

**THE SECOND**

**COMING**

**Editorials**

**All the best from *the Skeptic***

**1986 - 1990**

# THE SECOND COMING

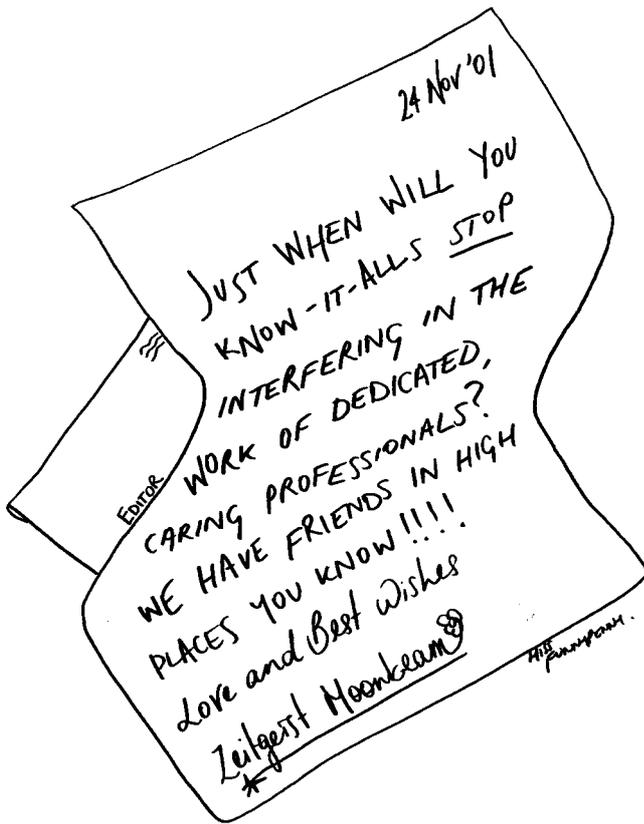
All the best from *the Skeptic*, 1986–1990

## Editorials

*Edited by Barry Williams*  
*Compiled by Richard Saunders*

*New Cartoons by Penny Rowe (Funny Penny)*  
&  
*Richard Saunders*





## Editorials

Vol 6 No 1 - 1986

### Logo Winner

The National Committee is happy to announce the winner of our Logo Competition.

We were delighted with the number and variety of designs submitted and found it difficult to make the final choice.

The winner is Stephan Niekrash of Chadstone. He submitted several designs, the one below being our final choice. You'll be seeing a lot more of it.

Many thanks again to all who entered.



### Vol 7 No 1 - 1987

#### *From the President*

This, the first edition of *the Skeptic* for 1987, reflects some major changes that have occurred within the Australian Skeptics during the past year.

As has been previously reported, the national committee responsibility was transferred from the Victorian to the NSW committee at the last convention. This edition of *the Skeptic* is the first to be published and edited by the new committee and some changes in layout and style will indicate this fact.

In its six years of existence, *the Skeptic* has grown from a four page newsletter into a 28 page magazine and a great deal of credit is due to the many people who have had a hand in the metamorphosis. In particular, we should express our gratitude to Anne Tuohy as editor, to James Gerrand and Graeme Watt for the production and to all the many other people who have contributed to the magazine's success. At the same time, we must recognise the outstanding work of the members of the original national committee, under the inspired leadership of Mark Plummer (the closest thing to a perpetual motion machine in existence). It is a tribute to their dedication and enthusiasm that Australian Skeptics has been transformed from a group of reactive individuals, seeking to promote rational analysis of paranormal and pseudoscientific claims, into a recognised organisation whose views are sought by the media, and others, when such claims are made. Such successes are gratifying, but it would need a supreme optimist to imagine that we are going to eradicate all spurious ideas.

This is why we need to enlarge our contact base. In 1986, subscriptions to *the Skeptic* topped 600 for the first time, which, while encouraging, must surely represent only a small fraction of our potential readership. All readers are urged to encourage other interested people to become subscribers. While on that topic, a number of the 1986 subscribers have not yet renewed for '87. We accept the blame as the last 1986 issue was posted so close to the holiday season that renewals probably were the last things on many people's minds. That is why all '86 subscribers will receive this first '87 edition, although if you do not renew, you will not be receiving Issue 2 for 1987.

**Barry Williams**

### Vol 7 No 2 - 1987

#### *From the President*

One of the more pleasant things in life is to have an occasional win. As a Skeptic, it is particularly pleasing to find that what we are doing is having some impact in the wider world.

