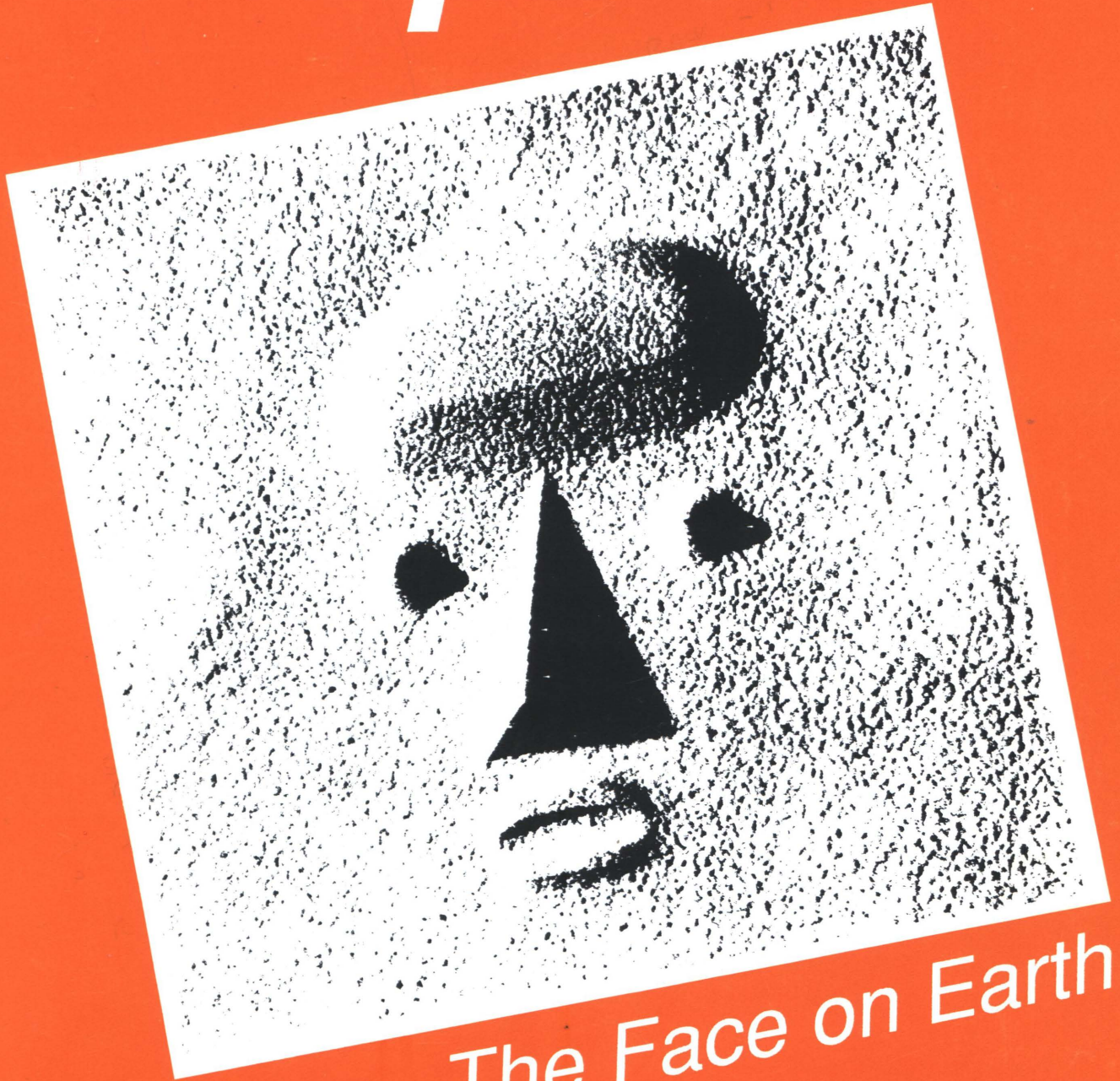


Volume 7 Number 4  
July/August 1993

# *The Skeptic*



*The Face on Earth*

Also in this issue:

*Neural Network NDEs*  
*Francis Galton—Victorian Polymath*  
*In Defence of Meditation*

£1.85



# Hilary Evans' *Paranormal Picture Gallery*



## The Snowman Cometh

One day in 1954 an inhabitant of the upper Nepalese valleys rode into Katmandu with a message for the Governor: it was a report from a Japanese explorer, announcing that he had set up a base camp at Dudhopokhari, as planned, but that an incident had occurred which had not been foreseen. On the night of 14–15 May, he had been awakened by the cries of his two sherpas: gesticulating, they pointed to some dark distant shapes moving rapidly across the snow. They told him how they had heard strange sounds outside their tent, and a moment later the flap was pulled aside and there were these strange creatures examining them with curiosity. Crazy with terror, the sherpas cried out—and their mysterious visitors took to their heels.

So says the article in *Radar* but though it supplies place and date, it names no names, and no Japanese explorer is mentioned in the yeti sightings for the period. Invention? Maybe... My daughter went trekking in Nepal recently and I specifically asked her to bring me back a photo of a yeti, but it must have been their time of year for hibernating. But even if she'd been successful, it probably wouldn't have been as dramatic as this...

*Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, 59 Tranquil Vale, London SE3 0BS*

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

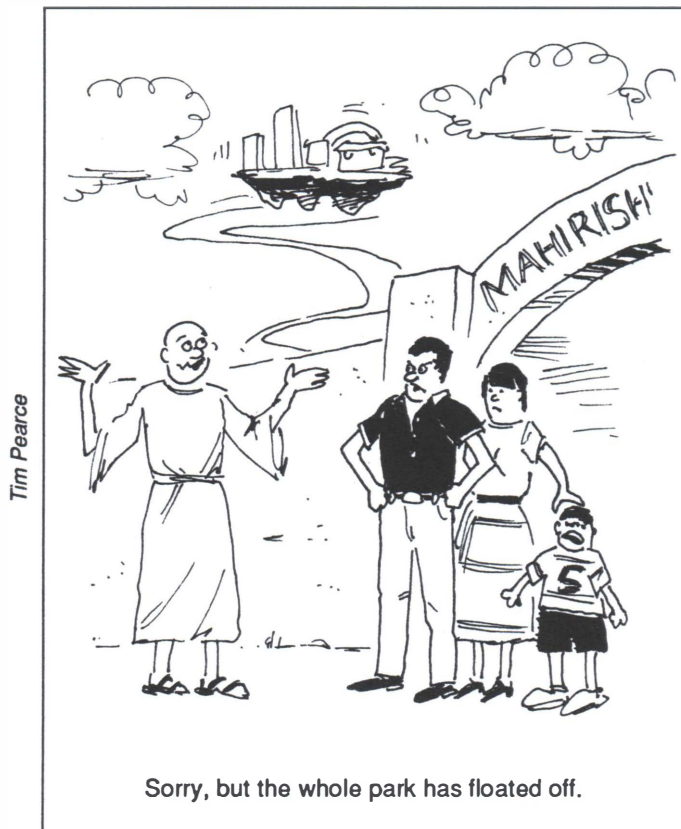


# Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

## Higher states in Ontario

Reality and enlightenment are not qualities that one normally associates with theme parks. Certainly, even experiencing the Pirates of the Caribbean at Disneyland failed to engender any profound thoughts on the true nature of the cosmos in yours truly. But all this will change in 1996 when the Mahirishi Veda Land Theme Park opens at Niagara Falls in Canada, combining 'enlightenment, knowledge and education' and offering attractions such as a magic chariot ride into the molecular structure of a rose and 'Veda Vision'—a spectacular vision of the totality of life projected as a series of images in mid-air. According to the August edition of *Harper's* magazine, the park will also include the world's only levitating building which will float fifteen feet above water but it is not clear, at this stage, whether the building will be kept aloft using well known physical principles or the power of meditation.



## Drugs with body

Drug users in the USA may well have had a surprise recently if they obtained their cocaine from a supplier in Boynton Beach, Florida. According to the *Daily Mail* on 7 June, thieves broke into the home of pensioner Nathan Radlich and stole only one item—a cardboard box containing the cremated ashes of his sister, Gertrude. The remains

of Gertrude are now probably distributed throughout the lungs of disappointed cocaine sniffers all over the Boynton Beach area.

## Born-again atheist

A priest has recently been dismissed from a training post in West Sussex in an interesting case in which he admitted that he did not believe in God. The Reverend Anthony Freeman has, however, been allowed to remain as priest-in-charge of St Mark's church in Staplefield for a further year while he considers his future. According to the *Daily Telegraph* on August 30, Mr Freeman admitted to this slightly unusual view for a cleric in his book *God With Us* which is due to be published soon by SCM Press. His bishop, Dr Eric Kemp decided to sack Mr Freeman from his job—organising post-ordination training for clergy and lay readers—after reading of his inability to accept an 'all powerful and interventionist God' in the book. The fact that Mr Freeman has remained in his priest-in-charge post, however, would appear to indicate that a belief in God is not a prerequisite for anyone wishing to become a minister of the Church of England. Unemployed atheists please take note.

## Bride of Dracula

A former resident of Blackburn, Lancashire was in the news in the town of Pisco in Peru recently when thousands of residents waited in a small cemetery for her to rise from the dead. Sarah Ellen Roberts—who died in 1913 and who was billed as the third wife of Dracula—remained in her coffin and severely disappointed the radio and television journalists who were transmitting live from her graveside. According to the *Independent* on 10 June, the town sold out of anti-vampire kits (consisting of a crucifix, a mallet a wooden stake and a string of garlic) following a broadcast about vampires a few months ago. Roberts was purportedly sentenced to death for witchcraft in Lancashire in 1913 and then buried alive in a lead coffin. Her husband searched the world for a place to lay her to rest, finally settling for Pisco where he paid a burial fee of £5. Before her death, Roberts had vowed to rise from the dead 80 years after her death. I guess she must have just been joking.

## Raining rubbers

Prayers are sometimes answered in a strange manner—perhaps never more so than in the case of a group of pious university students who were celebrating the end of their exams with an open-air prayer meeting in Cambridge. Their prayers may or not have been answered when hundreds of brightly coloured condoms rained down on the assembled multitude. According to *Today* on 18 June, these were not

however a gift from God but from a prankster in an aeroplane who had intended to drop the polychromatic prophylactics on a group of fellow student members of the Sir Joshua Wylie drinking society. Unfortunately—from 350 feet up—he had been unable to distinguish the more rowdy assembly from the Christian gathering. A university spokesman was reported as saying: 'These are just a group of drunken yobs with more money than sense. They seem to have nothing better to do than to play stupid pranks'.

## Celestial circles

From personal knowledge of the inner mental workings of extraterrestrial conceptual artists (and one or two of the Wessex Skeptics) I can authoritatively inform you that an extremely genuine crop circle narrowly failed to appear in fields around Keele University during the Euroskeptics conference which took place under the umbrella of the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at the end of August. (By the way if you are wondering how an event occurring in August could be reported in the July/August edition of *The Skeptic*, precognition is one possible answer). On this particular occasion, the non-appearance was due to the relative attractions of a warm pub and a cold field in the rain but it is not clear whether a similar explanation accounts for the other 350 or so circles that have failed to appear this year. According to the *Guardian* on 30 July, only 45 crop formations have been found this year compared with more than 400 in each of the last two years. This decline is really not mysterious at all—the canvas for the intergalactic artwork has simply changed from the Earth to the planet Mars and the complex circle formations have changed to giant faces. And, of course, the original mysterious planetary circle formation is still alive and well on Jupiter.



## Charging the batteries

Meanwhile, another type of circle formation in Wiltshire has recently had the benefit of attention from sports commentator turned New Age prophet, David Icke. According to the *Independent* on 30 July, David, with a group of 15 followers, channelled energy into Stonehenge. The ancient monument had apparently 'got a bit run down'. According to Icke, after he and his followers 'plugged in' and recharged the standing stones, residents in the Alton Barnes area had problems with video recorder timers and electric clocks going haywire and a mysterious burst of light appeared in the sky. But supernatural events surrounding the turquoise godhead are sometimes more down to earth. In an interview in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 1 August, Icke revealed that: 'Once you start allowing higher levels of your mind through, all sorts of wonderful things happen—I never have to look for a parking space.'

## Deep trance

An Indian guru, Balak Brahmachari recently demonstrated that meditation can be bad for you although his followers were unconvinced. On 24 June, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that a medical team in Calcutta was about to examine the body of the Hindu spiritual leader in an attempt to convince his followers that he had died a month earlier—they had kept his body in an ice-packed glass box in the belief that he was merely meditating and would soon come out of his trance. Unfortunately, chances of that were dashed when, as reported in the *Telegraph* on 1 July, Brahmachari's body was cremated after police stormed the sect's headquarters.

## Good for a laugh

Finally, an article in the *Scotsman* on 4 August has a remedy for those of us who wake up feeling grumpy in the morning (and sometimes remain grumpy for the rest of the day)—laughing meditation. This arcane form of meditation was invented by the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh who is quoted as saying: 'If you wake up laughing, you will soon feel how absurd life is. Nothing is serious: even your disappointments are laughable, even your pain is laughable, even you are laughable!' The practice of laughing meditation is fairly straightforward, consisting of ...well ... laughing. The standard method consists of laughing loudly for fifteen minutes and then sitting in silence for the same period but, according to Nirved Wilson of Laughing Buddha Enterprises in Scotland, an abbreviated routine of a big stretch, five minutes of laughing followed by five minutes of lying quietly will have us all raring to go. Laughing apparently stimulates the production of alertness hormones called catecholamines which trigger the release of endorphins in the brain giving a feeling of relaxation and well being. Feeling a bit fed up with your surroundings? Just have a few minutes of hearty guffawing in your place of work and the nice men in the white coats will come and move you to more pleasant surroundings.

