

the skeptic

VOLUME 25, NO 4

SUMMER 2005

A JOURNAL OF FACT AND OPINION

Descent with Modification through Natural Selection

EVOLUTION



Hey Presto

INTELLIGENT DESIGN

SPINA BIFIDA TSUNAMI HIV TORNADO EBOLA
EARTHQUAKE BIRD FLU VOLCANIC ERUPTION

Who designed these?

the Skeptic

Vol 25, No 4
Summer 2005

ISSN 0726-9897

Editor

Barry Williams

Contributing Editors

Tim Mendham
Steve Roberts

Technology Consultants

Richard Saunders/ Eran Segev

Chief Investigator

Ian Bryce

All correspondence to:

Australian Skeptics Inc
PO Box 268
Roseville NSW 2069
Australia
(ABN 90 613 095 379)

Contact Details

Tel: (02) 9417 2071
Fax: (02) 9417 7930

e-mail: skeptics@bdsn.com.au

Web Pages

Australian Skeptics
www.skeptics.com.au
No Answers in Genesis

<http://home.austarnet.com.au/stear/default.htm>

the Skeptic is a journal of fact and opinion, published four times per year by Australian Skeptics Inc. Views and opinions expressed in articles and letters in *the Skeptic* are those of the authors, and are not necessarily those of Australian Skeptics Inc. Articles may be reprinted with permission and with due acknowledgement to *the Skeptic*.

Editorial consultants:

Dr Stephen Basser (medicine)
Dr Trevor Case (psychology)
Dr Richard Gordon (medicine)
Dr Pete Griffith (biochemistry/microbiology)
Dr William Grey (philosophy)
Prof Colin Groves (anthropology)
Mr Martin Hadley (law)
Dr Colin Keay (astronomy)
Dr Mark Newbrook (linguistics)
Dr Andrew Parle (physics)
Prof Ian Plimer (geology)
Dr Stephen Moston (psychology)
Dr Alex Ritchie (palaeontology)
Dr Steve Roberts (chemistry)
Mr Roland Seidel (mathematics)

Branch correspondents:

ACT: Dr Pete Griffith
Gold Coast: Mr John Stear
Hunter: Dr Colin Keay
Qld: Mr Bob Bruce
SA: Mr Allan Lang
Tas: Mr Fred Thornett
Vic: Mr Ken Greatorex
WA: Dr Geoff Dean

Contents

Regulars

- ◆ 3 – Editorial: Intelligence Failure — *Barry Williams*
- ◆ 4 – Around the Traps — *Bunyip*
- ◆ 65 – Letters
- ◆ 70 – Notices

Features

- ◆ 6 - Intelligent Design? Only a Man Would Think so — *Loretta Marron*
- ◆ 9 - Digging Up the Bible — *Mark Lawson*
- ◆ 12 - Liberal Literalists — *Dan Stewart*
- ◆ 14 - Humbug: Competitive Corporate Uni Culture — *Jef Clark*
- ◆ 20 - Why Moon Planting Works — *Jackie French*
- ◆ 22 - Enough to Raise the Dead — *Brian Baxter*
- ◆ 25 - New Guise for an Old Idea — *Helen Lawrence*
- ◆ 28 - The Winchester Mystery House of San Jose — *Karen Stollznow*
- ◆ 33 - The Phone Call — *Kevin McCready*
- ◆ 36 - A Skeptic's Search for God: Pt 2 — *Martin Hadley*
- ◆ 41 - News: Little Pebble Rocked — *Wally Anglesea*
- ◆ 42 - Interviewing the Alien — *Stephen Moston*
- ◆ 44 - Doing the Sums — *Peter Bowditch*
- ◆ 46 - Food Myth: Food Additives Cause Allergies — *Glenn Cardwell*
- ◆ 48 - Why Is It So? — *John Stear*
- ◆ 50 - Lutec Move to Planet X — *Ian Bryce*
- ◆ 54 - Letter from Nigeria: The Wages of Fraud — *Leo Igwe*
- ◆ 56 - Magic Water: The Stuff of Life — *Pete Griffith*
- ◆ 59 - Forum: Design Flaw — *David Goss*
- ◆ 61 - Review: Meeting the Ancestors. — *Fred Thornett*
- ◆ 62 - Review: Goat Watching. — *Rob Hardy*
- ◆ 64 - Memoi: According to Hoyle. — *Tony Heyes*

Cover art by Charles Rose of Cogency

Skeptics around Australia

New South Wales

Australian Skeptics Inc
PO Box 268
Roseville NSW 2069
Tel: (02) 9417 2071
Fax: (02) 9417 7930
skeptics@bdsn.com.au

Hunter Skeptics

PO Box 166
Waratah NSW 2298
Tel: (02) 4957 8666
Fax: (02) 4952 6442

Victoria

Australian Skeptics (Vic) Inc
GPO Box 5166AA
Melbourne VIC 3001
Tel: 1 800 666 996
Fax: 03 9531 6705
contact@skeptics.com.au

ACT

Canberra Skeptics
PO Box 555
Civic Square ACT 2608
(02) 6231 5406 or 6296 4555
act@skeptics.com.au

Queensland

Australian Skeptics (Qld)
PO Box 6454
Fairfield Gardens QLD 4103
Tel: (07) 3255 0499
qskeptic@uq.net.au
Qskeptics eGroup
(To subscribe send blank message to:
qskeptics-subscribe@yahoo.com)

Gold Coast Skeptics

PO Box 8348
GCMC Bundall QLD 4217
Tel: (07) 5593 1882
Fax: (07) 5593 2776
LMDEERRICK@bigpond.com

South Australia

Skeptics SA
PO Box 377
Rundle Mall SA 5000
Tel: (08) 8272 5881
Fax: (08) 8272 5881
laurie_eddie@senet.com.au

Western Australia

WA Skeptics
22 Esperance Street
East Victoria Park WA 6101
Tel: (08) 9448 8458
wa.skeptics@australiainmail.com

Tasmania

Australian Skeptics in Tasmania
PO Box 582
North Hobart TAS 7000.
Tel: (03) 6234 1458
sharples@netspace.net.au

Northern Territory

Darwin Skeptics
PO Box 809
Sanderson NT 0812
Tel: (08) 8932 2194
Fax: (08) 8932 7553
dwnskept@ais.net.au

Borderline Skeptics

PO Box 17
Mitta Mitta VIC 3701
Tel: (02) 6072 3632
skeptics@wombatgully.com.au

Intelligence Failure

Few Skeptics would be unaware of the Intelligent Design movement that emerged in recent years in the USA, and is now being promoted for schools in Australia by evangelical Christian groups. Touted as a new alternative scientific explanation of how all life on Earth emerged and diversified, it seeks to explain the alleged gaps in evolutionary theory by proposing a designer. In fact it is none of those things — it is not new, it is not scientific, nor does it explain anything.

More accurately it can be described as a legalistic attempt to avoid the US constitutional requirement for the separation of church and state. Ever since Darwin published his revolutionary works on the origin of species, Christian (and other) fundamentalists have argued to deny the reality of evolution. The case relies on a naive literalist interpretation of *Genesis*, which requires a belief that the universe was created in six, twenty-four hour days, around 6,000 years ago, and for almost all life to have been wiped out in a global flood some 5,000 years ago. This is an extraordinary proposition for which no scientific (nor any other) evidence exists.

Undaunted, for the last half-century, creationists sought to prosecute their case by using a stratagem they styled ‘scientific creationism’, by misusing scientific terms, though not adopting scientific techniques. However, every time this notion has been tested in the US courts, it has been declared to be a religious belief and not a scientific theory at all. Hardly surprising, given that nowhere in the corpus of creationist literature is there any evidence in its favour; it simply seeks, ineffectually, to invent problems with evolution. It scarcely requires the forensic skills of someone learned in the law to see creation ‘science’ for what it is — naive religious dogma.

So we come to Intelligent Design. If the US courts persist in seeing religion as religion, how is the problem to be overcome? What emerged was a pastiche of creationist dogma, but substituting any mention of a deity with the phrase ‘intelligent designer’, and by largely resiling from the old-style creationist reliance on the Genesis timeline. While this subterfuge has attracted barely any support in the scientific community, it nevertheless has found more favour with some lawyers and, by extension, politicians. As a sop to the secular, ID proponents claim that the ‘designer’ need not necessarily be divine, it could simply be a highly advanced alien being. An indication of the sham nature of this subterfuge can be seen in the reaction of creationist fundamentalists to it. By its retreat from the more obviously religious claims of creation ‘science’ (for legalistic reasons) one would have thought that ID would have found no favour with hard-line creationists. However, a check of their recent writings reveals that many of them have accepted ID, despite its seeming flexibility on dating etc. Strange behaviour from those who hitherto have insisted on their interpretation as being the exact Word of God and who have, presumably, staked their immortal souls on it.

At the heart of ID is the notion of “irreducible complexity”. This holds that some of the mechanisms that make up living organisms are so complex (and need to be so for them to work) that they simply couldn’t have arisen by change through natural selection (evolution) from simpler structures. This idea itself is not new, it is simply a rehash of the old “God of the Gaps” argument, used since before Darwin’s time. Simply put, this attributes to God anything about the natural world that science has not yet explained. The blatant flaw in this argument is that, as scientific

knowledge expands, the gaps, and thus logically the role of God, gets smaller. While this might pose no problem for the naive or unlearned who are the prey of fundamentalists, no less an authority than the Catholic Church, has come out firmly against the idea of ID as a scientific explanation. Furthermore, evidence is emerging that even quite conservative Protestant groups in the US are now also backing away from support.

Ultimately, irreducible complexity amounts to arguing from personal incredulity, ie “I can’t understand how this structure could have arisen naturally, therefore it must have been designed.” This is the sort of mindset that leads people, seeing a light in the sky they can’t immediately identify, to conclude it must be a scout ship for an Arcturan invasion fleet. In fact, the whole argument is a *non sequitur*.

It also involves a circular argument. If, as is claimed, some biological structures are too complex to have evolved naturally, therefore demanding a designer, the obvious question is: “Who, then, designed the designer?” This sort of debate has kept theologians and philosophers in gainful employment for centuries, but no plausible answer has yet emerged. An infinite regression of designers answers nothing and any other answer is simply a matter of faith, not of evidence or logic and certainly not of science.

If we were designed, why do we carry so many obvious design faults around with us? This, and other flaws in the design argument, are canvassed at length by several writers in this issue.

Our perspective is that if we must have a designer, then the evidence suggests to that the most likely culprit is a committee. No other answer seems even vaguely plausible.

Barry Williams

Around the Traps

Cretionism its own parody

Our thanks to Mike Archer, Dean of Science at UNSW, who alerted us to a site:objectiveministries.org/creation/projectpterosaur.html,

which claims to be mounting an expedition to locate and retrieve “living specimens of pterosaurs or their fertile eggs” to be placed in a proposed Creation Science Museum. In the fine tradition of creationist enterprises, a primary purposes of this mission is to raise funds, but given no evidence that they have developed a time machine, we can only wish them the best of luck.

However, being of a skeptical bent, we suspect this site is probably intended to be satirical. One clue, the founder is named as Dr Richard Paley, and William Paley was the 18th Century naturalist who first proposed the “watchmaker argument” in support of divine creation.

But it isn't always easy to tell; satirists, in seeking to caricature something, try to follow existing illogical ideas to their logically valid conclusion. In that enterprise, creation ‘science’ claims, by their innately irrational nature, are virtually immune to satirical treatment. Without great effort it is extremely difficult to distinguish ‘genuine’ creationist writings from their parodies. And, we suspect, if salvation of the immortal soul is the aim, either would be equally efficacious.

I wanna watch

Like most other Skeptics who are connected to the Internet, we have been plagued over the years by manifold offers of Nigerian millions, cheap pharmaceuticals, and methods of extending our sexual lives or equipment. Suitable filtering seems to have inhibited the entry of such matter into the Bunyip's burrow to a large degree, but they now appear to have been replaced with interminable offers of cheap ‘replica’ Rolex watches.

As the Bunyip has managed to get through several decades of life owning only four or five watches in total, each of which has been less expensive even than the cheapest Replilex, we wonder what motivates this campaign.

A taste of honey

Coincidence is a funny old thing, as our Esteamed Editor (Barry Williams) discovered recently.

In a local corner shop he was confronted by a jar bearing the name “Skep Honey”. Intrigued, he bought some and on further reading of the label, discovered that it had been produced at Barrie Close, Williamtown (just out of Newcastle).

His curiosity aroused by this series of coincidences, he rang the manufacturer to find out the relevance of ‘Skep’

to honey (it's what the old fashioned conical hives were called), to tell the producers they would be getting a mention in the next issue of *the Skeptic*, and to offer them a free copy of the journal.

Janet answered the phone; she was amused by the coincidence and said her husband David, who was out, would also find it amusing. To ensure he got the correct name for the freebie, he inquired as to her surname. “Gordon”, she replied — just like our committee member and former President, Richard of that ilk.

To further stretch the coincidence, the Ed spent six years in the late 1960s at the RAAF base at Williamtown, and Dr Gordon is a native Novocastrian.

And it's very good honey too.

Crash of suit

Skeptics will be relieved to hear a report that a Russian court recently disallowed a \$300 million damages claim against NASA. It seems that Marina Bai, a Russian astrologer, tried to sue the space agency after it crashed a scientific probe into the comet, Tempel 1, on July 4 this year. Marina reckoned the crash would upset the “natural balance of forces in the universe” and infringed on her “spiritual and life values”. Who could argue with that?

The report makes no mention of a Russian judge collapsing in mirth.

Fishy story

Assiduous readers of the Skeptic might recall various references to the Age of Fishes Museum located at Canowindra in central-western NSW. In 1955 a road worker discovered fossils while widening a road in the area. In 1993, Dr Alex Ritchie of the Australian Museum explored the site and found that the deposit consisted of vast quantities of fish from the Devonian Period, some 360 million years ago. The way in which so many fossils, of many species, were found in close proximity, suggests that a large body of water had gradually dried up during a drought, trapping tens of thousands of fish in a small area.

As one of the largest deposits of fossils from this period ever discovered, this became a very important world palaeontological site, containing many different species, some of which had never previously been seen. Included were several varieties of armoured fishes, common in the Devonian but no longer in existence, and a variety of 'lobe finned' fish, direct ancestors of the amphibians that first colonised the land, leading through the evolutionary process to the full panoply of land vertebrates, including us.

Alex conceived of the idea of building a museum at Canowindra, canvassed and received support from local, state and federal governments, then sought sponsors to assist in the work. Over a decade the Age of Fishes Museum took shape, standing as a tribute to the enthusiastic dedication of many people, but principally Alex Ritchie.

When recently the Museum planned for further expansion, it sought donations from interested parties. Because of its importance to the history of life on Earth, both as a scientific site and as an educational institution, the Australian Skeptics Science and Education Foundation decided to



The original Canowindra site

make a donation of \$10,000 to assist with the work.

On the last weekend in September a group of Skeptics travelled to Canowindra to present a cheque to the grateful museum board, and to participate in the various activities organised by the staff. At one fossil site outside the town, joining other volunteers, the younger Skeptics could be seen keeping up with the Indiana Joneses by chipping away at fossil deposits, while the more mature members took a contemplative approach to palaeontology, sitting on comfortable seats under shady umbrellas.

For readers who are looking for an interesting and educational view into deep history, we can thoroughly recommend a visit the Age of Fishes Museum www.ageoffishes.org.au/aofm.htm in the very pleasant country town of Canowindra. One tip, it is pronounced Can-noun-dra — ignore the 'win'.



Example of the mass of fish involved

New Award

After eight years of fruitful and harmonious association with the Australian Museum Eureka Prizes, Australian Skeptics has decided to withdraw from sponsorship. While we still regard the Eureka Prizes as a most important showcase for Australian science, increasing administration costs and the very growth of the number of Eureka Prizes has caused our small association to reconsider how best to spend our sponsorship funds.

We have decided to institute a new Australian Skeptics Prize, broadly couched in generally similar terms to our Eureka Critical Thinking Prize:

awarded for work that investigates conventional wisdoms and beliefs that owe little or nothing to the rigours of scientific method and that promotes rational thinking in the community and in the education of young people.

The prize is designed to encourage the rigorous and critical investigation of issues, ideas and/or beliefs that have no rational basis - in effect, skeptical analysis of pseudoscientific claims - to promote rational thinking in the community and education system.

Details are yet to be fully worked out, and we welcome input from all Skeptics as to what the prize should be called, fine tuning of the conditions, ways of publicising its existence, etc.

Our initial thought is to present the first award in conjunction with the Skeptics Annual Convention Dinner, to be held in Melbourne in November 2006, and we will probably make it a feature of future dinners.

Your views are welcome.

Bunyip

Intelligent Design: Only a Man Would Think So!

In the 'design debate', the evidence finds intelligence in short supply

Dedicated to men who stick by their wives through thin and thick.

The female plumbing system provides gilt-edged evidence of the complete absence of design, intelligent or otherwise! And as for the male plumbing system, what sort of designer would put the sewer pipe right through the middle of a playground?

Rosemary Sceats, Macleod, Victoria
The Age 11/08/2005

I'm sitting alone in an unfamiliar food court, feeling totally worn out. I'm wearing a newly acquired baggy shirt over shapeless slacks that are held up by a hideous elasticised waistband. I now realise, with my thickening girth, that contains those recently gained extra kilos, defying all my aerobic and dietary attempts to remove, that it seems I will never return to my former Size 10 dimensions, and I need to accept my fate and change my wardrobe to include more of these senior-type, ugly but very accommodating garments. On my feet are flat-heeled and very comfortable slip-on shoes to hide my swollen feet. As I start sipping my much-needed cappuccino, I start to come to life and I find that I have stumbled into one of those ritzy high-rise apartment blocks at Surfers Paradise that uses its ground floor as a shopping mall and food dispensary. To my delight, in front of me is a life-size replica of

Michelangelo Buonarroti's statue of David in all his naked glory.

My senses are soon heightened by a much-needed caffeine fix. Inspired by the beauty of the youthful David's smooth and muscular alabaster limbs before me, I contemplate the concept of Intelligent Design. If I raise my eyes from his obvious centrally located talent, I can see that the handsome curly-haired David looks a little like a hairdresser I once went to who gave me fashion advice, but that shouldn't be surprising: after all, we all know about Michelangelo's taste in partners, don't we? Anyway, I'm not writing this to talk about hairstyles and shoes: I'm going to talk about plumbing that on this magnificent statue has been lovingly carved and is beautifully displayed.

So what has plumbing to do with Intelligent Design, you might ask? Let me spend the rest of this article slotting in a few statistics so you can appreciate that female plumbing could only be considered as 'intelligent' if you have a cruel side to your nature; or, perhaps like Michelangelo, you don't particularly care for women, or you hate your wife, mother and daughters.

Prior to joining the Skeptics and changing your magazine selection to include at least one that stimulates your intellect, over the years, seven out of eight of you blokes reading this article would have spent consid-



Loretta Marron is a science graduate and businesswoman, who, in her secret guise as Jelly Bean Lady, fights for Truth, Justice and Responsible Healthcare. See her website: www.healthinformation.com.au

erable time eyeballing the magnificent assets of many young, naked, curvy women in the centrefold of what are referred to as 'adult' magazines. For some of you, these centre-fold girls may have been part of your early sexual experiences when you were alone in your bedroom after you discovered your dad's secret magazine stash hidden behind the paint cans in the garage. This article is not about you, but about the life of a young woman with similar large-breasted, narrow-hipped assets (who seem to be preferred by males) as we follow her development from puberty onwards. Just to ensure that we are thinking about the same shape, let us call our darling 'Barbie'.

The journey begins

Our little princess starts life as the shining star in her doting parents' lives, a sweet child with golden curls and a happy disposition. When Barbie hits her teens she nicely fills out her short, close-fitting T-shirts and causes great distress in the young boys when she 'struts her stuff', displaying her lovely long suntanned limbs that flow out of her tight, tiny shorts. On many occasions, the sound of footsteps can be heard late at night, as stained sheets and underpants are clumsily hidden in the bottom of family's laundry basket by the bristle-chinned, pimply-faced, greasy-haired and unwashed boys who know and dream about our innocent and lovely teenage Barbie as she passes what is politely called the childbearing age of around 12 years.

Here I will start with the statistics. For the next 35 years, when not pregnant, she will have spent a total of up to six years wearing hygiene products. She will also have spent an additional four years with pre-menstrual tension (PMT), when she will experience major mood swings, while bracing herself white-knuckled and doubled over during agonising and debilitating stomach cramps, accompanied by daily unrelenting migraines, just to name a few of her regular monthly symptoms.

A few years later, it seems our

teenage Barbie finds, after testing out the springs in the back seat of her boyfriend's car once too often, that she needs to get married. Fortunately the young man, who has been lucky enough to convince our girl that she cannot live without him, does the right thing by her and we see Barbie in a loose-fitting, off-the-shoulder beige dress, watched closely by her father, holding the sweaty palms and staring lovingly at her perspiring, very white-faced, glazed-eyed husband-to-be, exchanging vows, assisted by a hastily appointed marriage celebrant. This happy event happens a few months before she is due at the maternity ward at her local hospital.

Reproducing - as God intended?

Now Barbie can't get off her egg to stretch her legs and go for a walk as sitting chickens do, nor can she look into her pouch like a kangaroo, because she carries her developing fetus within her body. Barbie's fertilised egg has attached itself like a parasite to the inside of her womb, where it sucks out young Barbie's blood and exchanges all sorts of other bodily fluids that cause a variety of, usually negative reaction, hormone surges, between regular sessions of kick-boxing practice. Meanwhile, Barbie has spent the first three months or more of her pregnancy with daily episodes of putting her head inside the nearest toilet bowl, looking at the regurgitated contents of the ice cream and pickled onions of her previous meal, or lying on her bed staring at her swollen legs and enlarged DD-sized breasts.

As the months progress, our Barbie now waddles, because unlike her four-legged mammalian ancestors, she has to walk upright while carrying her expanding curves. As her shape starts to include a monstrous protruding belly, she pushes her shoulders back so that she can avoid falling flat on her pretty face. Her back and swollen breasts ache all the time from the extra weight and size, and she is often unhappy with both her appearance and the hormones being constantly

pumped around her blood system that seem determined to make her young life a misery.

It is not long before young Barbie is spending a week in the maternity ward, three days of which are spent huffing, puffing and screaming in agony, and the remaining four days being spent in a drug-induced daze, watching hospital staff run around as they bring our girl back to life. Our princess wanted a natural birth, but those slim hips could not be wrenched apart enough for the giant head of her newborn, so the new mother has a few stitches on her tummy. One can't help thinking of the movie *Alien*, can one?

Fortunately, a new set of hormones kicks in, and Barbie leaves the hospital with her healthy and hungry bundle of joy, accompanied by her doting and delighted husband, to start family life in the suburbs.

When an animal has an offspring, there are no nappies to change and they can usually already walk or swim, so what went wrong with Barbie's baby? It seems that evolution has had to find a balance between the stretch of a woman's hips and a human baby's head size. During our evolution we have grown a large brain, so if a baby keeps developing inside the mother, it will not fit through the birth canal, and both the mother and child will die, so after nine months we eject a darling little creature that is totally dependant on us and will remain so for many months to come.

So why didn't women evolve with hips as wide as a cow's backside? Dare I suggest that the male preference for our Barbie's lovely shape over the past million plus years may have pushed her development in that direction? Sexual selection for skinny hips? I'm not saying you blokes are to blame, but to be fair, I think you should keep an open mind to that possibility. Of course, it may also have been natural selection, in that evolution narrowed the human frame so we could avoid becoming some carnivore's dinner, as this shape may have helped us run that little bit faster.

Intelligent Design?

As the years go by, Barbie produces four beautiful children before she sends her beloved off for the big snip. That is a total of three years where our girl is forced to regularly look inside the toilet bowl while suffering from backache and all sorts of mood-changing hormonal surges typical of pregnancy, sometimes with a dose of post-natal depression and other unkind birth-related issues thrown in for good measure. Our princess doesn't complain: she has a healthy family and her children are soon growing up without too many trips to the school principal's office, and as the years go by, they turn into fine young adults.

Beginning of the end?

Now Barbie hits the mid-40's, and the dreaded menopause kicks in. Sometimes Barbie is so moody that her family has described her as imitating Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, and they keep expecting her head to "spin around several times, eyes rolling backwards, while she vomits green slime"; they are sure that on these occasions she may have been possessed by evil spirits and so they send her to her bedroom for some 'quiet time'. Other times Barbie finds herself contemplating suicide, or feels sad and lonely and she keeps forgetting what she is doing or where she puts things. On the really bad days she even hates her family. Her nipples also seem to be racing each other to see which one gets past her waist first, she can't seem to stop putting on weight, and when she showers herself she notices that her once beautiful pubic bush has all but disappeared. Making love with her husband has also become quite painful, she cries a lot of the time, and she doesn't know why.

With menopause, her hormones are on another roller coaster ride, and now she finds that she has to change her perspiration-soaked bed linen several times each night, as she seems to have inherited a common and debilitating condition they call 'hot flashes'. How long this condition will last, no one can tell her, so she just has to 'get used to it' or

start swallowing buckets of unfriendly medication just to get through each day. On several occasions she has thought about throwing herself into the frozen veggies freezer at the supermarket, but her beloved comes to her rescue with the installation of a bedroom air conditioning unit, set permanently to 17 degrees, so she can get at least a few hours' sleep between her nightly midnight-to-dawn sessions of insomnia. Meanwhile, the constantly tired and sometimes incoherent Barbie cannot bear to wear anything but a flimsy cotton night shift, so her dutiful husband sleeps next to her both summer and winter, rugged up in warm fleecy pyjamas and thick bed socks, and to the best of their knowledge, this may go on for many years to come.

Where's the intelligence?

Intelligent design? Over one-third of Barbie's adult life has 'female issues', so to speak, and I haven't even begun to mention the occasions during her life when she finds herself sitting sad-faced and cross-legged at her local medical centre with frequent attacks of the bacterial urinary tract infection cystitis. As her doctor explained to her, that's because her plumbing outlets are too close together. Or the times she requires medication to treat thrush, the excruciatingly itchy vaginal fungal infection that she gets from time to time. Sometimes she suffers simultaneously from both infections, and she wishes she could trade in her troublesome nether regions for a better-behaved set. Nor have I mentioned her latest discussions with her doctor who tells her she is one of the 10% of women who have endometriosis, a condition where the tissue that normally lines the uterus is growing in other areas in her body, causing excessively heavy menstruation, as well as pain during this and other normal bodily functions. She will have to undergo a hysterectomy, or she will continually live with the inconvenience, discomfort, pain and distressing side-effects caused by this debilitating affliction. Or per-

haps she needs a hysterectomy because she suffers from fibroids, benign uterine tumours that cause prolonged and excessively heavy menstrual periods lasting up to two weeks, that are already forcing her to replace her super-absorbing hygiene products five times daily for several days out of every month. She may be spending anywhere from 50% to 100% of her life bleeding. She wonders if her husband will still love her when her womanhood is taken from her.

As a woman who is aware of Barbie's plight, and has first-hand experience in many of her ailments, I cannot think of anything about my plumbing design that is remotely intelligent. I get angry when I hear men talk about this topic, because there is something very unfortunate about the female reproductive and urinary systems that causes us so much pain, discomfort and inconvenience. So I say to you, as I look up to the statue of David while sitting on my own thickening derriere and devouring my small and tasteless lettuce and tomato salad, holding a fork in one hand, with an energetic wrist waving a fan in the other, I believe that God was either a sadist when he designed women, or evolution did the best it could but made a few mistakes in natural selection.

If you blokes reading this don't believe me, ask your wives what it is really like to be a woman, and I'm sure they will love you a little more if you make some extra time to listen.

Footnote:

GST legislation excludes sanitary napkins and tampons from the GST-free list of medical, pharmaceutical and therapeutic goods, as they are not regarded as medical necessities, but as hygiene aids/toiletries. However this same GST-free list includes condoms, allegedly because these recreational devices are a preventive medicine product. Can someone please explain that to our women?



Digging Up the Bible

Things in the Bible that ain't necessarily so



Mark Lawson is a journalist who has been on the Australian Financial Review too long for his own good. He also spent 11 years at an Anglican church school and has the scars to prove it.

In *Genesis* Eve tempts Adam with an apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, forbidden to them by God, which Adam eats and thereby loses his innocence. God becomes angry with the first couple for defying his orders and throws them out of the Garden of Eden, so that thereafter they must make their own way in the world.

As hardly needs to be said the story is unlikely to be literally true but the symbolism is both compelling and, on a deeper level, holds a truth. Humanity has eaten of the fruit from the tree of knowledge and there is no going back. We must prod and poke, and explain, and in the process we lose our wide-eyed wonder of the world about us. We know too much about how it works.

Archeological exploration

Archeologists have now done considerable prodding and poking of the first few books of the Bible, which includes the tale of Adam and Eve, by undertaking extensive surveys of the Holy Land — mostly what is now Israel — and those findings have been synthesised into a completely new history of ancient Israel by archeologist Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University and Neil Asher Silberman, a Belgian historian and contributing editor to *Archeology* magazine.

In their book, *The Bible Unearthed* (Touchstone, 2002), these two distinguished scholars say that the Jewish religion emerged in the late eighth-early seventh centuries BCE and not several hundred years earlier. (The Exodus is supposedly set in the thirteenth.) They say that up until then Jerusalem was nothing more than a hill town that happened to be the nominal capital of the small and poor region of Judea — not of Israel, which was a much richer and larger Kingdom to the immediate North of Judea.

The people of Judea, including subsistence farmers in villages and semi-nomadic groups with their flocks, were ethnically similar to the people of Israel to the North but had been mostly left to scratch a living in the poor, upland soil by Israel and other regional power players because the place was not worth invading. Thus when the Assyrians came calling in the early eighth century they conquered Israel proper but did not bother with Judea which, scholars suppose, suddenly became flooded with refugees from Israel proper. For at that time the archeological evidence shows that Jerusalem went from being a town to a big city with workshops, densely packed houses and a big defensive wall — all within a generation. The same sequence can be seen in the rural areas.

Digging up the Bible

Along with all this extra population and economic activity came an elite and a class of professional priests who, in the late eighth and early seventh century, so the hypothesis goes, went through a religious convulsion. A minority who worshipped YHWH, the Hebrew name for god spelt out in sacred letters (it is often spelt Yahweh) claimed ascendancy over the worship of other gods and idols. Archeological evidence in the form of recovery of religious figures show that both YHWH and other deities had been worshipped by the Jewish people for centuries, up until then. A crucial point is that this group spruiked YHWH not just as a chief god, but as the **only** god, whose worshippers were specifically forbidden from worshipping other gods. (“Thou shalt not worship graven images.”) This doctrine must have caused ructions at the time — why can’t we worship the others, everyone else does — but it seems to have taken hold.