This is most evident in our dealings with the news media. When Australian Skeptics started, it was all too common to see claims by "psychics" and proponents of crack-pot theories presented as established fact and without a trace of critical analysis. Our reaction was, as it had to be, to contact the media outlet concerned and to voice our objections to the story, with the result that our views were sometimes treated seriously, but frequently they were not.

It seems that the times are changing. It is now very common for journalists to contact Australian Skeptics, before the story is written or broadcast, to ask for our comments. Our side is not always presented, but the fact that we exist and that we have a point of view is usually mentioned. Members of the Committee are frequently interviewed by TV, radio and print journalists and our letters to the editor are usually published. Thus the purveyors of the irrational are not getting things all their own way and that has to be taken as a turn for the better. The fact that we are becoming successful in this, one of our most important roles, is borne out by the quality of the stories entered for our Skeptical Journalism Award for 1986 (covered elsewhere in this issue). The number of stories was not great, but the standard was high. We hope to make this award a continuing thing, with an annual presentation to encourage the media to be as sceptical of paranormal claims as they would normally be of political claims.

We will probably never reach the stage that *no* stories about paranormal phenomena are presented as established fact, without scrutiny, but we have certainly passed the stage where *all* such stories are.

As I said at the beginning, it is nice to have a win occasionally.

**Barry Williams**

Vol 7 No 3 - 1987

### *From the President*

Since the last issue, when I reported on our improved relationship with the news media, there have been a number of interesting occurrences that have focused attention on that relationship.

The first example is the Dankbaar/Colossus of Rhodes fiasco, or “Psychicgate” as we like to refer to it (see story this issue). Some media outlets reported this story uncritically, while others sought our views on the matter. Being as unaware of the facts as anyone else, we counselled caution and also mentioned our interest in the affair. When it became apparent that the so-called “fist” was a rock that had been submerged for a very short time, the media organisations that had exercised cautious skepticism told the true story with relish, while those that had played the story as fact, recanted, as would be expected, with much smaller stories. NSW Skeptics were astonished by the fact that, when the “fist” was recovered, it did not bear the inscription “We are building better Colossi” and signed “Laurie Brereton, Minister for Public Rhodes.

Now the good news. Australian Skeptics has been invited to provide a regular “Skeptics Column” for a number of media outlets. For instance, we have been invited to conduct a regular “Skeptics Column of the Air” on Peter J. Shield’s *World of Unexplained Mysteries*, each Sunday night on Radio 2UE, Sydney.

These are most encouraging events in our endeavours to bring our message to a mass audience, and we will certainly capitalise on our opportunities presented.

We were delighted to entertain Mark Plummer, former president of A.S., and current executive director of CSICOP, who returned home for a visit at the end of a world tour of Skeptics groups. During his tour, Mark assisted in the formation of a number of new national groups, and it was encouraging to hear him tell of the growing interest in scepticism in many countries. It seems to be a case of “Skeptics of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your superstitions!”

**Barry Williams**

Vol 7 No 4 - 1987

### *From the President*

What is, or what should be, the attitude of Australian Skeptics to religion? This vexed question is provoked by some correspondence we have received in response to my answer to a letter in the Spring '87 issue of *the Skeptic*.

Australian Skeptics has, since its inception, aimed to investigate scientifically and systematically, claims of a paranormal or pseudoscientific nature. It is important to note that our primary aim is to investigate claims, not individuals or organisations. Of necessity, in the course of investigating claims, we sometimes are required to investigate the background of the claimant, if that has a bearing on the claim.

Claims that we have investigated that may be perceived to be of an overtly religious nature include creation “science”, faith healing, the Shroud of Turin, miraculous visions, levitation and many others. These have been investigated precisely because, by their very nature, they are amenable to scientific testing.

It is quite consistent with our aims to continue to investigate such claims, whether they emanate from fringe cults or from mainstream religious organisations. On the other hand, there are areas of religious belief or faith that are not, in any way, testable by scientific means. Such areas as the existence of a deity, or universal spirit or the existence of Heaven and Hell may well be, and are, proper subjects for philosophical or theological discussion, but would seem to fall outside the area of interest of Australian Skeptics.

To put it bluntly, physical manifestations can (and will) be scientifically tested; the truth of metaphysical beliefs cannot.