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



# The Face on Earth

Robert E McGrath

## *Tales of gargantuan interplanetary human portraiture*

**A**MONG THE 60,000 images returned by the 1976 Viking mission to Mars, several show what appears to be a gigantic, three-dimensional human face on the plains of the Cydonia Mensae region of Mars (see Photograph 1). The 'face' measures  $2.5 \times 2.0$  kilometers, and about 400 metres high. A minor literature has arisen [1–12], including reports of the application of sophisticated computer enhancement, which has confirmed the existence of the 'face', if not its nature. Investigators have also discovered a whole complex of objects which they believe are the ruins of an ancient 'city.' Furthermore, these 'Monuments of Mars' are said to resemble ancient ruins on Earth, such as the pyramids of Egypt and Central America, and mounds and rings such as Stonehenge. The geometry of the Martian 'city' has been 'decoded', revealing 'correspondences' with the geometry of ancient human monuments, the geological distribution of 'upwellings' of energy, and with the geometry of recent 'crop circles'. The accumulation of such 'meaningful correspondences' is taken as evidence that the Monuments of Mars are the products of an alien intelligence, left as a message to us many thousands of years ago [5,9,13].

By chance (or was it?) I happened across a photograph that strongly reminded me of the Martian face (Photograph 2). I applied the 'look for correspondences' method, and found quite a few parallels. This discovery may represent a major new development in the study of Martian monuments. Photograph 2 depicts a model for a grand landscape project designed by the famous sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The project is titled 'Sculpture to be Seen from Mars' or 'Memorial to Man to be Visible from Mars.' The sculpture was to be a *huge* earthwork, and the pyramidal nose was to be one mile long. The work was never constructed, the only record of it being the photograph of the model. This grand vision was created in 1947—before satellite images or missions to Mars were possible and thirty years before the Mariner mission discovered the 'Face' on Mars [11,12].

Despite the separation in years and planets, these images are strikingly similar. Table 1 lists points of correspondence.

This many important correspondences simply cannot be coincidence! And the implications are positively *staggering*! Did Noguchi-sensei, through his sensitive artistic nature, somehow perceive echoes of the NASA discovery from the future? Or did visitors from space see this photograph in New York City in the 1940's and like the idea so much that they went to Mars and executed the project? Did some unknown third force instruct and inspire *both* Noguchi and the Martians? Or is it the case that, at a particular stage in the evolution of consciousness, there is an inevitable drive to create interplanetary human portraiture? The mind simply *reels* at the possibilities.



Photograph 1

### Digging Deeper

The photograph of the Noguchi 'Face' can be seen in the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum in New York City, which houses some of the fruit of Noguchi-san's long artistic

#### Noguchi (1947)

Giant human face  
Dramatic shadows  
On Earth to be seen from Mars  
Pyramid (forms the nose)  
Conical mound (nearby) purpose and meaning are obscure  
Exists only in photograph

#### NASA (1976)

Giant human face  
Dramatic shadows  
On Mars to be seen from Earth  
Pyramid(s) (nearby) conical mounds (the eyes)  
Purpose and meaning are obscure (if deliberate)  
Exists only in photograph (so far)

Table 1. Significant (?) correspondences between the Noguchi face and the Mars 'face'.

career [12]. Born in 1904 in California, Noguchi lived and worked all over the world, including China, Japan, Paris, New York, and a war-time relocation camp for Japanese-Americans. From the 1920s until his death in 1988, Noguchi created remarkable sculpture, drawings, theatrical sets, gardens and parks. His work often reflected the special influence of Japanese culture on a Nisei [3,11].

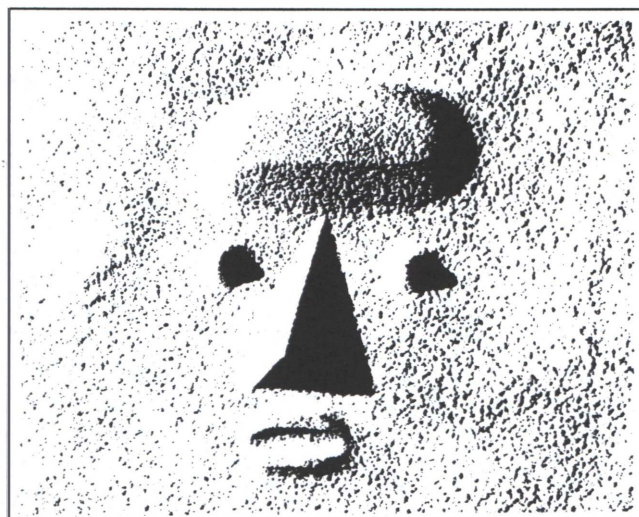
The 'Face' is one of many large scale works Noguchi dreamed of, including a massive, unrealized, 'Monument to the Plough'—a stepped pyramid on the prairie, one mile square at the base. The large earthwork 'face' also resembles a lifelong series of Noguchi's designs for parks and playgrounds. These include the unrealized 'Play Mountain' and 'Riverside Drive Park' for New York City, and culminating in the renovation of Bayfront Park and its Challenger Shuttle Memorial in Miami, Florida [11,12]. In the 'Face' one can detect the influence of Noh masks of traditional Japanese theater, especially in the prominent forehead. The large scale and interplanetary nature of this work may reflect Noguchi's own 'one-world' viewpoint and perhaps also the influence of his eccentric, and extremely broad viewed, friend, Buckminster Fuller [3,11].

The 'Face on Mars' was first seen in images returned by Viking missions to Mars in 1976 but did not attract much attention at that time. It was 're-discovered' by Vince DiPietro and Gregory Molenaar in 1981, who recognized it as an intriguing find [6]. Galvanized by the possibility that the 'face' is artificial, and faced with indifference and 'skepticism' by NASA, a group of enthusiasts formed the 'Independent Mars Investigation' to examine the issue and the data. These investigators have applied up-to-date computer image-processing techniques to clean up and enhance the image of the 'face' and to create three-dimensional reconstructions of it. This investigation has also located a complex of what they see to be unnatural objects very near the 'face', including 'pyramids', a 'fortress', and a conical mound [5,9,13].

Hoagland and others strongly believe that the 'face' and other objects are the product of an alien intelligence. Not only is the 'face' a highly non-random object, but also the 'pyramid', 'fortress', and so on, do not seem like 'accidental' shapes. And all these 'unlikely shapes' are found 'together', and form, it is said, a definite geometric arrangement. All these 'facts' are taken as so unlikely by random chance alone as to require deliberate, intelligent design. This design is also said to have detailed connections to artifacts of ancient human civilizations (although these relationships require major revisions in conventional estimates of the age of human civilization), and is said to be a geometric 'message', which Hoagland and others are 'decoding' [9].

### Other (Skeptical?) Views

NASA considers these images as 'coincidence' produced by the play of light and shadow on natural rock formations—aided, some might add, by a large dose of human imagination. Psychologists will point out that people have a tremendous tendency to see meaningful objects, especially human faces, even in random patterns. Skeptics have pointed out the hundreds of natural rock formations on earth that are seen to resemble human faces, not to mention clouds, trees,



Photograph 2

shadows, and any number of other things that may look like a face. Skeptics have also found other objects in the Viking images: Mickey Mouse, Kermit the Frog, a Smiley Face, and a naked female torso [7,8]. These 'silly' images indicate the important role that the 'eye of the beholder' may play in the 'discovery' of these objects. Indeed, I wonder if the face would be known at all, were it not for the coincidence that the 'face' is 'right side up' in the original image.

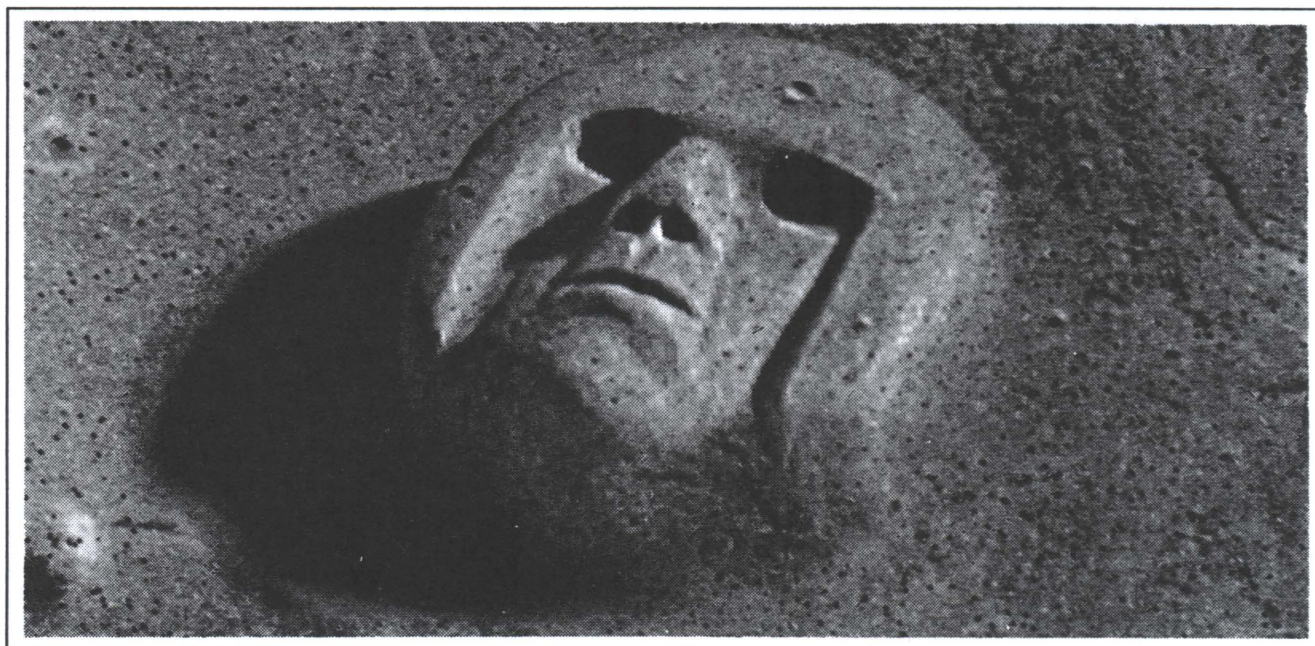
It is important to point out, though, that the computer analyses have shown that the 'face' is no optical illusion or artifact of the photographic process. The face was indeed discovered by the 'eye of the beholder', but it is really there. The techniques used by Hoagland and others are identical to those used by orthodox planetary scientists at NASA and elsewhere [1,3]. They have clearly shown that there is good reason to believe that there is a large, solid, three-dimensional formation there, which looks something like a human face [5]. The existing evidence is not sufficient, however, to say exactly what it is or how it was formed.

The 'decoding' of the 'message' of the 'Monuments of Mars' is supported with elaborate arguments, but they ultimately rest on the assumption that the objects on Mars are not natural rock formations. This is simply not known from the evidence available today. The 'message' is in fact a large collection of 'correspondences' and 'relationships', and inferences based on these links. This sort of argument is frequently seen in support of pseudo-scientific and mythological ideas. One must be cautious in accepting the validity of such arguments because people are very good at finding 'similarities', whether significant or not.

It is interesting to point out that the table of 'correspondences' above was the product of a few minutes of effortless brainstorming. The *rest* of the discussion, which develops the detailed facts behind the two photographs, was the product of many hours of careful work. Which of these efforts should count more? I am reminded of a quote from Marvin Minsky:

Everything is similar if you're willing to look that far out of focus. I'd watch that. Then you'll find that black is white. Look for differences! You're looking for similarities again. That way lies mind rot. (quoted in [4], p. 107)





*The face on Mars as exclusively revealed to its readers in the September issue of Weekly World News*

Skeptics should be careful, then, to distinguish the fact that a large, face-like formation probably exists on Mars, from the fancies that have been constructed from that fact.

#### What Next?

The Independent Mars Investigation and others, argue—not unreasonably—that the only way to settle the question is to return to Mars. They have lobbied the U.S. Congress with the result that the Mars Orbiter mission hopes to photograph the region of the 'face' with high resolution cameras as part of the next U.S. mission to Mars. If successful, images with more than 25 times as much detail will be returned [5,10].

The Mars Observer spacecraft will arrive at Mars in November 1993, and begin returning data from Mars in January, 1994. This 687 day (one Martian year) mission will return a wonderful array of new information about Mars, including data on the chemical composition of the Martian soil, the existence of water near the surface and many new images of all parts of the planet [2,10]. When the Mars Observer examines the Cydonia region, it may also confirm the the most important discovery in human history.

I don't know what relationship the Noguchi face might really have to the face on Mars, if any. But I suspect that Noguchi would have been watching carefully this fall for news from Mars. I will be.

#### Footnote

The Mars Observer spacecraft failed to contact Earth as scheduled in September and appears to be completely lost, its mission over before any data was collected. The loss of this spacecraft is a major disappointment, but there will be future missions to Mars. I hope readers will join me in supporting international efforts to move forward with the exploration of the solar system.

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# Neural Networks and NDEs

David Bradbury

*Can a computer have a near-death experience?*

**O**VER THE PAST FEW YEARS neural networks have been the subject of an explosion of interest from both the scientific research community and the popular media. It would seem, if the contents of *The Skeptic* are anything to go by (Hits and Misses, and Letters, *The Skeptic*, 7.3) that neural networks are now making their way into Research Into the Paranormal (R.I.P for short!). In particular the condition of 'Near Death Experience' where, to use the popular phrase, 'my whole life flashed before me'.

Indeed, it is because of the superficial similarity between artificial neural networks and their real counterparts (the human brain, for example) that research has flourished, notably in psychology and neuroscience where artificial neural networks are being used as tools to model psychological and physiological phenomena. Indeed whole new research disciplines such as computational neuroscience and cognitive neuro-psychology have grown at this new interface.

In his article on this subject [1], Philip Yam admits that there are shortcomings with the network which first appeared to simulate a NDE, in that the model used does not even approach the levels of complexity that one sees in real neural networks. However, the question of whether one needs to incorporate all the features that real neural networks have at either a neuronal or circuit level is the subject of much debate [2].

Many researchers have found that incorporating features of real neural networks into artificial models does lead to an increase in performance, both in terms of their learning speed and in terms of their usefulness for modelling psychological and physiological processes. This can be seen at the end of Yam's article where he reports that research is in progress using more complex networks.

