their personal motives are, remains largely unanswered. I favour two parallel explanations: serious conceptual artists, who discuss the matter gravely over their cappuccinos, and others who simply do it for fun after a few beers. I would guess that the latter far outweigh the former (physically, as well as numerically).

My guess is that it is a similar Booze 'n' Roller brigade which is terrorising gnomeowners. Rather like an extended April Fool's joke, the gnomes disappear, and in subsequent weeks the owners receive postcards from the little people, postmarked from all over the world. Sometimes, the gnome comes home, usually altered in some way, such as the acquisition of a sun tan achieved with a liberal application of boot polish, or holding a little suitcase. The logistics involved are obviously not straightforward. Who has the freedom to carry a gnome around the world, visiting exotic spots and sending postcards back? One serious suggestion is oil-rig workers, who freelance around the world's rigs and have time on their hands. Maybe. Some people do have strange hobbies. I certainly do.

My favourite gnome abduction story is told by folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand in his most recent collection of urban folklore *Curses! Broiled Again!* (Norton, 1990). In Australia, garden gnomes started disappearing on a large scale from one particular neighbourhood. They were found in a clearing in the bush months later, where they were all gathered around the largest gnome, having a meeting. A committee meeting of the Gnome Office, no doubt. (Sorry.)

Toby Howard is a lecturer in computer graphics at the University of Manchester.

Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

The mismeasure of women

SOME MONTHS AGO in this column (*The Skeptic*, 5.5) I pasted a book called *Brainsex* for its sexism masquerading as reports of scientific research. I am glad to report that this criticism wasn't completely unfair, according to Carol Tavris, the LA psychologist whose *The Mismeasure of Woman* picks apart such research. Tavris is author of several other books, and is also one of the few female Fellows of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

Tavris's hugely entertaining and thoroughly researched book is one of those books you want to buy a hundred copies of to give away to people, starting with your friends but ending with such well-known bigots as Anne Widdicombe, the people who tell girls they can't expect to understand science or technology, and Barbara Cartland. In a field that is fraught with anger and irrationalism on all sides, the world desperately needed a book exactly like this.

Tavris's title is, of course, a reference to Stephen Jay Gould's classic *The Mismeasure of Man*, the book that picks apart the history of scientific attempts to measure intelligence. It is both amusing and revealing to watch the way white, middle-class, male scientists have over and over again convinced themselves that white, middle-class males are the brightest folks on the planet—only to have someone come along a few years or decades later and expose the flaws in their research methods. Tavris does something similar here, although her focus is much broader.

If you think about it, even without reviewing the scientific literature on brains, it should be fairly obvious that the major differences between men and women lie south of the neckline. Tavris looks in detail, however, at research that doubts this, and it turns out that, just as in Gould's study, what scientists see in their own research has a lot to do with what they want to see in it—and the popular press disseminates it to the public through its own filter. The fact is, says Tavris, that when you examine the research carefully you discover that the differences between the sexes, brainwise, are less than the variation within each sex. If you are a fan of *Brainsex*, check out Tavris's analysis: it's much more compelling and free of the anecdotal, hearsay stuff that *Brainsex* uses to bolster its conclusions.

Tavris sees, moreover, a pervasive problem with the way research into sex differences is reported: the women are always compared to men. Men are normal; women suffer from being different from them. Why, she asks in one hilarious passage, do we for example see so many books

offering women an antidote to their low self-esteem instead of books aimed at men offering an antidote to their excess of self-esteem?

The sad part is that the focus on mythical differences between men and women has obscured the real ones. Take hormonal cycles. No one doubts that those are different. But medical drugs—even ones like antidepressants which are mostly prescribed for women—are tested almost exclusively on white, male subjects (this is changing now, with funding from the National Institutes of Health). Heart disease is considered such an exclusively male preserve (it's not) that cases of it in women are often neglected because doctors dismiss their symptoms. At the same time, male hormonal cycles have gone unstudied and male depression goes undiagnosed.