Like a wolf on the fold

It was not all plain sailing for the group who worshipped YHWH-alone, as the Judean King Hazekiah decided he need no longer send tribute to the Assyrians when their new king Sennacherib came to the throne, and the Assyrians came calling again — this time to Judah rather than Israel. Although Jerusalem itself was spared — perhaps by a plague in the Assyrian camp — those ancient bad guys did enormous damage to the rest of the kingdom (as is evident from the archeological record) and forced Judea to heel. As YHWH did not seem to protect the kingdom much, later kings allowed worship of the old gods for a time. After a few decades, in which Judah became an integrated part of the economy of Assyrian empire, during the reign of Josiah (639-609 BCE), the YHWH-alone group seized power and stamped hard on all other forms of worship.

Then the Assyrian Empire unexpectedly collapsed and the YHWH-alone group saw their opportunity to take back the Israel from which

their forebears had been chased, and which they hated because it was much bigger and richer than their kingdom and should rightfully be theirs — got it! One of the things they needed to give this claim some backing, and to rally the people of Judah, was a good piece of propaganda, “proving” that Israel and Judah were the one kingdom.

Politics

That is the background proposed by the two scholars for the books of the Bible, including the first five which are also called the Torah or Pentateuch. Those books include the much-celebrated *Exodus*, the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert; ending with the blessing by Moses and his death in *Deuteronomy*. After the Pentateuch come the books comprising what scholars call the Deuteronomistic history, starting with the book of Joshua which includes the conquest of Canaan (Israel and Judah) by the Israelite tribes as the land promised to them by YHWH

The earlier books such as *Exodus*, so the hypothesis goes, were all part of this political-religious message that the scribes so brilliantly flung together. The legend of Moses and his people, for example, may be a retelling of what was probably an old legend about a group of Canaanite workers who escaped from Egypt of long ago but updated to the seventh century and given a theological-political theme. In all respects — as Finkelstein and Silberman point out — the tale is set in seventh century Middle East. Some of the sites mentioned were only inhabited in the seventh century, and the Egypt from which the Israelites escape also seems to be very much the Egypt of seventh century BCE.

This political-religious message, the authors say, can also be seen in the books following Joshua when, after a period of disunity, David was anointed king by the prophet Samuel and both he and his son Solomon ruled the whole area. David and Solomon were probably legendary kings of Israel who worshipped all sorts of gods, but their legends were adapted

by the YHWH-alone group, the scholars say. They were never headquartered in Jerusalem, which was just a dot on the map at the time.

The political message continues after that period of the two great kings. In the Bible stories, when Solomon’s son Rehoboam came to the throne, Israel splits into Israel proper, and the smaller but more righteous Judah. After that, in the interplay between Israel and Judah in I and II *Kings* and I and II *Chronicles*, Israel is shown to be the bad kingdom caught in a constant cycle of sin and redemption whereas Judah is, on the whole, the good guy.

Despite the propaganda there is no evidence that Judah did retake Israel, at least not then. Not long after those books were written the Babylonians took Jerusalem — life in the Middle East has never been easy — and carted perhaps a quarter of the population away to Babylon (the estimate is from extensive archeological surveys). More fled in later turmoil. However, with the religion now crystallised and as YHWH was the one god and everywhere — and thus a step up from the multiple, gods worshipped only in certain localities everywhere else — the exiled Judahites retained their faith. Eventually, in a well know historical episode, when the Persians conquered the Babylonians in 539 BCE, many were permitted to return and live under Persian control to form a buffer state. At some point in all of this the books were re-edited to explain away their recent misfortunes, as well as to give the Judahite community new hope in what were troubled times. Much later the Judahites did retake most of Israel proper only to eventually be taken over by the Romans, but that is another story. The word Jew, incidentally, comes from the Arabic form of Judah,

That is a very simple outline of how the first few books of the Bible came about, according to the particular stream of biblical research synthesised by Finkelstein and Silberman. As noted, much of their arguments rely on archeological evidence with some reading between the lines of the

early books, plus guesswork. Up until the 1980s, it should be noted, excavations of major sites in the Middle East appeared to confirm parts of the early books. The problems really arose when archeologists, including Finkelstein, started making extensive surveys of the areas outside the cities using all the impressive techniques of modern archeology. (Like CSI but on ancient sites.) To the layman it may appear that scholars have crawled through whole areas with microscopes, but the result is insight into details such as different waves of settlement, population densities, village sizes, types of agriculture and so on.

What does a non-archeologist make of all this? A trawl through the Internet, including the various public reviews of Finkelstein and Silberman's book indicates that scholars have not been much bothered by the book's treatment of the very early tales of the Bible. All but the fundamentalists have long tacitly accepted that there is only a tenuous link between any historical reality and those early tales. As is now well known, the story of Noah's Flood, for example, is suspiciously similar to a much earlier Babylonian tale, and so on.

Exodus

As for the Exodus (to return to that famous tale again), as the authors point out and as is widely known, there is simply no evidence of anything like an Exodus in Egypt's extensive records — including the recently discovered archives of the border forts. Nor is there any evidence in archeology. Although various biblical cities have been conquered at different times, say the archeologists, there is nothing that really fits the picture of one group replacing another. The people in Israel and Judah when Judah emerged as a state were the same people, more or less, who had been there all along. Archeologists have also not been able to find any traces of camp sites of a major group wandering about in the Sinai for 40 years or so. It is amazing to the layman that anyone should expect to

find any traces after 3,000 years, give or take a few centuries, but Finkelstein and Silberman point out that traces from the third millennium BP have been found, but nothing from the 13th Century when the Exodus was supposed to have taken place.

Thus although a clear rejection of the Exodus tale and various other stories as brilliant fictions has caused some grumbling from the lay community, scholars have disputed other points. One such point is the rough treatment the book also metes out to the United Monarchy — David and Solomon ruling over both Israel and Judah. The details need not detain us here, but concern the dating of monumental gates and palaces which have been connected to the legendary David and Solomon. Finkelstein and Silberman say they should be redated to a different century. One scholar who takes a "more traditional" view that there could well have been a centrally-administered state under David and Solomon in Jerusalem, is Lawrence Stager, a professor of archeology of Israel at Harvard University.

Another point of contention, it seems, is the likely period of compilation of the early parts of the Bible. A review of the book by Keith W. Whitelam, a Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield in England, points to "methodological problems" in dating the writing of the Bible to the time of Josiah. Another critic — William M. Schniedewind, a Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of California — expresses "disappointment" that the book narrows down the likely compilation period of the Old Testament to the seventh century BCE, instead of a century or so earlier. He also rejects the possibility that the books had been re-edited during the Babylonian exile or later. Those were dark times.

Those quibbles aside, the book is then properly a lengthy guess or hypothesis about how the books came to be written, which broadly fits with the known archeological facts, give or take a few arguments

over dates and interpretations. Many segments of the story compiled by the two scholars were originally suggested by others, as is acknowledged in the book. Egyptologist Donald Redford (Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies at Pennsylvania State University), for example, suggested that the Exodus tale takes seventh century Egypt as its setting.

Hypothesis

The demolition, at least of the early tales, is also not surprising. The immense length of time between the supposed date of the Bible tales, and the compilation of the text is quite enough to cast doubt on the details, as are various anachronisms such as the frequent references to camels where camels are now known to have first been introduced into the Middle East around 1000 BCE. The writers were writing about their own world.

Although the hypothesis put forward by Finkelstein and Silberman is an attractive one, it remains that — an hypothesis — until it can be tested in some way. How can it be tested? Archeologists are continuing to scratch around in ancient sites, and find ancient tablets: perhaps something will turn up.

Whatever skeptics may make of those early books, whoever compiled them did their job brilliantly. The stories of Moses leading the slaves to freedom, the parting of the sea, the walls of Jericho being shaken down, Noah building a boat to escape the flood, the story of Cain and Abel ('am I my brother's keeper?'), and David slaying Goliath, to name a few, all have compelling imagery. The story of the Exodus, in particular, with Moses' plea to the Pharaoh to 'let my people go' has resounded through the ages.

It seems a pity to continue to prod and poke these inspired stories but Eve should never have offered Adam the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and that fool Adam should never have taken it.



The Liberal Literalists:

or Why Literalists Cannot Take Things Literally

Seeking the literal truth about literalism

The word liberal is wonderful, it has a liberal range of meanings. There is small “l” and big “L”, open minded or wishy washy, saint or sinner, generous or lacking backbone, something to be proud of, and something to despise, all depending on who you are, and what the word liberal is applied to. Then there is the guilt by association, you are liberal theologically, therefore you must be liberal biblically, and you must be liberal educationally, and ...

It may well be that the reason that liberal churches are less robust than conservative churches is that they also are educational liberals. As a minister I would have to tutor young people, and adults new to the faith, in membership classes. Once only did I use the material provided by the church, usually considered a liberal church. The material was strong on getting the thoughts of those new to the faith, and being “warm and fuzzy”, but lacked substance in the foundations of the faith, for example: what is the Bible? Part of the problem may have been a fear of a backlash, if you say what you really believe people might leave. This fear probably pervades theologically liberal preachers the world over who face the dilemma (Cameron, 1993); talk about what the Bible is really like and be attacked by the conservatives, or preach “relevant” sermons that do not deal with the hard biblical issues and do not “rock the boat”.

The result of not facing up to the basic issues of Christianity is that liberal-minded members are let down, while middle-of-the-road members are poor in the basics, and therefore open to persuasion by fundamentalists. My

insistence on teaching the basics about the Bible, God, etc, in my membership classes was confirmed for me some years later. On beginning to study psychology one could not escape learning the basics, the class was given lists of words and definitions that had to be learnt: there was no point scientifically studying human behaviour, or being able to argue against the stranger notions of Freud and others, if we did not know the basics.

One way to talk about liberal views of the Bible in a conservative congregation (and being a preacher in country Queensland I had a few of these!) is to puzzle over why two versions of the same story could be widely different, even contradictory. Inevitably, it was important events that had several versions, such as creation, and the birth and death of Jesus. Rather than try to amalgamate the stories, as happens with the modern Christmas story, be honest with the differences between Matthew, Luke, and John; and why didn't Mark bother with the birth at all!

Something struck me one day in conservative country Queensland, and it wasn't a fundamentalist stone being thrown my way. The thought that struck was that it was a Biblical liberal who takes the Bible literally, and to take the Bible literally should lead one to be a liberal in interpreting the Bible. No one can honestly take *Genesis* chapters 1 and 2 literally and not realize that they not only tell different versions of creation, but versions that contradict each other. As many would realize, in Chapter 1 the man and woman are created at the same time



Dan Stewart was formerly a Uniting Church minister. He now researches road safety in the taxi industry. A common response from taxi drivers is laughter!

after all the other animals; in chapter 2 the animals are created in between the creation of the man and the woman.

To take the stories literally necessitates accepting that the two stories are contradictory. There are other differences which, if they don't make the stories incompatible, certainly sit very oddly together: did God create by saying a few words, or by moulding mud? Literalists must take the Bible liberally, regardless of whether they know they are liberals, literalists, or whatever. The real question is how honest and brave the literalist is!

The honest reader of the Bible will know that God must have another purpose to having the creation stories included in the Bible, not some scientific understanding of the beginning of life. One could preach that the first story describes a God who is in command, and can control the troubled seas, and is in control in troubled times, giving certainty and life. The second creation story tells of God being intimately involved in human affairs. I find reading the Bible thus is much more uplifting than trying to pretend contradictory stories are literally true. For a fundamentalist what I have just written is incomprehensible. No doubt they will think I am deluded. But the Bible is all the more rich and exciting for you being honest with it and letting it be honest with you. Thus I have found some of the uplifting writings about the Bible are by people like Spong (1994).

There is actually very little support in the Bible for taking it literally. A favourite verse of fundamentalists is 2 *Timothy* 3:16 (for a still relevant critique see Barr, 1984). The key word they seem to focus on is "inspired", and at this point they equate inspiration with dictation: God **told** Paul, Moses, Matthew, etc, exactly what to write. That is an unusual and unique use of "inspire". The biblical Greek word for inspire has to do with breathing (respire), wind, and spirit. The Hebrew equivalent, "*ruach*", is used in *Genesis* 1 to describe God moving over the waters of creation. The modern meaning of inspire is still close to the ancient Greek and Hebrew meaning: to be inspired is to "come alive", to

have life "breathed" into you. What the 2 *Timothy* passage is actually saying is that God has enlivened people to write. Even the word "scriptures" is misused, when 2 *Timothy* was written there was no specified "holy scriptures"; scriptures were any writings, though Paul (assuming he wrote 2 *Timothy*) was likely to have been referring to many of the writings that now form the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), or perhaps just the first five books thereof, but certainly not the New Testament. And what purpose were these writings? They were "useful" for teaching and discipline. Taking the passage literally, it provides no support for literalists!

At the risk of being simplistic, there is a common thread that divides fundamentalist and liberal in terms of the Bible, creation, and other issues such as prayer. Fundamentalists tend to believe in a God that directly and dramatically breaks into the world working mighty miracles; but liberals tend to believe that God works through and in people and the world, and believe the spirit moves subtly among our lives. Of course, that is a false dichotomy, there are complex beliefs about how God operates in the world, and many would hold that sometimes God works dramatically, other times subtly. But then again, fundamentalists are the masters of false dichotomies: Christian creationists *versus* atheistic evolutionists; righteous *versus* unrighteous people; warm-blooded *versus* cold-blooded animals; a legalistic right *versus* wrong, black *versus* white; literally true or totally wrong; etc. False dichotomies, or at least false large divisions between body features, are a basis for Intelligent Design: the false argument that the human eye is so different from anything else leads to the false conclusion that it must have been designed.

Back to the false dichotomy at hand: A fundamentalist believes God dramatically created the world, saved life through Noah, told Moses and Paul exactly what to write, answers prayers in dramatic fashion, and will be involved in the end of the world in a momentous way. The fundamentalist must show how God is dramati-

cally involved in the world today, thus an emphasis on miraculous healings, or at least assertions that God was directly involved in the healing, the finding of a car park, or the saving of large numbers of people in some distant country. The crux for the creationist is: how is God dramatically involved in the world today? If that cannot be answered with positive examples and testable processes, then creationist dogma cannot survive. One could believe in a deist's God who started the world going, then left it all up to people, but that is hardly Christian, and speaks of a highly inconsistent god. Meanwhile, there are numerous good examples of how the proposed dramatic involvement of God, such as at creation and with Noah, is pushed to logical, and ridiculous conclusions (read back through the issues of *the Skeptic*, or check out the *No Answers in Genesis* website).

On the other side of our false dichotomy: A liberal will believe that God subtly works through the world, his spirit encouraging people and tweaking the evolutionary process. At times there may even be dramatic miracles as the spirit works in the lives of people. The crux for the liberal is: how is God actually involved in the world in this subtle way? Has anyone detailed how God tweaks the evolutionary process, or found a subtle influence beyond what can be explained in materialistic terms? This subtle influence appears to disappear into the black hole of insignificance. At least the biblical liberal, or the literalist who through honesty is lead to take the Bible liberally, is open to discovering what the world actually is. And maybe the tweaking mechanism will be found.

References

- Barr, J. (1984). *Escaping from Fundamentalism*. SCM Press: London.
- Cameron, P. (1993). *Necessary Heresies: Alternatives to Fundamentalism*. NSW University Press: Kensington.
- Spong, J. S. (1994). *Resurrection: Myth or Reality, a bishop's search for the origins of Christianity*. Harper San Francisco.



Development of a Competitive Corporate University Culture:

Vignettes from a make-or-break year at an Australian university

Further revelations from an academic grove

Disclaimer

Readers should not assume that this article is based on the author's experiences at his own university. The scenarios, incidents, behaviours, personalities and policies described in this article are grossly exaggerated caricatures or entirely fictitious. No one in his or her right mind could possibly take offence at any jibe, jest or lampoon in this article.

Summer: Professor Doreen Skink, Vice-Chancellor and President, charts a challenging course into the future.

The scene is the Vice-Chancellor's private meeting room. The Vice Chancellor, Professor Doreen Skink is having a "power breakfast" with Frank Appraisal, the managing director of The Frank Appraisal Advertising Agency. Frank is handling the University's new Corporate Positioning Advertising Campaign (CPAC). Frank hands over a one-page covering letter to Professor Skink, and she settles back to read and absorb the contents. The letter begins as follows.

My Dear Professor Skink, we've evaluated the recent advertising campaigns of your two closest rivals in this demographic to make sure that we can position Walladumpdung as a distinctive institution. You have a detailed copy of our methodology and findings, but I know that you are a very busy

woman, so I propose to summarise our principal findings in this covering letter. Please forgive my blunt language, but be assured that this summary is for your eyes only.

Your main rival in this city is Amalgam Technical University. It styles itself as 'The University for the Fair Dinkum World' and it tries to appeal to a demographic, which we refer to in the advertising business as 'airhead wannabe expats'. That is, twenties-something wet-behind-the-ears snots who believe the world owes them a living, and who think they can graduate and get away from the oldies by falling into a top job overseas. The TV ads for ATU are very persuasive — we see a variety of snots hanging out at famous landmarks overseas, chilling out, rapping with colourful locals, breaking into spontaneous dance routines on the street, and boasting to camera with smug self-assurance. The ad usually closes with a particularly repellent snot fronting up to a firm of professional architects, engineers, bankers or accountants and being welcomed with open arms by an avuncular manager. The premise is that this manager has been waiting all his life to employ a wet-behind-the-ears gormless, inexperienced twit. Preferably sight unseen and just off the plane. Priceless!

Your other main competitor is John Kerr University. It styles itself as



Jef Clark purportedly peddles pedantry to putative pedagogues in a city that just avoided being labelled Edinglassie by an uncharacteristic onset of good taste.

'The University for Changing the World'. It tries to appeal to the demographic we refer to as sanctimonious hypocrites. You know, twenties-something snots who feel that they ought to make a charitable gesture before they get out and earn the big bucks. The unstated assumption is that students only have to be Mother Theresa for a couple of weeks within a four year degree program, and they can then set about their real goal of being as rich as Croesus three years after graduation.

The Vice Chancellor expresses a decorous amount of disquiet about the cynical and blunt language used by Frank. However she is honest enough with herself to recognise that she essentially agrees in her heart with Frank Appraisal's frank appraisal. The Vice-Chancellor then offers her own insights into possible themes which might be used to establish a distinctive "brand name" for Walladumpdung. She points out that she has been busy surveying her senior faculty over the last few weeks — seeking pithy and catchy slogans or phrases, which could represent the aspirations of Walladumpdung.

She pauses for a moment while her executive secretary sets up a powerpoint presentation in the room. There is only one slide, and there are only the two of them in the room to view it, but Doreen is an enthusiastic proponent of digital communications technology. So she fires up her laptop and selects her state-of-the-art animated dot-point slide for viewing. The slide is headed:

Brainstorming Exercise – Senior Faculty Creative Ideas for a Corporate Theme or Slogan Which Will Guide and Direct Walladumpdung Through the First Few Decades of the Twenty-First Century

There are some technical difficulties and the dot-points take about 10 minutes or so to emerge from the bewildering, nauseating, dizzying, and fragmented images on the screen. (Doreen uses every advanced feature in powerpoint, no matter how much the features impede ac-

tual communication of content.) When the plain text of the dot-points eventually emerges, the themes are clear enough.

- ◆ Walladumpdung — The University for Social Justice
- ◆ Walladumpdung — A Universal Program for Social Justice
- ◆ Walladumpdung — The University for a Just Society
- ◆ Walladumpdung — The Just University for Social Progress
- ◆ 'Walladumpdung — The Social University for Just Progress

Frank Appraisal examines these alternatives judiciously, but seems somewhat dubious. The Vice-Chancellor (sensing Frank's skepticism) breaks in with her clincher, which she has saved until last.

"I have one more suggestion, which came from my Deputy Provost, Vice-President and Acting Pro-Vice Chancellor for Marketing and Grey Water Management. He suggested what I consider to be a rather riveting and vigorous variant on these themes":

Walladumpdung — Forging Social Justice Out of the Crucible of an Unjust Society.

Frank clearly remains unimpressed with the Vice-Chancellor's suggestions. An impasse appears to be developing, but then Frank comes up with a 'left-field' suggestion, which saves the day. A suggestion which instantly seems to hold out the prospect of future prosperity for Walladumpdung. Frank says: "I think these sorts of slogans can get lost... they're a bit mealy-mouthed, but do you remember a couple of weeks ago, when we had our first brainstorming session, your Dean of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies came up with a slogan that I haven't been able to get out of my mind since". Both Frank and Doreen experience one of those spooky synchronous insights, and they spontaneously and simultaneously ejaculate as if with one voice":

Walladumpdung, the Bestest University in the History of the Whole World — Ever!

An excited discussion ensues. They both agree what while on the surface, this claim for Walladumpdung might be a little hard to sustain, there is nothing wrong with setting "stretch goals". That is, goals which are impossible to achieve. The Vice-Chancellor initially expresses some concern about the execrable grammar in the statement, but Frank assures her that there are two key advantages to the incorporation of bad grammar in such a slogan. Deliberate errors such as "bestest" makes the slogan stick in the mind of irritated pedants, and it reassures prospective students — particularly those students who have had problems with written expression in high school.

Frank then proceeds to develop the outline of a television advertising campaign with the Vice-Chancellor's excited concurrence. "Here's one of my suggestions. We go with the stretch goal and we translate it onto a memorable corporate motto":

Walladumpdung: Dream the Impossible Dream.

"To make sure we don't scare off the spivs, lurk merchants and slackers, we'll have to come up with a TV campaign which embraces mutually contradictory notions — you can be a lazy underachiever and still succeed at the highest levels."

"We'll have montages of undergraduate students slacking off and having a good time. Playing sport, street parties, vandalising facilities, partying, rolling ball bearings under police horses, sleeping off hangovers, surfing and so on, but we'll finish with the main Party Animal fronting up to receive a university medal at graduation. In the final sequence he'll hold his medal up in the air, turn to the audience and proclaim in a ringing voice..."

"Walladumpdung — the bestest university in the history of the whole world — ever!"

"In the last few seconds, we'll freeze-frame and put the motto in text underneath the image: 'Walladumpdung — dare to dream the impossible dream'."

After several more hours of intense and gruelling creative effort, the Vice-Chancellor signs off on the general shape of the campaign, and the two conspirators proceed to work on costings. The Vice-Chancellor is confident that Walladumpdung can afford a much more expensive advertising campaign than those mounted by ATU and John Kerr. Her management team has already come up with many creative suggestions for clawing back funds from the faculties. Funds which would otherwise only be wasted on non-essentials, such as tutorials and seminars.

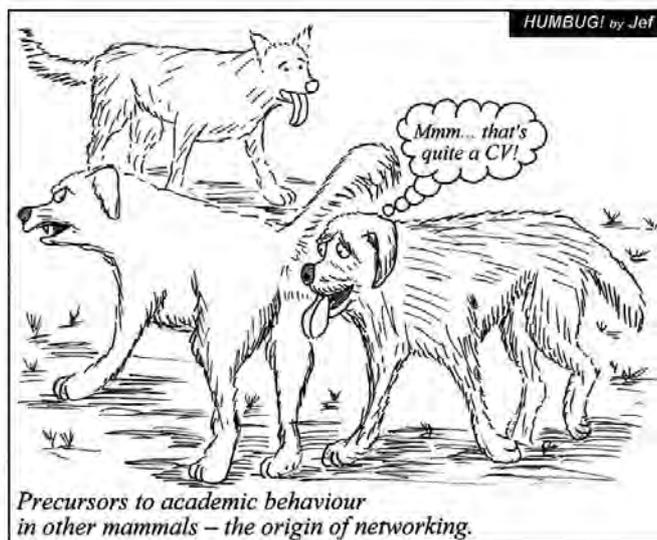
Autumn: Professor Patrick Fitzvolvo, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Institutional Footprint) introduces an innovation

At the beginning of April Professor Fitzvolvo sends an email to all academic staff. The email states, inter alia.

Colleagues, as you know, I am currently sponsoring a project to develop a database of Walladumpdung research expertise that can be used to promote our research and research training capability to potential research partners and higher degree students. As well, the database will support a "guide to the experts" for the media. You have already been approached by the Project Team via your head of element to check the accuracy of your profile prior to publication in the ResearchExperts@Walladumpdung database.

However the Project Team is concerned with the undue modesty displayed by many senior faculty. I should not need to remind you that as an aspirant to the title of 'The

Bestest University in the History of the World — Ever!', we need to enhance the perceived scope and level of expertise across our faculties, particularly in the eyes of the media. To this end, the Public Pontification and Aggrandizement Project Team (PPAAPT) will be running a series of workshops for Level B and C academics, which are designed to enhance the capacity of senior staff to engage in public pontification and aggrandizement. The PPAAPT workshop sign-up sheet is attached to this email.



The training program is duly designed by the PPAAPT. It is introduced by trialling by the last week of April. It is based on a simulation and training approach, and is informed by some earlier research the team conducted on academic "personalities" from other institutions who currently feature prominently in the electronic media. The research involved recording morning and evening news, infotainment and current affairs programs on both radio and television. The PPAAPT then excerpted for analysis the inputs from academics on such shows over a two-week period. The team found that the academics sought out for comment by the media were not necessarily experts or unbiased commentators (often quite the contrary). This was verified with simple literature searches on the names and positions of the academic commentators.

The team found that many commentators had weak or irrelevant track records on the topics they were asked to comment on. This was encouraging news, as the Team felt that anyone at Walladumpdung had the potential to be a "media star". Further analysis of the characteristics of "on-air-talent" led to the following descriptions of the three essential attributes, along with suggestions as to how Walladumpdung faculty should go about acquiring these essential attributes.

The on-air academic expert on television must be eccentric in appearance. A male academic may wear a suit, but if he wears a suit, it should be a poor fit and look tacky and uncomfortable. Not mundane "off-the-shelf Target tacky", but "St Vinnie's deceased estate tacky". Suits and ties should be lavishly stained with egg and milk residues in the green room prior to the "academic talent" appearing in the studio. Both male and female academics have the option of wearing extremely

colourful smart-casual clothing rather than suits. Casual clothes should be of a cut and colour which went out of fashion (if they were ever in fashion) at least 20 years ago. Hairstyles should be so bad that the viewer's gaze is irresistibly drawn to them. (A distracted gaze takes viewer attention away from the lack of substance in the interview).

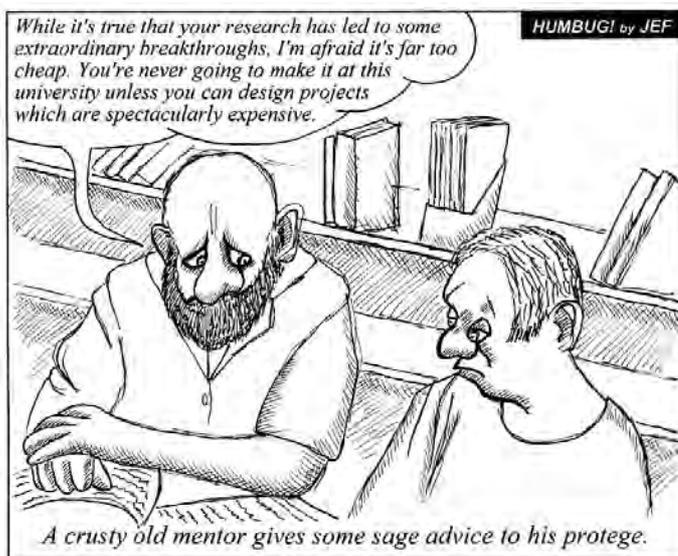
The on-air academic expert must have an irritating voice tone (think of a chainsaw working its way through corrugated iron). The voice cadence should be peculiar (robotic, frenetic or slurred). Visual aberrations such as facial tics, eccentric posture and gesture are an advantage for academics who wish to appear on television. Normal intensity and duration of eye contact should be avoided. (Choose either a basilisk stare, or coke-fuelled darting

glances — whichever you are more comfortable with.) Consider using “science wonks” as role models. The antics of “Professor” Julius Sumner Miller have never been surpassed in this country, but there are more contemporary science wonk personalities who are acceptable role models (eg, Dr Karl). Science wonks were successful in the past because audiences were not threatened by them. They were non-threatening because they were easily mocked and derided by normal people. For this reason, the Team believes that it is preferable for all “expert” academics appearing on TV to behave like science wonks. In a very real sense, everyone at Walladupdung should embrace wonkdom — even prospective commentators on serious and boring subjects such as foreign affairs and the economy.

On-air academic experts must be prepared to abandon traditional academic prudence and modesty. They must be prepared to offer definitive statements on any issue put to them, no matter how little they actually know about the issue, or how complex and nuanced the issue might be. Fortunately, it is possible for an essentially ignorant or hopelessly biased academic to pontificate with authority, and without challenge on either radio or television, and to do so indefinitely. No challenge is likely because of the time limitations inherent in electronic media, and the intellectual limitations of radio and television journalists and presenters.

The first PPSAPT training program to be set up is the Radio Quickie Interview Program. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor’s budget allows the Team to set up a dedicated purpose-built training facility which consists of ten work stations which closely approximate the work-stations to be found in a typical academic’s campus

study or office. The facility looks like a language laboratory, as each aspiring media star is seated at a computer, and has a hands-free telephone headset. The trainer is at the front desk and is similarly equipped. The trainer takes the role of a radio producer for a morning talk-back radio program. He has a number of cards from which he chooses randomly. Each card has a typical topic of public interest on it.



The procedure is as follows. The trainer picks a card. For the sake of illustration, let’s say the topic is: “Our kids have too much homework in Primary School”. The trainer, taking the role of a radio producer, rings one of the academics. He introduces himself as producer of the program and then says that a live discussion is going to air on the proposition that “Our kids have too much homework in Primary School”. He then asks the academic whether he would care to comment later in the show. In the early stages of training, “later in the show” means after about five minutes have elapsed. As the trainees gain more experience and confidence, “later in the show” might mean after about 30 seconds.

On receipt of the topic, the academic immediately conducts a text-only Advanced Google Search on key words and phrases in the topic (15 seconds). He or she further searches within the results and isolates a number of likely articles — that is,

articles with titles that suggest they are more or less on the topic (another 15 seconds). The academic then clicks on the likeliest title and scan-reads the text. The trainer then speaks on the telephone to the academic — this time, the trainer takes the role of the presenter of the radio program rather than the producer. He asks some questions based on what “the listeners” want to know about the topic. The academic responds while scan-reading vaguely relevant stuff from the article on his or her screen.