Neural networks (both real and artificial) operate according to the same general principles: Input from the outside world causes neurons to 'fire'. This means that they send a signal to those neurons to which they are connected. The extent to which the neuron fires (if it fires at all) is determined by the amount of input it receives from other units. This input can be either excitatory or inhibitory. The former increases the probability of the unit firing, whereas the latter decreases the probability. The network can also modify the strength of the connections between units and it is this ability which enables the network to learn.

The above is, to say the least, a very crude description of the basic processes of neural networks. Readers who wish to look deeper into the subject will find no shortage of intro-

ductory texts. The most comprehensive, and in my opinion the best, is Rumelhart and McClelland's *Parallel Distributed Processing* (MIT Press).

If neural networks are able to offer an account of NDE's then it is necessary to look at the impact of neural networks on the debates on consciousness and human nature. Naturalistic attempts to resolve these debates are often met with the charge of reductionism: that human nature, viewed from the standpoint of the natural sciences, is essentially unchanging (since physical processes follow unchanging laws) and that this is incorrect given the endless variety of human societies that have existed throughout history. On the other hand, if consciousness is solely a product of materialist processes (that is, neuronal firings) then ought an explanation of consciousness be well within the grasp of the natural sciences?

The key point to realise about neural networks in relation to this debate is their extreme plasticity. Even without structural modification, a large amount of variation is available simply by modification of connection strengths that occur as part of the learning process. Of course not all connections will be modified, others (concerned with motor control for example) have little to do with consciousness and the modular construction of neuronal circuits in the brain will limit the possibilities. However, given that a typical human brain consists of something like 100 billion neurons it is easy to see how such a formidable architecture, working in concert with the diverse environments that humans find themselves in, can display such a diverse 'human nature'.

If then we accept that consciousness is an emergent property of the complex processes that occur as a result of neuronal firings in the brain and that simplified artificial neural networks are a good way to model them, how well do they account for NDEs? If they are simply the result of severing the links between units then we would expect that people would have been unable to relate their experience. Try severing 90% of your neuronal connections and see what happens! So, if this is the cause of NDEs then the severing in artificial models is clearly not what is going on in real brains, where the processes involved are far more complex. However the argument that statistical mechanics could underlie NDEs may still have some validity. As Stephen Thaler is quoted as saying in Yam's article:

*In a fully trained functioning network, all the weighted inputs to a particular unit are about the same in magnitude and opposite in sign... The odds are then that the sum of several weighted inputs to a unit equal zero. Hence when the links are broken, the unit might not feel the loss... The few surviving links will often be sufficient to generate reasonably coherent output.*

Furthermore, according to Susan Blackmore (interview in *The Skeptic*, 7.3) only 5% of NDErs' lives flash before them. Clearly the other side of the coin, environmental effects on brain wiring, must have some part to play.

Death, like taxation, happens to us all. So it is not surprising that the question 'Is there life after death?' is one which troubles most people, particularly those who are religious or superstitious. Many of the things experienced by NDErs have some religious symbolism. Just imagine, for example, how a Christian undergoing an NDE would interpret what Blackmore describes as 'the world beyond the tunnel'. Go into any book shop and see how the subject of life after death fills up a fair amount of shelf space one way or another. Given that as skeptics, or religious believers, or whatever, we all think, talk or write about it at some stage of our lives, is it surprising that there is some similarity between NDEs?

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Our thanks to reader Adrian West for providing us with this dramatic photographic evidence of paranormal activity on a building site in Wilmslow, Cheshire.

## Prometheus Books Prize Crossword

by Skepticus

### Across

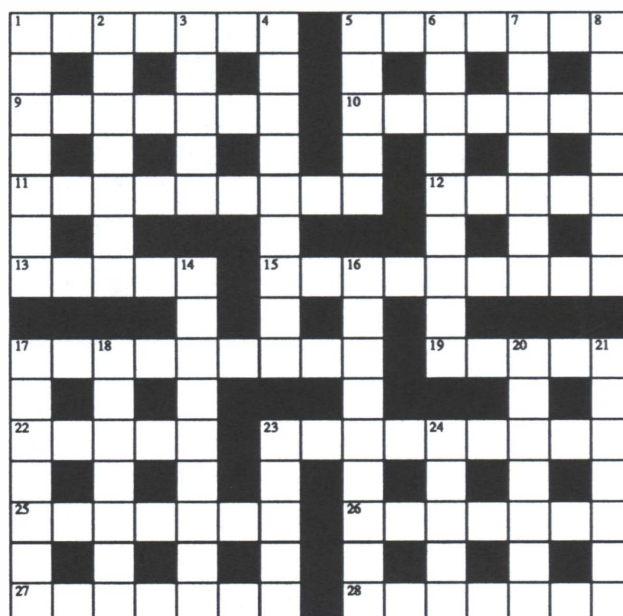
- 1,5 Wish cats bath and be prepared for coven's meeting (7,7)
- 9 Nothing missing from rooster - I'm in to make merry! (7)
- 10 Downpour expected late Sun evening? (7)
- 11 Mobs undam mixture for official (9)
- 12 Go round with leaders of 1 Ac. hordes in riotous living (5)
- 13 Lack massage, we hear (5)
- 15 Girl and Ra rue their uneven combination (9)
- 17,19 Purging this law when 1 Ac. dance with the Devil (9,5)
- 22 Iron man? (5)
- 23 Hello, a new mix-up at the end of October (9)
- 25 See idol confused by this plant (7)
- 26 Echo and Len make order (7)
- 27 Fosters abnormal trees (7)
- 28 Gin and mist: temporal measurements (7)

### Down

- 1 Male 1 ac (singular) in battle against hair (7)
- 2 Finger protector in sheath. I'm blest.
- 3 That Edward has strongly disliked inside (5)
- 4 Sing about pleat, cutting corners (9)
- 5 Simple Templar? (5)
- 6 Fashionable movement sounds taboo with wit on (4,5)
- 7 A meeting (hostile) (7)
- 8 Person holding it may be held, right (7)
- 14 Dead relative with not so much is fearless (9)
- 16 With silent ire bouncing back (9)
- 17 What changes with moonlight? Half answer 'mixed-up fowl' (7)
- 18 Our ball is small and lobe-like when misshapen (7)
- 20 An aerial spirit produced by Merlin (with the help of gravity) (7)
- 21 People who rent 10 insects (7)
- 23 Underworld headless shades (5)
- 24 Headless pig and pig's meat - that's strange writing (5)

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# A Skeptical Traveller

Russell Dear

*A portrait of a Victorian polymath*

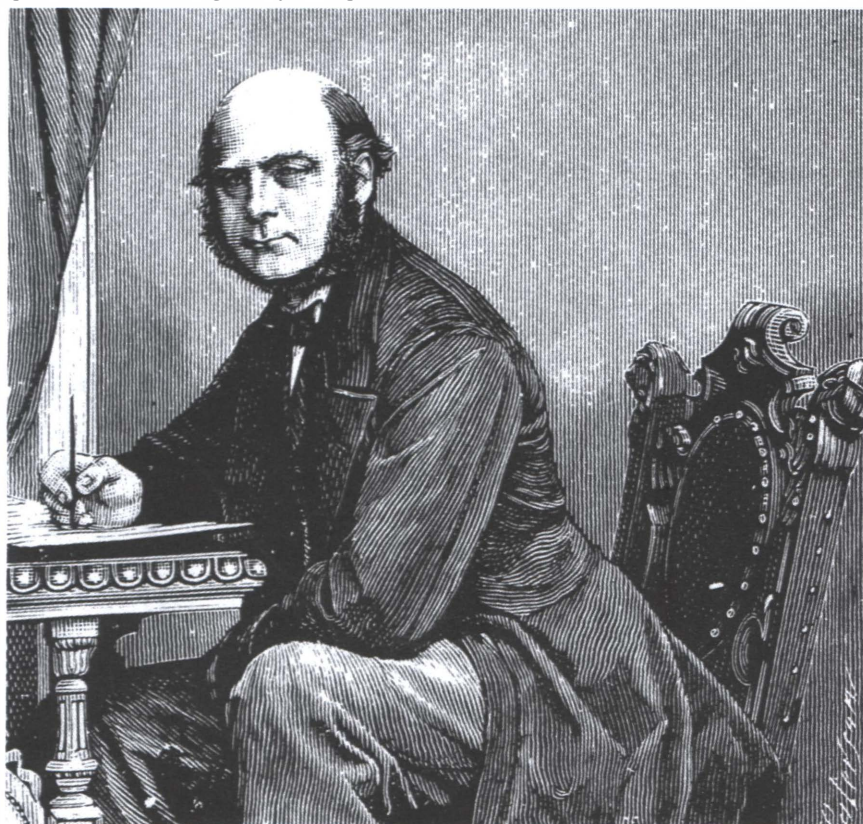
**W**HAT DOES THE NAME Sir Francis Galton mean to you? An eminent Victorian scientist well-known for his contributions to statistics, anthropology and meteorology, perhaps. Apart from his work on eugenics, and I guess everyone is entitled to one major gaffe in his or her lifetime, he happens to be a particular hero of mine. Recently I searched my local library for any of his books and came up with *The Art of Travel* which he wrote on his return from West Africa, an exploration for which he was awarded the Royal Society's Founder Medal in 1854. In it we find an interesting anecdote about a pair of 19th century escapologists who claimed paranormal powers. But first, a look at Francis Galton himself.

As a title, *The Art of Travel* is really a misnomer, because the book, subtitled *Shifts and Contrivances Available in Wild Countries*, is a veritable cornucopia of general science—so much so that it would not be out of place today used as a supplementary school text. *The Art of Travel* was the handbook for nineteenth century explorers and intended for a time when travelling was rough, and a person's life depended on their ingenuity and perseverance. Scholars of

the book would make MacGuyver look like the greenest of tenderfoots. Designed to be useful, the book could only have been written by a capable scientist, one accomplished in both theory and experiment. As Dorothy Middleton wrote in her introduction to the 1979 edition, 'Galton had an aptitude for gadgetry much in tune with the spirit of the times'. That he was respected for his knowledge of rough-country survival is evident from his being asked to deliver a series of lectures on the subject to troops preparing for war in the Crimea. For anyone intending to embark on a long hazardous journey into darker parts of the globe the book is highly recommended. It contains everything you could ever possibly want to know—from how to break in an ox, to lighting a fire in a thunderstorm without matches. The section on medical emergencies alone is worth including on the inside of every first-aid kit. It is important, surely, to know the correct procedures to follow in case of scorpion stings or the effects of rarefied air. A paragraph on drowning anticipates modern techniques in artificial respiration, described as a preferred alternative to 'hanging the unfortunate up by his feet to let all the water drain out'. In addition to extensive

information on navigation, including 20 things to do if you get lost, Galton described how to use, repair and sometimes even construct scientific instruments; how to silver the glass of sextants, for example, and how to tell the time by sundial, pendulum and hour glass. He also compiled a wide variety of tables, some of standard trigonometry, others less familiar such as two based on human pace lengths, and those of camels and horses, for determining rates of travel.

Animal husbandry was not forgotten. Galton had a wide knowledge of the correct management of elephants, dogs, goats, sheep, cattle, camels and horses including their health and well-being. He described all the equipment necessary for using these animals as beasts of burden or food and how to make it from local materials. More unusual activities associated with animals and described by Galton include swimming across rivers with horses and using otters and cormorants to



Mary Evans

catch fish. Apparently, if a cormorant is disobedient the water near them is struck with the back of an oar, although the reason for this is not given. The book does mention though that it requires caution to train a cormorant as the birds have a habit, when angry, of striking at their instructors eye with 'an exceedingly rapid and sure stroke'.

Galton was also a builder of some repute and described, in detail, how to construct boats from a variety of materials such as reeds (anticipating Thor Heyerdhal perhaps?), wood, hides, canvas, rubber, bark and sheet tin. A table giving the specific floating powers for a range of different woods provides useful supporting information here. Galton also described how to make horse accoutrements, bivouacs, carriages, bridges and all manner of useful smaller items.

Giving credit where it was due Galton described 'the indefatigable Rumford's scientific ingenuity in obtaining information on the relative thermal insulation powers of different materials such as twisted silk, beaver's fur, eider-down and taffety (*sic*). A mercury thermometer was suspended in the axis of a glass tube ending in a globe. The space between the globe and the thermometer bulb was filled with the material being tested. The instrument was then heated in boiling water and afterwards plunged into a mixture of pounded ice and salt. The times of cooling to a specific temperature were then noted. Hare's fur was found 'to offer the greatest impediment to the transmission of heat.

Galton also anticipated that the traveller would at some stage require to make soap and included a table showing the relative amounts of alkali in the ash of materials such as pine wood and bean stalks. There were also tables on nutrition which gave 'real nutriment' as a percentage of the gross weight for a selection of (once) common foodstuffs, although the constitution of this real nutriment was not clearly defined. Whatever it was, apparently 17 ounces were required for a sedentary life and 30 'in severe labour', a delightfully ambiguous remark.