Circumstances and environment count for more than we think. Are women good at personal relationships, or is it just that many of them are in subordinate positions or in jobs where they are expected to pay attention to people's needs? And what about the effect of people's expectations? Studies have long shown that if you tell a teacher that some kids in a given class are brighter than others, the teacher will treat them differently and they will get better grades. So if you tell teachers that boys are better at spatial relationships than girls (leaving out, of course, that those girls are expected to be able to tell which bowl the leftover mashed potatoes will fit in), the teachers will react accordingly.

I said, in that original column, that I thought *Brainsex* would never have been written in the US, where women's lives have changed so fast that people would not have found its arguments credible. I was probably overestimating the US there—apparently fundamentalists love the argument that women are genetically suited for Life in the Kitchen, because it reinforced the view of the world they already have. But I was right in a way: *The Mismeasure of Woman* has been quite successful in the US, and it's being translated into several languages. But it has yet to find a publisher in Britain. Shame.

The Mismeasure of Woman: Why women are not the better sex, the inferior sex, or the opposite sex by Carol Tavris. Published 1992 in hardcover by Simon & Schuster, and in paperback in 1993. ISBN: 0-671-66274-0.

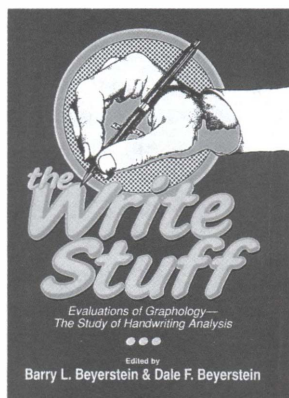
Wendy Grossman is a member of the UK Skeptics, and a writer and folksinger. Her Compuserve ID is 70007,5537.

Reviews



Watching your Ps and Qs

Barry L. Beyerstein and Dale F. Beyerstein (Eds), *The Write Stuff: Evaluations of Graphology, the Study of Handwriting Analysis* (Prometheus Books, 1992, 515pp, pbk £15.95, hbk £37.95)



The editors of this collection of essays are both professors (one of psychology, one of philosophy) in British Columbia. Their aim has been to bring together the best available evidence for and against graphology. The invited psychologists all contributed original papers. The graphologists were not forthcoming, so the editors had to dig out the best of their published papers from the literature.

It turns out that in the US alone there are about 32 different graphological societies, many of them incompatible with the others. (For one, an undotted letter *i* signifies 'absentmindedness', for another, this is the chief sign of a 'treacherous thief'. Some attend to individual features. Some insist on an overall 'holistic' impression. Some believe in tracing over the original script, so as to get a feel for the writer's personality. Some believe there is no cut-and-dried technique—only the 'experience' of the graphologist. Some turn everything back to front, and claim that altering your handwriting (graphotherapeutics) will alter your personality traits. Proposals to test these claims are not welcome, as graphology is 'an art not a science'.

Nevertheless, some of these practitioners claim to identify heart trouble, dishonesty, violence, infirmity of the legs, weakness in the lower back, high blood pressure, marital incompatibility, and the alleviation of pain. And many are fond of referring to themselves as 'clinicians'—this from people who can't even identify a writer's age or sex.

Most everyday-language terms for personality traits are vague and ambiguous anyway. And there's always the fudge factor: if you disagree that you're a shy person, you can be told that you're shy underneath and just trying extra hard to compensate. But the fact is that clients can't pick out their own readings from a random selection. If a number of people are given an identical random reading, most of them will be delighted at the high accuracy. Barnum rides again. And test results show that practitioners who claim to judge extroversion by handwriting slant would do just as well to toss a coin.

Many graphologists refuse to work with samples that are not 'spontaneous', and prefer to use personal letters and job applications. This means that the content contains biographical and personal information that could be useful in forming an opinion of the writer. In fact psychologists who read typed versions of such revealing scripts did better than graphologists using the original handwriting.

If graphologists' claims were true, 'one would have to consign a century of well-documented data in psychology and the neurosciences to the rubbish heap'. (For example, how would one account for the fact that brain damage that dramatically alters personality can leave handwriting unchanged?). Unfortunately, in tests, these expert 'clinicians' have shown no greater success than students. 'Perhaps' says one of this book's contributors, 'the answer lies in the popular definition of expert, where *x* is the unknown, and spurt is a drip under pressure'. In summary, graphologists' claims are 'without even the standard of proof one would normally demand of a used car salesman'. But 'before you chuckle, remember these people offer advice to the police!'

