

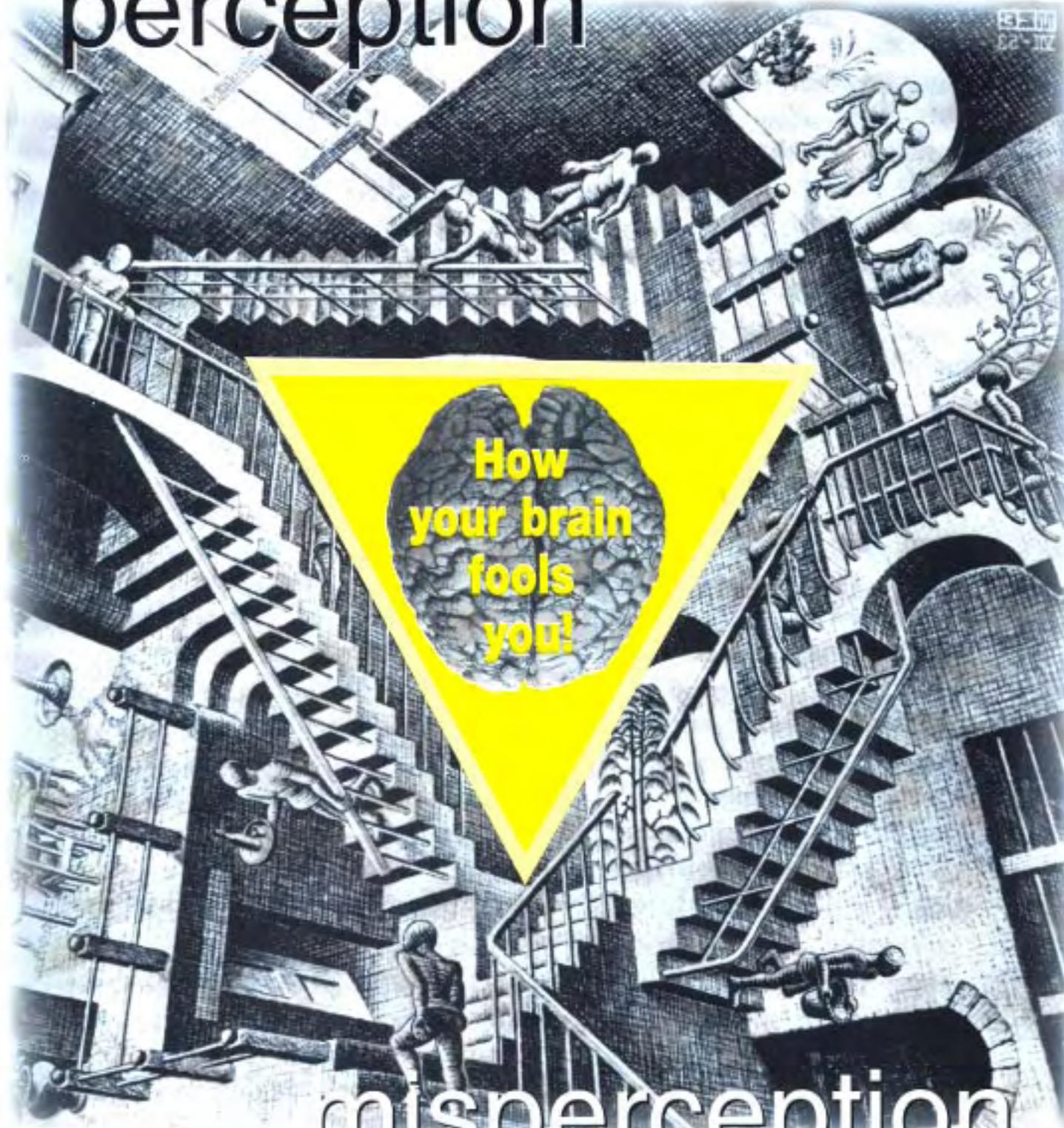
# the skeptic

VOLUME 18, NO. 1

AUTUMN, 1998

A journal of fact and opinion

## perception



How  
your brain  
fools  
you!

## misperception

# the Skeptic

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## Editorial

# What's on your mind?

Barry Williams

We enter a new year with an issue of *the Skeptic* that, I hope, will stimulate your interest, and encourage you to maintain your Skepticism.

Although it wasn't planned that way, this issue seems to be largely concerned with issues of the mind and perception - or perhaps that should be mis-perception. So many of the topics that concern us as Skeptics, stem from the natural human desire to see and hear what we want to, rather than what is.

Inside you will find a number of references to common mis-perceptions regarding UFOs and other popular myths, plus in-depth analyses of cases where people are encouraged to place their own, comforting, interpretations on the generalisations and commonplaces of everyday life. One article makes a persuasive case that our brain is very adept at telling us lies.

This issue also launches a re-invigorated \$100,000 challenge to people who claim to have paranormal powers. In the past, we have had very little success in convincing anyone who believed they possessed paranormal abilities, to take part in a mutually agreed test that would, if they were successful, not only advance the store of human knowledge, but would also net them \$30,000.

We haven't learned much about paranormal abilities, but we have heard a great many excuses, and we have learned a good deal about self-deception.

This has encouraged us to take a new approach, first mooted by the Gold Coast Skeptics, by introducing a "spotter's fee" directed to anyone who uses the services of psychics, or others who make similar claims. If they can convince their psychic to undergo a

test of the claims made and, if the psychic passes the test, the "spotter" will be paid \$20,000, and the psychic \$80,000. If psychics are too shy, or too altruistic, to want to take our money, then we will see whether their customers can convince them. We will put our money where their mouths are.

Another issue that has been causing us a great deal of concern is the growth in acceptance of various electronic gadgets that make claims about therapeutic benefits. We have obtained a number of these devices and intend to have them tested to see if any of the claims made for them are valid.

Those we have investigated so far seem to consist of a handful of inexpensive electronic components, incorporated in a standard container, and selling for hundreds of dollars. Engineers who have looked at the circuits have been unable to find anything more than standard solid state oscillators, and can see no reason why these devices can substantiate the claims made for them.

In the next issue, we hope to have more details of our campaign to alert the regulatory authorities to the dangers to public health posed by these devices. You can help us by telling us of any experiences you have had with any such device, or if you know someone who has bought and used one.

Finally, I would like to thank all the subscribers who took the trouble to give us words of encouragement when they renewed their subscriptions. We like to think we are producing a good magazine, but your feedback is the only thing that tells us we are seeing what is, and not what we want to.

It's all about perceptions, you see.



# Around the traps

## Bunyip

It was pleasing to see included among the 100 Living National Treasures announced recently were both patrons of Australian Skeptics, Phillip Adams and Dick Smith. But then we already knew that they were, didn't we?

\* \* \*

Thanks to all the readers who pointed out the odd dating system used in "History of the Bent Spoon" (17/4). Dennis Hassell and Anne Dankbaar won their accolades a decade earlier than was indicated in the article.

On the same topic, reader, Jeff Whiteker, of Northcote, has a useful suggestion. Jeff suggests we run an article, "Where are they now?", concentrating on the careers of our BS Laureates, after they were honoured by the Skeptics. So here is a challenge to our readers. Let us know of any public utterances from any of our past winners that you see or hear. We'll keep you informed of results in future issues.

\* \* \*

One previous laureate who seems to have suffered no ill effects, is the 1990 winner Mafu, aka Penny Torres Rubin. Until recently we had assumed that channelling had succumbed to its own inanity, and been replaced by something new and equally vacuous.

Then we were alerted by Gold Coast subscriber, Ian Schilling, that Mafu was due to make a public appearance in that fair city in February. She was holding a free public meeting and a series of private seminars for seekers after wisdom, at the not inconsiderable cost of \$2,000 per person (meals not included). We heard that more than 80 people had signed up for these.

Girding their loins, two stalwarts of the Gold Coast Skeptics, John Winckle and Graeme Laing, went along to the public meeting. We'll let John describe it:

"Talk about boring, I was less bored the night the power went off.

Penny and Mafu are now one; she didn't go into her trance act, or come out of it. The punters regarded her as a holy entity, and she was conferring blessings. At least Pope status.

"She performed for an hour, then took 20 minutes to walk out of the joint (she did everything in hyper slow motion and the fans loved it). Mainly hugging women her own age, and a short dose of wisdom 'the boommerrrrraang, comes back, perfect kama'. I got out of the hall in case I was asked for money.

"Graeme and I waited outside the hall. There were people on their knees, people praying and people crawling after her. One girl stopped her and 'just wanted to thank you', and cried and hugged her. Spooky stuff for yours truly, not being used to religious hysteria. We were the last people she had to pass, and she homed in on us and started rubbing Graeme's forehead.

"I was trying to hide behind Graeme, and was on the point of diving into the ladies' toilet when Graeme took her hand and shook it and said 'good show, good act'. 'Have you joy' she said. 'You should', said Graeme, adding some more sarcasm. She was totally unfazed and stared us down.

"There was a wall of faces behind the glass doors, each bearing a look of simpering idiocy. Then the chanting began. A barefoot lady in the hall told us Penny would not come back for the chanting, because she was 'very elevated'. Inside there were people standing and swaying to the chant, all practising their looks of divinely inspired stupidity. Bit like an up-market disco. Look out Catholic church, this is alternative religion.

"However, I did feel a sense of fulfilment and gratitude for one piece of wisdom she gave; 'Keep breathing'."

\* \* \*

No doubt our readers will be distressed to hear that the US

company that operates the Psychic Friends Network, the home of \$-per-minute psychic advice, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection last month. Chapter 11 of the US Bankruptcy Code allows a company to postpone payment of its debts while it reorganises its finances.

Inphomation, with its network of about 2,000 self-proclaimed psychics, listed its liabilities at \$26 million and assets at about \$1.2 million. According to marketing analysts, it had an estimated revenue of \$100 to \$125 million in the early 1990s, which, they judged, had plunged to around \$25 million in the last two years.

Please stop laughing. Everyone knows that psychics are forbidden to seek advice that effects them personally (or so they always tell us) though whether this is a natural law, or a self-imposed stricture is not entirely clear).

\* \* \*

An interesting clash of cultures occurred during the end-of-year break. Picture the scene:

the place: the towering edifice that houses the vast conglomerate that is Skeptics Central;

the date: December 30, 1997;

the time: 5.57pm;

the plot: a TV set glowers in the corner; South Africa is 7 wickets down; it is the last over and Shane Warne has been tossed the ball; no one has ever taken a hat trick in the last over to win a test, but this is the Sultan of Spin, the Sheikh of Tweak, the finest "leggie" in half a century, if not ever. The tension is palpable.

Suddenly, the tension is shattered. "Ding Dong" peals the Official Skeptics Door Bell. A wild-eyed Skeptic-in-Chief hurls himself at the door. He wrenches it open, to be confronted by two dark suited, clean-cut, and very young, men bearing labels on their chests which, improbably, proclaim them to be "Elders". In straight-off-the-plane accents, they declare their desire to engage the S-in-C in a discourse on

“the Lord”. In the background, a full-throated roar can be heard from the crowd at the MCG.

The normally urbane, but by now slightly agitated, S-in-C politely informs the young gentlemen that they have interrupted his devotions, that their timing is inopportune and concludes the theological discussion by wishing them well and inviting them to go forth and multiply, or some similar sentiment.

Hurling back into the sanctum, he discovers that Shane has four balls yet to deliver. To no effect as it happens.

Still, we can't help wondering how this conversation was reported back to Salt Lake City.

\* \* \*

A correspondent who prefers to remain anonymous points out that:

(1) The recently-deceased singer known as John Denver was well-known to be keen on both aircraft and space flight;

(2) So enthusiastic was he to get (back?) into space that he had reportedly offered US\$10 million to the Russian space agency to take him into orbit;

(3) After the air crash into Monterey Bay which was claimed to have taken his life, his body was not recognisable, with identification being made only from fingerprints;

(4) His real name was not John Denver, but a rather longer and unpronounceable appellation which indicated that his forebears, at least, were aliens (according to the definition of the US Department of Immigration); and

(5) According to his obituary in *The Australian*, Denver was born in the 1940s in Roswell, New Mexico.

Readers of this journal will be able to draw their own conclusions from these startling facts.

\* \* \*

Those whose activities put them into contact with astrologers will often have heard the claim that work done by the late French statistician/psychologist, Michel Gauquelin, supports their contentions about the direct relationship between the location of celestial objects and human affairs.

With the so-called Mars Effect, Gauquelin claimed that there were small, though statistically significant, correlations between people

who later achieved prominence in certain sporting activities, and the location of Mars in the sky at their times of birth. Other studies, by different groups, have failed to replicate this effect, however. Apologists for astrology are quick to cite the Mars Effect in support of their beliefs, even though Gauquelin himself was scathing about the claims of traditional astrologers.

One of the big problems is that, in his studies, Gauquelin carried out a huge amount of work, and spent a great deal of time, in tracking down birth times of the athletes included, and no one else has since found the necessary incentive to do likewise. Thus the arguments have frequently revolved around the esoterica of statistical theory and experimental design. As this is not the stuff of common knowledge among those who are not professionally involved in such matters, it is understandable that lay people may be led to think that perhaps there could be something in the proposition after all.

After forty years of being a contentious matter, this issue may now have been resolved. In an article “The Mars Effect in Retrospect” in the November/December issue of *the Sceptical Inquirer*, Jan Willem Nienhuys, a Dutch mathematician and editor of the Dutch Sceptical quarterly, *Skepter*, reports on his research into the controversy.

He had been given access by Gauquelin's widow, and other researchers, to original data and correspondence between Gauquelin and the French Skeptics committee, CFEPP. What he found indicates a subtle (though significant) bias in Gauquelin's methodology that, if removed, may well dispose of the small (though significant) “effect” that has caused all the controversy.

It indicates, *inter alia*, that Gauquelin, when confronted with birth data that were not firmly established by records, tended to accept those that supported his hypothesis and to reject those that did not. This simple and not easily recognised bias, and other examples of a like nature, are probably sufficient to explain the Mars Effect without any recourse to an unrecognised connection between planets and people.

The article is far too complex to precis here, but it is compelling, and

interested readers are well advised to get hold of a copy of the relevant issue of *the Sceptical Inquirer*.

\* \* \*

The ever vigilant NSW branch treasurer, Richard Lead, was intrigued to read in his local paper, the *Hornsby Advocate* (7 Jan, 1998) a road safety column presented by the Road Safety Officers of two adjoining municipalities, Hornsby and Ku-ring-gai (His Worship, the Mayor of which, is a *Skeptic* subscriber).

It was mostly useful and timely advice about road safety, except for one item. This listed the percentage of road accidents attributed to each Zodiac star sign and went on to suggest that, in future, people of different birth dates may have to pay differential rates for their motor vehicle insurance. All a bit of harmless fun you might think, except that the figures given were attributed to *Informaation*, the newsletter of the Motor Accident Authority (MAA), a NSW State Government agency.

Hot on the scent of scandalous wastage of public money, researching dubious statistics, Richard (who, in his other life as a professional international taxation consultant, is very interested in that sort of thing) sought to track this information to its source. He visited the MAA office and demanded to see a copy of the newsletter. There it was in all its statistical glory, “Taureans may have to pay more than Leos for car insurance...” said the small item, quoting the director of a British insurance company. And where did this story originate? The *International Journal of Actuarial Statistics*, perhaps? Not at all, the attribution line said “Article courtesy of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, August 1997”.

A small issue to make a fuss about, and it was treated in a rather tongue-in-cheek fashion in both publications, but we all know that it will now enter the folk lore of astrologers that there is statistical (and officially recognised) proof of their vacuous claims. To a casual observer, the figures attributed to the assorted signs look not far removed from a normal distribution and, in the absence of any information on sample size, they say very little about the likelihood of a lion crashing into a bull. 

# The evolving challenge

Roland Seidel

Life's a challenge isn't it? Or so they say. Everything's a challenge, really. But 1998 will go down as the Year of the Challenge (contrasting with the Chinese year of the Tiger, the Aztec year of the Tochtli the Rabbit, the Egyptian year of the Crocodile, the Mongol year of Riding Backwards, the Sumerian year of Ab.sin the Furrow, the Easter Island year of Taha the Frigate Bird and the Victorian year of failing Feng Shui in the Casino).

## \$100,000 from five Australians

There are now five Australians underwriting the Australian Skeptics' Challenge to the tune of \$100,000. This is, coincidentally, its original value. Dick Smith announced this figure in the November 1981 issue of *the Skeptic*, as a challenge to water diviners, in response to concerns about the amounts of money farmers were spending on such dubious consultation. He later reduced his contribution to \$10,000 which was matched by Phillip Adams and subsequently by Ronald Evans of Skeptics SA, so that we have known it for a long time as the \$30,000 Challenge.

Now, two new sponsors, Richard Lead, treasurer of the NSW branch, and a Victorian Skeptic who wishes to remain anonymous, have guaranteed sums to bring the total up to \$100,000.

## The \$20,000 Spotter's Fee

There has been another sea change in the Challenge, thanks to a brilliant idea from the Gold Coast Skeptics as described in the following story. The new Spotter's Fee idea works like this:

You know a marvellous psychic, astrologer, healer, diviner, channeller, feng shuier, prophet, tea leaf reader, reiki master, remote viewer, telekinetic, clairvoyant, clairaudiant, clairolfactant, clairgustatant or clairtactant. You say, "By crikey, they could win the Skeptics Challenge easy." We say, "If they win, you get the first \$20,000, they get the remaining \$80,000."

I know I might sound a bit light hearted. That's because I get miserable if I take things too seriously. But we really are serious about this.

The astrologers we talk to say, "Yes, there are charlatans about, giving us real astrologers a bad name." This may be a way of cutting through the PR the charlatans use. If your astrologer is genuine she/he should jump at the chance of being tested and earning you \$20,000. They believe their system works, and we are nice people who make every effort to be fair, respectful and of the highest integrity. If they are charlatans, though, they will use every subterfuge to wriggle out of being tested and you should rightly be suspicious of them.

We are planning a national media campaign to advertise the Spotter's Fee. You, dear reader, are among

the first to know about it, and we would like you to pass your knowledge on to anyone who tells you about their favourite psychic, who is "always spot-on".

We did tell James Randi, of course, who found the idea "simply delicious" and asked if he could blatantly steal it, to which request, naturally, we agreed. Journalists among our readers, who would like to cover the story, should contact their local state committee who should have brochures and application forms by the time this magazine hits the post.

## The challenge team

The 1980 divining challenge was conducted by Dick Smith and James Randi and this was followed, in 1989 by another, arranged by Ian Bryce, the seminal challenge officer, in whose wake many now follow. The full team includes a challenge officer from each state, a mathematician, a magician, a psychologist and the Skeptics Executive Officer, in whom the responsibility for conducting challenges formally rests.

## Typical protocol

I stress again we are quite genuine in this. We approach each challenge with an open mind, respectful of the challenger's belief that their claim is genuine.

For instance, in a recent exchange with an astrologer I observed that there are two main sceptical objections levelled at astrology: that the readings are so vague they will fit anyone; and that the reader uses ordinary techniques to get information about the subject (cold reading). We respect the astrologer's claim that there is special information about the subject in their birth data, so we must devise a test that completely eliminates either of the objections. Our hypothesis is "These readings are no better than random statements". The Astrologer's hypothesis would be "These readings are unique to the individual".

This leads to a protocol where the astrologer has no contact with any subject, and success means beating million-to-one odds of the result happening by chance. On the face of it, these conditions sound severe. But this is not a lucky dip, we are testing whether something is real. We owe it to the challenger to make it a real challenge and we owe it to our underwriters to ensure that we don't blow their money on a fluke.

## Testing

The test will always be devised in consultation with the challenger, after the challenger has made an explicit statement of exactly what it is he claims he can do. This will ensure that the test is fair to both parties, and to accommodate the challenger's unique claim. An independent umpire, acceptable to both parties, will be appointed to oversee the test, to ensure its fairness.

So, roll on 1998. A challenging year.



## Challenging times

John Stear

Each year about this time, on the Gold Coast, the new agers come together in droves to hold their psychic fair, the Aquarius Expo. And each year about this time, local Skeptics scratch their noggins wondering what if anything they can do to induce at least a few of the thousands of credulous souls who flock to this expo, to ask questions about their favourite psychic's abilities.

This year a glimmer of inventiveness rippled through the ranks of the Gold Coast Skeptics. Why not, we wondered, make an offer to the customers of psychics, to encourage them to promote the case of their favourite seer. After all, the psychics themselves haven't exactly been queuing up to take part in the Australian Skeptics Challenge, so perhaps the Gold Coast branch could get the psychics' customers to put some pressure on them (by way of monetary reward) to come forward. And so an idea was born, and when better to test it than on the occasion of the Aquarius Expo?

We put our plan to the MIBs (men in beards) at GHQ and, to our surprise and delight, we found that the challenge prize money had been increased to \$100,000. We were authorised to split that into a spotter's fee of \$20,000 and a challenge prize of \$80,000.

An advertisement:

*Win \$20,000,  
Skeptics amazing offer, details Friday,*

was lodged with the *Gold Coast Bulletin* and ran for three days. Further ads were lodged at the end of the week, giving simple details of the challenge and explaining that, to qualify for the prize, people were to nominate a clairvoyant, etc, of their choice, who would agree to undergo a test at which their psychic powers would be tested in accordance with the long standing Australian Skeptics Challenge.

As well as the newspaper ads, 2,000 flyers were placed on windscreens in the packed car parks at the expo's venue. The flyers were carefully worded to ensure there were no put-downs and no suggestion that we had any doubt there were people out there who could really perform a paranormal feat. The flyers were headed "*Skeptics Search For Truth*" and emphasised that the offer was a genuine one.

Then fortune smiled and the plot began to thicken. The expo organisers had gone to the trouble of setting out 48 advertising signs on roads leading to the venue. Lo and behold, the signs suddenly went missing. The organisers, strangely puzzled by the theft, offered a \$500 reward for "information leading to...". The Skeptics, quick to spy an advantage, placed a further ad in the *Bulletin*, denying any knowledge of the theft and asking the entirely reasonable question:

Why, with 100 psychics and clairvoyants at the festival, was an advertisement placed and a reward offered? Why couldn't one of their own psychics tell them who took the signs or even where they might be found now? For that matter, continued the Skeptical probing, "How is it that these foretellers of the future did not anticipate the theft and do something to prevent it?" *Touche!* One for the Skeptics.

Perhaps the saga of the missing signs might have ended there, had it not transpired that those who pilfered the paranormalists paraphernalia weren't merely low-lives or light-fingered layabouts, as one might have expected, but none other than an addled assortment of fundamentalist Christians, who believing that spiritualism and the things supernatural being carried on shamelessly at the expo, were an abomination to God and the work of Satan, had taken upon themselves to remove temptation from people's path.

It's interesting to note that our own Barry Williams, prior to the admission by the fundies, dissected and examined the entrails of the office cockroach, and correctly predicted the identity of the culprits. Barry claims it was a "gut" feeling and voiced a tentative suggestion that such a successful prediction was sufficiently accurate that *he* should be awarded the \$100,000. The motion lapsed for want of a seconder.

From the feedback received, the novel idea of offering a spotter's fee for dobbing in your favourite psychic has been a great success. Negotiations are under way with at least one paranormal person who has agreed, in principal, to take up the challenge and several other nominations have been received. The Gold Coast Skeptics have so far received eight letters, including one request for membership, two self nominations, one nomination of a "very kind, spiritual person" (aren't they all?) and a letter from a confused lady with beautiful handwriting.

But the big plus has to be the publicity given the Gold Coast Branch and consequently, Skeptics everywhere. Channel Nine (Brisbane/Gold Coast) want to do a story, and John Winckle is getting this together. The *Weekend Bulletin's* column *Slush File*, reported on the public notice in which the Skeptics questioned the need for the expo organiser to offer a reward for information relating to the theft. And it has since come to light that the same public notice was actually the cause of considerable mirth when read from the pulpit of a local Pentecostal church.

The Gold Coast Skeptics are in an enviable locality. As well as our magnificent beaches and perfect climate we are blessed with more fundamentalists and new age paranormalists than one could poke a forked stick at. We intend to go on to bigger and better things.

Meanwhile, the Australian Skeptics Challenge has come alive. Stay tuned. 

## A little out where?

Scott Campbell

On 17 September, 1997, the Foxtel cable television network recorded a show called *A Little Out There*, which dealt with various matters psychic, as applied to various “celebrities”. Australian Skeptics was invited to participate, and several of the NSW committee and other assorted Skeptics turned up, including Harry Edwards, Barry Williams, Richard Gordon, Richard Lead, Alynda Brown, David Roche and myself.

We were led to believe that the show would be “balanced”, but we were sceptical, and with good reason, as, to our complete non-surprise, the show turned out to be totally one-sided. It made *The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna* look like an in-depth, well-controlled scientific study. Harry Edwards and Barry Williams were given some opportunities to speak, but the amount of time they were given was minuscule compared with the other side.

Particularly appalling was the way Barry was continually howled down by the co-host, Ian Parry-Okeden, every time he started speaking. Parry-Okeden’s crude and cynical bully-boy tactics demonstrated that he has no credibility whatsoever as an objective investigator.

Nor does Jeannie Little, the other co-host, but that will come as no surprise to those who remember her. The ‘Queen Luvvy’ of daytime television in the seventies, Jeannie may well be sincere every time she says ‘daaahhh-ling’, in her inimitable drawn-out crow’s voice, but she sure as hell ain’t no rocket scientist.

### There’s no business like Show Business

One interesting aspect of the show was that many of the people who spoke about their psychic experiences were ‘show folk’, ie actors, producers, directors and musicians. (Many of the ‘celebrities’, though, were rather minor figures). This confirmed a few thoughts of mine. Show folk tend to be believers in the paranormal, alternative medicine and the like. I do not know if the percentage is higher than the rest of the population, or whether they just like talking about it more. (Perhaps someone should do a survey one day to find out.) But that has been my experience ever since being involved in theatrics in my undergraduate days.

I suspect this has to do with the fact that many people in the performing arts thrive on excitement, fashion, glamour, gossip and imagination (and of course some of these are good things). Most of them live a life which involves continual uncertainty about the future. And of course show folk love to be in the limelight, and rarely resist the chance to puff up their own experiences. But they rarely have any idea about what they are talking about, beyond the superficial, although they may sound convincing to the ordinary person because of their performing skills.

### Margaret Dent, ‘Psychometrist’

Appearing on the show was a clairvoyant, Margaret Dent, who gave readings to several people, including myself. These people, except for myself, were all clearly impressed by the readings they received. I have transcribed Dent’s readings off a video-tape of the show. In the rest of this article I will closely analyse her readings so that her methods become clearer, and it will be seen that there is little doubt that she has no psychic ability whatsoever.

**Jeannie Little [Host]:** While science disputes the existence of an afterlife, psychics and mediums continue to make contact with those beyond the grave. One of Australia’s leading mediums, Margaret Dent, can connect with the other side using a technique called psychometry. Now Margaret, how does this work?

**Margaret Dent:** It works by a process of tuning in, is the best way I can explain it. I’m not a scientist, and my way of explaining things comes from my experience, you know, with them, throughout my life. What I’ve found is that when I take something that belongs to a person I’m tuning into the vibration of that person. If, um, I’m talking, say, on the phone to the person it’s the vibration of their voice.

**JL:** Without Margaret’s knowledge we chose a personal effect from one of the people in the audience. Now Margaret, here’s ... here it is. And you’re holding two rings but they both belong to the same person.

**MD:** Right, okay. So, immediately the first thing I get with this is about the person themselves. This lady, and obviously it’s a lady, you don’t have to be psychic to know that. Um, obviously this lady, er, is the type of a person that is a very strong-willed, very strong-minded person. Also, ah, the type of a person that’s very good at any job that she happens to do, Jeannie. So... she would be the type of character, for example, that you could trust with a secret. Do you know? Okay. Now, what I’m looking at here is a diversity with her to do with her work area, her ca-, career path. Ah, she has had a whole opening up of events taking, [sic] taking place in her life, over the past twelve months, and she’s now actually come to a crossroads where she needs to make a decision as to whether to follow the love of her life, in terms of the career path, or whether to actually branch out which will then entail her actually going overseas... Um...

**JL:** That’s quite a statement.

**MD:** Mmm. Yes.

**JL:** I, I think we should sort of leave it at that and find out who it is.

**MD:** Okay.

**JL:** Who was it?

**Jean:** Me.

**JL:** So, so darling, what’s your name and what do you think of that?

**J:** Yes, I think that’s quite good, yes.

**JL:** Fantastic.

### The Jean Genie

Dent has made the following claims. (1) Jean is strong-willed, strong-minded; (2) Jean is very good at any job she happens to do; (3) Jean is the type of character that

you could trust with a secret; (4) She (Dent) is looking at a diversity to do with Jean's work area, her career path; (5) [Perhaps related to 4, perhaps not] There has been a whole opening up of events taking place in Jean's life, over the past twelve months; (6) Jean has now come to a crossroads where she needs to decide whether to follow the love of her life, in terms of her career path, or whether to branch out, which will entail her actually going overseas.

Before we analyse these claims, it is important to note that Jean does not say that what Dent said was "all correct", but only that it was "quite good". Not even good, but only *quite* good. This suggests strongly that not everything Dent said was correct. But note that neither Dent nor the host make the slightest effort to get more information from Jean which would help in more accurately determining Dent's supposed success.

The first three claims mean little. These are the type of claims that most people will agree with. Take the first one. Who would speak up against the claim that they are "strong-willed" in order to say that they are in fact "weak-willed" and "weak-minded"? Very few people think that they are weak-minded, and even if they do, they are not going to say so. And if you really are weak-willed and weak-minded, and know it, then you will not be strong-minded enough to speak out against the clairvoyant and host, who obviously would be unhappy with any dissent you show!

Anyway, anyone who comes to this sort of show and is willing to offer up some of their personal possessions and to be involved in a reading is probably not weak-willed. So a clairvoyant really cannot go wrong with this sort of claim.

The second and third claims are also ones that very few people are going to deny, especially people who are confident enough to come to this sort of show. And even if they do think this about themselves, no-one is going to go on national television saying that they are not very good at their job, and they cannot be trusted to keep a secret.

(4) is utterly vague. "Diversity to do with work" here could apply to almost anything. Most believers will be able to find something that this will apply to, and will then credit the clairvoyant with the success.

(5) is also hopelessly vague. What exactly is an "opening up of events"? This is the sort of term that could apply to anything of interest that has happened in the last year. Even if, against the odds, nothing at all has happened of interest in the last year to Jean, this phrase could apply simply to some attitude that Jean had towards her work during the last year. And everyone goes through changes of attitude towards their work over a year. Even if this attitude did not seem significant at the time, the believer may well decide now that that attitude was significant after all.

The other thing to note about (4) and (5) is that the subject is given little time to think about what has been said. So, even in the rare case where the subject can think of nothing specific that definitely matches what the clairvoyant has said, most believers will not wish to say straight-out that the clairvoyant is wrong before they have had a chance to have a longer think. Because they believe right from the start, they are confident that if they think hard enough, they will work out what the clairvoyant is talking about.

### **I foresee changes in your career**

(6) is slightly more ambitious, but is not as specific or as bold as it may appear. Firstly, Dent sneaks in two claims here, but presents them in an 'either-or' form, which makes it appear as though she has only made the one claim. "Following the love of her life" is not necessarily the converse of "branching out and going overseas". This doubles Dent's chance of getting a hit. Jean could even be thinking of doing both, and in this case, Jean would not think that Dent was mistaken, as she should (given that it is an 'either-or' statement), but would think that Dent got it exactly right. Believers tend to ignore little words like "or", even though the truth of what is said may hang on them.

Dent does not make it clear whether or not she thinks that the career Jean has now is the "love of her life" (careerwise). This means that if Jean is thinking of changing careers, Dent will be regarded as being right, and if Jean is not thinking of changing careers, but thinking of moving onwards with her chosen career, then Dent will be regarded as being right. It is on such little ambiguities, which not even the most hardened Skeptic may notice until a close analysis is done, that the apparent success of a reading hangs.

The general point to make about (6) is that a clairvoyant is on pretty safe turf if they talk vaguely about career decisions. Most people have at least some thoughts about where their career is heading over the course of the year. We should also note that the vast majority of people who go to clairvoyants (especially where you have to pay good money), are those who have some sort of problem, or face some tough decisions. These problems tend to fall into limited categories, usually to do with love, career, money, or the death of a loved one. So talking about the subject's career is a good bet; after all, most people have them.