After a heavy hour or so of training, and after canvassing a large range of topics, the trainer reviews progress. He makes the observation that while the best response of the morning was to the “homework issue”, it was unfortunate that (unknown to the trainer) the academic he called on was actually an educator. The trainer points out that total ignorance of the topic results in the most desirable simulation, and that next time he will make sure that the trainees receive a topic which they are not familiar with. He concludes by saying that the most impressive performance of the morning was by the physicist who pontificated on the war in Iraq. Although as the trainer pointed out, such a mismatch was hardly unprecedented, as there was no topic under the sun that had not been pontificated on freely by past Nobel laureates in the natural and life sciences.

Winter: Professor Leonie Fabulist, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research Indices and Research Grants) gets serious about runs on the board.

In mid-July, Professor Fabulist sends an email to all academic staff. The email states, inter alia.

Dear Colleagues, in September last year I sent out early notice about trialling a publications incentivisation scheme. This is now the official notice for this trial

scheme. You can find the guidelines for the scheme, application proformas and journal rankings at:

www.walladumpdung.edu.au/youvealldoneveryverywell/baksheesh

I would like to encourage you to take full advantage of this scheme. I realise that there could be difficulties in having your articles accepted and actually published next year as required by this pilot scheme. However, as the guidelines indicate, if this incentivatory scheme is considered successful, then incentivatory funds will be available for researchers in subsequent years for articles submitted but published after next year. In the meantime you can access initial support funds for papers submitted to the very bestest journals over the next few months and for those of you who are successful in having articles published in the very bestest journals in next year, even if submitted at an earlier date, incentivatory funds will be provided. The lists of the very bestest journals on the web result from a journal ranking process instituted by the senior management at Walladumpdung. My thanks to all those involved in this process – you’ve all done very, very, well (c.f. Mr Grace in Are You Being Served).

This is only the first blow in Professor Fabulist’s aggressive program for generating runs on the board. Leonie’s personal motto has always been “comply without question” and her formula for success in academe has always been KUPD (Kiss Up Pee Down). Her instincts accord with her conditioning, and she is resolved to slavishly follow the indices of research quality as set out by the present and largely accidental set of career public servants infesting the current Federal education bureaucracy.

While financial inducements are important, Leonie also uses more subtle means to foster staff contributions to the impossible dream. For example, she ran a retreat for line

managers in the early part of the year. The retreat was designed to foster “people skills” among newly promoted Heads of Departments and other functionaries. The title of her retreat experience was framed as a rhetorical question:

“Is it possible to be too patronising to underlings?”

The workshops and discussions on the day provided the predetermined answer to the rhetorical question, viz: “not if the underlings are academics”. This was the only possible conclusion to draw after the workshop examined the full range of patronising statements issued by senior management during the previous year. Statements which were accepted as normal and unremarkable by faculty. A representative sample appears below.

On behalf of the Division of Health I would like to congratulate Nigel for his achievement in winning a Lite and Easy Linkage Grant for his project Fat Schmat — Get Some Exercise. He did very, very well, and I’m sure his mum and dad are very proud. I know we all are. Cheers, Linda.

Hi everyone, congratulations to Jules and Cheryl who have been granted study leave in semester 1 next year. Both Jules and Cheryl wrote the bestest applications ever. Their penmanship and decorations in the margins were most impressive, particularly the little bunnies. (I think Cheryl tried a little harder than Jules.) Please join with me in saying that they did very very well, and give them a pat on the back when you next see them. Remember, we can all do very very well if we try even harder. Regards, Harriet.

Sorry for the late notice, but we are having a tea party tomorrow afternoon for Dolly and Denny. There will be lots and lots of scrummy cakes and chippies to eat, and opportunities to slag off members of the Faculty who don’t attend. So be there. Or else. It’s not every day that two colleagues win the Vice-Chancellor’s award for 10 years faithful service. Come on, I know

that everyone gets one, but try to be supportive. Please. Don’t just think of Dolly and Denny. What about me? If no one turns up, what does that make me look like?

Dear Colleagues, my warmest congratulations to all successful applicants for these grants. Such grants are not only important to your individual research but to the reputation and standing of the University. I know how much work goes into preparing these grants so my thanks to all applicants. May I say that I am particularly pleased that so many more of you are seeking to write successful grant application rather than wasting your time by simply doing research. I know that writing grant applications take an enormous amount of time away from actual research, but in the long run our reputation as a university depends not so much on what we find out from our research, but how expensive our research was. If I might take the liberty of tampering with the university motto: “Walladumpdung, the most expensive research (and therefore the most bestest research) in the history of the world — ever!”

The excerpts provided by Leonie are compelling, and she convinces the assembled line managers that they should patronise staff at every opportunity. The collective view is that no patronising statement, no matter how infantile, shallow or condescending will be as embarrassing as the university motto itself.

Spring: A Meeting of the Faculty of Social Sciences Assessment Board

Noam Chimpsky, the official representative from the School for Schoolies is speaking to the Faculty of Social Sciences Assessment Board. The School for Schoolies is one of the 47 schools within the Faculty of Education, Humanities, Social Sciences, Social Justice, Social Cohesion and Social Diversity (Faculty of Social Sciences is the short title). The School for Schoolies is so designated because its graduates will for the most part end up as schoolteachers. Noam is speaking to the Board about the course results of Denise

Wattlebaum. Denise is a lecturer in Drama, and the results under consideration are those she has put up for her course Puppetry 1.02a/iii. As in previous semesters, none of her students have passed. Nor have any failed. Indeed, none have achieved a credit. All of her students have in fact received either a Distinction or a High Distinction. As always, there is frank disbelief among some members of the Assessment Board when these results are tabled.

Denise achieved some notoriety the previous year for awarding a High Distinction to Jimmy Weasel, a student who was nominally in her course (and therefore on her marks spreadsheet) but who was in fact incarcerated for the semester in which her on-campus workshop-based puppetry course was offered. This situation arose because of her chaotic record-keeping and low self-confidence in her capacity to judge student performance. When she saw blanks against Jimmy Weasel's name in her mark book, she assumed that she had mislaid his assignment (a puppet) and exam paper. To cover her tracks, she conjured up some outstanding marks out of thin air and entered them in her spreadsheet. She thought it prudent to give Mr Weasel good marks. After all, when students got the wrong mark, they never complained if the wrong mark was a very good mark.

So Denise's results are always inflated. However Walladumpdung's assessment policy is criterion-referenced, so most enquiries about grade distributions can be shrugged off and ruled "out of court". The sanctimonious rationalisation "we don't mark on the curve" is often used to justify extreme inequities. When Noam finishes a brief summary of Denise's results, he invites comments from the Board. One of the Board members wonders aloud what meaning could be ascribed to the words "High" and "Distinction" in Denise's course, since all her students got one. Weren't these relative concepts? If all students were "distinctive", didn't the word lose all useful meaning? Noam is able to counter this by

reading aloud from Denise's explanatory note attached to her results.

I realise that the stuffy traditionalists on the Assessment Board are going to query my results. (As always — surprise, surprise.) They will say 'how can all of your students be distinctive or highly distinctive, when they are drawn from a mediocre cohort'. The answer is that of course, my students when they enter my course are typical, mediocre students. But I see them as raw clay, to be shaped by my charismatic, energetic and stupendously successful teaching. My inspirational teaching lifts them above the common herd. Their high grades are testament to the quality of my teaching. If I may take some liberties with the University's new motto: "Puppetry 1.02a/iii, the Bestest Puppetry Course in the History of the World — Ever!"

At this point, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Doreen Skink enters the Boardroom with her retinue. The Chair of the Board has already foreshadowed the attendance of the Vice-Chancellor at some point in the meeting and so no one is actually surprised at her advent. Naturally there is a degree of interest in, and speculation about her reasons for being there. (The Vice-Chancellor is an ex-officio member of all university committees and boards, but she never attends unless she is running a particular agenda).

The Vice-Chancellor remains silent during further discussion of Denise Wattlebaum's results. The discussion drones on along familiar lines, the parties agree to disagree, and as always, Denise's results eventually get rubber-stamped. At this point the Vice Chancellor asks the Chair if she may say a few words, as what she has to say may neatly resolve all future cases of apparent grade inflation, and yet recognise excellence of teaching and learning. Permission is of course readily given.

The Vice Chancellor begins by affirming that there has to be a wholesale re-alignment of thinking at Walladumpdung on the issue of

grades. She reminds the Board that the whole university community, and all activities of both staff and students must be aligned with the corporate slogan. She insists that they all say it together. Obediently, and as one, the board intones.

"Walladumpdung, the bestest university in the history of the world — ever!"

The Vice-Chancellor then makes the point that as the bestest university in the history of the world — ever!, Walladumpdung should not rule out the possibility of all of its students getting a Distinction or a High Distinction. "In fact", the Vice-Chancellor states, "from now on, the assumption will be that all students will receive at least a Distinction for turning up and turning in — that is, for turning up for classes and exams, and for turning in assignments".

The Vice-Chancellor anticipates a possible objection to this system. She knows that some on the Board will wonder how it is possible to identify the truly outstanding students for selection to honours programs, or for the award of university medals.

She forestalls any such objections by outlining her plans for introducing a new grade — a grade which is even higher than a high distinction. It will be known as a Super High Distinction (SHD) and no more than 50% of students enrolled in an undergraduate course will be able to get one. The Vice-Chancellor frankly acknowledges that in due course, further grade inflation will mean that the currency of a Super High Distinction will be devalued. She has an answer even to that problem. The introduction of ever-higher grades, beginning with the Super-Duper High Distinction (SDHD).

The meeting drones on. Some more senior members of the Board fall asleep — and begin to Dream the Impossible Dream.



Why Moon Planting Works

Investigating and explaining a persistent myth

About 15 years ago I decided to see if moon planting worked. (For those who have been too sceptical to have ever glanced at the subject, moon planting assumes that the position of the Moon relative to the Earth influences the way plants grow. Some phases of the moon are optimum for plants where the leaf growth is most important; other phases are best for plants where the roots matter most to the growers; other times are 'barren' when nothing should be planted.)

Okay, moon planting seemed like a load of codswallop.¹ But many gardeners — particularly the 'my organic tomatoes are bigger than your organic tomatoes' sort who have climbing beans so vigorous they could be planning to strangle their owners in their beds — swore that they owed it all to moon planting. I wondered if just perhaps moon planting did have a bit of a wallop without the cod, and was worth investigating further.

Testing moon planting is not simple. It's easy to test a new fertiliser for example — four or six as identical as you can make them plots, each planted with seeds of the same bean variety at the same time but grown with different fertiliser regimes. Watch how long till the first flowers, the first beans, weigh the crop, make a note of pest numbers, diseased leaves, how many days the bean plants fruit for...

But this wouldn't work for moon planting. The whole essence of moon

planting is that there is one ideal time each month to plant. This meant that the trial crops couldn't be planted on the same day — and any beans planted before the ideal day would have had longer to grow, and any planted after that time would have less.

Finally I dug six long rows and planted two bean seeds in each row every day over a three-month period. If the moon planting theory worked then the bean seeds planted on the optimum days should do better than the ones planted either side.

They didn't.

Of the seed planted the first month, the seeds planted **after** the moon planted seeds flowered earlier and were more productive. The effect was similar but not as marked for the second month. In the third month the beans flowered in an almost perfect gradation — the earlier they were planted, the earlier they flowered and fruited.

Conclusion:

Planting by the moon seemed to have no effect whatsoever on bean seeds.

I dismissed moon planting for a decade, merely murmuring tactfully to questions at garden shows that no, I didn't follow moon planting, I'd tested it and it didn't seem to work... usually adding with extreme cowardice 'for me'.

Except over the following years I kept hearing impassioned declara-



Jackie French is the author of a shelf⁵ of gardening books, writes various gardening columns and was a presenter on Burke's Backyard for a decade.

*. She wrote the books, not made the shelf⁵.

** . Come to think of it she made the shelf too.

tions from moon planting gardeners, who swore that planting by the moon worked for them.

Okay, human kind likes to create order in a complex world and all the rest of it, and neat charts that document some aspect of the natural world are comforting even when they're hogwash. Or perhaps moon planters feel they achieve some mystic communion with the natural world by following the guidance of the moon, a pleasing combination of spiritual one-upmanship and the ability to grow more beans than their neighbours.

But still...

Years after that first test, I discovered that there are several schools of moon planting. One person's successful day with brassicas may be another's time to commune with carrots.

So I tried it again, with competing moon charts. Still no win for moon planting. And, no, when I looked back at my initial results the peak growing times still didn't correspond to anyone's idea of the best 'moon times' — they were due to faster growth in warmer soil. And there the matter rested, until today...

...when I woke up² and suddenly realised why I'd been wrong for 15 years. And why moon planting **does** work. (Which possibly the observant reader has already worked out from the material above.)³

Let's look at a possible scenario. Gardener I is a moon planter; Gardener II isn't. Both gardeners wait till spring to plant their beans. (No sensible cool climate gardener will plant beans in winter. It's too cold for them to germinate, and many seeds will rot or be taken by ants.)

But come the first warm spell Gardener II succumbs to one of the great spring urges and plants the beans at the first hint that spring has arrived. Gardener I, on the other hand, waits till the next good moon planting time before planting the seeds.

Early warm spells are usually followed by another cold one... and again seed planted too early may rot. Even if it doesn't, plants that suffer any set-back when they are young

usually don't do as well as plants that have flourished right from the start. (The set-back can be from cold, boggy soil, snail or scale attack — the effect is the same). So counter-intuitively, beans that are planted later in spring will probably do better than beans planted too early.⁴

Result:

Gardener I's moon planted beans produce sturdier plants and crop earlier.

The reverse may happen in autumn — the moon planting gardener will be aware that they only have one good time to plant, so may get their seeds in without delay — and in autumn, earlier planting into warmer soil usually means bigger plants.

It's this tendency to slightly later spring planting and perhaps slightly earlier autumn planting, that I suspect is the reason so many gardeners will swear that they see an effect. (One keen gardener who has been following moon planting for more than 30 years once told me that he finds moon planting more effective for early rather than late spring plants, though he believes it's because the young spring moon is more powerful.)

Which means that generations of gardeners may not be deluded about the efficacy of moon planting. It just works for a different reason than the one they believed.

Folklore

Folklore is often based on accurate observation. It's just the rationale that may be codswallop. Over the years I've tested various bits of 'companion planting' folklore. And some actually work — though not because 'basil likes tomatoes'. (As a matter of fact this common bit of companion planting lore doesn't work at all — basil tends to get black spot planted near tomatoes, while the tomatoes do neither better nor worse. And never trust a gardening book that tells you that marigolds (*Tagetes spp*) deter aphids — beans, onions and fuchsias planted with

marigolds get **more** aphids, not fewer, and I suspect the same may be true for a range of other plants.

But root knot nematodes, for example, do appear to avoid the root secretions of marigolds, though a companion crop of marigolds can make the problem worse because... and at this stage I had better stop treatise Number 56 on companion planting...)

It's worth remembering, though, that sometimes an observation may be true, even though the reasoning is faulty.

Notes

1. Codswallop: According to *The Oxford Library of Words and Phrases* cod's head was slang for blockhead (XVI) hence prob. (sl.) cod fool, simpleton (XVII) whence cod vb. (sl.) hoax, humbug (XIX). But more intriguingly (and colourfully) Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable has: Codswallop. Nonsense. The word is of uncertain origin but the following story is sometimes offered to account for it. In 1875 Hiram Codd patented a mineral water bottle with a marble stopper. Wallop is a slang term for beer. Thus Codd's wallop is said to have become a disparaging term among beer drinkers for mineral waters and weak drinks and in due course gained a more general application.

2. Literally not symbolically, as in 'opened eyes and got out of bed'.

3. Actually this moment of enlightenment was probably sparked by an email the night before, asking if I knew anyone who would give an interview on moon planting, and a mooch at dusk among this year's bean crop, where I noticed once again that the ones I'd planted later germinated before the ones I'd planted with the usual gardener's boundless and baseless optimism on the first day with a breath of warm air.

4. This works with most other spring veg too of course, not just beans. The effect is slightly different with spring flowers — early planted seeds or seedlings may bloom earlier, but the plants won't be as large and so the flowering time will be shorter, with fewer and often smaller blooms.



Enough to Raise the Dead

O Death, where
is thy sting?

I read quite a lot of Pentecostal literature and every now and then I come across references to 'raising the dead'. This has nothing to do with the resurrection of Jesus or with people like Lazarus who are supposed to have been raised by him. Rather, some modern Pentecostal preachers claim that they can revive dead people and indeed that they have often done so.

I first saw this startling assertion a couple of years ago in a publication called the *Jubilee News* (Sept. 2003):

We have received invitations to lead missions to Tanzania and Zambia in Feb 2004. If God wants you there and you can intercede, minister healing, raise the dead, etc, please contact our office for details.

This little outfit is right out on the fringe even by fundamentalist and Pentecostal standards, so I simply passed the item on to our Esteemed Editor who popped it in the "Around the Traps" column (*the Skeptic* 23:4, p5). Still, a disquieting aspect was the casual context in which the writer used the term 'raise the dead', as if it were the most natural thing in the world to possess such a talent.

A few months later I was looking up something on Pentecostalism in a reference text — Ward and Humphreys' *Religious Bodies in Australia* (1995) — when this jumped out at me:

In 1969, a branch [of the Universal World Church] was formed in Townsville by Percy R. Nielson, an Australian returned from America. He claimed many healings including raising the dead. (251)

Then, during the Terri Schiavo euthanasia controversy in America earlier this year, I found this on an Australian website (www.saveterri.net, downloaded 29 Mar. 2005):

In China God is raising the dead. These are miracles. God can heal Terri in the blink of an eye.

As Ian Fleming wrote in *Goldfinger*, 'Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, the third time it's enemy action'. And hyper-Christians running around claiming to raise the dead looked pretty much like enemy action to me.

A. A. Allen and others

Careful reading of some older books disclosed a number of references to the practice of instant resurrection. James Randi's 1989 edition of *The Faith Healers* told the story of Brother Ted Whitesell's tour of Australia in 1970:

...[H]e claimed that he not only gave sight to a young boy, cleared up several arthritic conditions and cured astigmatism and stuttering



Brian Baxter is our regular Melbourne-based commentator on the outer fringes of religious eccentricity.

cases, but lengthened sixteen short legs as an encore! Furthermore, he said he often raised the dead. (128-9)

Randi also mentioned the work of A. A. (Asa Alonso) Allen, a precursor of Assemblies of God televangelists such as Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart:

[Allen] specialised in visions, divine voices and prophecies. At one point, Allen advertised a plan to raise the dead, in accordance with biblical instructions to the apostles to do the same. (85)

Hank Hanegraaff's (2001) *Counterfeit Revival* confirms this:

Allen actually launched a 'raise the dead' campaign in the mid-sixties. Thankfully, it died when his disciples refused to bury their departed, and their departed refused to come back from the dead. (148)

Alan Bestic (1971) in *Praise the Lord and Pass the Contribution* recounts this discussion with Raymond G. Hoekstra, a colleague of Allen's:

[Bestic:] One national magazine quotes [Allen] as saying that he believes people can be raised from the dead by prayer. Is that true?

[Hoekstra:] I'm sure it is possible. There are well-documented instances of it in South Korea and Indonesia in recent years.

Documented by whom?

Evangelical leaders connected with such people as Billy Graham and *World Vision*.

Where were they reported?

I've seen them in evangelical publications. [This is a recommendation? Most 'popular' evangelical publications are notoriously credulous, especially when it comes to reporting missionaries' claims.] (122)

Allen died in 1970 of 'acute alcoholism and fatty infiltration of the liver'. A pathology and toxicology examination disclosed a blood alco-

hol concentration of 0.36 per cent, enough to induce a deep coma. (ibid.)

Current work

A number of more recent books written by concerned Christians have criticised modern Pentecostalism for its descent into mysticism, including this vaunted power to raise the dead.

Michael Moriarty's 1992 text *The New Charismatics* contains several references to this claim, dating from the 1930s:

[Revivalists] believed God's property was being reclaimed as the sick were healed, the dead were raised, and those taken captive by demon powers were set free. (41)

Prominent among these 'prophets' and 'apostles' was William Marrion Branham (1909-65), whose 'ability to heal the sick and raise the dead was fervently promoted by his followers'. (47) The current 'signs and wonders' movement in modern Pentecostalism owes much to the influence of people like Branham, and according to 'prophet' Bill Hamon:

The gift of miracles will be restored to its full function ... The working of miracles will cause creative miracles among the maimed and deformed. New limbs will grow back ... As needs arise, the working of miracles will enable the Church to 'walk on water', be transported by the Spirit from one geographical location to another ... and involve a greater number of incidents of people being raised from the dead. (100)

Hank Hanegraaff (*op cit*) tells us that:

[L]eaders at the Brownsville Revival in Pensacola have begun citing resurrections from the dead. For \$75, the Brownsville Revival School of Ministry will sell you a video series titled Faith to Raise the Dead. Brownsville leaders are claiming that David Hogan and his ministry associates have seen more than 200 people raised from the dead.

The expectations of people have reached such a fever pitch that some

time ago a parent who lost a child put his baby on ice and drove 350 miles to the Brownsville Assembly of God to have the baby raised from the dead. (xxii-xxiii)

As you would expect, most of these claims are rather imprecise. The resurrections themselves never seem to happen in front of independent medical witnesses or even television cameras, but 'in China', 'in Indonesia', 'in Mexico and Guatemala', or according to evangelist Randy Clark:

[P]eople are being raised from the dead ... It's all over. Germany and Africa. It's everywhere. God's doing it. (252)

Even when a story is slightly more specific, it is generally second-hand at best, and often ridiculous. Take 'prophet' Rodney Howard-Browne's story about the English healing evangelist Smith Wigglesworth (1859-1947) and his treatment of a man dying of cancer:

'Wigglesworth punched him in the stomach so hard he flew through the air and hit the floor; dead! He killed him!' ... [But] ten minutes later the man was running around the church, healed. (38)

This raises an intriguing legal question: if you kill someone and then immediately resurrect your victim, are you guilty of murder? Seriously though, what a lot of rot — and yet millions of people accept these tales without question.

Resurrection on the Web

Go to Google and search 'raising the dead' and you'll find that most of the material is of no interest to you whatsoever. However, if you persevere you'll find a number of relevant sites, some of which appear to move you tantalisingly close to the grail, which in this case is a convincing and fully-documented resurrection event.

Some sites consist merely of biblical quotations indicating that attempts to raise the dead are scriptural provided that the Holy Spirit

Raise the Dead

has given you the all-clear – www.believers.org/believe/bel165.htm:

Jesus told His disciples to raise the dead ... We should never try to raise someone from death unless we are sure it is the will of God. In this, we must be led by God's Spirit. When we are certain of God's will, we should command with authority and not give up. Death is an enemy ... and at the Name of Jesus every knee must bow ...

Other web-authors claim to have witnessed one of these miracles but the stories are fundamentally flawed eg, www.miracleshealing.com/mhc_index1/story_07_cr2.htm, where it's clear that the resurrectee, a stabbing victim, wasn't dead in the first place! In another case, a hospital patient was 'miraculously raised' through resuscitation techniques employed by her doctors. This doesn't count.

Let's cut to the chase and examine two detailed stories.

Rev Idrifua of Uganda

According to Jim Bramlett, writing in 2003 — www.choicesforliving.com/spirit/part4/raising_dead.htm — he had recently 'received a letter from a long-time missionary friend who just returned from Uganda', telling a story about one of his 'pastor friends', one Rev. Idrifua. Bramlett's friend wrote as follows:

On September 25, 1999, after preaching in a village near the town of Bostime, Uganda, [Rev Idrifua] was preparing to leave the meeting when a Muslim man approached him. The man had met a weeping mother walking along the road on her way to bury her dead child. He had told her that there was a man in town preaching about Jesus' power to raise the dead.

What a coincidence that of all the subjects Idrifua could have been preaching about, it just happened to be that one. Note also the resemblance between the setting and phrasing of this story and, say, one of Jesus' miracle stories.

The Muslim man brought the woman with the dead infant to Rev Idrifua wanting him to pray for the dead child. Rev. Idrifua asked the mother if she was a believer. She said she was. The Spirit of God came on him ...

... [H]e laid hands on the baby and strongly rebuked the spirit of death, then commanded life to return. Immediately the baby came to life crying and began to swing its arms and legs, then quieted down and began to nurse!

Rather typically, the story concludes with a fine piece of lily-gilding:

The Muslim man got so excited he went to a friend's house whose baby also had died several hours before the first baby. This dead baby was the child of a Muslim cleric ..., a Haji. He brought this dead child and its mother to Rev Idrifua. God raised the second baby to life too! Five Muslims gave their hearts to Jesus that day — including the Haji!

Clearly we can't prove that this tale is untrue, but there are many problems: the second- (or third-) hand source, the stylistic similarity to scriptural precedents, even the fact that the babies had apparently only been 'dead' for a short time. In terms of the possibility of confirmation, the only things the story has going for it are the names of the pastor and the town, and the precise date. There are very few 'Idrifuas' mentioned on the Web, although a German site refers to a 'Father Richard Idrifua' in Uganda. Bostime, if it exists, is certainly not a large town and indeed the only reference to it that I can find on the Net is in this 'raising the dead' story. As for September 25, 1999, well, I guess pastors can preach on Saturday as well as Sunday.

I remain unconvinced.

Smith Wigglesworth

Malcolm B. Heap of Midnight Ministries (www.midnightministries.org.uk/mc14.htm) doesn't like our kind:

Sceptics argue about the miracles of healing being performed in the name of Jesus ... However, there is one thing they cannot refute. Raising the dead!

When dead people come to life, sceptics may like to argue, but they haven't got a leg to stand on.

Heap informs us that in recent times there have been 'verifiable accounts of several people being brought back from death', six in Nigeria, ten others 'from various sources around the world' etc. But his only worthwhile story concerns our old mate Smith Wigglesworth who 'raised at least 14 people from the dead' and 'even called his wife back from death ...' One of Wigglesworth's biographers, George Stormont, relates an Australian incident in *Wigglesworth, A Man Who Walked With God* (55-6):

Bishop Ronald Coady and his wife were ministering in New South Wales, Australia, in 1950 where they met a Methodist deaconess called 'Sister Mary' ... While there, they were reading Stanley Frodsham's book, Smith Wigglesworth, Apostle of Faith. The incident of his raising a young woman from the dead ... had gripped them, and when Sister Mary came in they read it to her ... [Sister Mary said], 'You've known [that lady] for some time. I am that lady.'

Mary then told them of her experience with the evangelist. In 1922 she had been seriously ill and partly paralysed. Wigglesworth was visiting her town but she did not believe in divine healing and declined to attend his meetings. Her condition deteriorated and she agreed to have Wigglesworth come to her house, but before he arrived she died.

Sister Mary Pople related that she went to heaven and was allowed in the throne-room. She saw the Lord Jesus sitting on His throne. She saw light such as she had never seen and heard music such as she had never heard. Her heart was filled with rapturous joy.

Continued P 27 ...

New Guise for an Old Idea

Rebadged religion still isn't
science and never will be



Helen Lawrence, who trained and practised as a physiotherapist before taking a degree in palaeoanthropology, is the author of *Making Friends with Fossils* and *Eve's Family Tree* (available from the *Skeptics* web site).

The original idea

In 1759, philosopher, David Hume's *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* was published posthumously. It was a discourse between three people representing three different points of view on the possible attributes of character possessed by an omnipotent God. Although Britain was no longer a theocracy where Hume could have been tried for heresy in an ecclesiastical court, stating views that questioned biblical dogma was still a risky thing to do, if only because it might tarnish one's reputation.

Accordingly, Hume made his own convictions obscure and it is still difficult to work out exactly which character in the dialogues he represents — if any! He gave the personae classical names, maybe tongue in cheek to ridicule the long history of adulation for a body of 'knowledge' CS Lewis calls 'the medieval model' — all based on classical Greek authors like Aristotle. (Incidentally *The Discarded Image* is a first class account of medieval thought, with no evangelising!)

Hume calls his protagonists Demea, Cleanthes and Philo. Demea is a creationist, Cleanthes a believer in what became known as 'the design argument' and Philo takes a scientific view consistent with what was known

at the time. Hume himself may have been a mix between Philo and Cleanthes, as both appear to waver and occasionally to agree with elements of the opponent's arguments.

The rehash

Intelligent Design (ID) in its modern form is simply a rehash of the kind of thinking that surfaced among other freethinker arguments in what became known as the Enlightenment — only far less intelligent, considering the current state of scientific knowledge. David Hume had an analytical mind and was quite capable of independent thought. For instance he was a pioneer in the empirical analysis of the self. He says:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble upon some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception.

But one should remember that Hume lived a century before Darwin's theory of evolution came to the fore. He probably saw *Homo sapiens* as a being apart, at one remove from other animals, a conclusion borne of

millennia of conditioning. Hume's exercise was an attempt to put religion to the test of science at a time when the scientific method was in its infancy. The modern form of so-called ID is a bid to subvert the course of the scientific method. Proponents even envisage taking legal action against the autonomy of science in schools.

The great danger with ID is ignorance — the fervent wish to separate us from the animal world. Darwin, while appreciating the wonder of nature (he would not have said 'beauty'), stressed the importance of experimental research by breeding many different species of animal and plant and his findings led him to the conclusion that humans evolved like every other living thing on this planet. What is more, we now know that we have the genetic evidence to prove it! And if you read *The Journey of Man – a genetic odyssey* by Spencer Wells, you will see that there are a fascinating number of ways of proving the point (and there *is* a reason for the sexist title — the book is about the Y chromosome). We now find ourselves causing, albeit unwittingly, the extinction of whole species. We are, presumably, the only human species left on the planet. Many scientists and those of us who avidly try to keep up with a whole raft of sciences through reading and the media (often not quite accurate) are frankly worried. Separating ourselves from other animals is the last thing we should be doing if we don't want to become extinct ourselves!

According to the Bible we should act as stewards. Science actually says the same but the issue is complex and most rational people look to science for answers as to how to go about this duty of care. Surely even the most ardent creationist would not look up his/her Bible to find out how to treat malaria or save the Tasmanian devil!

Does ID need to be taught at all?

Some people seem pathologically disposed to doing God's thinking for him. In spite of the fact that it is supposed to be virtuous to believe without evi-

dence, diverse remedial thinking has led to a complete muddle as to exactly what the content of a belief package should be.

A free thinker in the 18th century was a person of independent mind who was not afraid to differ from church edicts and dogma but who would possibly, for safety's sake, pay lip service to the church, which was, to all intents and purposes, the arbiter of public opinion. Freedom of speech came somewhat later and is still a right that 'the church' does not readily tolerate. Of course it depends on which church and whether it is liberal or fundamentalist.