This whacking collection contains just about everything you ever wanted to know about graphology, and even includes what amounts to a short course in scientific method, and an entertaining tour of the pitfalls of inadequate testing. The book is a corker. If you really want the complete lowdown on handwriting analysis, you don't have any choice. Get it.

—Lewis Jones

Dreamy therapy

Arnold Mindell, *The Dreambody in Relationships* (Arkana, 1992, 146pp, pbk, £5.99)

According to the author, the dreambody is a part of our subconscious which acts to reveal our true beliefs and feelings when we are trying to conceal them from ourselves or others. As the author says, 'Dreambody language is truly dream-like. We do not quite notice or understand its signals. Its information appears quickly as incomplete body motions, strange notions, or dreams, as well as in beliefs or myths which we do not even realise we have'.

The book suffers from a flaw in that although the author states at the beginning that he wrote it 'hoping to be of service to the layman and professional therapist who is pressed to delve deeply into the mystery of relationships', he writes as a professional therapist and this severely limits its use to the nonspecialist such as myself. I'm not sure when I'm next going to be analysing the Jones's—not for quite some time I suspect!

However this book would not succeed as a specialist text since he has clearly made some effort to use nonspecialist language and to explain the concepts involved. Unfortunately in so doing I think that he may have oversimplified as his ideas seem to reduce to the following tautology: Sometimes you should consider an individual as being totally disconnected from interactions with other people. Sometimes you shouldn't! However, as a friend of mine pointed out, almost all statements about the real world have this property and I'm being unfair in expecting more.

Much of the book consists of transcripts of particular cases the author or his colleagues have been involved with. These, together with the author's explanation of the subconscious signals being sent, are by far the most interesting part of the book. Although, as an emotionally repressed Englishman, I find it difficult to believe that people break down so readily in front of their therapist and I suspect some heavy time compression is present in these dialogues.

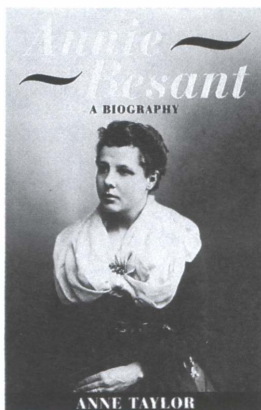
The book is certainly not a rigorous, closely argued explanation of how or why what people think they believe is not what they really feel. Yet despite this, it is an often interesting account of how one therapist does his work and how he interprets people's unconscious actions.

File under: 'Rainy Day Reading'.

—Toby O'Neil

A remarkable woman

Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant, A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1992, 392 pp, hbk, £25.00)



If Annie Besant is known at all, it is as the leading force in the Bryant & May match-girls' strike, and her involvement in the esoteric cult of Theosophy. This is but a small part of the history of a leading female activist of the late nineteenth century. Anne Taylor's book skilfully reveals a much wider personality and context.

Annie Besant was a remarkable woman. After an unsuccessful marriage ending in separation, she became a writer of pamphlets and a journalist for the *National Reformer* (published by the National Secular Society in which she played a leading role) and then undertook an almost unheard of occupation in Britain at that time for a woman, that of a public lecturer. She formed a deep professional alliance with the NSS's President, Charles Bradlaugh, who was to be her guide and mentor for the next twelve years. She travelled the length and breadth of the country drawing large audiences to her lectures on free thought and birth control, and rose quickly through the ranks of the NSS to become one of its Vice-Presidents. She campaigned for the Irish Land League (she had Irish blood in her) and for Bradlaugh to be allowed to take his seat in Parliament, won in 1874, by affirming rather than by swearing an oath of allegiance to the Crown (Bradlaugh was an atheist). Annie's thoughts led