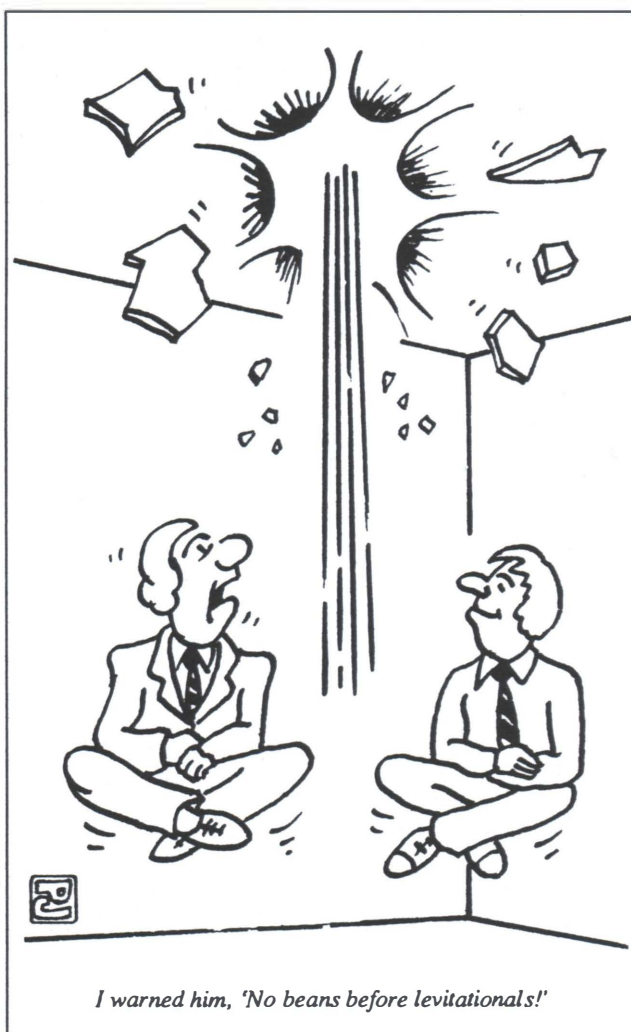
A section on signalling describes Coulomb and Bolton's flashing signals, a predecessor of Morse Code, and Galton's own design for a more efficient hand heliostat. Galton's attention to detail was such that he included an observation by a Mr Parkyns on the signalling techniques employed by a group of bandits in Abyssinia.

Having amply established his credentials as a scientist, what of his scepticism? In *The Art of Travel*, Galton describes the activities of the Davenport brothers who, in the 19th century, made money by claiming that they were being assisted by supernatural entities. The brothers were escapologists and realising that little financial gain could be had from traditional approaches to their trade decided to increase their income by implying that they were set free by supernatural beings. Instead of performing on street corners or at country fairs where escapologists usually worked, they held fashionable séances in London and were immensely popular for a while. Apparently, two people were selected from the audience and tied the brothers face-to-face in a cupboard. The cupboard doors were then closed and the room lights dimmed for five or ten minutes until a signal

was received from inside the cupboard. The doors were then flung open and, in a blaze of gaslight, the brothers strode free leaving their ropes behind them. They would do this a number of times with different people tying the ropes claiming that they had been freed by spirits. Unfortunately for them, at one séance two 'nautical gentlemen' insisted on tying the brothers with pre-stretched string they had brought themselves from naval supply. Neither the Davenport brothers nor their spirit friends could set them free. Subsequently the nautical gentlemen followed the brothers from séance to séance totally discrediting their performances and exposing the scam. The Davenports soon left the country.

At first Galton was impressed by the Davenports. On one occasion he had the opportunity of tying the knots himself, but the Davenports escaped all the same. Later, Galton realised that knot-tying required a skill that few people possess and that having two people do the tying increased the brothers' chance of making a quick escape. As Galton put it, 'If it be 20 to 1 against any one person having sufficient skill, then it be 400 to 1 against both persons having it'.

Russell Dear lives in Invercargill, New Zealand, where he teaches and writes about mathematics.



*I warned him, 'No beans before levitationals!'*



# Cyril Burt Reconsidered

John C McLachlan

## *Another look at the charges of fraud levelled against Burt*

**A**S RAY WARD SAYS (*The Skeptic*, 7.2), the 'Cyril Burt Affair' is of significance to studies of paranormal belief. However, it is of rather more significance than the reasons he gives, which are that research can alter apparently well founded views, and that strong prejudices can bias understanding. The further significance is that Burt published extensively on extra-sensory perception, and these writings, although properly sceptical in many ways, in general took a rather benign view of a number of paranormal phenomena. He held for instance, that 'the experimental evidence now provides a fairly strong presumption in favour of so-called telepathy', and seems to take the view that 'spirit messages from beyond the grave' were unlikely to have arisen from chance coincidences, but to represent some other phenomenon. His general reliability and credibility are therefore of some interest.

Science deals with what *happens*: history and law deal with what *happened*. Standards of proof in these fields are necessarily rather different, for, in history and law, it is not possible to repeat the event under consideration as part of an

experiment. It is therefore difficult to prove that Burt's behaviour in his own field of research was deliberately fraudulent, rather than profoundly flawed through incompetence, since this deals with motivation. Fortunately, it is not necessary to decide which is most applicable—that can remain a matter of opinion—if it can be demonstrated that it must be one or the other.

As Ray Ward says, two books have tried to rehabilitate Burt. These are *Science, Ideology and the Media: the Cyril Burt Scandal* by Ronald Fletcher (Transaction 1991), and *The Burt Affair* by Robert B Joynson (Routledge, 1989). Of the two, Joynson's book is the more measured in tone. Fletcher sets out to defend Burt *and* some of the views he espoused, while Joynson has no such additional aim. Since Ray Ward is right to say that prejudices can distort perception, I should perhaps say that I have no position to defend on the interrelationship of intelligence, inheritance and the environment—my interest in this subject relates only to the methodology of analysing evidence in science.

Since strong disagreements plainly arise over this matter, I think it is best to concentrate on those matters on which there is a degree of agreement on facts. For this reason, I will follow Fletcher and Joynson's accounts for evidence of Burt's wrongdoing, and leave the reader to decide if it was deliberate or accidental.

### The Missing Ladies

Ray Ward says that 'There now seems no doubt that the "missing ladies" existed'. This is not the case. A number of hearsay descriptions of the 'ladies' have been made, not all of which are mutually consistent. Joynson says 'There is still no certain documentary evidence for the existence of either', though a Miss M A Howard was a member of the British Psychological Society in 1934. He certainly admits a degree of uncertainty as to whether or not they existed. Fletcher identifies a 'Miss H M J Conway' who certainly existed in the right place at the right time, but properly cannot confirm her identity as the 'J Conway' cited by Burt. Miss Howard he takes to be the M A Howard mentioned above. This can hardly be said to admit of no doubt as to their existence.

However, both Joynson and Fletcher concede that Burt himself wrote papers and letters to journals under false names, and 'Miss J Conway' was employed in this way as a pseudonym in one significant work. This is not a minor



Mary Evans/The Cutten Collection

peccadillo. Personally, I would count it as outright fraud, but it may merely have been extraordinarily unwise. The reason I consider it fraudulent is that the essence of testing scientific work is its independent repeatability. To have worked with someone does not compromise a researcher's reliability, and their subsequent work may count as a verification. Writing a paper and attaching a false name to it gave Burt the opportunity of citing this work as if it was an independent confirmation.

It can be quite proper to add someone's name to a paper—even as first author—without their participation in writing it, if they made a significant contribution to the work. Ideally, they should see and approve the manuscript before publication, but it may well happen that this is not possible. What is wrong is for the true author to delete their own name in such circumstances. For minor publications such as correspondence and book reviews, the reader may also decide whether it is right for an editor to write such items under false names and insert them in a scientific journal, particularly when they comment on the editor's own work or that of his rivals.

### Invariant Correlations

A number of papers were published in which the numbers of separated twins changed, but the correlations between their intelligence, and/or other properties, remained the same. Burt is defended against this charge in a number of ways. One is that in some papers, he was merely repeating tables published in previous work. This is plainly the case. However, in such cases it is incumbent on the author to state that this is being done. In particular, tables including new and old data together must indicate which is which, and in all papers in which a statistical argument is made, it is necessary to state explicitly the number of cases ( $n$ ) underlying each category. Burt did not do so in the papers under consideration in this regard. This is unwise, and likely to mislead. In the case of the key invariant correlation between intelligence of separated twins and of non-separated twins (0.771 and 0.925 respectively, in two separate papers involving different numbers of twins in each case), it is argued that this is not impossible, that Burt did not draw particular attention to it, and that he was too clever to fake the results in this particular way. This last argument is not wholly reliable: to say that 'no sensible person would do such a thing' is not of itself sufficient to demonstrate that it was not done, or that the person doing it was not otherwise sensible. Nor can anything be made of Burt not drawing particular attention to it. To any mathematically literate analyst it requires no attention drawn to it. That it was not impossible is of course true. It is unlikely but possible. It bolsters a lifetime philosophical position that Burt espoused in the most convincing way imaginable: it was produced without adequate documentation when he was over 80 and of admittedly waning powers. But it is indeed possible.

### Inadequate Description

The last paragraph raises another category of criticism: that Burt described his work inadequately. For the crucial twin studies, Burt provides no clear details of when or how or by whom the twins were identified and assessed. It is not

enough to say that his methods were clear enough in general: in papers of such vital import the methodology must be clearly and explicitly spelt out, or clearly referenced to an accessible source. Not to do so is a sign of extraordinary sloppiness. It does not necessarily imply fraud: but clear descriptions of methodologies are one of the indications that fraud or error had not taken place. His defenders suggest that Burt's standards were no worse than those of other psychologists at the time; whether or not this startling accusation aimed at a large field of scientific endeavour is true is irrelevant in this instance.

### Inadequate Measurement

In his first ever paper, Burt set out to investigate the relationship between the intelligence of parents and their children, with the aim of estimating the relative contribution of heredity and environment. Tests were administered to small numbers of children, and the results validated by subjective impressions. The intelligence of their parents (in essence, their fathers) was not tested at all: it was *inferred from their social position*. Burt interpreted the results as showing that intelligence was inherited, and he referred to these results with evident satisfaction in his later work. This parody of the scientific method would be laughable, if this were not an important topic.

### School Attainment Levels

Burt was opposed to comprehensive education and modern teaching methods, and contributed to the second 'Black Paper' on education which promoted a traditionalist view. In this he said that modern attainment standards were appreciably lower than those achieved previously. No figures were given here, but a reference led to an article in the Irish Journal of Education. A table was published in this journal, the compilation of which Burt ascribed to a Miss M G O'Connor, who has also not been traced. Curiously, this table gives rather flimsy evidence for a fall in standards. However, the essential problem with this table is that it gives no indication of where, or by whom the data was collected, nor does it give the numbers involved. Some of the earlier data might well have been available to Burt; the later data would have been harder for him to collect. Of course, this does not prove that he invented it. He might just have been completely incompetent at reporting it.

In conclusion, Burt may have been guilty of deliberate fraud, or of merely failing to conform to the most basic scientific standards. His biographer concluded that some of his activities were fraudulent, and speculated on what may have driven him to this. These speculations, which Ray Ward attacks so vigorously, are irrelevant to the assessment of the value of Burt's work. It is quite possible for a fair-minded person to read the books by Fletcher and Joynson, and still believe that Burt's reputation had been grossly overestimated during his lifetime. There is certainly, for sceptics, no compelling reason to accept Burt's valuation of the worth of parapsychological events.

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# It's All In The Mind

Arthur Chappell

## *A further defence of meditation*



**M**Y ARTICLE ON MEDITATION (*The Skeptic*, 7.1) inspired an article and several angry letters with a common claim that meditation doesn't stop its practitioners from rationally thinking for themselves. John Clarke's letter (*The Skeptic*, 7.2) simply tells us that meditation works for him, and I say the best of luck to him. Interestingly he compares it to Librium, 'reducing obsessive connectivity' in the brain, and talks of comparisons with expensive sensory deprivation tanks. In other words, his chosen meditation promises to isolate and change his thinking, reducing obsessional thoughts—defined as obsessional by whom? where? in a meditation handbook?—cutting off the meditator from sensory stimuli which might interrupt the process. Letting the mind go blank is a standard visualization technique. Mr Clarke did in fact still experience a sense of himself as 'consciousness', and some people would actually regard that experience as 'mystical'. He says he had no guru, but maybe he was reliant on the authority of the author of the book cited (one of many such works). And no money changed hands, eh? What about royalties on the book sales?

Dr Dace (Letters, *The Skeptic*, 7.2) argues that temporary quieting of the mind isn't necessarily going so far as to attack the mind in its proper functioning. He adds that 'the usual state of the mind' is the mind 'malfunctioning'. Says who? Why do pro-meditation supporters see the mind as fundamentally flawed in this way? It is this mistrust of our apparatus for the recording and analyzing of sensory data (the mind) that I question. Sincere and insincere meditation teachers share this extremely negative view. Here are some sincere quotations:

The human mind, in its never-ending changes is like the flowing water of a river or the burning flame of a candle, like an ape, it is forever jumping about, not ceasing even for a moment. [1]

An undisciplined mind expresses evil thoughts by evil actions, and these actions leave evil after-effects on the mind: and as soon as external stimulation occurs, the mind suffers the consequences of its past actions. Thus, if we suffer miseries, they have their remote causes in the past. All pleasures and pains have their mental origins; and religions are required because without them, the mind cannot be controlled. [2]

It is the very energy of thought which keeps thee from thy God. [3]

The mind is labelled restless, Arjuna: it is indeed hard to train But by constant practice, and by freedom from passions the mind in truth can be trained. [4]

Meditation starves the mind of stimulus (sensory deprivation)

and cuts like a knife through any consciously apparent thinking with the aid of mantras, visualizations, and so on. Some secular meditations may not go so far as the more religious ones in combining mantras with strict dietary control, ascetic retreat, celibacy and so on. Some western practices are occasionally mistaken for meditation: activities such as prayer, and reflection of theological passages are more akin to contemplation and cognition than meditation in its strictest sense. Yoga, the primary source for much meditation is defined as: 'attempts to transform consciousness by mental control, to go beyond thought to absence of thought' [5]. The same author defines Buddhist meditational practices:

The student begins with purification, followed by a strict ascetic code, and learning mindfulness (sati), a minimal awareness of sensory perception without allowing them to stimulate thoughts. Mindfulness then leads to 'seeing things as they are'. [6]

Not surprisingly, the author tells of how the adept experiences 'tremendous physical pain' as 'he or she seeks a cessation of all mental processes'.

The mind is basically seen in Eastern belief systems as a barrier between us and the absolute:

Generally speaking, the senses and mind are regarded as appetitive, as desiring, grasping and relishing their objects, in the very act of sensing or knowing them. In the unenlightened this rapaciousness is wayward and uncontrolled; enlightenment requires the imposition of control on it, either to stop ordinary experience entirely, or to let it proceed seen in its true light, seen as it really is. [7]

Many secular works on meditation simply present a cookbook-like recipe for the mechanical act of meditating. They fail to set it out in a historical or anti-cognitive philosophical context.