There are matters on which it might be considered that speech is too free. Governments sweat over trying to please minorities and regulations have to be constructed to control those who go beyond what is considered acceptable by a society. But by and large, freedom of speech acts as a pillar of democracy. However, just how far should we bend the rules?

Take education; the instruction of the very young. In our society it has become necessary to warn children at a tender age to be on the lookout for all sorts of circumstances that might harm them. This is the norm for social animals, in fact the whole animal world, when young, either undergoes learning or relies on instinct to guard against danger. It seems right and proper that we guard our young people from bad people and bad influences as far as we can. But should we guard them against free speech, let alone free thinking?

'Fundamentalist' schools, teaching special creation, are required to teach (side by side) the theory of natural selection, ie, evolution along with their preferred dogma as explanation for life on the planet. This bending over backwards in liberality allows for the teacher's proviso — 'this is not what we think'. That attitude may easily blunt a child's burgeoning critical faculty, particularly if it is reinforced by parents and combined with a predicted negative effect, assuming an old testament god who punishes deviation, albeit vicariously.

It would have been obvious to hunter-gatherers living a supposedly simple life, that humans had more versatile brains than other animals and if they could not win by strength or body, weapons could often outwit their prey. This understanding of the primacy of *Homo sapiens* in the grey matter department, led to a special position for *H.s* in the imagined estimation of god(s). Therefore ID was tacitly accepted in religion and stated eloquently in *Genesis*. Children steeped in a religious atmosphere learn about ID from the cradle. Schools exist where ID is already taught. Parents who don't agree with the impartiality of the scientific method can send their children to such schools.

But ID propagators have a hidden agenda. *Nature* recently published letters discussing the issue of ID being allowed to penetrate all science classes. One correspondent deplored "the seepage of this slyly religious ideology into science curricula". There are hints that the mainstream churches may not be too pleased with this development. They have educated the young for centuries and have, reluctantly perhaps, incorporated scientific findings and the teaching of them, when not to do so becomes idiotic. It is time for mainstream religion to distance itself from the modern form of ID — imported from a small USA based coterie.

The jejune repetitive nature of the "wedge strategy" document would bore most people into a coma. Phase I is reserved for "scientific research" — but surely research builds on previous research and has evidence to underpin any updates. It is difficult to understand how any research paper can be taken seriously unless it cites recognised research that has been already done on the topic under study (ie, evolution — now an immense body of knowledge). A further objective (Phase II) is to run a publicity campaign, to facilitate "Opinion-making". Phase III leads to "Cultural Confrontation and Renewal". This three-pronged attack is, presumably, to counter the Darwinian theory of evolution and replace it with Biblical

interpretations. It is bemusing to try and work out how original research can be undertaken when the outcome is already known and more or less set in concrete!

The “wedge strategy” document would make little impact on the world of real science if it were not for the fact that this poison in the chalice of truth might just influence a few deluded anti-intellectuals, who see real science as a threat to religion. Mainstream religions have yet to pronounce on this curious document (see ref. list), but if ID were ever to be allowed by governments or courts to gain admission into science classes, parents have a right to know the policy of the proponents on important social issues. Is the position of women to be based on biblical edicts? What is the attitude to homosexuals, same sex marriage, use of contraceptives, abortion, euthanasia? The US Senate has been asking these questions about a potential judge for appointment to the high court. It is reasonable for parents to be properly informed, even if ID is relegated to a class on philosophy or psychology.

How to become a creationist without believing in a young earth

There are so many proofs that the world is not a mere 6000 or even 10,000 years old that the number of Australians who believe this strange dating system must be minimal. ID is a very wishy-washy dogma, unsure of what it stands for. Some forms allow a belief in the evolutionary process over millions of years, but the subclause is murky. It seems that God is an independent agent who can step in at any stage of the proceedings. ID might be a more thoughtful quasi-creationism than the hardline variety, but it still ignores the massive amount of evidence that tells us that we are a logical part of the animal world, evolved from earlier forms of humanity and ultimately linked to apes through a common ancestor. Another well known fact about evolution is that once a living species becomes out of step with its surroundings it goes extinct.

ID is a doctrine that is apparently independent of church membership. It is plausible because it sounds reasonable and feels cosier than evolution. Liberal minded parents might see ID as acceptable in a science class because they confuse pure science with technology — which they see as anything but pure! One way of preventing adulteration of science classes would be to tell students how the scientific method works. Even very young children can understand how trial and error can lead to a positive outcome, which may be the result of independent thinking. And, the process can be verified by repetition.

It is true that although we can't prove the existence of God, we cannot prove that such a being does not exist. Chance as the *modus vivendi* of the universe sounds like chaos — but we see order in many systems and there is much we don't understand. The problem lies in jumping to conclusions without examining the evidence. When evidence is produced and pronouncements are made it is right to be sceptical and science demands such scepticism.

Science began as native curiosity and led to the building of Stone Age observatories and Arab genius in maths, medicine and civil engineering. It can be used to make a bomb, but it can also feed the hungry and provide fresh water, give early warning of natural disasters and invent life saving vaccines. To function intelligently, science needs to remain pure. It does not deserve to be traded.

References:

- Hume, David. 1993. *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*. JCA Gaskin (ed.). Oxford Univ. Press
- Lewis, CS. 1964. *The Discarded Image*. Cambridge Univ. Press
- Wells, Spencer. 2003. *The Journey of Man – a genetic odyssey*. The Penguin Press, London
- Lynch, JM. 2005. *The Wedge Strategy*. <http://www.public.asu.edu/~jmlynch/idthe/wedge.html>



... Raise the Dead from p 24

Wigglesworth then walked into Mary's room and spoiled the whole party.

...[S]he heard a voice that later she knew was Smith Wigglesworth's. He was saying, 'Death, I rebuke you in the name of Jesus'. Then he commanded Mary to live. Her eyes opened and those who had been weeping around her bed began to rejoice ... Not only was she raised from the dead, but she was totally healed of her sickness ... and of the paralysis ...

Unfortunately we are not told the nature of Mary's illness nor the basis of her paralysis. There is no mention of a doctor being present at her bedside and the facts as related seem perfectly consistent with a 'near-death experience' or even a dream.

And, as far as I can see, these Idrifua and Wigglesworth stories are the best the Web has to offer on the subject of modern resurrections. All the others that I found lack meaningful context (time and place etc.) or are disqualified through elementary flaws or obvious scriptural derivation ('this resurrection took exactly three days' etc.)

Conclusion

There is a very unhealthy mindset at work here. There is also an immense amount of scope for both fraud and heartache. Even some of the more thoughtful Pentecostals realise the primitive and dangerous nature of this type of thinking. Several of the people mentioned here are or were associated with the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination in Australia. I'd like to see our politicians consider the whole picture a lot more carefully before giving aid and comfort to these atavistic churches.



The Winchester Mystery House of San Jose

Superstition does strange things to believers



Karen Stollznow, Skeptics committee member and expatriate trans-Pacific correspondent, is a linguistics lecturer in California.

Discovering that I am an investigative skeptic, a colleague of mine remarked, “you must go to the Winchester Mystery House!” Years ago, I’d seen a documentary about this bizarre mansion with a curious past, and so I set out to investigate the story on an appropriate day, Halloween. While it passes largely unnoticed in Australia, Halloween has near holiday status in the US. For weeks beforehand, stores are decorated festively while houses are adorned with effigies of witches, vampires, grim reapers and demons. Hedgerows are covered in mock spider webs with ‘monster’s claws’ peeking out. Gardens are elaborately decorated with dangling plastic skeletons, bats, polystyrene tombstones and many varieties of pumpkins. Trick-or-treating is immensely popular and even the big kids get into the ‘spirit’ of the event, donning costumes and holding parties. In this tradition, the Winchester Mystery House conducts Halloween flashlight tours.

Located in Downtown San Jose, California, this incredible Gothic Victorian mansion is an oddity. Now surrounded by freeways, fast food outlets and the high rises of Silicon

Valley, in bygone days, when Santa Clara County was known for its orchards, this legendary house was designed and built by the eccentric heiress, Sarah Winchester. This, then, isn’t so much a paranormal story as a story about a woman whose life was reputedly ruled and ruined by the paranormal.

Sarah Lockwood Pardee was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1839. In 1862, at the height of the Civil War, Sarah married William Winchester, the sole child of Oliver Winchester, owner of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winchester_Repeating_Arms_Company. The couple had only one child, Annie, who died in infancy. Oliver died in 1880, quickly followed by William in 1881. As her husband, like her child, had died of tuberculosis, Sarah became a major benefactor to pulmonary research, donating \$2 million during her lifetime to this cause. As the last Winchester, Sarah became an independently wealthy woman, when her husband bequeathed her fifty percent of the Winchester Company and the substantial income of \$1000 **per day**, tax free as it was then!

Cruel counsel

Sarah slipped into a deep depression following the deaths of her family members. But do the facts end here? Now alone and vulnerable, she was reputedly convinced that her family were victims of a curse.

Allegedly, she travelled to Boston to consult with psychic medium Adam

Coons. Instead of

providing Sarah with a comforting message, Coons confirmed the wealthy widow's fears that the Winchester family was cursed. In illogical logic, he explained that the spirits of those people and animals who had died at the hands of a Winchester rifle, 'the gun that won the west', were avenging their deaths by claiming the lives of her husband, child and father-in-law — Sarah was to be next. Coons' had a peculiar 'solution'. The only way Sarah could appease the spirits was to build them a house. He advised that his client move west to build this home. As long as the house was being built, the spirits would not harm Sarah. Utterly convinced by Coons and desperate to remove this 'curse', Sarah relocated to San Jose and purchased an eight room farmhouse.

Coons' cruel counsel initiated Sarah's creative mission, resulting in a constant, 38 year work-in-progress leading to an astonishing labyrinthian mansion. On what was once a 161 acre estate, the contemporary building boasts some staggering statistics: 160 rooms and 4 storeys (in its prime the house had 7 storeys!), with 6 kitchens, 40 bedrooms, 19 chimneys, 40 staircases, 47 fireplaces, 52 skylights, 950 doors, 3 elevators, 2 ballrooms and 10 000 windows!



The Mansion in 1900

It is said that Sarah had builders working 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, over the four decades of construction. However, there were only ever two sets of formal blueprints — for the elevators and the boiler. All other plans were sketched onto scraps of paper, napkins or even tablecloths and were destroyed upon implementation. Was this the procedure of an amateur architect or, according to legend, a deliberate ploy to prevent the 'spirits' from knowing the outlay of the house? Construction began in 1884 and ended on the day of Sarah's death, September 5, 1922. In total, the mansion was remodelled over 600 times, at a cost of five and a half million dollars!

I attended the complete Estate Tour of the house, including a guided

tour of the mansion (a generous viewing of 110 of the rooms!) and a 'behind the scenes' guided tour of the estate grounds. Tours are conducted all day but I decided to attend the last one of the evening, to appreciate the eerie ambiance of the house. In its heyday, the house was gas lit. Aside from a few contemporary lights, the tours are held mostly in darkness and with many of the many windows

wide open, allowing in the cold valley air. Sadly, none of the original furnishings adorn what must have once been an opulently decorated home. On Sarah's death, her sole relative, niece Frances Marriot, auctioned off most of the furnishings, from the crockery to an ornate bird bath in the aviary. The tour guide informed us that it took eight weeks to remove all the furniture from the premises, at six truckloads per day! Only 24 of the rooms are now furnished sparsely with donations, all genuine period furniture, but not the original household décor. Aside from the fireplaces, elevators, a chandelier, an organ and some original marble and tiling, all that remains is the house, a cold, dark and empty shell.

One of the first rooms we visited was the 'Séance Room', built deep inside the house. This room has three exits but only one entrance. One door leads to a sink while another door opens to a ten foot drop to the kitchen! According to our guide, this is where Sarah held nightly séances between the hours of midnight and 2am. At midnight the bells in the bell tower would ring to summon the spirits to the séance. When the séance was completed, the bells would toll to signal that it was time for the spirits



The Mansion today

Winchester House

to depart. Conflicting stories state that Sarah's construction efforts were 'guided' by her husband, while the guide asserted that Sarah's séances were an attempt to 'contact' the spirits of those killed by Winchester rifles, to seek their 'advice' and instructions on how the following day's construction should proceed. Apparently, Sarah's goal was to never complete the remodelling, lest the spirits exact their revenge upon the last living Winchester.

Guilt?

If we believe the stories, when Sarah began her quest to placate the 'spirits', she became inextricably bound to the paranormal, with superstition and fear influencing every part of her life. Sarah Winchester was, by all accounts, an educated woman of her time. She had attended school, was fluent in four languages and was an accomplished musician. So, why did she succumb to the occult? Why did she believe Coombs' superstitious theory and illogical 'solution', and to such an obsessive extent? My theory is that Sarah suffered a powerful combination of grief, a natural predisposition to depression and considerable guilt at her family's bloodthirsty trade and subsequent affluence. Apparently Sarah often referred to her family's wealth as "blood money" derived from misfortune. Furthermore, this was still the zenith of Spiritualism. Perhaps these factors led to Sarah's indoctrination into the occult and superstitious existence, her substantial wealth allowing for the indulgence of her eccentricity.

If any readers have ever participated in a séance, they will recall that the spirits seem to only ever 'know' as much as the medium does, and have lost the ability to spell correctly. Well, the spirits that Sarah 'contacted' were hardly architects or structural engineers! The Winchester mansion has many, many peculiar and redundant features. This is



Seance Room, with window bars



Window to nowhere



Double-back staircase

a house that could have been the brainchild of MC Escher.

On tour

Where to begin? The house itself looks like an elaborate, colourful Victorian mansion, albeit with many add-ons; turrets, cupolas, and cornices. We started the tour in the stage coach entrance and as we entered the house itself, were directed to peer around a corner at a stairwell. This infamous stairwell leads straight to the ceiling!

This house is as eccentric as its owner and designer. The legend asserts that Sarah built the maze-like mansion to confuse and disorient any lurking spirits, but the design truly succeeded in confusing her staff! Given it's such a large and complicated premises, not to mention that Sarah didn't ever want anyone to know her whereabouts, servants were summoned to a wing, rather than a room! The house is a web of corridors, stairwells and rooms within rooms within rooms. There are many doors high enough to only accommodate Sarah's diminutive 4 foot 10 inch frame. There is a tiny, superfluous balcony. One room has a window built into the floor. Countless closets, doors and windows open out onto blank walls. A 'door to nowhere' opens outward to an 8-foot drop! A blind chimney stops short of the ceiling. There are numerous trapdoors and double-back hallways. There are security bars on internal windows. There is a 'Room of Fires', a sauna-like room with seven sources of heat, built to "ease Mrs Winchester's arthritis". Most rooms have strange, awkwardly-shaped alcoves of varying height and depth, that aren't large enough to house anything at all.

All the bathrooms have glass doors and spy holes, while the kitchen was designed so that Sarah could overhear the gossip of her staff. Apparently, if anyone ever proposed building plans, discussed her plans, or her, they were fired on the spot. For their loyalty and silence,

her staff were paid \$3 per day, triple the standard rate. Throughout the house, curious, winding stairwells climb only a few feet and have risers of only two inches. While the tour guide initially explained this as another architectural attempt to 'confuse the spirits', I was pleased to hear a grain of skepticism employed in the alternate theory, that Sarah may have designed these 'easy riser' stairwells with her chronic arthritis in mind.

Earthquake

During the 1906 earthquake, in the early hours of the morning, Sarah became trapped in a room in the front section of the house. The walls shifted and the door jammed shut. She had been in the habit of sleeping in a different room each night, purportedly to 'confuse' the spirits as to her whereabouts. Again, this only confused her staff, when they couldn't find her. Eventually, after a full hour of searching, she was located. The marks still exist on the door where a crowbar was employed to wedge it open. The earthquake damage to the house was extensive. The entire top three floors collapsed into the garden and were never rebuilt. We were told that the incident convinced Sarah that the 'spirits' were displeased with the progression of her handiwork as it appeared that she was nearing completion of the home. She promptly sealed off the front section of the house, thirty rooms in total, and they were never again used during her lifetime. Supposedly, this was to ensure that the house was perpetually 'under construction'. To this day, they remain as they were, partially remodelled and with broken plaster and damaged walls as evidence of the quake. This episode also persuaded Sarah to select a permanent bedroom, with easy access to her séance room, and it was here that she died in her sleep, at the age of 83.

Today, the Winchester Mystery House is regarded as the "safest

house in California" as far as earthquakes are concerned, as the mansion is built on 'floating foundations'. This is a feature implemented by her builders and not of her own design. Contrary to this title, Sarah had yet another strange feature built into her home. A Victorian superstition of the time dictated that one column in every home must be installed upside down, for good luck. As usual, Sarah took this notion to the extreme. She reversed this tradition, and had every column placed upside down, bar one!



Stairway to nowhere

It appears that Sarah was ahead of her time for environmental design, as an upstairs greenhouse was designed to conserve water. This feature was also built into her kitchens and bathrooms. The house has many mod-cons that were seldom found at the time of its construction, including steam and forced-air heating, indoor toilets and plumbing, button controlled gas lights, a hot water shower and three elevators, one model which is unique to the house.

Guests not welcome

Despite the many guest rooms, parlours and ball rooms, obviously named for convention, Sarah never had any guests, aside, allegedly, from one famous gentleman who never made it past the front door. One day, US President Teddy Roosevelt made an unannounced visit to the Winchester home. A particular rifle had been named after

him, a limited edition commemorative weapon the 'Theodore Roosevelt'. Appearing on the doorstep of the home, a staff member who opened the door, obviously unaccustomed to visitors, reprimanded the startled President for daring to try to enter through the front door! Obviously mistaken for a job applicant, Roosevelt was advised, "You'll enter the house through the back entrance, like the rest of the servants!" Roosevelt was so offended that he left the grounds and never returned! In a more skeptical but less dramatic account, Roosevelt had requested a visit with Sarah but he was flatly refused. Contradicting the tour guide story, a book produced by the estate asserts that Harry Houdini once made an impromptu visit to the house. Houdini was graciously welcomed and even attended a midnight séance! However, this event took place in 1924, two years after Sarah's death!

If we believe the stories, Sarah must have led a lonely and tortured life. Despite her painfully arthritic hands, she would often play the ballroom organ with great energy, "for the spirit guests". Every night, the lady of the house would sit down to a lavish dinner, alone. Or so it would seem. The elaborately decorated table was always set for thirteen; Sarah, and her twelve 'spirit' guests. Contrary to the triskaidekaphobes, Sarah had an obsession with the number thirteen that was reflected throughout the house. This is a recurring theme everywhere, from the thirteen windows in most rooms to the thirteen steps for each stairwell to the thirteen drains in every sink. In the séance room, there are 13 clothes hooks for the 13 coats she used in her nightly ceremonies. Sarah was a preferred customer of the Tiffany Company in New York and the house still contains many fine examples of lead-light windows. The most prized example contains hundreds of crystals and cost her

Winchester House

\$15,000. She was once invited to design her own leadlight window and created a piece that is a swirl of colours and stars — of course, thirteen stars.

One of the last places we visited was the ballroom, an elegant room that reputedly cost \$9,000 to build. A door in the centre of the room was locked at all times during Sarah's lifetime and only she had the key. Upon her death, her staff eagerly seized the keys and unlocked the door. Inside, they found a vault. Inside, they found another vault, and yet another within that. After unlocking a total of five vaults, they came to the 'treasure'. Not money, not jewellery, as they had expected, but a lock of her husband's hair, a lock of her daughter's hair and their obituaries. Had Sarah, in keeping with superstition, carefully stored these precious keepsakes, to hide them from those who would use them against her, in a spell, or a curse?

San Jose wasn't always known as Silicon Valley. A tour brochure claims that, prior to the Dot Com boom, the region was previously known as the "Valley of the Heart's Delight" as it was renowned for the Winchester orchards and local farms. The Winchester estate, in its 160 acre glory, was mostly farmland where plums, apricots, almonds and walnuts were grown, dried and sold at markets under Mrs Winchester's own packing label. Only a few trees still exist on the grounds. The estate also contains a Firearms Museum and a Products Museum. The Winchester Company didn't only produce guns, they also produced cutlery, flashlights, fishing tackle, roller skates and electric irons. They were also the country's largest producer of hardware, including farm and garden tools.

On Sarah's death, the house and contents were sold off by her remaining relative, the mansion left unfinished and unfurnished. It was purchased by a group of investors who planned to use it as a tourist attraction. Within two years, the house was opened for self-guided tours. Apparently, Robert Ripley was one of

the very first visitors to the property. Sadly, during these unsupervised visits, much of the property was damaged, vandalised or stolen.

Ghosties, ghoulies etc

But are there any ghost stories surrounding the Winchester Mystery House? It is important that I note this tour is marketed as an historical tour and not as a ghost tour. I was only informed about any 'possible' paranormal phenomena after questioning the tour guide. While my guide didn't have any stories of her own, she had heard many stories from visitors and other guides. As usual, these are the stock ghost stories; footsteps down the halls, cold spots, orbs captured in photographs, the sound of doorknobs turning and doors banging (with so many doors and windows open during the tours, why is that so strange?) and sightings of Sarah. Various books and websites repeat these same stories about the mansion, including other tales of phantom organ playing, disembodied voices and screams, strange lights, strange smells and even sightings of ectoplasm! Of course, various 'psychics' have toured the house and capitalised on its reputation, including Sylvia Browne, who confirmed the 'curse' and reported to have witnessed the spirits of both Sarah and fallen soldiers from the Civil War. Most surprising of all, is that there aren't any reports of phantom hammering and construction. These people just don't know how to invent a plausible ghost story!

Speculation

Should we be skeptical about the stories surrounding the Winchester Mystery House? Absolutely! We have no primary documents attesting to the stories, in fact, they are all anecdotal and usually conflicting. Sarah was extremely reclusive and didn't leave behind any diaries or letters that revealed her beliefs. Books about the house and owner all provide indirect, second-hand information — one popular book was written by the grandson of a former gar-

dener! Have the stories been embellished over time? After all, Sarah was the subject of much gossip and rumour during her lifetime, and beyond. Did Sarah really visit Adam Coombs and even if she did, what took place during the sitting? Did she receive other advice that influenced her actions? Was she profoundly superstitious, or was this all-consuming project just an eccentric hobby for Sarah, a distraction from her loneliness and sorrow?

Unfortunately, this is all speculation, as are most of the stories surrounding the mansion and owner. The strange, inexplicable features of the house are attributed to Sarah's attempts to placate or confuse the 'spirits' who had cursed her family. But are they really "inexplicable"? A little bit of conjecture can provide potential explanations for many of the strange features. The winding 'easy-riser' steps designed with a pragmatic purpose, for Sarah's mobility. Barred windows in internal rooms? Perhaps these internal rooms were once external and the bars served a valid security purpose. The chimney that stops short of the ceiling? Perhaps this was where a roof once stood. A window in the floor of a room? Perhaps this was also a roof and the window a skylight. Doors that open onto walls? More examples of rooms added on to rooms. After all, this is an extremely *ad-hoc* house!

It is said that when Sarah died, news of her demise spread quickly throughout the estate, to the servants and builders who immediately laid down their tools. Apparently, nails can be found throughout the mansion, half-hammered in, the work halted mid-task. However, the existing house and 6 acres of the estate necessitate constant maintenance; there are gardens to care for, rooms to paint and constant cleaning and repairs. Fact or fiction, the construction continues, and the alleged 'quest' lives on.



The Phone Call

An excellent example of Skepticism in action

I urge you to make simple phone calls whenever you see advertising or TV programs making claims that may be unsupportable. By the end of this article you'll see how simple it is.

Fair Trading Legislation

On 14 November 2003 the new NSW *Fair Trading Act* came into force. A Media Release from the Minister of 12 November 2003 said: "promoters would be required to provide scientific evidence of the benefits of their products." It wasn't quite correct because the Director-General of Fair Trading has a discretion whether to ask for proof or not. But it was good news anyway.

The legislation says in Division 3A Section 23A:

Power to require proof of claims and representations:

(1) The Director-General may require a person who, in trade or commerce, published or caused to be published a statement promoting, or apparently intended to promote, the supply of goods or services or the sale or grant of an interest in land, to provide the Director-General with proof of any claim or representation (express or implied) made in the statement.

The Minister's Media Release said failure to provide scientific evidence

could result in fines of up to \$110,000. Actually the word "scientific" doesn't occur in the Act. But it was good news anyway.

You can download the legislation from www.austlii.edu.au and your state probably has similar legislation. For example in Queensland it's the *Fair Trading Act* 1989.

The Minister said in her media release, "*Fair Trading may also seek injunctive orders from the Supreme Court to prohibit them making such claims and compensating consumers who have suffered detriment due to these false claims.*"

The Claim

Having followed a long series of articles by naturopath, Paul Keogh, in our local newspaper, and having no luck with the editor reminding him about his obligations under the new legislation, I phoned my local Department of Fair Trading and followed up with this email cc'd to the Minister:

Re: Daily News, newspaper story 20 Feb 2004 page 11 by Paul Keogh headed "Herbs can turbo-charge the brain"

Thanks for outlining to me the complaints process.

In order for me to be kept informed about the progress of the official



Kevin McCready enjoys playing tea-towels when he's not translating Chinese to English or riding a tandem recumbent tricycle. He escaped to northern NSW after nine years servitude in Canberra as a public servant.

The Phone Call

investigation you have set in motion about this article, you told me I must write to you with an official complaint. Thus this email. Please keep me informed of the investigation.

I believe that Australian Provincial News (APN) uses Mr Keogh's column in other of its mastheads in Australia and New Zealand. This is not the first time that such articles by Mr Keogh have been run in recent times by APN. I hope the Office of Fair Trading will also investigate those and other activities of Mr Keogh since the inception of the new legislation.

I understand that this new legislation operating in NSW puts the onus of scientific proof on APN and Mr Keogh when they make claims which consumers should be able to rely on. I complain about the statements made regarding the benefits of the five following herbs:

- . *Bacopa monniera* (brahmi),
- . *Centella asiatica* (gotu kola),
- . *Siberian Ginseng*,
- . *Schizandra chinensis*,
- . *Ginkgo biloba*.

My complaint is that APN and Mr Keogh in various publications, including the one referred to above, represents that in isolation or in combination these herbs are effective for treatment or improvement in 41 instances of (from his article):

- "turbo-charging the brain"
- "calming the nervous system"
- "enhancing adrenal recovery"
- "increasing energy"
- "feeling tense"
- "poor memory"
- "loss of concentration"
- "unusual fatigue"
- "irritability"
- "anxiety"
- "mild depression"

- "reduced vision"
 - "reduced hearing"
 - "light headedness"
 - "dizziness"
 - "insomnia"
 - "unrefreshed sleep"
 - "aiding knowledge"
 - "improving memory"
 - "decreasing the extinction rate of newly acquired information"
 - "significantly improving speed of visual processing"
 - "learning rate"
 - "memory consolidation"
 - "enhancing serotonin levels"
 - "depression"
 - "intelligence promoting properties"
 - "increasing alertness"
 - "attention span"
 - "learning"
 - "recall"
 - "sexual depletion"
 - "anti-ulcer properties"
 - "preventing alcohol induced gastric ulcers"
 - "strengthening gastric mucosal barriers"
 - "inhibiting free radicals"
 - "cognitive enhancing"
 - "increasing the body's ability to adapt to adverse physical conditions"
 - "stimulating the central nervous system without overstimulating it"
 - "improving concentration"
 - "improving co-ordination [sic]"
 - "alleviating headache"
- I also complain that Mr Keogh and APN represent that *Ginkgo biloba* in combination with the first four above mentioned herbs is effective in the following 15 instances:
- "inhibiting oxidative damage"
 - "improving blood circulation to brain

- cells"
- "being a smart drug"
- "enhancing attention span"
- "enhancing memory"
- "enhancing learning"
- "enhancing intelligence"
- "inhibiting age-related cognitive impairment"
- "inhibiting stress-related cognitive impairment"
- "improving sleep for people on anti-depressants"
- "raising levels of happiness"
- "raising levels of optimism"
- "raising levels of motivation"
- "compensating for self-neglect"
- "compensating for self-abuse"

Please understand that I take the same view of "alternative medicine" as I take of any other forms of medicine: they must all be evidence-based.

My knowledge of science and medicine causes me to doubt if Mr Keogh has the evidence for the claims he makes.

Regards

Kevin McCready

The Reply

David O'Connor, Commissioner for Fair Trading, replied on 3 August 2004 (6 months later) saying:

The Office of Fair Trading established that after careful consideration the contents of the specific article, the subject of your complaint did not merit a notice to substantiate being issued to Mr Keogh. The information that was contained in the article was within reasonable parameters and was viewed as being an opinion that Mr Keogh could form, based upon Mr Keogh's accreditation and experience as a naturopath and a specialist in medical herbalism.

But David went on to thank me for bringing the matter to his attention and said:

Fair Trading advised Mr Keogh that his future articles will be monitored and that he should ensure that he can substantiate any claims or representations that he may make in these articles.

At least Paul was now on notice and I expected he would have been made aware of his duties to citizens under the legislation.

Round Two

I continued to cast a skeptical eye on Paul Keogh's articles. Research on the internet also showed links between Paul, Global Therapeutics, Fusion Health and Oriental Botanicals. And lo and behold, within ten days I wrote the following back to David O'Connor about Paul:

I am sorry to have to report that in an article published on page 11 of the Tweed Daily News Friday 13 August 2004 he promoted a website (www.fusionhealth.com.au 1800 550 103) some of which testimonials I have attached.

"Testimonials" on the website claimed:

1. *"immediate" relief from chronic hayfever by taking a concoction of Chinese herbs including Bupleurum and Pinellia (don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying these are ineffective, rather that evidence needs to be provided beyond the silly claim that they've around for thousands of years - so has wife bashing);*

2. *A statement from Denis L Stewart, Director of Southern Cross Herbal School, Gosford NSW saying "ASTRA 8 is arguably the most powerful and effective treatment for addressing weakened or depressed immune system disorders, ranging from simple recurrent infections of the respiratory system through to more compromised immunological states like chronic fatigue syndrome*

and some cases of HIV/AIDS, chronic hepatitis and even cancer."

Notice the medicalised language and the use of words like "arguably", "addressing" (not curing or treating) or "some cases of HIV/AIDS" (not all cases). However, the words of the legislation are clear. They state "apparently intended to promote" and "representation (express or implied)".