her gradually to embrace socialism, which she previously condemned as being too violent. She joined the Fabian Society, but later switched her allegiance to the Social Democratic Federation, writing and lecturing to defend free speech, condemn police brutality, and marching with the unemployed and bailing out demonstrators who had been arrested. She collected evidence of workers being unlawfully fined and sweated and channelled it to Bradlaugh who used it as ammunition to ask questions in the House. Her success in obtaining victory for the girl match-workers brought calls for help from many other underpaid workers and she became a respected figure at trade union gatherings. She won election to the Tower Hamlets district of the London School Board and campaigned tirelessly to improve the lot of the poor and underprivileged children who attended these schools. The last 40 years of her 86 years of life were devoted to the Theosophical Society, and were spent mainly in India at the Society's headquarters in Madras. Spiritualism was enormously popular at the time; it had acquired the spiritual and moral values that accompany religious faith and Annie had always yearned for something to replace the spiritual solace lost when she left the Church. The aims of the Theosophical Society were both subtle and far-reaching—to establish a brotherhood of man, to promote the study of comparative religion and philosophy, to investigate the mystic powers of life and matter. Annie fell under the spell of the Society's leading light, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, an enigmatic woman with a larger-than-life personality who was known to hold many people under her sway (those who she didn't called her a fraud and a charlatan). Anne Taylor unfolds Blavatsky's careful 'wooing' of Annie to Theosophy. Annie read deeply and pondered long and hard, and was converted. She experienced visions of the Masters. Her wholehearted conversion to Theosophy led her to renounce her previous advocacy of birth control, since interfering with the act of procreation was incompatible with the idea of reincarnation. Only self-denial was permitted to limit family size. She invited Madame Blavatsky to share her London home, supported her as she succumbed to Bright's disease, and gradually withdrew from participating in political life in Britain.

At first Annie was very well received by the Indians—Theosophy had wide respect there too. She now saw her task as arousing India's sense of self-respect, and pride in the greatness of her religious and cultural traditions. She learned Sanskrit and dressed in Indian robes. She joined the Indian National Congress. She rose to become President of the Theosophical Society and changed its direction to promote Hinduism at the expense of all other religions. In old age she became somewhat imperious and campaigned passionately for Home Rule for India. For this she was interned by the authorities.

It would be difficult to write a dull book on a woman who had led such an interesting life. Annie Besant is revealed as a human being complete with faults as well as many strengths. Anne Taylor has an easy command of the English language and attention to detail which makes this book an absolute pleasure to read.

—Daf Tregear

Science versus dogma

Herbert C. Corben, *The Struggle to Understand: A History of Human Wonder & Discovery* (Prometheus, 1991, 398pp., hbk, £18.95)

This voluminous work is a result of Herbert Corben's interest in the historical evolution of scientific thought, and grew out of an undergraduate course given by the author at the University of Toronto. A theoretical physicist by profession, Professor Corben has written a long and detailed account of how many brave souls seeking scientific knowledge have had to struggle, sometimes to the death, against superstition and highly entrenched religious dogma. The status of present scientific knowledge has been won at tremendous cost in the past—science is hard enough as it is without religious and political interference making it harder still.

What has clearly interested Corben were the difficulties experienced by scientists in the face of politically expedient dogma. As such, his work is a very good attempt at documenting many cases where such interference arose. In doing so, Corben has tended to focus on the dogmas and political forces that were threatened and challenged by scientific knowledge. Not surprisingly, these are generally less well-known than the ideas that eventually overtook them.

In any historical treatise on interference in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, it is perhaps not surprising that Christianity figures as one of the main historical agencies opposing scientific development in the West. Christianity in Europe has for a long time been in alliance with the business of government, its dogma being liable to misuse as a basis for repression and arbitrary law making in general. The logic goes that religious forces like Christianity come to represent 'truth' by way of it being the 'Word of God'. According to this, state power in alliance with Christianity would appear to have the backing of God, so enabling secular powers (such as Church and State) to acquire a mantle of divine providence and infallibility. To put it perhaps too simply, whatever the State decreed, it could do so with the *automatic* authority of God, so long as it was seen to be consistent with the accepted dogma, as defined by the Church. In this way, organised state religion became a major political tool in the hands of those wielding state power. Clearly, any opposition to the Church could also be interpreted as opposition to the State and furthermore, generally inspired by the Devil. Such a self-reinforcing system of religious and state persecution allowed Christians to murder and sacrifice those that the Church and State authorities chose to take a dislike to.