Note the phrase that Dent used: "love of her life, career-wise". If Jean decides that there is nothing that Dent said that applied to her career, then there is a good chance that Jean is instead having troubles with her love-life. (This would especially apply in a private consultation.) But Dent's phrase allows that, if so, Jean can decide that this was the real psychic 'message' that Dent was getting, only not clearly. If Jean then said as much, then you can bet that Dent would say something like "yes, that's the message I'm getting now, the earlier message was not clear". So this is another subtle example of Dent's phrasing giving herself an 'out' in case of trouble.

What about the claim that Jean is thinking about going overseas? Isn't that fairly specific? Well, many Australians think of going overseas at some stage. The move does not even have to be permanent; Dent does not say that. The move does not even have to be something that Jean has seriously considered; all it has to be is an option that is open to her. That makes the chance of getting a hit much higher than it may have appeared at first glance.

### **Was anyone keeping score?**

So (6) is not such a bold claim, although it is certainly bolder than the others. But do we know that it was a hit? We do not. Remember that Jean said that Dent's reading was "quite good". For someone who is probably a believer, that is faint praise. That means that

there is most likely a definite miss in there. Given that it is almost impossible that (1) to (3) would not be counted as hits, and that (4) and (5) are so vague that they probably were hits as well, that suggests that Dent has got it wrong about the overseas claim. If so, that means that the only claim made that was even halfway specific and bold is probably wrong.

We have been reduced here to making educated guesses about Jean in regard to Dent's claims. This is because neither Dent nor the host asked Jean to say which claims were right and which were wrong. Clairvoyants rarely give the subject a chance to disconfirm them, especially in a public reading. And the subject is unlikely to volunteer the information without being asked, because they will feel like a troublemaker doing that. Believers mostly ignore misses anyway, or else they think that there probably is something in what was said, which will become clearer once they go home and give it some serious thought.

### Dent sees the dead hanging around Jean

**MD:** Now, as I look at that person, what I see around her, and I'm sorry to call you that person...

**J:** Jean.

**MD:** Jean, okay, um, who I'm seeing around you, I see a man on your father's side of the family tree that's passed over, and he stands where your father would stand, and he tells me, ah, that, he has a brother also in the spirit world with him, and, um, he tells me that you know, you know that he is there watching over you. Is that correct?

**J:** That's right.

**MD:** Right.

**JL:** Oh Margaret, you are fantas....

### Clairvoyancy-by-numbers

Here we have some textbook stuff. Jean is middle-aged, and there is a good chance that there is at least one male and his brother on her father's side who has died at some stage in her life. Note that saying "the father's side" makes Dent sound that much more specific, when in fact what she has said is still pretty likely to get a hit.

The phrase "Standing where your father would stand" is also vague. It sounds like it could mean "man who played the role of father for you in your life", but it could be taken to mean any number of things by the believing subject. How about some names? Clairvoyants always claim to be hearing the names of people in the spirit world. It is funny how they only ever know the names before they know who they can be matched to, and when they can throw out a list of names to the audience until they inevitably get a hit. After that, the names mysteriously dry up. (Or else the clairvoyant gives the subject a list, until the subject says yes.)

### Be prepared!

One point about the practices of some clairvoyants needs to be made more public. In personal readings that are made by appointment, some clairvoyants will come up with startlingly specific information about the subject, information which is far more accurate and detailed than the sort of vague stuff that we have seen here.

This is done in two ways. The clairvoyant can do some digging for information on the subject before the appointment, or else use a fact sheet which will con-

tain information about the person, and about their worries and dead loved ones and so on. This will have been acquired from another clairvoyant.

Such swapping of information is common in many clairvoyant circles, especially in the USA, where the same subjects will go from one clairvoyant to another. For example, see *The Psychic Mafia* by M. Lamar Keene, a 1976 book recently reprinted by Prometheus. Keene is a former psychic who spilled the beans about the unscrupulous nature of fraudulent psychics. The Reverend Arthur Ford was another such crook - see chap. 23 of Martin Gardner's *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus*, Prometheus, 1981. (I'm not saying, though, that Dent engages in any such practices, and on this show she did not seem to.)

### The clairvoyant's juiciest prey: the actress

**JL:** Darling, what about Ally Fowler in the front here...

[Ally Fowler is a television actress, who started out in soap opera.]

**MD:** Hi.

**JL:** ...who's been killing to get a reading.

**MD:** [To Ally Fowler] It's interesting for you sweetheart because, um, you, you, well, you know, I'm just, I'm thinking how to say this, I'm sorry. What I was gonna say to you is sometimes you can be your own worst enemy, because you can take too long to make the decision.

We are all our own worst enemy sometimes - and notice that Dent specifically says "sometimes" - and we can all take too long to make important decisions. I suspect that this is even more likely to be true of a TV actress.

We should bear in mind here that Ally Fowler would have appeared in stories and interviews in TV magazines, women's magazines, and newspapers, and so Dent could make use of any information she has gained about Fowler from these sources.

An actress a day keeps the debt-collector away.

**MD:** And what you're doing now, it's like, everything's going well, but there's a part of you that's saying, yes, well what's going to happen?

"What's going to happen?" is something that most young people ask of themselves, and it is especially likely to be something that a young actress asks herself, because the future for almost all actors is uncertain.

**MD:** Right. This is what I call the self-fulfilling prophecy, you know, the power of the mind, because we can talk ourselves into or out of anything. I'm a firm believer in that.

This is pure waffle. No psychic powers in evidence here.

**MD:** And you know, I need to say to you ... go ahead, just, just, live for the day, live for the moment, go with things as they are at the moment.

This is just vague advice, which obviously anyone can give. (I wonder if Dent really is this inarticulate, or whether she's 'dumbing down' for an actress?)

**MD:** Because in fact actually you are very perceptive, and you have a lot of problems with that, don't you?

**Ally Fowler:** Yes, yes.

No-one is going to deny that they are very perceptive. This is simply flattery. Many actors would like to be considered perceptive, intelligent etc, especially if they

feel they are not taken entirely seriously because of the shows they do.

**MD:** And what you are feeling in terms of the work area is quite correct.

This is just blatantly evasive. Dent obviously couches this in terms which enable her to avoid referring to anything specific. She tries to make it look as though she is using this phrasing merely to be discreet and to preserve the subject's privacy. Note also that the subject is bound to be feeling something about her work, even if only general contentment. So how could Dent possibly go wrong here?

**MD:** But let me tell you this, as one door closes another one opens.

Again, all we have here is some wishy-washy, trite advice which anyone could give. It is especially likely to sound good to an actress, who is forever finishing one role and looking for another. (Imagine paying money for this kind of advice. You would be better off buying a fortune cookie.)

**AF:** Hmm-mm.

**MD:** Okay?

**JL:** Fantastic.

**AF:** Thank you.

Again, the subject is not asked to comment in any depth on what was given, not that there was much chance that any of it could miss.

### **Some general advice from the clairvoyant's handbook**

Some important points about clairvoyants need to be raised here before we go any further. It is never made clear just what the clairvoyant is doing. Are they reading your mind? This seems to be suggested when they say that they cannot read a sceptic's mind, because the sceptic's mind is closed off to them because of the sceptic's negativity.

Or are they just getting information about you from the 'psychic ether'? It must be this at least some of the time, as clairvoyants will usually claim to have information about a subject that not even the subject knows. And mind-reading will not explain how it is that the clairvoyant can communicate with the dead. Also, we will see that sometimes clairvoyants make claims about a person's life that seem to be wrong (not that this fazes believers). This could be explained as her picking up the wrong information from the psychic realm, but it is hard to see how she could get it wrong if she is mind-reading.

Perhaps the clairvoyant is doing both. Who knows? It is never made clear just what they are doing. It is in their interest to keep it unclear (and any book on magic will tell you that a good magician never tells you beforehand what he is going to do). That way, they give themselves multiple outs. If you turn out to be a sceptic, it is your mind that is closed. But if you are a believer, they have the ability to tell you things that not even you know, because they get it from the 'astral plane', or from communicating with the dead.

### **Predictions**

There is further ambiguity in what the psychic is supposed to be doing. Not only do they tell you about yourself, but they also make predictions about what

will happen in your life. This is very handy for them. This way, they can make a few vague claims about the person, and then, when the subject might start to want something a bit more detailed or significant, they switch to predictions. That also enables the spotlight to be taken off the previous claims, so that their vagueness does not get a chance to become apparent.

It should be noted that there are three other great things about predictions. The first is that we never get the chance to see whether they come true. They cannot be tested on the spot, and no-one ever follows them up. The second is that if they are given after the clairvoyant has already given a subject a reading, and if the subject has thought that the clairvoyant's reading was right, then the subject will simply assume that the clairvoyant's predictions must also be right. So in the subject's mind the prediction provides further reason to believe that the clairvoyant has psychic powers.

The third great thing about predictions is that if a prediction does not come true, then most subjects will not see this as a failure on the part of the clairvoyant. For example, if the prediction was that something bad will happen unless the subject takes some action, then the non-appearance of the predicted event will be explained as due to the fact that the subject took the appropriate action.

Even if the subject did not take the appropriate action, the non-appearance can be explained away on numerous other grounds by the subject. For example, the subject at least thought about doing the action, and this indicated a change of heart to the powers-that-be. Or that other psychic happenings prevented it from happening. And so on. Most predictions are so vague that this is easily accomplished. In fact, many predictions are so vague that the subject may well simply forget them in time.

And speaking of time, we should note in this regard that clairvoyants are rarely specific about what time the predicted event is going to happen, which makes it very difficult for them to be proved wrong, and ample opportunities for the subject to forget the prediction or for their memory of what was said to change over time.

### **Advice**

The ambiguity of what a clairvoyant does is not over yet. Not only do they tell you about yourself, communicate with the dead and make predictions, but they also give advice. Needless to say, advice has many of the advantages of predictions. It cannot be discounted on the spot. It is so vague that the subject can interpret it in their own way, and over time their understanding of what was said may unconsciously change. It is so vague that if it does not prove useful it can be explained away by the subject as due to their inadequate understanding of what was said.

And of course if the subject is regularly visiting a clairvoyant, the clairvoyant can change the advice they give when it suits them, on the basis of the updates they get about the subject's life in every visit.

It is also not made clear whether the advice given is 'psychic' advice, ie advice that the clairvoyant receives from some 'wiser power', or advice that the psychic is personally giving on the basis of what they can see in your future. This again provides them with an out. They

can appear impressive and in touch with the psychic world when they give advice, but in the unlikely situation that anyone comes back complaining about bad advice, they can say, well, that was just what I would have done knowing what was going to happen. (Of course, they should be able to psychically see what will happen when you take their advice, but clairvoyants' powers are mysteriously limited when it suits them.)

The clairvoyant, then, has all these different 'powers' at their disposal, and they can switch between them as it suits them. Whenever any one of them is going nowhere, or going stale, they can simply turn to another one to find more success or revive interest. And having so many tricks up their sleeves means that they never have to spend too long on the one thing, so what exactly they are doing never gets looked at too closely. Because it is never clear just what they are doing, the uncritical subject who wants to believe is unlikely to be able to focus in on what is being done closely enough to see that it is all just flim-flam.

### A producer of imaginary worlds

**JL:** What about ... is there anyone else who'd like a reading?

**John Frost:** [Butting in eagerly] Ah, I, I produce a lot of stage musicals.

**MD:** Okay, just don't say any more, and I'll tell you.

Too late John. You have just given Dent the information she needed. A whole reading can easily be built up on the fact that you are a producer of stage musicals. And stage musicals are not cheap, so you are obviously something of a high-flyer, and not just some two-bit producer or an arty struggler in fringe theatre.

And Dent also now knows, from the way that Frost desperately butted in, that he is an eager beaver of a believer. This means that she can go fishing with him - throw him some suggestions and he will do all the work in trying to make them fit something. She would also be helped by the fact that Frost is a well-known producer, and many of his activities would be common knowledge.

**MD:** All right. At present it's, there's three areas there. Ah, can you understand what I mean by those three projects?

Areas or projects? This is another old trick. Make out that you are using synonyms, when really you are using word that can apply to quite different things. That way you get two guesses for the price of one.

Also, both terms are very broad, especially "areas". Is she talking about theatre shows? Shows in production or shows that he is setting up or just thinking of? Can he include scripts that he has written, or has commissioned, or has read, or is thinking about writing? Can we include shows that he has directing or going to direct, or shows that he has lent a helping hand to? Or can he include any administrative duties he performs in theatre circles?

What is the time frame? Can he include a show just gone? Or a show that he has his heart set on doing in three years? What about the big show that set him up to begin with?

Anyone who knows anything about theatre will know that successful producers and directors usually have at least three shows on the go at the one time. They usually have one that is running now, one that

they are currently rehearsing, and one that is being set up for rehearsals to start soon. Add the fact that there may be other shows that they have some involvement in, and any number of other things that could come under the headings "area" or "project", and you cannot miss with this sort of claim.

Anyway, if Dent knows all this psychically, why can't she tell us what these projects are? If they are shows, what are their names? Where are they playing? Why do clairvoyants only ever receive such vague information when it suits them?

There are some more subtle points to note about what Dent has said. She does not even say that the three areas or projects are three of Frost's own areas or projects. She just says that there are three areas or projects "there". This allows him to include any number of 'areas' or 'projects' that he knows of, for example, any that good friends are working on.

And "areas" or "projects" do not even necessarily mean shows. He could take these to mean the three main activities in his life, for example, his theatre, his bush-walking, his competitive squash-playing, his record-collecting, his wine-appreciation, his family, or any number of things.

**MD:** Okay. And, really, they're all going to take off.

What exactly does "take off" mean? By leaving the meaning open, Dent leaves it open for the subject to supply the meaning that best fits his situation. And note that this is a prediction, and we will never know how successful it was.

**MD:** And, you're getting, the same, er, who ... be careful when you ask for something because you just may get it. And you're about to.

Such priceless and meaningless waffle is easily overlooked in the normal flow of a clairvoyant's patter, until we take a closer look.

**MD:** And you know, you can't be in three places at once...

No kidding.

### Another bold 'overseas' claim?

**MD:** ...because you have two that are centred here, in Australia, and one that has to take you to England.

Here it appears that Dent has stuck her neck out with a claim that the subject has something going on in England. But in reality this is simply a shrewd guess on her part. If you know anything about Australian theatre circles, you know that almost everyone in it with ambition would like to make it in England, and anyone who is at all successful will be taking steps to do something in England. (Even those whose ultimate aim is to make it in America know that England is traditionally the first step to take). So it would hardly be a surprise if Frost has some kind of project on the go in England. So this is the sort of thing that a competent cold-reader can make use of.

But note that "has to take you to England" is very vague. It might mean that Frost has a show on in London, or it might just mean that Frost is intending to go, or even just thinking about going, to London, to see about the possibility of getting the show on there. Or that he has to go there to negotiate with an actor or director to come over to Australia to do the show. Or

even that “it has to take you” in the sense that “this Melbourne show will probably be your one and only big chance to get you to England, so it *has* to succeed, otherwise you will never get another good chance”.

With phrases like these, there are many possibilities for hits, possibilities that will not occur to the people in the audience. And note that the subject does not have to be aware of all these possibilities either - he only needs to find something in his life that can be said to fit the claim.

Later on, co-host Ian Parry-Okeden claimed that Dent had known that the subject had a show on in England. But she *never* said this. As we have seen, all she said was that he had an “area” or “project” involving England. So this is an example of the distortion effect that often occurs with clairvoyants. The believers start attributing successes to her which she never achieved, or exaggerating the trifles that she did get right.

Also, bear in mind that Frost may not have even been taking her to be referring to a show in the first place. He could then have taken her reference to England to refer to anything in his life that involves England.

**MD:** And, um, it’s an impossibility, but, it’s a great success for you, it’s a great achievement.

The subject is hardly likely to interrupt to say, “No, what I’ve done is not in fact any sort of great achievement or success for me”.

Anyway, is Dent here making a comment on current events in his life, or a prediction about future events? It is not made clear, so Frost is free to interpret it how he likes.

And what is the phrase “it’s an impossibility” supposed to mean? Most subjects filter out such stray unexplained comments if they do not hit, perhaps unconsciously taking them to be random ‘psychic noise’. But if any of these comments hits in any way, then of course the subject will take it as a success, while totally forgetting all the other comments of this sort that were made.

### Oklahoma on my mind

**MD:** And, have you any idea, who the person is, it’s a male voice, that would be singing the song *Oklahoma* to you? Who has passed over?

Finally we get Dent taking something of a risk, with a fairly specific claim. But it is not as daring as it looks. She knows that Frost is a theatre person, and is on the ‘luvvy’, light entertainment side of theatre. Most luvvies love show tunes, and they often get played at theatre parties. (Frost’s demeanour also suggested that he would enjoy a show-tune or two.) So Dent figures that mentioning a well-known show tune is bound to get a reaction.

Note also that while Dent suggests that this person had some special connection with the song *Oklahoma* (so that her claim sounds impressive to the audience), Frost need not think that. All he has to do is imagine someone for whom it would be appropriate in some way to be singing it.

Dent says that the person has died. If she knows this, why doesn’t she know his name? Are we supposed to believe that she has somehow got in contact with some spirit who is telling her that he is a dead friend of Frost’s, and that he likes singing *Oklahoma* to Frost, but

that he will not tell Dent his name? (Is this a new kind of ‘shyness effect’ amongst the dead?). Or does her ‘psychic reception’ go conveniently fuzzy whenever he tries to tell her his name? Or did he just burst into singing *Oklahoma* before Dent had a chance to ask him his name? Or is Dent reading Frost’s mind? In which case, how come she does not know this person’s name?

Not giving a name obviously gives Frost a wide range of dead people to choose from. Anyone who Frost knew who has died and who liked show tunes will do. They do not even have to be a friend of his; Dent did not say this. This is just textbook cheating again, and it is almost embarrassing to have to acknowledge that some intelligent people are taken in by it.

I think here that Dent is also using the fact that Frost is in the theatre, and in particular, the light entertainment side of theatre, which has a high proportion of gay men in it. It is no secret that in Sydney many gay men from this community have died of AIDS in the last ten or so years. Theatre is a very small world, and so a major producer like Frost is bound to have known some of these people. But, read on:

**JF:** No I don’t.

Despite it being a shrewd guess on Dent’s part, it did not work. So, on the only really halfway-specific claim she has made to Frost, she gets a straight-out miss. (If she was reading Frost’s mind, how could she have missed?)

I think one mistake she made here was to be a bit out-of-date. *Oklahoma* was a popular show in her youth, but Frost looks to be in his forties, so *Oklahoma* would have been a hit before his time. (Nor has it come back into fashion.) She should have picked a song more suitable for Frost’s generation.

Her claim here should count as a miss, but no believer will think this. They will take it that either Frost has not yet realized who this person is, or that there is a crossed psychic line somewhere. They do not doubt that Dent did psychically ‘see’ such a person. To them, apparent failure is irrelevant.

Note that her earlier vague claims were made boldly, whereas this somewhat more specific claim is more tentatively made. (This may not be noticeable on the page, but it was noticeable in her tone of voice.) This makes the claim more forgettable if it does not hit.

**JF:** But, er, certainly the composers of *Oklahoma* I know. Or I know of.

This is incredible, and it is why this sort of close analysis can be such fun. The believing subject clutches whatever straws he can to try to make it a hit. So he says that he “knows of” the composers of *Oklahoma*. In other words, it is perhaps not a miss *because he has heard of Rogers and Hammerstein!* By this logic, if Dent had said, this person will be reciting Hamlet, he could have said “Well, I know of the author, William Shakespeare”.

**MD:** Okay. This is a person that you would have worked with. This man died, um, and he died around the middle forties.

Having failed with the song, Dent then deflects attention away from it, and concentrates instead on the man it could have been. But even this does not work, as Frost shakes his head.

Nevertheless, although Frost could not think of any-

one, he gave the impression that he was not dismissing her claim out of hand, and that he was thinking deeply about it. This means that the audience will also not count this as a miss.

**JL:** John, what do you think.... about all that?

**JF:** Well, er, that's, that's really interesting, because I do have three projects, two in Australia, and one in London, first time in London, which will be *The King and I* next year, *Cabaret* which is now on, and *Crazy For You* in Melbourne.

### A theatrical taste for fantasy

This illustrates how easy it is for a clairvoyant to appear to succeed with a believer. Suppose she had said "There are two areas or projects". In that case he could simply have taken *Cabaret* and *Crazy For You* to be what she was referring to; after all, he points out himself that *The King and I* will not be on until next year. If she had said four or five or even six areas or projects, I am sure he could have found any of those numbers. But three is a good number for Dent to choose: it is very safe - you can bet that the subject will be able to think of three on the spot - and yet it sounds much more bold than saying one or two.

Note that my earlier point about the time-frame came into play. *The King and I* is not on until next year, yet Frost included it. If the time frame can include anything from so far into the future, how could Dent have failed? It even sounds like *Crazy For You* is not yet on. As I said earlier, producers always have at least three shows on the go at once, but not necessarily all on at the time. What about shows of his that had just finished? There was nothing to stop him including those if he needed to.

Note that Frost has now given her the titles of his productions. A good clairvoyant will, by the end of a normal one-hour consultation, have made it appear that these particular shows were the ones she was talking about. There is surprisingly little skill required to pull this off if your subject is a believer. Simply feed back the facts that you now know a few times, and the believing subject comes to believe that you knew these facts all the time, even that it was you who first mentioned them.

Sometimes no skill whatsoever is required: the subject will simply come out of a session declaring that the clairvoyant knew certain facts. But transcripts of such sessions always reveal that the clairvoyant made no such claims, but merely made some very vague and general claims. The believing subject convinces himself or herself that the clairvoyant knew the specific details. (This echoes a principle you will find in books on magic tricks: let the subject do half the work.)

**JF:** And, this has been a really tough year for the entertainment industry, and certainly my industry, and, er, this is really nice to hear. Um, it's terrific to hear, you know. Thank you.

This is all irrelevant, at least for the purpose of trying to ascertain whether Dent has psychic powers (which, after all, was supposed to be part of the point of the show; Frost, however, seemed more concerned with getting a free reading). Dent never said anything about it being a tough year for the entertainment industry. (It would have been a good one for her to use, though: it always seems to be a tough year for the entertainment industry).

And as for his saying "this is really nice to hear" and "it's terrific to hear", this just shows how eager he is for some sort of reassurance. Anyway, she did not even say all that much in the way of predicting success for him, and it was not clear whether what she did say was a prediction or not. But he seemed to hear in the few vague comments she made a clear message of future success.

Finally, we should note that Frost entirely ignores the miss concerning *Oklahoma*, despite it being the only halfway specific thing she said. Probably he will go home to puzzle over it further, convinced that if only he can make the connection, the meaning of what Dent 'saw' will be made clear.

### The "young boy"

**MD:** Going for that young boy up the back, actually. [Points to Scott Campbell, Skeptic.]

This "young boy" is myself. I am 31. It is funny how someone who was supposed to have psychic insight into people was so easily misled by my boyish, fresh-faced looks.

**MD:** Yes. Wha-, the first thing that I'm seeing with you is a change and a move, and the change has to do with the career path. And what it gives to you when you have that change is actually a move of address, you know, a change in direction.

If you were to pretend to be a clairvoyant, and you were faced with what looked like an intelligent young man in his mid-twenties, the obvious fact to use is that he is most likely going to be moving around a bit, both in his address and his career, especially in these days of job insecurity. I know of hardly anyone in their twenties who has not moved a move around a fair bit. And most have changed jobs during their twenties, or at least seriously consider doing so, even if they stay put.

And it is not clear whether Dent is here using her psychic powers to describe the fact that I have just recently moved, or that I am intending to, or whether she is making a prediction that I will move in the future. This ambiguity means that it seems as though she has an amazing power to know all about me, yet if I were to demur, she could just say that she is making a prediction, so there is no failure.

What she says is very woolly. The change "has to do with the career path". Why so vague? What is she seeing? How can you see something as vague as "a change to do with the career path"? Is she seeing me in a new job? If so, what is it? Or is she seeing me leave my old job? If so, what is my old job? What am I doing in the situation she sees? Am I talking to my boss? If so, who is he or she? What does he or she look like?

She then says that the change in career path gives me a change of address. However, she does not say whether this refers to a change of home address, or a change in work address, which, for anyone who gets a new job, is quite likely to be the case. The trick here is to say something which to most people will sound like it is referring to one thing (in this case, a change in home address), but which can easily be taken by the subject to refer to something even more likely (namely, that a new job provides a change of work address). If she gets a hit with the first, it sounds like a bold claim has come true (not that it was all that bold to start with), and if

she gets a hit with the second, people will accept that as well, and will fail to realize how unremarkable a hit on the second would be.

After seeming to specify that she is talking about a change of address, she then says, "you know, a change in direction". I'm sorry, Margaret, but I don't "know" - I don't know what you are talking about now. How is this qualification supposed to be helpful? All it does is take her claim back to the realm of vagueness, for "a change in direction" could apply to almost anything. Note also the lack of a time-frame in what she says.

Was what she said true? No, it was not true! (At least insofar as claims that vague can be true or false). I had recently moved into a new house, and I intended to stay there, for at least as long as I normally stay at a new address. But no doubt I will be moving at some stage in the next few years; I do move a lot. Would a move in a year's time count?

As for a change in my career path, this was also wrong, as far as such a vague claim can be assessed. My career path is rather static - I am a part-time University lecturer/tutor and a PhD student. Some time in the next year or so, I will finish my studies and try to go full-time in my lecturing. Is this what she was referring to? Who can say, with only such ridiculously vague and evasive claims to go on?

#### **And, it's like, you know, a change, and it's, well, there are periods, working hard, you understand?**

**MD:** And, it's like you've been going through a stage where you've been, really working to get ahead, do you know what I mean, it's as if there's been a dead period there, can you understand what I'm saying to you? [She looks expectantly at me, so I'm forced to nod.] And it hasn't been through lack of trying, but it just hasn't been happening.

As far as one can answer this (and I have heard sullen teenagers speaking more articulately), it is all completely wrong. I have not been working very hard at all on my thesis for the last couple of years (partly due to my interest in Skepticism). It most definitely *has* been through lack of trying on my part! This is not the sort of thing one wants to admit on national television, though.

Note that she says "there's been a dead period there". Now, given her other statements, what she has to be saying here is that "despite your hard work, you're getting nowhere in your career". But if I was a less alert believer, I may just have focused in on this claim, which would have struck me as right - as referring to my own slackness. "Yes", I might well have said, "you are right - there has been a dead period in my work", thinking of my own laziness. I would have taken no notice of her other comments, and so would have failed to see that I had completely inverted the meaning of what she really said. Again, there is no time frame for the period she is talking about. And what person does not have ups and downs in their work?

**MD:** And what you're gonna do is you're going to change course, that's the best way I can explain to you.

This is a prediction, and provides no evidence of psychic powers. As for testing it - well, frankly, it is untestable. No doubt I am going to change course in some way in the future, but anyone could have told

me that. This is a rather feeble effort from Dent, on a par with such standards as "You will encounter problems with your love-life in the future".

**JL:** Fabulous, darling. [To Scott Campbell] Darling, can I ask you your name and what that means for you?

**Scott Campbell:** Uh, my name's Scott. Um, that all just sounded extremely vague, and could apply to anyone really, so, it didn't really convince me very much.

**MD:** I'm sorry, I can't hear him.

**JL:** Oh, act-, act-, actually he wasn't that excited about it... [To SC] Are you one of the, ah, Skeptics?

**MD:** [Quickly] Yes he is, mmm.

Note the way that Margaret says that she has not heard me, but a few seconds later she confidently pronounces that I am one of the Skeptics, as though this information has just come through on her psychic antenna. More likely, the comments made by myself and the host clicked in her mind

**SC:** Yes, I'm one of the Skeptics.

**JL:** 'Cause I think you're all a bit closed off, and it's probably hard for Margaret to get through, I mean that.

#### **My secrets were safe (even the legal ones)!**

If it was so hard to "get through", why did Dent have no trouble in giving me the usual spiel about my life and what was going to happen to me? If it was so hard to get through, why did she not say, "I find your mind closed to me?" right from the start? She seemed to have no trouble in 'reading' me *before* she knew I was a Skeptic. Surely she must have 'sensed' that I was a Skeptic if she has any powers at all!

It might be replied that she got this information about me not through mind-reading, but through some other psychic channel. But in that case it is completely irrelevant whether or not I have a "closed-off mind"! There is no way out of this situation for the psychic. She cannot have been doing mind-reading (because she failed to read my mind), but she cannot have been anything else, because then the "closed-off mind" defence is inapplicable.

But these sort of difficulties never concern the true believer. They have no interest in grounding their explanations in anything solid, so they can always think up some *ad hoc* solution, for example, that my "negative attitude blocked her access to my aura". Anyone can think up these sort of fantasyland rationalisations, because there is no possible evidence that could count for or against them, nor do believers bother with normal working scientific principles like Occam's razor.

Anyway, my complaint was that her comments were extremely vague. What does my scepticism or closed mind have to do with this? Was it my closed mind that caused her reading to be so vague? But it could not be this, because her reading of me was no more vague than all her other readings!

#### **She can't be bothered!**

**MD:** No, I, and I can't be bothered to be honest with you, because my work, my work talks for itself.

I can only agree with her that her work talks for itself.

**Barry Williams:** [A grizzled Skeptic, interjecting] You didn't predict anything for him, you gave him a vague generality, as you did to other people.

**JL:** She said he's going to move, darling, and I'll bet he does.

continued p 18 ...

# The rise and demise of psychoanalysis

Sydney Bockner

When Sigmund Freud described a new method of treatment of psychoneuroses in 1900 he was considered brilliantly original, but also outrageous. Freud was born in Freiberg, Germany in 1856. He died in London in 1939. His new form of therapy, which he called psychoanalysis, was primarily concerned with sex, and this was at a time when this subject was taboo. In Victorian England even piano legs were covered.

It was courageous of Freud to write openly about this subject in a period when it was discussed only in whispers. He produced neologisms such as *superego* and *id*, and new concepts such as dream censor, condensation, and displacement in dream symbolism. Freud studied Greek mythology, and the Oedipus myth was integrated into his therapy, resulting in his famous Oedipus Complex. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, psychoanalysts consider Freud's Oedipus Complex is being acted out in a disguised form. Freud's famous works, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), and *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1922) described the methods of his therapy, and psychoanalysis developed a cult following.

Freud had the gift of language, and was a brilliant writer. Besides his native German he spoke English and French fluently, and also Latin, Greek, Spanish and Italian. He was not the originator of the unconscious (as often claimed by his followers), but he had novel ideas of its contents. The basis of psychoanalysis was to uncover these contents by free association and dream analysis, and thus lead the way to resolving unconscious conflicts. Freud considered dreams to be the disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes. Dreams contained symbols which disguised the dream's true meaning. Psychoanalysis aimed at exposing the significance of these symbols, and the cathartic insight gained by the patient relieved his symptoms. Symptomatic cures (Freud's term) simply removing symptoms eg by hypnosis or drugs, was useless according to Freud. Unless the underlying cause was removed by psychoanalysis the symptoms, or new ones, would return.

Freud was trained in the scientific discipline of medicine and he specialised in neurology before he turned to psychiatry. He clearly had a scientific attitude when he stated "Truth cannot be tolerant". But the major criticism of his work is that it lacks rigorous scientific testing of his many hypotheses. Psychoanalysis is based on Freudian dogma and doctrine. There were no scientific studies, no critical analyses, no rigorous testing.

Psychoanalysts have difficulty in accepting criticism of Freudian analysis, although this is a recognised procedure in advancing science, and critical papers can expect a hostile reception (present article included). Clinical trials comparing psychoanalysis with other methods of psychotherapy and untreated groups are resisted or dismissed by psychoanalysts. As a result Karl Pop-

per (1959) labelled psychoanalysis a pseudo-science. In Freud's opinion experimental evidence was not needed to confirm his hypotheses (Eysenck & Wilson, 1973). It should be noted that in the early days of psychoanalysis double blind clinical trials had not yet been thought of.

Freud conceived a complicated structure of the human mind, based on flimsy anecdotal evidence and dogma. His writing and exceptional language skills were so persuasive (and brilliant) that dogmatic statements, without scientific evidence, were accepted as the truth almost without question by his followers. Psychoanalysis became more akin to a religion, with Freud being the God-like figure. Belief, which has no place in science, became the rule.