3. *Another testimonial re chronic fatigue and ASTRA 8 said "I am a registered nurse and can honestly say that I have never seen such a miraculous cure."*

4. *Another testimonial extolled the virtues of Fusion Health's Cold Flu Cough medicine: "so I tried some with immediate results. The fever subsided and didn't return, the clear watery mucus stopped running from my nose and the sore throat also disappeared overnight." Again the implication can be drawn that it is a cure for the common cold.*

Pressure Mounts

The Commissioner for Fair Trading wrote back to me on 9 September 2004 saying:

The Office of Fair Trading intends to investigate certain claims or representations made on the website www.fusionhealth.com.au which is operated by Global Therapeutics Pty Limited. When the investigation is complete a Fair Trading officer will advise you directly of any outcomes.

In the interim, should you wish to make an inquiry regarding this matter or provide any additional material, please telephone Mr Tony Stanley of Fair Trading on 9895 0551.

The response was quicker and more positive this time. Perhaps the Department was concerned about the imputations of cancer and AIDS treatment. I could also understand if they were concerned that despite the earlier warning, Paul had promoted a website with such claims.

The Denouement

The Department asked for evidence under s.23A. None was provided. A summons was issued and a plea entered. Before the final hearing the company changed its plea to guilty. The company was also asked by the Department to publish ads in major daily newspapers correcting any misunderstandings which may have been implied in their earlier advertising. I don't know if this happened.

For the record I should report that in my discussions with a Global Therapeutics representative he said their testimonial webpages were not linked to their home page, were not meant to be public, and had been an error by a person who no longer worked with them.

More Simple Phone Calls

In the last month I have made a few phone calls to advertisers and newspapers when I have seen claims I think may be difficult to substantiate. I'm unfailingly polite. I tell them who I am and that I would not like them to be sued by the Department of Fair Trading. I ask them if they are aware of s.23A of the *Fair Trading Act* and I have it available to read to them. I also outline the Global Therapeutics case without naming the company. And I let them know in the friendliest way I can that I'll keep an eye on future editions of the publication in which the claims were made.

The responses I have had so far have been quite good. People thank me for calling and I know they have taken careful notes. Newspaper advertising executives have been particularly interested.

Perhaps in future the Department of Fair Trading might sue the publication which publishes unsupported claims. Our best hope is a more scientifically literate society - a topic for another day.



A Skeptic's Search For God Part 2

Completing an investigation into an improbable journey

I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.

Stephen Roberts

In part 1 of this review I followed author Ralph Muncaster through his skeptical childhood and the temptations of university. We had reached the point where Ralph revealed the true measure of his skepticism by accepting a stranger's assurance that people really can be swallowed by whales or large fishes, spend "extended periods" and "in one case more than a day" inside the brute and emerge still ticking.

That Ralph is happy to take this hearsay curiosity and present it to us as fact is a bit of a worry, particularly given the tendency of creationist writers like him to quote from each other. A trusting reader will tend to believe something that is put as fact. If a reference is given, they will want to believe that the author has verified that the proposition was proved in the work referred to. Checking out the reference takes time, but as Ian Plimer showed in *Telling Lies for God*, when the work is done we see that creationist authors are often more concerned with ministering their foregone conclusions than in presenting an honest argument for the reader to assess.

A bonus mark to those readers who noticed that the hearsay assur-

ance was that a person could survive for more than a day in a whale or a large fish. So why does Ralph's mate not even know whether it was a fish or a whale? Or is he saying that there has been at least one instance of each?

When conditions prevent scuba divers from 'getting wet', they console each other by talking endlessly about dive experiences, idiosyncrasies of equipment and secrets of reducing air use. If a person really had been swallowed by a whale or fish, ever, even once, then we would all damn well know about it, including the species. Neither a fish nor a whale version of such a story exists even as a myth. But Ralph has begun the process of trying to convince us that we can take the Bible literally. Unfortunately for him, the story of Jonah is mentioned twice in the Bible: featuring a fish in the book of *Jonah*, but a whale in *Matthew*.

I agree that if the tale of Jonah is meant to be allegorical then it does not matter whether it was a whale or a large fish — whale sharks are big enough or maybe a big white pointer who had forgotten to chew properly like his mother taught him — but the Bible can also perplex you over what should be straightforward stuff. Take the genealogy of Jesus back to David — not inspiring reading, but it was considered important enough to put at the very beginning of the *New Testament*. The scrupulous historian Luke has a go as well. Alas, the discrepancies begin with



Martin Hadley, President of Australian Skeptics Inc, barrister and patron of purry creatures everywhere.

Jesus' grandfather who is Jacob according to Matthew but Heli in Luke. Matthew ends up with 27 generations whereas Luke gets 42. You can find a comparative table in the *Skeptics Annotated Bible* (which is a useful tool for dealing with fundamentalists, or at least having a bit of fun with them).

Meanwhile, Ralph accepts the kindly stranger's recommendation to pursue creationist literature, which may explain where Ralph ends up in life — preaching and writing books for those with “belief struggles”. But there is no need to struggle. Just go with the flow. What should a believer do when study of the Bible leads to an uncomfortable feeling that too many things do not stack up and the more literally you take it, the worse it gets? Ralph's answer is like what we might think about an aging friend who cannot find romance even through the internet: just lower your standards and you will eventually get an acceptable result. Ralph's level of credulity is akin to a friend whose requirements for a partner have become a pulse and a day job.

Taking a chance on chance

Ralph is good at reassuring the reader with lots of sound factual material, but his argument worries me in places. For example, when Ralph sets out to calculate the probability of life arising without a God, he stipulates these conditions:

Reproductive cell components must be gathered.

Correct specifications of all components must appear in the same place at the same time.

Correct components must be properly assembled.

Destructive elements present must not overwhelm cell assembly.

Cell assembly must be energised with life.

He has set the bar too high by requiring random emergence of a complex cell. He retreats from this

later to a simpler form of life but he stipulates that “*all steps must be completed well within the time frame of the Universe (only 15 billion years are available).*” This looks fishy.

Take my word for it that I have acquired a charm that will improve my gambling odds — a platinum locket containing a carved crystal image of Shane Warne. Suppose I head off to the roulette table to test it. I believe it will improve the odds but I don't know how much — the extent of the improvement is the mystery of the Warnie crystal! The odds of spinning a single number are 1/37. What if I spin my number on spin 4? What have I proved?

We Skeptics know that the crystal truly has no effect (as true as my middle name is Warne) and one lucky spin proves nothing. Hence the problem with Ralph's method. He might prove that random life generation is so unlikely, that it should take x billion years. So what? He says the actual timing of the emergence of life defies probability and so is convincing evidence that a god must have done it. But it could be a bit of luck, with our sample size of one.

Of course, if I play 37 wheels at once, odds are I will get a single number on the first spin. Similarly, the probability of the chance emergence of life depends upon the number of other earth-like planets. Even if we knew that life had arisen only on Earth throughout the universe, the presence of every other earth-like planet makes it less outlandish that life arose here by chance.

My general understanding is that the estimated number of earth-like planets out there is continually being revised upwards. How many wheels are spinning in Ralph's universe? He invokes a line of authority whereby the idea of there being ANY other planet capable of producing life is completely rejected. So he not only improves the odds for himself against the chance emergence argument, but he also acquires the idea that our exclusive experience of life

implies an intelligent designer's special plan for us.

Ralph starts to get very enthused about the complexity of life. He appears to be a member of what I call the ‘see-the-squid-it-moves-by-sucking-water-in-one-end-and-blowing-it-out-the-other-wow-that's-amazing-therefore-God-exists’ school of theology. Ralph's book is riddled with impressive facts and big numbers. The complex activities of the cell — “*a single cell is far more complicated structurally than the most advanced factory in the world*” — take place in a space one thousandth the size of a full-stop. The DNA from a single human body would stretch out to 50 billion kilometres!

Quotes are where you find them

Time for another dialogue. (Like Bo Bo's Fat Pizza Pizzas, they're BIG and they're CHEESY!)

One day I was playing golf with a business associate. He brought a friend with him named Mark. When I discovered that Mark taught biology at a local college, I asked to ride in the cart with him. By the third hole he had affirmed that he strongly supported the theory of evolution, and I knew this would be a great round regardless of the score I shot that day. On the fourth hole, his drive sliced wide right. Mine too...

I will spare you the fulsome text. Bottom line is that Mark tells Ralph that the most basic bacterium would have needed 100,000 base pairs of DNA. He is no longer talking about a cell but the big numbers help prepare the reader for the conclusion that it is just too complicated to have happened without a creator!

Ralph next extracts Fred Hoyle, a brilliant man who loved a scrap and was often wrong. I am wary of important quotes taken out of context but here is all Ralph gives us:

...the likelihood of the formation of life from inanimate matter is one to a number with 40 thousand naughts after it. It is enough to bury Darwin and the whole theory of evolution.

There was no primeval soup, neither on this planet nor on any other, and if the beginnings of life were not random they must therefore have been the product of purposeful intelligence.

It is fairly clear by the end of this book that Ralph wants the Bible taken literally. He probably insists that it was all done in 'twenty four six' but he might concede longer 'metaphorical days' as being just short of burnable heresy. Either way, Fred Hoyle is about as much in bed with Ralph as I am. Fred was sure that life came here from elsewhere in the universe — brought by comets from some place much older than the earth.

This is typical creationist method. When I can filch a quote from him, mine enemy's enemy is my friend. Ralph invoking Hoyle would be like John Howard criticising Labor policies by quoting Trotsky's criticisms of other communists.

Designer arguments

When Ralph finally gets to the number crunching he takes:

The time since the beginning of the universe until life first began.

The "commonly accepted" amount of matter in the universe, broken down into sub-atomic particles [not quite sure why he has done this — I thought there were molecules in the soup, not isolated sub-atomic particles].

*An assumed number of interactions per second [taken from a book called *What is creation science?* so that's reassuring.] and the chance of life emerging randomly turns out to be 1 in 10 to the power of 99,999,999,879.*

It was absolutely impossible just to get the parts together to start the first simple bacterium, let alone all the amazing changes that had to happen after that so human beings could finally evolve. Random chance could not possibly assemble the first cell. So all the talk about fossils and everything else was essentially moot.

Really? All Ralph has supposedly proven is that the first life form looks like it needed an intelligent designer. Now maybe the designer created all the species at once, but some did not survive the flood, which of course created most of the fossils, and if you are wondering why you don't find some modern species lying there alongside the old fossils, well don't forget that the creationists have those footprints of men walking with dinosaurs....

Or maybe the designer kicked off the first living thing and thought that evolution would be a capital way of letting things move on from there. Sit back and see what happens. Rather like my approach to gardening.

The second version means you can take the natural world as you find it, including the fossils of various ages. And you don't need to play sillybuggers with changes in the speed of light or radioactive decay etc to try to fit things into Bishop Ussher's timeframe. From his number crunching, Ralph has inferred the presence of a designer at the moment life began, but such is perfectly consistent with an old Earth on which species have evolved, diversified and become extinct in ways still being deciphered.

Ralph needs to be reminded or informed for the first time that Darwin pondered the origin of species, not life in the first instance. He reasoned that if species could arise through evolution, then the idea of a once only creation in 24-6 had to go, but a creator who instigates evolution is not precluded, as most Christians realise. If Ralph's numerical exercise is valid, it does not disprove the work that Darwin started and others have continued with.

Creationists try to belittle the discipline of evolutionary biology by insisting that it is just one theory. Some evolutionists differ as to details of the process and the usual creationist *sequitur* is to characterise this as large scale defection from Darwin's one theory, which is defended as 'dogma' by the implacable minority. Then, in what I regard as

indicating a guilty conscience, a creationist will typically claim that you need faith to be an evolutionist! It is as silly as saying that economics comprises the theory of the Invisible Hand and that the disagreements between economists show that no valid economic principles exist.

In reality we have an idea that is as simple and profound as Adam Smith's invisible hand; not dogma, but something to think about: non random survival of randomly varying hereditary instructions for building embryos.

Meanwhile Ralph has only got as far as a generic god who started it all off. Thanks to another piece of wisdom from the whale story man, Ralph wants to believe that his god allows microevolution only — no macroevolution! Species may change internally and even in ways we can see, but only as long as they do not become separate species.

Ralph's god liked what he created so there was no need for any kind of evolution at all. Well, that is what they used to say. That trench became hard to defend when the little moth changed colour for starters. So Ralph's god moves in mysterious ways, allowing microevolution but not macroevolution. Ralph does not tell us why.

Ralph's conclusions come from untested assertions of his dialogue companions, and some shenanigans with probability. Ralph seeks to calm his flock and remove "belief struggles" but the ones doing the real struggling, as in putting in the real hard yakka, are the scientists who know that tomorrow's discovery could discredit part of today's wisdom. No true scientist sits with the conclusions of Darwin or Gould or any researcher as smugly as Ralph holds to his, which include:

Evolution cannot work because too many simultaneous mutations are needed to achieve a simple change such as adding an eye. Hence there is "no proven mechanism for transition from lower to higher life forms".

Groan. Not the eye-thing again. *Très passé*. This is the creationist

trick of postulating the probability of getting an instant change in all the genes needed for something to appear fully developed and just right — like an eagle’s eye. That probability is very low. But small mutations that are neutral or which create a slight advantage will tend to be preserved. Take an animal with no sense of sight. If a mutation to part of its skin gives it the ability to detect light from dark — the kind of information you get if you walk around with your eyes closed — then that is a useful advantage to be getting along with. Meanwhile, mutations involving inefficiency, such as an eye that is prone to infection, will tend to be eliminated. With plenty of time, the changes we see are explicable. A lot of creationists would settle down if they could just get their minds (unfortunately, the word is an overstatement in some cases) around what might take place during the passing of a million years.

Evolving mousetraps

The latest fashion is to talk about the impossibility of evolving mousetraps. Let’s follow that metaphor. To the extent that any of the parts of a mousetrap conferred a survival advantage, then you could well see the emergence of such a mutation, after enough time. It is an unfair comparison with biology because no single part of a mousetrap is useful, in common with most multi-part machines. But I have been closely acquainted with a very effective evolved mousetrap — my cat Candide.

“The fossil record: it doesn’t support evolution”. Ralph dismisses a whole field of enquiry as quickly as you can throw a book on a bonfire. His basis? Ralph has read creationist books with polemic titles like “Not by chance — shattering the modern theory of evolution”. And don’t forget what the stranger said about there being no reptile around with half developed feathers.

Ralph knows that you don’t help a

person with belief struggles by setting out both sides of the arguments on a complex question. But remember from part 1 that this is supposed to be a book that is good enough to “deal with” skeptics. If I may use a verb I learned from George Bush, I think they have underestimated us.



The author with Candide, an evolved better mousetrap

However, the creationists are still dug in firmly on the issue of transitional forms. Compared to many areas of human endeavour, not much time has been spent finding and interpreting fossils. I mean that we began pondering fossils much more recently than things like agriculture or metallurgy. I’m very impressed even by the little I know of what has been discovered during my life, but it’s never enough for the creationists. From them we get a succession of arguments which take a few assorted facts and attempt to make out a glaring lack of transitional forms across the board. Each argument is an example of what can be contrived at that time — like John the whale story man’s silly comment quoted in part 1 of this review that you don’t see reptiles with half developed feathers. However, over time the trend has been the remorseless uncovering of an increasing number of transitional forms, including the creationists’ favourite — the eye.

Compared to things like gravity, evolution is hard to demonstrate by experiment. When you find two simi-

lar fossils, a palaeontologist will consider whether the more recent find may have evolved from the earlier one. The creationist, however, will be certain that the two were always separate species living in their respective times. Maybe some creationists will give a little ground when we start dropping dead from an evolved bird flu virus.

You will never find enough transitional forms to satisfy a determined creationist. It is like an acquaintance of mine whose capacity for whinging is truly remarkable even after allowing for her being a Pom and more so from one of the gloomier parts of that fine country: *“You know there isn’t a SINGLE flippin phone box between ‘ere and the Junction...”* Three months later: *“You know there isn’t a SINGLE flippin phone box between ‘ere and the one half way to the Junction...”*

Designer as marketing advantage

Undeterred, Ralph presses on and spends the rest of the book getting acquainted with the mysterious intelligent designer. Which god to choose? A person who is convinced that a designer exists is spoilt for choice. It is a bit like a beauty contest, except that instead of lots of kissing between the contestants, most are insisting that the other contenders don’t exist.

Following an objective and statistical analysis, it turns out that the one true god is the very one that is followed by the majority of people near at hand for Ralph to sell books to. Phew! He’d sell a lot less books in California if he had proved that the one true god was Thor. Only the god of the Bible has repeatedly issued prophecies which have come true to an extent that is truly miraculous, says Ralph. Here is revealed another reason why people like Ralph find skeptics hard to understand, let alone deal with — what is a miracle for them is something else for us.

Search for God

I have had one naïve soul assure me that the existence of God was proved for him by the miracle of avoiding a car accident. He nearly caused the accident because he was tired and his judgment was faulty. Add to such faulty judgment a big fright and the adrenalin that it brought, and the man was unable to understand the physical forces that gave him back control of his car at the critical moment. Then for other people there are the miraculous one-in-a-million coincidences. (I've experienced at least one myself.) Imagine a life so peaceful that only one thing happened each day. Well these miracles would happen to 20 Australians per average day. As life really is there are many events in one day. Then there is the class of miracles which are just stunts using the magician's art to produce things like tears from a statue or making a saint's blood liquefy, etc, etc. (Truly miraculous would be for St Januarius to inspire his worshipful Neapolitan flock to remove the garbage from their streets and keep them clean. If I ever see that, I will look for Hercules back amongst us.)

For Ralph, the survival of the Jewish religion is a miracle, only possible through divine intervention of the god of the Bible. Evaluating this could take a whole book in itself. Let me simply acknowledge that the Jewish religion includes what is effectively a legal system ideally suited for the survival of a small group. Add to that the priority given to recording and preserving sacred texts, plus sheer determination and you can see why the Jews have survived when other groups such as the Etruscans assimilated. Mind you, a Jewish historian would note that it has been a rough ride and Israel is no picnic today. Nothing sums it up better than the Jewish proverb: If God lived on earth, people would break his windows.

Miraculous too for Ralph was the fulfilment of many prophecies. Not so amazing for me given that many did not specify a time frame. I'm confident enough to prophecy that

part of Australia will be taken from us (by non-believers) but won back again (by the grace of God); if you allow me 500 years. It is a simple historical prediction which sounds religious if you add the words in parentheses.



Chloe, the Official Skeptics Evolved Mousetrap

I must defer to the likes of Ralph when it comes to Biblical scholarship but he just can't help himself by adding tosh like this:

The complete Bible was written by at least 40 authors over a span of 1500, perhaps 2000 years [Hey Ralph, you don't allow evolutionists that kind of leeway]... Yet, as I read it and studied it again and again, I saw that it was still consistent on many subjects (such as adultery and homosexuality, for example)... The authorship and content of the Bible were seeming more and more miraculous to me.

Though independently formed and operated, the various skeptical organisations around the world all have similar aims — miraculous!

I suppose it is convenient for Ralph not to mention that the Jews worshipped a number of gods before Moses tidied things up. Ralph keeps it simple and accepts one god of the Bible, there from the beginning and with us forever. Then you can spend the rest of your life learning about this God with the assistance of reasonably priced books and videos from Ralph and his mates. Have you ever wondered about what the size of the Bible-interpretation industry says about the clarity of the document?

Searchers for god may ponder

whether He has changed over time. Preachers tell us that God is love. Tsunamis and earthquakes are a bit confounding but there are always a few miracle survival stories and God gets the credit for them as proof of His love for us. But the God of the Old Testament — who fulfilled the prophecies that Ralph finds so convincing — would have been well at home in a Glasgow pub-brawl. The people who did God's work on earth make the Bush regime look like a macramé class. Here is a selection, with God's people the aggressors each time.

And the Lord our God delivered him [Sihon] before us; and we smote him, and his sons, and all his people. And we took all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed the men, and the women, and the little ones, of every city, we left none to remain...

So the Lord our God delivered into our hands Og also, the king of Ba'shan, and all his people and we smote him until none was left to him remaining...

And we utterly destroyed them [threescore cities], as we did unto Sihon king of Hesh-bon, utterly destroying the men, women and children of every city.

Ralph's book was an insight into the quality of thinking that is good enough for some people. Some lip service to scientific method while failing to apply it. The escape hatch of miracles is always there. At least there is a happy ending — another gem from Ralph's life. He is finishing a Chinese meal.

As I paid the check, I pondered my long search for God, my countless hours of research, and my new labor of love — telling other skeptics about what I've learned. I got my change back and left my usual tip. Just before leaving, I broke open my fortune cookie for fun. And the message inside read: Skepticism is the first step towards truth.

Amen.



Little Pebble Rocked

Australia has its fair share of cults of various persuasions, but in my opinion, the most notorious, is the Marian Work of Atonement (MWOA), led by William Kamm, who was recently convicted of sexual assault, and is now in jail.

Part of a phenomena that began shortly after Vatican 2 (the Second Vatican Council, Opened by Pope John XXIII in October 1962 and closed by Pope Paul VI in December 1965), like many similar groups, followers wanted to practice the traditional rites, and rejected many of the reforms of Vatican 2.

An expose of Kamm and the MWOA in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (December 24, 1993) showed how he had been infatuated by mystics such as “Veronica of Bayside”, a Catholic mystical seer, long since discredited. After being asked to leave Bayside, where he had been a volunteer, William is supposed to have said “I suppose it’s time Australia got it’s own seer”.

So William Kamm set up in Australia, and eventually settled on a property in Cambewarra, near Nowra. The compound is typical in structure of those used by cults, big fences (to keep others out, it’s claimed), and a community that whilst near to a town, has an element of social separation and isolation encouraged by the leaders.

The Catholic Church’s position on this is that there is nothing mystical whatsoever in Kamm’s claims, and he has no validity.

Principal in his “messages”, purporting to come from many heavenly occupants (more than any other seer), were the normal portents of disasters, dire consequences, and the typical claims for the faithful that only **they** would be saved, and the rest of the world would be doomed.

What made William Kamm differ-

ent though, was his claim to be the foremost of the seers, and the next Pope (As Pope John Paul II became ill, William modified his claims, and has claimed that John Paul II was not actually dead — which would come as a surprise to Pope Benedict XVI). All other seers around the world had to agree that William Kamm was the most important of all. If a seer disagreed, then obviously that seer was out of favour.

He made many blunders, including making specific claims in his messages, which were obviously false. Every one of his messages that dealt with astronomical events (For example, A comet colliding with Mars’ moon Phobos, with bits of it heading towards Earth) were laughably inept, but William was being encouraged by what I refer to as “Disaster Junkies”. The sort of people who see vast conspiracies by NASA, in cahoots with millions of amateur astronomers, for instance. Kamm’s prophecies and messages were not conditional, but predetermined, or had actually happened; eg, the comet **had** collided with Phobos, and bits of it **had** broken off and **were** heading for Earth. As an amateur astronomer, it took very little time for me to expose these kinds of things.

Add to that an evident desire for William to somehow insert himself into world events

Shortly after 9-11, William sent a message to President Bush claiming that there was a mole in the State Department

In a letter to President Bush, and Prime Minister Howard, Weapons of Mass destruction were under Mosques in Iraq.

(in neither of the above was the Virgin Mary able to give details)

Angels were keeping people alive

underground in Thredbo after the landslide

If Schapelle Corby was not released he would visit the plagues of Egypt on Indonesia;

You can see there is an element of narcissism in all of this.

Part and parcel of this was William’s belief, (supported by his followers, and passed on in many messages) that he would be the father of the next generation of worshippers. He began to use names such as “Little Abraham”, and through the powers of a “Shiny Holy Thing”, he would be able to father many children.

More than anything, this has probably led to his downfall, because eventually, people came forward with complaints, as he acted upon these “instructions”.

In August 2002, William Kamm was charged with four counts of aggravated sexual assault, one count of aggravated indecent assault and one count of an aggravated act of indecency.

Over the period until June 2005, this prophet of God, the chosen mystical spouse of the Virgin Mary sought to have the charges overturned, and the case dismissed.

On July 8, 2005, William Kamm was found guilty of five counts. Sentence was passed on October 14, 2005, and he was sentenced to five years imprisonment. Evidently the Virgin Mary wasn’t able to help.

A second trial is scheduled for 2006 with charges from a second complainant. He now also faces 11 new charges from a 3rd complainant.

William continues to maintain his innocence of all charges.

Wally Anglesea is a lay Catholic who has been following, and reporting on, the Little Pebble phenomenon since it began

Interviewing the Alien

Useful advice on appropriate investigation techniques

How suggestions can influence recall and how investigators can guard against eliciting false testimony.

Have you ever seen a flying saucer? Since 1947, when pilot Kenneth Arnold was famously misquoted, the skies have been full of flying saucers. The fact that Arnold actually described boomerang shaped objects that flew “like a saucer if you skip it across the water” has generally been overlooked. However, skeptics have not missed the significance of this situation. The prevalence of saucer shaped sightings, for example, 82% of abductees report saucer shaped alien craft (Bullard, 1987), is taken as an illustration of the power of suggestion on eyewitness accounts of UFO sightings. The skeptical position holds that UFOs are either misidentifications of known objects (such as planes), perceptual illusions (eg, where planets are mistaken as flying objects), or descriptions of as yet unknown, but nevertheless, natural events. These “erroneous” sightings are then described as alien spacecraft because of cultural conditioning, or suggestions put by interviewers.

Cultural factors have long been understood as an important determi-

nant of the way in which sightings of UFOs are described. For example, Berlitz and Moore, scarcely the most critically minded of authors, write in *The Roswell Incident* (1980; p.7),

It is possible that all these sightings throughout history, and to an increasing extent in the present, are all versions of the same phenomenon, aided perhaps by imagination and a penchant for seeing what one expects to see. This is why the Chinese have long thought that they have seen hurtling and luminous dragons; the ancient Hindus, two- and three-decked aerial chariots; the Indians of the Americas, great canoes; and tribes and nations in all parts of the earth, luminous monsters, demons and Gods.

Whilst many will agree with such a position, the possibility that suggestions made by interviewers (and others) can result in faulty testimony is one that many researchers of the paranormal often find hard to accept. Unfortunately the reasons for rejecting this premise are far from compelling. Citing the sheer volume of sightings (eg, Berlitz & Moore, 1980) as proof against the power of suggestion, or multiple witnesses to a single incident, does not invalidate the skeptical position. It



Stephen Moston is Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at James Cook University in Townsville.

is possible for every person to be mistaken, it is possible for groups to be mistaken.

Suggestibility

The process of suggestion is generally poorly understood, both by the majority of psychologists and lay people alike. To many, suggestibility is thought to be a personality characteristic, probably linked to some other quantifiable characteristic such as intelligence. However, attempts to identify those high and low in suggestibility have met with little success. A person labelled as high in suggestibility on one measure (such as susceptibility to hypnosis) will typically show no such characteristic when assessed for other forms of suggestibility. The forensic psychological literature contains many illustrations of this point (eg, Gudjonsson and Gunn, 1982). Similarly, attempts to match suggestibility to other personality characteristics have yielded inconsistent results (see Gudjonsson, 2003 for a comprehensive review). Instead of thinking of suggestibility as a personality characteristic, it is perhaps better to think of it as a process, in which characteristics of the interviewee and interviewer interact, also allowing for variations in interviewing techniques and contexts which have been shown to impact on suggestible behaviour.

The UFO literature contains many possible examples of the power of suggestion on testimony. This can be illustrated by looking at one of the most famous cases, the abduction of Barney and Betty Hill. The Hills were allegedly abducted on September 20 1961 and they were first interviewed under hypnosis on February 2, 1964. The filmed recreation of their story (*The UFO Incident*) was shown on television on October 20, 1975.

In the period between the alleged abduction and the screening of *The UFO Incident* there was relatively little in the way of reported UFO activity, but after the October 1975 screening reports of cattle mutila-

tions, UFO sightings and other such activity appears to have dramatically increased. This would have its ultimate manifestation on November 5, 1975 when Travis Walton would be allegedly abducted. Such events can be interpreted in two ways. Either the alien activity did not cease in the intervening 11 years, it was simply not reported, or there was no such activity and it was only the suggestion planted by the film that prompted the sightings and a fraudulent abduction claim.

One of the most difficult facts for those who believe the Hill's version of an alien abduction is the undoubted effect of suggestion on the Hills themselves. For example, Barney Hill was the first to describe the aliens as having what we now recognise as "wraparound eyes". This particular alien characteristic (amongst others) appears to have been influenced by his watching of an episode of *The Outer Limits* ("The Bellerio Shield") which featured such distinctive eyes on February 10, 1964, eight days after his first hypnosis session, but crucially, twelve days before he would first recall seeing them (February 22, 1964). To skeptics such as Kottmeyer, the time line here is clear evidence of suggestion, thereby calling into question not only this aspect of the tale, but the entire incident itself, particularly given the incredible differences between Betty Hill's first description of the aliens and her ultimate version (for example, initially the aliens had hair and noses).

It is rather sad to note that UFO writers sometimes either willfully or unintentionally misreport this sequence of events, thereby seeking to invalidate the skeptical standpoint. For example, in a 2001 issue of *Australian UFOlogist*, writer George Simpson reported the above events in the following way:

A couple of years ago, some skeptics decided to attack the case of Betty and Barney Hill. As a major part of their argument they declared that the Hills had seen an episode of the science fiction show on TV called

The Outer Limits. They claimed that as a direct result of seeing the episode titled... "The Bellerio Shield" they went on and imagined being abducted by aliens who looked "similar".... with 'wrap around' eyes.

The problem with this "explanation" is that the Hills encounter occurred on 19th of September 1961 ... yet the Bellerio shield wasn't broadcast until 10th February 1964!

Never let the facts get in the way of a good explanation I suppose.

Obviously the fact that UFOs are now commonly described as saucer shaped and that aliens have wraparound eyes does not prove that all such sightings are false. Nor do examples of apparent suggestion in other cases. Nevertheless, these facts do support the skeptical stance. If we recite the skeptical mantra (extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof), then it becomes a requirement on paranormal investigators to show that suggestion is not the explanation for their findings. To a limited extent, some writers have tried to meet such a requirement. However, in most cases the clumsy and unconvincing way in which such checks have been made does not inspire confidence. As stated earlier, the process of suggestion is poorly understood by most psychologists, so when a writer such as David Jacobs, with no training in the field whatsoever, asserts that his subjects were not leadable (see *Secret Life*, p. 322-323), any reaction other than skepticism is inappropriate.

Traps to avoid

So how might interviewers realistically attempt to identify leadable (or suggestible) subjects? One way is to try to implant a false suggestion and to see if it is accepted. This is a common procedure in psychological research involving eyewitnesses to crimes.