Birds should be alarmed if their cages are disturbed, Dr Dace, and so should the mind if it faces some data of which it is (at least temporarily) uncertain. Densensitizing the mind to stimuli may actually affect human ability to react properly with the level of fear, love and other emotions required in any given social situation. Dr Dace argues that we ought to hear from people who have practiced meditation techniques before making up our minds. I practiced four visualization meditations solidly between 1981–93 (see my article 'Brainwashing a Skeptic', *The Skeptic*, 6.2).

Mike Rutter's letter argues correctly that traffic accident statistics don't make us call for a ban on cars; nor have I called for a meditation ban. I merely ask possible meditation recruits to recognize the possible hazards as well as the

potential benefits. I do think the car analogy goes a little too far in saying that the responsibility for accidents lies entirely with their handlers. Not so: mechanical failures often lead to cars being withdrawn for safety checks; drivers can't always be responsible for the brakes, and what of passengers? Meditation is often a group promotion. I agree with Mr Rutter in that it isn't necessary to join a cult to meditate, and there are always the books. In *Divine Light Mission* I was often asked why, once I had the meditation techniques, I still followed the Guru, instead of just meditating on my own. The answer is that, for me, and many meditators, the discipline required to practice in depth, with full commitment to getting up early (especially after long nights on the pop) is difficult. Practice can become occasional and half-hearted. Many guru-less meditators find it at first, unfulfilling—as John Clarke (Letters, *The Skeptic*, 7.2) seems to have experienced at first—and may join yoga groups, and make long term commitments to gurus to maintain and hopefully improve the necessary discipline. Meditation is not as easy as it is often made out to be.

Like Mr Rutter, Adrian West cites the example of the Dalai Lama ('Meditation: Skepticism of Cynicism', *The Skeptic*, 7.2). As I have every respect for his Gandhi-like non-violent stance on the political rights of the Tibetan people, and feel he fully deserves the Nobel Peace Prize, I am careful not to invoke his name alongside that of Maharaj Ji and the (TM) Maharishi. There is however no doubt that mainstream (non-cultic) Buddhist and Hindu beliefs involve taking on board ideas such as reincarnation (so vital to ideas on Karma) that have been subject to skeptical inquiry, and articles in this very publication have touched on matters that are important to these religions, even though skeptics need not be anti-religious or atheistic.

Dr West aims to present a case for the 'positive aspects of meditation'. I do not deny that such benefits may be possible. My article attempts to put forward a counterbalance to the mass of pro-meditation literature available. Interestingly, Dr West, while accusing me of cynicism and popular journalism, agrees that many of the possible abuses and dangers I highlight may well apply in certain circumstances.

In his article, Dr West begins with the undisputed observation that mental preoccupation on a few unkind words

will upset us, and while few would try that systematically, we often find ourselves doing it, unintentionally. As he asks, why not actively groom positive states of mind? The problem starts when we try to think of this 'positive mindfulness processing' as having to be through meditation, when it can be through education and basic psychology. Pop-psychologists have encouraged clients/patients to use near-meditative mantras like, 'Every day in every way, I'm getting better and better', 'Youth, health, vigour', and so on. The problem with this was what William James called its tendency to be 'moonstruck with optimism' [8]. No doubt there could be a more pessimistic branch shouting 'Nolite te bastardes Carborundum' each day. Sadly, the problem with this artificial optimism and meditation is that people start telling themselves they need 'improving' even when

they don't. To sell meditation, or pop psychology 'healthy mindedness' you have to convince the buyer that she/he is in dire need of such self-improvement.

Minds are resilient and often straighten themselves out. We find our mislaid objects and stay in control even in difficult situations. We get ourselves to the dentist's despite our abject terror. Suddenly, a book comes out telling us we need some technique to achieve better self-control, we buy it and in effect to some extent, risk loss of that control and have to regain it through some mental landscaping process, be it pseudo-psychological or meditative. The problem with such techniques is that we often find ourselves unable not to use them. I have seen medita-

tors in states of confusion, distress and indecision because circumstances, time or laziness have prevented them having their daily chant. We end up like the caterpillar in the fable: asked how he co-ordinates his countless legs to walk with ease, he thinks about it, and starts tripping himself up.

Meditation books and gurus first tell the customer why he needs to meditate, and in effect the mind is targetted before the first mantra is ever given. To say 'You'll feel better after doing this' is in effect to tell someone that he isn't entirely up to his full potential so far. This is of course nothing that any advertiser worth his salt wouldn't do with any product.

The Lama is quoted in support of Dr West's argument that focusing the mind isn't necessarily stifling thought. Here, the Lama seems to be talking of reasoning and cogita-





tion rather than meditation, arguing the need for reason to counter 'anger, hatred and attachment'. I say that even non-violent people get angry. The Lama is doubtlessly angered by the Chinese intrusion into his homeland. Meditation shouldn't eradicate anger, but reasoning should question its justification and what positive and hopefully harmless course of action should be taken in expressing anger.

Attachments are a favourite target in Hindu/Buddhist meditation. Attachment, or desire for worldly goods, and people you love, are seen as counter-productive to the inner states of tranquility (Nirvana). Why attach yourself to the fleeting, insubstantial, illusion-like objects that your death takes away from you anyway? Meditation philosophy is one of detachment from thought about these externals, and refocusing on the inner reality, the visualized meditated-up world. Dr West starts by showing how meditation can help us feel better after unkind words at work, but then brings in a quotation on attachments to the world where work takes place, a world (Maya) dismissed as a mental illusion.

He argues that many meditation teachers are more open to receiving questions. True: it is answers that are difficult for them. Buddhist koans (most commonly used in Zen Buddhism, but in other Buddhist groups too) are designed to confound the questioner and to make him reflect on the futility of the question itself [9]. Many koans, the most famous one being about the sound of one hand clapping, are used as meditation exercises.

Dr West misses the whole point of my farmers/porridge analogy by saying that logically crime would go down if everyone meditated. The point is that TM claims that a percentage of people meditating affects the behaviour of the non-meditating community at large, not just those who are meditating rather than stealing cars. (But I'm not accusing TM recruits of being criminals here!). This is precisely why I add that meditation helps only the meditator and no-one else. Clearly, if the meditator resurfaces behaving better/worse then his actions will have an influence on the world itself. In that sense it does indirectly help or hinder us all.

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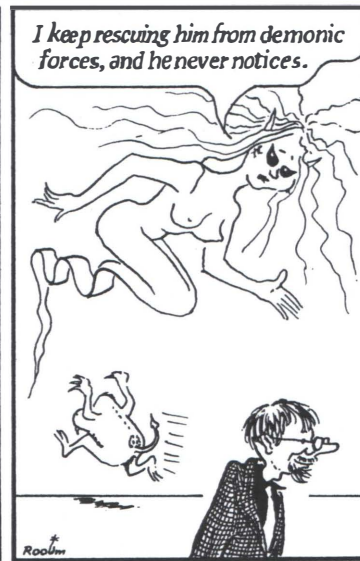
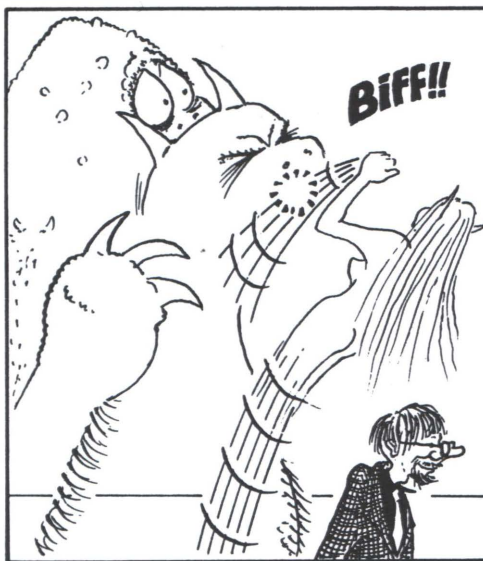
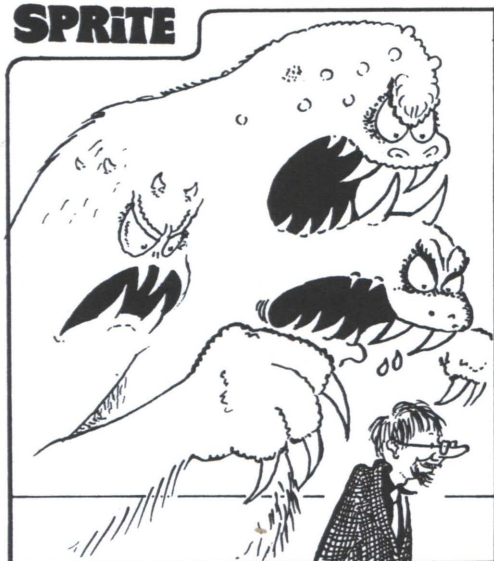
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## SPRITE



I keep rescuing him from demonic forces, and he never notices.

Rooster

# The Computer Conspiracy

Andrew Bulhak

## Microsoft and the Bavarian Illuminati

The chessboard is the world, the pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are the laws of nature. The player on the other side is hidden from us.

—Thomas Henry Huxley

In every grain of wheat there lies hidden the soul of a star.

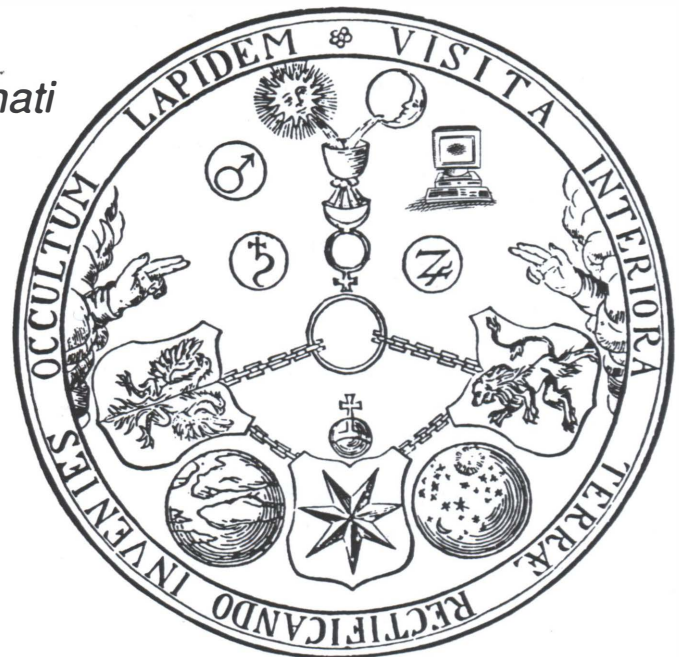
—Arthur Machen

The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are and the Old Ones will be... not in the spaces we know of, but between them ... Yog-Sothoth is the Gate.

—Abd al-Hazred, *Al Azif*

All perception is inferential; all inference uncertain: all theory, a combination of perception and inference, is therefore educated guessing.

—de Selby, *Golden Hours*, I, 93



THESE DAYS most people have heard of Microsoft Corporation, and its founder Bill Gates. The majority of computers in use today use Microsoft system software, and those that do not often run applications from Microsoft. However, few people know the true story behind the rise of Microsoft and even fewer suspect the terrible cosmic secrets that are concealed beneath the façade of a successful software company.

In the *Object Linking and Embedding 2.0 Programmer's Reference* there is a very curious term. On page 78, the second paragraph starts with the sentence, 'In the aggregation model, this internal communication is achieved through coordination with a special instance of unknown interface known as the *controlling unknown* of the aggregate.' The term 'controlling unknown' is a very interesting choice of words. It is not the most intuitively obvious term for what it is describing (a base class used for implementing an object-oriented data exchange/embedding system).

A term strikingly similar to 'controlling unknown' was the term 'unknown superiors', used by many occult secret societies. These included the Strict Observance Masonic lodge, whose members were sometimes referred to as 'illuminati', and which had some connection with Adam Weishaupt's order. 'Unknown superiors' is a term that refers to non-corporeal or superhuman agencies in command of secret societies or mystery cults. Such an agency is frequently known as the 'inner head' of an order of organisation, as opposed to the outer head, who is human.

Organisations that claimed or were claimed to be com-

manded by such 'unknown superiors' include the Ordo Templi Orientis of Aleister Crowley and the Knights Templar, whose Inner Head was apparently a being named Baphomet.

Apart from the term 'controlling unknown', another hint at the secrets behind Microsoft is the fact that Microsoft Windows has a limit of five window device contexts. Five is a decidedly odd number for such an application, being neither a power of two nor one less than a power of two, but let us not forget Adam Weishaupt's discovery of the Law of Fives in the *Necronomicon*. (Some sources claim that the copy of the *Necronomicon* which Adam Weishaupt owned was the von Junzt German translation; this, however, is unlikely, as von Junzt lived in the nineteenth century. The *Necronomicon* involved was probably either Olaus Wormius' Latin edition or the original Arabic, as the details of the illustrations would attest.)

Few people for sure know how many buildings there are in the Microsoft campus in Redmond, WA. No maps of the entire facility are known to exist. Some Microsoft employees put the estimate at six or three. An article in an Australian newspaper has claimed that there are 22 buildings. That is partly true; however, there is another building, hidden from the public and even from most Microsoft employees. The twenty-third building, or Building 7, is pentagonal in shape; its exact location is known only to five people (of whom Bill Gates may be one), however it is believed that the building is accessible from elsewhere in the Microsoft campus by a secret passage.

What is in the five sided building is not known. How-



ever, it is believed that the contents of Building 7 are of a supernatural nature. Apart from the Pentagon, there was a similar five-sided building in Nazi Germany. This has been carefully kept hidden from the public. One hypothesis is that Building 7 is inhabited by, or used to communicate with, the Inner Head, or 'controlling unknown'. The identity of the Outer Head is unknown. Bill Gates may be the Outer Head, a high initiate of the conspiracy or just a figurehead whose purpose it is to divert attention.