Freud's psychoanalysis extended into non-medical disciplines such as anthropology. Here again, dogma rather than scientific evidence was presented. Margaret Mead's field studies in Samoa in 1925 (*Coming of Age in Samoa*, 1928) suggested an idyllic life of young Samoans, free of inhibitions, with promiscuous sexual freedom. As a result, said Mead, there was an absence of neurosis, rape, crime and many other problems of Western societies in this South Pacific paradise. This appeared to confirm Freud's views that sexual inhibition was the basis of neuroses. However Derek Freeman showed clearly that Mead's work was entirely incorrect both in her findings and conclusions (Freeman, D. 1996)

The most recent method of psychotherapy is cognitive behavioural therapy. This short term (3 - 4 months) treatment aims at removing symptoms rapidly, and is very effective. Contrary to Freud's dictum that removing symptoms without dealing with the underlying cause would result in a return or replacement of symptoms, this has been found to be incorrect. There is no recurrence of symptoms and patients are quickly cured. In fact the symptoms are the disease (Rachman & Hodgson, 1980)

Freud laid down a recommendation that psychoanalysts needed to be analysed themselves to be effective therapists. His point was that this would enable the therapist to modify or neutralise his own prejudices which might slant his reactions and interpretations in the analyst/patient situation. Furthermore it was a valuable training method for the therapist. It takes several years to complete. However, it seems that therapists with only a few months' training obtain just as effective results as therapists with a full training analysis (Smith *et al*, 1980). The same authors found that the duration of treatment was unrelated to results.

Freud did not consider that it was necessary for therapists to have a medical qualification to practise psychoanalysis. As a result it has been eagerly taken up by "counsellors", therapists, social workers and

probation officers, some of whom have had limited formal training. Non-medical clinical psychologists who practise psychotherapy are, of course, highly trained. A full formal psychoanalysis takes three to five years.

One of the basic concepts of psychoanalysis is that symbolism in dreams expresses unresolved problems of childhood sexuality, eg the Oedipus Complex. However, new discoveries about dreaming throw serious doubt on this hypothesis. Dreams occur in rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. During dreaming the eyes move rapidly from one side to the other, and this can be observed in the sleeper by movements of the closed eyelids. It can also be confirmed by the electroencephalogram which shows absent alpha rhythm when dreaming occurs. Thus REM and absent alpha rhythm indicate dreaming. But REM sleep (ie dreaming) occurs in the new born infant. Furthermore it can be demonstrated in the unborn foetus by ultra-sound imaging. Obviously it is illogical to relate these findings to sexual problems. These discoveries contradict one of the essential criteria of psychoanalytic therapy.

Criticism of psychoanalysis may be summarised as follows:

1. It is a very lengthy and expensive procedure.
2. Three to five years psychoanalysis is no more effective than short term (three to six months) psychotherapy (Rachman and Wilson, 1980)
3. The length of training of therapists is uncorrelated to therapeutic success.
4. Cognitive behaviour therapy is significantly more successful and much more rapid in effect than psychoanalysis.
5. Psychoanalysis is based on highly speculative doctrine and dogma - not on scientific studies.

Do these points mean that Freud's work can be dismissed as of no significance today? They certainly do not mean this. Freud's contributions have been an enormous boost to psychotherapy in general. He produced new ideas on the psychological significance of mental symptoms. He conceived the concepts of repression and conflict as a cause of symptoms. Above all, in a time of sexual inhibition he led the way to the open discussion of sex which we accept as normal today. He was more than fifty years ahead of his time. Many of his neologisms have become part of our everyday language. Clearly his genius had a huge influence on modern thought - in literature, anthropology, mythology, language, social sciences, painting, and art. It is non-medical disciplines rather than therapy which have benefited from his work.

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#### ... A little out where? from p 16

As soon as I revealed myself to be a Skeptic, the person holding the microphone moved away - so much for this show being a serious investigation into psychic phenomena. So I was unable to inform the audience in further detail just how wrong Dent had been, and how I was not going to be moving soon, contrary to the host's assertions. I considered yelling and waving my arms to get attention, but Skeptics who do that sort of thing can easily be made to look over-the-top and rabid by the people calling the shots on the show, so I refrained, thinking it best to leave further comment to the experienced Barry Williams.

#### Entereth a man of peace and understanding

Once Barry started speaking though, the show's co-host, Ian Parry-Okeden, stormed in. Parry-Okeden is a true believer who has his own psychic show on radio, and he seemed determined to prevent Barry from saying anything which may sow the seeds of doubt in his audience's mind. He continued to speak over the top of Barry (no mean feat!), displayed naked hostility to any suggestion that Dent was not a psychic, and completely stymied any halfway-serious discussion of the topic.

It was an appalling display of narrow-mindedness from someone who supposedly believes in opening minds and making the world a better place, and a classic example of the worst excesses of talkback radio.

#### No Dent made in the Skeptics' position

I conclude from all this that Margaret Dent is an obvious fake, and not even a particularly good one. (I was tickled when the little old lady next to me said she also thought Dent was a fake.) Dent may perhaps half-believe in her own 'powers'; she may not fully realize why her methods seem to work so well with believers. This is not unheard of, although I personally doubt it. Even so, there is little doubt that she has no more psychic power than does Harry Edwards, who does a much better job at playing the clairvoyant than she.

The fact that so many intelligent people can believe in clairvoyants like Dent is rather astonishing. Some 'psychic' powers can seem impressive, and in the absence of a scientific explanation, one cannot blame many people for believing in such powers. But this is not such a case. A little common sense, and a close look, were all that were needed to demonstrate that Dent had no psychic ability. But both were in short supply during the making of this pathetically inept show.

The only value of this show was to provide very clear examples of how people with a strong need to believe, and an ignorance of some basic, common sense rules of scientific procedure, can be taken in by simple flim-flam.

**Moving?**  
**Please let us know**  
**your new address.**

# Make Believe II: sex, religion & politics

Roland Seidel

In a previous article, "How can you tell from make believe?", (17/3) I presented a layman's view of what it's all about with particular emphasis on brain research, the nature of belief and the nature of science. I'd like to reiterate some of the ideas from that and show how they apply to real life. I take as an example a fascinating *Compass* (ABC TV) program aired recently, exploring whether society should recognise more than two sexes.

## How can you tell from make believe?

A quick reiteration:

- . Ninety percent of what we know about the brain has been learnt in the last decade.
- . Memories are stored where they are experienced and are always distorted.
- . Reality is what your brain tells you it is.
- . The principal currency in the brain is security; beliefs serve to maximise it.
- . The Self (that's you) is a construction of the brain informed on a need to know basis only and given the illusion that it is in charge.
- . The Self probably doesn't exist before eighteen months of age.
- . We are subject to constructed beliefs, brain swindles, and engage in foggy speak and sophistry to assemble a convincing justification for believing things that are not true.
- . The paranormal is the sanctuary of the disenfranchised (if you can't get real power, you have to make do with pretend power).
- . The key element of the scientific method is peer review.
- . Science is not a faith and is not inconsistent with faith.
- . Science is the only universal "way of knowing"
- . Science tells us what is True and False; everything else tells us what is Right and Wrong.
- . Science tells us what Is; everything else tells us what Ought To Be.
- . Science tells us about the natural world; everything tells us about what it feels like to be human.

How to respond to extraordinary statements:

- . "That's an interesting claim."
- . "How would the world be different if it weren't true?"
- . "How can you tell that from make believe?"

## Sex, Religion and Politics

I've only seen the first part of *Compass*, "The Heart of the Matter" and will be very interested to see the second. They talked with, and about, hermaphrodites, transsexuals, intersexuals, homosexuals (gays and lesbians), Klinefelter's syndromes (genetic XXY), Turner's syndromes genetic (XO), males and females. How should society and religion regard and treat the grey area people? Should they be "fixed", or accepted? Can they, should they, may they be parents?

There was a cleric who made a very good fist of a difficult matter, but who was hamstrung by having to defer to the Bible all the time. There was an ageing hermaphrodite who was painfully and paradoxically right wing, a Klinefelter who argued his right to be a parent, a female-male who argued for acceptance, a marvelously intelligent female-male managing parenthood brilliantly and a female social academic who came closest of all to separating fact from fancy.

What makes it a difficult problem is what makes everything about humans difficult: awareness. Every other animal seems to get through life doing what is natural (ie whatever they bloody feel like) but humans agonise over whether they should or shouldn't. Let's have a pause to reflect on this swindle word "natural".

## Natural sex

The whole business of life is reproduction. Get them genes into the next generation. It sounds like an imperative but that's just a misperception in the style of the Tattsлото Effect - you only ever see the winners. Any genetic material that doesn't elicit, or doesn't cooperate to elicit, behaviour that encourages reproduction simply doesn't appear in the next generation.

We know reproduction as binary sexual copulation but it was not always so and is not, nor will it ever be, universally so. Good old splitting in half (fission) has always been more popular, but it only works well for single celled creatures. Many millions of years ago one cell pinched some of another's DNA, or got it poked in, and sex was born. It speeds up evolution by several orders of magnitude, makes multicellularism feasible and we wouldn't be here without it.

By the way, (provocative interlude) one can't help but wonder at the awful waste of biomass in males. They can't have babies and all they do is take the genetic material entrusted to them by their mothers and give it to some other humans (by which I mean females) in their generation. Meanwhile they consume resources, fight among each other and just want to be the bosses of everything.

Asexuality still has its appeal and its advocates. Aphids go for half a dozen generations without males and then have one with boy children to mix up the genes a bit. Six species of American whiptail lizards have no males at all anymore. There are some Parameciums who are giving up sex and going back to asexual reproduction because sex has become too expensive and too dangerous. Some species of slime mould have up to thirteen sexes (think of it, at any time, 82% of the population wants *you*.) There are plenty of fish species with peculiar reproduction: only one male, when the male dies the toughest female takes over and switches sex.

## Human sex

Anyway, humans are stuck with binary sexual reproduction. Then there are the strategies available for maximising your reproductive fitness (number of grandchildren is a useful measure of this).

Human babies are such sooks that a female is hard pressed to parent on her own so a companion male is an advantage (pair bonding). Males are torn between this and the promiscuous strategy where Alpha-Male behaviour is an advantage (power is the only real aphrodisiac). Being a flocking animal, communal living shares the parenting duties around a lot. (Remember the sixties "free love"? I reckon this was a strategy on the part of males to get the community to do all the parent support leaving them free to be promiscuous.)

## Religion and politics

Now let's move away from what is natural to what is invented by humans. You may have noticed that the preceding sections never even looked like including words like "right" and "wrong". Nature couldn't give two stuffs what any life form does. If what they do maximises their number of grandchildren, good for them.

Unlike any other animal we have awareness and language. The terrible burden this brings is awareness of mortality and concern about ethics. Every group has to come up with answers to the three awesome questions: Where was I before I was born? How should I behave while I'm here? and What happens when I die? Religion has a view on all three and politics legislates on the second.

We have to work out a set of rules for behaviour that won't drive us to extinction. In fact, they should maximise our advantage against other groups in the competition for resources. Curiously, this commonly involves co-operating with our competitors.

The point is that these rules are invented by humans. They are not natural. To a large degree they are arbitrary and they often have to change because circumstances change. This last exigency makes it really silly, in my view, to rely on a dogmatic prescription written several thousand years ago.

Nature determines what Is.

Humans have to determine what Ought To Be.

## Regulated reproduction

OK, back to the cafeteria of sexuality. No culture has ever successfully regulated binary sexual reproduction and very few have ever even

tried. Heteros are going to reproduce no matter what you do, even when they themselves don't want to.

For other sexual categories, having a child is a choice. It usually involves cooperation with heteros and, because it doesn't happen naturally, humans can decide whether it ought to happen. Heteros are stuck with nature, others can choose nurture - if they're allowed.

## Confusion

The debaters talked about human rights, about good and bad parents, about right and wrong, about morals and ethics - these are all arbitrary decisions made by humans on the basis of how they feel about them.

They also used words like God and Nature (with a capital N) as sources of authority and referred to sexual ambiguity as "Nature playing tricks". Many of them conveyed the impression that their opinions on what is right and wrong derived from an impeccable source; a clear example of a brain swindle.

I felt sorry for the cleric, a genuinely nice man who sought to maximise human happiness and security, but who often had no room to move because he had to remain loyal to the Bible. I felt sorry for the old hermaphrodite who, despite being very intelligent, well educated and credentialed; was stuck with an austere worldview that found tolerance threatening. I felt sorry for the Klinefelter who wanted a child and could find no other argument than "it is my right as a human being".

I was greatly impressed by the female-man whose documentary opened the show and by the female social commentator because they took great care in acknowledging where they were simply expressing feelings. They both displayed the sort of humility that suggests they did not take as gospel what their brains told them. They both conveyed the impression that they were aware of the first clue of brain swindles: if you're getting angry, you're probably protecting a swindle.

## Lessons

Don't confuse what is with what ought to be.

Watch out for anthropomorphism (nature is not a being). Be suspicious of passionate opinion.

Be suspicious of vague opinion ("I just know, I can't explain it.")

Ethics and morals are invented by humans. We can't live without them, they are crucially important, but they have nothing to do with the natural world. They are part of what it feels like to be human.



Queensland subscriber, Lesley Mc Burney, risking life, limb and sanity, spreads the Skeptics message at the 1997-8 Woodford Folk Festival in the Sunshine State.

Your bravery award is in the post, Lesley

# Investigation

## Synchronicity, telepathy, coincidence?

Scott Campbell, Trevor Case, Harry Edwards

The following challenge, addressed to Harry Edwards, was received late in 1997, from Brooke Groombridge, Elizabeth Town, Tasmania.

Dear Sir,

I have recently been reading and thoroughly enjoyed *A Skeptic's Guide to the New Age*. I concur with much of what you have written and, as I have written a book that offers an explanation for the prevalence of ideas and attitudes that many reasonable people might regard as lacking intellectual merit or attitudinal enlightenment, I can empathise with what I suspect is the frustration to which the prevalence and consequences of such ideas might predispose a fellow skeptic, and that can be a primary motivation for such writing.

My own perspective has, however, been influenced by my interest in genetics and factors effecting the replication of units of information, be they biological (genes) or intellectual (memes, ie ideas and attitudes). It has also been influenced by the fact that while being of a sceptical disposition, and acknowledging that there is little verifiable evidence of telepathy that could satisfy the requirements of objective analysis, I have the dubious advantage of having had regular experience of what might be described as telepathic information transmission.

Until recently, most of those experiences have not been verifiable; the subjective nature of such experiences normally precludes any objective analysis and I would be reluctant to encourage anyone to adopt an attitude of belief in respect of any proposition (as distinct from an attitude of simply assessing the relative plausibility of propositions) let alone specific propositions about telepathy for which they have no substantial supporting evidence, though naturally I am inclined to encourage the maintenance of an open mind in relation to such matters.

Associated with the writing of my book is, however, a remarkable synchronicity of circumstances that I suspect might either provide some evidence of the possibility of telepathic information transmission, or at least lead to an assessment that it was not, and for the most part, could not have been the result of collusion or communication by any normal human agency; that the probability of it being a product of chance is so remote as to be practically impossible; and that the proposition that it was the result of telepathic information transmission is therefore relatively more plausible than its alternatives.

Please find enclosed a short description of the circumstances to which I have referred, as well as a synopsis of the plot of what was originally intended to be a fictional futuristic scenario representing the extrapolation, analysis and amplification of existing trends in relation to a broad range of information replication related issues, with a view to making the possible consequences of such trends more obvious. I did not expect or intend that the story would be associated with a verifiable paranormal event that might infer that the story had some prophetic value.

In the best of good humour and appreciative of the stated aims and attitudes of The Australian Skeptics, I hereby issue Australian Skeptics Inc with the challenge to investigate this matter fairly and objectively, and either conclude that the most plausible explanation is

one not involving telepathic information transmission, or otherwise agree to publish both my book and the story of their own investigation of the synchronicity of circumstances associated with it. I would be pleased to cooperate fully and supply details and references should the matter be considered worthy of investigation by Australian Skeptics Inc.

I anticipate that you will come to realise, should you agree to investigate this matter, that my aims and attitudes are consistent with those of Australian Skeptics Inc, but that my approach to addressing the consequences of the replication capacity of untenable ideas and attitudes involves the proverbial 'fighting fire with fire with fire? irrelevant administration of what unfortunately tend to be pathetically ineffectual doses of rationality.

(The following synopsis was enclosed. )

On September 17th 1997, the author of an unpublished novel entitled *Flinders' Keepers* attended a National Book Council meeting held in the Launceston Regional Library, Tasmania. The guest speaker at the meeting was Dr J C, [*The identity of Dr C is mentioned in the original, however, as we have not sought his permission to use his name in this article, and as such use may be embarrassing to him, we refer to him as C throughout. Ed*] who was promoting his recently published autobiography.

The meeting of the two authors was to reveal an improbable set of apparent coincidences:

1) The main character in *Flinders' Keepers* is a Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, an experienced public speaker, a victim of a car accident, and a victim of medical negligence. He also has a romantic relationship with a woman whose principal residence is on Flinders Island, one of Tasmania's offshore islands.

1 a) Dr C is a retired Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, an experienced public speaker, a victim of a car accident, and a victim of medical negligence. Professor C's late first wife was born and raised on Bruny Island, another of Tasmania's offshore islands.

2) The author of *Flinders' Keepers* is a first time author who began writing in mid 1996 because of his experience of debilitating symptoms presumed at the time to be associated with injuries sustained in a car accident and exacerbated by medical negligence in 1982. Months before the meeting with Dr C, the author of *Flinders' Keepers* had presented before a general practitioner with symptoms of musculoskeletal injury, specifically rib and vertebrae damage.

2a) Professor C is a first time author who began writing his autobiography in mid 1996 following his experience of medical negligence and a car accident in early 1996, in which he sustained rib fractures and a broken neck.

3) On the day of his first physiotherapy appointment at the Launceston General Hospital, and in the context of researching his book, the author of *Flinders' Keepers* had, apparently by chance, stumbled upon the August meeting of the National Book Council, Tasmanian branch. While there, he was informed that a Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics would be at the next month's meeting and, mentioning that he was in need of the expertise of such a person to proof-read his manuscript, he had asked if he could attend that meeting.

4) The story of *Flinders' Keepers* begins with a Gynae-

cology and Obstetrics Professor's public speaking engagement that reveals the occurrence and implications of a statistically improbable set of apparent coincidences.

4a) It was in the context of Dr C's National Book Council speech that the statistically improbable set of apparent coincidences described here was revealed.

5) The improbability of this remarkable synchronicity of circumstances occurring by chance might suggest that there must have been some collusion or communication between the two authors, using normal sensory processes, whether direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious. The only evidence of prior contact between them, however, adds to the list of coincidences. They had met 37 years ago, when Dr C was the obstetrician attending the author's birth.

6) An alternative explanation implicates the use of telepathy. Significantly, specific reference is made in *Flinders' Keepers* to the potential for a 'paranormal' process called telepathic meme transmission to induce accidents involving transport vehicles.

Reference is also made to what the main character initially interprets as a premonition of his own car accident, but which might actually have been an example of telepathic meme transmission predisposing him to experiencing the accident.

*Flinders' Keepers*, a manuscript of which had been in the possession of a major Australian publisher (Harper Collins) prior to the meeting, is a futuristic account of an investigation of an organised criminal conspiracy that culminates in the cataclysmic decline of humanity early in the 21st century and the survival of a community, mostly of women, residing on Flinders Island.

It is a story that develops the idea that experiences can be thought of as the phenotypic expression of replicating units of information, be they units of biological information, that is, genes, or units of intellectual information (ideas and attitudes), sometimes referred to by geneticists and evolutionary theorists as memes.

It also deals with factors that influence the replication success of both genes and memes and offers an explanation for why ideas and attitudes that might be considered to have the least intellectual merit or attitudinal enlightenment are often the most prevalent and influential. The influence that the global media and Internet systems can have on the replication success of certain types of ideas is given particular attention.

It is in the context of considering the various ways that ideas can be transmitted that the concept of telepathic meme transmission and the potential inducement of effects remote from their source are developed.

Due to its futuristic setting, it is understandable that *Flinders' Keepers*, though an entirely plausible scenario, might initially be regarded as a purely fictional account of a future cataclysm. It is, however, an account in which narrative versions of many of the author's own experiences including some of a 'paranormal' nature are attributed to the story's main character.

Perhaps the extraordinary synchronicity of circumstances described above suggests that *Flinders' Keepers* is a prophetic account of future events and an explanation of how those circumstances could have been induced telepathically, thereby demonstrating the phenomenon, facilitating its own marketing, and warning of future catastrophe?

*Flinders' Keepers* is the story of one man's (Professor John Ottoman's) investigation, in 2009 AD, into a conspiracy of human genetic fraud; a conspiracy involving the illicit collection of semen from wealthy men for later use in IVF procedures, eventually facilitating litigation against the men in paternity suits and implicating practitioners of a range of human reproduction professions and some of the residents of isolated women's communities that are regarded by some as lesbian enclaves.

Professor Ottoman presents his investigation findings publicly, in the context of an analysis of the necessary preconditions for the conspiracy to occur, a comprehensive analysis of the human condition, and the principles and processes of information replication. His subsequent investigation of a further two cases provides vital

information that enables him to identify the mastermind of the conspiracy.

The conspirators are not brought to justice, however. The necessary preconditions for the conspiracy to occur instead culminate in the cataclysmic decline of the human race, and the conspirators are among the few survivors.

Just as the plot deals with these issues and themes in the context of their relevance to the principles and processes of information replication, the story itself has been designed as a memetic virus; the human equivalent of a computer virus; a unit of intellectual information that has the capacity to make more copies of itself, to infect (or vaccinate) the minds of the masses; which conveniently coincides with the ultimate goal of publishing a book.

This seemed an interesting challenge, and, although we were not interested in publishing Mr Groombridge's book, we were happy to investigate his claims. Harry recruited the talents of two Skeptics with professional skills in the area. They were, Scott Campbell, PhD candidate, lecturer and tutor at the School of Philosophy, University of NSW, whose speciality is philosophy of the mind, and Trevor Case, PhD candidate and lecturer, in psychology, Behavioural Sciences Dept, Macquarie University, and the winner of the 1996 Skeptics Eureka Prize for Critical Thinking. After considering the claims, these responses were sent to Mr Groombridge.

### Harry Edwards responded

Thank you for your letter, synopsis of *Flinders' Keepers*, and the challenge to investigate your perceived synchronicity of circumstances outlined therein. Regarding the latter, specifically the inclusion of a proviso that we publish your book, this is not acceptable. From our perspective, the work would be a topic generally considered by Australian Skeptics Inc to be outside its published aims. I am nevertheless, pleased to have the opportunity to tender my personal comments.

Although on first consideration the odds would appear to be astronomical, when closely examined the probability of the events experienced by you occurring, far exceed their improbability, the sum amounting to no more than a series of coincidences. There have been articles on the subject of coincidences in *the Skeptic* that illustrate just how common are "uncommon" occurrences. In case you haven't seen them, here are two of my own.

1. In 1979 I went to Mexico. At Chichen Itza I joined a bus queue behind an Australian backpacker. I asked from what part of Australia he came. He replied "Sydney". Not a startling coincidence given that one in six Australians live in that city and that Mexico is a popular tourist destination. However, when he revealed that he had lived in the same suburb as myself, the odds increased dramatically, even more so when I discovered he had also lived in the same street. Then came the most remarkable revelation of all – he had lived at No 3, a block of apartments owned by me! So now we have one of a number of Australian tourists from Sydney, in Mexico, and conveniently situated in a bus queue at Chichen Itza at a specific time, multiplied by the number of suburbs in Sydney, times the

number of streets in my suburb, and multiplied by the number of houses in that street. What were the odds?

2. While crewing on a yacht in the Pacific, I befriended a Patrol Officer on the island of Kirawina. I returned to Sydney and never saw or communicated with him again. Five years later I sought out a secretarial service in an adjacent suburb to type up a manuscript of an article I had written about the yacht trip. In the article I mentioned the name of the Patrol Officer. The typist rang me the same evening to say that she had read the manuscript and that the Patrol Officer mentioned in it was her husband.

Given experiences like these, my opinion is that you have simply encountered a set of coincidences well within the bounds of probability. I have, however, passed on your letter to two colleagues who will no doubt give a more definitive reply.

### Scott Campbell responded

Some comments on some of Mr Groombridge's introductory remarks:

Groombridge writes (letter):

I have the dubious advantage of having had regular experience of what might be described as telepathic information transmission... The subjective nature of such experiences normally precludes any objective analysis.

It is incorrect to state that telepathic information transmission cannot be objectively analysed. On the contrary, if telepathic information transmission really is occurring, then objective methods can easily be adopted which will discover this fact. Otherwise the whole study of parapsychology would be impossible.

This follows from the fact that Groombridge claims he is receiving information. If it really is information, then objective methods can be devised to test the accuracy of this information, and whether Groombridge could have gained such information in any other way.

I do not see how the 'subjective' nature of these experiences precludes objective analysis (whatever 'subjective' is supposed to mean here). Information is something that can be objectively measured. In what way does the 'subjective' nature of his experiences change this? The two problems that usually occur with measuring supposed telepathic information transmission arise from the difficulties in deciding whether the information is accurate, and with ruling out other possible sources of the information. But any supposed difficulty arising from the 'subjective' - whatever that is - aspect of these experiences is something completely different and mysterious.

Groombridge seems to be claiming that while it may be true that no-one else can take his claims seriously, he is entitled to, because he has had the experiences. But my point is that Groombridge himself has no reason to think that what he is experiencing is telepathy if he cannot in any way verify what he is 'receiving'. Anyway, Groombridge should explain to us what is going on in these experiences. Is he hearing voices in his head?

He writes (letter):

Associated with the writing of my book is, however, a remarkable synchronicity of circumstances that I suspect might either provide some evidence of the *possibility* of telepathic information transmission... (my emphasis).

The bare possibility of telepathy is not in question. Telepathy is logically possible, but then it is also logi-

cally possible that pigs can fly, the Moon is made of green cheese and that Scientology is true. I presume that by this unnecessarily guarded use of words Groombridge is suggesting that his experiences give us reason to think that telepathy is a reasonably strong possibility. This interpretation of his words is confirmed when he says on the next page that "telepathic information transmission is therefore relatively plausible".

Groombridge (letter) mentions that the circumstances in question occurred in the course of his writing a book. He challenges us to either prove that telepathy did not take place, or publish his book and the story associated with the telepathic occurrences. I think that this undermines Groombridge's credibility. There is now a fair likelihood that Groombridge is motivated by a desire for publicity (however good-humoured), as much as anything else.

He writes (letter):

[M]y approach to addressing the consequence of the replication capacity of untenable ideas and attitudes involves the proverbial 'fighting fire with fire...'

It we took this literally, we would read it as Groombridge proposing to fight untenable ideas and attitudes with other untenable ideas and attitudes! I suggest that Groombridge be more careful about saying what he means in future.

This sentence continues:

... not the irrelevant administration of what unfortunately tend to be pathetically ineffectual doses of rationality.

I hope Groombridge is not suggesting that applying rationality is in itself necessarily ineffectual, and that we should apply irrational methods.

The supposedly amazing "apparent coincidences" involved in the writing of Groombridge's book involve parallels between Groombridge's main character and a Dr C he met while writing the book, and between Groombridge himself and Dr C. Let's first of all look at the parallels between Groombridge's character and C.

- (1) Groombridge's character is a Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, and C is a retired Professor of Gynaecology and Obstetrics.
- (2) Both are experienced public speakers.
- (3) Both are victims of car accidents.
- (4) Both are victims of medical negligence.
- (5) The fictional character has a romantic relationship with a woman who lives on Flinders Island, one of Tasmania's offshore islands. Dr C's late first wife was born and raised on Bruny Island, another of Tasmania's offshore islands.

### Some comments on (1) to (5):

(1): We cannot consider it significant in any way that Groombridge met someone with the same profession as his main character. Anyone who writes fiction is likely to meet people with the professions he writes about. Given the millions of books that have been written, what would be remarkable is if authors never met people with the same professions as their characters.

Nor is it particularly surprising that Groombridge and C met, given that both attend writers' groups in Tasmania, which is a small place. (I come from Tasmania myself, and I know what a small place it is, and the amount of other Tasmanians I meet outside of Tasmania who know someone I know is startling.)

Note also that C is a *retired* professor of Obstetrics

and Gynaecology, whereas Groombridge's character is not. This reduces the parallel.

(2): The fact that both the fictional character and the real professor are experienced public speakers is irrelevant, because most professors are experienced public speakers. It goes with the job. What would be more uncommon - though still of no significance - would be a professor who was an inexperienced public speaker.

(3): Is too commonplace to be of any significance whatsoever.

(4): Is more uncommon, but it still happens enough to be of little significance. Note also that this is related to (3). Both negligence cases occurred because of car accidents. But having a car accident increases your chances of undergoing negligent medical treatment.

Note that we would certainly need to have a claim like (4) independently verified. Even if Groombridge and C are sincere in their beliefs that they suffered negligence, we would need to make sure that this was also the opinion of some appropriate medical board or court.

(5): Here we see the fudging typical of proponents of the paranormal. Bruny Island is not Flinders Island. In fact, Bruny Island is nowhere near Flinders Island. Flinders is to the north of Tasmania, Bruny is way down south. The fact that they are both offshore islands cannot be considered to be significant. This is stretching things too much. (Would it have seemed significant if both women had come from, say, very small Tasmanian country towns? Probably not, even if the populations involved were the same, because this isn't as exotic as coming from an island.) Once you start allowing that the apparent coincidences don't even have to be all that similar, as long as they have *something* in common, you increase the number of such coincidences that you can find by an enormous amount. Groombridge, in common with most people, seems not to appreciate just how enormous is the number of apparently amazing coincidences you could find once you allow this.

And there is also another fudge in (5). As the book is set in the future, Groombridge is comparing his character's *future* romantic interest to C's late wife, who C presumably met *many years ago*. Why should we allow this parallel to be significant, when it concerns such different time periods? Doing so just opens up the floodgates again. You enormously increase the number of possible parallels you can find if you allow all periods in the life of the people concerned to count.

So I find (1) to (5) individually to be unexceptional, especially (1), (2) and (5). Because I find these parallels individually less unlikely than Groombridge seems to, it will follow that the unlikelihood of them all occurring together is also going to be less than Groombridge estimates, even if we accept whatever method of calculating probabilities he is using (which seems to be intuition, as far as I can tell).

So what about the fact that (1) to (4) all occurred together? Is it significant that there are all these parallels between C and Groombridge's character? Not at all. We have five unexceptional things in common between them (or rather four, because (2) doesn't count). And while the unlikelihood of them all occurring together is higher than the unlikelihood of each one occurring separately, it doesn't follow that the likelihood of all occurring together is high. And it doesn't seem

very high to me. In fact, I am amazed that Groombridge thinks there is anything of significance here.

### Evaluating coincidences

There are three things that need to be kept in mind when evaluating the likelihood of coincidences.

1. Coincidences are much more common than most people think. Groombridge seems, like most people, to not appreciate just how common coincidences are.

2. Most people are especially poor at estimating the likelihood of coincidences when the events involve them personally, and this also seems to apply to Groombridge.

3. We can find many parallels which may seem to be unlikely, and may in fact *be* unlikely, but in most such cases, the *most likely alternatives may be just as unlikely*. For example, if we toss a coin twenty times in a row, we get a certain sequence of heads and tails. The odds against this particular sequence occurring were enormous, over a million-to-one. But the odds against any other sequence occurring was exactly the same.

A serious investigation would, of course, attempt to quantify the likelihood of Groombridge's 'apparent coincidences'. However, it does not seem to me that any *prima facie* case has been made out to show that such a time-consuming investigation would be worth it.

Other parallels occur between Groombridge himself and Dr C:

1'. Both had car accidents in which they suffered rib and spinal trouble, Groombridge in 1982, C in 1996.

2'. Both suffered medical negligence, Groombridge in 1982, C in 1996.

3'. Both started writing in mid-1996.

4'. C started writing after his accident, Groombridge because of recent complications that apparently occurred as a result of his 1982 experiences.

The first thing to note here is that the coincidences we are supposed to marvel at are no longer between the *character* and Dr C, but between *Groombridge* and Dr C. This is another fudge. Groombridge is not his character. So Groombridge is now allowing himself the opportunity to compare C to *two different people*. No wonder he is able to find some more coincidences. I'm sure if he looked hard enough he could find even more between C and other characters in his book, not to mention between C and some relative or friend.

So even if we were likely to think that it would be amazing for there to be nine such coincidences holding between A and B, we would be much less inclined to think that anything amazing is happening if we found out that in fact, five of these occurred between A and B, and four between A and C.

Let us now look at 1' to 4' individually.