The procedure goes something like this. At some stage during questioning (either before, during, or

Continued on p 45

Doing the Sums

Sometimes the mathematics simply does not add up

The promoters of pyramid and multi-level marketing schemes rely on the inability of their targets to do mathematics. The most obvious manifestation of this attitude is the way that they expect people to be unaware of the market saturation effect caused by the necessity to recruit more people each month. It might be understandable that potential victims don't appreciate that particular problem, because not everyone understands geometric progressions, but I have come across some examples of where the scheme promoters are working on the assumption that the marks can't even do simple arithmetic.

I recently had to look at the web site of the Direct Selling Association, the industry body for multi-level and pyramid operators in the USA. I was investigating the DSA because I had found out that they were using someone else's organisation name to deceive people. (They were paying for web advertising which appeared to be for an anti-MLM organisation known as Pyramid Scheme Alert, even to the extent of using those exact words. Placing the cursor over the ad showed the normal browser message which suggested that the link led to Pyramid Scheme Alert, but clicking on one of the advertisements took the visitor to the DSA site instead.)

In one place on the DSA site they boast that the industry has annual sales in the USA of \$28.7 billion, sold by 13 million distributors. As I said, the marketing of all multi-level and pyramid schemes relies on prospects being unable to do simple mathemat-

ics, and I suspect that they think that nobody is going to be other than impressed by these huge numbers. They think wrong.

Ignoring the fact that the total sales is a fictional number based on what the sales would be if all product ended up in the hands of people who are not participants in the system and pretending that no distributor ever buys anything for themselves, if you divide 28.7 billion by 13 million you get average annual sales per participant of \$2208. Remember that this the gross sales income for a year. The average commission rate is about 2% (most people actually receive a lower rate of commission payments) so this gives an annual net income before taxes and expenses of \$44.15. Net income. For an entire year's work.

Out of that \$44.15 the participants have to pay for training materials, conference and seminar fees, normal business costs like telephone and transport, make-up, dry cleaning and nice clothes to look prosperous at functions, child minding while they are out showing the plan. Of course, there are people making money out of these schemes, but it is usually by fees deriving from recruiting, not by the direct selling of anything.

The situation is not much different in Australia. During a court battle with a multi-level marketing organisation I was forced to run a notice on my web site in which the other side got to proudly offer in their favour the statistics that in Australia there are 500,000 MLM participants selling \$1.2 billion



Peter Bowditch, Vice President of Australian Skeptics and scourge of quacks and scamsters, is to haut couture what Bob Dylan is to grand opera.

worth of goods and services each year. This works out to \$2,400 gross sales per year per participant.

At the time this was written (November 2005) the minimum legal wage in Australia was \$12.30 per hour, which comes to \$24304.80 per year for someone working 38 hours each week (and not getting any overtime). This is just over ten times the sales for the average MLM participant. A single mother on a pension gets a minimum of \$12383.80 per year, which is more than five times the average MLM gross income. A 16-year-old can get benefits of \$178.70 a fortnight while looking for work. But it gets better, because the \$2,400 sales turns into \$48 real income at the average commission rate of 2%. \$48 per year! That's less than for working for four hours at the minimum wage rate. Less than for a

day and a half as a poverty-stricken single parent. Less than four day's income for a kid on the lowest level of the dole. I think I will stick to stacking shelves at Safeway to earn my pocket money.

Still, those billions of dollars of sales are very impressive, so let's look at the \$28.7 billion in perspective. \$28.7 billion sounds like a lot of money, and it is to you and me. If I were to be getting paid that each year I would have to put on extra staff just to help me spend it. Anyone who has ever been shown the plan will have been told how multi-level marketing is about to replace conventional retail trade, so how does \$28.7 billion compare to the real world of retail sales?

I chose one company which operates in Australia, a country with about 7% of the population of the

USA. The company is Coles Myer Limited, and in 2004 Coles did \$A32.3 billion of sales. Adjusting using the exchange rate on the day this was written, this is about \$US25 billion. So we have a single company in a country with 20 million people doing 85% of the total business that is being done by a group of 164 companies in a country with 300 million people and an economy to match.

And these companies are about to dominate the retail sales universe? Is it any wonder that they have to lie in and with their advertisements? They must be terrified of prospects getting even a hint of the truth.



... Alien from p 43

after an initial interview) a false suggestion will be made. Care needs to be taken to ensure that the suggestion is not too obvious, otherwise it will be identified and rejected, leading to a false conclusion that the subject was not leadable. Each interviewer should come up with their own materials for suggestions, to guard against such checks becoming public knowledge. For example, in alien abduction cases the interviewer could pick some relatively trivial aspect of such encounters, such as the presence of insignia on either the clothing worn by the aliens or inside their spacecraft. The suggestion can be made in several different ways, such as a verbal suggestion ("Was there any kind of marking or insignia on their sleeves?"), or visually. The subject could be shown several fictitious icons and asked if they recognise any of them as having been present during the alien encounter. If the subject does pick one icon, or subsequently recalls seeing "some kind of symbol" then the interviewer will have some evidence to suggest that the subject's

recall is not entirely accurate. It would be unfair to say that this proves that the subject is lying (there may well have been an insignia on the alien spacecraft), but it does identify the subject as being receptive to suggestions, in which case extra care should be taken with questioning.

Given the wide number of possible sources of contamination on testimony about the paranormal, there is clearly a need for investigators to be pro-active in the way in which they deal with potential criticisms. This process involves preparing interviews for subsequent scrutiny in much the same way that police officers must now collect evidence. Many people are skeptical about the validity of statements elicited during police questioning and in many countries, including the United Kingdom, the law essentially places the burden of proof of the investigators. Police officers have to demonstrate that they took every possible step to ensure the validity of the testimony they seek use in evidence. UFO and other paranormal investigators could learn a great deal from such procedures. Such a demand hardly consti-

tutes a request for extraordinary proof. In this case, the regular kind would be more than acceptable.

References

- Bullard, T.E. (1987) *UFO Abductions: The Measure of a Mystery. Volume 1: Comparative Study of UFO Reports*. Fund for UFO Research.
- Berlitz, C. and Moore, W.L. (1980). *The Roswell Incident*. New York. Berkley Books.
- Gudjonsson, G. (2003). *The Psychology of Interrogations and Confessions: A Handbook*. Chichester John Wiley.
- Gudjonsson, G.H. and Gunn, J. (1982) The competence and reliability of a witness in a criminal court. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 141, 624-627.
- Jacobs, D. M. (1992) *Secret Life. Firsthand Documented Accounts of UFO Abductions*. New York. Simon & Schuster:
- Kottmeyer, M. (1994). The eyes that spoke. *Skeptical Briefs*, September. Available at <http://www.csicop.org/sb/9409/>
- Simpson, G. (2001). What next? Never let the facts get in the way of a great explanation. *Australian UFOlogist*, Vol. 5 # 2, 31.



Food Additives Cause Allergies

Popular belief does not accord with the facts

I live in a world where, if you would like an allergy, there are plenty of “natural therapists” willing to give you one or more for a price. In the 1980s, while working at the Children’s Hospital in Sydney, I would be regularly called by a concerned parent who would list the foods their child is now allergic to, according to their natural therapist. (These lists were extensive. In the department we used to joke that there was time to make a cup of tea as the list was read out.) When asked why the person doling out the list shouldn’t also be the one providing the meal plans, parents told us that their natural therapist was busy (and presumably those at the Children’s Hospital weren’t).

Anyway, I’m not writing to gripe about the politics of food fears and advice. However, there is an entrenched view that the food supply is problematic, with allergies another widespread problem attributed to food. Too often, the problem is the advice, not the food.

According to the *Food Myths Study* conducted by Dangar Research in 2001, one in three adults believed that most people suffer food allergies. In reality, a true and proven food allergy will afflict some 1-2% of adults and 5-8% of children, depending upon the data source. The mathematically attuned will immediately, and rightfully, conclude that

many children “grow out of” an allergy. Indeed, most have by the time they leave kindergarten. Unfortunately, the public immediately label all genuine reactions to food as allergies. They should really be called Adverse Food Reactions until the cause is known.

Many people think that food additives are a major cause of allergy, probably because seven out of 10 adults believe that additives are inherently harmful (Dangar Research 2001). They are surprised to find that allergies are caused by the protein in wholesome, natural foods and not highly processed foods.

What is an allergy?

An allergy is a reaction that produces extra antibodies (immunoglobulin E) which in turn triggers the release of histamine, giving the symptoms of an allergy. An allergy occurs mainly in children and is usually easily recognised as it triggers a clinically characteristic immune reaction. Allergic symptoms include eczema, acute urticaria (hives), tissue swelling (angioedema) and anaphylaxis (the most severe form of generalised allergic reaction). Triggers, or allergens, for such reactions are pollen (hayfever), dust mites, animal hair and food.

Food allergens are normally the protein components in foods like eggs, cow’s milk, peanuts, tree nuts,



Glenn Cardwell, Sports Dietitian and regular nutritional columnist, can be contacted on www.glenncardwell.com

fish, crustaceans, sesame, soy and wheat. This normally harmless protein has been misidentified by the body as being harmful. There is a window of susceptibility in infancy and early childhood, and some children can become sensitised to allergens present in breast milk from the mother's diet. When allergic children are then introduced to the food for the first time, it can trigger an acute reaction. While many children will 'grow out' of an allergy to milk or eggs, four out of five children with peanut allergy will be allergic for life.

An allergy to highly processed foods is less likely because the offending protein tends to further broken up, making it no longer able to trigger an allergy. Allergies can be tested for with skin prick tests or blood tests (RAST). Skin tests are preferred because they are more sensitive, less costly, easy to perform, and can be read in 10-15 minutes.

Is there really egg in my wine?

The allergenic protein can end up in unusual places. I was recently asked in a radio interview why there was a warning on some wine that they could contain traces of egg. I didn't know the answer then, but I do now. Egg white (albumin) can be added in the latter stages of wine production to reduce the tannin level in the wine, often making the wine clearer, or less cloudy. The albumin binds with the tannin and sinks to the bottom of the storage vessel for easy removal. Done properly, virtually no albumin remains in the final bottled wine. Some people will react to the sulphur dioxide or yeast in wine, but this is not an allergy. (There is a theory that the headache and a dry mouth after a bottle or two of wine could be due to the alcohol and not an egg allergy or SO₂ reaction. I shall be conducting more research on this front, but a conclusion may not be reached for decades).

Peanut peril

Strict peanut avoidance measures are needed in nut allergy. As there

can be cross contamination of very small amount of nuts in food factories, many food manufacturers are taking the option of stating, "May contain traces of nuts" on their food labels. If nuts are used as an ingredient somewhere in the factory, then food manufacturers play it safe.

"Peanut allergy is the most potentially dangerous allergy," says Dr Rob Loblay, allergist at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. *"Many have died from this allergy. In fact, one study in the US showed that 94% of allergy deaths were due to peanuts or tree nuts. The best defence is for those at risk of a life-threatening reaction to carry an EpiPen auto-injector which delivers a dose of adrenaline to immediately counter the allergy reaction".* In cases of anaphylaxis, emergency treatment with adrenaline can be life-saving. In the US, a 14 year-old girl died after eating a salad sandwich. It had been made using a knife that earlier was used to make a peanut butter sandwich.

Dr Loblay says that as the warning about nuts was now so widespread it was limiting food choice for those with nut allergies and this was leading to risk-taking behaviour, especially among teenagers and young adults (who are at highest risk of death from food anaphylaxis). It has got to the stage that child minding services have banned peanut butter sandwiches for fear that one day they could have an allergic reaction on their hands. Another option available is to genetically engineer peanuts to modify the offending protein or remove it altogether. I wonder if that would meet the approval of those who find GM foods abhorrent?

Food intolerance

There is a distinct difference between a food allergy to a food and food intolerance, a difference not well appreciated by the public. For example, lactose intolerance is when the gut is not able to digest all the lactose due to a natural drop in lactase enzyme, resulting in diarrhea. This is found mainly in

people over five years old with an Asian, African or Aboriginal background.

Other food intolerances are mainly due to naturally occurring food chemicals (such as salicylates, biogenic amines and glutamates) and/or food additives (such as preservatives, colourings and flavourings). Food intolerances can occur in both children and adults and can be quite difficult to isolate. Symptoms include skin rashes (recurrent or chronic urticaria or hives), mouth ulcers, wheezing, headaches and digestive problems. For example, the preservative sodium metabisulphite may trigger asthma. As some food intolerance reactions are similar to those found in allergy, you can see why there is confusion between the two.

In order to make an accurate diagnosis, patients are placed on an elimination diet for 2-6 weeks, comprising meat, rice, fruit and vegetables. If symptoms improve during this time, double-blind challenges are conducted with suspected food substances in capsule form. If they don't, then the elimination diet is made more spartan until the offending food is identified. Food intolerance reactions are highly individual in terms of the food substances involved and the symptoms provoked. They are dose dependent, and the threshold dose for reactions can vary over time. Interestingly, food intolerances are about three times more common in females than males.

Dr Loblay said that most people do not realise that different foods can contain the same substances to which they may be sensitive. For example, people with migraine often blame chocolate without realising that many other foods that contain biogenic amines (eg, oranges, bananas and cheese) could be contributing. If these foods are consumed in sufficient amounts beforehand, a piece of chocolate may be enough to exceed that person's biogenic amine threshold, causing a reaction that is unfairly blamed solely on the chocolate.

Continued p 49 ...

Why Is It So?

How can people believe what they know is not true?

I do not regard religious opinions... as exotics that have to be kept under glass, protected from the frosts of common sense or the tyrannous north wind of logic. Such plants are hardly worth preserving. They certainly ought to be hardy enough to stand the climate of free discussion, and if they cannot, the sooner they die the better.

Robert G. Ingersoll, *A Christmas Sermon*

Religion fascinates me. My fascination lies in how intelligent people can seriously subscribe to a belief in something that to me flies in the face of all that is rational.

I would describe myself as being of average intelligence, but what does it mean when someone of equal or greater intelligence professes a stalwart belief in a supernatural being and does so on the basis of faith rather than reasoned deduction while I, equally stalwart, have deduced that there is absolutely no rational basis for such faith? Arguments abound about whether certain people are pre-disposed to a belief in God and others simply brainwashed, but can there be another explanation?

Why, for instance, do some need to be reassured that there is something beyond death while others are comfortable and even relieved that for them death is the absolute end? Young Earth creationists (YECs) for instance oppose the processes of biological evolution based on their unfounded fear that it precludes the

existence of God, which in turn confirms man's mortality: ashes to ashes, dust to dust indeed.

Many of those who profess a belief in God take that belief to simplistic lengths. They look on their deity as a personal one who is on the one hand omnipotent and omniscient, and on the other mundane enough to intercede when entreated by prayer. Such illogicality is astounding.

Praying for Rain

A couple of years ago in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* it was reported that a Gold Coast City councillor was urging the churches to hold a day of prayer in the belief that God would respond and send rain to break the prolonged drought. The councillor planned to hold the prayer meeting at the Hinze Dam, which holds the Gold Coast's water reserves. To support her choice of that particular venue, the councillor cited a similar prayer meeting held at the Mackay showground, at which a gathering of hopefuls prayed for rain. According to the councillor, the rain did fall, by the bucketful, but only over the showground. In short, this obviously intelligent person seriously advocated holding a meeting at which the Lord would be asked to send rain to end the drought in the surrounding districts. Implicit in the choice of venue for this meeting, and uppermost in the councillor's mind was the knowledge that a similar meeting, held in another district, resulted in rain but only at the location at which the prayers were offered.



John Stear, a Life Member of Australian Skeptics, is a retired public servant who maintains the No Answers in Genesis website home.austarnet.com.au/stear/default.htm

It should be noted that the then Mayor supported the councillor and his past comments indicated that he believed in the power of prayer. It's a fair assumption that the Mayor and the councillor are intelligent people. Why then would they not have at least a twinge of doubt, knowing that on a previous occasion their God ignored the fact that the whole district needed rain and, capriciously, chose to rain only on the place where the faithful congregated to pray? Can it be that HL Mencken was close to the mark when he said, "The creator is a comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh"?

Compartmentalisation

But perhaps "compartmentalisation" can go some way to explaining such irrational behaviour. Compartmentalisation has been described thus:

... Food Myth from p 47

The bottom line

Allergies are an immunological response to proteins in whole foods; they are not due to food additives. The most common allergens are declared on food labels. If people react to certain foods, it is wise to seek an allergy professional to help them find the offending food or food class. Knowing whether they have an allergy or food intolerance will help them choose a diet better suited to their wellbeing. For more information on allergies, go to www.allergy.org.au
www.glenncardwell.com

Bibliography

- Mahan K, Escott-Stump Sylvia. *Food, Nutrition & Diet Therapy* 11th edition. Saunders 2004
- Whitney E, Rolfes SR. *Understanding Nutrition* 10th edition. Thompson Wadsworth 2005



[the] isolation or splitting off of part of the personality or mind with lack of communication and consistency between the parts.

With regard to its application to religious belief Ken Harding writes:

The claims of religion... are placed safely behind a wall of faith, hidden in some part of the brain into which scrutiny cannot tread. This process is called Compartmentalization — sectioning off parts of the brain so that certain subjects, like religion, can be protected from rational, critical thinking.

See:

home.austarnet.com.au/stear/compartmentalization_harding.htm

I recall that Phillip Adams once reported asking Barry Jones how, for all his intellect, he managed to reconcile a belief in the almighty with a rational mind. Barry replied with something along the lines of, "Oh, they're in different part of the brain."

Belief above reason

Then there is the paradox of an intelligent person who obtains a university degree, imbibing evolutionary principles in the course of his studies, yet goes on to espouse the creationists dogma of a young Earth and a Noachian flood. I speak of Australian geologist Andrew Snelling. Andrew Snelling once worked for Answers in Genesis and has written many articles for their glossy, but science-free, magazine *Creation ex nihilo* (now renamed simply *Creation*). He has impressive scientific qualifications, a BSc (Hons) in Geology from the University of NSW and a PhD for research in uranium mineralisation from the University of Sydney. Snelling was the subject of a scathing exposé by Dr Alex Ritchie, "Will the Real Andrew Snelling Please Stand Up?", first published in late 1991 in *the Skeptic*, (11:4, pp 12-15) and subsequently on my web site.

See:

home.austarnet.com.au/stear/realsnelling.htm



Tasman Walker, another YEC "scientist", listed by AiG as "Creationist Mechanical Engineer and Geologist", who still writes for *Creation*, is also well qualified but similarly befuddled by YEC dogma, to the extent that he fervently espouses what he calls "Flood Geology", a theory which relies on a young Earth and a world-wide flood, for which there is not one skerrick of evidence.

See:

home.austarnet.com.au/stear/flood_geology.htm

Here we have two obviously intelligent men, who obtained their degrees by hard work and serious application, then "forgot" all they had learned, choosing instead to remould their legitimately gained knowledge of geology to fit the fundamentalist dogma which posits a 6,000 year old Earth and a Noachian flood. Snelling and Walker can obviously compartmentalise their extensive knowledge of geology and, in another area of their brains, embrace the extremely absurd.

I haven't even touched on the mentality of the hopeful fools who open their wallets and throw away their wheelchairs and cancer medications when the likes of Benny Hinn proclaim them to be "cured, praise Jesus!", or the gullible who are convinced that crazies like Sun Myung Moon, David Koresh, Jim Jones and our own William Kamm alias "The Little Pebble", a home grown cult leader, are genuinely in communion with God, Jesus or the Virgin Mary while what they are really on about is the wielding of power, the amassing of enormous amounts of money, and sometimes the statutory rape of the daughters of their gullible followers.

Devotees of charlatans of this ilk defy explanation. Like the marginally less gullible who never go to extremes but simply believe in the unbelievable, they are an enigma to me.

Lutec To Move To Planet X?

Updating a previous investigation

Remember Lutec — the free energy merchants from Cairns, who seek investment in their magical generator which produces up to 20 times more output than input? My first article on Lutec appeared in *the Skeptic* in September 2001 (21:3), and may be seen at www.skeptics.com.au/journal/2001/3_lutec1.pdf

This was prompted when Lutec claimed the \$100,000 prize for anything which lies outside known science. Lutec presented measurements which, they claimed, showed 10 times more energy output than input. In my article I described the correct way of combining time-varying currents and voltages, and showed that the real efficiency was not 1000% but 33% — thus it loses energy, not generates it.

Access to Lutec's data

Lutec have, in their web site, responded to my *Skeptic* articles, asking how we can criticize their machine when we have never seen it? This would seem a trifle unfair, because they offered to demonstrate it, but when I arrived in Cairns, they had conveniently misplaced the key to the lab.

How novel is Lutec's excuse? In Eric Krieg's book *Perpetual Motion* — the history of an obsession, he says, regarding attempts by scientists to investigate a previous claim:

When the team arrived at the house, they found that the door of the room containing the machine was locked, and the key, conveniently, missing...

When did this occur? 1813! So Lutec do not even score for originality!

But nevertheless, the Skeptics have obtained:

- demonstration of an early model Lutec generator
- detailed photos of the Lutec generators
- detailed diagrams showing the claimed principles of operation
- full Lutec patents
- eye-witness accounts
- videos from 2000 showing operation
- detailed performance measurements
- response to our articles from Lutec themselves.

This data has allowed the Skeptics to perform a full analysis of both the claimed underlying theory, and the actual measured performance.

Lutec's patents

My second article appeared in the December 2001 *Skeptic* (21:4) and may be seen at



Ian Bryce holds degrees in engineering and science and is the Chief Investigator for Australian Skeptics.

www.skeptics.com.au/journal/2001/4_lutec2.pdf

It examined in detail Lutec's first patent, on which they claim validity of their invention, production of free energy, and protection of their manufacturing rights.

The scope of the patent lies well within my own expertise, and I believe there is nothing there to provide any advantage over prior technology. Lutec's own patent attorney told me he had assured them that it was **not** capable of generating free energy... but they did not want to hear it.

Granting of a patent in no way depends on a device **working**. There are thousands of patents for perpetual motion machines. Not a single one has ever worked.

However, having patents in 23 countries **does** indicate something. Lodging patents costs a lot of money and after they are granted, many recurrent fees come into effect. Unless the product is in production, these ongoing expenses often send the inventors broke. To hold so many patents in so many countries indicates that either the Lutec principals have very wealthy and generous 'friends and family' or they have managed to attract a number of outside investors.

Seeking your money

As reported in *the Skeptic*, Lutec's web site in 2001 said:

*FREE ENERGY and OVER UNITY
or over 100% efficiency.*

The World's First Free Energy Machine

Also creates an incredible opportunity for you!

It gave a numbered bank account in Singapore, and included instruc-

tions on how to transfer money to it. It described how they hope to get enough "little players... to raise the large amounts of money needed...". They offered certificates ranging from US\$50 (Iron Level) to \$2000 (Platinum). When production commences, you could redeem your certificate for twice the face value against the purchase of a machine:



Lutec's, Lou Brits and John Christie displaying their planet-saving device

Its about telling your children and grandchildren, and them telling theirs, about how you had the opportunity, the wisdom and foresight... to protect their financial future... and save the planet...

Following exposure of their tactics in *the Skeptic*, Lutec did a backflip in their advertising for investors. Their 2004 web site said:

Nobody, repeat nobody, invested money with us through the B.A.N.K Inc attempt at raising funds which was designed to help the ordinary people have a financial involvement in this technology. We have had to finance this entire development with help from family, close friends and a couple of business people. We did try to find a way of allowing the "little" people to participate and we would have been delighted to have helped them do so. Unfortunately without a prospectus and the appropriate company structur ... this is not allowed.

However, in 2005, their web site still says:

Where we stand right now is that we do need a million dollars to complete the technology to where we want it before releasing it in the form of a generator. Jacco is dead right in his evaluation there. We are not looking for a free hand-out, so if you dear reader know anyone who might be interested in becoming involved, with a minimum one hundred and fifty thousand dollars available to contribute, please have them email us at info@lutec.com.au and request information. We will also need their full names, address, and contact phone numbers, this tends to keep the tire kickers away. Enquiries from outside of Australia are welcome.

This would seem to be a pattern among free energy merchants the world around! Let me quote from Eric Krieg at <http://www.phact.org/e/skeptic/frenfaq.htm>

....The other group knows quite well that their scheme won't work. However they happily solicit investment from the public to develop and introduce their machines. This brings in money, most of which is used to publicize the scheme and bring in more suckers. Their biggest problem is how to keep the scam going and stay out of jail. They have to keep coming up with new excuses for not demonstrating or installing a working machine to stop investors from asking for their money back. Often they blame their failure on a conspiracy by the oil companies or the government.

Lutec have paid for 23 patents. "Family and close friends" could not have paid for that, unless they are

Lutec to Move?



Various Lutec technologies: the chipboard Model No 7; No 8's switching module; the shiny No 9, and the wedding cake No 10.

both very wealthy and extremely generous. This indicates to me that Lutec have had some success in attracting investors.

Lutec are also calling for electricians to install the generators:

Wanted: Electricians from all over Australia

We need "gold card" electricians from all regions of Australia to form the network of installation and service agents for the Lutec 1000.

If you are a "gold card" electrician and would like to be part of this exciting revolution, please contact us now so that we can invite you to our special Technicians Seminars.

It will be a condition of the Lutec 1000 warranty that installation be carried out by an "authorised" agent...

One wonders if they have held any such Seminars, and if they charge a fee?

Prototype construction

Lutec numbering indicates they have progressed through at least 11 iterations of their motor. The first seen by us was No 4, a small toy sized motor which ran off a torch battery.

By 2000, they were showing No 7,

with black-painted chipboard end plates, a rotary switch providing the commutation, the current being delivered to 'artfully wound coils'.

No 8 introduced a solid state switching module, containing field effect transistors (FET's). These are expensive, and (as used in electric cars) have a short life at the best of times. FETs are very susceptible to being blown up by 'switching transients', which are well known to experienced engineers. However Lutec have shown ignorance of such glitches, and I predict their FET's will follow the usual trend.

Generator No 9 was a complete rebuild, possibly financed by a major investment. It sported shiny metal endplates and a rod frame, to which the coils can be bolted and rearranged at will. The rotor had three rows of permanent magnets mounted in an aluminium disk. (Lutec frequently complain that the parts they order from outside are usually defective when they arrive, and have to be returned for rework.)

No 10 included a second motor added on the same shaft, to make a vertical-axis double-decker machine. Some say it resembles a wedding cake, but I think of it more as a memorial to hopes of free energy.

By 2003, technical updates were

scarce on their website. Instead, it waffles on and on about how long it takes to make a jumbo jet, by way of excusing lack of progress.

In 2005, there is virtually no progress reported, only more waffle and excuses. A new video posted on their web site shows Device No 11 (our numbering), a much flatter configuration.

New performance in video

A new video on their web site as at November 2005 shows meters claimed to indicate input DC voltage and current, and output AC voltage and current. The output power divided by the input power gives an efficiency of 362%.

The Skeptic challenges Lutec to provide backup data and let us scrutinize the tests. Meanwhile, we know that in 2000, Lutec published a video and detailed measurements, which were backed up by circuit diagrams. Lutec claimed an efficiency of 1000%, but when correctly analysed by us it gave 33%.

Lutec's new scientist

Having had so much difficulty on the engineering front, what about the science? With *the Skeptic* revealing that their machine would have to violate the laws of nature in order to produce free energy, Lutec have been searching for an 'academic' who might support their claims. Now they have found one. A quote from their current web site:

*Jacco Van Der Worp, a Dutch physicist and systems failure analyst ... has examined the physics behind the control system used in Lutec motors, and has **confirmed the validity of the technology** [emphasis mine]. Basically Jacco concludes from an*

academic stand point, that the controlled periodic interruption of a rotating permanent magnetic field, by the temporary and precise introduction of another magnetic field, causes the secondary effect of the naturally occurring polarity flip of the permanent magnet influence, to be accessed, harnessed, and applied to assist in the rotor's on-going revolution direction. And most importantly, he agrees that this flip effect is influenced by voltage rather than current, and also allows the flip back to the original polarity to naturally occur at no cost of current, so the rotor is driven onwards at a very small cost of electricity.

This magnetic field effect is what is covered in our patent applications, but has never before been publicly reviewed by an academic of standing. It is very encouraging to have **a notable qualified academic** put his name to it, and we are thankful to him for doing so.

[Lutec's principals seem to be suffering here from a confusion between the terms 'academic' and 'scientific'. Professors of English Literature or Accounting Practice might well be distinguished academics, but they are not scientists. Scientists may or may not be academics, but they are the sort of people you need to approach if you want validation of a scientific principle.]

Some of you have heard me talk about my 'three legged stool' test of pseudoscientific claims. You should ask the proponent three questions:

- ◆ Is there a theory which at least makes the claimed phenomenon possible?
- ◆ Is there real evidence that the effect actually exists?
- ◆ Does the proponent's track record establish his/her credibility?

If the claim fails any one test then, like a bar-stool with a leg missing, it falls over, because the required backup is not there. We have shown that the theoretical basis is faulty, and the evidence consists of flawed measurements. Let us finally

examine the credentials of their experts.

Who, we ask, is this scientist on whom Lutec now pin their credibility? He is the "resident physicist" (or sometimes "engineer") at the web site www.yowusa.com, where you can find that Van der Worp has lent his generous support to other free energy devices. One such is Thomas Bearden's Motionless Electromagnetic Generator (MEG), which he proclaims (contrary to all evidence) actually works.

A web search reveals more examples of Jacco's expertise:

...a warning about the Galileo probe which is scheduled to crash into Jupiter this Sunday. Because the retired NASA satellite contains plutonium, there is a chance it could cause fusion and turn Jupiter into a second sun.

Really? And then:

*As the debate over global warming heats up to a frenzied pitch between the USA and the rest of the world, the real truth of the matter is being withheld. This is unfortunate because **America is not the primary contributor to global warming — it is the current inbound flight of Nibiru.** [my emphasis] Also known as Planet X and the Destroyer, this massive object is the primary engine of warming throughout our solar system. In the coming years, its flight through the core of our solar system will generate a dizzying increase in Sumatra Superquake-class events, freakish European weather, Atlantic hurricanes and other natural catastrophes across the globe... Detailed predictions for the types and frequency of natural disasters between now and the year 2013 are presented...*

[Historically, Nibiru was a planet associated by the Babylonians with their god, Marduk, one which modern scholars believe was actually Jupiter. More recently Zechariah Sitchin (who belongs in that school of pseudohistory also inhabited by

Erich von Daniken and Immanuel Velikovsky) claims to have found evidence in ancient Sumerian texts that Nibiru is a wandering planet travelling through the Solar System on a 3,600 year cycle, bringing with it death, destruction and, presumably global warming. Incidentally, according to Sitchin it is also the home of gods who created human beings some 450,000 years ago by genetically engineering female apes. [Now that's a tale of Intelligent Design we doubt will get the approval of fundamentalists for inclusion in school science curricula.] It hardly needs saying that genuine scholars of ancient history or astronomy, have found no evidence at all to support Sitchin's claims.]