To fully understand this history, or whatever of it may be understood by human minds, one must have some knowledge of the history and origins of the Illuminati. Little is known about the Illuminati, but what is known is that the Illuminati can be definitely traced back to 1776.

On Walpurgis night 1776, five men met in a cavern deep beneath Ingolstadt, Bavaria. There they invoked some sort of supernatural beings and made contact with the Unknown Superiors. The following day, one of these five men proclaimed the foundation of the Ancient Illuminated Seers of Bavaria, using the name 'Adam Weishaupt', which means 'the first man to know the Superiors'.

Although the Illuminati were officially disbanded in 1785, they did not disappear; throughout the past 200 years, they have been observing the profane world carefully, and occasionally intervening (as they did in Sarajevo in 1914, St. Petersburg in 1917, Manhattan in 1929 (to divert attention from a rather unpleasant affair off the coast of New England) and Dallas in 1963 to name a few cases. Their contacts with the Unknown Superiors continued in specially constructed buildings, originally in Germany but later in Washington. During the 1920s and 1980s there occurred a potential problem; a young writer named Howard Phillips Lovecraft published many stories which contained allegories to Illuminati history (for example, Joseph Curwen's invocation of 'Yogge-Sothothe' in an underground complex in the 18th century). It is believed that Lovecraft's father was a Grand Orient Freemason. The Illuminati, however, persuaded Lovecraft to join their cause and faked his death in 1937 (Have you ever wondered why his grave is not marked?) Another incident occurred on October 21, 1967, when occultists attempted to 'raise' the Pentagon; they were given permission to approach it but prevented from completely encircling it. However, in 1975, a crisis developed that threatened the very foundation of the Illuminati.

A book, claiming to be a fantasy novel, appeared. This book was mostly fiction; however, it hinted at the secrets of

the Illuminati (even going as far as using Lovecraft's term 'Yog-Sothoth' for the Unknown Superior). To this day it is not known whether the authors were renegade Illuminati or whether the information was acquired from informers within the organisation. The book was called *Illuminatus!*

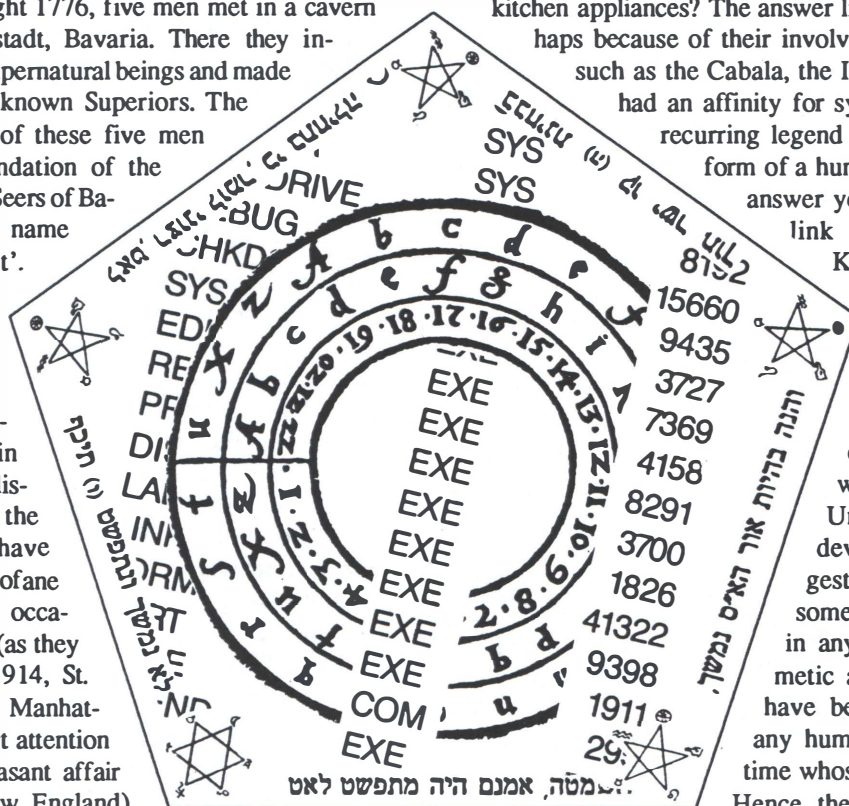
Immediately, the Illuminati convened an emergency meeting in Cesme, Turkey. There they discussed a contingency plan to restructure the organisation and to move the Pentacle of Invocation to a new location. They decided on setting up a small computer company in one of the smaller cities of the United States as a front. That year, Microsoft Corporation was founded.

But why did the Illuminati select a software company and not, say, a company that manages investments or makes kitchen appliances? The answer lies in symbolism (Perhaps because of their involvement in mystick arts such as the Cabala, the Illuminati have always had an affinity for symbolism). There is a recurring legend about a device in the form of a human head which could answer yes/no questions (some link this device to the Knights Templar and their god Baphomet; others claim that Pope Sylvester, who lived in the tenth century, brought such an object back from India, where he met the 'Nine Unknown Men'). This device is extremely suggestive of a computer of some sort, and if it did exist in anything more than hermetic allegory, it could not have been manufactured by any human civilisation of the time whose existence is known.

Hence, the Illuminati decided to use a computer company as a front.

It has been already speculated that the name of the founder, Bill Gates, is a code much as 'Adam Weishaupt' was a code. Apart from being the name of a magician in Aleister Crowley's novel, *Moonchild*, Gates is a reference to the Unknown Superior and the gateway between ordinary reality and the Invisible World; Lovecraft himself referred to Yog-Sothoth as 'the Gateless Gate'. By the same token, IBM can be said to stand not for 'International Business Machines' but rather for 'Iacobus Burgundus Molensis', or Jacques de Molay, the last overt Grand Master of the Knights Templar, whose name was borrowed by the Bavarian Illuminati for one of their ciphers. One must also not forget that a Microsoft network administration tool currently under development is named Hermes, after the god of alchemy, and that a line in Umberto Eco's novel, *Foucault's Pendulum* reads, quite clearly, 'Microsoft-Hermes'.

Andrew Bulhak is a writer living in Australia.



# Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

## Two North Yorkshire oddities

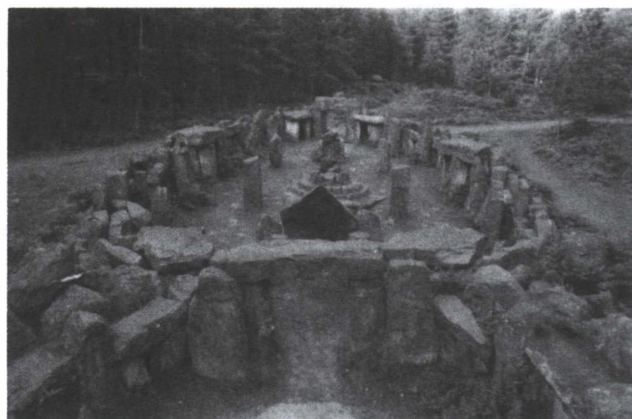
ONE RECENT SUNDAY I woke up to find myself struck down with Dabbler's Disease. I was bored. I couldn't decide which section of the Sunday paper to read, the choice was so immense to me. I tried listening to records, but couldn't get past the first track on any; picked books at random off the bookshelves... Leisure wasn't working. What about doing things around the house? Today's options, I was informed by Jane—who was catching up on some work and was supposed not to be disturbed—were bleak: defrost the freezer, clean the car, knock down the shed, or fix the toilet door. In 30 seconds, I had grabbed every 'what to see in Britain' book I could find, and I went for a drive.

There were two places I wanted to visit in North Yorkshire, both quite bizarre, in their own ways. First was the graveyard of St John's church, Sharow, where there is a scale model of the Great Pyramid of Cheops at Giza, Egypt. A strange object to find in graveyard, you might think, but stranger still is the fact that below it lie the remains of a past Astronomer-Royal of Scotland, Charles Piazzi Smyth (1819–1900). Smyth will, I am sure, be familiar to many *Skeptical* readers, for his extraordinary efforts in seeking esoteric



*The tomb of Charles Piazzi Smyth*

meanings in the dimensions of the Great Pyramid. Smyth purveyed his ideas in three monumental books, *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid* (1865), *Life and Work at the Great Pyramid* (in three volumes, 1867) and *On the Antiquity of Intellectual Man* (1868). Perhaps the best summary of Smyth's numerology is given by Martin Gardner in his *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (Dover, 1957). Gardner's description of Smyth's efforts to find connections between the dimensions of the pyramid, and the calendar, the distance of the earth from the sun, the mean density of the earth, and so on, is for my money informed skeptical writing at its very best. Smyth also crops up (inevitably) in



*Ilton Temple*

Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, where Eco uses a similar analogy to Gardner (who refers to the Washington Monument) to show that such numerical correspondences can also be readily found in the measurements of mundane objects, such as a wooden booth used for selling lottery tickets. Smyth was, perhaps a little unkindly, classed as a 'pyramidiot' in Barry Williams' article 'Pyramyths and Pyramidiots' (*The Skeptic*, 3.3), but he was in fact a highly respected and intelligent man. As Gardner points out, Smyth's passionate belief in his theories was supported by his extraction of a web of seemingly self-consistent numerical correlations from a huge mass of data. Smyth's pyramidal tomb remains a thought-provoking monument to pseudoscience.

In search of another eccentric figure, I headed northwest for the village of Masham, and eventually found 'Ilton Temple'. This extraordinary collection of standing stones, mounds and lintel-bearing uprights, also known as the 'Druid Circle', looks for all the world like a remarkably well-preserved ancient monument. But it is, in fact, a complete fake. It is a folly, built in the 1820's by Squire William Danby of Swinton Hall. It's a rather overdone affair, too. Like Smyth's tomb, Ilton Temple is a miniature. There is a stone-clad recess set into the hillside, fronted by an altar-stone, and all around the temple are cairns and stacks of stones. Whether or not Danby built the folly to provide work for the local populace, or whether he had deeper esoteric intentions, is not clear. Some writers say that Ilton Temple has an aura of darkness about it, and that it stirs sinister vibrations in visitors. I thought it was a rather silly place. After a day walking around the traces of these two characters I drove home feeling rather uninteresting. I doubt if I will ever be able to leave my mark on the landscape by building a folly, or arranging to be buried underneath a huge golden monolith celebrating *The Skeptic*. But I could knock down that shed in the garden...

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

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# Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

## *An evening with the Miracle Man*

**Y**OU KNOW HOW ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE are always saying kids grow up believing life is the way they see it on TV? Well, I grew up watching TV, and I suffer from the opposite problem: I'm always convinced everything on TV is pure fantasy, and that real life is different. It must be: nothing in my life has ever been remotely like anything I've ever seen on TV. (I have a theory, by the way, that kids are perfectly aware of this; they have no trouble discerning that life on the *Cosby* show, with parents who squabble sometimes but love each other and who both work but somehow manage to have six kids, nine kids, whatever it is they have, has nothing to do with *Life As They Know It*. They may be couch potatoes, but they're not stupid.)

So it was with absolute, shocked astonishment that I discovered that at least one small part of the real world is exactly like it is on TV. I mean, I went to a show by Morris Cerullo, praise God!, at Earl's Court, toward the end of his London run.

I had been told that the doors opened at 7, but when I got there the place was already humming; moving up the escalator toward the first-floor balcony (I found out later that the ground floor was already full), was like going full speed into an echoing cavern of rhythmic sound. I found out why when I peeked into one of the (already full) sections of the balcony: there was a black choir on stage, singing and moving the way they do in the studio scene from Robert Altman's film *Nashville* if anyone remembers that. There must have been at least 100 in the choir, all in white robes. They were backed by a band with drums, organ, and a bunch of other instruments whose names I didn't catch. The overall effect was thrilling and hair-raising, the way emotion-inspiring music is. Many in the overwhelmingly black audience were already sobbing quietly and raising their arms, waving them gently in time to the music. I'm no good at estimating crowds, but they were expecting 16,000, and I see no reason to think they were wrong.

Then we got the warm-up act: a London-based minister with a habit of punctuating his sermonette by asking 'Amen?' The crowd would reply, 'Amen.' There was sitting, there was standing, there was praying and singing hymns, and then there was a collection. I had already noticed the red and white plastic buckets at the end of each row; irresistibly and irreverently they reminded me of the sick bucket one chronically ill friend keeps by his bed.

A singer, Cindy Price, was introduced as the greatest singer in the world who's doing the Lord's work (to an ex-pro musician, this suggested that she probably couldn't

compete in the real business and chose a smaller pond to compete in). Everyone joined in: 'Let's exalt him.' Excuse me: actually they sang, 'Let's exalt heem.'

And then we got the main act, and there was another shock: a little guy in a black suit with an extremely hoarse but powerful (and powerfully amplified) voice. This was your basic revivalist, hellfire and brimstone preaching. Cerullo has mastered the art of the sob note: he can shake his voice up at the drop of a devil and seem to cry for all the lost souls in the audience. One of his themes was suicide: those who might be contemplating it were told that they would leave with something to live for. But the main one was families.

'This is family night,' he intoned. 'How many families are here to be healed tonight?' Almost every hand went up. 'The devil's not going to have one family in this building tonight when this service is over!' Divorce, it seems, is the problem: children divorcing their parents, parents divorcing each other. 'God hates divorce. Divorce is not God's will.' He segued through kids 'toting' guns and children being murdered in the streets to a worldwide epidemic.

Ah, I thought, now maybe he's beginning to get to it: I had been told that this was the night that Cerullo was going to cure AIDS. Nope.

'There is a worldwide epidemic,' he ranted, 'it is sweeping the church, and sweeping the world. It is the spirit of rebellion. Everybody wants to do their own thing. But God has a divine order. God has a structure. God has authority.' God also, apparently, has corporal punishment; Cerullo isn't too happy about moves to outlaw parents' 'disciplining' their children.

Now, I didn't stay for the whole show — I had my own religious ceremony I had to get back to, namely watching Sanchez play Capriati in the semi-final of the LA tournament (sorry if that seems frivolous) — but as far as I saw, Cerullo's cure for AIDS was this, with the organ swelling beneath his voice: 'Do not wonder, young people, whether you need condoms' (his voice dripped with bitterness on that last word). 'Do not worry about AIDS. God will keep your virginity pure. Be a virgin unto him.'