1' and 2' do not count. They are simply a repeat of the parallels between C and Groombridge's character. Groombridge obviously based these fictional experiences of his character on his own experiences. And so of course there will be the same parallels in this respect between his character and C as there were between himself and C. So we cannot count 1' and 2', otherwise we are just counting the same parallels twice.

Groombridge might protest that the significance here is that he used these experiences in his novel, rather than other experiences he could have used from his life. How, he might ask, did he know that these experiences

that he chose for his book would be the ones that parallel C's life? But I don't think this is significant. These events were obviously major events in Groombridge's life, and it is not surprising that he used them for a character. If he then finds someone else who also had a car accident and suffered medical negligence, he can't then claim that there are two sets of 'amazing parallels'. here.

Note that we also have yet another fudge with 1' and 2'. Groombridge's accident and medical negligence occurred in 1982, *fourteen years before C's* in 1996. Once you start including events that can occur so far apart in time, you open up the floodgates again. I'm sure you could find heaps of coincidences between two people if there are no time limits.

Look at it this way. Groombridge had a car accident in 1982, C in 1996. In other words, Groombridge is obviously allowing any such similarity to count as amazing as long as it occurred at *any time* in each's life. Groombridge is stretching the 'rules' (or whatever is passing for rules here) when it suits him. If Groombridge's car accident had occurred 30 years ago, it would probably have been considered significant by Groombridge. But if he thinks about it, the odds against two people both having a car accident at some time in their life is not very high. Many people have car accidents at some stage in their life.

Groombridge is making a mistake that has been made time and again by believers in the paranormal. You have to specify what is to count as significant in advance. Otherwise, as we have seen, without proper protocols you can just include what suits you, and reject what doesn't fit (without even realising that you are doing this - and I have seen many highly educated people make this sort of mistake, as with astrology, for example). Would Groombridge have allowed that parallels that occur fourteen years apart to be significant *before* he had discovered that they existed? And if he had allowed such latitude in advance, by being so liberal, he would have to allow all sorts of other parallels to count, and this would reduce any comparison to banality, because with such liberal standards we could find such parallels between almost any two people.

Another problem with 1' and 2' is this. We saw that there was a problem with 1 and 5 to do with temporal differences. The romantic affair that C had with his wife was much earlier than the character's romance. And C, unlike the character, is retired, and so his career happened much earlier than the character's. Now perhaps Groombridge could say that his character is 'following the psychic path' already set by C. But, as well as being so much hot air, this faces the problem that Groombridge had his car accident and medical negligence fourteen years *before* C did. So are we to suppose that C is also following Groombridge's path somehow? (And could he sue Groombridge for causing his accident?) Or are we dealing with backwards-in-time causation (technical name: 'hogwash')?

Or are we supposed to explain all this by resorting to unfalsifiable mystical claims like 'everything's connected up to everything else behind what we see as reality'?

Further fudging occurs with 3'. Groombridge started writing fiction. C, however, started writing an *autobiography*. Are we supposed to assume that it is

significant that both started doing *some sort of writing*? But this is ridiculous. C is a professor. Virtually all professors are writers of some sort, and writing is, I would say, the main activity of most retired professors. And Groombridge is an author. So it is not surprising that we have the parallel that both are writers of some sort. So again we have an 'amazing coincidence' that barely even makes it to the status of being a coincidence at all.

We also need to consider the fact that both were recovering from medical conditions at this time. It is hardly surprising, then, that both started writing at this time. Many people, especially well-read people, find that while recovering from medical conditions, they become more (or even more) introspective and thoughtful, and they start to question their life more, and they will often do some writing.

As for 4', note that Groombridge says they both started writing 'in mid-1996'. Does this mean they both started writing on the same day, or the same week? Presumably not. Does it mean the same month even? Or are we talking about May-August? Why is 'mid-1996' significant? Would '1996' have counted as significant? Given Groombridge's ability to fudge, I can imagine him finding as significant the fact that they both started writing in 'the mid-1990s'.

(Note also with 4' that Groombridge writes that his recent medical problems were presumed at the time to be associated with "the 1982 accident and negligence". If this whole case was worth investigating seriously, which it isn't, we would need to confirm that the recent problem was in fact caused by the 1982 incidents.)

So how significant is the fact that all four parallels, ie 1' to 4', hold between Groombridge and C? First of all, we have seen that we can't count 1' and 2'. That leaves only 3' and 4' occurring together, and we have seen that there is considerable fudging with these. I see nothing here that is remarkable in the slightest.

Is it at least significant, though, that in addition to these parallels between Groombridge and C, there are also parallels between Groombridge's character and C? No. All we have is 1, 3, 4, 3' and 4', as the others have been eliminated. (And note that 1 is so unremarkable that I am loathe to include it, 3 increases the odds of 4 happening, and the fudging involved in 3' and 4' is almost enough to rule them out altogether.) I can see nothing remarkable here at all, especially considering that 1, 3 and 4 do not hold between the same two people as 3' and 4'.

Another supposedly significant fact that Groombridge mentions later on, is the fact that C delivered Groombridge as a baby 37 years ago. Is this significant? No. C delivered babies, that was part of his job (at least at that time). Tasmania is a small place. There aren't that many obstetricians around. (For example, I've met lots of Tasmanians who were, like me, born in the Queen Victoria Hospital in Launceston. This is unremarkable, because it was the main, or even only, public hospital where babies were delivered in Northern Tasmania.)

So, unless we are to presume that there is some significant psychic connection that holds between obstetrician and baby, which is surely to beg the question (ie assume the conclusion that is being argued for), all we have here is the fact that Groombridge and C met 37

years ago, in circumstances which made it likely that they would meet. So this is hardly astonishing.

(And if a strong psychic connection does spring up between obstetrician and baby, then there must be thousands of people all psychically connected to C!)

### Conclusion

My overall conclusion on these events is that all we have here is coincidence and nothing else. And the coincidences do not even seem in any way remarkable, let alone unexplainable in any naturalistic way. There are vastly more interesting sets of coincidences out there than have occurred here. One thing that Groombridge should keep in mind is that coincidences always seem much more remarkable when they happen to you than when they happen to someone else. Groombridge should try to see the circumstances he is in from an outside point of view. He should ask himself, would I have found these coincidences so remarkable if they had happened to other people?

The same can happen with Tattslotto. The winner may think that it is so amazing that *they* win that they think God must have helped them, or they must have psychic powers. But other people, looking at the situation from an objective, outside viewpoint, can see that there is nothing at all remarkable about *someone* winning Tattslotto.

As for the claim that “the probability of it being the result of chance is so remote as to be practically impossible” (letter), this is simply absurd, and indicates that Groombridge knows nothing whatsoever about the likelihood of coincidences. Statisticians and other scientists have shown that apparently amazing coincidences are commonplace, they occur all the time, as the appropriate calculations predict they should. And many psychologists and other social scientists have shown that the average person is hopelessly wrong in their estimates of how likely coincidences are. Groombridge seems to be no exception.

But this is not really his fault. Schools do not explain these facts to students, and many journalists are either unaware of these facts, or they deliberately ignore them. Even some Skeptics may not have fully appreciated these facts until they were educated through reading the Skeptical literature. I suggest that Brooke acquaints himself with some of the literature on coincidence.

I also suggest that he engage in the following useful exercises. See how many *non- parallels* he can find between himself and C, and between his character and C. And then see how many parallels he can find between himself and randomly chosen public figures (and they must be *really* randomly chosen: no more fudging!).

My final point concerns his claim that in his novel he develops the idea that “experiences can be thought of as the phenotypic expression of replicating units of information, be they units of biological information, that is, genes, or units of intellectual information (ideas and attitudes)”. As a philosopher of mind, I don’t see how this goes any way towards explaining experiences, ie conscious mental events. The phenotypic expression of genes of course results in the building of a brain, and it is a brain that has conscious experiences, but this is not to explain what an experience *is*, and what makes

it conscious. The “phenotypic expression of memes”, on the other hand, taken literally is incoherent, as ‘phenotype’ is defined in terms of gene expression. Even if I were to be charitable and try to make sense of this phrase, I don’t see how it would help explain experience.

### Trevor Case responded

In his letter Brooke Groombridge details a number of events which he describes as “a remarkable synchronicity of circumstances”. Mr Groombridge goes on to claim that these events are so improbable that it is a practical impossibility that they could simply result from chance. Indeed, Mr Groombridge offers “telepathic information transmission” as a plausible alternative explanation.

Mr Groombridge issues the Australian Skeptics Inc. with a challenge to:

...investigate this matter fairly and objectively, and either conclude that the most plausible explanation is one not involving telepathic information transmission, or otherwise agree to publish both [Mr Groombridge’s] book and the story of [the Australian Skeptics Inc.] investigation of the synchronicity of circumstances...

After considering the events that Mr Groombridge has detailed I cannot conclude that they represent anything more than chance occurrence. I detail the rationale for this conclusion below. I have attempted to keep my responses general, in considering the problems of coincidences as evidence of the paranormal. My objections, therefore, apply to all coincidences, not just Mr Groombridge’s described events.

Coincidences as evidence of the paranormal are very weak. Unlike claims of psychokinesis and extrasensory perception, coincidences do not easily lend themselves to laboratory/scientific investigation. Rather, coincidences must stand on their own as evidence of the paranormal just because of their improbability. The events described by Mr Groombridge are of this type; they do not permit scientific testing. Thus, the weight of Mr Groombridge’s argument (that these events represent evidence of the paranormal) rests solely on his estimation of the improbability of the events.

The main problem with enlisting coincidences as evidence of the paranormal is that very unlikely events are expected to occur from time to time - just by chance. As Aristotle once said, “the improbable is extremely probable.” It would be more surprising if very unlikely events never occurred. So, although the chances of picking the winning combination of numbers in this week’s Lotto draw are vanishing low, it is quite likely that someone will do it. The winner may believe she has been ‘touched by luck’ but in reality she simply represents a point on a normal distribution.

The universal lack of precision at estimating the probability of coincidences may be one of the main reasons that many people believe they have had first hand experience with the paranormal. Accordingly, when considered from the appropriate statistical perspective, the events described by Mr Groombridge may be far less remarkable than he suggests. The physicist and Nobel laureate Luis Alvarez provided a well documented coincidence (described by Tom Gilovich, 1991) which illustrates this point:

After reading a brief passage in a newspaper which reminded him of an old college acquaintance, Alvarez

was amazed to see, a few pages on, the obituary of that very same individual. Rather than jump to a hasty conclusion that this unlikely coincidence represented evidence of precognition, Alvarez attempted to calculate the approximate probability of this coincidence occurring by conservatively estimating (a) the number of people the average person knows, and (b) how often the average person has such recollections. Alvarez calculated the probability of thinking about an acquaintance approximately five minutes before learning of that person's death to be about  $5 \times 10^{-5}$  per year. Given this figure, ten of these coincidences can be expected to occur in the United States every day.

Although I do not intend to calculate probability estimates for each of Mr Groombridge's listed coincidences, I submit that (as depicted by Alvarez) many of his coincidences are less remarkable than he suggests. The simple fact is that people are poor at estimating the probability of coincidences and this, in turn, leads people to believe coincidences are less likely to occur than they really are (even famous intellectuals such as Carl Jung, D. H. Lawrence, Arthur Koestler, and Sigmund Freud have all subscribed to the view that mere coincidence does not exist). Our unjustified amazement at these coincidences leaves us easy prey to explanations that invoke the paranormal. Support for this claim comes from a study I recently conducted which suggests that a tendency to see meaning in coincidences is highly associated with a wide range of paranormal beliefs.

Apart from the actual probability of the reported coincidences being less remarkable than is suggested by Mr Groombridge, the descriptions are also taken from an increasing pool of events. The first coincidence offered is limited to a comparison of only the pool of events that are mentioned in Mr Groombridge's novel with the pool of events in Dr C's life. Then Mr Groombridge expands the boundaries of the comparison to include the pool of events that are mentioned in his novel *or* the pool of events in his life, with the pool of events in Dr C's life. By extending the sampling parameters, the chance of finding a coincidence is inflated. In short, if one continues to extend the sampling parameters, eventually, everything will become a coincidence.

While the odds of any particular coincidence mentioned by Mr Groombridge may be unlikely, the odds of any set of equally remarkable coincidences is generally much higher. For example, one of the coincidences described by Mr Groombridge is that the main character in his novel has a romantic relationship with a woman who lives on Flinders Island (Tasmania) and Dr C's late first wife was born and raised on Bruny Island (Tasmania). Would this coincidence be any less impressive if it was not Dr C's late first wife but his second wife? Or if she was not born and raised on Bruny Island but lived there for 10 years of her life? And suppose it wasn't Bruny Island, but any one of Tasmania's other islands? This example demonstrates that the probability of the union of all such potential coincidental events (each with the capacity to amaze us) is quite high, even when the probability of any one coincidence is quite low.

There are also other factors that inflate the apparent improbability of coincidences. For example, Mr

Groombridge describes only events that coincide with each other while ignoring the abundant details about the character in his novel (or himself) and Dr C which do not coincide. Furthermore, the coincidences are drawn from multiple distributions, which obscures the repetitive element of the sampling process - making the events seem less likely than they really are. I refer Mr Groombridge to *Believing in Magic* by Stuart Vyse, for a more detailed account of these issues.

Finally, many people may be predisposed to read meaning into coincidences (eg synchronicity, telepathic information transmission, etc) because these events often evoke powerful emotions. This strong emotional investment may also cause people to become resistant to any disconfirming evidence and, hence, closed minded in their consideration of the facts. Indeed, the well-know psychologist and Skeptic, James Alcock, warns that even Skeptics should be wary of mere coincidences that evoke powerful emotions, because these events could shake their disbelief and lead to credulity.

In sum, I cannot agree with Mr Groombridge that the coincidences he described represent "telepathic information transmission" or evidence of "synchronicity". On the contrary, these events represent chance coincidences that are *expected* to occur occasionally. Furthermore, the events described by Mr Groombridge may be far less remarkable than he suggests. The apparent improbability of such coincidences is inflated by the notoriously poor ability of humans to estimate the probability of coincidences. This, together with the powerful emotions elicited by coincidences, compels people to accept explanation that involve paranormal phenomena or processes. I therefore conclude that the more likely and parsimonious explanation for the events described by Mr Groombridge is that they are merely chance occurrences.

### Reactions

These responses were transmitted to Mr Groombridge. None of them was in agreement with his hypothesis, indeed, they showed that no such hypothesis was required to account for events that were more than adequately explained by coincidence. Our conclusion was that we had complied with his challenge to us to investigate his claims (insofar as such tests were possible) "fairly and objectively", using the talents of people whose professional skills seemed most appropriate to the task.

Some time passed before we were to get a reply from Mr Groombridge, but when it arrived it was considerably longer than his original submission, and was couched in terms that were decidedly insulting to the professional skills of our investigators, and to the Skeptics in general. He also demanded an "external review by eminent skeptics".

Harry Edwards replied that we had complied with his challenge to us, and that none of us were inclined to take the matter any further in the absence of any new information.

We have since received a brief note from Mr Groombridge, in which he warns us that this article will be "scrutinised for any misrepresentative and therefore defamatory statements, and for any breaches of copyright" regarding his novel.

We wish him the best of luck.



# The Australian UFO mania of 1909: the impact of responsible journalism on a case of mass wish-fulfillment

Robert Bartholomew

During an approximately one-week period in 1909, a fascinating social delusion swept across parts of Australia, as scores of citizens became convinced that an Australian had perfected the world's first practical heavier-than-air flying machine. What is even more extraordinary is that many people not only believed the rumours, but actually claimed to have spotted the craft motoring through the night-time sky! I have talked to some Australian UFO researchers who believe the most likely explanation for the sightings is that they were of an alien spaceship that had been misidentified by people culturally conditioned to expect to see airships - even though a practical heavier-than-air ship did not exist at the time. While the extraterrestrial hypothesis may seem plausible to many lay persons who have been bombarded with images of extraterrestrials by the mass media in recent years, the key to understanding these sightings lies in a familiarity of the social and historical climate in which they occurred. When we examine the context of the episode, apply basic theories of social psychology, add some empathy with the people living at that time, and throw in a bit of common sense, the sightings can be readily explained without recourse to aliens in UFOs.

## Prelude to the delusion

From about 1880 to the early twentieth century, a massive popular literature appeared on the theme of science and inventions. Aeronautical developments were a prominent feature of these accounts as "this literature fed the public a steady diet of aeronautical speculation and news to prime people for the day when the riddle of aerial navigation finally would receive a solution."<sup>1</sup> The general mood of this literature was positive, trumpeting the wonders of science and technology.<sup>2</sup> In the years immediately preceding the episode, intense excitement was experienced worldwide in anticipation of the first practical, mechanically-powered heavier-than-air flight.<sup>3</sup> With the dawn of the twentieth century there were rapid, dramatic aeronautical advances, culminating in the Wright brothers' first powered flight in 1903. This, coupled with heavy newspaper coverage of other powered flight attempts, led to a spectacular climax, just prior to the Australian airship delusion.

The years 1908-9, brought wide publicity and belated acclaim. Orville Wright's tests for the War Department ... and Wilbur's flights in Europe before enthralled crowds, including the kings of Spain and England, became ...front-page news. Meanwhile, the flights of other pioneers, like Glen Curtiss, stirred additional interest in aviation.<sup>4</sup>

It was during 1909 that British aviation historian Charles H. Gibbs-Smith remarked that "the aeroplane

came of age" with French aeronaut Louis Bleriot's dramatic flight across the English Channel on July 25, and was gaining rapid acceptance as a potentially practical device for long-distance transportation.<sup>5</sup>

## The Australian sightings

During the first two weeks in August, a brief spate of sightings occurred over Australia, being mainly confined to the east coast region of New South Wales. Between August 5 and 9, there were scores of sightings at Goulburn. On Saturday night August 7, a clergyman and several eye-witnesses saw strange lights above the Dandenong Ranges. They said the lights changed colours from blue to red to white, and they "slowed down, dipped, and rose again."<sup>6</sup> On the evenings of the 8th and 9th, people living between Mittagong and Wollongong reported seeing a possible airship light. Numerous residents near Moss Vale saw what appeared to be an airship or balloon hovering some 2,000 feet above the highlands on the 9th. On Tuesday evening August 10, it appeared near Sydney and all the way across the country at Perth.

To provide readers with a flavour of the sightings, consider the following excerpt from the *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* of August 14, 1909, under the headline:

### The Mysterious Light

...Thomas Apps, Breadalbane Hotel, writes under date Friday 13th: 'A mysterious light was seen here tonight about 7:30 in the west from Breadalbane. It was seen by myself and several other people staying at the hotel.'

### Sights Visible In Sydney

Considerable excitement was occasioned in all the coastal suburbs on Friday night between 7 and 8 o'clock, when residents were afforded an excellent view of the nocturnal mystery of the air at present creating such a stir in all parts of the State. The lights were plainly visible in the north-west, and after several sharp movements to the east they slowly disappeared south.

### More Reports

**Bathurst**, Friday.—The mysterious light observed at about 9 o'clock last night was floating in an easterly direction. At times the light had a bluish appearance...

**Helensburgh**, Friday.—An illuminated body was observed here on Tuesday night. At about 10 o'clock the object appeared to be about a mile east of the town, and to be moving in a northerly direction. The brilliancy of the light was continually varying, and at times swaying movements could be plainly detected...

**Sutherland**, Friday.—At about 10 o'clock what appeared to be a light blue light steadily ascended from the east, and when at a certain height appeared to circle about for 20 minutes. ...

**Zeehan** (Tas.). Friday.—A number of residents at Zeehan report today having seen mysterious lights in

the sky. Shortly after seven o'clock last night there were two lights, white and brilliant, which seemed to be travelling rapidly in a north-westerly direction, against the wind, and soon disappeared behind the clouds. As the lights travelled one appeared to grow smaller and the other larger. ...

In Western Australia, the Perth area sightings were first reported at Pingelly, halfway between Perth and Albany at about 7:30 pm on the 10th when "residents saw two mysterious lights, a few feet apart, rapidly passing southwards over the township." On the 12th, an airship was sighted in the northeastern Perth suburbs on early Thursday morning, and by Friday evening a large crowd had gathered in Victoria Park to gaze at the mysterious lights that some took to be the airship. Quite a crowd of people gathered [at Victoria Park], focusing the sky through binoculars, and seeing red and blue lights in familiar stars. A practical experiment convinced the pressmen that, if looked long enough at, any star could be seen to show red, blue, and other lights, and that if viewed through the fleeting clouds it could easily be imagined that the lights moved. Previous witnesses, however, were emphatic that they had seen not only red and blue lights, but clusters of lights 'shaped like a boat,' passing over Mount Eliza, low down on the horizon.<sup>7</sup>

### Explaining the sightings

Firstly, most of the sightings correspond with the appearance times and sky positions of Mars, Venus and Jupiter. Near the end of the episode, Mr W.E. Raymond, the officer in charge of the Sydney Observatory, was contacted by two residents who pointed out a strange light. Raymond said they were pointing at Venus and Jupiter which were approaching each other and nearly in the same line of vision at the time of the evening they observed it. Further, Mars was nearing opposition and was a strikingly brilliant in the eastern sky a few hours after sunset. We also know from press accounts that many shopkeepers reported brisk sales of fire balloons during early August. Fire balloons were available in Australia during this period and typically sold at shops selling pyrotechnics. They were also referred to as tissue balloons and consisted of paper balloons with candles attached near the mouth and made buoyant by the generation of heat. Another common prank at this time was to send up a kite at night with Japanese lanterns attached.

You may be wondering how people can be so mistaken as to misinterpret a kite, paper balloon or stars and planets for an airship. In reviewing the Australian sightings, it is fruitful to look at the field of perceptual psychology, a branch of the behavioural sciences that deals with how people perceive and process information. Why? Because we are essentially left with eyewitness testimony, and studies on the fallibility (imperfect or interpretive nature) of human perception and conformity are especially applicable.<sup>8</sup>

The human mind and eyes do not work together to collect information like a video camera. Humans interpret as we perceive the world. The accuracy of eyewitness testimony is remarkably subject to error and preconditioned by mental outlook or frame of reference. A good example of this process that most of us are familiar with, involves close decisions made by referees and umpires at sporting events. Through the use of instant replay, we can usually see where we were wrong, or on occasion, where a trained observer - the

referee - who practices their trade for many years, was wrong.

Perception is based more on inference than reality, allowing for interpretations which often differ substantially from what actually exists. In such situations, "inference can perform the work of perception by filling in missing information in instances where perception is either inefficient or inadequate."<sup>9</sup> Variations in perceptual observations that are markedly different from what a general population accepts as material reality are especially pronounced in ambiguous group situations where considerable yielding to a false consensus is more likely.<sup>10</sup> This effect is especially pronounced in ambiguous situations such as the night-time sky, as a variety of atmospheric effects can engender misinterpretations. For instance, stars and planets can appear to move, change colour, and flicker.<sup>11</sup> Even former President Jimmy Carter apparently mistook the planet Venus for a UFO.<sup>12</sup>

Two striking examples of perceptual fallibility involve the formation of beliefs in the existence of extraterrestrials. During the live, realistic broadcast of the *War of the Worlds* radio drama in 1938, millions of Americans panicked, believing that hostile Martians had landed in New Jersey. For those accepting the drama's authenticity, perceptual outlooks as to what constituted reality were temporarily redefined to include the existence of extraterrestrials in towering metallic flying machines. Concordantly, several residents reported to police that they could see "Martians on their giant machines poised on the New Jersey Palisades."<sup>13</sup> In another case, on June 24, 1947, Kenneth Arnold reported seeing nine objects while flying over Washington state. His use of the word "saucers" received intense media coverage and is generally credited with providing the motif for a deluge of global flying saucer reports during that year<sup>14</sup> and several waves since.<sup>15</sup> However, according to statements by Arnold during his original press conference, the objects were described as crescent-shaped, referring to their movement as "like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water."<sup>16</sup> The Associated Press account describing Arnold's "saucers" appeared in over 150 newspapers, encouraging numerous citizens who had observed unidentifiable aerial phenomena to report their sightings, which tallied in the tens of thousands.<sup>17</sup> The descriptive phrase "flying saucer," allowed people to place unfamiliar or inexplicable observations within a new category.<sup>18</sup>

### Mass media influence

There is another important aspect to the brief flurry of imaginary airships over Australia in August 1909, that makes it highly unusual—the manner in which the Australian press handled the wave and how quickly the sightings died down. In my examination of international UFO sighting waves over the past two centuries, and other waves involving sighting clusters of legendary or extinct creatures in Australia such as the Yowie, phantom puma and Tasmanian "tiger", mass media publicity is clearly instrumental in fanning these episodes of collective delusion. All of the press reports describe the airship's reality with expressed degrees of scepticism, with most attributing the observations to overactive imaginations.<sup>19</sup> While many of those who reported seeing the mysterious objects were convinced

that a local inventor was secretly perfecting an airship under the cover of darkness, and sometimes even claimed to have discerned the outline of the vessel, the press reports these observations while journalists simultaneously expressed serious scepticism throughout the event. This is extremely rare and refreshing. I suspect that part of this exceptional scepticism resulted from numerous press dispatches from England and New Zealand that had appeared in Australian papers in the several weeks leading up to the early August. During this period, there were many reported sightings of phantom airships in these two countries. At the time when the Australian sightings began, it had become obvious that the vast majority of sightings were psychological in origin. Many sightings were confirmed as hoaxes and others, sometimes involving entire communities, were misidentifications of prominent astronomical bodies. But no matter what the reason for the Australian press scepticism, I believe it teaches us an important lesson. Responsible journalism can make a major impact in influencing public opinion away from superstition and myth. By responsible I do not mean negative, debunking, self-righteous journalism, but reporting based on a careful, rational examination of the facts and drawing reasonable suppositions. With responsible reporting, the Australian sightings died out within about a week, and most people were able to figure out what was happening for themselves. The task today is much for challenging. In contrast, contemporary flying saucer sightings have been on the scene since 1947 and are fuelled by sensational tabloids, movies, books and pseudo-scientific documentaries where the line between fact and speculation are blurred, often deliberately with the hope of increasing audience interest.

In fact, sociologists have consistently found that the mass media has played a key part in numerous UFO-related collective delusions. One example is their role in predisposing people to reinterpret such mundane processes as decaying cows as "cattle mutilations" perpetrated by sinister extraterrestrials or Satanic cultists.<sup>20</sup> Another example involves the widespread sightings of nonexistent airships in the United States during 1896-97, which occurred following voluminous but erroneous press speculation that such a vessel had been perfected.<sup>21</sup> In British South Africa during 1914, it was widely reported in regional newspapers that hostile German monoplanes from adjacent German South West Africa, were undertaking reconnaissance flights as prelude to an imminent invasion or bombing raids. Despite the technological impossibility of such flights, encouraged by plausible press accounts, thousands of residents misperceived ambiguous, almost exclusively nocturnal aerial stimuli, such as astronomical bodies and meteorological phenomena, for the monoplanes.<sup>22</sup>

There are remarkable similarities between the phantom airship wave and contemporary clusters of UFO and flying saucer reports. We can learn from studying this historical episode of airship sightings to gain a better understanding of more current events. The use of history to evaluate the credibility of UFO reports (as well as other extraordinary claims) can be a valuable tool in the hands of sceptics as history distances the researcher from the subject-matter, allowing for less

emotional, more contextual insights into incredible or improbable claims.<sup>23</sup>

The Australian airship social delusion occurred shortly after we entered a new century, amid great enthusiasm over rapid technological advancements. As we approach the twenty-first century and a new millennium, I can only ponder what new delusions await us. What is exciting is that Sceptics groups are growing more popular and organised and vocal around the world. It will be most interesting to see how we respond to the challenges that will occur in the new millennium, and how effective we will be in turning the tide of ignorance and superstition.

#### Author's Note:

Robert E. Bartholomew is a Sociologist at James Cook University in Townsville Queensland. He is co-author of *UFOs and Alien Contact: Two Centuries of Mystery* (Prometheus Books, March 1998), with Professor George S. Howard, former Chair of the Psychology Department at Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, Indiana.

Using several thousand rare press reports, and conventional theories of social psychology, they examine the context and meaning of UFO sighting waves including the US airship wave of 1896-97, sightings of Thomas Edison's imaginary "giant light bulb" in the latter 1800s; Canada's ghost balloons of 1896; The New Zealand Zeppelin Scare of 1909; The New England airship hoax of 1909-10; The British UFO panic of 1912-13; phantom German air raids and spy missions over Canada, Upstate New York, Delaware, New Hampshire and South Africa during World War I; Sweden's ghost rocket wave of 1946; and the emergence of flying saucers since 1947. The book also examines pre-Roswell crashed UFOs involving aliens, and includes over 200 alleged case summaries of contacts with ETs.

I should emphasise that a detailed discussion of the Australian airship mania of 1909 sightings does not appear in the book. I have written these reports into this modest article for the Australian Sceptics to make them aware of this fascinating, all but forgotten chapter in Australian history, and let them know of the publication of my book.

#### Notes

1. T.E. Bullard. *Mysteries in the Eye of the Beholder: UFOs and Their Correlates as a Folkloric Theme Past and Present*. Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University Folklore Department, 1982.
2. I.F. Clarke, "American Anticipations: The First of the Futurists." *Futures*, 18, 1986, 584-596.
3. Hot air balloons are not encompassed under this definition of successful flight. However, such modes of transport are unlikely to be mistaken for an airship. Balloons of the period were highly unstable, clumsy, sensitive to even slight wind shifts, dangerous to fly at night, and could not remotely perform the sophisticated maneuvers reported by "airship" observers. These same proscriptions applied to airships of the period, which were bulky and impractical.
4. Bilstein, R.E. (1984). *Flight in America 1900-1983: From the Wrights to the Astronauts*. London: John Hopkins University Press, p. 15.
5. Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, *Aviation: An historical survey from its origins to the end of World War II*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1985, pp. 145-146.
6. "Mysterious Lights," *Taranaki Daily News*, August 10, 1909, citing an Australian Press Association cable from Melbourne.
7. "The Lights in the Sky. West Australia Falls into Line," *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, August 17, 1909.
8. For several classic studies in this area, see: Asch, S.E. (1956). "Studies of independence and Conformity: A Minority of One Against a Unanimous Majority". *Psychological Monographs* 70; Krech, D.,

continued p 32 ....

# Roswell saucery examined

Barry Williams

**The UFO Invasion: the Roswell incident, alien abductions, and government coverups; Kendrick Frazier, Barry Karr, and Joe Nickell, eds, Prometheus, 1997. The Real Roswell Crashed Saucer Coverup; Philip J. Klass, Prometheus, 1997.**

It is now more than half a century since the incident that gave birth to the modern phenomenon of ufology. On June 24, 1947, US pilot Kenneth Arnold, flying a private plane in Washington state, reported seeing a number of objects "skipping like saucers over water". Media headlines about "flying saucers" stimulated other reports and soon it became a flood, one that has hardly abated since.

*The UFO Invasion* is one of the books, published every few years by Prometheus, that consist of a compilation of articles from the *Sceptical Inquirer*. Unlike its predecessors, which covered a wide variety of paranormal and pseudoscientific topics, this book concentrates on UFOs and related issues. Authors of the various pieces look at the UFO phenomenon from the perspectives of psychology, engineering, physics, medicine, historical research and plain investigation. Those who have subscribed to the *Sceptical Inquirer* for any length of time will probably have seen many of these articles before, but these have been updated and it is very useful to have them collected in one book.

The topics covered range from an historical perspective on previous cases of mass delusion, in the "airship scares" of last century (written by Dr Robert Bartholomew, whose article on the Australian experience appears in the issue), through alien abductions, crop circles, UFO crashes, an even a look at the scientific search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Above all, it is a sober and sensible look at a phenomenon that, all too frequently, exhibits neither attitude.

Among the best known of all UFO cases is, of course, the so-called Roswell incident, the 50th anniversary of which was celebrated last year, amid much hype and ballyhoo.

It all began barely two weeks after Arnold's "saucer" sighting, when a rancher found some material spread around his property near Roswell, New Mexico, which he then took to the local sheriff for identification. At their Roswell base the US Army Air Force (soon to become the US Air Force) took charge of the substances, and an enthusiastic public relations officer, no doubt influenced by the widespread accounts of sightings of mysterious "discs" that followed the Arnold publicity, issued a press release to local newspapers claiming the USAAF had recovered debris from a "flying disc". This story caused a brief flurry and then died, largely because the substances were quickly identified as parts of a weather balloon, and there were more interesting stories around.