Mr Van der Worp, who is apparently an acolyte of Sitchin, claims a Masters Degree from Twente University in Holland (2001) where he studied laser physics and laser engineering. Regardless of the existence or not of Nibiru, is a pity his study did not include an understanding the inverse square law, which limits the distances over which events of a given magnitude can exert an influence. This simply rules out such planetary influences on mundane affairs on Earth. Thus Lutec fails the stool test on all fronts — theory, evidence, and credibility. Remember that all three legs are needed for a stool to stand up

Perhaps Lutec which, having for six years been unable to reach production (or even to build a working generator) on Earth, will shift their plant offshore ...to Planet X!

If their version of physics allows this body in the outer reaches of the solar system, to influence energy systems here on Earth, moving there should be a breeze. And Planet Earth would really benefit!



The Wages of Fraud

Improvement evident, but more needs to be done

There is a saying in Nigeria that many days are for the thief, but one day is for the landlord. And another maxim has it that every action and reaction — forthright or fraudulent — has its reward. So it is with the financial scam, otherwise known as 419 after the section of the Nigerian penal code that prohibits it. For some time now, Nigerian scammers have terrorized the world, swindling unsuspecting individuals and corporate bodies, locally and internationally. And now the rewards are coming. Nigeria is paying heavily for 419 activities. Nigerians locally and internationally are reaping the unsavory dividends of this ignominious trade.

In the nineties, 419 activities reigned. In Nigeria, 419-ners lived like kings. They bought and owned the best houses in town; they lived luxuriously and ostentatiously with their ill-gotten wealth, thanks to a corrupt and lawless regime then in Nigeria. Scammers were above the law; in fact they were laws unto them selves. No one who brought a case against any fraudster ever succeeded. The case was either thrown out for lack of evidence, or the complainant himself ended up being convicted and jailed. Locally, 419-ners were sacred cows; they bought the justice system, they bought the Police; they bought the government, and they corrupted the Nigerian value system — 419-ers bought, ruled and controlled Nigeria.

Nigerian fraudsters sent thousands of letters abroad, claiming to be government officials, ministers, heads of government contract agencies, or family members — brothers, wives, sons,

daughters, etc, of Heads of State or top government officials. These 419-ners wrote business letters claiming to be the Central Bank Governor or Bank officials, looking for someone who would help transfer millions or billions of dollars. In most cases they used 'official letterheads and signatures'. Some claimed to be terminally ill, with millions of dollars to will out.

Nigerian scammers converted any building in any part of the country, including their own houses, to government offices and apartments. In some cases they had access to actual government establishments and facilities, which they used to consummate their scams. These economic terrorists did not stop at that. They went to the extent of torturing and murdering their victims, especially those who refused to yield to their demands. In 1995 an American fraud victim, lured to Nigeria, was murdered in Lagos. There was no kind of crime or atrocity these hoodlums did not commit, in their avid quest for wealth. In many Nigerian cities, especially Lagos, 419 activities became the order of the day.

Day of the landlord

Eventually the day of the landlord came, following the inauguration in 2003 of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC). A police officer, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, heads the Commission. Within weeks it had arrested top-flight 419-ners, hitherto thought to be untouchables. It recovered billions of naira in cash and seized assets of suspected fraudsters.

EFCC is working to recover looted funds both within and outside Nigeria.



Leo Igwe heads the Nigerian Skeptics. He is a regular Skeptic columnist.

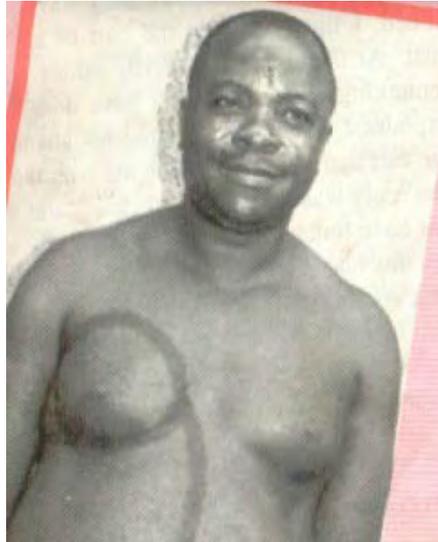
The Commission is helping to fight fraudulent activities in the banking industry, in the petroleum sector and in cyberspace, and has started prosecuting some of the fraudsters. Last year, one of the key suspects, Maurice Ibekwe, a former member of Nigeria's National Assembly, died in detention. Ibekwe was arrested for allegedly defrauding Munch Klause, a German national, of the sum of \$300,000 dollars and 75,000 DM. In September a court in Nigeria sentenced a woman, Amaka Anaemba, to two years imprisonment. Anaemba was among those who defrauded a Brazilian bank of the sum of \$254 million, the biggest scam in history. She was the first person to be convicted for 419 activities in Nigeria. EFCC has also arrested some youths in Lagos, popularly known as "Yahoo Millionaires" These youngsters use the Internet to fleece foreigners, especially online companies and corporate bodies. Annually the global losses to 419 activities were estimated to be between \$US750 million and \$1,000 million. US citizens lost \$100 — \$350 million. Britons lost £17.5 million. In 2003 166 Canadian victims were known to have lost \$6.2 million.

Apart from the efforts of the EFCC to combat 419 activities, various other police forces have special fraud units for Nigeria. The Financial Action Task Force (FINATF), an arm of the IMF has blacklisted Nigeria and once described Nigeria as the worst perpetrator of financial crimes in the world.

Scambaiting

There are also other group and individual initiatives to tackle fraud. One of them is scambaiting, which entails faking interesting in a 419 scam artist's proposal and wasting his time with drawn-out bizarre email exchanges that can go on for months. It works by trying to cajole, make caricature or scam the scammers. If the scam artist's time is wasted, scambaiters reason, it is time he can't spend on genuine victims. And if the swindler is misled by surreal email exchanges that never deliver what they promise, that seems more a case of just deserts than injustice. The scambaiter culture has given rise to several sites — the largest are

scamorama.com and *419eater.com*. Volunteers at these sites use their computer skills to fool the scammers. One baiting that made international headlines was that of a scambaiter, Mike, who did not want to reveal his full name.



Scammer scammed: Eboh with painted breast

Mike got an email from 'Prince Eboh' who described himself as the Chairman of the Contract Award Committee of the Niger Delta Development Commission. Eboh wanted Mike's help to transfer \$US45 billion. Mike replied that he was Father Hector Barnett of the Holy Church Order of The Red Breast, and that he would not do any business with people who are not members of the church.

Eboh responded, indicating his intention to join the church and "to do anything you want me to do in the faith". Mike replied that he needed to go through an initiation process, which entailed breast painting. Using image software, Mike made up an initiation picture and sent it to Eboh. Eboh carried out the initiation and emailed back his photo with a painted breast! In a typical 419 style, Mike wrote informing Eboh that the church had a lot of money. He persuaded Eboh to send him \$80 'withdrawal fee', which he did by courier. At one point Mike said he wrote informing Eboh that he had started questioning his faith after the death of a friend and had to leave the church. That he had decided to "put the money in a business exporting snow to Siberia"

Even though he was down by \$80, Mike said that Prince Eboh continued to send emails saying he was "sticking to his promise and saying the daily prayer (given to him by Mike) "When all above seems a great test, get down with the Holy Red Breast"

Retaliation

Serious retaliatory measures taken against Nigerians by fraud victims in some countries. In the Czech Republic, a 419 victim killed a Nigerian diplomat; in 2004, a 419 kingpin was murdered in South Africa; and there have been reports of attacks and killings of Nigerians in connection with fraud in Sierra Leone and Eritrea. According to the EFCC, more than 200 Nigerians are serving jail terms for 419 activities all over the world.

Internationally 419 activities have done a lot of damage to the image and reputation of Nigerians or anything Nigerian. Most Nigerians are treated with suspicion abroad and many have suffered humiliation and maltreatment.

Recently I had an experience of that. Not long ago, I issued an international appeal to skeptical friends and groups for financial support for our movement in Nigeria. But a friend in the UK told me, he couldn't raise a penny. Why? Because when he announced the appeal from Nigeria at a local meeting, someone stood up and said "Are you sure you are not raising this money for some thief out there who will take the money and run away?" I mean every Nigerian is now seen as a thief, thanks to 419 activities. An Igbo proverb says that it is one finger that gets the oil that stains a whole people. This is exactly what has happened to Nigeria and its people due to the fraudulent activities of few individuals.

So the wages of fraud is suspicion, lack of trust and confidence, poverty, misery, stagnation, persecution, victimization, humiliation, stigmatization, discrimination, hatred, prejudice, insensitivity, anger, violence, death and underdevelopment.



Magic Water: the Stuff of Life

An expert look at a
dubious claim

Apart from a lousy set of lower back genes, I inherited an Aeroswing from my late mother. As I hung suspended from my feet in a vertical position on this contraption my mind turned to *the Skeptic* — and to water. I was about to part with \$55 of the green and crinkly to a very well-spoken employee of Cool Pools in return for the information our swimming pool was leaking. Now this was not news to me. A first-class English and Australian state — and, I might add, HECS-free — education had enabled me to deduce this for myself. But having been advised by Mr Cool Pools to seal the liner around the skimmer box, I had spent the morning hanging over the side of the swimming pool thereby straining the worst of Mother Nature's lousy bioengineering experiments.

Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is the most common of joint diseases. It starts in your 20s and 30s and eventually everybody has frank disease by their 70s. It's no consolation to learn that all groups of vertebrates, both extinct (eg, the dinosaurs), and extant suffer(ed), from it — with rare exceptions. Those quick off the mark will no doubt nominate aquatic vertebrates such as fish, frogs, whales, porpoises as being free from osteoarthritis. After all, if one spends one's life weightless sus-

pending in a dilute solution of homeopathic remedies, one might expect to be free of this affliction. However you would be wrong. According to an impeccable source — my *Merck Manual* (16th ed, p1339) — the only mammals that fail to get osteoarthritis are bats and sloths. This is presumably because they spend much of their time hanging upside down. Whether the inventors of the Aeroswing were aware of this I do not know. But hanging from one's bootstraps certainly relieves the pressure on one's lumbar spondyls (Gr. *sphondylos* = vertebra). And as we will see, if you believe the purveyors of Unique Water, it ensures that one is more effectively relieved of carbon dioxide.

Now my problem is nothing compared with suffers of ankylosing spondylitis (morbid adhesion and inflammation of the spondyls) — a rheumatic condition of the spine resulting in recurrent back pain. It is three times more common in men than women, typically starts in the 20s/30s, has a genetic component, and possibly is precipitated by exposure to an infectious agent with a composition similar to normal tissue, resulting in inflammatory reactions directed at the latter (autoimmunity). Typically, like many arthritic and other autoimmune conditions, it is episodic and as such is much favoured



Pete Griffith, the Immediate Past President of Canberra Skeptics, is a retired microbiologist.

by the alternative remedy practitioners as one to treat. If you take the homoeopathic remedy, herbal tea, magic water and/or massage long enough, a remission will eventually occur (for no better reason than it was going to occur anyway) clearly proving the “treatment” works. I have a niece whose partner is a sufferer and consumes 2-3 litres of Unique Water daily in the firm belief it helps his condition.

So what is this stuff?

Unique Water gained prominence following an article in the *SMH Good Weekend* April 6, 2002 and the media-hype that followed. Dr Russell Beckett, a veterinarian with a PhD in biochemical pathology, had been granted patents by the US and Australian Patents Offices in 2001 for a formulation of Unique Water which, it was asserted, slowed the ageing process and increased the length of life of humans and other mammals and could be used to treat all inflammatory and degenerative diseases. Peter Bowditch was quick to point out the weaknesses in the “science” behind this stuff (www.ratbags.com/rsoles/comment/uniquewater.htm). Beckett received three nominations for the Bent Spoon award in 2002: in my view the Australian Patent Office should have been nominated too, but wasn't. A quick look at the Unique Water website is revealing.

It seems sheep around Braidwood (NSW) with access to drinking water containing low levels of magnesium live longer than those that don't. Now magnesium deficiency in stock is not uncommon and would be known to veterinarians. But why is this so? Plants facing a hot summer and/or a cold winter tend to take stuff out of their leaves and store it in their roots, so animals grazing on dried out vegetation (and I don't mean hay, which is cut green) tend to go short of a few things. It is well known that, as long as they receive appropriate levels of trace elements and vitamins in their diet, the lives of ex-

perimental animals are significantly extended by near starvation. Maybe this explains why Beckett's sheep lived longer (assuming it is not genetic, which has yet to be established).

Now magnesium deficiency in humans is supposed to be common (www.mgwater.com/content.shtml). Advocates of magnesium supplementation of the diet quote an old review by the US National Academy of Sciences (1977) of more than 50 reports, from nine countries, indicating an inverse relationship between drinking water hardness and cardiovascular disease mortality. I do not know whether these reports took into account that soft water, especially if it contains dissolved carbon dioxide, solubilizes lead and copper pipes and whether cumulative heavy metal poisoning leads to cardiovascular disease. Hard water results in a protective deposit on such pipes.

Some individuals survive on total parenteral nutrition so their daily magnesium requirement is accurately known and is, at most, 400 mg per day. We have a varied diet, and all cells containing phosphorus compounds contain magnesium as a counter ion. Nuts, whole seeds, cheese, flesh, fresh vegetables, fruit and cows' milk have around 200, 100, 45, 25, 25, 15, 13 mg magnesium per 100g respectively. Interestingly human milk has only 4 mg/100g. Now rickets used to be rampant in Scotland, and it was not only because of lack of sunshine. The Scots had the habit of consuming large quantities of porridge; this can result in a calcium deficiency, as oats contain much phytic acid which is an avid complexer of calcium and prevents its absorption from the gut. Assuming phytic acid is preferentially complexed with calcium, a plateful (200g) of rolled oats muesli containing chopped nuts and dried fruit, with yoghurt and milk, would in theory provide the daily allowance of dietary magnesium, if all were absorbed. A diet of white bread, butter, strawberry jam, eggs

and carbonated water (containing 24, 2, 5, 11, 0 mg /100g respectively) would probably be magnesium deficient. But a 150g bar of almond nut (270 mg/100g) dark chocolate (292mg/100g) would be enough! Hooray for certain junk food.

Unique Water contains 125 mg of magnesium and 650 mg of bicarbonate per litre. These ingredients are supposed to alleviate inflammation (www.uniquewater.com.au). Cells produce carbon dioxide by breaking down sugars to yield energy. In addition protons are formed which are removed by reaction with oxygen with the production of water and lots of energy in specialised cellular organelles (mitochondria). Daily, an adult produces 500 to 1000 grams (250 to 500 litres) of carbon dioxide much of which reacts with water to yield protons and bicarbonate ions. The latter are carried to the lungs, converted back to carbon dioxide, and exhaled.

Carbon Dioxide at fault?

According to Beckett, the excessive production of carbon dioxide, and hence protons, yields an acid environment within cells and mitochondria and this causes ageing. A mitochondrion has a radius of around 1 micrometer and hence a volume of $\frac{4}{3} \times \frac{22}{7} \times 10^{-18}$ cubic meters, or around 4×10^{-12} ml. Eighteen ml of water contains 0.62×10^{24} molecules. Assuming 70% of a mitochondrion is water, it will contain $0.7 \times 0.62/18 \times 10^{24} \times 4 \times 10^{-18}$, or around 100,000 molecules, of water. At pH 7.0, one in 10,000,000 water molecules is ionised, at pH 6.0 one in 1,000,000 and at pH 5.0 one in 100,000. Thus at pH 5.0 a mitochondrion will contain just a single proton and at pH 4.0 just 10. Any free protons are rapidly converted to water by reaction with oxygen. The whole idea of acid production in mitochondria is thus a nonsense.

Beckett theorises that the longevity of animals is directly related to how efficient the species is at avoiding elevated tissue carbon dioxide levels. Starvation is just one way.

Hanging upside down is another. Bats live 10 times longer than mice of equivalent size. According to Beckett this is because the former spend much of the day upside down. Their lungs, it seems, are relieved of carbon dioxide, which is heavier than air, by the help of gravity. (I would have thought this would be largely achieved by breathing.) The bowhead whale apparently lives two hundred years. The fact that whales and other diving mammals and birds accumulate very high tissue carbon dioxide levels during prolonged dives seems to have been conveniently overlooked by Beckett.

In the absence of oxygen, acid does accumulate in cells through energy production by anaerobic fermentation, which can lead to lactic acid accumulation in the tissues. (Evident as stiff muscles the morning after a bout of intense physical activity.) This also occurs during inflammatory processes, which actively involve acid production locally through the action of white blood cells. Where the pH drop in cells is sufficient, precipitation of their protein content can occur; this is occasionally seen in the living (leg muscles of marathon runners and cyclists) and always in the dead — where it causes rigor mortis. Beckett claims that ingesting a few hundred mg of bicarbonate reverses acid accumulation in the tissues. He ignores the fact that stomach acid at around pH 1.0, converts all ingested bicarbonate to carbon dioxide, which is burped out, or if absorbed, exhaled. Any increase in blood carbon dioxide automatically stimulates the breathing reflexes to blow off any excess carbon dioxide and regulate the blood pH up for just a few seconds. A few hundred mg of ingested bicarbonate will thus have zero effect on tissue pH, or that at sites of inflammation. The pH drop in the latter is best controlled by reducing the activity of the accumulating white blood cells — for example with colchicine in gout, or steroids in autoimmune disease. Maybe periodic bouts of heavy breathing can help — I must try it.

Whither magnesium?

And where does magnesium get involved? According to Beckett it acts to transport bicarbonate ions into cells from the blood plasma. For every magnesium ion pumped into cells two bicarbonate ions enter too. And the latter react with all those nasty protons to give carbon dioxide and water. Beckett ignores the buffer effect. The carbon dioxide-bicarbonate equilibrium around pH 7.3 is capable of accommodating large fluctuations in proton or bicarbonate ion levels with very small changes in ultimate pH. His theory just does not hold water.

But what if you drink two litres of water a day — Unique or not — What effect does that have? Dehydration effectively increases the concentration in the body of nasties such as uric acid, which, in many ageing males and some females, is close to saturation in body fluids at 37C and pH 7.3. Drop the pH a jot by local joint inflammation as a result of a bit of unaccustomed exercise or a strain, add a fall in local body temperature from wet or thin clothing, add a spot of dehydration from too much strong liquor or excessive sweating through exercise or overheating, add a reduced kidney clearance of uric acid through excessive lactic acid production from heavy exercise and/or alcohol consumption, add a bit of blood plasma uric acid overload through eating sweetbread and kidney pies washed down with strong liquor and what do you get? Uric acid crystallizes in the joints. This starts a more intense inflammation which causes a further pH drop which causes more uric acid precipitation and the whole thing gets agonisingly out of hand. So off to Epsom Spa to take the waters? No, stay at home and drink two litres a day of the stuff from the tap. And if you really believe magnesium and bicarbonate ions relieve inflammation, get a packet of sodium bicarbonate and one of Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate) from Woolies and weave your own magic with water from the

tap at a fraction of the cost of the “unique” stuff. As an alternative, Mylanta (containing 400mg magnesium hydroxide per 10ml), will have the bonus of relieving constipation as well.

Hitting the bottle

I read the other day that kids teeth are starting to rot again — it seems because they drink bottled water lacking added fluoride. Sales of bottled water have skyrocketed in all affluent countries. And so have kitchen-based water filters. Why people in Australia waste money on plastic-coated water is beyond me. In the old days one could ask for a glass of water, and that in the taps meets some pretty tough standards. Bottled water is partly a fashion statement, partly a purely commercial exercise in bars and restaurants and partly because people believe it is safer. In fact, unlike tap water, unless sterilized and bottled aseptically, bottled water is loaded with bacteria. Manufacturers tend to filter the water to remove grit, protozoan cysts and bacteria, but their filters do not remove viruses, and bacteria get into the water and/or bottles during processing. *And that includes the homoeopathic remedies.*

In a former life I used to perform experiments to demonstrate this to students of pharmacy. Water taken directly from the condenser of a glass still to a sterilized glass beaker and left unsealed on the bench overnight was routinely found to be contaminated with 10,000 bacteria per ml by the following day. The bacteria live off the minerals leached from the glass and organic material entering from the atmosphere, or passed over by steam-distillation. The problem of steam-distilled pine tree resins contaminating distilled tap water (derived from the Cotter Dam) that was used for tissue culture in the Microbiology Department of the JCSMR in the mid-1960s, will be familiar to a few Canberra residents

Continued p 60...

Design Failure

The following is a copy of a letter written by a subscriber (a member of the Uniting Church) to an evangelical religious magazine, *Challenge*, regarding Intelligent Design. As the writer explains in a footnote, the magazine refused to publish his letter, but we think the points he makes are excellent and deserve wider distribution.

David Goss
Torrens ACT

During a recent trip to Western Australia I was given a copy of *Challenge*, distributed by the Anglican Parish of Geraldton, containing Andrew Lansdown's article on "The Design Evolution Debate". Like all advocacy of "Intelligent Design" [ID] it causes me concern because it brings the Christian Church [to which I belong] into disrepute and I ask the use of your pages to explain why.

Claiming that acceptance of evolution is "just faith and unproven" is false to the point of dishonesty. Evolution is a scientific hypothesis which has evolved over 150 years with each new discovery strengthening it. Like all scientific theories, some details are still in dispute and there is still much left to discover. But it explains the facts as we know them. No evidence has arisen to disprove it [eg, kangaroos in the Jurrassic period]. Another theory — "Gravity" can be described in the same terms as Lansdown describes evolution. But we launch satellites and go to the Moon using the theory.

Humans have an unnecessary appendix, if cold goose bumps try to raise fur they do not have, and their retina

is installed backwards. Evolution explains this. But these, and other human bodily quirks, raise doubts as to how "intelligent" any "designer" could have been. Perhaps the concept should be called "Incompetent Design" [ID]

AIDS, malaria, bilharzia, a parasite that blinds millions or a gene which covers babies with painful blisters etc, reflect evolution with its trials and errors. Any "designer" who actually designed these has to be a warped sadist. Creationism's answer is that man himself chose this suffering when he departed from God's lordship in the Garden of Eden, when man chose to know evil so that he would be "like God". Even if we accept for the sake of argument a literal Garden of Eden, this answer does not explain genetic defects like the baby blisters. The explanation could only work if God rushed out and placed genetic diseases in a previously perfect mankind when they left the Garden of Eden! Such an answer still leaves the warped sadist argument unanswered!

Evolutionary theory explains the current concern with bird flu, why rabbits became immune to myxomatosis and why bacteria become resistant to antibiotics. Evolution is an integral part of modern medicine. I observe that ID advocates do not reject the modern medicines science provides, while rejecting the theory which produced them. Evolution as a scientific theory has 150 years of evidence, it is tested daily and claims to the contrary can only be made out of ignorance, dishonesty or both.

In contrast the ID theory is not a scientific one. Like Selley's filler, it inserts God into perceived gaps in evolution theory where we do not yet have full details. But when Science fill the gaps the filler has to be discarded.

Lansdown thus he sets God up for a fall — a foolish act for a believer. ID proponents are very careful not to define what they mean by ID, presumably to make it harder to attack. It not based on any evidence, and there is not even one published ID paper in any scientific journal which opens it to peer review. ID thus has no place in science learning. It could be included in religious studies to show that while Religion has inspired much good it still harbours odd and quirky ideas in its darker corners.

Any position based solely on the Bible or religion makes them look foolish when it is shown to be wrong. Some religions believed God wanted child sacrifices to make the crops grow. It was sincerely held, but we now know it was wrong and such religions are no longer around! Was Christianity stronger for past Bible based insistence that the world was flat, and was created in 6 days from 23 October 4004 BC or that the Sun went around the Earth? I suggest not. Similarly, opposing evolution and advocating ID leads thinking people to regard the church as foolish, and to ask if it can be so wrong on an obvious fact how can it be right on less obvious issues of God and morality. Intelligent people do not expect to leave their brains at the Church door.

We are influenced and limited by our cultural environment and upbringing. The idea of creation was an ancient attempt to explain the world and God by people who knew little of what we know today. When Papuan natives saw a radio for the first time they believed the voice was a "little man" inside the radio. Papuans learned about radio waves. Today's knowledge lets us go beyond creationism and its offspring ID.

Design Failure

Science has proved *inter alia* that the world is much older than believed and rather than being the centre of the Universe, Earth is a small planet circling a minor star at the edge of one of the thousands of galaxies in the Universe. The big bang discovery is a concept which leads believers to the bigger question of what was behind the big bang. If ID advocates chose to use the brains God gave them they would see that the big bang was “creation” and since then developments have gone according to laws God laid down. One of the laws is evolution by which the most simple form of life has evolved to the extent that some life can now comprehend itself and stand in awe of the “wondrous way in which we are made” and the process that brought it about. That is a truly awe inspiring vision of God, his works and ways.

In contrast, ID and Creationism is the “little man theory” explanation of radio which is limited, wrong and completely unconvincing. Basing such

theories on religion, brings religion into contempt. True religion can accept the majesty of God and the discoveries of Man and does not need to squeeze the latter into the narrow limits of a confined mind.

I conclude with two quotations by religious people. Thomas Lowell’s American Civil war hymn said

New occasions teach new duties,

Time makes ancient good uncouth.

They must ever up and onwards

Who would keep abreast of Truth.

St Paul noted [1 *Corinthians* 13/11]:

When I was a child I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a Child but when I became a man I put away childish things.

Creationism and ID is ancient but uncouth, a childish explanation like the tooth fairy that mature humans put aside because they now have a more informed vision of creation and

the ways of God. Scientific discoveries do not disprove God’s existence. The only way to do that is Andrew Lansdown’s way — that is to nail God’s colours to a deck chair on the Titanic after it has hit the iceberg.

Footnote.

Challenge declined to publish the letter. An exchange of correspondence which ensued saw no attempted answer to any questions raised, with me being described as a liar, an atheist and a person who associates only with atheists. I noted, *inter alia*, that atheists are thin on the ground at the Uniting Church I attend. I closed the correspondence quoting *Proverbs* 26.4 loosely translated as:

Do not argue with a fool as people may not be able to tell the difference.



... Magic water from p 58

— especially those whose vertebrate cell cultures simply died as a result.

The Chinese long ago learned that heating water with a bactericide (namely tannin) rendered it safe, as well as mildly stimulating; they called the product t’e or ch’a. Now if you do go to China you are well advised to drink fresh tea, or at least water from the hot tap (though these days, when hot water tanks are held at 50oC, this could be unwise as many bugs survive — and some even flourish — at this temperature; those flourishing are unlikely to prove a health hazard for you, but will definitely shorten the life of your plumbing, the copper/zinc/iron version that is). If you drink bottled water, insist on it being carbonated.

Why? Because, my friends, the pH of water saturated with carbon dioxide is around 3.5 and no bacterial pathogen can grow at this pH, and not too many survive. No doubt this is why beer, champagne and certain fizzy mineral waters have acquired their reputation for palatability.

Unfortunately many viruses infecting the gut are designed to survive the pH of the stomach and so survive in carbonated beverages. Many years ago I read a report in the journal *Nature* that red wine knocked off poliovirus. Clearly the French had worked out that adding some of the red stuff to water was a Good Thing — the acid, tannins and alcohol in red wine do nasty things to bugs. However Pasteur did show

that the wrong sort of bacteria in wine could make it go off — although none of these would be a threat to anything other than your palate. Poliovirus isn’t around much any more, though hepatitis A virus, Norwalk virus, rotaviruses and SARS virus still are. What affect red wine has on these I do not know. Better stick to fresh tea. And there is a bonus — as it is high in fluoride — tea is good for the teeth.

An earlier version of this article appeared in the Canberra Sketics newsletter, *Argus*, in 2003.



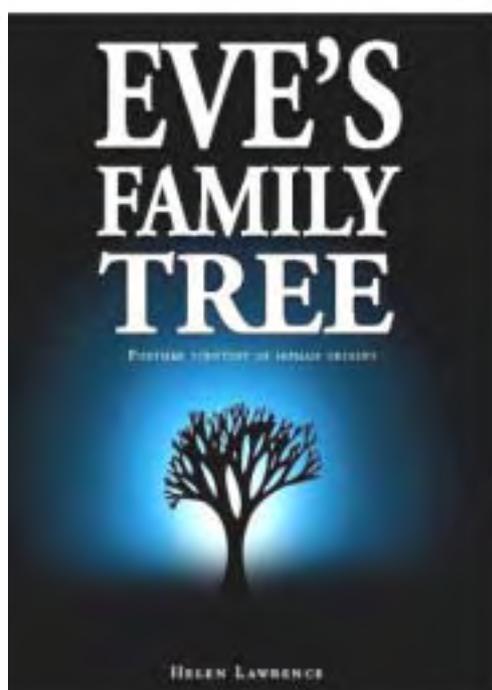
Compliments of the Season to Our Readers

Meeting the Ancestors

Eve's Family Tree: Further Scrutiny of Human Origins, Helen Lawrence; Maygog Press, 2005.

In *Eve's Family Tree: Further Scrutiny of Human Origins*, Hobart-based author, Helen Lawrence expands on the material in her previous book, *Making Friends With Fossils*. She canvasses the origins of modern humans and tells of the main extinct and living species which share our origins. The book includes a discussion about *Homo floresiensis* aka "The Hobbit", which was recently discovered in Indonesia. She also writes of the way in which several of our extinct ancestor species, like *Homo erectus* and our extinct sister species *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, populated the continents. In the second half of the book Ms Lawrence describes the coming of humans to Australia and some nearby islands, how the continent was populated and discusses aspects of the culture, languages and economic life of Aboriginal Australians.

Eve's Family Tree offers evidence that answers the question, "Where did we come from?" Ms Lawrence does this by citing the rich tapestry



of evidence that has accumulated from research all over the world. Importantly she does this in a popular, easy to read style that will not require the reader to have specialized knowledge. She examines the African origin of our genus and its movement out of Africa and how hominins went off to occupy all the habitable areas of the world. This section includes mention of the main areas of uncertainty in the saga of the development of our species and its spread across the world.

This is a book of broad canvas, which will excite the newcomer to the topic of human origins, and will explicate many things of interest to people who already have some knowledge of human origins. By using uncomplicated, plain language and interesting explanations, Helen Lawrence tells the gripping story of the origin of humans, as well as helping readers to understand something of the fascinating world of palaeo-anthropology.

Proponents of the grandly titled conceit of "Intelligent Design" claim, *inter alia*, that there is something so mysterious about humans such that only supernatural intervention can explain how and why we differ from other species. Ms Lawrence shows that, although Intelligent Design may have some small role in a religious studies class, it is clearly not science and does not belong in the science classroom when human origins are being considered. For those teaching students about the natural world, and for others keen to learn about the ancestry of humanity, this title book is an essential volume.