On a purely practical level, Australian Skeptics seeks to promote rational thinking, and seeks to promote it to the widest possible audience. To do this we need to use the popular news media. This requires us to use the language understood by the consumers of the news media, the general public. Finely tuned philosophical arguments are generally not couched in terms that lay people, including myself, can understand.

While we would maintain that a sceptical outlook is the most healthy attitude any intelligent person should take to any unsubstantiated claim, be they religious, political, commercial or anything else, we would ignore our own best interests if we were to chase down every hare that crossed our path.

My answer to the question I asked at the beginning of this piece is that Australian Skeptics should have no attitude to religion *per se*, just as we should have no attitude to politics, sex or cricket.

**Barry Williams**

### Vol 8 No 1 - 1988

#### *The Carlos Hoax* - a personal view

It is not my intention to canvas the ethical implications of the *60 Minutes* Carlos hoax, nor particularly to take sides in the media furore that resulted from it. My concern, as president of Australian Skeptics, is how it affects our endeavours to encourage the media to take a more sceptical approach to all paranormal claims.

To me, it is regrettable that the very TV current affairs programs that were largely the victims of the hoax were those programs that have, in recent times, displayed more skepticism to paranormal claims than had hitherto been the case.

These programs have often sought the views of Australian Skeptics on stories, and we, as an organisation, have developed a good working relationship with them. This is largely because we believe in fair dealing and are prepared to present our case in a reasonable and non dogmatic manner.

Certainly, *60 Minutes* proved its point that a charlatan can gain free media publicity by the perpetration of stunts. I am however dubious of the truth of the old axiom "Any publicity is good publicity, as long as they spell your name right". The media may well have a duty to protect the public from false claims, and I believe that the great majority of the reasonable public would have been protected by the clearly skeptical manner in which most of the media (see cover story) covered Carlos.

Those sections of the public who are terminally gullible, and who are prepared to believe everything, are surely immune to protection, regardless of how the media treat any such story. There is an interesting philosophical point here as to whether we should even try to protect such people, or whether we should present fair and reasonable comment that allows reasonable people to draw reasonable conclusions, and in the end invoke the legal concept of *caveat emptor* - let the buyer beware.

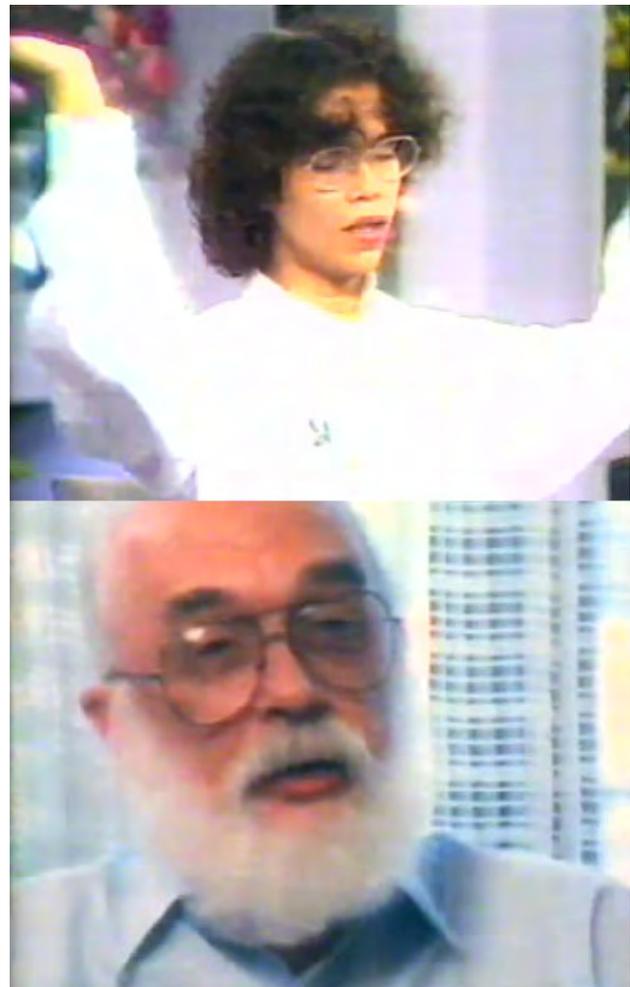
In this particular case, I was approached by a number of people with the question, "is this a Skeptics set-up?". It is a view I probably would have taken myself, except that I knew it was not.