It generated one book, *Behind the Flying Saucers*, by Frank Scully, which sold well for a while, but which did not survive the exposure of its chief "witness" as a known confidence trickster.

But being dead is one thing, staying dead is another thing again; resurrection is just as central to the UFO movement as it is to the Christian church.

The UFO phenomenon moved on, traversing ever more strange byways, to become part of the folklore of the USA, and much of the rest of the world. The Roswell incident remained on the books as little more than a footnote for 30 years, until, in the late 1970s, several UFO believers looked for something to answer the frequently asked sceptical question, "Where is the physical evidence?"

The next book on the topic to see print, and one which marked the beginning of the resurrection, was *The Roswell Incident*, by Charles Berlitz (promotor of the "Bermuda Triangle mystery", among other crank theories) and William Moore. It took the line that a UFO had crashed near Roswell, had been recovered by the USAAF, and that the US Government had ever since been involved in covering up the evidence. This book contained so many inaccuracies that it was not particularly successful, but it clearly sowed seeds in other minds, and several other books on the topic were to follow a decade later. (Slow germinating seeds? Infertile soil?)

Competing organisations and competing authors, within the UFO movement sought out witnesses to the original events. Not surprisingly, it being 40 years after the events, these witnesses were not easy to find, many having died and those still alive being well advanced in age. Books by such UFO luminaries as Don Schmitt and Kevin Randle (*UFO Crash at Roswell*, Avon Books 1991), Stanton Friedman and Don Berliner (*Crash at Corona*, Paragon House, 1992), Schmitt and Randle again (*The Truth About the UFO Crash at Roswell*, 1994), as well as innumerable articles in UFO journals, TV specials and news reports in the press, promoted a wide variety of stories about what had happened in New Mexico in 1947.

And what a diverse selection of views they were (one is almost tempted to describe them as orthodox, catholic and protestant), but on one thing they all agreed; the US Government was involved in a conspiracy to cover it up. The most serious claims of cover-up were those concerned with the technology and alien bodies recovered from Roswell and its environs. Perhaps it is unsurprising that none of the accounts of the affair in popular UFO books agrees in detail with any other, for such is the way of competing religious claims. And the accusations directed by each of the believers against each of the other believers, smell strongly of "heresy" and "apostasy".

Enter Philip Klass. Klass, a long time senior editor with *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine, is the doyen of the UFO Skeptics, and this is his sixth book on the subject. He is widely known and respected for his meticulous research and critical analysis of UFO claims and he does not fail us here.

He charts the Roswell myth through its increasingly byzantine twists and turns, with new "witnesses", new sites and new conspiracies emerging as each Ufologist tries to steal a march on his fellows. He catalogues the "evidence" that withstands no scrutiny; the short- and long-term alliances between the different camps, alliances that often founder on small doctrinal differences; the "witnesses" who seem to disappear, leaving no trace of their existence.

The book discusses in detail the only real event to which the term "cover-up" could legitimately be applied, and then only in a peripheral way. What had been described as "weather balloon" debris was almost certainly from Project Mogul. Mogul was an attempt by the US military, in the era before satellite or effective long range aircraft reconnaissance, to sample the upper atmosphere for radioactive evidence that the Soviet Union had exploded a nuclear device. Mogul consisted of a string of balloons, lifting an instrument package and a selection of radar targets, which would allow ground observers to keep track of the system. There can now be little doubt that the debris found on the ranch outside Roswell was, in fact, from one of the Mogul balloon trains. It is doubtful that the information supplied by the officers at Roswell Base was deliberate misinformation (a common conspiracy claim), as Mogul was a Top Secret project and it was unlikely these officers knew about it. And the materials used in Mogul were standard weather balloons and targets, it's just that there were a lot of them in each system.

Klass is particularly scathing in exposing the selective use of evidence by the UFO conspiracy proponents. Much is made by them of various documents that have come to light under Freedom of Information legislation, referring to concerns the US authorities had about the mysterious flying objects. These are widely quoted by many ufologists to show that the military hierarchy was very concerned about the phenomenon, and not at all dismissive of it as a collective delusion. Klass has obtained copies of the original documents, and shows that the proponents of conspiracy have used them very selectively indeed.

More than one document expressing concern about UFOs, also contains the sentiment that "if only we could get some physical evidence". These were written after the debris from Roswell was supposed to have placed into the care of the USAF Technical Intelligence Centre at Wright Paterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio and they were written by people whose official positions made it incredible that they would not have known what the Tech Int people had in their care, if they indeed had any.

Facts that are fatally damaging to the credibility of the UFO proponents, and the producers of sensationalist TV pseudo-documentaries, are that these documents have been publicly available since the mid-1970s, and that Philip Klass has personally drawn their full contents to the attention of these people. Not once, in any of the UFO books or documentaries, has this evidence been made available to the public.

## .... Airship sightings from p 30

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*"A number of residents of Zeehan report to-day having seen mysterious lights in the sky shortly after 7 o'clock last night. There were two lights, white and brilliant, which seemed to be travelling rapidly in a north-westerly direction against the wind, and soon disappeared behind a cloud. As the lights travelled, one appeared to grow smaller and the other larger. This phenomenon was, doubtless, the conjunction of the stars, Venus and Jupiter."*
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Philip Klass contends that there really is a cover-up about the events at Roswell, and that cover-up is being perpetrated by authors and producers who, for their own reasons, have laid baseless charges of conspiracy against the US Government. Read this book, consider the damning evidence he has gathered, and you will find it very difficult to disagree with him.

# Fair(1)y true

Allan Lang

## Fairytales: A true story [... almost]

By the time you read this, this film will probably no longer be showing in the theatres. If, by some chance it is, do yourself a favour and go and see it. If not, rent the video. It's pretty close to my top rating - a movie made so well that it couldn't be improved.

This review is more in the nature of a comment on how Ian Michaels, the reviewer for Adelaide's *New Age Guardian*, saw it. I have to disagree with Michaels. I do not think that the film will "appeal to both children and adults alike". The smaller rug-rats will probably get a little bored, because it's not really about fairies, but about those far stranger and more fascinating creatures, human beings. I would go even further, and say that only a sceptic will really appreciate the film.

While the basic background of the story portrayed is true, certain liberties have been taken with the truth. Most of these can be justified from a dramatic standpoint, provided you realise what the story being told is. If, like the reviewer for the *New Age Guardian*, you believe that it's just the recounting of how two innocent children managed to photograph magical beings who share the planet with us, you will be as easily gulled as a Theosophical lecturer.

The *New Age Guardian* sees Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Peter O'Toole) as "superbly scientific in his appraisal of the pictures". Sorry, that's not how I saw it. I saw him as desperately seeking validation, willingly accepting experts favouring authenticity, but not welcoming those who did not give such assent. Actually that interpretation is pretty close to the historical reality.

One of the changes the film made was to compress into a few months, events that actually took place between 1917 and 1921. This led another reviewer to imagine that public enthusiasm about the matter was due to the public seeking reassurances in the grim days of WWI. However the real public developments only took place in 1920.

Of course, reassurance in the spiritual realm was sought by many people, including Conan Doyle, even after the war. This search for comfort led Doyle to accept any evidence, and to declare that "innocent girls of the artisan class" could not have fabricated the pictures. The necessity that Doyle's judgement of the innocence of the girls be not seen as obviously and totally naïf was probably responsible for another major change. In the film, Frances Griffith is eight years old and her cousin Elsie Wright is twelve. In reality, the girls were ten and sixteen in 1917, and, of course, were three years older in 1920, when the later three photographs taken.

Our more cynical age might be less likely than Doyle's to accept the view that girls of their real ages

would be lacking the ability and guile to fabricate the photographs.

So this is a dramatic change needed to make the story work by introducing a small ambiguity about whether the pictures were real or not. But it is only a small ambiguity. The film makes it very clear that the girls are quite capable of fooling adults (their confusing and misleading of Theosophical lecturer Edward Gardner is classic), and that they know more about the making of the photographs than they are prepared to tell anybody.

There was also no trip by the girls to London to meet the world's press, this, like the presence in London of Harry Houdini (Harvey Keitel), was invented by the film makers. But there are valid artistic reasons for these embellishments.

Houdini is the necessary sceptic. But his role is more important than the *New Age Guardian's* view of a "professional foil" to the "superbly scientific" Arthur Conan Doyle. He actually provides a good summary of both the reasons why people believe, and how they accept illusion. He also gives the girls the courtesy of treating them as professional equals, and is prepared to understand their motivation.

Are fairies on the photographs genuine? Probably not.

Did the girls ever see fairies, other than in their imagination? That remains ambiguous, even at the final time that Elsie sees the fairies.

Why is she so captivated by the fairies in her bedroom? After all, she has supposedly seen them several times before.

Could this have been the only time she actually saw them? Is it her last view of the fairies before her thirteenth birthday put her childhood behind her? Certainly this question would not have worked if the film makers had been strictly accurate by portraying her at her real age of twenty.

Or was it a "false awakening" dream? That would explain her failure to wake Frances sleeping in the nearby bed.

If you know, don't tell me. The questions are really more important than the answers.

Ultimately, from a sceptical viewpoint, *Fairytales is A true story*. There is nothing portrayed which contradicts what Elsie Wright said in the 1980s, that the first two photographs were a minor hoax intended to fool her parents for a few hours. When they were sceptical (as the film shows, mainly her father, whose first words on seeing the picture were "OK, how did you do it?") the girls decided to maintain the story. Three years later, they were surprised to find that the enormously respected Conan Doyle was accepting the pictures as

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# Dark deeds in Ufology

Shaun Cronin

**Dark White, Jim Schnabel. Penguin Books 1994**

We live in a technological age - a time when science and reason have led us to a greater understanding of our world and the universe. However, many of the myths and superstitions that once were commonplace, but seemed to have fallen by the wayside, have reappeared in a modern guise. Once the terrors of the night were given the name of incubi and succubi, now the modern equivalent is the alien abduction phenomenon.

A poll in the United States indicated that about four million Americans believe that they have been abducted by aliens. The majority of these cases seem to occur at night, when the victim wakes up, unable to move, and seeing strange humanoid creatures standing around his or her bed. The victim is then spirited away to a place where the aliens carry out experiments and some even claim to have had sex with, and been impregnated by, aliens. Often the victims cannot remember these experiences, having only a vague feeling that something happened. By use of "hypnotic regression" these supposed memories are recovered and the scope of the alien presence is revealed.

*Dark White* is Jim Schnabel's documentation of the alien abduction phenomenon. Schnabel is no stranger to examining the fringes of the UFO cult. His book, *Round in Circles* was an examination of the crop circle craze in England, in which he entered the investigation with an open mind, but came to realise that there was nothing more mysterious going on than happily inebriated Englishmen coming out of the pubs on late summer evenings and making a few crop circles on the way home. Schnabel himself got into the act and found it was ridiculously easy to make circles. Some of his art work seemed to confuse the self-appointed experts, leading them to exclaim "There is no way that these circles could of been made by humans!" However, these circles were demonstrably of human origin.

Schnabel approaches alien abductions in much the same way. With an open mind, he sets out to explore the world of the abductees and those who help them. He doesn't just examine the phenomenon from an abductee's point of view, he also takes a more sceptical perspective and looks at hypotheses that allow for a more earthly explanation for alien abductions. Are aliens really visiting Earth and conducting experiments on our species? Or is this a modern manifestation of an age-old psychosis?

The first chapter, "Dr X" sets the tone. Recounting the alleged abduction of a unnamed, "respected scientist", the case of Dr X illustrates the motifs that run through all abduction claims: lost time; vague recollections that something had happened; mysterious marks on the body; strange lights in the sky; gradual

recall of memories of strange events with strange beings. These are the classical symptoms of an alien abduction.

Schnabel's delightful romp through the history of abductions gathers steam in "Remembering Lemuria". This chapter gives an excellent overview of the development of the UFO myth. It begins by recounting the airship craze in the USA at the turn of the century, then Schnabel leads us through the intricacies of the connection between *Amazing Stories* editor-in-chief, Ray Palmer, the conspiratorial tales of mysterious Lemurians, written by the equally mysterious Richard S. Shaver, and Kenneth Arnold's legendary 1947 "flying saucer" sighting. While Palmer, Shaver and Arnold weren't directly connected (at least before Arnold's sighting) they helped lay the foundations for the modern myths of UFOs.

Schnabel slowly immerses the reader in the world of the abductees by introducing, one by one, the leading protagonists in the world of alien abductions. Budd Hopkins, the painter turned UFOlogist from New York. Whitley Strieber, the author, turned abductee, turned modern-day shaman. Phillip Klass, the aviation writer turned arch-skeptic. An interesting point to note is that Klass receives a sympathetic portrait from Schnabel. Klass is often met with vitriol by UFOlogists but in *Dark White* he comes across as a kindly old curmudgeon. On the other hand, Strieber, according to Schnabel's account, seems quite mentally unstable. By the time the introductions are done, the giddy world of the abductee cult has been revealed through Schnabel's wry exposition.

While exploring the possibility that abductions are caused by actual aliens, Schnabel allows for other possibilities. The chapter, "Old Hag and Amygdala" explores the possibility that abnormalities in brain functions may be partly responsible for the fantastic tales of alien abductions. The Old Hag of Newfoundland was an apparition that appeared in people's bedrooms in the late 1970s, mainly in the Newfoundland province of Canada. Victims would awake at night, unable to move, and the Old Hag would appear lying on top or pinning the victim down. Elements that are very similar to the classic alien abduction experience, but which are usually regarded by psychologists as example of hypnopompic and hypnogogic illusions.

Schnabel then explores a neurological basis for the abduction experience. There seems to be a curious connection between abduction experiences and the recent screening of movies or TV programs that deal with the phenomenon. Can the motifs for an abduction be spread by popular culture? Are they the result of abnormalities in the temporal lobes? Psychic powers? Schnabel goes after every theory. He makes no judgments concerning the validity of any theory, merely

recounting what have been suggested by some as possible answers. However, the clues to what Schnabel may think concerning the validity of each theory lie in the understated irony that characterises his writing.

The book eventually focuses on the work of Hopkins, with a digression into the Ed Walters/Gulf Breeze Case, that lets one into the Machiavellian politics of the UFO world. UFO conferences are as much a setting for personal vendettas as they are for a chance to share information about the phenomena. Hopkins vs Strieber vs Klass, *et al* has been a long running show in the UFO world. The intrusion of professionals into Hopkins' domain as the high priest of the abductee cult didn't help, especially when they encroached into Hopkins' work and started charging fees.

The arrival of Harvard psychiatrist John Mack on the scene raised the hope that research into alien abductions would enter the mainstream. However, as Schnabel points out, Mack had left mainstream psychiatric research years before he became interested in abductions. Mack apparently believes that the "aliens" are from another dimension, in contrast with the Hopkins' hypothesis, that the aliens are the occupants of craft from other worlds within this dimension.

The case of Linda is cited by some, including Hopkins (she is the subject of his book *Witnessed*), as one of the most compelling cases to show that alien abductions are real. As quoted, it involved a woman who was abducted by a UFO, through her apartment window in the middle of New York City in November 1989. The abduction was allegedly witnessed by others, including a high-ranking official in the United Nations. Some writers are more explicit and claim that it was Javier Perez de Cuellar, the then UN Secretary General. Perez De Cuellar has denied the claim that he was abducted (this is actually regarded by some as positive proof that he *had been*). If true, then it would have to be one of the most important cases of all time. But, as happens so often in the world of UFOs, the more details of the case that Schnabel recounts, the murkier it becomes.

The chapter, "The Man in The Blue Striped Pyjamas" relates one instance of how Hopkins, seemingly convinced that Perez de Cuellar was aboard the same UFO as Linda, pushes her to identify Perez de Cuellar as being present. Initially she is adamant that the Secretary General was not involved. That was not the answer Hopkins wanted. He kept showing Linda photograph after photograph, pushing her until he eventually elicited the result that he wanted - her identification of Perez De Cuellar as being aboard that spaceship. As Schnabel states, "Hopkins had won". One may agree, but counter with "and the case for unbiased research by Hopkins lost". The Nova TV program, *Abducted by Aliens?*, showed further examples of Hopkins using the same tactics of coercion in eliciting information from "abductees".

The lack of physical evidence is one troubling aspect of the alien abduction phenomenon. Schnabel does mention that in some cases, when abductees had experienced multiple and continuing abduction experiences, electronic equipment (tape recorders, video cameras) were set up in their rooms. When this was done, the abductions abruptly ceased. Of course this held true only until the time when the abductee would feel an

### ...Fairies from p 33

genuine. Faced with the prospect of humiliating him, they decided to keep the story going for the next fifty years.

Final non-fictional note: the reviewer for the *New Age Guardian* stated as his final comment, "It is worth mentioning that in the 1980s, Frances and Elsie (by then old ladies), intimated that some of the photographs had been faked. They went to their graves still insisting that two of the photographs were entirely genuine".

If *would* be worth mentioning, *if it were true*. Elsie was quite definite that all the photographs, including the three that she took, were fakes; Frances said that only the last one of the three that she took were of genuine fairies.

As there were only five photographs altogether, it seems that Frances is attributing the last photograph (which most commentators consider an inadvertent double exposure due to it being taken by both girls) as showing something unexplained.

In any case, which two are supposed to be genuine? Certainly not the two 1917 photographs. Commentators agree they are obviously simple cutouts. Recent research has revealed that the originally published versions were doctored by an expert photographer (most probably Snelling, whose "authentication" Doyle relied upon).

As Frances said in 1982, "I don't see how people could believe they're real fairies, I could see the backs of them and the hatpins when the photograph was being taken". The only photograph for which this would be possible is the first, "Frances and the fairies". Call me sceptical, but if the first photograph was a fake, then all the others are probably faked as well.

Incidentally, what Frances revealed in 1982 showed how both believers and sceptics can misinterpret the evidence. One of the first questions raised was, why Frances was not looking at the fairies but directly the camera. Believer Gardner said it was because she was accustomed to the fairies but fascinated by the new experience of the camera. Sceptic, James Randi, reckoned it was because she didn't much care for Elsie's project.

It seems the more probable explanation is that she was not looking at the cutouts so that her disbelief wouldn't show on her face. 

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"overwhelming urge" to turn the equipment off - then the abductions would start over again.

The ephemeral nature of the evidence regarding alien abductions lends credence to the idea that they are a modern day psychosis. In fact, *Dark White*, while covering many aspects and possible theories regarding abductions, reinforces this view. Schnabel does a very good job in exposing this modern day cult; one in which dissension, paranoia and the willingness-to-believe is rife. This book, written with dry wit and irony, is a valuable guide for the Sceptic interested in the history of the modern day UFO phenomenon and the alien abduction sub-genre. 

# Prophecy for fun and profit

Roland Seidel

How do you tell a true prophet from a false prophet? They all sound so convincing. For instance: "I am the only true prophet. Here is the proof. I was told in a dream on 8/8/88 that we would enter a period of proliferation of false prophets. In further dreams on the 7th, 13th, 37th, 73rd and 91st nights after that I was shown how false prophets are created and how to identify them. These numbers are, of course, the 'Divine Sequence of Primes' known to the Egyptians and described by Pythagoras." (anon)

False prophets are people whose brains have been seeded by the forces of chaos in several specific ways. They are told that they have been chosen to pass on a special message to humanity and that they must be very humble about their special role. The changed response to serotonin and several of the choline neurotransmitters, particularly in the amygdala, in the intentional region of the frontal lobe and in the synchronistic area of the temporal lobe, exaggerate the perception of significance in otherwise ordinary events to the point where coincidence is readily confused with causation. In parallel with this exaggeration is a diminishing of clarity; perceptions tend to merge, details blur and conceptual transferrals increase (borrowing elements of one perception and attaching them to a different one).

You identify false prophets by looking for key behaviours.

1. Connection with the Divine. They are under the impression that the messages they are privy to have come directly from God (Godess, Godhead, Godness etc.).
2. Conviction. The exaggeration of significance makes it impossible for them to countenance the possibility that they may be wrong.
3. Incoherence. The diminution of clarity makes it very difficult for them to string ideas together in a coherent way, despite passionate attempts to do so.
4. Urgency. They are aware of an imminent and imminent danger. An illusion of course, but one from which it is impossible for them to turn.
5. Merchandise. For some reason not shown to me, there is always something to buy, to subscribe to, to enrol for, to donate to. When spreading the word means selling it, you have a false prophet. Real agents of the divine have no use for earthly goods.

Once inspired, the false prophet is only able to become aware of his or her predicament by a considerable effort of will. Very few things are capable of getting a lever under the edge of the carapace that both smother the suffering brain and so effectively shields it from reality.

Some mantras like, "How can I tell this from make believe?" and, "How would the world be different if this weren't true?", can find that edge. There is, however, one simple test that will almost always provide the required revelation: specific prediction.

The profundity of the pronouncements of the false prophet argue that spectacular prophesy must be readily available. The prophet must make a very specific prophesy - *very specific*; date, place, people, event. Because of the loss of clarity this can be quite difficult for them but it must be insisted upon. There is no other way for the truth of their position to be seen.

Here is a short list of some of the predictions that have revealed notably false prophets.

- Edgar Cayce predicted New York City, Connecticut, South Carolina and Georgia would be inundated in 1997, that the Great Lakes would empty into the Gulf of Mexico in the same year, that Japan would fall into the sea in the 1990s, that Mt Taal would erupt in 1995, Mt Vesuvius and Mt Pelee in the 90s.
- Nostradamus predicted the recapture of Gibraltar and the beginning of World War III in 1997, war between China and Russia in 1996, French or Spanish Papal candidates in 1995, droughts lasting 40 months followed by floods in 1994, war between Russia and US in 1993.
- Sun Bear predicted three years of world starvation from 1996.
- Max Toth predicted natural and electrical storms would plague humanity in 1995.
- Elizabeth Claire Prophet predicted a cataclysm would destroy most of humanity in 1990.
- V. J. Hewitt predicted for 1994 that: Queen Diana would calm a mob of people on Jan 8, that cannabis would be legalised on June 15, that baldness would have a genetic cure on July 10, that King Charles III would found a spiritual retreat on Sept 13 and that Baroness Thatcher would quit the House of Lords on Nov 17.
- Jeffrey Goodman, PhD, predicted that a major earthquake would destroy a large part of New York and that Palm Springs would be under water by 1985, that the Black Sea would grow larger and the Western US would be stricken by a flurry of earthquakes by 1990, that much of western US would submerge as would part of Britain by 1995, that by 2000 Copenhagen would be relocated, Krakatoa would erupt, Hawaii would sink, and that ice build up on the poles would cause the Earth to tip over.
- Jeanne Dixon predicted in 1978 that a comet would strike Earth in 1985.

By the way, here's a list of things from 1997 that I would have thought the prophets and psychics and astrologers should have warned us of. Perhaps these events weren't significant enough to cast a shadow from the future that the seers could recognise.

The deaths of Diana, Mother Theresa, Michael Hutchence, Giovanni Versace, John Denver, Jaques Cousteau, Robert Mitcham, James Stewart, Deng Xioping, Pauline Hanson (oh, sorry, she's not dead). The Maccabee games disaster, the persistence of El Nino, the bushfires in Sydney, Perth and Gippsland.

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# Feminist amnesia

James Gerrand

**Feminist Amnesia - The Wake of Women's Liberation** by Jean Curthoys. Routledge 1997. 200pp. pbk \$26.95

The author, a pioneer of the Women's Liberation Movement, is a philosophy lecturer at Sydney University. She was one of two teachers of the first course in feminist theory at the University in 1973. Her book is about her disillusionment with contemporary feminist thought, arguing that it is muddled and contradictory. Academic feminists present ostensibly radical credentials whilst pursuing power in conservative academia. The radical implications of early Women's Liberation thinking have had to be repressed by helpful amnesia by those seeking positions of authority.

However I should warn prospective readers that this is the most difficult book I have ever read. Philosophy has its own jargon and it needs a Bertrand Russell to make it clear. But making the job of understanding even more difficult is the feminist academia use, as a cloak for their power seeking, of deconstruction and postmodernism, philosophies which even Jean Curthoys finds at times incomprehensible.

As an example of the philosophic fogs, here are definitions I obtained from the Internet. In providing these definitions its author Michael Fegan states "this is very un-postmodern since postmodernism tries to avoid all encompassing definitions or truths."

Deconstruction: an attempt to dismantle the binary oppositions which govern a text by focusing on the aporias or impasses of meaning. A deconstructive reading will identify the logocentric assumptions of a text and the binaries and hierarchies it contains. It will demonstrate how a logocentric text always undercuts its own assumptions, its own system of logic. It will do so largely through an examination of the traces, supplements and invaginations in the text.

Postmodernism: calls into question enlightenment values such as rationality, truth and progress, arguing that these merely serve to secure the monolithic structure of modern capitalistic society ... focuses on four basic critiques of western philosophic thought: (1) of the human subject; (2) of history; (3) of meaning; (4) of philosophy.

Now back to the book. Curthoys explains how the Women's Liberation movement arose in the USA, via Black Liberation in the 1960/70s, as a popular moral and political movement to redress women's oppressed position in the male patriarchal society. By the 1990s a second wave of feminism constitutes one of the most powerful networks operating in social institutions. The women's studies movement, which reaches hundreds

of thousands of tertiary students, is one of the strongest parts of the network.

Curthoys criticises this second wave on a number of grounds. She doesn't accept their credo that "knowledge is sexualised", meaning that what we decide as true or false is a function of "sexual difference". She considers the second wave corrupt when it undermines, rather than strengthens, the critical abilities and independence of mind of philosophy students.

Curthoys finds a parallel to the second wave authoritarian dogma, that feminist thinking is correct thinking, with the Soviet Union's proclamation in 1948 of Lysenkoism as the correct science, and the banning of the teaching of genetics as "bourgeois" science.

To Curthoys, Women's Liberation was a social movement engaged in a search for the good. She is concerned with the increasing emphasis by feminists on measuring the worth of human beings on their "appearances", both on physical appearance and the appearance of achievement and efficiency.

As a Humanist, I am pleased that she plays tribute to humanism as an ethos seeking the common good, and where each person is valued as an individual, and is concerned for each other.

As a Skeptic I cannot but conclude that, if only philosophers and feminists were scientifically literate, then much of their philosophising and feminist thinking would become more productive. Why try to resolve, in the mind, the difference between mind/matter, God/reality, male/female, when the scientific method determines, much more understandingly and positively, any differences? One is foolish to reject science when its use over the past four centuries has proven to be the most powerful tool for making wise decisions. 

## ... Prophecy from p 36

The earthquakes in Italy, Indonesia's forest fires, Monserrat's volcano, the lost yachtsmen Tony Bullimore and Thierry Dubois, trouble in Bougainville, the scale of the Wik debate, Cheryl Kernot jumping ship, the Asian economy boom, the Asian economy bust, the Mike Tyson's bite, Brigitte Muir (first woman up Everest), the success of the Mars landing, the peaceful change-over for Hong Kong...

And a few from earlier years. Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fall of Communism, Pinnatubo, Melbourne's bloody awful Casino, cyclone Tracey, the flu epidemic after WWI that killed 22 million (the war killed less than 9 million), the discovery of Neptune and Pluto, gene therapy ...

As 2000 approaches humanity will be 'tested' by an increasing array of false prophets. Good old *Fin de siecle* fever winds up to *Fin de millenium*. Have fin, folks. 

# On fools and money

Clive Robbins

They come in their thousands, like the Mongol hordes out of Asia, or the great schools of mullet that migrate along the coast to their eventual doom. There seems to be an inexhaustible supply of intellectually disadvantaged people, in spite of the ten plus years of education that most youngsters get nowadays, as opposed to the seven that their grandparents got. This over-supply of dills creates an enormous pool for exploitation. They don't need to be robbed, all that is necessary is to make a gambling device available and they will very obligingly rob themselves.

A minimal amount of lateral thinking will soon reveal the fallacy that it is possible to "beat the books." Ponder on where the money comes from to feed and train the horses, to maintain large race courses, to buy the bookies a Mercedes now and then. There is only one source of supply, and that is the hopeful punter, who thinks that by studying form, and using his native cunning, he can beat a book that is mathematically stacked against him. According to statistics, of four hundred million dollars wagered, two hundred million came back to the punters. This is two to one against. Not real good odds to start with.

But rough on the punter as the "Sport of Kings" (and other idiots) is, it is almost fair compared to some of the other rorts. The ubiquitous poker machine is about three to one against. The odds on winning Lotto, cannot be calculated on an eight digit calculator. To win the jack pot, the first number is 40:1, the second 39:1 the third 38:1 Multiply these three numbers together and the result is 59,280:1. And that's only for the first three numbers (there are 40 numbered balls).

Even the "Fairest game of all", Two Up, where the "boxer", who runs the game, normally takes 20% from the winner. Losers don't pay, only winners. Oh yeah, the dollar changes hands five times, and it is goodbye forever. Neither winner or loser will ever see it again. It must be obvious that if the game lasts long enough, the boxer will have the lot!

So much for gambling as an easy road to riches (if only for the person who runs the show). But there is another way, that is to sell nothing for something. There is infinite profit in selling the promise of future wealth, or everlasting life, or anything else that you have no chance of providing.

Hardly a week goes by, when we see someone on TV who has just trusted his/her life savings to some plausible crook, who promised to double it for them. Needless to say the con man lives in a luxurious mansion on the Gold Coast, and seems to be immune to prosecution. The law has no sympathy for suckers. Let the buyer beware.

Why is it that many people can only see the bait, and never worry about a possible hook? Probably the easiest way to part people from their "hard earned", is

to convince them that you are in direct telephonic communication with God, and that you have the ability to intercede on their behalf, so that they will be assured of a bright and very, very long lasting future. This little earner is largely practised in the USA, although Australia has had quite a few.

One of the early practitioners of this art was a man who called himself Archbishop Leadbeater, apparently here under the auspices of the Theosophical Society. He had an amphitheatre built at Balmoral, a Sydney beach-side suburb, which faces the ocean through Sydney Heads. The purpose of the amphitheatre was to give the faithful an excellent view of the Messiah who, the Archbishop said, would walk on water through Sydney Heads. The collections for building the concrete theatre plus the sale of reserved seats, must have netted the Archbishop a tidy retirement sum. When an Indian boy named Krishnamurti, who was being groomed as the Messiah, blew the whistle on the scam, the Archbishop decamped (as they say in the police force) taking the loot with him, and was never heard of again, leaving behind a lot of sad and disappointed followers, and the Theosophical Society with a face resembling an omlette.

Another rip-off that comes to mind was the Bagwan Rajneesh. He had a real earner with his religion of sex, soul, and rock 'n roll. When he had acquired ninety seven Rolls Royces from his faithful followers, he too decamped, leaving behind an Indian lady (?) who had been his faithful secretary. When questioned by the press, about the rip off, her deeply spiritual reply was "Tough titties".

There have been many such shake-downs, most of which showed the followers as being unbelievably gullible. Among the saddest was the recent suicide of people who believed that beings from outer space were riding on the tail of the Hale Bopp comet, and that they had to top themselves in case they missed the bus (sorry, comet).

But as silly as Australians can be on occasion, the gold medal must go to our cousins, the Americans. They don't mess about over there, when they have finished fleecing them, they bump them off. Remember the poor jerks at Jonestown? About 900 men, women, and kids poisoned. How sad that children had to be involved. Suffer little children? The next mass extinction was the whackos at Waco. This sect which was a mixture of right-wing militia and fanatical fundamentalist, called themselves Branch Davidian, fell foul of the authorities, resulting in eighty people being burnt to death.

There is an unlimited series of these confidence tricks, in business, in gambling, and in religion. Many seem to originate in the USA, although the Koreans aren't doing too badly, with the Rev Moon and others.

continued p 40 ...

## Conning the con-men (Pt II)

Harry Edwards

Part 1 of this article described my personal encounter with the perpetrators of the Nigerian Advance Fee Fraud. The numbers of victims of this, and other Nigerian frauds, worldwide over the last ten years, has been variously estimated to be upwards from half a million into the millions, at a cost to them of about US\$5 billion. The 419 Coalition averages 60 front door hits a day seven days a week, and the American Secret Service Task Force gets some 500 scam documents per day, every day, five days a week, mostly from the US.

Since my encounter, I have received an enormous amount of information regarding the extent of the scam, its variations, and the involvement of government officials. Some aspects of interest to critical thinkers include scepticism, pseudoscience and the nature of true believers. This article deals primarily with those latter aspects.