I found this book to be thoroughly absorbing to read. It is probably best not to try to read it all the way through, as I tried to at first, but to 'dip' into chapters and look at whatever interests you most. Corben tends to ramble through his chosen topics, weaving many disparate threads and anecdotes together to make a rich text, but a hard going one to take in. Nevertheless, the labour is probably worth it, if only for the sense of appreciation of the comparatively progressive times that we presently live in. In any book document-

ing scientific persecution, you would expect all the old favourites to be here—Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin—and so they are. More interestingly, Corben mentions many, many other cases as well, such as, for example, the chemist Joseph Priestley and the philosopher Pythagoras.

I have one major criticism of the book: given its subtitle 'A history of human wonder and discovery', it spends too much time documenting the persecution of scientists for reasons of dogma and not nearly enough describing the general difficulty of doing science in the first place. It is hard to imagine those things that no-one else has done before you, and it is hard to think of and execute experiments to see things that no-one has seen before. In addition, by focussing upon the negative aspects of repression, he doesn't do enough on charting the *positive benefits* of scientific knowledge. Perhaps he felt that these were entirely self-evident and that science itself is its own best propagandist. Given the rise in 'pseudoscience' and lazy ignorance, perhaps no-one can do enough to sell the important message that science works—and you ignore it at your peril!

An unfortunate side-effect of focussing upon so much past persecution of scientists by religious groupings is that the reader could be forgiven for suspecting that such groupings continue to be the main potential source of opposition to scientific progress. But as suggested above, surely progress and change is likely to be opposed by any grouping whose interests lie with defending the status quo. In particular, present-day scientific endeavour is 'directed' and channelled by many powerful forces (such as national economic, technological and defence priorities) as well as the niceties of religious and political dogma. Corben is right to alert us to the present-day sources of religious intolerance, such as the Creationists and other fundamentalist sects. However, he does not adequately generalise his main points to include these other forces that now have a fundamental effect upon shaping and directing present-day scientific endeavour.

Overall, I found the book well-written and full of unusual and interesting material. Corben has succeeded in producing a detailed account of how hard the struggle for human understanding has been in spite of opposition by the forces of superstition and religious dogma. He has provided a timely reminder of how fragile and delicate are the social conditions that permit scientific endeavour and encourage future progress.

—Brian Monahan

Shamen at large

Shamanism and the end of the world, Public Lecture, Friends Meeting House, 17 February 1993

The young people queuing outside Friends House in the Euston Road are dressed in yak hair jackets, crocheted hats, and rug wool jerseys. They are queuing for an 'ambient lecture', 'Shamanism and the End of the World as we know It' by Terence McKenna, to be followed by shamanic drumming.

In the small hall ambient music is playing (drone, fweep). A voice (McKenna's, recorded) starts up over it. 'Virtual reality will never surpass psilocybin... "direct-addressing"

the organism...the brain is an oscillator [is this cyber-spiritualism?] ...the message ricochets...there is no escape...really dissolve, really dissolve (fweep, fweep, fweep, drone)...the mushroom told me...to the tourist from the future human history is looked back on as a nightmare awakened from...to be happily kissed goodbye...the whole ball of wax is going to shift dimensionality...There are five billion years of planetary life ahead uncontaminated by industrial process'.

An old anarchist introduces the real McKenna: 'The frontier of the 90s is shamanism and anarchy. We need a state that is more non-existent. This is perfectly possible through computers. Shamanism is the strange archaic attractor at the beginning and end of time.' The man himself begins his 'airy-fairy rap'. To the 'jaundiced eye of the sneering positivists', shamans are witch doctors who boil missionaries. We have lost touch with the 'non-physical world copresent with ordinary reality. But the psychedelic revolution of the 60s forced a reappraisal'. A 'small group of valiant mental explorers entered a domain of intensified synchronistic connection, unexpected harbinger of an invisible world of non-linear time'. They took LSD. 'Why are the defenders of monotheism so intensely phobic of these experiences? A destructive relationship to nature is unavoidable in western science and western consumerism'—surely this is 'commercialism'?

evolution
presents
Playshop 8
Shamanism
& The End of the world
as we know it



His thesis is that human evolution was triggered by psychedelic drugs. We should 'reject the skid marks of the flying saucer, however attractive that might be to the flakier among us'. Drugs suppressed our genetic heritage of hierarchical, oppressive, possessive behaviour. We reproduced through periodic orgies, our egos were dissolved, no-one knew whose child was whose. What makes drug-taking 'radioactive to the establishment is that they dissolve local assumptions. The idols of the tribe will lose their numinosity. The emperor appears to be parading in his lingerie'. But can't this be done with reason? 'What is presented is the Gaian mind.' Despite Lovelock's 'two-stepping around' the definition of Gaia, McKenna feels 'the coherency resident in nature is a kind of intelligence present in hyperspace,

carrying a numinous charge of affection and involvement in the human dilemma'.