Right. Noted. Meanwhile, Cerullo, who claimed that 'the sick have been healed every night', seems to have had little effect on a friend of mine, who's been chasing his claims up and down the country. Even after anointing with holy oil, reports my friend, 'I am still bald, fat, and stubbly.'

But still: it's a great show. Pity about the miracles.

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

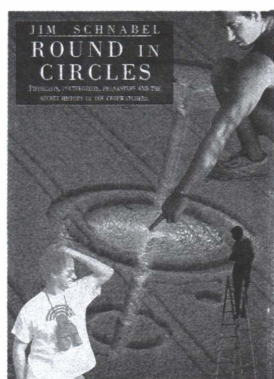
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# Reviews



## The world beyond the circles

Jim Schnabel, *Round In Circles*, (Hamish Hamilton, 1993, 294pp, hbk, £16.99)



If there is one thing crop circles researchers cannot abide, it is being made to look stupid in public. There is nothing unusual in this; we all have our pride. However, in the cerealogist, self-esteem—particularly when it borders on a magnificent hubris, as it so often does—has proved to be a distinctly unfortunate trait. A quick history lesson: In 1991, Doug and Dave, two mischievous

sexagenarians from Southampton, stepped forward and took credit for not only initiating the circle phenomenon, but, with the aid of copycaters, keeping the science-can't-explain-it-no-human-being-could-do-this-that'll-be-£15.99-guv-thanks circus going. The world laughed; the cerealogists squirmed under the weight of their collapsed egos. Things got worse: in 1992, the circle hoaxing competition left the world—that part of it that was still listening—with the clear impression that, yes, human beings *could* do that. Cerealogy shifted uneasily in its seat. Now, in 1993, the beleaguered experts are once again having to nurse bruised egos: this time because of a book, *Round In Circles*, the publishing debut of Jim Schnabel.

Subtitled *Physicists, Poltergeists, Pranksters and the Secret History of the Cropwatchers*, Schnabel's book is a journalistic account of his own personal odyssey through the bizarre world of circles research, fleshed out with a comprehensive history of the circle phenomenon. It is all here, from the first, unnoticed, circles of Doug and Dave in the seventies to the press hysteria, bandwagoning and, ultimately, *Gotterdammerung* of the nineties. Schnabel, an American journalist-cum-student in the sociology of science, arrived on the circles scene in 1991 and has been hanging around ever since: socialising with and interviewing cerealogists, attending their gatherings, spending nights with circle-watchers and, for much of last year, going out with a garden roller to provide the gawping croppies with much sustenance. If this latter behaviour attracted considerable cropprobrium when it was exposed, his depiction of the cerealogical world in *Round In Circles*—as hermetic and squabble-ridden, populated by a Kafkaesque menagerie of colourful mystics, gullible fantasists, local government officials, real, pseudo- and wannabe-scientists, all with vast

chips on their shoulders, all vying for ascendancy, all knowing that they are right, all bewildered by a phenomenon apparently determined to confound them—will probably make him even less likely to appear on the cerealogical Christmas list than Doug and Dave. Schnabel's emphasis is on people, rather than phenomena, and this probably accounts for the strong condemnation his work has elicited from cerealogical quarters: *Round In Circles* tears the media-constructed scientific raiment from the priests of cerealogy, exposing frail, fallible individuals with an almost supernatural ability to sculpt disaster from the raw materials provided by hoaxers and chance. It is as difficult not to laugh at all this as it is to understand how grown men and women can make such asses of themselves.

Gripes? One or two. In any account of this kind, dependent as it must sometimes be on hearsay, media accounts and personal impressions, truth will occasionally be a casualty. Schnabel has been criticised, no doubt justifiably, for presenting numerous 'factional' accounts of incidents at which he was not present; accounts which, at times, rather deride the participants. Now and then, his research is superficial: there are, for example, a number of errors, of fact and interpretation, in that section of the book in which the Wessex Skeptics appear; Schnabel could have avoided these simply by picking up the 'phone. But these are venial sins, in the nature of the beast: tales of this kind could never be told if the author was not allowed some licence.

Ironically, one criticism that no doubt will be levelled at *Round In Circles* by the croppies' concerns what is, for me, the highlight of the book: the brief epilogue, in which Jim fondly recalls his own, and others' hoaxing escapades. Schnabel is no slouch with roller and stomper: he ran a close second, alone, in the circlemaking competition, and his 1992 creations were invariably authenticated. The evocative portrayal in *Round In Circles* of hoaxing as an almost mystical experience inspired at least one skeptic to take up his stomper and venture forth into the fields this summer; and it is inevitable that he will be accused of glamorising and inspiring what are, in the final analysis, acts of trespass and criminal damage. Circles researchers, as always touchingly enraged on behalf of the farming community, and not at all pursuing a vendetta, would like to see Schnabel and co. prosecuted; I would like to see them awarded a grant from the Arts Foundation.

*Round In Circles* is particularly devastating to the credibility of cerealogy because—faction apart—it lets cerealogists speak for themselves, thereby digging their own graves. The narrative is by turns breathless, gentle, lyrical, but rarely flippant, and always free of malice: in-

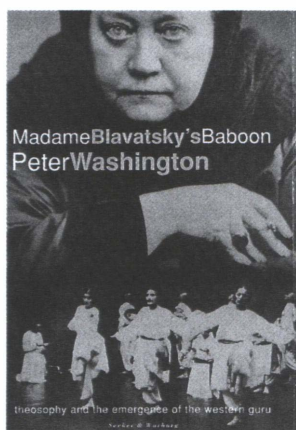


deed, Schnabel often exhibits considerable fondness for his characters, especially the meteorologist Terence Meaden, who is treated with what might be the kid gloves of the faint ideological adherent. It is an enjoyable read, and will appeal not just to those who have followed the circle saga with interest, but to all who relish a rip-roaring saga of human gullibility and folly, the thrill of the hunt, and, as Schnabel has it, the magic of art. I can unhesitatingly recommend it to all.

—Robin Allen

## Monkey business

Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (Secker & Warburg, 1993, 470pp, hbk, £20)



From Madame Blavatsky to such contemporary figures as George King (of the Aetherius Society) and David Icke (of Turquoise Tracksuits), many independent spiritual teachers have claimed authorisation from a body of superhuman figures—Ascended Masters (variously from Egypt, Tibet, Atlantis or Venus), Secret Chiefs, or (increasingly) Space Brothers,

who look after this planet in their wisdom. So, where do these ideas come from?

This fascinating and scholarly work (subtitled 'Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru' traces several aspects of the current New Age movement back to the middle of the last century, when modern science (including Darwin's theory of evolution) had seriously eroded the authority of traditional religion; new and unconventional sects abounded, together with esoteric traditions and Eastern religions, as large numbers of people sought wisdom from the most variegated sources.

Mr Washington shows how the legacies of Swedenborg, Mesmer, Spiritualism, and the Occult schools (the Rosicrucians, Templars, etc) blended with the newly-popular philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism to construct a worldview that would (it was hoped) reconcile Science with Spirit. Theosophy was the result, followed eventually by spin-offs such as Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and the Krishnamurti Movement, with parallel developments including the schools of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, and the Vedanta Movement in California.

The author also gives interesting details of Bennett, the Subud Movement, Idries Shah, and such organisations as the Summit Lighthouse and the Raelians (UFO contactees). Groups such as the Golden Dawn, the Maharishi's TM Movement, and the Rajneeshis, mentioned in passing, clearly fit the pattern he describes. He makes no attempt to judge the value of these cults, but simply presents the bare facts in a superbly erudite and humane fashion, and with a fairly straight face.

The Theosophical Society, founded on Madame Blavatsky's fraudulent psychic phenomena (including letters and manuscript passages 'materialised' by the Masters), was rent by factions with their own divergent metaphysical views. On the astral plane, C W Leadbetter's researches showed that everyone in the Society had incarnated as past celebrities, all related to each other in bizarre combinations—an idea similar to some of Arthur Guirdham's theories.

Two of the most sympathetic characters mentioned are Jiddu Krishnamurti and Swami Prabhavananda. Krishnamurti was adopted by Besant and Leadbetter as the coming World Teacher (his father sued in vain for repossession on grounds of deification), but he renounced both Theosophy and the Masters, and told his followers to find the truth within themselves. Prabhavananda (of the Los Angeles Vedanta Centre) hobnobbed on friendly terms with Auden, Huxley, Isherwood and other fascinating individuals. Some of the other gurus depicted seem quite unattractive, often living in luxury while their followers slaved in poverty.

The baboon of the title—stuffed, clothed and bespectacled—was known as Mr Fiske, after a prominent Darwinian professor, to show Blavatsky's contempt for orthodox science.

This is a splendid book for skeptics, and indeed for anyone interested in the human need to explain the cosmos in such unusual ways. Buy it, read it, and give copies to your friends!

—Mike Rutter

## New words for old thoughts

Paul Kurtz, *The New Skepticism: Inquiry and Reliable Knowledge* (Prometheus Books, 1992, 371pp, hbk, £21)

'An outgrowth of pragmatism, skeptical inquiry differs from earlier forms of skepticism' says the blurb, 'because its motivation is inquiry rather than doubt. Thus the new skepticism is constructive rather than negative.'

On this slim (if not dubious) basis, Paul Kurtz (the chairman of CSICOP) delivers himself of almost 400 pages of subject matter. Even a brief riffle through lets you know what you're in for. A trawl through philosophers of the past, from the ancient Greeks onwards ('A Historical Overview'). And headings such as 'Analytic Truths' 'Ontological Argument', 'Ethical Nihilism', and 'Knowledge as True Belief Intersubjectively Corroborated'. Anyone who has sauntered through even the fringes of philosophy has been here before, probably many times. And readers of Kurtz's previous writings will experience a particularly strong sense of déjà vu.

'The hypothesis that I have introduced is that there is an enduring "transcendental temptation" that entrances people to crave, to search for, and ultimately to believe in the reality of mysterious realms still unknown...'; 'There are powerful noncognitive urges within the human psychological makeup that make illusions and fantasies seem true...'; '...astrology remains popular because it resonates a responsive chord within the believer...'. Kurtz puts forward a number of such statements, apparently in the belief that they contain explanatory content.

When a writer claims that ordinary language is not rich enough to encompass his favoured concepts, it is all too often a sign that he intends to shelter behind some not-too-well-defined neologisms. Kurtz is clearly developing a liking for these. *Eupraxophy*: 'a well-grounded cosmic outlook and practical wisdom in conduct'; *Coduction*: 'to describe how the behavioral and social sciences now seek to understand human behavior in its various dimensions'; *Igtheism*: 'because the kind of theistic being discussed by theologians and philosophers is irreducibly unintelligible'.

He is also worryingly ambivalent about whether or not to dismiss any occult assertions at all out of hand: he is clearly nervous about appearing intolerant of even the most outlandish claims. 'There are still uncorroborated reports of dinosaurs in the Congo, of Yeti in the Himalayas, and of Bigfoot in the American Northwest. All of these reports need careful investigation. One cannot foreclose inquiry'. 'Thus we need to keep an open mind,' he says, 'willing to give a fair and impartial hearing to every responsible idea'. Alas, by slipping in the word 'responsible', Kurtz simultaneously begs the question and immunises his assertion against critical assessment. Sometimes he appears to be moving in opposite directions at the same time. 'There is no doubt that hypnosis can be a useful technique and can be used in many ways. It may help individuals remember otherwise forgotten experiences. It may also be useful in certain cases as a method of therapy.' But on the very next page, Kurtz acknowledges that psychologist Robert Baker, in his book *They Call It Hypnosis*, 'shows how unreliable hypnosis often is'.

About the most that the new skepticism will allow itself is a 'reflective *unbelief* about some claims that it finds lack adequate justification'. (The most that Kurtz can bring himself to say about the existence of angels is that it is 'highly unlikely'.) In fact, what Kurtz is openly skeptical about is hard-nosed skepticism: for example 'dogmatic or narrow-minded atheism and apar paranormalism'. (So now, if you use the word 'nonsense' you run the risk of being dubbed an apar paranormalist.)

This is not the book to recommend to a first-time enquirer on the subject—it is too heavy-handed for that, and there are many more interesting and enticing volumes to be had. Nor is it the book to recommend to anyone well-versed in skeptical matters; this is very much another stirring of the same porridge.

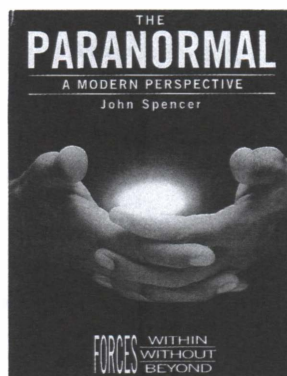
Paul Kurtz is without doubt on the side of the angels (even though he doesn't *quite* believe in them). I would just like to see his word processor put in for servicing for a while—a good while. Maybe by the time it comes back, he will have had time to consider fresh paths and new approaches.

—Lewis Jones

## A poor perspective

John Spencer, *The Paranormal: A Modern Perspective* (Hamlyn, 1992, 160 pp., hbk, £14.99)

'Sceptics should read pro-paranormal books...' I found I was repeating this to myself over and over again like a mantra as



I read this particular example. Sceptics will find reading good pro-paranormal books both challenging and informative (see, for example, Edge, Morris, Palmer, and Rush's *Foundations of Parapsychology*, 1986). Unfortunately, John Spencer's book is *not* a good pro-paranormal book. In fact, it is pretty awful. Having realized from the first few pages that this book was badly researched, I had the frustrating experience of having to finish reading it just so that I could write the promised review. At least it did not take more than a few hours, as much of the book consists of impressive, if not always relevant, colour photographs.