I do not decry hoaxes on principal, believing that they do have their place in the exposure of psychic fraud. In this instance, I believe that, in its own terms, this hoax was not particularly successful, but that the

ensuing media furore may have produced the useful result of focusing media attention more clearly on the ease with which 'genuine' charlatans can manipulate our uncritical media.

My primary concern is that those current affairs program with which we have developed a good relationship, having been bitten by the hoax, will now vacate the field altogether and leave reporting paranormal claims to the entirely credulous sections of the media. For this to happen would be a disaster. This personal view may be coloured by my proximity to the story. We would be most interested to hear the views of you, our readers.

**Barry Williams**



"Carlos" & James Randi

Vol 8 No 2 - 1988

### **Alternative medicine and quackery**

In this issue, we publish a number of articles on alternative health practices and quackery. These issues of health must be of fundamental concern to all skeptics.

A common cry among alternative practitioners is that orthodox medicine treats only the symptom and not the “whole” patient. This dubious claim may contain some small grain of truth, in that surveys have shown that, on average, the alternative practitioner spends more time with each patient than does the scientifically trained medical practitioner. The placebo effect gained by telling one’s troubles to a sympathetic listener should be familiar to all. Perhaps the bedside manner is a neglected subject in our medical schools. But it should not hide the fact that, while a sympathetic ear may be a useful tool for a doctor, its curative value is limited. We must be careful, in any consideration of alternative practices, not to dismiss their claims out of hand. Some such practices have been proven to have some beneficial effects. Hypnosis and acupuncture are among these, although the benefits have often fallen far short of the wildly exaggerated claims made for them by proponents whose concept of evidence owes nothing to science.

Against these, we should consider those practices for which the evidence is vanishingly small. Crystal healing, psychic surgery, faith healing, iridology, reflexology and hundreds of other such practices owe far more to wishful thinking than to any scientific view of the human condition. Studies of these practices have shown them to be at best useless and at worst dangerous. Largely, the danger lies in the unquestioning acceptance of the efficacy of the “treatment” and the consequent neglect of proper medical treatment. In other cases, the treatments themselves are inherently harmful, as evidenced by the massive overdoses of some vitamins advocated by some practitioners.

There are, tragically, many documented cases of people dying from treatable conditions after receiving the ministrations of alternative practitioners. It will, of course, be argued that there are also many documented cases of people dying after treatment by orthodox practitioners. The difference lies in the fact that, in the latter cases, the causes may have been negligence or that medical science, in common with all other areas of human knowledge, is imperfect. In

the former cases, the deaths all too frequently follow the “correct” application of “treatments” that have no scientific foundation and are demonstrably not effective.

As is the case with many other areas of the paranormal or pseudoscience, it is the role of the skeptic to demand of the alternative practitioner, loudly and frequently, “Where is your evidence?” Alternatives without evidence are no alternatives at all.

**Barry Williams**



Barry Williams trying out a few “treatments”

### Vol 8 No 3 - 1988

#### *The Shroud and the Hydra*

So the Shroud of Turin is a medieval fake. That won't come as a surprise to skeptics; there have been more than strong indications for some years that such was the case. But to believers in the shroud's links with Christ the revelation must be quite a shock.

The question to be considered is "What now?". If the past record of debunked paranormalities is anything to go by, what was once the most important holy relic in the world and a major example of the reality of the paranormal will quickly become totally irrelevant. When used as an example by skeptics of how easily fooled believers can be, it will be shrugged off as unimportant and not to be bothered with, as if that were always the case.

Those who put faith in the paranormal, and this is especially true of New Age adherents, are amazingly resilient when it comes to passing off past failures. Hydralike, the paranormal raises new heads in other areas, letting those subjects that have let them down in the past wither and disappear.

Whether paranormalists ever learn a lesson is doubtful. It seems that it doesn't matter what they believe in, as long as they believe in something. The past is littered with discarded theories - Bermuda Triangle, von Daniken, Velikovsky, etc. Tomorrow they will probably be joined by Uri Geller, Doris Stokes and pyramid power. Some time in the future will be added crystals, channelers and UFO abductions.

It is not the job of Australian Skeptics to reform the world; it will never be a totally rational and sensible place in which to live. Rather we should concentrate on the potential believers, those with still enough common sense not to fall for the next two-card trick that comes along. They are the ones who will learn from the experience of the shroud's fall from grace.

So if you ever feel like it is an uphill battle, remember that if just one person is stopped from making a fool (or worse) of himself by the efforts of sceptics, then that makes the whole skeptical approach worthwhile.