'So what spoiled the party? Why did we ever descend into the domain of soulless capitalism? Of laundry lists of moral proscriptions dictated by beady-eyed little priests?' The mushrooms became scarce. It was the fall of man. 'Are these the naive mythologies of the 60s and 90s, or does it contain a political imperative? History is finished. Our choice is radical: an unimaginable hell of managed scarcity, or the snake of this peculiar and perverse civilisation that we call "western" sheds its skin. If hortatory preaching could have done the trick the sermon on the mount would have marked a turning point. The answer is pharmacological intervention to the thanatopic and lethal streak in our conscious minds, and an archaic revival of shamanic religion.' And it would help if women had only one child each.

Drugs will save society. 'The end lies not that far into the future.' There's no time for such things as educational reform. Where to now? 'Zeta Reticuli? Or inward? Perhaps to a continuum called fairyland? 'All other answers are illusions designed to trick us into imagining that it's business as usual. We have to reconnect ourselves to the planet and the feminine entelechy that throws her cloak over all life on this planet. We must reacquaint ourselves with the Gaia mind.'

Thunderous applause. People have said the world is going to end—or change—for at least 2,000 years. And if you tell the young, maybe they'll be encouraged to bring it about.

—Lucy Fisher

The foolish guru

George Feuerstein, *Holy Madness* (Arkana 1992, 290pp, pbk, £6.99)

Vacancy:

GURU REQUIRED. Must be in tune with higher consciousness/be part of universal web of existence. Must have genuine knowledge to impart. Charismatic personality preferred. Own ashram an advantage. Must have Rolls-Royce. No timewasters.

If disciples solicited gurus, instead of the other way around, notices like the above would be commonplace. You'd shop around; perhaps ask for a wisdom sample; and certainly get a few estimates. And in the process, the chances are you'd find yourself a far better guru than hitching up with the first one you run into, which seems to be the way these things really happen.

By their nature, gurus are 'different' from the rest of us. But how different? At one extreme, we have the traditional image of the kindly soul festooned in orange, sitting beneficently cross-legged, gently teaching his 'children'. Then there are the infamous characters such as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and L. Ron Hubbard, whose methods and lifestyles give rise to much concern. In *Holy Madness* Feuerstein

looks at a particular type of guru—the Holy Fool, the Trickster, the crazy-wise adept. This is a teacher who behaves irrationally, who contradicts himself, and his own teaching; who acts by turns possessed and meditative, cruel and loving; who issues crazy instructions to his disciples; who is, to all intents and purposes, quite mad.

Feuerstein draws upon his own experiences with his ex-guru Da-Love Ananda for much of the discussion of the irrational behaviour of gurus, and this is a very good example. Da-Love Ananda, or Da Free John, or Bubba Free John, or Da Kalki (or Franklin Albert Jones to his mum) served as Feuerstein's guru in California in the 70s, and his antics make going on the road with Led Zeppelin look like an afternoon at the park.

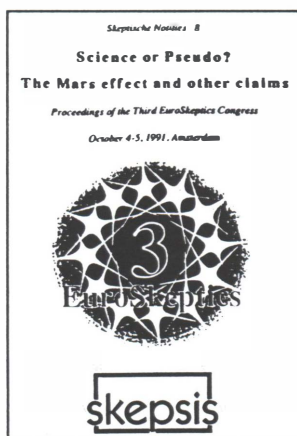
As a teacher myself, I know that sometimes one has to go to extraordinary lengths to capture the attention of the audience, and to keep it. It helps to have a streak of exhibitionism. But what I find really hard to swallow here is the way disciples find sound logical and mystical reasons to put up with their leader's excesses of sex, booze, partying and ill-treatment. If he goes on a beer binge, it's to illustrate a deep truth about the relationship of the body to the Universe, course. What other reason could there be?