### Scepticism

My reaction to the scammers' proposition to make me a multimillionaire was one of extreme scepticism for a multitude of reasons already mentioned in Pt 1. Ordinarily, the proposition would have been confined to the trash bin. However, curious to see how they went about it, I went along like an innocent to the slaughter, but stopped when it came to parting with money. Others, although equally sceptical in the beginning, have been persuaded that all was fair, square and above board, and the experience cost them dearly. Embodied in the following account, passed on to me by the 419 Coalition, we have evidence of a fraud utilising pseudoscience, and an astonishing example of a true believer.

### The True Believer

The 419 Coalition reported the case as follows:

(We) got a call from the wife of a member of a fundamentalist church (husband a church member, wife not). A while back, the Church had received a letter from "Good Guy Christians" in Nigeria being persecuted because of their religious and political beliefs. They needed to get money out of the country so that it would be safe from their persecutors. They felt that they could trust no one but another reliable Christian church to do that for them. Of course, the monies gotten out would then be used both for the benefit of the Nigerian Christians, who needed to get it out, and the church who helped them.

The Reverend hailed this as an Act of God. With this, he got the congregation behind him, and even when the Nigerian Christians told him that, because of their beliefs etc, their money had been chemically marked (Nigerians call this the "Red Mercury" version) so that it was no good for deposit in Western Banks without being chemically cleaned, and that the cleaning chemicals were expensive, the Reverend was not deterred. God works in mysterious ways, after all.

So, the church members took out second mortgages on their homes and the Church sent a delegation via London to Ghana to meet with representatives of the

persecuted Christians. There they saw a significant "sample" of the money and provided the funds (around \$500,000) to acquire the cleaning fluid. But the cleaning fluid did not work ... too old, or defective, or something. Much wailing and tearing of hair on the part of the Nigerian Christians. The church delegation retreats to London and has further meetings with representatives of the Nigerian Christians there. It is decided to try again. This time with better safeguards on where the chemicals come from.

Reverend and delegation comes back to us [419 Coalition] and conveys all this to the congregation, including that it is God's will that this thing go through, and asking them for more money to make it happen.

It was at this juncture that the wife of the church member found the 419 Coalition on the net and called us. We explained the entire thing to her at length and faxed her a mountain of backup documents to present to the Church. We urged her to make it official by filing a complaint with the Secret Service, she said she wanted to present the data to the Church first (though we here had been keeping Task Force informed of all this). This took great courage, as this is one of those churches where people can be "cast out" or "shunned" by Church members as required, and, since her husband was a member, and hence (even though she was not a member, her husband was, and their whole life, friends, etc. was in and revolved around the Church). Anyway, she presented at the next Full Congregation meeting. The Reverend was incensed, said again that this was God's will, and, essentially, that she was doing the Devil's work etc, for questioning it. Finally, Reverend said that those who were with God would stay with him and proceed in this, but that those who doubted the Will of God could withdraw. Fortunately, half the congregation did. But the rest stayed with the Will of God and the Reverend.

That is where it ended for a while. The hero wife (for that is what she was) was so intimidated by all this (or was instructed by her husband) to have nothing more to do with this matter. She therefore never filed a complaint with Task Force, so the case never went "Official", even though 419 Coalition had kept Task Force informed on this matter.

About three months later, Task Force called us and said that they had gotten a formal complaint from the son of a Church member, and wanted to compare notes to see if it was the same Church. We did, and it was. The Reverend had gotten his parishioners (those who still believed in the Will of God) to take out third mortgages on their homes etc and had gone back to London to meet with the Nigerian Christians, fully resupplied with cash in order to buy more chemicals. He was in London now.

This immediately set off a major search effort (now that case was official) to find the Reverend in London by US and UK authorities to get to him before he lost any more of his parishioner's money. The search proceeded frantically for several days - he could not be found. Then, entirely out of the blue, 419 Coalition got a call from a limo company that had found us on the internet. Their driver had heard some pretty odd stuff going on in back of the limo, so they looked us up on the net and called. A short conversation confirmed that this was the Reverend (maybe *this* out of the blue call was God's will and he had decided the parishioners had suffered enough) and the limo company knew where to find him. We informed US and UK authorities immediately, and the limo company people tagged the Rever-

end until the UK authorities got there. The UK authorities explained to the Rev what was going down, but he refused to believe them, said all was well, he was following the Will of God etc, etc, the same bit. UK authorities withdrew and checked with ours. Upshot was that Reverend was crammed kicking and screaming onto a plane back home, still a True Believer.

Six months later he 'recanted' and promised to pay back every dollar lost by his parishioners in the first go-round ... all half a million. The money spent in the first go-round was long gone, you see, given that no official complaint was filed until months after the initial loss, even though Rev had been fully informed, so trail was cold, no monies recovered, and no arrests were ever made in this case that we know of.

"But the Good Guys *did* manage to prevent the second half a million from being lost in this case .... over the Reverend's dead (figuratively) body, of course.

### Government of Ghana duped by fraudsters

The Reverend's loss was peanuts compared to the loss sustained by the Jerry Rawlings' government of Ghana in another fraud perpetrated by Nigerian swindlers. It holds the dubious distinction of having the largest amount conned out of a single victim – \$78,000,000.

In 1995, the Ghanaian government awarded the Nigerian based Union Elektrik Nigeria Limited a contract for \$136,000,000 for a hydroelectric scheme and the refurbishment of 44 transformers belonging to the Electricity Corporation of Ghana. Officials of the Nigerian Company tendered many documents to establish their credibility in the eyes of the Ghanaian government. They came with letters of recommendation allegedly issued by the Nigerian government, and certificates of completion of various jobs for the National Elektrik Power Authority (NEPA), the government owned electricity monopoly in Nigeria. Also displayed were payment vouchers to the tune of millions of dollars, from the Central Bank of Nigeria. Seventy eight million dollars was paid over as a mobilisation fee so that the work could begin. No work began, and there was no evidence of any intention to commence work.

The Electricity Corporation of Ghana then decided to terminate the contract and demanded a refund. The call was ignored, the Union Elektrik Nigeria Limited fax line suddenly went dead, and attempts to locate the company at its given address were to no avail. The birds had flown the coup. Other attempts through diplomatic channels have proved futile, and three years later there is still no trace of the money or those who perpetrated the fraud.

Unfortunately, scams such as this, may also have negative implications for genuine businesses trying to explore markets in the same region.

### Warning

Those silly enough to follow through and make the trip to Nigeria would be well advised to buy a one-way ticket because they won't be returning. The following advice was given by the 419 Coalition to an attorney seeking information on behalf of a client:

If your man gets too snotty with them, he can end up dead. People sometimes do in this, you know. And they are generally eliminated in rather unpleasant ways, including a piece at a time (get ransom and then snuff), and especially if *in* Nigeria the Bad Guys can do this with no fear of retribution from either their own or our authorities – nobody is ever caught or arrested.

Two who spring to mind are the Black American businessman who was sent home in pieces for ransom and

then incinerated in broad daylight outside a major Lagos hotel (nobody knows whether he was alive or dead when they flicked the Zippo) and another guy who was trussed up like a goat and gagged in a luxury hotel in Lagos and had his throat slit from ear to ear.

People also disappear. People are also arrested at whim by the government of Nigeria when carrying 419 documents, usually this is done when the guy is getting to be too much of a pain in the ass for the Bad Guys, they just drop a dime to their law enforcement pals and tell them to get the annoyance off their back.

Under *no* circumstances should your guy go to Nigeria. *None*. Or *any* African country (Ghana, Cote D'Ivoire etc.) to meet with these guys, he's not safe in western countries either, but the danger level increases exponentially in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular. Not shitting around here, please inform your client. These people are *not* pussycats when they are pissed off and the government of Nigeria backs them up and/or turns a blind eye.

### Nigerian point of view

So what do the Nigerian authorities have to say about all this? Although officially the Nigerian government is cooperating in stamping out the fraudulent activities, no Nigerian has ever been convicted for mail fraud. The reason has become obvious to those investigating the scams—corruption in high places. It has even been suggested by some that the Nigerian government is, itself, the prime mover.

Unofficially, victims are regarded as gullible and greedy, and, because they are partners in a money laundering scheme, are just as guilty in the eyes of the law as the fraudsters. In other words—they get what they deserve.



### ... Fools and money from p 38

These are just a few examples. There are dozens of similar cases, Father Divine, Aimee Semple McPherson, and who could forget the little fat lady with four eyebrows, who collected millions of dollars from her followers, for heart balm, when her husband, Pastor Jim Bakker, was caught playing the wrong organ with the church organist. This wasn't Jim's best year; he was later caught fiddling the books, and went to jail.

In Upton Sinclair's book *The Profits of Religion* he outlines some unbelievable scams, and the equally unbelievable mental retardation of the people who keep falling for them. There are still hillbillies who handle rattlesnakes, because the New Testament says that snakes and poisons can't hurt the faithful. They are frequently bitten and usually die, which proves that the author might have been clued up on theology, but he didn't know much about herpetology.

Probably the most outlandish example of mud-headedness in Sinclair's book was the case of the "Bootstrap Lifters" These dopes were told that money kept them on an earthly plane, and if they lightened up by getting rid of it, they would ascend to the spiritual plane, where life would be a bowl of cherries They had to put their money in a back pocket, grab their boot straps, and lift themselves off this earthly plane. While they were giving themselves hernias and cardiac arrests, the "priests" were transferring their money from their back pockets, into the offer toy bags, for which help the faithful were duly grateful. At least until their brains started working again.



# Testing a strange claim

Bob Nixon

A few months back, our webmaster, Greg Keogh, fielded a note sent via e-mail from a man calling himself Jason Worthing. Jason was interested in the Australian Skeptics Challenge, a long standing offer of \$30,000 for any successful demonstration of a paranormal ability. Jason claimed to have just that. A telepath is someone who is able to communicate with another person, and perhaps even with animals, using only the power of his or her mind. Jason claimed to be telepathic, and he was prepared to prove it under controlled conditions.

As the challenge co-ordinator for the Victorian Branch, it fell to me to contact Jason to determine if he was suitable for testing. All our communication was by telephone.

Thanks to his reasonably straightforward claim, the process of developing a protocol was relatively simple. He stated that he could transmit what he called "silly" images from his mind to that of another person. He claimed also to be able to compel his subject to tell the truth. For this reason, and because he saw it as cast iron proof if he was successful, Jason was happy to have his target group composed entirely of Skeptics.

While we gave some thought to the actual test procedure, Jason suggested that I look at his web page for further information about him. You'll find it at <http://www.wire.net.au/~worthing>. If you take a look, you might find yourself as taken aback as I was. Jason had told me that he worked for the military, using his telepathic abilities to prevent nuclear war, but his web site offered a great deal more information, which I fleshed out during subsequent conversations with him. He claims to have several degrees from various universities; to have been commissioned into the Australian Army as a First Lieutenant in 1961 at the age of 15 years and 9 months; to have served from 1961-1969 and from 1971-1995, before retiring as a colonel. After some coaxing from me he identified the unit to which he belonged as J9, and that this unit had been formed specifically to make use of his telepathic abilities. He claimed J9 was named in parliament in 1978, although without reference to its actual role, the prevention of nuclear war by telepathic means.

What caught my eye most readily, however, was Jason's claim to have been awarded the following decorations, all of them in 1969: Knighthood - United Kingdom; Victoria Cross, Commonwealth of Australia; Congressional Medal of Honor - USA; Legion de Honor - France (Jason's spelling) and others.

I have had the honour to meet two of the surviving Australian Victoria Cross winners, Sir Roden Cutler and Keith Paine. For those readers who might not be up with military awards, the VC was, prior to the replacement of imperial awards with uniquely Australian

counterparts, the highest decoration available to an Australian serviceman.

I asked Jason if he could tell me for what action he was awarded the VC, he replied that it was all too secret to talk about, so I asked him if he could tell me what type of action the VC was awarded for. He thought about it for a bit, before I reminded him that it is written on the medal itself (Inscribed on the face of the decoration are the words "For Valour"). Then he told me that he has never seen the medal, nor any of the others he has, or any of the citations that go with them. It was all just too secret. He warned me that he couldn't talk about it, and if I were to go asking questions about him or J9, I might find myself in hot water. Similarly, Jason was unable to tell me which order of knighthood he had received.

I was now faced with someone who was demonstrably telling lies, and had to think long and hard about whether or not it would be appropriate to continue with the challenge. My decision to carry on was not an easy one, but Jason's claims to awards and degrees which he could not substantiate, did not have any direct bearing on his claimed telepathic ability.

We made one major change to the procedure to accommodate Jason's apparent flexibility with the truth. A challenge will usually be accompanied by a major media push, but for Jason this did not seem appropriate. There was a reasonable chance that we were dealing with someone genuinely unbalanced and we did not relish the idea of being associated with him in the media. I made it clear to Jason that we were going ahead in spite of his untruths. Jason was happy with that, and even happier when I told him that the \$30,000 challenge prize had recently been increased to \$100,000.

Jason claimed that he could transmit simple images, so we devised the following test:

Twenty simple pictures would be prepared, each would be harmless - no mutilated heads or similarly gory images. This was because Jason feared that the images he transmitted would remain in the heads of the subjects. Using some suitable randomiser, one of the twenty pictures would be selected and Jason would transmit this to a volunteer.

The volunteer would then select a picture from a set identical to the one Jason was using.

These steps would be repeated twenty times, with the dice being rolled for each pass to determine a new picture for transmission. Jason would be deemed to have been successful if on fourteen occasions the volunteer chose the same picture that Jason had transmitted. Pure chance would dictate one correct selection from the twenty tests.

Jason would not know of his progress during the test, nor would we. Only when the two tally sheets were compared upon completion would we all learn the result.

Jason had a couple of conditions; he would not appear on camera unless he was guaranteed that his image would be disguised, and he would require the volunteers to sign disclaimers indemnifying him against any lasting effects of the process. The first condition was easily agreed, but I informed Jason that I could not speak for what the volunteers would or wouldn't sign. He was happy with that, and we set the date for January 24, 1998 at the studios of Yarra Access TV.

Jason expressed some concern at the venue. Initially I thought this had to do with the fact that it was a TV studio, and reminded him that we had already agreed to protect his identity. In fact his objection related to the fact that that building is located in a one way street, leaving only one safe exit in the event of a problem. A problem, it transpired, was Jason's word for some shady dealings by one or another government agency, or an "enemy" government agency. To counter this, Jason would arrange to have members of J9 patrolling the nearby streets, although we wouldn't see them.

It was this conversation that prompted me to e-mail the few Skeptics who had been privy to the whole story so far. Initially I had planned to detail the test protocol for them, but the note that flew off my fingers was a description of Jason and his outrageous claims. It was just me blowing off some of the steam that had been building since I first contacted the telepath.

What I received by return e-mail was a suggestion that we needed professional advice about Jason, and a

list of Skeptical psychologists and psychiatrists. I contacted three of them, describing my conversations with Jason and his claims. There were two main concerns,

both of which would be relevant only if Jason failed the test. Was he likely to become physical? Would a failure have a lasting negative effect upon him? All three thought it unlikely that Jason would become violent, although one suggested we move the larger Skeptics to the front if we had to break the news.

All three advised that Jason would rationalise away a failure, given time. One suggested that we ask Jason to bring along a friend. I contacted Jason, one week prior to the test, and advised him strongly that he should bring someone with him to the venue. I had done this previously, but Jason had been happy that there could be no cheating, so I had not pressed the point. He agreed to try, and promised to contact me later in the week. This he did the following Thursday, two days before the test, to confirm the details and told me that he would bring someone with him.

The pictures I prepared were simple, as agreed. I used stamps from my wife's art and craft collection, placing a single black picture in the centre of a white A4 sized sheet. There was, for example, a dolphin, a stone bridge, a lighthouse and so on. No two pictures could be described as similar. I made a second copy of each picture, two to a

page, for the volunteers to select from, sealed Jason's set inside plastic envelopes and placed the whole set inside a three ring binder.

While we waited for Jason to arrive, Roland Seidel

### Australian Skeptics Inc. Challenge Challenger's Declaration

I, the undersigned, agree to be tested this..... day of ....., 19.....

I have been informed of the test protocol, the conditions constituting success or failure.

I agree to abide by these conditions.

There are no factors present which will impede by abilities. Specifically:  
No persons are present to whom I object.

I am not under the influence of alcohol or narcotics.

I am not currently under the influence of any medication which will affect the test.

I believe the test to be a fair one which I can complete successfully.

I am mentally and physically prepared to be tested.

I understand that I shall be awarded the prize money immediately upon successfully

completing the test. Should I fail the test, no penalty shall be incurred by me.

I am aware that the results of the test will be the subject of a press release by the Australian Skeptics, and will be reported in *the Skeptic*.

Signed: .....

Witnessed: .....

On behalf of the Australian Skeptics.

This document constitutes a format agreement between the Australian Skeptics and the person calling himself Jason Worthing, but whose real name has not been disclosed.

The challenge will consist of twenty individual tests conducted in the following way:

Mr Worthing will be located in a room which is separate from but connected via a window to a second room.

Using a 20 sided die or some similar random device a number will be selected.

This number relates to a picture prepared prior to the test and kept in a secure place until the test begins. Only the person who prepared the pictures is aware of what they show.

A person will be placed within sight of Mr. Worthing, but will not look at him.

Mr. Worthing, by telepathic means alone, will transmit the image selected at random to the person.

The person to whom the image was transmitted will then be removed to another area where all twenty images are displayed and will select from these twenty, the image which Mr. Worthing transmitted.

A record will be kept of the number relating to the picture which was transmitted and the number selected by the volunteer. At the completion of the test the two lists will be compared. If fourteen of the twenty match, Mr. Worthing will have been deemed to have successfully completed the challenge and will be awarded the \$100,000 Australian Skeptics Challenge prize money.

The following conditions apply, and have been agreed by both parties.

The test will be video-taped, although Mr. Worthing will not be shown.

The event will be the subject of a media release.

Mr. Worthing has prepared a document which he will ask the volunteers to sign. This document indemnifies Mr. Worthing against legal action should the process have lasting effects upon the volunteers. Signing this document is a matter for the individual.

Prior to the test, Mr. Worthing will sign a document attesting that he is happy with the test protocol, the people present and the location.

Mr. Worthing will rely on his ability to compel others to speak only the truth to ensure a fair result.

Signed: Jason Worthing  
Robert Nixon (for the Australian Skeptics)

**Declaration signed by challenger**

who would marshal the volunteers' side of the window, Craig Wilson, who would act as umpire and myself compared the two sets of pictures to ensure that they, and the numbering were identical. No-one else was permitted to view any of the pictures at this stage. There were eight volunteers, seven members of the Victorian committee, and the boyfriend of another. Two cameras were positioned, one would follow Jason and the other would keep watch over the volunteers during the test.

Jason arrived on foot, a few minutes late. Despite a polite refusal to shake hands, something he does not do, he was friendly if a little nervous. This was not surprising, of course, he was here to win \$100,000 after all. He had a coffee, which he brought himself, chatted to me for a while and handed over the disclaimer forms he had prepared. Each of the volunteers read and signed the document. Jason then spent a few minutes with each of the volunteers, just chatting about their background in general.

The atmosphere was relaxed, Jason was calm and friendly, the volunteers were ready. Jason, Roland and I went through the procedure, and Jason requested a couple of minor changes which we agreed to since they did not effect the protocol. After a smoke and a coffee Jason said he was ready and we began. He signed the documents which I had prepared.

The test went smoothly, with me rolling the die and handing over the pictures, making a note of the number. Jason would examine the picture for a few seconds before announcing he was ready. I then signalled to Roland who brought the volunteer into view. The transmission took only a few seconds, and on my signal Roland turned the volunteer to face a board which displayed all twenty pictures. The volunteer made a selection, Roland would write down the corresponding number and the process would be repeated.

The only minor glitch was when the number 11 came up three times in the first six throws. Jason asked that we not use this picture (an old well, with hand pulley) again. I replied that it was a result of a random process and could not be altered. In the event the number did not reappear.

After twenty passes the test was complete. Jason surprised me by not wanting to hear the results right away, and we went outside for a smoke and another coffee. I asked him how he felt it had gone. He replied that he estimated that he had transmitted sixteen of the twenty pictures correctly. He had difficulty with a couple of the volunteers, others had been easy subjects. Only two received special mention, particularly difficult was James Gerrand, one of the original Australian Skeptics, and the senior member of the group, the easiest subject was Kathy Butler, the only female present.

And so to the result. Jason sat to one side while Roland and I read out the numbers on our sheets. Of the twenty, Jason had achieved one hit, exactly as chance had predicted. I asked Jason if he could offer any reason for the outcome. He seemed genuinely surprised and could not explain the result. He looked over the pictures, and we picked a few at random to ensure that the numbers did indeed match.

It was clear quite quickly that our concern that he might become physical was not going to be realised. He was baffled by the outcome and walked away to his bag. Remembering that we had been advised that he would eventually rationalise the result, the reader may not be surprised to hear that Jason then suggested "Someone has been got at". I replied that I was disappointed that he seemed to be accusing us of cheating. He made the comment that he should have brought someone with him to look after his interests. I reminded him that he had agreed to do just that only two days earlier. Something had happened to prevent this, he said, but offered no further explanation. Jason left unhappy, but with the answer to his failure already taking shape in his mind.

No doubt the Skeptics are, for Jason at least, part of whatever conspiracy exists which forces him to use a false name, to park a long way away and walk, to worry about one way streets and to think anyone asking questions about him will find themselves in trouble.

I would like to thank the Victorian Branch of the Australian Skeptics, Barry Williams and James Randi for their help and advice in devising the test and carrying it out. 

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## All in the interests of education

A former Australian Skeptics committee member, Dr Dave Wheeler, now head of the Physics Department at Mahanakorn University of Technology, in Thailand, demonstrates on TV how physics can be used to explain many popularly accepted "mystical" tricks.

That's Dave acting as a base for the concrete blocks, as one of his students works out her frustrations with a large hammer.



Dave advises that a video tape of the demonstration, which also included lying on a bed of nails and walking on broken glass, is being supplied to all Bangkok high schools.

In these days of financial stringency in Australian Universities, we can only suggest that a few more professors consider taking a "show biz" approach to their work.

Dave assures us his ribs are on the mend. 

# Travels of a Skeptic

Harry Edwards

At 10.17 a.m. on June 17, 1929, the small township of Murchison in the South Island of New Zealand was devastated by an earthquake, 7.8 on the Richter scale. Nine people died and the town was rent asunder in the worst natural disaster experienced in New Zealand since the 1855 Wellington earthquake. All the roads were blocked by slips, and it took nine hours to reach Glenhope, a distance of twenty-eight miles, to send a message to Nelson for help.

Nearly seventy years later, while browsing through a Murchison bric-a-brac shop, I came across a well preserved hardback copy of *Cheiro's Yearbook for 1929*. Coincidence ... or had the fickle hand of fate placed it there for me to find?

Turning to Chapter III – “Predictions for the world at large”, I hurriedly went through them to see if New Zealand (in particular Murchison) was mentioned, and whether Cheiro had predicted the earthquake. Yes, New Zealand was mentioned on pages 86 and 87, and yes, Cheiro had predicted an earthquake. Enough to convince a believer of this man's prescience? No doubt, but a true blue Skeptic like yours truly? Not on your life.

Who and what was Cheiro and why is his credibility worth examining? Cheiro, or Count Louis Hamon (1866–1936), was considered to be the most outstanding palmist of his day and, posthumously, his basic principles are still followed by contemporary palmists. A lecturer and editor, he also wrote books on astrology and numerology, specialising in future telling.

A measure of Cheiro's success and popularity can be gauged by reading extracts from his Autograph Book which was open to the public in his London Consulting Rooms – glowing testimonials from Sarah Bernhardt, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Lillie Langtree, Dame Nellie Melba, Lillian Gish, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Sir Ernest Shackleton. Names which would still be recognised today by some of Cheiro's remaining contemporaries. And, (without exaggeration), thousands of less familiar, albeit prominent, society names. Without exception, they all testify to Cheiro's accuracy in revealing past events in their lives and the predicting of future events which eventually came to pass. My own assessment of Cheiro's ability however, detailed in my book *Skepton*, concludes that he astutely employed the techniques of cold reading, generalities, ambiguity and informed guesswork so well known to Sceptics. That conclusion holds good for his 1929 prediction for New Zealand and others with which I will now deal.

New Zealand will be under favourable aspects during 1929, both Islands will enter into a period of prosperity and her shipping and commerce will largely increase. Some volcanic phenomena may be expected during the course of this year and an earthquake or tidal wave do considerable damage along her coasts.

**Fact:** Like the rest of the world, New Zealand suffered a deepening depression in 1929–1930, and there were no volcanic phenomena, earthquakes or tidal waves along any coast of New Zealand during 1929. (Murchison is situated approximately fifty km inland from the west coast of South Island).

No doubt believers will accuse me of splitting hairs and argue that merely predicting an earthquake was close enough. I beg to differ, and submit that Cheiro simply based this prediction on common knowledge and the laws of probability and came unstuck. Ignoring the modifier “may” which lets the prognosticator off the hook in respect of volcanoes and tidal waves, what were the chances of an earthquake occurring in New Zealand in that year?

In the past one hundred years there have been eight earthquakes in New Zealand causing major damage, six causing moderate damage and nine involving minor damage. Twenty-three in all, averaging one nearly every five years. Prior to the Murchison catastrophe, there had been no earthquake activity since the Cheviot quake in 1901, but following it in quick succession were Napier (1931), Wairoa (1932) and Pahiatua (1934). It should also be noted that, apart from the South Wairarapa earthquake in 1942, there was no activity between 1939 and 1955 and then followed seven earthquakes between that date and 1968. Now I am not a seismologist but this grouping would seem to indicate to me that perhaps a series of earthquakes is likely to follow a long lull in activity. Whether Cheiro used this admittedly questionable assumption or not is of no relevance – he also predicted for 1929, volcanic activity, earthquakes and cyclones for the United States, the Rockies, the Andes, the Alps, Mexico, Panama and the deep sea levels in the Pacific near Japan and elsewhere. As this almost covers the entire surface of the Earth subject to these natural phenomena how could he miss? Yet he did!

What of Cheiro's other predictions for 1929.

The United States will continue the upward march of prosperity during 1929 that I mentioned in my previous book (*Cheiro's World Predictions* – London, 1925) ... Great excitement will be caused in Stock Exchange circles by the rapid movement of Stocks and Shares, and large fortunes will be made and lost during the course of the year. Increased expansion of trade and general prosperity will be the main influences during 1929, especially in such industries as iron and steel, rubber, artificial silk, motor cars and all luxury items.

Seems to be a bit of a contradiction here! Prosperity – fortunes made? Wasn't 1929 the time of the worst economic depression in history when millionaires became paupers overnight?

Cheiro was fond of a two way bet. For England, his 1929 election year prediction read:

The result of the General Election is indicated to be a feeble and ineffective Conservative majority, or a

Labour Government, equally hampered by lack of power.

As these were the two major contending political parties in England in 1929, one or the other had to win. As it turned out Labour just won – 287 seats to the Conservatives 261. So Cheiro had a hit!

Other Cheiro croppers include: “... there will be no ‘break-up’ of the British Empire, in the lifetime of the present generation”. And, “... there will be great changes concerning the Throne of England”. There was precious little if anything left of the British Empire by the time the last of the ‘present generation’ was laid to rest. Seven years passed before the Prince of Wales ascended the throne of England on January 20, 1936, following the death of his seventy year old father George V. This constituted a single change, not changes, and whether this natural succession could be termed a ‘great’ change is a moot point, it was, after all, a predictable and inevitable change. Again, believers will argue that Edward VIII abdicated and was succeeded by the George VI on December 11, 1936 and, therefore, there *were* changes. However, none of these events took place in 1929 or close thereafter.

## Stuart Landsborough's

### PUZZLING WORLD! Our \$50,000 Challenge

To Mind Readers and Psychics

THE MIDDLE OF THIS SCROLL IS MISSING. IT IS A PROMISSORY NOTE FOR \$50,000, AND IS BURIED WITHIN A 5 KILOMETRE RADIUS OF STUART LANDSBOROUGH'S PUZZLING PLACE. IF YOU ARE A MIND READER OR PSYCHIC, YOU ARE INVITED TO HAVE A HALF HOUR APPOINTMENT WITH STUART LANDSBOROUGH WHICH WILL COST YOU \$1,000. THE POWER OF YOUR MIND COULD HELP YOU TO DISCOVER THE HIDING PLACE, BEST OF LUCK! THIS CHALLENGE STARTED DECEMBER 1ST 1994.

## The Wizard of Wanaka.

A couple of km from the township of Wanaka is Stuart Landsborough's Puzzling World. Here one can spend a couple of hours navigating through what may be the world's best maze, be fascinated by a comprehensive collection of holograms, or challenge one's mind with the thousands of puzzles on display.

Of particular interest to Skeptics and displayed in the corner of the puzzle room, was a large notice in the form of a roll of parchment. A piece had been removed from the centre of the parchment and the remainder is reproduced in the box to the left.

The \$1,000 appointment fee is to deter loonies. Stuart has since reduced the area to five hectares. Although the challenge has attracted a fair amount of media attention, there have only been two attempts in three years – both unsuccessful and for whom the fee was waived. The challenger proposes to keep reducing the size of the area progressively and, encouraged by my opinion that, even if it were reduced to one square metre, contestants would still fail to find the missing piece, he may eventually do just that! Stuart also included with the promissory note a lock of his hair – just in case psychics say they can't get vibes from a piece of paper!



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# Campaign against quackery

For some time now we have been very concerned about the proliferation of devices and substances, being widely promoted, particularly in “new age” and “conspiracy” magazines, as cures or treatments for a wide range of illnesses, without any scientific evidence to support their claims. Our concern is echoed by people in the electronics industry, and articles in the January and February editions of *Electronics Australia* have exposed some of the outrageous claims made for these devices.

Many of these products are advertised as being “listed” with the Therapeutic Goods Administration, a virtually meaningless label, and one that gives absolutely no guarantee of efficacy of the device.

In the current session, the Federal Parliament will be debating changes to the legislation regulating such devices, and there has been an orchestrated campaign by supporters of “alternative” therapies to have this legislation watered down. Their claim is that it is censorship and a denial of people's “right to choose”.

Australian Skeptics has no argument with people's right to choose, but we also believe that they have an

overriding right to the facts that will enable them to make an **informed** choice. This is especially important when the choice has to do with one's health, and we have a right to expect that any product that has the imprimatur of a government agency will, at the very least, have been tested for its ability to do what is claimed for it.

You can help by writing to your Federal MP or Senator, supporting legislation to tighten up the regulation of all product that make therapeutic claims.

We have obtained a number of electronic devices that make claims about treating illnesses, by the use of certain frequencies, and we are planning to have tests done on them.

We also need your help in practical ways. Do you work in the biomedical engineering field? Do you know anyone who has bought a device that makes claims of being able to “zap” pathogens, and who will be willing to participate in tests?

We plan to address this issue in much more depth in the next edition of *the Skeptic*, and we welcome your contributions.



# The rise and fall of dental mercury: hazard or scam?

Don Wilson

The December 1997 meeting of Skeptics SA consisted of a debate on the pros and cons of the use of dental amalgam. The author of this article is Dr Don Wilson, a strong sceptic of many anti-amalgam views. Also speaking was Dr Roman Lohyn, President of the Australasian Society of Oral Medicine and Toxicology whose article follows.

## Introduction

The concern about mercury in dental fillings has its origins in the wider issues of health management today. Medicine, whether it be traditional or alternative, can rarely offer a cure for chronic disease. And yet there are many people who are afflicted with those chronic diseases who would literally try anything. Hence, there is a captive market for techniques and treatments which are so bold as to offer a cure or eliminate the cause.

The mercury used in dental amalgam is implicated through a simple piece of faulty logic. Mercury is a harmful poison. Dental amalgam fillings contain mercury. Dental fillings are a harmful poison.

This discussion looks at the reasons how such allegations about mercury have originated and why they have persisted. However, it is hoped to make it quite clear that the status of current scientific analysis and study of the subject can arrive at one conclusion only: that dental amalgam is not proven to be implicated in widespread illness and that it is contrary to the patient's best interests to remove adequate amalgam fillings in search of a health improvement.

## Chronic disease

If you lived in the early half of this century, you worried about acute disease. Bacterial infections, appendicitis, tuberculosis and even childbirth, all could kill you. But medical technology caught up. We don't fear those things now. As Edward Jenner says in his book *Why Things Bite Back*:<sup>14</sup>

Never before in the history of the human race have people been healthier. But along with each level of well-being experienced by men and women, so do we move to a new level of worrying, whether it be health or Hale-Bopp comets. We are more anxious than ever about our health."