**Barry Williams**

PS. In case you were wondering, I am still president, despite a rather surprising promotion given to William Grey in an article credit last issue. William should have been listed as president of Canberra Skeptics, although he is no longer there. I hope that's clear. I know one of the editors is very confused, but that goes without saying.

### Vol 8 No 4 - 1988

#### *From the President*

1988 has been a successful year for Australian Skeptics and for skepticism generally. We have increased our subscriptions by 20% over our 1987 numbers, continuing the trend of the past several years. The new-look *Skeptic*, with its broadened scope of articles is, with the exception of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, the largest sceptical magazine produced worldwide.

The year began with the Carlos hoax, an event about which I must confess to having had mixed emotions at the time. The results from this however seem to have been positive as there has been a noticeable diminution in the free media publicity given to visiting and local purveyors of irrationalism and an increase in the critical media analysis of their inflated claims. My initial reaction to the Carlos affair seems to have been wrong. On the broader scene, we have seen the final scientific refutation of the Shroud of Turin myth, the reduction in official support for the puerile fallacies of creation "science" and the exposure of the fraud of the late Doris Stokes. Conversely, we have seen little or no reduction in the spread of the mindless philosophies of the New Age, nor any indication that people are less willing to fall for the blandishments of any new psychic huckster that comes on the scene. I suspect that this would be asking too much of fallible human nature.

*the Skeptic*, in its new format, has received many compliments from our readers. In 1988, we have produced a much more professional magazine than we have in previous years, as well as producing the largest ever edition. Much of the credit for this improvement is due to the outstanding professionalism of our editor, Tim Mendham, who has, for the past three years, combined this role with that of secretary and treasurer.

The increase in the activities which we have undertaken has seriously overheated our willing horse and Tim has stepped down as National Secretary, while continuing as Editor and Treasurer. His secretarial duties will now be shared by Harry Edwards and Dick Champion.

Tim Mendham is a remarkable individual whose contribution to the success of Australian Skeptics can never be overstated. I believe that we all owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude and, on behalf of all Skeptics, thank him for his past work as Secretary, for his continuing endeavours as Editor/Treasurer and for being a good bloke. (Readers are asked to excuse any

typos that appear in this panegyric because Tim, as Editor, will have to typeset it.) [Editor's comment - No comment]

The need for a continuance of a skeptical approach to paranormal and pseudoscientific claims is as important now as it was when Australian Skeptics was formed eight years ago. We cannot continue unless you, our readers, continue your support by renewing your subscriptions, by encouraging others to do so and by submitting articles and letters for publication.

I wish all our readers the best for the holiday season and for a skeptical 1989.

**Barry Williams**



Barry Williams on some of his many TV appearances

## Vol 9 No 1 - 1989

### *Perpetrators of ignorance*

My normal attitude of bemused tolerance of irrational belief was recently shattered by the showing on TV of a video tape taken of the birth, and subsequent death, of a baby whose arrival was attended by all the shibboleths of the New Age. My anger is not directed at the people personally involved in these tragic events, but at the perpetrators of the specious mythology encompassed by the term, New Age.

The New Age is but one of many manifestations of an anti-intellectual tendency in the human mind, that finds further expressions in the spurious dogma of creation “science” and the return of fundamentalism in various religions. A widely read columnist in a national newspaper recently sought to support his reasoned opposition to experimentation on human embryos with a wide ranging and unreasonable attack on science.

The promoters of these simplistic solutions quite unashamedly use techniques and technologies, which are the fruits of knowledge, to peddle the benefits of ignorance. It is not difficult to understand why many people seek solace in the superficial attraction of simple solutions to the complex problems attendant upon life in a technological age, but they ignore history if they believe that it is possible to go back into some mythical “golden age”.

Knowledge is often uncomfortable. It can be, and often is, misused. But ignorance is never a real alternative. Regardless of how the results of knowledge may have been abused, any study of history will show that ignorance has always caused more pain, suffering and death than knowledge ever has.

Skepticism may not be the most comfortable of positions, but it is the only position a rational being can afford to take. In this argument, we are on the side of the angels.

**Barry Williams**

### *Obituary Don Laycock*

It is a sad duty to report the death of Don Laycock, one of the founding members of the Canberra Skeptics, who died after an illness on December 27, 1988.

Don was a graduate of Newcastle University, working as a researcher in anthropology at Adelaide University and undertook his PhD at the Australian

National University, where he later became a senior fellow in the Research School of Pacific Studies. He was also a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and vice president (1985-87) of the Australian Linguistic Society.