This book is essentially an unsystematic collection of observations and anecdotes which will appeal only to the most credulous and uninformed. Sceptical accounts are rarely referred to, even though there are few topics in the book, if any, that have not been the subject of sceptical consideration. One example of the sloppiness that characterizes Spencer's book occurs on page 10 where the author claims he is describing experiments conducted by Roger Sperry 'in the 1950s' on commissurotomy patients (in fact, the experiments were carried out from the early 1960s onwards, but we will let that pass). Such patients had undergone surgery in which the corpus callosum, the large nerve tract joining the two cerebral hemispheres together, had been severed as treatment for intractable epilepsy. Studies of such 'split-brain' patients led to an interest in the area of hemisphere specialisation of function which continues to this day. Here is Spencer's description:

Sperry showed one of these patients an apple to his left eye and an orange to his right and asked him what he had seen. He would verbally reply orange and write the word apple. Asked what he had written he would verbally reply 'orange'.

This is pure fiction and bears little resemblance to any experiment ever carried out by Sperry (or anyone else). For a start, presenting different stimuli to each eye would mean that *both* hemispheres would receive the stimulus information. Spencer seems to think that nerves from the right and left eyes project to opposite hemispheres. In fact, as any first year psychology student would tell you, the neuroanatomy of the visual system is such that each retina is divided into right and left visual fields. Each visual field projects information to the opposite side of the brain. Thus information presented in the right visual field will project to the left hemisphere and vice versa.

Even if we allow that Spencer might have intended to write 'visual fields', but had inadvertently written 'eyes', his description still makes no sense. The classic description of Sperry's early work would hold that patients asked to name an object in the right visual field could do so without hesitation because the information had been sent directly to the left hemisphere which is responsible for language expression. This would apply *both* to spoken *and* written responses (both of which are verbal, despite Spencer's implication to the contrary). If the stimulus was presented to



the left visual field, however, the patient would be unable to verbally identify it because the right hemisphere is essentially mute. The patient would, however, be able to identify the stimulus correctly by pointing to it with the left hand, because this response is under the control of the right hemisphere. It is impressive that Spencer could get so much wrong in three short sentences. Although this example does not relate directly to the paranormal, I knew I could not have any faith in the quality of any of his research from then on. Another example occurs on page 116:

One much mentioned coincidence which occurs is that two people of a party discover they have the same birthday. In fact probability theory indicates that this will happen if there are 23 people or more at the party...

No, John, probability theory shows that there is about a 50:50 chance that two people will share a birthday among a random selection of 23 people. To be 100% sure, you need to have 366 people (or 367 if you include leap years). I could list many further examples, but hopefully two will suffice.

Spencer has the usual ambivalent attitude toward science that characterizes proponents of the paranormal. Although he includes what he considers as scientific validation for his views wherever possible, he spends much of his time decrying science for what he sees as its limitations. On page 8 he informs the reader what science is: 'it is no more and no less than measurement'. And to think that silly billies like Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn spent so much time trying to figure out what science was! It is worth bearing in mind that the next time you buy a pint of beer or a pound of sausages that you are witnessing the totality of science: no more and no less. And just think how much more progress we will make now that we can forget all about hypothesis formation, theory building, data analysis and all that other nonsense.

Sceptics should read pro-paranormal books—but not this one.

—Christopher C French

## A supernatural tour

Jean Ritchie, *Inside the Supernatural: An Investigation into the Paranormal*, Fontana, 210pp., pbk, £5.99

There have been many books written with titles along the lines of *Inside the Supernatural: An Investigation into the Paranormal*, and when you have read a couple of these, reading any more is probably not worth the effort. There will be the same stories, the same stock photographs, the same wise words from the leading players in the paranormal game, and so on. But this book is a welcome exception.

Jean Ritchie is an established journalist who has previously written about, amongst other things, Myra Hindley and the Moors Murders, and religious cults (her *Secret World of Cults* was reviewed in *The Skeptic*, 5.5). What sets her book apart is that she writes from a strong personal curiosity, and while sometimes strongly skeptical, treats her subject matter, and her subjects, with respect. The approach she takes is more 'sociological' than 'scientific', in the sense that she bases her investigation on seeking out inter-

esting people and talking to them, rather than conducting a painstaking review of the extensive literature.

The book concentrates on the world of the paranormal in the UK, and covers a lot of ground: the Society for Psychical Research, poltergeist hunters, the experiments of Bob Morris at Edinburgh, Sue Blackmore on OBEs, physical mediumship in the 1990's, the New Age, Christianity and the paranormal, and, perhaps in print for the first time, the state of 'skeptical activity' in the country, including an interview with Steve Donnelly, co-editor of *The Skeptic*.

Jean Ritchie is refreshingly honest about her investigation, saying that she started the book as a 'dyed-in-the-wool' skeptic, but emerged far less certain that there were not phenomena which defied a scientific explanation. Following in her footsteps reading her book, I didn't share her 'conversion', but it is instructive to see how the same evidence can be multiply interpreted. But that apart, this is a well-written book that I would recommend.

Finally, I feel it is my duty to warn potential readers of a nervous disposition to exercise caution when referring to the photographic plates section. There lurks a rather gruesome picture of the editors of *The Skeptic*. It's not a pretty sight.

—Alan Smith

## More odd bods

William R Corliss (Editor), *Biological Anomalies: Humans-2* (The Sourcebook Project, PO Box 107, Glen Arm, MD 21057, USA, 1993, 292pp., hbk, \$19.95)

To regular readers of *The Skeptic*, William Corliss should need no introduction. For the uninitiated, however, Corliss is the hand behind the 'Sourcebook Project', based in Maryland, USA, which aims to 'classify the residuum—reports of phenomena which cannot currently be explained in terms of conventional scientific knowledge.

Corliss and his world-wide correspondents scour the scientific and popular literature for eye-witness reports of such discoveries and events, and the project produces meticulously indexed and cross-referenced catalogues, sourcebooks and handbooks, spread across many disciplines. There is also a regular newsletter, *Science Frontiers*. To date, Corliss has produced 29 volumes, with 10,000 pages of source material on scientific anomalies. A prodigious accomplishment!

His latest catalogue, *Biological Anomalies: Humans-2*, is his second to look at anomalous reports related to human physiology (the first volume was reviewed in *The Skeptic*, 6.4). The present volume covers Chemical and Physical Anomalies, Bodily Functions, Health, Internal Systems and Structures, and Organs. There is such a wealth of material covered here that it is impossible in this short review to give anything but the tiniest taster. We meet electric people who can generate large electrostatic voltages, magnetic people, an excellent survey of anomalous human combustion, corpses which do not decay, fiery breaths, anomalous objects in the stomach, male menstruation, extreme longevity, the remarkable capabilities of badly damaged brains, the similarity of human and bee eyes, the enigma of the fetal graft, phantom limbs, and so on and on.



What distinguishes Corliss's approach from many other collectors of the bizarre is his meticulous and informed research. More importantly, he doesn't appear to have fixed views of which reported anomaly is unlikely or not to be spurious. Using his 'data evaluation' and 'anomaly evaluation' scales we are constantly reminded that what we are reading is a set of 'reports' of anomalies, some of which may hold the seeds of revolutionary scientific ideas, and some of which are just plain daft.

To anyone even remotely interested in the strange business of being human, this book and its companion volume will delight, and amaze.

—John Yates

## Kidnapped by aliens

*Fire in the Sky*: The story of the abduction of Travis Walton by aliens. Now showing at a cinema near you.

*Fire in the sky* is not the sort of film title that gives much of the plot away. Indeed, when I sat down to watch it I hadn't the foggiest what it was going to be about. I must confess to a silent groan when it became apparent that the theme was alien abduction, and what is more, a true story at that.

The film is based on the book by Travis Walton, an alien abductee. Since I have not read the book I cannot comment on how accurately the film follows the book. The story begins with Travis, a member of a logging crew, cutting timber way out in the back-of-beyond USA. On returning home along a deserted track the crew see what appears to be a large ball of light hovering in the sky. All bar Travis are terrified by this, but the only thing stopping them driving away, is the fact that Travis has climbed out of the truck, and is marching, awe struck, towards the light. As he approaches it he is lit up by a beam of light and then flung backwards violently, appearing to all gathered as if something, or someone has killed him. At this point terror takes over and the logging crew make a bee-line for civilisation.

Conscience gets the better of Travis's best buddy, and when he returns a few minutes later, there is no Travis and no fire in the sky. The crew return to town resolved to tell the truth and say what they saw. This opens up a jumbo sized can of worms. The local police are sceptical, Travis's family are incensed, the local populace turn against the men convinced that they have murdered Travis, and the media circus sniffing out a good juicy alien abduction story, roll up for a field day. The failure of repeated police searches to find the missing man all adds fuel to the fire.

Much of the plot centres around the effect the disappearance has on the those who saw him knocked down by the light in the sky. Throughout, the men are dogged by a persistent police detective, who is convinced that they have murdered Travis and are spinning a web of deceit to cover their tracks. As a study into the psychology of a small community exposed to the glare of sensational publicity as a consequence of the alleged misdeeds of some of its inhabitants, I found the film worked well. Friends rapidly donned the mantle of Brutus, and were prepared to attribute all manner of misdeeds to the logging crew. Perhaps it is a salutary lesson to us all. If you want to find out who your

real friends are, tell them that you have seen some strange and unexplained phenomenon do away with someone. Your real friends are the ones who call you nuts to your face.

The murder hunt is finally abandoned when, after five days Travis, like ET, calls home. Naked and strangely bruised, cowering like a frightened animal, Travis is found in a bad state. Only when he is convalescing at home do we get an insight into the crux of the mystery. Through horrific flash-backs Travis remembers his alleged ordeal as a human guinea pig at the hands of alien creatures. The ranks of antivivisectionists could well be swelled after people watch this. Genuinely scary was my opinion, although an acquaintance who had read the book did intimate that some artistic licence was at play here.

There are no conclusions drawn for the viewer, and anyone expecting a definitive answer to the 'Do aliens abduct people?' question, may find this film thin gruel. The closing titles mention that ten years later, all the witnesses took lie-detector tests to clarify some ambiguous results from tests taken at the time of the event. All tests conclusively showed the respondents to be telling the truth. It wasn't mentioned however, that the quality of memory, unlike that of fine wine, does not improve with ageing. Personally, I remain unconvinced that what the men saw was an alien ship. My interpretation is that Travis walked into the electric field of some phenomenon like St Elmo's Fire or ball lightning. Stunned by the shock he stumbled through the woods dazed and confused until he happened upon civilisation again. Watch the film and make up your own mind.

—Dave Mitchell

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# Letters



## No value in meditation

I'm afraid that I find the recent discussion about meditation in *The Skeptic* remarkably unenlightening. While some might feel that meditation is conducive to inner peace, others might, with equal justification, claim that drinking at the pub is even better for that purpose.

One has to ask: what scientific question can we pose about meditation? An obvious one is: has it *specific* positive effects, e.g., as a psychotherapeutic tool? All the evidence that I am aware of shows that this is not the case and the commentators in the last issue don't even advance this claim. Of course, some people will always say that it makes them feel so much better, but this is also true for homoeopathy, the primal scream, and so forth.

Another possible question is: what are the dangers? This would appear to be the issue of concern to Arthur Chappell (*The Skeptic*, 7.2). However, he was reminded by the other commentators that this is not always so. True, but so what? If I write an article about the danger of social drinking leading to alcoholism and someone reminds me that for him drinking is a harmless pleasure, this hardly refutes my statistical claim.

The point is not that one wants to forbid someone the joys of meditation in his own bedroom (in case he has nothing better to do there); the point is rather, can we recommend meditation as an alternative way of studying 'mind', which could add something worthwhile to the methods of scientific psychology? The claim that there is some independent value in non-problem-solving introspection of any kind is, I believe, highly dubious. A corollary is that such a practice has no place in psychotherapy because it is useless at best and iatrogenic at worst. I find myself agreeing with Wim Betz (*Euroskeptics Proceedings* 1991, p.48) when he remarks: 'I for myself

intend to demand that gemmotherapy and oenotherapy (treatment by precious stones and by good wine) be made available to me, expenses paid by the National Health Insurance'.

Gerald Huber  
Schieling, Germany

## Typography and Burt

Thank you for your errata and apology (*The Skeptic* 7.3), but I fear the errata needs an erratum! The reference to the fourth paragraph should be to the fourth *from the end*.

Burt's work on typography (Donald Rooum's letter, *The Skeptic*, 7.3) is very peripheral to his main work. He became interested in the subject very early, when concern arose about the effect of the printing of textbooks on children's reading. While he was psychologist to the LCC he and the medical research officer carried out some tests. Much later he produced 'A psychological study of typography' (with two other authors who would presumably have had to be in on any deception) in *The British Journal of Statistical Psychology* in 1955, a book of the same title (Cambridge University Press, 1959), and a contribution to the 1960 *Year Book of Education*. It seems possible that, as with his publications on twins, the conclusions were mainly based on data collected long before.

While one can see that Burt might have had motives to falsify work in his main field it's hard to see why he might have done so in typography where it would have done little to enhance his reputation, and where his concern would presumably be genuinely to reach accurate conclusions. How could he have made useful recommendations without data, and what would have been the point of simply making them up? Burt's enormous erudition in psychology might well have enabled him to fool others, even in the same field, but it's

hard to believe he could have done so in another area where others were more knowledgeable than he.

I don't recall receiving the offprints Donald Rooum says he sent (I've no idea to which address he may have sent them and so far as I know he knew none at which I might be contacted), but if he would now like to send them again, and any other relevant material I would be glad to see it.

Ray Ward  
Sheffield

## OBEs and endorphins

The interview with Susan Blackmore (*The Skeptic*, 7.3) encapsulated very well the ingenious physiological explanation Susan gives to account for the Near Death/Out of Body Experience.

She has always been very careful not to diminish the sense of 'but it seemed so *real*' accounts that people give when describing the sensations they experience. I don't think that her explanation to this point can account for the very real sensation of movement that those who describe such experiences give.

Endorphin release in the brain doesn't seem quite enough to account for the sense of movement in a 'floating above the body' or 'going down a tunnel' experience. Nevertheless the empirical proof of actually reaching a target via an out-of-the-body trip has so far proved elusive, so Susan's explanation has to have the upper hand ... meantime.

Michael Ross  
Peterhead

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