You see, the new worry is the chronic diseases - depression, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, ulcers, cancers ... and all these and more have been implicated in alleged low-dose chronic dental mercury amalgam poisoning. The anti-amalgam movement is linked to this new age of worrying.

## Who started it?

As with every movement, there is a leader, a guru. In this case, the person is Colorado dentist, Dr Hal Huggins. Huggins was influenced in the early 1980s

by reports from Brazilian dentist Dr Olympio Pinto who told him that he had cured many patients of leukaemia, Hodgkin's disease, bowel disorders and a host of other diseases by removing the amalgam fillings<sup>13,18</sup>. Huggins published a book in 1985 called *Its All In Your Head*.

Huggins initially could only claim success in about 10% of cases. He then turned his attention to the electric currents generated by metals in the mouth (implying rates of corrosion) and developed a sequence of removal of the fillings and, combined with nutritional supplements, claimed an improved the success rate which he then boasted as 85%.

The next significant event occurred on 23 December 1990 when *60 Minutes* in the US featured a story entitled "Poison In Your Mouth" with a particularly powerful image of a patient who claimed that Multiple Sclerosis symptoms disappeared overnight as a result of amalgam removal<sup>13</sup>.

Recently, when asked on the NBC *Dateline* program by reporter Robert Bazell if he could quote any studies of large populations showing that people who had mercury in their fillings have more disease than those who have no mercury fillings (a fair question asking for an epidemiological basis for his techniques), Huggins dodged the question saying "this is not a fair question because mercury does not create the same disease in each person."<sup>19</sup> This is the crux of the argument and he couldn't answer it

It seems that Dr Huggins dental licence was revoked in 1996. During the revocation proceedings the administrative law judge called Huggins, treatments "a sham, illusory and without scientific basis."<sup>13</sup>

The judge said that:

He is perfectly capable of ignoring the large body of scientific evidence which suggests that his theories in every arena are not credible; citing scientific literature selectively; exaggerating findings or studies which appear to support to his work; referring to the thousands of publications which support him yet being unable to produce those; and asserting that his clinical experience, as biased and unscientific as that may be, is itself the only support he needs and that he essentially says 'trust me' to the dental profession and the public but provides no reasonable basis upon which he should be trusted.

But the Huggins ideas gained the support of the alternative, holistic network of therapists which included medical practitioners and dentists. Referral networks grew and many patients sought amalgam replacement, mercury chelation (chemical removal) and other dietary supplements to remove mercury as the supposed source of their ills.

## Health authorities take notice

Naturally, this provoked a reaction from the various health bodies<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> as there was much dispute about the

ethics of such treatments. Some were saying dentists were overstepping their expertise by practising medicine rather than dentistry, but this may have been overcome by dentists acting under the prescription of a medical practitioner.

The recent Health Canada response<sup>5</sup> caught much attention. Dr Mark Richardson of the Environmental Health Directorate produced a report in 1995 entitled: *Assessment of Mercury Exposure and Risks from Dental Amalgam*, and Health Canada used this, and subsequent peer review and other scrutiny of the report, as the basis for a position paper on the safety of dental amalgam.

Apart from stating that "current evidence does not indicate that dental amalgam is causing illness in the general population" and that "a total ban on amalgam is not considered justified. Neither is the removal of sound amalgam fillings..."<sup>5</sup>, the group advised the reduction of all human exposure to heavy metals in our environment provided the cost to society was reasonable and it didn't introduce other adverse effects.

Further, they advised the selection of alternative materials for children and sufferers of kidney disease where possible and advised against the placement of amalgam in, or removal of amalgam from, the teeth of pregnant women. (This must not be confused this with the oft misstated position that they warned against having amalgam fillings in the mouth if you are pregnant.)

The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare was another. After an extensive review, they concluded that no study has shown that mercury from amalgam has an adverse effect on health<sup>8</sup>. The US Public Health Service concluded that "there is scant evidence that the health of the vast majority of people with amalgam is compromised or that removing fillings has a beneficial effect on health."<sup>6</sup>

A very recent and comprehensive study of the literature by Eley<sup>18</sup> reaffirms the lack of evidence for the alleged health effects of dental amalgam containing mercury.

### Signs and symptoms

In Australia, Dr Roman Lohyn is one dentist who adopts a stated position that mercury amalgam fillings only need to be removed from the mouths of people who are showing "vague symptoms where the person knows that things are not right but nobody can find any reason for it." He said that he removed amalgam from his wife's and his own mouth as a preventive measure even though both of them were healthy and presumably not showing any adverse symptoms. Further he said that the general dentist population is "totally untrained" at observing the signs and symptoms of mercury poisoning.

The list of purported symptoms appearing in Figure 1, which has been reported by a Dr Philip Sukel<sup>11</sup> and others, shows that they cover almost all known common chronic illnesses and ailments. Look at the list. How many people would suffer from *none* of the symptoms listed? And that is only a few of them.

Looking at this list, one cannot help becoming sceptical. The convenience of such a wide range of signs and symptoms is too good to be true for any practitioner advocating removal and detoxification. The vested interest is blatant. In being told that only a

trained dentist can observe these symptoms, it is implied that the rest of the profession cannot be trusted. The clinician is on a mission. Huggins said he was more interested in saving the life of his patients than the life of their teeth<sup>12</sup>. Everyone is poisoned and everyone needs treatment - everyone who walks through the door. The Huggins Centre accepted for treatment patients with just about any symptoms<sup>13</sup>.



### Flawed research

The western world is spending millions on health cures and medicines that are basically doing nothing. People want to find a simple solution. It has always been like that since the earliest civilisations when these cures were called miracles. They sometimes still are.

Russell Turpin<sup>15</sup> says that the search for cures of chronic diseases is fraught with many, many failures, with dead ends. It is understandable that impatience can seduce a researcher to accept flawed evidence. Remember, also, that almost all of the health workers advocating amalgam removal are the clinicians performing the removal, or involved somewhere in the treatment (profit) chain.

Turpin lists the mistakes that can be made by researchers and clinicians. Let's look at that list and apply it to the amalgam question and ask what elements research needs to even try to guarantee credibility.

1. Eliminate subjective measurements. This means don't rely solely on the patient's testimonial that they felt better or that their symptoms disappeared. This, unfortunately, is poor evidence. It can only be relied upon when the patient is unaware what treatment they received. Remember Huggins in court? Huggins "admits that he cannot prove the link between mercury from dental amalgam and disease but believes that he is entitled to rely on his clinical experience which suggests such a link."<sup>13</sup>
2. Be careful with subtle differences - if the change resulting from the treatment is small and hard to meas-

ure, then it is suspect. If, as well, it is subjective (measured by the patient), it is even worse.

3. Negative results are more important than positive ones. The measure of a theory is the number of times attempts have been made to disprove it, not prove it. In other words, if the researchers or clinicians were serious about strengthening their amalgam toxicity theory, they would construct studies that tried to disprove that theory. If they failed, the theory is reinforced. This has not happened.

4. Effects should be able to be measured and the measurement should be able to be observed by others working independently. Experiments should be duplicated by anyone who wanted to. Anti-amalgamists, like Huggins, rely too much on their own experience.

5. As the years go on, the evidence supporting the claim should mount and be more detailed and the research direction should be clear. Evidence against dental amalgam has never mounted and the research direction for mercury is towards environmental concerns.

### Quackery, health fraud...?

Does the profession consider the replacement of sound fillings for a health benefit to be quackery? A quack is usually defined as a pretender to medical knowledge or skill, with or without the implication of deliberate deception. Clinicians can be accused of health fraud if they promote, for profit, a medical remedy known to be false or unproven. What are the features of this issue which show elements of quackery or health fraud?

1. Making simple associations which can be easily misunderstood by the population. Mercury is poisonous, amalgam contains mercury, amalgam is poisonous.

2. The development of a Society which institutionalises the weak theory based on mistaken notions. The Australasian Society for Oral Medicine and Toxicology (ASOMAT) is such a body which functions to institutionalise the theory away from the larger scientific community (from which it gets little or no support). Furthermore, despite the suggestion from the name of the society, there are no Oral Medicine specialists or Toxicologists as members.

3. The use of the word scientific, is abused. Science implies a collection of evidence and the sum total of what we have learned about that evidence<sup>15</sup>. There is too much reverse science in the anti-amalgam theories - making evidence (sign and symptoms) fit the theory.

4. Various reasons are given for the authorities, not recognising the theory, ranging from such statements such as the Australian (and American) Dental Association (ADA) being a powerful and wealthy business corporation with vested interests, to more perverse mass poisoning conspiracy theories which permeate the internet.

5. Tactics replace intelligent analysis. In August 1997, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) withdrew a pamphlet it had circulated for many years entitled Dental Amalgam and Mercury in Dentistry, pending a review of the issue in December that year. The Australasian Society of Oral Medicine and Toxicology, and specifically Dr Lohyn, on 9 November 1997, issued a press release saying "NH&MRC Withdraw Support for Dental Mercury Amalgam". The NHMRC had not issued any statements at all. Naturally, print and radio reporting organised by lazy news editors who failed to contact the NHMRC, dangerously assumed that the NHMRC had made such a statement. Since, the NHMRC has stated that its action in with-

drawing the pamphlet does not imply a change in policy.

6. Defensiveness commonly occurs and, if present to extremes, can interfere with scientific inquiry. This is a feature of this debate. Just post an alternate view to one of the anti-amalgam bulletin boards to see this effect. Beware of people captured by a cause, because the first thing that they lose is their capacity for impartial analysis of their work. In other words, they become defensive.

### But people do get better ...

So, why do anti-amalgamists think their methods work? Beyerstein<sup>16</sup> gives several reasons which, once again, can be applied to this phenomenon.

1. Some diseases do run their natural course and regress or resolve anyway. Arthritis, multiple sclerosis<sup>9</sup>, allergies, asthma etc, are cyclical in many cases. People cancel appointments when in a good phase in this cycle and seek treatment during the bad. Some of the more common ailments such as arthritis have a come-and-go pattern about them making it easier to find times when the treatment, seems to be working. If treatment isn't working, it's put down as a slow process to rid the body of the toxins. There is always an answer to fit the theory.

2. Suggestion, belief, expectancy, diversion of attention, cost of treatment; all can alter the course of a chronic condition. The placebo effect is strong in some cases and it is dangerous to use it as a basis for a treatment regime. It has been estimated to be as strong as 70% in Multiple Sclerosis sufferers as they search in vain for a cure<sup>9</sup>.

4. Concurrent treatment using traditional and alternative methods often result in the patient giving the credit for improvement to the alternative method.

5. Incorrect diagnosis in the first place. Some of us will remember Milan Brych and his cancer cure in the early 1970s. His best results were later believed to have come from tuberculosis cases wrongly diagnosed as lung cancer.

6. Alternative healers often have a charisma and an image that creates a psychological uplift in spirits, a sort of evangelical power to make people believe. Once again, good if it works, but unpredictable and hardly a basis for sound medical advice.

7. Some people will bury the doubts they have about their improvement in order to save face with their friends or relatives, who may not approve of their course of action. It may be that the clinician overemphasises some aspects of improvement and underestimates aspects of lack of improvement. When the improvement can be any one of hundreds of signs and symptoms, even any one of the example given in figure 1, it is not hard to find a symptom which has improved during a course of treatment.

8. Often, patients will want to offer praise to the therapist who consequently has a greater belief that they have performed some good for the person. Patients then refer others but in the process may overstate the effectiveness of the *cure*.

Some practitioners will offer to detoxify the body - to rid it of accumulated toxins. These concepts seem logical, common sense and simple, but if they are, why aren't they embraced by more mainstream medicine? It may be because they are nebulous and very difficult to measure.

The pursuit of dental amalgam as a source of so

many diseases is a gross miscalculation on the part of the clinicians involved. They are captured by the cause. They feel under siege and alienated by the mainstream of the profession and their reputations are on the line. Many are accused of using fear as a marketing tool, leading to a consistent source of income. Based on the state of published material and statements made by health authorities throughout the world, the medico-legal implications could be astronomical if treated patients challenged their methods.

### Complexities of cause and effect

One of the most comprehensive texts on the subject<sup>17</sup> states that it is likely that as more is learned about the patterns of chronic disease, single causes will become the extreme exception rather than the rule. Evidence rather supports behaviour patterns and psychological influences.

There are more than 5,000 chemicals which are used as herbicides throughout the world and of these only some have been subjected to credible epidemiological studies. Dental amalgam has received that scrutiny. There are thousands of published scientific studies on the mechanisms of toxicity of mercury, both from experiment and from epidemiological standpoints<sup>1,2,3,4,10</sup> - looking at the patterns of disease in large population groups over a period of time.

There are millions of known chemicals with tens of thousands being involved in environmental exposure on a widespread basis. Drugs, pesticides, food additives and cosmetics have been the subject of close scrutiny, but the mind boggles as to the lack of information on the combinations of these chemicals, even just for any two. We assume environmental exposure includes a variety of such chemicals, so their effect in combination has never been studied and may never be<sup>17</sup>.

### The Press

The more an issue is in the press, the more the public perceive a risk. Attempts to neutralise concerns over amalgam by public discussion may continue to remind the public about the problem. Simple images are easily remembered. Deceptive press releases seem so clear. The true position can then be lost, hidden in the complexity of the issue. This can be scurrilously manipulated and is quite stressful to people<sup>17</sup>.

### Multiple Sclerosis

Sheridan<sup>9</sup> has attempted to provide sound advice to multiple sclerosis (MS) sufferers who are one group who commonly seek amalgam removal. He focuses on another simple but misleading association that is commonly made by alternative health workers, that mercury poisoning is linked to MS because both affect the Central Nervous System. He says that mercury poisoning shows a vastly different series of pathological and histological (cell effects) patterns than MS. Furthermore, he shows that:

- MS predates the widespread use of dental amalgam
- Occupations which have a higher mercury exposure (dentists) have no higher incidence of MS
- MS occurs in people who have had no exposure to amalgam
- MS is unpredictable, with exacerbations and remissions of varying degrees.

### How to avoid being quacked

The best advice to anyone whose dentist or other therapist recommends amalgam removal purely for health related reasons is simple; obtain a written treatment plan and cost estimate from that dentist stating the reasons for the treatment and the expected health improvements. Then seek a second or third independent opinion, either dental or medical and definitely not someone recommended by the original dentist or therapist. As NBC *Dateline* reporter, Robert Bazell concluded: "If your dentist makes such a recommendation, hold on to your wallet and talk to another dentist."

You see, one of the main features of quackery is the reluctance to submit to scrutiny, using the excuse that no-one else understands, that other dentists aren't trained in looking for the signs of so-called amalgam related disease and so on. It is in your interests to remain sceptical about such controversial claims and techniques.

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# Some facts on dental amalgams

Roman Lohyn

Dental amalgams are *not* a true alloy. They are made up of 50% mercury which is *not* locked into a set filling, but escapes continuously during the entire life of the filling in the forms of vapour, ions and abraded particles. This release is stimulated by chewing, brushing and hot fluids. One study reported levels of mercury vapour in the mouth, 54 times higher in the mouth of a patient with amalgams, after chewing, than the levels in the mouth of a patient without amalgams after chewing.

The ATSDR (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry) listings (home page <http://atsdr.atsdr1.cdc.gov:8080>) of toxic substances show mercury to be number 3 on their list of the 20 most toxic substances, behind lead and arsenic. The ATSDR's allowable Minimal Risk Levels (MRL) for acute exposure are 0.02 microgram/m<sup>3</sup> and for chronic exposure 0.014 mg/m<sup>3</sup>. Compare this with published amalgam mercury vapour concentrations as high as 87.5 mg/m<sup>3</sup>. The absorption rate of inhaled mercury vapour is extremely high, approximately 80% of the inhaled dose, reaching the brain tissue within one blood circulation cycle.

The extreme toxicity of mercury is well documented. Current research is clearly demonstrating that inorganic mercury is just as toxic as organic mercury under various physiologic conditions. The toxic threshold for mercury vapour has never been found. Even the US Environmental Protection Agency has so stated. The existing occupational standards are all specifically declared to be estimates only on the appearance of *clinically observable signs and symptoms*. Statements by the dental profession that the amount of mercury exposure encountered by patients from dental amalgams is too small to be harmful are contradicted by the scientific literature and are totally indefensible. Dentists receive no training at all which would enable them to even look for symptoms relating to mercury toxicity.

Mercury from amalgam fillings is stored principally in the kidneys, liver and central nervous system. This mercury has also been shown to cross the placenta and collect in fetal tissue. Studies show the level of mercury in liver, kidney and brain tissue of deceased foetus, new-born and young children is proportional to the number of amalgam fillings in the mother's mouth. One such study concludes that, "the elevated concentrations of inorganic mercury found in tissues of people with amalgam fillings, derive mainly from these fillings and not from other theoretically possible sources."

Mercury from dental amalgams crosses the placenta, accumulating in the foetus, and is also transferred through the breast milk to neonates. Mercury from dental amalgam will also be transported across the breast milk of lactating women. In fact it has been demonstrated that breast milk increases the bio-availability of mercury to the newborn. Negative developmental ef-

fects have been shown (in animal models) in relation to these sources and concentrations of mercury.

The half-life for the elimination of a single dose of mercury is extremely long, certainly at least 30 days for the whole body and perhaps as long as 10,000 days for the brain. Multiple small doses will therefore result in body accumulation. Sheep and monkey studies have confirmed that the mercury from dental amalgams enters and accumulates in the patient throughout the body, including the brain. Human autopsy studies have shown that the concentration of mercury in the brain is directly related to the number, size and age of amalgam fillings in the mouth

Mercury has been shown to interfere with tubulin synthesis resulting in "neurofibril tangles" in the brain. Mercury specifically from dental amalgam, placed in rats' teeth, has been shown to affect tubulin synthesis. Mercury from dental amalgams has been shown to be related to antibiotic resistance in the gut and oral cavity.

Both Health Canada (1996a) and the World Health Organization (1991) consider dental amalgam to be the single largest source of mercury exposure for the general public, with amalgam potentially contributing up to 84% (WHO, 1991) of total daily intake of all forms of mercury from all sources. Therefore, the level of exposure resulting from amalgam is not an issue of contention. The WHO also noted that *no* level of Mercury Vapour has been found, that can be considered harmless.

Amalgam fillings have been associated in the scientific literature with a variety of problems such as periodontal problems (pyorrhoea), allergic reactions, oral lichen planus, interference with the immune system as measured by the T-lymphocyte count, multiple sclerosis, fatigue, cardiovascular problems, skin rashes, endocrine disorders, eye problems. Blood mercury levels, significantly higher in amalgam patients than in non-amalgam patients, correlate with number and size of the fillings but return to normal when the fillings are replaced.

Claims by the Australian and American Dental Associations that the incidence of mercury allergy is less than 1% have never cited any references. Such claims are totally refuted by the scientific literature. Published peer reviewed studies show allergic reactions range from 5%-8% (*Nth Am Derm Gp*) up to 39% (Miller *et al*)

The earliest symptoms of long term, low level mercury poisoning are sub clinical and neurologic. Consequently due to their subtlety, these symptoms are easily misdiagnosed. Some recent studies show that at least 50% of dentists with elevated mercury levels had peripheral nervous disorders and that dentists have twice the rate of Glioblastoma than non-dentists. Research shows female dental personnel have twice the rate of infertility, miscarriage and spontaneous abortion than

the rest of the population. Dentists have a suicide rate almost double that of other professions. In Canada 20% of all dentists on long-term disability are away from their practice because of mental or nervous problems.

The German and Norwegian Health Departments have directed their dental professions to *not* use amalgams in pregnant women and the German Health Department has also directed that children not receive dental amalgams either. Canada Health, in the wake of the Richardson report, has stated similar views and has also added that people with kidney or neurological problems might consider alternative fillings as mercury is of particular concern in their cases. A report, "Dental Amalgams and Human Health, current position" commissioned by the New Zealand Health Department has just been submitted to the NZ Government. It concluded that in some circumstances some people could be adversely affected by dental amalgam fillings.

Two studies usually quoted as showing no health problems in amalgam bearers (Ahlqwist and the Nun Study in *JADA*, November 1995) are flawed in that they have disregarded the chronic accumulation of mercury from amalgam fillings and have tried to correlate symptoms only from the number of fillings in the mouth. It should be obvious that if a person has had many heavily filled teeth which have been extracted (resulting in a no amalgam score) then this person's mercury exposure could be much higher (half life can be up to 10,000 days) than someone with four or five small fillings. Yet these studies ignore this fact and rank the no amalgam people as the control group. There has only been *one* study so far which has matched a group with no exposure to amalgams at all with an amalgam exposed group. That study found significant differences between the two, concluding that the amalgam group reported 45% more health disorders. The same study also reported on 86 subjects who had their amalgams replaced. Results showed that after 10 months, 70% of previous health problems in this group had improved or disappeared.

Wolf *et al* in 1983 in the journal *Neurotoxicology*

stated..” It is generally agreed that if amalgam was introduced today as a restorative material, it would never pass FDA approval

Readers may be interested in the fact that Caulk Company, manufacturers of Dispersalloy, one of the most popular amalgams on the market, have recognised the dangers of amalgams in their MSDS (Manufacturers Safety Data Sheet) where they have explicitly stated that the use of amalgams is contraindicated as follows..

- not to be used in pregnant women
- not to be used in children under the age of six
- not to be used in patients with severe renal deficiencies
- not to be used in retrograde or endodontic fillings
- not to be used under cast crowns

The previous reassurances of the ADA, NHMRC and all the other so called authoritative bodies now ring very hollow. Official policy still states that amalgams are safe with no restrictions needed at the same time that the manufacturer says don't use it in the above situations. Who do you want to believe?

The above can be viewed at the following Internet addresses

<http://www.caulk.com/MSDSDFU/DispersDFU.html>  
<http://www.caulk.com/MSDSDFU/DispersalloyMSDS.html>

It is appropriate to end this summary with a statement from the National Research Council of the United States of America, which issued a report in 1978 entitled "An assessment of mercury in the Environment".

Mercury compounds have no known normal metabolic function and their presence in the cells of living organisms, including human beings, represents contamination from natural and anthropogenic sources. In view of the toxicity of mercury and the inability of researchers to specify the threshold levels of toxic effects on the basis of present knowledge, all such contamination must be regarded as undesirable and potentially hazardous.

#### References:

There were too many references to list and they were left out due to space considerations. The entire list is available from Dr Lohyn either by fax (03) 9650-8161, or email [lohyn@melbpc.org.au](mailto:lohyn@melbpc.org.au) and he will be happy to forward the list to anyone who is interested, 

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## Campaign against quackery II

As well as our worries about pseudo-medical gadgets (see p 45), we are also concerned at the growing popular acceptance of a variety of other treatments that owe their success to word-of-mouth, rather than to any clinical testing. Practitioners of many of these treatments seem to have no scientific or medical training, yet they diagnose and treat conditions, with seeming impunity.

John Foley, from Skeptics SA is the coordinator of Qakatak, an informal group within Australian Skeptics dedicated to ensuring that such practitioners cannot practice medicine without being properly trained.

This has nothing to do with the medical industry and everything to do with the rights of consumers to make informed choices.

Visit Qakatak on the Australian Skeptics' webpage:  
<http://www.skeptics.com.au/features/qakatak/qakatak.htm>

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# Immunisation: a reply

Viera Scheibner

In "The anti-immunisation scare: some inconvenient facts" (*the Skeptic*, Vol 17, No 2), Dr Stephen Basser was highly critical of the involvement of Dr Viera Scheibner in promoting that cause. Dr Scheibner, who was later voted the winner of the Australian Skeptics annual Bent Spoon Award for 1997, publicly requested space to rebut arguments put by Dr Basser in his article, to which we readily agreed. However, as her reply exceeded the original article by a considerable amount, and canvassed areas beyond the original, we requested that she confine her response to areas where she claimed Dr Basser had misrepresented her. We are happy to publish her response below, followed by comments from Stephen Basser.

## Introduction

Basser provided no evidence for causal association between fall in "immunisation" rates in Australia and outbreaks of infectious diseases. The recent figures from the SA Health Department show that up to 87% of children with whooping cough in the last 18 months were fully vaccinated. It is well documented that when the US in 1978 mandated vaccination, the incidence of whooping cough increased three-fold, particularly in the babies below 6 months and the well-vaccinated.

Demonstrably, the media do not give "plenty of coverage to the opponents of vaccination": quite the opposite. A vast majority of programs do not invite the opponents of this unscientific and useless procedure. The ABC TV *Quantum* program which as mildly critical of vaccination was not shown again and the presenter was publicly ostracised by vaccinators whilst just doing her job.

It is clear that Basser considers his and other (hopefully not all) Skeptics' opinions as scientific and everybody else's unscientific. A reminder of the freedom of speech was delivered in a recent court decision about whether a preacher can say that God created the world in six days (make no mistake: I am an evolutionist). Voltaire wrote words to the effect: I disagree with your idea but will fight to death for your right to say it.

Ironically, it is those who oppose vaccination who read the orthodox medical literature showing up a multitude of serious problems with vaccination. It is the vaccinators who ignore the accumulated wealth of data against vaccination and rely on their personal opinions. The recent hearing of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in Maroochydore is a good example. The medicos stressed that they only presented their personal opinions and admitted not knowing published research, as recorded in transcripts.

Immunological research repeatedly demonstrated over decades that vaccine injections do not immunise,

rather that they make the recipients more susceptible to diseases. Maybe that's why the so-called mainstream scientists, who Basser alleges have at times been unwilling to appear alongside immunisation opponents just fear the wrath of vaccinators. Not everybody has the courage of their persuasion in the face of a threat to their employment.

If a car has a technical fault, all units are recalled and rectified. Sadly the same prudence does not apply to vaccines when they kill and injure babies. The victims and those who defend them are ridiculed and victimised. Basser shows us how.

## Pertussis

A doctor said at an ABC Radio National program recently that pertussis is so infectious that even his fully vaccinated child contracted it. - Whoops! No further comment.

Pertussis is a disease only potentially dangerous to small babies. When Sweden stopped pertussis vaccination the disease stopped occurring in babies below the age of six months.

## Effect of reducing immunisation:

When most UK parents stopped vaccinating in 1975, the infant mortality immediately decreased substantially and as the compliance increased the infant mortality increased. The incidence of pertussis remained at its lowest for three years and, when the normal 4-year epidemic arrived, 37% of reports came from 2% of surgeries: vaccinators were over-reporting. Still an exceptionally low mortality rate gave them away. Stewart published a number of articles about this, not just one letter.

## Sweden, Sweden, Sweden

No doubt a thorn in the Vaccinators' eyes. Without any pertussis vaccination, the age distribution of pertussis in Sweden returned to normal: no incidence below 6 months, 90% between about 2 and 10 years, with mild outcome.

Within about 7 months of one of the recent Swedish trials of the acellular pertussis vaccine a huge epidemic affected babies who were given three doses: the trial was stopped. Recently, a Swedish newspaper reported on 18 babies who fell into coma after given the acellular vaccine and a doctor was quoted as opining that coma is not dangerous.

## DPT and SIDS

Another major thorn in the eye, yet, reports of cot death after DPT show the same clustering of these deaths along the same critical days as recorded by computerised Cotwatch.

### The Japanese experience

A documented fact remains that when in 1975 Japan moved the vaccination age to 24 months they zoomed from 17th (very high mortality) to the lowest infant mortality in the world. When I gave an invited talk on our work to doctors at one of the US hospitals they told me that cot death figures can and are being manipulated.

### Conclusion

"I do not believe that Dr Viera Scheibner's claims regarding DTP and measles immunisation are supported by the available scientific evidence." It follows from this statement without strain that the claims of Dr Viera Scheibner regarding other vaccines are supported by the available scientific evidence. 2 pages afforded me for reply do not permit comment on all points in Basser's Conclusion; however, any information coming from any communist country is suspect. In China they introduced a new term - Chinese infantile paralysis - outbreaks of which followed their polio vaccination programmes, as different to polio, and which was later found indistinguishable from the polio. Dutch polio epidemics in the members of three religious groups started in the vaccinated. Between about 25% to 78% of the members are polio vaccinated. Just like everywhere else, the rate of Hib diseases in Finland fell markedly in an age group which was not targeted for vaccination. Diseases shift naturally, too.

Real scientists are dispassionate and stick to facts. Vaccinators, Basser being no exception, resort to *argumenta ad hominem* and angry and coercive hyperbole; they very quickly run out of facts.

## A reply from Dr Basser

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to respond to Dr Viera Scheibner's piece. Though she does an excellent job herself of casting doubts on her credibility, I am happy to add the following brief comments:

1. Though I do not agree with Dr Scheibner's views I treated her with the appropriate professional respect, and addressed her as 'Dr Scheibner'. She feels it appropriate to refer to me as 'Basser'.

2. Dr Scheibner should know that whooping cough immunisation was introduced in the USA well before 1978, but even if we overlook this blatant error, her assertion about a 'three-fold' increase is also incorrect. It really does surprise me that a 'principal research scientist' like Dr Scheibner is unable to locate the official published figures for whooping cough cases in the USA. For her interest here they are for the period concerned: 1977- 2,177 cases, 1978 - 2,063 cases, 1979 - 1,623 cases, 1980 - 1,730 cases, 1981 - 1,248 cases, 1982 - 1,895 cases. So much for a 'three-fold' increase!

3. Dr Scheibner asserts that it is only 'those who oppose vaccination' who acknowledge the problems with this public health measure. I suggest she re-read my original article in which I clearly acknowledged that

immunisation is neither 100% effective nor 100% safe. It may suit her polemic to misstate the truth, but it is scientifically dishonest for her to do so.

4. We are told that faulty cars are recalled whilst similarly affected vaccines are not. How then does Dr Scheibner explain actions such as the Japanese and Swedish halts on pertussis immunisation because of concerns regarding adverse effects? Need I remind Dr Scheibner that the recall of a faulty car does not mean all cars are taken off the road Nor does it mean the end of ongoing research into how the car can be improved. Thank you for the analogy Dr Scheibner!

5. The UK experience in the mid to late 1970s was a fall in pertussis immunisation followed by a rise in cases followed by an increase in the immunisation rate and a subsequent fall in the cases. As I noted in my article Dr Scheibner relies almost entirely on the opinion of Dr Stewart in assessing this period. His views have been addressed in detail, and I refer readers to my original references for further information.

6. Dr Scheibner has failed to explain to us why, if the Swedish experience is so damning for immunisation, has Sweden reintroduced pertussis immunisation?

7. Dr Scheibner is unable to provide a shred of evidence to support her lie about the relationship between immunisation and SIDS, and is unable or unwilling to admit her error in relation to the Japanese experience.

8. Dr Scheibner wants us to accept her as an objective scientist, but she doesn't trust information from 'communists'. Need I say more?

9. Dr Scheibner tells us that the Dutch polio epidemic of 1992-3 'started in the vaccinated'. According to the paper published in the *Lancet* (reference in original article), the first patient in this epidemic was a 14-year-old boy. We are informed that "for religious reasons he had not been vaccinated in the routine national immunisation programme. He had received one dose of monovalent oral poliovirus vaccine.." Is Dr Scheibner suggesting that one dose means this person was fully vaccinated? The authors of this paper had no doubt that this epidemic "occurred because of rejection of vaccination and not because of incomplete protection induced by vaccination.." Do we need to wonder any more why Dr Scheibner chooses not to share these facts with those she is trying to con?

10. Yes, Dr Scheibner, real scientists stick to facts. They don't ignore evidence just because it disagrees with a preexisting belief, and they are capable of assimilating new evidence even if this means changing their previously held view. You have not yet demonstrated such a capability to readers of *the Skeptic*. 🙄

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# God and Mammon

**The article by Richard Lead, “An oasis of privilege”, in *the Skeptic* (Vol 17, No 4), regarding the taxation status of religious institutions, has generated a considerable amount of correspondence, both pro and con. We publish a number of the items here, together with a response from Richard Lead.**

The claims of accumulating wealth in the mainline churches made in the article “An oasis of privilege”, are unsubstantiated. Richard Lead should know that this is below par for a Skeptic. The article even seems to suggest that wealth accumulation is the main objective for the churches. True, there are few figures available, but suspicion doesn’t adequately fill the gap. A closer examination of current issues within many churches would reveal that reserve depletion is a far greater concern.

I need to declare an interest here - I am one of the 18% of Australians who attends church regularly. In general, I agree with Lead’s direction, and I’m sure it would warm the heart of P.P. McGuinness, that all the tax exemptions and concessions be removed, and replaced by direct cash grants, where justified.