It was his linguistic skills that represent some of this writer's warmest memories of Don. At the first Skeptics convention in Sydney in 1985, he performed a rendition of "speaking in tongues" and a trance possession by spirits that were easily highlights of the convention. He was also an expert in divination techniques (particularly Tarot cards).

He will be sadly missed by his family and all his Skeptical friends.

**Tim Mendham**

### Vol 9 No 2 - 1989

#### *Fighting the New Ignorance*

This issue of *the Skeptic* contains several of the papers which were presented at the fifth annual convention and will allow those subscribers, who were unable to attend the event, an opportunity to consider some of the matters which were discussed. The fifth convention must rank as one of the most successful of all our annual gatherings, and was a tribute to the organisational skills of the Canberra Skeptics branch who provided all the hard work. Quite obviously, some Canberra residents are capable of organising things, the evidence of the recent ACT local elections notwithstanding.

We were almost overwhelmed by the amount of media interest in our convention and in the awards that were to be presented. There is little doubt that the media are now taking a much more sceptical approach to unsubstantiated claims than was the case a few years ago.

This is not to suggest that we in Australian, Skeptics can afford to relax. We have not won the battle yet, nor are we likely to ever claim victory.

The siren song, promoted by the New Agers and the Creationists (New Earthers?), is seductive in its simplicity. The anti-intellectualism implicit in their easy answers is often difficult to counter because the path of reason is not always a comfortable one.

They will continue to preach their New Ignorance while there are financial rewards and power to be gained from it. We have the harder row to hoe, but it is a worthwhile task because knowledge is always preferable to ignorance.

**Barry Williams**



**Vol 9 No 3 - 1989**

### **Science & the Paranormal**

Science is not a body of knowledge science is the way we attain knowledge. It involves experimentation, observation, publication and replication. It is all of these aspects, but especially the last two, which normally differentiate science from pseudoscience.

In the Skeptics investigation of the paranormal, these rigours should be applied equally to all claims, both those of the pro-paranormal fraternity and those within the “established” scientific community, including Skeptics. It is not good enough to accept an anti-paranormal claim purely because it is such. This journal is dedicated to publishing a wide range of items, all of which are open to discussion and dispute.

In this issue, we look at a number of subjects which involve the scientific method. They cover devices supposedly tapping energy fields, a proposal that meditation and Tarot cards contradict probability theory, the lack of scientific rigour among creationists, and various religious claims. On this latter subject, it is interesting to see that at least one letter writer has responded to an anti-supernatural item in the previous issue.

This sense of peer review is vitally important in all areas of science. It was rapidly and efficiently, if not harshly, applied to the recent claims of nuclear fusion “in a jar” by Fleischman and Pons. It can equally be applied to Skeptical arguments, and this journal - the only one of its type in Australia - is more than happy to serve that purpose. Dogmatism and conservatism are comfortable but not productive. Discussion and debate are what it’s all about, and on that note, please accept our invitation to use these pages for your view of pseudoscience, the paranormal and skepticism.

**Barry Williams**

**Vol 9 No 4 - 1989**

### **Sincerity is not enough**

A question frequently posed to skeptics concerns the sincerity with which beliefs in the paranormal and pseudoscience are held. Experience suggests that the vast majority of believers hold their beliefs sincerely. That being so, it may well be asked why should skeptics be so concerned with challenging sincerely held beliefs? To answer this, we should understand the nature of the emotional attribute “sincerity” and its relevance to the matters under discussion.

The dictionary has it that sincerity means “freedom from deceit, duplicity, dissimulation or hypocrisy”, yet we are all aware that the fields in which we investigate are full of these negative characteristics. How then can we consider any believers to be sincere?

The problem is that the presence or absence of sincerity can tell us much about the holder of a belief but nothing at all about the belief itself. For a belief to have any real substance, it does not need to be sincerely held but it does need to be rationally held. Do we sincerely believe in relativity or evolution? Probably not, but we rationally believe that these theories describe the real world.

A person is not culpable if he holds a belief that is irrational when he has no knowledge that would convince him of its irrationality. In this case, sincerity is understandable but meaningless. A person who holds to an irrational belief, despite being aware of evidence for its irrationality, may or may not be held equally blameless. His sincerity might be called into question, yet we should remember that because self delusion is also a well known human trait, we should perhaps instead question his rationality. The person who does not believe at all, yet manipulates others who do, may be totally rational and entirely insincere. He is a charlatan.