Theories continually surface about how *Homo sapiens* populated the whole world. Each exciting new discovery adds to the knowledge about our primate ancestry, helping to form a composite picture. Ancient bones and forgotten lifestyles are laid bare and tell us really interesting things about ourselves as human beings. You too can become a palaeo-watcher!

Eve's Family Tree is an excellent choice as a gift for the intelligent layperson, including older children. If you can buy this book in time for Christmas: do so! If not, then buy copies as birthday gifts for all your friends and relatives to whom it could be of interest. And do not forget one for yourself!

***Eve's Family Tree* is available from the Australian Skeptics web site for \$24.50. Helen Lawrence's previous book, *Making Friends with Fossils* is also available at \$16.50. You can buy both together for \$40. www.skeptics.com.au**



Fred Thornett, Secretary of the Tasmanian Skeptics, is a Life Member of Australian Skeptics



Goat Watching

Worrisome weirdness in the intelligence game

***The Men Who Stare at Goats*, Jon Ronson; Simon & Schuster, 2004.**

“This is a true story.” That is the first line in *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, and it is an entirely necessary one. The rest of the book is just too weird to be believed; this means that Ronson is in his element, as he showed in his last book *Them*, a study of paranoid conspiracy addicts. Those suspicious folks were laughable, and indeed there are many, many laughs to be enjoyed in reading this new work. But each laugh is a sad one now, for Ronson details goony beliefs among those in power, those whom the government is paying to do our will. They feel that “America, the great superpower, needed to be defended by people who actually had superpowers.” Ronson has met with many of these warriors, found some who wanted to tell their stories and even brag about them, and with wonderful reportorial detachment has laid out the results. If you have an ounce of common sense, you will be dismayed to learn that our taxes are going to military and intelligence officials who are making sincere attempts to walk through walls, turn invisible, stop an animal’s heart by just staring at it, warp brains by subliminal stimulation, and more. The waste is stupid enough, but Ronson shows how the doctrines have been part of the reason for the debacles at Waco and Abu Ghraib. Laugh through this book, but see if each laugh does not make you a little more indignant over this stupidity.

It was that bane of skeptics, Uri Geller, who put Ronson onto the

scent in 2001. Geller had claimed that he had been a consultant “psychic spy” working for US intelligence. In fact, he claimed that he still was. From Geller, the trail goes to Major General Albert Stubblebine, who is quite serious about his own attempts to walk through walls. Such a talent would be a boon to any soldier, but the general confesses, “I just haven’t figured out how *my* space can fit through *that* space. I simply kept bumping my nose.” He is also frustrated in his attempts to levitate. “I could not get my fat ass off the ground, excuse my language.” To give the general his due, he *has* succeeded in bursting clouds just by thinking. Success or no, he still thinks these are great ideas, because in the intelligence game, you cannot afford to go stale, you have to try everything. He has had some trouble convincing even Special Forces at Fort Bragg of the need for psychic healing, bending metal through merely thinking about it (*à la* Geller), or bursting the hearts of animals without physical contact. Special Forces receives his ideas in silence, and say they don’t even have access to animals on which he might try that last experiment.

But they lie. They actually thought his ideas were excellent, and they had access to plenty of goats that had been deliberately de-bleated so that they would not cry out when such things as psychic heart-stopping were attempted on them. The goats were kept in the Goat Lab at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, with the goal of creating a super soldier, armed not with ballistics but with psychic powers that could



Rob Hardy, a psychiatrist from the USA, is a regular reviewer for the Skeptic.

According to Hoyle

*Tony Heyes
Doncaster East VIC*

In the early 60s I went to do a PhD at that name dropper's paradise the Cavendish Physics Laboratory in Cambridge. There I worked with some of the leading scientist of the 20th Century and lived in an environment of privilege, achievement and self confidence. It was some time before someone let me into the secret of coping. The secret is summed up in two words: effortless superiority. In my first few months in Cambridge I was not especially good at effortless superiority I was rather more concerned with such thoughts as, "What the hell am I doing here?"

Luckily I attended a lecture by Fred Hoyle. Here was this short guy with myopic spectacles, talking in a north country accent much broader than my own Manchester dialect. You must recall that these were pre-Beatle days when northern accents were definitely not an asset.

Fred was in inspiration. He held a large audience spellbound with his account of the chemical composition of stars. More of this later. On that night Fred became one of my heroes.

Fred did some brilliant work. He did some controversial work. He upset many people and inspired others.

Fred Hoyle is know in Skeptic circles as a bit of a joke. In 1983 he wrote a book, *The Intelligent Universe*, in which he made the oft quoted and much lampooned analogy. On the formation of a protein molecule he asked the reader to imagine a junkyard containing all the bits and pieces of a Boeing-747, dismembered and in disarray. A whirlwind blows through the yard. What is the probability that after its passage there will be a fully assembled 747?

As Richard Dawkins and many others have pointed out, no one in evolutionary circles suggests for one moment that a creature, an eye, a

protein or even a DNA molecule would jump fully formed from the "primordial soup". Fred was correct in what he said — the probability would indeed be infinitesimal — but totally wrong to use it as an argument against the theory of evolution. Natural Selection just does not work that way.

Fred is known in scientific circles as one of the three co-founders of the "Steady State Theory" of the universe. In this theory there is no Big Bang. Actually the expression Big Bang was coined by Fred Hoyle to describe the theory propounded by his opponents. In Fred's theory the universe has existed, and will always, exist. Expansion takes place but matter is continuously created to fill in the gaps. The Steady State Theory, sometimes known as Continuous Creation, was dealt a deadly blow by the discovery in 1964 of cosmic microwave background radiation. My own belief is that the Big Bang theory may not be the end of the story. There are a couple of rather large anomalies: Inflation seems little more than a frig and as for dark matter! We may not have seen the last of the Steady State Theory.

Fred suggested that viruses, such as the common cold, influenza and possible even life itself was and is seeded on to the earth when it passes through the tails of comets. The howls of derision that this idea produced have long since died away and there are now university departments of Astro Biology.

Fred led the criticism of the Nobel committee when in 1974 Tony Hewish and Martin Ryle won the Physics prize for their work in radio astronomy. We were all stunned that Jocelyn Bell, the girl, who had discovered pulsars and thereby put radio astronomy on the map, had been left out. Outrageously the prize went to her supervisor and his boss.

So what of Fred's greatest work — the chemical composition of stars. He alone showed how, in a star containing

hydrogen and helium, nuclear processes could create heavier elements beginning with carbon and going through to iron. This was completely new, it was so novel that after the scientific paper was published in 1946 not a single scientist took any notice of it until about 1954. During the 50s Fred worked with colleagues on the origin of the rest of the elements from iron right through to uranium. This led to a monumental paper in 1957, which actually shows us why the periodic table of the chemical elements is how it is, and also tells us why some elements are common, like carbon and iron and some elements are rare.

Essentially Fred worked out an energy staircase up which nuclear synthesis could climb. At one stage he went, cap-in-hand, to the USA to persuade Willy Fowler, an experimentalist, to use his atom smashing equipment to look for some of the predicted energy steps. Willy reluctantly agreed to give it a try for a couple of months.

In 1983, Fowler and a colleague Subramanyan Chandrasekhar, shared the Nobel prize for Physics — for theoretical and experimental studies of the nuclear reactions of importance in the formation of the chemical elements in the universe. Fred Hoyle was not included. In Willy Fowler's acceptance speech he mentioned Fred 18 times and on leaving Stockholm, Fowler and Chandrasekhar pooled their prize money and gave Fred one third.

The atoms which form our bodies and all the objects around us were cooked in stars. We are made of star-stuff. The temperatures, the times and the ratio of the resulting products were all worked out by that irascible Yorkshireman — Fred Hoyle.

So the next time some smart-arse Skeptic says, "Oh yes, Fred Hoyle the guy with the 747."

You must say, "Ah yes, but "



Letters

Promote fraud – increase grief

Jackie French
Araluen Valley, NSW.

I've just read Ken McLeod's excellent article 'Dumb and Dumber at the ABC', (*Skeptic* 25:3) on *The Spirit of Things*' promotion of Allison Dubois' claims that she helps police locate bodies and murder suspects. But I think if anything he understates the case. *The Spirit of Things* was not just lifting the credibility of a psychic — they were promoting a fraud.

My sister disappeared eight years ago. Her body has never been found, despite the offer of a reward by the family, and later a larger reward by the police, and the case has attracted a fair bit of media attention.

And of course the psychics. Two in particular claimed that they regularly worked with police, but were unable to give a good reason why they contacted me with their 'information', instead of the police officers they supposedly worked with. (It is probably unnecessary to add in this journal that none of the information they offered was at all useful — in fact all has proven to be way off the track.)

When someone you love is missing, or has been the victim of a violent crime (as the police assume my sister was) you are more than grieving and vulnerable. It becomes an intellectual problem, not just an emotional one, as you try to sift and analyse every skerrick of information to try to make sense of what has happened. Too often there is almost no information to work on. And that's where the psychic

has the advantage — they can conjure data out of nowhere.

(Two months after my sister disappeared, when a large part of every day was still spent trying to work out how or why, I saw the headlines in a women's magazine in the doctor's surgery — flying saucers were beaming up earthlings to train as ambassadors for their landing in the year 2000. I don't believe in flying saucers — in fact you could categorise my non-belief as fervent. But just for a couple of seconds I thought: "Yes, THAT'S what might have happened. She'd make a wonderful ambassador".)

It's the puzzling, even more than the grieving, that makes you vulnerable. You are so open to ANY solution that things you'd previously ridicule become... well, if not possible, at least something to fill the void.

But back to the psychics — two in particular, both well known names in the psychic world. One went on insisting that my sister kept appearing to her, giving her a message to me. At that stage I thought the woman was sincere, if deluded. So to shut her up I told her (truthfully) that my sister never used the name 'Jackie'. If she really was trying to communicate with me from the grave she'd call me the name she'd always used.

That's when the phone calls to my husband started, trying to find out any names I might have been called in the past, asking him to look at photographs of my sister for details of her appearance, just to 'check up it was really her appearing' — and each time telling him that I knew all about it and wanted him to help, but not to men-

tion the calls as they'd only distress me.

No, this wasn't just a case of adding to 'the trauma and heartache of bereaved people'. This was a deliberate and organised attempt to claim the rewards, and to get publicity for the psychic's media appearances on a popular TV show. I'd be a useful and quite public testimonial for their services.

We're talking fraud — trying to gain money under false pretences. We're talking con artists. But thanks to misguided shows like *The Spirit of Things* we are also talking publicly sanctioned fraud. The police will act if a con artist asks me to send \$100,000 to a bank account in Nigeria. They won't arrest a psychic con who asks for \$150,000 for telling me that my sister is in a grave with a view of a church steeple, with pansies nearby, and was taken there by car. Oh, and that 'she's at peace now, and happy on the other side.'

And while programmes like *The Spirit of Things* keep promoting fraud, they never will.

Nor does is the excuse 'police are not willing to admit they use advice from psychics' valid. Most police in homicide or missing persons that I've spoken to are quite open about following up advice from psychics at some time in their career. This is partly because police, too, can get obsessed by an unsolved crime, particularly where kids are victims, and look for any possible solution, but also in case the informant actually does have some knowledge of the case, but prefers to hide their involvement by pretending the information came paranormally.

Letters

The reason police don't consult psychics is because psychics are no use whatsoever in solving cases.

(I noticed this convenient 'we have definite proof psychic powers exist but no one wants to admit it publicly' theme repeated on the recent ABC show *Sea of Souls*. But at least that was in the fiction time slot.)

Inappropriate advice

Blair Alldis
Bundaberg QLD

The following is a letter I wrote to the Editor of *Conquest* magazine, the journal of Diabetes Australia Ltd

I was very surprised, annoyed and disappointed to read the full-page article on Reflexology in the Spring edition of *Conquest* (page 23).

Reflexology is of course one of the components of New Age "complimentary medicine" (formerly called "alternative" medicine — an even more misleading name). There is no scientific evidence whatever for the effectiveness of reflexology and the same can be said of homeopathy, iridology and a host of other unsupported nonsense. It is true that a lot of people have faith in it, but then a lot of people have faith in many other absurdities such as water-divining, astrology and the magical power of magnets to alleviate pain. If some people derive comfort from these faiths, this is brainless but not illegal and sometimes such a faith may have some beneficial effect as a placebo. However I did not expect to read about any of them in your magazine.

The article to which I refer casts no doubt whatever upon the validity of reflexology. The second paragraph of the article commences with the statement: "Reflexology involves massaging points on the hands or feet that correspond with parts of the body to mobilise the body's internal healing resources by restoring the natural energy flow". In fact there has never been any connection shown between areas of the hands or feet with other

parts of the body and there is no such process as "natural energy flow" in the body (unless you are merely referring to circulation of the blood and/or the lymph).

It is disappointing to read such nonsense in your magazine and it puts me in the position of not knowing what "information" promulgated by Diabetes Australia can be trusted and what can not.

I thank you for the good work which you undoubtedly do but in future I will read your advice in your magazine and elsewhere with skepticism.

Evidence blind.

Bill Moriarty,
St. Leonards, VIC

I found David Brookman's article "Theism: How, Why, and Wherefore" in the Spring 2005 issue (25:3; p.30), interesting in a number of ways. However, for the present I would like to comment just on his suggestion (p.32) that people who have been brought up to believe in a divine creator "cannot perceive the evidence for biological selection" because "they lack the neurological equipment". I take it this is to say that people who do not believe in biological selection are in a sense blind. Is this meant to be a general statement?

As against such a view, there is the fact that there are many people who have been brought up to believe that there is a divine creator, and who still believe this, and who also believe in biological selection. Again, there are many people who have been brought up without any belief in a divine creator, but have come to believe in one. Some of these people believe in biological selection, and some do not.

More generally, it is relevant to consider the processes involved in making a decision, whether it is about what course of action to take, or whether particular statements or observations should be accepted, or whether one or another scientific theory is correct. Suppose, for instance, I have to decide

whether a theory A should be accepted, or theory B. Arguments supporting theory A have been put forward, and also arguments for theory B. I can "see" both sets of arguments. There is no question of my being "blind" to any of the arguments. I must weigh up the arguments, and decide which set is the more convincing to me. Suppose I opt for theory A. It is not sensible to accuse me of being "blind" to the arguments for theory B. I might just as well accuse my accuser of being "blind" to those for theory A. I just find the arguments for B less convincing than those for theory A. Someone else, perhaps with a different background, might find them more convincing.

In the particular case considered by David, the people he suggests are "blind" have a view of the divine creator which they find inconsistent with biological selection. They are not therefore blind to the evidence for biological selection. They just consider their reasons for their view outweigh such evidence. Their evidence, their reasons, for taking such a view are not likely to be considered by David, or many others, to be scientific. So for David, they would carry, no weight. Is David "blind" to such reasons?

Childhood conditioning

Nigel Sinnott
Sunshine West, Vic.

I very much enjoyed John Warren's article, "Dawkins, McGrath & Me" (Spring), and I think he set out very well the different origins and approaches of the idealist-religious method and the materialist-scientific one.

John makes some interesting points about the "overwhelming role" of early indoctrination and emotional attachment for the continuation of ideologies like religion. On the other hand, the presence in China and North Korea of numerous prison camps for dissidents means that, even there, constant indoctrination of the state ideology from an early age is not always successful.

I was brought up in Britain by par-

ents who were unvarying right-wing Tories. Anything vaguely left, liberal or intellectual was regarded with derision. My father was a church-going Anglican; my mother the sort of “agnostic” who regarded religion as “good” for keeping the working classes in their place. My parents packed me off to an Anglican choir school for five years, followed by another five years in an Anglican school that ran on a diet of 1870s vintage “muscular Christianity”.

The result? I have been a very staunch atheist since the age of eleven, and have never voted conservative in my life.

Now I am sure plenty of environmental reasons can be adduced to explain why I so completely kicked over the traces. But is this the whole story? Maybe not, because I know a bit about my paternal grandfather.

My grandfather was born (1881) in India of Irish parents. He was the eldest of several children and, according to the psychologists, the eldest of a group of siblings tends to be the conservative, “responsible” one. The family moved to England in 1898. Both parents were dead by 1899, so my grandfather became head of the household. In 1913 he married an Anglican and, about two years later, rejected all forms of religion to the utter horror of his more-Catholic-than-the-Pope siblings. He also moved to the left politically.

So I would not discount the possibility of there being a genetic component in nonconformity, even if it is less pronounced than environmental factors.

A philosophical question

Michael O'Rourke
Braddon ACT

The article by my fellow atheist, John Warren, entitled “Dawkins, McGrath and Me” (25:3), was disappointing.

The Dawkins in the title is of course the Oxford apologist for evolution (“apologist” in the old and noble sense of a justifier and defender). Alister McGrath, the author of *Dawkins' God*, is an Oxford theologian who recon-

verted to his parents' theism after a period as an atheist.

Warren cites the 19th Century German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, against McGrath because ... Feuerbach agrees with Warren. But he dismisses the 13th Century Italian philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, because ... well, Aquinas was a Believer. This is a simple fallacy: the fact that John or Ludwig or anyone else believes God's qualities such as omnipotence to be “simply projections of human qualities writ large” doesn't make the statement true. This is the fallacy of False Authority.

Warren correctly observes that Aquinas's arguments are “not proofs in the scientific sense of the word”. Of course not. The existence or otherwise of God is not a scientific question; it is a philosophical question.

And Aquinas is an excellent philosopher for atheists to read precisely because he lays out so well the ‘traditional’ arguments for God's existence, with real elegance and clarity. John may despise Aquinas, but David Hume and Immanuel Kant thought his arguments well worth refuting.

In like manner, Warren misunderstands the terms ‘idealist’ and ‘materialist’. To put the difference very crudely, for idealists the world is an Idea, while for materialists the world is a Thing. Certainly Idealists can and do “use words in the brain to try to create an image, an interpretation, of the world,” (as Warren correctly states), but so do Materialists. So does everybody. And if Materialists “use experience of the real world to try to create the words — theories — to describe it”, so do the Idealists. We all do.

Again, the dispute between Idealism and Materialism is a philosophical question, not a scientific one. (I commend Bishop Berkeley, the 18th century Anglo-Irish philosopher, to anyone who wants their materialism challenged. Check him out, John.)

John Warren goes on to attribute Alister McGrath's belief in God to an emotional attachment coming from McGrath's early experience in a loving religious family. This claim may or may not be true. Presumably it is not based on a scientific experiment (Mr Warren's test of truth), so we are entitled not to

be persuaded. In any case, a quick thought-experiment will cast doubt: why do some children of loving theist parents become atheists and some children of loving atheist parents turn to God? (And how to account for agnostics? Their parents only a little bit loving, John?)

Let's us by all means be atheists, Mr Editor, but let's have better arguments than Mr Warren's.

Massaging the message

Disgusted father of two (and ancient decaying hippie)
Northmead NSW

I have just received the latest edition of your fine magazine, *the Skeptic*, and I notice a serious and, in fact, egregious error on almost the very first page. You refer to the late Professor Marshall MacLuhan and associate him with the expression “The medium is the message”. The actual title of the book written by Prof MacLuhan and Quentin Fiore was *The Medium is the Massage*. “Massage”, I tell you, not “message”.

I have a copy of this book somewhere in my garage, and one day I will organise a trip of the people of Conowindra to my place to conduct a dig with their little trowels and brushes. Then you will see the truth.

At least people don't misquote him when he invented the term “global village”.

The angle on angels

Dan Stewart
Gympie QLD

ABC local radio on the Gold and Sunshine Coast has a tendency to indulge in various pseudo-scientific fantasies. This may well so it can be “relevant” to the local milieu, whatever that may be. However, one suspects some of the announcers find it hard to keep a straight face, their tone of voice only just masking a certain mirth when a feng shui or

other “expert” is answering the talk-back questions. Bob Bruce from the Qskeptics is a welcome voice on the Coast FM air-waves.

A special mention needs to be made of Spencer Howson, on Brisbane ABC radio. Driving home from Brisbane recently (Oct 25) I heard him interviewing a person who was promoting a seminar about angels. Yes, every person has a personal angel, and for *only* \$120 (if memory is correct) you could attend a seminar to hear how to contact yours. (Sadly, the seminar leader’s name has vacated my memory.)

Howson’s questioned the cost: if these angels really wanted to contact us, as the expert claimed, then why the need for the seminar? The response: the fee was based on an angel’s advice.

Within ten minutes emails from two listeners were read out. One described the angel seminar as c.r.a.p. The other email writer described his wife as his angel, and said he would prefer to spend the money on her.

If nothing else, the second email writer had a more biblical view of angels than the angel expert. Most angels in the Bible are described as people, scary or laughable men to be more specific. However, the real angel experts are Howson and the email writers.

Early job departures

*Geoff Sherrington
North Balwyn VIC.*

I would like to share with fellow Skeptics a small piece of old documentary movie that I found profoundly moving and full of philosophy.

An airship was docking via the long rope that dangled from its nose, to be tied to a tower. The men on the ground had gripped the rope as planned, when a sudden wind gust lifted the airship. More men ran from the crowd and held the rope as well, but the ship rose higher.

Eventually, the men could hold on no longer as their strength gave way. Those who first held on were taken the highest, dropping to a certain death. The more eager of the volunteers were

the next highest and the next to go. Those who held back were not lifted from the ground and did not perish.

There are several morals to this story.

1. When you take on a new job, inquire about safety procedures. Would the paid men have been safe with a mechanical sling instead of bare hands?
2. Remember the old bull and the young bull. (Young bull: “The cow paddock fence has broken. Let’s rush in and knock over a couple”. The old bull: “No, let’s walk in slowly and knock over the lot”.)
3. Remember that loyalty **NEED** NOT have its just rewards. The most loyal of the men were taken highest and dropped.
4. As Army privates knew, Never Volunteer.
5. Re Andy Warhol, “Every person has 15 minutes of fame”. Rider: Make sure you live to enjoy them.

I am trying to make this episode readable and light, but it disturbs me deeply. The cinema photographers showed the men dropping off like ants in the distance, with horrible velocity on impact. The more I think about it, the more it stands out as an anomaly in life that has deep import. Can our Skeptics philosophers help me to expunge the recurring dream?

Credentialism?

*John August
Ryde NSW*

I relate to and identify with the concerns the Skeptics have about creationism, astrology and similar. But I also hold some unconventional views — one is a belief in an alternative to the theory of relativity — Ritzian theory. (Perhaps a better description would be “I am aware of the evidence relating to Relativistic and Ritzian explanations”.)

Compared with the other controversies the Skeptics take an interest in,

it’s not fair to expect Skeptics will be interested in this one; if you look at the Internet you’ll find many such theories — perhaps there’s an interest in how they come about and how they relate to mainstream science — are they charlatans or is there something in it? But clearly if we’re wrong, nobody is being “conned” over it and there’s no financial impacts to speak of. It seems that an important dimension is not whether there’s a controversy over whether something is true or not, but the perceived impact of it being true or false.

But I’ll give my own views a plug; some people did seem to find them intriguing at the last Skeptics convention. You can find it at : arachnid.apana.org.au/johna/ritz.html

One thing that was apparent during discussions was the difficulty John Winckle had with promoting alternatives; essentially his difficulty was that he had no credentials in science. Well, I have credentials — a physics degree — but even so, I’m puzzled by this viewpoint. What someone says either makes sense or it doesn’t — and whether they have qualifications or not is a separate matter. Just as it is a fallacy to look to authority, it is a fallacy to assume a *lack* of authority means you’re wrong.

I see a lot of “credentialism” in wider political comment — different sides trying to shout down the other based on “whether they have the credentials”. But it’s a strange point of view. Politically, I would have thought that everyone has the right to an opinion.

Equally, it can make sense to ignore others based on their lack of qualifications. However, where this is reasonable it’s a pragmatic statistical thing — it’s not fair to *assume* someone is wrong because of their lack of credentials, but it can be an unfortunately necessary way of filtering the torrent of information before us.

But there’s a problem when you are *exhorting* people to ignore someone based on their lack of credentials. It’s a personal choice — not something you should exhort others about. Exhortations are usually not in the service of “reason” or “information content in the world” — but rather serve a vested in-

terest — and it's difficult to tell the difference. When it becomes a motivation for a political clique, that's a worry.

It reflects a definite tension within the Skeptics. Notionally, Skeptics are "aware of the evidence" in a neutral fashion. But, the reality is that there's a tension between "being critical of mainstream claims we take for granted" or "being critical of claims from outside of the mainstream which are challenging the mainstream". And it seems to me this is a dichotomy which goes beyond the neutral ideal of Skepticism, to the underlying biases of the people involved.

And before it seems I'm poking the stick at others — clearly, I have my biases, too. What's my vested interest in putting this forward?

Tasteless

*Michael Meyerson
McMahons Point NSW*

It's a pity that an academic such as Jef Clark finds the use of sloppy English language more offensive than his tasteless stereotype of "Hymie-Comb-Over.

Censorship?

*Phil Riley
Blacksmiths NSW*

The Skeptic's fascination with alternative medicine is becoming almost a crusade. In the Winter issue (25:2) Bunyip fulminates about the ABC screening *Second Opinion*.

Bunyip's remarks smack of censorship, one of the most repugnant ideas ever invented. No one has the right to dictate to another, what they may see, hear or read. Just because Bunyip, or anyone else, does not like something, it does not mean that no one else should like it either, and Bunyip's analogy of a 'balancing act', comparing the ABC and *Second Opinion* with a police commissioner's remarks and some imaginary organisations is, quite bluntly, the worst I've ever read.

As for alternative medicine; I was born in an era (pre-WWII) when doctors did not know what caused constipation. Their 'cure' was a roughage-free diet and laxatives, which gave rise to some embarrassing accidents. Very few chemicals were in use. Aspirin and a few others. An aspirin tablet and a bottle of coke gave a 'high' in those days and a little bit of sugar made the medicine go down.

Came the peace. The chemists engaged in inventing weapons of mass destruction, turned their attention to finding a peaceful use for their chemicals, and put them into foodstuffs and seduced the medical profession with the idea they could cure things. [At least one carcinogen in cigarettes is used extensively in processed meats.]

To me then, conventional medicine is the alternative medicine. [Incidentally, was Dr Holt. 'Alternative' .?]

Could we please have a rest from the alternative medicine crusade and turn our attention to the more harmful mental abuse of young children in our schools.? The teaching of religious scripture, magic and the supernatural, all unsubstantial claims, as the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to the very young who, because of their age, believe everything they are told without question. Blatant indoctrination of young vulnerable children. And, for no useful purpose. Let us give non-thinkers something to think about.

Response

It seems odd that you equate our opposition to claims made on behalf of 'alternative medicine' on *Second Opinion* with censorship. There are laws that preclude false claims being made in advertising, and in our opinion, *Second Opinion* was doing precisely that, albeit in the form of 'free plugs' rather than paid advertisements. We also believe that the excuse given by the ABC, that the show was produced in the interests of 'balance', was lame in the extreme and we said so.

It is not reasonable to claim that we concentrate on alternative medicine to the exclusion of other issues. We have

been at least as vocal on pseudoscience and disguised religious dogma being taught as science, and will continue to do so — *the Skeptic's* remit is a broad one, as it should be. **Ed**

More on music

*Dave Molloy
Shropshire UK*

Further to Michael Lucht's article in 25:2, I can provide some more examples of skepticism in music.

Firstly, I am surprised, given the capabilities of the general *Skeptic* readership, that no-one has yet mentioned the great (and late) Frank Zappa. He was an original musician, a wonderful composer and probably had the best brains in rock-'n'-roll. His song *Cozmik Debris* from his *Apostrophe* album (1974) is a great example of the skeptical ideal. In the song FZ describes being approached by a 'purveyor of piffle' (ie, the mystery man) who tries to sell him various cures. However, like any good skeptic, FZ is able to turn the tables on said mystery man, outsmarting and then mocking him (especially by querying the authenticity of the mystery man's ethnic garment).

The second contribution is surprisingly from Ted Nugent, known mostly for that romantic ballad, *Cat Scratch Fever*. Ted is a very good guitar player whose peak was in the 1970s. He was known for many stunts, including arriving on stage in a tank or playing in just a loin cloth. My favourite story (though I am skeptical of this) was that he would use his famous guitar feedback to shatter a crystal ball, placed in an appropriate place on the stage, by matching the natural harmonics. His song *Lady Luck*, from *Tooth Fang & Claw* (1974), is Skeptical in that it dismisses mumbo-jumbo and espouses personal critical thinking.



Are you a Skeptic?

Subscribe or buy merchandise at our secure on-line store at www.skeptics.com.au

Australian Skeptics appeals to rational individuals of common sense, intelligence and with a social conscience, who are interested in actively pursuing the truth about claims of paranormal or pseudo-scientific phenomena and other irrational popular beliefs, from a responsible and scientific perspective. For more than twenty years it has established a national network of like-minded groups which, by investigation and the application of critical thinking, aims to help free our society of the results of fear bred by irrational thinking.

We seek the evidence.

We challenge the claims.

We don't believe everything we hear .

We encourage the public to adopt a critical attitude towards these claims.

Our quarterly journal, *the Skeptic* is the voice by which we have offered the public and the news media the opportunity to find out what science and reason have to say about paranormal and other irrational claims.

It conducts investigations and publicises the results.

It opposes the generally uncritical sensationalism presented by the popular media.

It draws attention to the possibility of natural and ordinary explanations of such phenomena.

Its findings are sometimes humorous, often sobering and always fascinating.

You can join our growing list of subscribers by subscribing to *the Skeptic*, using the form below.-

To: **Australian Skeptics Inc; PO Box 268 Roseville NSW 2069**

ABN 90 613 095 379

Ph: 02 9417 2071, Fax: 02 9417 7930, email: skeptics@bdsn.com.au

Tax Invoice This document will be a Tax Invoice for GST when you make payment.

Please send me four issues of *the Skeptic* for 2006

or a 3 year subscription

All back issues *the Skeptic*, 1981-2003, now available on *The Great Skeptic CD*²

(Upgrade)

\$44.00

\$120.00

\$55.00

\$25.00

Total enclosed:

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

POST CODE: _____

OCCUPATION: _____ QUALIFICATIONS: _____

BACKGROUND/INTERESTS: _____

PHONE: (H) _____ (W) _____ **Email:** _____

Bank Card, Master Card and Visa Card accepted

Name: _____ Card No: _____/_____/_____/_____

Expiry Date: ____/____/____ Amount: \$ _____ Signature: _____

Overseas subscribers please add \$A15 per annum for surface mail, \$A25 for Airmail