The fascinating book is stuffed with anecdotes about many teachers throughout the ages, and should appeal to anyone interested in the psychology of the guru-disciple relationship, cults and personality-worship. Feuerstein writes well, and obviously has a wide-ranging knowledge of his subject. He is, however, far too charitable.

—John Yates

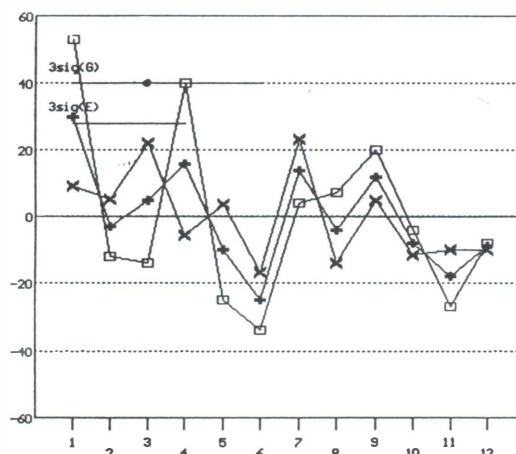
Behind the Mars Effect

J.W. Nienhuys (Editor), *Science or Pseudo? The Mars Effect and Other Claims*, Proceedings of the Third EuroSkeptics Congress (Stichting Skepsis, Postbus 2657, 3500 GR Utrecht, 1992, 232pp., pbk, Fl 25)



This is a collection of papers presented at the Third EuroSkeptics Congress, October 4–5, 1991, held in Amsterdam. Collections of conference papers can often be deadly dull affairs, but this volume of excellent material is a welcome exception. It is somewhat unfortunate that it should appear so late after the conference, but this delay is due to preparation of the final section of the book which contains an in-depth discussion of the Mars Effect affair, including an important new contribution by Madame Gauquelin.

The collection opens with a discussion by CISCOP stalwart and high-profile secular humanist Paul Kurtz, about the psychology of paranormal belief. Following are papers about quantum mechanics, a discussion of whether the State should interfere with practices such as astrology, and a plea for skeptics and parapsychologists to work together. Two of



the papers here have also appeared (in modified form) in *The Skeptic*: Wim Betz's study of the struggle of alternative medicine for recognition, and Martin Hempstead's look at the crop circle industry. Other papers include a skeptical look at psychotherapy, a test of dowsing, and attempts to find a 'witness' to the Flood. Something for everyone!

Perhaps the most important part of the book is the contribution to the ongoing debate about the 'Mars Effect'—the claim that sports champions are born slightly more often when Mars rises or culminates. Here there are six papers on the topic, beginning with an excellent summary by Jan Nienhuys of the details of the claims, and the explanations offered. The scoop is a new paper by Françoise Schneider-Gauquelin, the widow of Michel Gauquelin, who answers the most recent criticisms and analyses of her late husband's work.

Whether or not the so-called 'Mars Effect' in any way validates astrology is still far from clear. Opinions and tempers run high, and this is a very complicated matter to analyse. For those interested, the papers here will be essential reading.

—Alan Smith

1993 Euroskeptics' Conference Call for Papers

We are pleased to announce that The British Association for the Advancement of Science have agreed to the UK Skeptics organizing a 'Mason' Conference to take place within their own 1993 Conference at the University of Keele, near Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. Registration will be on Sunday 29 August and the conference will take place on Monday 30 and Tuesday 31 August. Delegates to the UK Skeptics Conference will also be able to attend other activities at the main BA Conference which takes place from 29 August to 3 September.

The theme of the 1993 BA Conference is 'Science for Life: Health, Medicine and Well-Being'. We are hoping to devote one day to this general theme.

We would be pleased to hear from anyone interested in presenting a paper at this conference, either in connection with the main theme or on any other skeptical topic. Anyone interested in receiving further information about the conference should contact: Mike Hutchinson, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex IG10 4PZ. Tel: 081 508 2989; email: 100023.2355@compuserve.com

Letters



Sheldrake replies...