A recent historical example, from outside our field, which shows the irrelevance of sincerity in the judgement we make of actions, is the case of Adolf Hitler. His actions were abhorrent to any thinking person, yet we have no reason to dispute the sincerity with which he held the views which led to those actions. That is why, as skeptics, we should continue to strive to expose irrational beliefs to the light of reason while being prepared to be tolerant of many of the people who hold those beliefs and why we should, at the same time, continue to expose the charlatans who prey on the gullible. Sincerity is largely irrelevant in determining which beliefs are valid, only in determining which practitioners are worthy of condemnation. As with many human attributes, sincerity is not enough.

**Barry Williams**

### Vol 10 No 1 - 1990

#### *Believing and thinking*

We are all believers to some extent. As skeptics, we would all like to think that the beliefs we hold are rationally arrived at and defensible. I nevertheless suspect that even many skeptics hold some beliefs that would not really withstand the cold light of critical analysis. Such is the perversity of human nature, that the beliefs that we hold least rationally are those that we are likely to defend most vociferously (or so I believe).

What then of the people who are less inclined to skepticism than we are? The people whose beliefs in completely irrational ideas amount to obsessions? Whether these ideas be of a paranormal, pseudoscientific, religious, political or philosophical nature, can we ever hope to convince all people to be skeptical? We try to hold beliefs which are arrived at because the evidence supports them, but what of those who believe, despite the evidence? Can we ever hope to communicate the idea that the real world is much more exciting, when viewed rationally, than it ever can be when viewed through the blurred lens of prejudice? That knowledge is always superior to ignorance?

Several articles in this issue address unsubstantiated beliefs, yet it would be surprising if any of them were successful in convincing the adherents of irrational ideas. That does not mean that we should not continue to strive to achieve that objective. Scepticism is an essential tool for all who seek to live in a complex world and we should always be aware of the important message that lies at the heart of skepticism

**- DO NOT BELIEVE - THINK!**

**Barry Williams**



### Vol 10 No 2 - 1990

#### *An open letter to Nicholas Joyce, born May 2, 1990*

At the moment you were born, the Solar System had a unique configuration. This fact is unlikely to have any effect on your future life. Your name contains a certain selection of letters. Apart from being a label you will wear for life, or at least until you decide you would prefer to be called something else, there is no hidden, esoteric significance in the letters which make up your name. You will live on a planet that is several billion years old and in a universe that is somewhat older. You are a member of the species *homo sapiens* and your distant ancestors were of different species. You are not the descendant of purpose-built humans who were designed to dominate our planet, nor are you the result of experiments by spacefaring aliens. Your childhood ills will not be cured by quartz crystals, vibrations given off by coloured threads, or appeals to supernatural entities.

The world you will live in is a strange, complex place, full of contradictions. You will encounter superstition, fear, ideologies, hatred, dogmas and many other unpleasant things. You will also encounter knowledge, love, joy, beauty and lots and lots of people. I hope that you will be wary of superstition, fear, ideology, hatred and dogma, that you will seek out knowledge, love, joy and beauty and that you will be tolerant of people. I hope that you will be sceptical, because skepticism insulates, you from all those things which are the fruits of unreason.

I will do everything I can to make it that way for you, and why not? That's what grandfathers are for.

With much love,

**Barry Williams**

This sort of self-indulgence would never have been allowed when Mendham was editor. **Ed.**

New grandfathers are allowed to be self-indulgent. **Pres.**

### Editorial changes

As from this edition, *the Skeptic* has a new editor, Barry Williams. Tim Mendham, after several years of unremitting toil, has asked to be given a break from editorial duties. Of course we agreed to Tim's request, although filling his shoes will be a most onerous task. Tim Mendham has always been one of the mainstays of Australian Skeptics. For several years, he filled the roles of Secretary and Treasurer of the NSW Branch, continuing in those positions for the National Committee when we took over from the Victorian Branch. He also assumed the position of Editor at that time, a role in which he has made his greatest contribution.

Tim is a professional Editor who has brought great professionalism to this publication. I am sure that all of our readers will agree that *the Skeptic* has become an outstanding platform for the exposition of the skeptical viewpoint during Tim's stewardship. He will remain as a valued member of the national committee and source of wise counsel and advice to Harry and myself as we endeavour to maintain the standards of excellence which he has set.