In his review of *Dialogues at the Edge of the West* by Ralph Abraham, Terence McKenna and myself (*The Skeptic*, 6.6), Toby O'Neil adopts the know-all tone that those of us who are not card-carrying Skeptics find so off-putting. He speculates that Descartes claimed to be guided by an angel to make his ideas 'more acceptable to a religious age', implying that he knows Descartes' motivations better than Descartes did himself. In fact Descartes not only claimed to be guided by an angel, but also went on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Loretto in Italy to give thanks for his vision. Perhaps Toby O'Neil will effortlessly dismiss this as a PR exercise, with no need to study any of the actual facts about Descartes' biography or religious beliefs.

Mr O'Neil's superior point of view is not matched by his choice of dictionary; he seems to have a very small one. He starts his review by telling us that 'Dialogue' is not a word listed in my dictionary (*The OED*), but according to this book it is a dialogue between three, as opposed to two, people'. But in my copy of the *OED* (the Shorter), 'trialogue' is listed, and defined as 'a dialogue between three persons'. In Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* it is defined as 'a scene, discourse or colloquy in which three persons share'.

Rupert Sheldrake
London NW3

Sympathy for magicians

Skeptics, I am told, walk under ladders fearless and bold, and scorn tossing horseshoes over the shoulder. They lead a placid, uneventful life, secure in the knowledge that the paranormal does not exist, and that psychics always cheat.

Of course psychics cheat, everybody cheats, even scientists do—but

not all the time. One girl whose neck chain held a metal ornament, invisible beneath her dress, was entertained by a metal bender. Afterwards, on removing her dress, she found the ornament was bent. She needed no forensic tests to prove that the bender had *not* had his hand down her dress.

The Brazilian psychic surgeon, Arigo, treated as many people each day as a large hospital. The medical and religious establishments had him put in prison, not because he cheated, but for the same reason that Galileo was placed under house arrest, and the reason magicians disparage psychics. When magicians spend hundreds, even thousands of pounds, on a trick, they feel annoyed if a non-union member demonstrates the impossible using only a spoon.

One can sympathise with the magician, because everybody knows his act is trickery.

Tom Banner
Chertsey, Surrey

Campbell replies...

If Janet Bord reads the *Journal of Meteorology*, she should have seen mention of my comments on Burger's picture in a subsequent issue (in a response by Dr Keul). There are several discrepancies between Burger's account and the photograph itself and it would be reckless to accept it as a genuine photograph of ball lightning. I suggested it could be a hoax and that fuller investigation is required.

I am obliged to Stephen Tyndale-Biscoe for pointing out my excessive use of exclamation marks. I plead guilty. However, H G Fowler (in *Modern English Usage*, 1965) noted that the matter is not quite as simple as it seems. He stated that a sentence 'may and sometimes must be so marked to convey that the tone is not merely what would be natural to the words themselves, but is that suitable to scornful quotation, to the unex-

pected, the amusing, the disgusting, or otherwise to imply that the words, if spoken, would have a special intonation'. (I probably *did* give the sentences so marked a special intonation when I gave the paper).

Steuart Campbell
Edinburgh

Creative imagination

I think a magazine like yours does a great deal of harm in suppressing people's natural use of their creative imagination, which after all is at the root of all science, art and romance.

For instance, a few miles from here, outside a cottage in the hamlet of Orrisdale, there is currently on display a wheeled wooden mine-tub with a plaque on the wall behind it reading as follows:

This mine 'tub' was discovered, during cottage restoration in the tunnel behind this bricked up entrance to the old Orrisdale quartz mine, worked by the Druids in the 12th century. After mining, the ore was taken by pony to a site at the Druids Circle, where it was then smelted down and used in their quartz crystal and watch making industries.

12th century druids? Smelting quartz? Watch making? If any of your readers possesses a 12th century druid-made crystal watch, in no matter what condition, I would advise her or him to hang onto it, as it may be worth something some day.

But seriously, would you rob the world of such magic and mystery? Surely life is grey enough. We cannot all be expected to clap our hands in delight at the so-called wonders of science, such as stratigraphic analysis and the statistics of inter-urban traffic flow.

R.J. Wentworth-Davidson
Peel, Isle of Man

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