From all the Skeptics I say, "Thanks Tim. You are a great Australian."

**Barry Williams**

### Honours & awards

Five prominent Skeptics were awarded honorary Life Membership of Australian Skeptics at the 1990 Annual Convention, held in Melbourne on June 9-10, 1990. Announcing the awards, national president, Barry Williams said, "In many organisations, Life Memberships are awarded to people when they have ceased to take an active role in the organisation or when they have reached such an age that their lives are not expected to last much longer. In Australian Skeptics we do things differently. Not only are our recipients still active, but this award cannot be taken as an excuse for them to reduce their activity. This award, presented during the tenth year of our existence, recognises the outstanding contributions made by these individuals to the formation of, and to the continuing success of Australian Skeptics. We all owe them our utmost gratitude for their work."

Those receiving the awards were, Drs Martin Bridgestock and Ken Smith of the Queensland branch, Co-editors and producers of *Creationism - an Australian perspective*, now into its fourth printing, Mark Plummer, foundation member and inaugural

president of Australian Skeptics, former executive director of CSICOP and currently president of the Victorian branch, James Gerrard, Inaugural Secretary of Australian Skeptics and mainstay of the Victorian branch and Tim Mendham, Inaugural Secretary and Treasurer of the NSW branch, continuing in these positions when the branch became the national committee and, for four years, Editor of *the Skeptic*.

The National Committee extends its congratulations and its gratitude to the new Life Members.



### Vol 10 No 3 - 1990

#### *From the President*

It is not my intention to continue to use this page for the promulgation of my personal affairs, however, just as in the last issue I sought the indulgence of our readers to celebrate the birth of my grandson, I again ask you to bear with me as I mourn the death of my father.

Bill Williams was born in Barry, Wales in the closing months of the nineteenth century. He arrived in Australia in 1921, finally, in the mid 1930s, settling at Mt Tamborine in Queensland, where he lived for the rest of his long life. At his death on September 5, he was just six weeks short of his 90th birthday.

A man of firmly held opinions, he was always tolerant and moderate in his dealings with people. He was a voracious reader and his failing eyesight in his later years was a great trial to him. He was always interested in, and conversent with, events in the world at large. The views he held were those he arrived at after rational consideration of the facts and were expressed with vigour, though never dogmatically.

He taught me that knowledge was worthwhile in its own right; that to read is one of the great pleasures that life holds; that the other person's point of view should be respected, even when you disagree with it and, above all, that one should always think for one's self. He was a skeptic in the best possible meaning of the word.

I wish to thank all those members of the Skeptics who have been so kind with their condolences. I will continue to try to live up to all of those good examples my father gave me.

Bill Williams was a gentleman and a gentle man. My mother, my brother and our families will miss him. We all loved him very much.

**Barry Williams**



### Vol 10 No 4 - 1990

#### *From the President*

With this issue, we complete ten years of publishing *the Skeptic*. In this time, the magazine has grown from a four page broadsheet format, going to less than two hundred readers, to a 30-40 page magazine, having over 1,000 subscribers and a considerably larger number of readers. The magazine which was originally produced on a typewriter and collated and assembled by a team of loyal volunteers, is now produced on a computer and printed by professional printers.

As with the technicalities, so with the content. We have published articles and news stories on almost every facet of the paranormal and pseudoscience which has relevance to Australia, as well as many book reviews, opinion pieces and, most importantly, letters from our readers.

Our stories have been taken up many times by the media in Australia and our message, that a skeptical attitude to extraordinary claims is the best way to discover the truth, is now well recognised by many commentators.

Other stories have been reprinted in overseas skeptical publications and we recently gave permission for one of our articles, on pyramids, to be translated and published in the magazine of the Spanish skeptics group. We intend to continue producing a quality product for our readers but we would like to print more of your views. Letters to the Editor allow us to gauge the areas our readers find most interesting and, while we cannot guarantee that we will publish everything we receive, we will certainly consider every submission. We are constrained by the laws of defamation and as we have not been sued in ten years, we would like to maintain that record. This is not to suggest that letters should not be contentious; some of the long running correspondence in our columns certainly fit that category; but they should not be libellous. And, above all, they should be interesting to other readers.

We would also like to expand the range of articles, and their authors, published in the magazine. Your submissions or ideas would be very welcome.

We thank all our loyal supporters and wish everyone all the best for the holiday season. And despite all the economic gloom, we hope that you all have a happy and skeptical 1991.

**Barry Williams**