It would be possible to design a system where the federal government effectively gives a rebate to the churches for defined “good works.” This could work, provided that the states went in to bat for the churches to ensure the rebates were adequate. Any system where the funding was subject to political whim would put the churches in an invidious position - for example during the current Wik debate. (A desire to de-politicise support to churches - and to avoid corrupt relationships between church and state - may have been behind the system we now have).

We need to understand that the “good works” the churches perform cover a wide range and a significant extent. Moreover, many church-sponsored activities are necessary parts of government policy frameworks, and some are essential to it. One small example are the tough punitive measures introduced by the present government against dole-receivers who do not meet strict requirements to show they are actively and continuously seeking work. Benefits for these people, already living below the poverty line, can be cut for several weeks running simply because the Salvation Army is there to provide food vouchers and temporary shelter.

“Good works” for the churches cover everything from child care to aged care to marriage counselling - the value to the community should not be underestimated, much less written-off. I don’t deny that safeguards would be needed, but the system I have outlined above would help to draw the line between the benevolent (or at least benign) religious bodies, and those which are frivolous or motivated by profit.

In regard to church wealth, a name like The Uniting Church or The Church of England covers a multitude of entities. There are many local parishes, regional, state

and national administrations, as well as benevolent organisations, bequests and even superannuation funds. Some churches run investment services for members. In this context, it is much easier to understand why a church is involved in large scale property deals - church superannuation funds are bound by the law and behave much like any other fund, holding a portfolio of property, share and cash investments. Rather than existing to conceal wealth, as Lead suggests with apparent paranoia, the different parts of churches exist to serve different purposes, although perhaps in an organisational structure unlike modern businesses.

By Lead’s assessment, the churches are at fault for buying, selling or developing property; perhaps he would explain what they *are* allowed to do with it! Seriously, though, the mainline churches have been endowed with property in almost every city and town due to crown land grants over one hundred years ago. An earlier example of a state concession to religion.

Today many church properties are enormously valuable. However there may be a huge discrepancy between the book value or insurance value and market value. It is not difficult to appreciate that the market for ecclesiastical properties is extremely limited, however fine the architecture or however valuable the site. Anyone who needs convincing could take a drive in the country and calculate the distance travelled for each crumbling church observed - no longer useful, nor of any market value.

Heritage listings further reduce market options. In Victoria at least, when a property ceases to be exempt from council rates, the council can claim five years worth. Whether or not the exemption should have existed, this is a clear market inhibitor. In total, there are a great many difficulties for churches trying to organise their assets and resources towards their true objectives of mission and service - and this sometimes forces some strange results.

Finally, if tax breaks to the churches are under consideration, then there are a great number of other institutions which should also be brought into the spotlight. For example, non-church private schools - which sets the situation for church schools in perspective. And perhaps the bushfire brigade which can register itself as a charity in order to buy beer for its barbecues exempt from sales tax.

In closing, I want to raise the case of the RSPCA organisations in each state and territory. As a registered charity, all donations to the RSPCA are tax deductible. Note that donations to churches are not generally tax-deductible - only those for specific humanitarian aid are so approved by the taxation commissioner. Charity status for the RSPCA may have been appropriate when the organisation was entirely concerned with the humane treatment of animals, and to the extent which it still is. However in recent years the RSPCA has become a thinly-veiled front for the animal liberation move-

ment, promoting vegetarianism and so on. The devotion of tax concession dollars to illegal raids on poultry farms and the like is highly questionable. However, perhaps these people would justify this tax treatment on the basis of the religious fervour behind their beliefs and actions.

**Lindsay Brash  
Orange, NSW.**

I was disappointed with the article "An oasis of privilege". Mr Lead is entitled to his views, as ill-informed as they may be, as indeed we all are. However this is hardly the forum in which his views on religion, embittered and irrational arguments which insult the intelligence of readers, should be published. The aim of the Sceptics, as I understand it, is to investigate "supernatural" events and extraordinary claims made by people and organisations. This publication is meant to draw attention to the possibility of natural and ordinary explanations of such phenomena using scientific research and common sense in order to refute such claims. What has the financial situation of Christian Churches in Australia and the *supposed* tax breaks they have, got to do with the stated aims of the Sceptics? Absolutely nothing!

Many, both within and outside the Church, would argue that the churches provide schools, hospitals, nursing homes, counselling services, foster care agencies, psychiatric services, prison services and aged care facilities, (to mention a few of the services they provide to the general community) and therefore this entitles them to some tax breaks. A rational debate would have given room for such a view.

Mr Lead does not provide us with a rational scientific approach to this emotive issue. I was reminded of the *60 Minutes* approach to current affairs. Demonise someone, anyone, (usually an innocent victim), victimise the average bloke on the street and allow the evidence to hang the offender when they write into the show the following week. Lead throws a plethora of data at the reader in a way that reminds me of creation scientists. Figures are quoted out of context and religious groups are mixed together and demonised in much the same way as creationists deal with scientific theories and scientists. Mr Lead can't really expect intelligent people to accept the proposition that the Church and Scientology and the Salvation Army are one and the same organisation? This is what he is arguing. Scientologists have some wacky views, so all religions (at least Christian religions!) should receive the same treatment as Scientologists. Would that we don't apply the same rationale to accountants, as this paper would surely condemn them to an even greater image problem.

I joined the Sceptics for what I saw as a balanced approach to an increasingly anti-intellectual Australia which I see as very susceptible to quackery and charlatans. I was hoping for a forum where cheap shots and popularisms, as we find in the current media, were ignored and serious academic discussion of spurious claims was on offer. In the main I have been glad for the way in which this journal, and the Sceptics in general, have provided such a forum. Mr Lead's article I hope will get the mileage it deserves.

**Matthew Wills  
Kariong NSW**

I found the paper "An oasis of privilege", presented by Richard Lead at the last convention and featured in *the Sceptic*, particularly illuminating and timely.

Richard speaks of the inordinate wealth of the mainstream churches, ably assisted by generous tax breaks, but few of them could match the enormous cash bonanza reaped by many of the American TV evangelistic organisations.

One such evangelist is Benny Hinn. A couple of weeks ago it was reported in the Brisbane *Sunday Mail* that Hinn was visiting Australia and that his performances had attracted 60,000 people in Melbourne and 45,000 in Brisbane. The *Sunday Mail* reported on the Brisbane meeting; the reporter who was refused admittance but finally sneaked in; the dark suited, burly body guards; the collection envelopes strategically placed and impossible to ignore; and the long lines of gullible worshippers hoping Hinn can cure their sundry ills with a shouted exhortation in the name of Jesus and a wave of his behering hand.

Last week's *Sunday Mail* reports that Hinn is relocating his Australian Ministry from Perth to Brisbane. The proliferation of these charismatic holy rollers in Queensland is alarming. Acacia Ridge, near Brisbane, as well as being the headquarters of Answers In Genesis (previously the Creation Science Foundation), now has the dubious distinction of being host to several other charismatic religious organisations, mostly relocated from interstate.

Hinn, although popular in Australia, has caused some controversy in the US. I quote from the *Sunday Mail*, "Some say his miracles are frauds [surprise, surprise] and his church a massive tax-free cash bonanza funded by the sick". For example, it is reported that Hinn claimed to have cured boxer Evander Holyfield's heart condition. Holyfield's doctors later admitted that cardiologists had wrongly diagnosed the condition. No doubt there are many more such cases.

Hinn is reported to employ five doctors who medically check alleged miracles backstage. We are not told who these doctors are, nor their *bona fides*, nor how they authenticate a miracle on the spot. These questions need to be asked.

We are all aware that so-called faith healers, who claim to cure every malady from cancer to bunions, are a danger to society. What is particularly galling is that these people are making millions out of the misery of their credulous supporters. [James Randi, in his book *The Faith Healers* (Prometheus), exposes many of the tricks of the trade resorted to by these hucksters-in-the-name-of-God. Ed]

Can we, Australian Sceptics, do anything to counter this proliferation of charlatans? Even if religious frauds qualified for the Sceptics' Challenge, they wouldn't be interested, they probably make \$100,000 or more for a single performance!

Can we run a media campaign (I intend writing to the major newspapers) to highlight the dangers posed to the sick and the desperate by faith healers.

Surely the medical profession must be concerned. Can we approach it from the angle of their tax free status?

Richard Lead, who no doubt has incurred the wrath of the righteous, has made an important contribution the religion/secularism debate being carried on by a

pitifully few individuals and groups and is to be congratulated. But what can we Skeptics do to keep this important debate alive?

**John Stear  
Coombabah, Qld**

## Richard Lead responds

Sigh. Where to begin? *The Skeptic* is a journal of fact and opinion and its canvas is broad. Recent editions have included articles on Nigerian letter scams, economics, electricity generation, the millennium bug, mine salting, and other topics which have little to do with our stated aim of the scientific investigation of the paranormal and pseudoscientific claims. But the journal would be diminished by the loss of such articles. Is *the Skeptic* to be quarantined to the nonexistence of the tooth fairy? My paper stated why the tax status of religious institutions should be of concern - the age-old<sup>1</sup> practice of utilising religion for its taxation and other benefits.

Whether by oversight, agreement, or embarrassment, neither Matthew nor Lindsay chose to defend the legal tax-free loophole provided to ministers of religion, so let's look at the religious institutions themselves: If Jesus cheerfully paid his taxes<sup>2</sup> why won't his churches?

Matthew accuses me of not providing a "rational scientific approach to this emotive issue." I suggest that if he finds tax reform an emotive issue he should try to get out a bit more. He also accuses me of quoting figures out of context, but without elaboration. I believe this is called argument by unsupported assertion.

Matthew and Lindsay both advance the canard that, because religious institutions perform good works for the community, they deserve their privileged taxation status. Both mention the Salvation Army, a sect which, according to the 1996 ABS Census, had just 74,100 members. They did not mention sects of similar size - the Churches of Christ (75,000), Jehovah's witnesses (83,400) - perhaps because any community good works these groups perform are well and truly hidden under a bushel.

I have difficulty with the proposition that because the Salvos perform commendable community services, the Hari Krishnas, the Presbyterians, the Ananda Marga *et al* should be exempt from tax. The "good works" argument conveniently ignores the largest do-gooders in the country - our federal and state governments. How can social security payments be made and hospitals be built without taxation?

And the "good works" argument might carry some weight if religious institutions were the only non-government groups performing community services. The Sydney 1998 Yellow Pages lists some 180 charities of which only 30 or so leap from the page with their religious link. This, not coincidentally, is about the same percentage as the population which attends church regularly. The species *Homo sapiens* is sociable and generally has a willingness to contribute to its common welfare. But when we donate money to charities we receive an income tax deduction for the gift - we do not

receive the blanket tax exemption commanded by religious institutions.

Compare religious institutions with charitable trusts. A fund established for public charitable purposes is exempt from income tax<sup>3</sup>. But the Commissioner requires the fund to apply at least 85% of its income to its relevant charitable purposes each year<sup>4</sup>. This restriction on accumulating assets within a tax exempt environment does not apply to the temporalities of the various religions. They can continue to add to their commercial wealth without limit. What is the possible justification for this different treatment? And why are the tax-exempt charities required to file audited accounts and be subject to government monitoring, while the tax-exempt religious institutions are not?

Matthew claims churches provide schools, hospitals, nursing homes etc. Has he not heard of state aid, Medicare, etc? These institutions are heavily subsidised (if not entirely funded) by the taxpayer. I understand Matthew is the Head of Religious Education at Knox Grammar, which styles itself as "a Uniting Church School for Boys." Matthew may care to peruse the accounts of his school and advise *the Skeptic* the percentage of its income received from student fees, government subsidies, and the Uniting Church. I predict his claim that "churches provide schools" will prove hollow indeed.

Matthew asks whether I believe the Church of Scientology and the Salvation Army are the same organisation. Of course I don't, but my perception is not the issue. In the eyes of Her Majesty's tax gatherers, they are identical.

Why are religions exempt from tax on their trading activities? As I munch my Kelloggs cornflakes each morning, I am heartened to know Kelloggs is liable to 36% income tax on its profits plus 15% withholding tax on unfranked dividends remitted to its foreign shareholders. But I glumly observe my wife eating her Sanitarium Weet-Bix. For Sanitarium is owned by the Seventh Day Adventist Church (52,700 members), and the Seventh Day Adventurers pay 0% income tax and 0% withholding tax on any trading profits remitted overseas. My usual lunch (two sandwiches spread with Kraft peanut butter) helps our governments build roads, schools and hospitals. My wife's lunch (Sanitarium peanut butter) does not. I find this discrimination between major<sup>5</sup> trading enterprises utterly unacceptable.

Lindsay makes two vacantly silly statements which cannot be allowed to pass. Unemployed who receive aid from the Salvation Army do *not* lose their dole. Bushfire brigades cannot under *any* circumstances buy beer free of sales tax. I find it ironic and sad that volunteer firefighters must pay 37% sales tax on beer consumed after a bushfire, while church worshippers are exempt from the 41% sales tax on their 1987 Coonawarra Blood of Mithras, if quaffed during a religious ritual.

Lindsay also claims that much of perceived church wealth is owned by their superannuation funds. In researching church wealth (which included trips to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, a government authority which incidentally rents space in a valuable Sydney CBD office building owned by the Anglican Church) I noted several instances of such funds owning proper-

## A peripheral idea

ties. These were not included in my paper. By law, superannuation fund assets must remain separate from the employer's assets and this is one law from which the churches cannot claim exemption. No, Lindsay - the churches are wealthy all right, and neither you nor I know just how huge their commercial investments are, due to a total lack of public accountability. And despite what you claim, I don't mind how the churches invest their wealth. In his address to the Anglican Church's synod in Sydney on 3 February 1998, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney called the Star City casino a "scar on our State" and condemned the greed and addiction of gambling and its social cost.<sup>6</sup> In the same week the Queensland TAB reported it is negotiating to lease one of the many commercial office buildings owned by the same Anglican Church.<sup>7</sup> The uses of commercial buildings owned by the Anglican Church do not bother me in the least, although sometimes I cannot suppress the boggle reflex.

Section 116 of the Australian Constitution guarantees our freedom of religion. It does not guarantee taxation privileges to religious institutions, and these can be revoked by parliamentary fiat. I urge our parliamentarians to do so. If this means worshippers at their suburban church, mosque, kingdom hall, or synagogue must each drop an additional dollar per week into the collection plate to pay for the building's land tax and council rates, then these burdens shouldered by the rest of us will be lightened and we will be grateful to them for paying their way. And if religious institutions do not spend **all** the funds collected from their parishioners and the public on "good works" they will lose 36% of the profits as income tax - just like the rest of us. Church wealth accretion will be delayed and the community will benefit. Australia can find far better uses for its taxation revenues than subsidising parishioners' Sunday morning tranquilliser.

### Notes

1. "...the fascinating phenomenon of lay landholders turning themselves, their lands and their families into 'monasteries' with the intention of avoiding certain common burdens that fell on lay but not church lands, such as occurred in England in the late seventh and eighth centuries. The parallel with contemporary taxation practices is obvious." J Gilchrist, *The Church and Economic Activity in the Middle Ages*, Macmillan. P.6
2. Matthew 17:25 "...Do the kings of this earth collect taxes and fees from their own people or from foreigners?" Peter answered, "From foreigners." Jesus replied, "Then their own people don't have to pay. But we don't want to cause trouble. So go cast a line into the lake and pull out the first fish you hook. Open its mouth, and you will find a coin. Use it to pay your taxes AND MINE." *News For Today, New Testament in Contemporary English*. Bible Society in Australia Inc. 1993
3. *Income Tax Assessment Act 1936*, Section 23(j)(ii)
4. *Income Tax Ruling IT340*.
5. *Australian Financial Review*, 14 February 1998 p.32. For the 1997 financial year Sanitarium's sales totalled \$253 million. Budgeted contributions to the SDA church from 1996 to 2000 are \$55 million. As the AFR laconically observes: "Being church-owned, Sanitarium operates free of corporate tax, a status that is the envy of its competitors."
6. *Daily Telegraph*, 4 February 1998 p.9
7. *Australian Financial Review*, 2 February 1998, p.30

At last the Skeptics are approaching a worthwhile subject for discussion, with Richard Lead's paper "An oasis of privilege". Instead of providing a continuous, pathetic whining about the irrelevancies of various beliefs, with what appears to be a pathological fixation on bent spoons and Creationism, the Society can finally justify its existence by making a lasting contribution to science.

My argument is that science is a religion, just like any other religion, and should enjoy the benefits. Every one knows that science is a belief system based on the fundamental assumptions of objectivity, reproducibility and the cosmological principle. Science also is a religion in that it has breakaway schisms and sects caused by paradigm shifts, as illustrated by histories of the phlogiston theory and plate tectonics, to mention just two. It has miracles; for example, an infinite universe arising from a singularity, the singularity itself, galaxies travelling faster than the speed of light and quantum action at a distance.

Science offers a way to find meaning and purpose in life. Scientists believe in many strange and wonderful immaterial things that cannot be directly perceived. Researchers still sacrifice themselves on the altars of Science, either through unrecoverable salary sacrifice when pursuing higher learning, or personal sacrifice as shown in the proposed trials of attenuated HIV. Scientific discoveries provide emotional responses, akin to religious emotional experiences. Science competes against the belief systems of other religions. Science has everything that is required for a very powerful religion.

Some may argue that Science does not have a supreme being to worship, but not all religions require deities. If necessary, it should be easy to choose famous scientists to fill this role. Apologists say that Science cannot examine all of life's questions about the supernatural, emotions, morals or ethics because such questions cannot be falsified. A typical question is, "Is there or is there not a god?". I am sure that science and *Homo sapiens sapiens* will progress to study and answer such questions, to the stage where we can ring it up, meet it and shake its pseudopod. It is foolish to limit Science to only presently falsifiable inquiries. New knowledge, technology and techniques are sure to become available which will allow what was once unexaminable to now be scrutinised. In the future, to place limits on Science will be regarded as heresy.

It is unfortunate that the more intelligent members of society tend to gravitate towards Law and Medicine, but there still must be a few left for Science. These scientific luminaries could apply themselves to the problem to ensure that all religious ecological niches are filled by Science, thus eliminating the causes of war, pestilence and poverty provided by other religions. Darwinian principles will ensure that Science will become the one and only true religion. The high priests (those with DScs) could shave their heads; with the hair being woven into shirts for the current editors of *the Skeptic*. The editors would naturally take up the abstermious life of hermits to learn humility and gain ethereal experiences in their new-found role as religious leaders.

**continued p 58...**

# The definitive Skeptics library

Allan Lang

The listing is going along reasonably well and I am now able to see what the various categories will be.

Fringe Beliefs: General overview of the strange things people believe.

Explaining Fringe Beliefs: As above, but examining why they believe.

Investigations and case studies: Skeptical explanations of all those "unexplained" mysteries.

Madness of Crowds: Mass hysteria/Rumour Panics.

Learning to Think: Philosophy and books that intrigue the thought processes.

Freethought: OK, the Skeptics don't deal with religion *per se*, but it follows on from the last category. Some books have been already been recommended, and our pals at the Creation Science Foundation would be really disappointed if it was omitted.

Reference Books: I am trying to avoid listing too many general reference works, on the assumption that using these is taken as a given. But reference works that are reasonably reliable on arcane subjects will be listed.

Ignorance of the Community: These are also reference books, but those of a totally unreliable nature (Allusion is to Oscar Wilde's comment on modern journalism).

Specific topics: Creationism, UFOs, Spacegods, etc.

I am considering including a section: How the Real World Works. Candidate books would seem to include one of James Burke's: *Connections*, *The Day the Universe Changed*, *The Pinball Effect*. Any thoughts on which (if any)?

The nominations have topped four hundred, but that's nowhere near enough to ensure that all the best Skeptical books have been included. Success of the list depends on it being the accumulated wisdom of a large number of skeptics.

Of the 12 books which have received 4-plus nominations, I have read eleven and wouldn't dispute the claim of any to be in the top twelve. Even the top 100 look so apt that I did not notice that there had not been a single nomination of anything by S J Gould before January 7. So what else is missing?

The listing now covers a wide range of topics and time. Excluding those writers from 500-2500 years ago who now need a translator or editor, the nominations now run from 1794 to 1998. I am delighted that the Skeptics recommending books for the listing agree with my view that encouraging rational enquiry in general is at least as important as taking a critical view of a particular piece of nonsense. But the listing still lacks sufficient breadth.

Also, there are some categories which I consider significant that have attracted few recommendations. I have some books in mind but would like a few nominations to ensure I include the best examples. Null categories presently include: Satanic Ritual Abuse, False Memories, Postmodernism, Feminism, Witchcraft,

Greenhouse, Environmentalism, New Age, and Technophobia.

So keep those faxes, letters, e-mails rolling in. I feel confident that the final listing can be a fair representation of the best of Skeptical resources, but the more nominations, the better the final listing will be.

Try to give me enough information for an adequately described entry. Title, Author, publication details, what it's about, and a word or three why you think it should be on the list.

Could you send your listings to me:

Fax: (08) 8277 6427 ; e-mail to: [lakes@senet.com.au](mailto:lakes@senet.com.au);  
literal mail: PO Box 377, Rundle Mall SA 5000



## ... Peripheral idea from p 57

The advantages are enormous. Scientists would belong to the religious organisation of Science and could be paid tax-free salaries boosted by fringe benefits. People without science degrees who follow the practices of Science could be acolytes within the church and thus share in the benefits. Members could be leased to organisations to carry out their holy scientific works, with large tax-deductible donations from these corporations ensuring favourable outcomes. Royalties from church-owned patents would free the levels of funding and the direction of research from corporate profit requirements and the vagaries of political self-interest. With the financial power now available, PhDs would no longer need to go on two year contracts and could have a career structure through the church. Long term research could be supported and well-respected scientists would no longer need to grovel and abase themselves in obsequious pleadings for research funds. Research could freely follow the true shining path.

Once Science is established as a religion, we will all be on the gravy train for life. So, Richard Lead should do something more useful than just mucking around with the Society's financial accounts. He should take that leap of faith and be filled with the holy spirit by immediately incorporating Science as a religion, with the Australian Skeptics as its founding church. The world would be beholden through the uplift of humanity's devotion to Science and the spreading of the word of Science through heathen backwaters of ignorance, such as Queensland and southern parts of the USA. With Science as the one and only true religion and all the others being the works of the devil, the tax-free advantages should mean that financial power and world domination will soon be ours, rather than presently accruing to the existing tax advantaged non-Science religions.

**Bill Saxby**  
**Hornsby Heights NSW**

# The dog that didn't bark

**In Dr Alex Ritchie's article, "Dropping the pretence" (Vol 17, No 4), he questioned the motivation behind the change of its name by the Creation Science Foundation, to Answers in Genesis. The NSW representative of that organisation wrote to dispute some of Dr Ritchie's claims. We are always happy to give critics a chance to respond to anything published in *the Skeptic*, unlike the AiG (nee CSF) which has always flatly refused to publish any of our criticism or corrections in their journals**

Upon reading "Dropping the pretence" by Alex Ritchie, I felt I had to write and bear all, admitting that it was indeed I the 'member' of the Creation Science Foundation who had that meeting with Alex. I concur that it was a friendly meeting, the cordiality strained only when I mentioned the C (creation) word.

Alex writes that CSF has changed its name to "safeguard this religious organisation from the possibility of legal action, following the precedent created by the Plimer/Roberts case." Considering amongst other things, that the battle has gone two nil in Roberts favour, with the big one to come, no one at CSF has lost sleep from fear of Plimer's legal wrath.

Alex further says that CSF's "US offshoot" changed its name to Answers in Genesis "recently", when in fact this happened three years ago, hardly recently and before there was any mention of Plimeresque trade practices action. Then I suppose three years is but a blink of an eye to a man who believes everything worth investigating happened millions of years ago. It is worth noting that the Creation Science Foundation still exists as a legal entity, Answers in Genesis being the now formalised name of the ministry wing, a name which has been in use here for more than one year. Creation Science Foundation is still on the literature and letterheads. This makes nonsense of Alex' claim that CSF changed its name for fear of legal action. Once again he has got it wrong!

Alex also falsely states that CSF is a "business carried on for profit", when in fact the CSF is a non-profit organisation which is independently audited with its financial reports a matter of public record. Once again you have not done your homework Alex, hardly the scientific method. Possibly your religious fervour got the better of your reason? Again!

Alex claims that the CSF spearheads the drive to have creationism taught in science classes in Australia. I challenged Alex to back this claim up when we met, he was unable to do so then and is unable to do so now. I have been a speaker on behalf of CSF for over six years now and in that time have never spoken in a science class. I have spoken in hundreds of churches but only in three state schools, only in Scripture lessons, and only when invited. Alex has CSF's statement regarding its opposition to legislation to force the teaching of creation in state school science classes, however he has cho-

sen to ignore this and repeat this demonstrably fallacious claim. Shame on you Alex and after we fed you all that lovely healthy food which by the way didn't appear upon the table by chance.

Alex says that he will be watching for any attempts by the CSF to infiltrate Australian schools. This I promise will be a boring and unrewarding exercise. This reminds me that it was this same A. Ritchie who claimed to have mobilised a team of sixty scientists to dog CSF's path. They must be clones of the invisible man as their presence has been noted only in the negative. But then it was Alex' mate Ian Plimer who gave thousands of unsuspecting people the impression that he had had all sorts of unpleasant experiences at CSF meetings. In reality he has never been seen at any CSF meeting.

**Warwick Armstrong  
Seaforth, NSW**

Method thinks that Warwick Armstrong protesteth too much, and very selectively, concerning my speculative comments about the Creation Science Foundation's recent name change to a more honest, and accurate version, 'Answers in Genesis'.

Exactly when CSF's US-based sister organisation (or offshoot, since it is run by our old CSF friend, Ken Ham) changed its name is irrelevant. Three years ago is very recent to a geologist, even to those whose time vision is limited to 6000 years. More to the point is, when did the Australian-based organisation change its name?

Since CSF loudly proclaimed this name change, with reasons, in its November 1997 *Prayer News*, after the outcome of the Plimer/ Roberts Ark Trial, I drew the natural conclusion. Now all good scientists know that correlation is not proof of cause, but the coincidence seemed too good not to comment upon, and I stand by my speculation.

As for Warwick's comments that no-one in CSF was losing any sleep because the court cases had gone two nil in Robert's favour well, pull the other leg. Prof Ian Plimer lost to Mr Alan Roberts on a legal technicality, depending on a strict interpretation of 'trade and commerce'. Ian's lawyers are so convinced that he has a case that they themselves are taking the appeal process farther, to a higher court.

In any event, as I explained in my article ("Dropping the pretence", *the Skeptic* 17/4 pp13,15), in the same situation, the CSF would almost certainly qualify on virtually all counts as being 'in trade and commerce'. If, as Warwick Armstrong states, the name 'Creation Science Foundation' is still used on their literature and letterheads, maybe the CSF should still be worried.

On the matter of creationist infiltration into Australian schools, I accept Warwick's statement that he, personally, has only very rarely spoken in state schools. My comments were based on many years experience

'at the coalface' as the Australian Museum's palaeontologist when many of the state school groups coming through the museum had obviously been 'got at' by a creationist teacher, although usually not the teacher accompanying them.

At the same time evidence emerged of active creationists working in the education departments of the Australian Museum, Taronga Zoo, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Science Department of a leading Sydney Teachers College. One of these individuals later surfaced as the president of a major regional branch of the Science Teachers Association of NSW, still actively pushing his creationist views. One need not be paranoid, just sceptical, to detect a possible subversive pattern in the above.

OK, let's assume Warwick Armstrong is correct and I have unjustly maligned this fine, upstanding Christian organisation, the Creation Science Foundation. Since they still use the name CSF themselves, I think I'm justified in not using their new *nom-de-plume*. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck ...!

Let us put it to the test. I do not have a direct line to all science teachers in Australian schools, although I am proud to be patron of the NSW Central West Branch of the Science Teachers Association. I assume that many Australian science teachers, as natural sceptics, are also members of the Australian Skeptics and read this magazine. To all science teachers out there - I have been challenged by Warwick Armstrong, on behalf of the CSF (aka Answers in Genesis) to provide evidence that the Creation Science Foundation has actively targeted Australian public schools. I would be grateful if anyone knowing of such activities would let me know and provide supporting evidence.

Warwick also enquired what happened to my 60-strong country wide network of anti-creation activists which I put together in the late 1980s to monitor and respond to creationist activities in Australia. Well, the answer is simple. With heavy museum exhibition com-

mitments, and no scientific support staff, something had to give. I decided to concentrate on the most valuable use of my time and energies. The results can still be seen in some of the finest fossil and evolution displays in any Australian museum.

Readers may well be curious about what all this has to do with the title of my reply, 'The dog that didn't bark'. Well, nothing really, but I would like to remind readers (and the Creation Science Foundation) that the same issue of *the Skeptic* contained a second article by me, much less light-hearted than my speculative comments on CSF's name change.

In the second article, "Flood Geology - a house built on sand" (*the Skeptic* 17/4, pp16-21, 25) I provided chapter and verse on some of the activities and publications

of Warwick Armstrong's Brisbane - based colleague, Dr Andrew Snelling, one of CSF's leading lights and its resident geological spokesman.

I accused Dr Snelling of deliberately misquoting, misrepresenting and falsifying the writings of other scientists, asked him to justify his actions and I repeated my challenge to him to a public debate with me, face-to-face, on "Geological Evidence for Noah's Flood - For and Against".

Strangely, despite the seriousness of my accusations, some of the worst that one can level at a supposedly genuine scientist, Dr Snelling has preferred to remain silent, as he did in response to my earlier article on the same subject, 'Will the Real Dr Snelling Please Stand Up?' (*the Skeptic* 11/4 pp 12-15).

Creationists are very quick to respond on minor nit-picking criticism. It is a good diversionary tactic to divert attention from the real issues at stake. But they are remarkably silent when it comes to answering more serious allegations. So, the most important conclusion to draw from this latest exchange with

the Creation Science Foundation is the remarkable silence of Dr Andrew Snelling, 'the dog that didn't bark'.

**Alex Ritchie  
Turramurra NSW**



Our mole in the ABC\* sent us this picture of Alex Ritchie using his patented "fish divining" technique on a cast of the Devonian fossil fish deposit that will form the centerpiece of the Age of Fishes Museum at Canowindra. This museum will be, when completed, one of the world's largest and best displays of fossilised fish and will stand as a tribute to the scientific skills of Alex Ritchie, and of his devotion to the cause of science education.

\* Dr Paul Willis



## Victorian attitudes

Roland Seidel

### Sex in science

The Australian Skeptics Science Symposium is on again. This time in conjunction with STAV, our topic is "What are women doing in science? (is sex a barrier to critical thinking?)" It's an evening for *all* sexes, with four great speakers and supper. Come and listen to:

Professor Priscilla Kincaid-Smith. Emeritus professor of medicine at Melbourne Uni, former president of the World Medical Association and leading kidney research scientist, was told in her first job that she could have the job until a man came along. Not a more qualified man, any one. Hear her ideas on how times have changed for science.

Dr Claire Colebrook. Hear what Claire, from Monash Uni's philosophy department, has to tell you about why boys are more attracted to science, and why girls tend towards astrology, homeopathy, aromatherapy and the like (when was the last time you read your horoscope in *Penthouse* magazine?)

Dr Andi Horvath. You've probably heard the "Kitchen Professor" on 3RRR's *Einstein-a-go-go*, or seen her with CSIRO's double-helix club for kids, maybe at Melbourne Uni, or at the Museum. She has all the latest research - what attracts men to technology of all kinds, what technology will women use willingly, and if you are a teacher, how can you steer boys and girls toward science.

Professor Adrienne Clarke. Is she the busiest speaker on our program? The Lieutenant Governor of Victoria is also Professor of Botany, Director of Plant Cell Biology and school of botany at Melbourne Uni, member of four company boards (including CSIRO). She grew up on the family farm at Gisborne, and began her travels in science using her brother's chemistry notes (her parents had to hire a tutor as there was no chemistry taught at her girls

school.) Fortunately, she says, things have changed. Come and hear the former head of CSIRO talk about science now and then, and opportunities for science students (boys and girls).

The evening is held at Scienceworks (just over the Westgate bridge) starting about 5.30 pm on Tuesday, August 11. There are refreshments for early arrivals, and supper during the evening. All this for only \$25.00. Pay by cheque or credit card using the form in the back of the magazine.

### TV

We've had a bit of fun in the TV studio. The Jan 24 shoot was intended as a screen test and muck-about session but some of it was pretty good. Look out for Madame Roland's Oracle and some interesting disclosures from Greg about UFOs he's known and loved. It's amazing how some people behave when you point a camera at them. We also took a complete video record of the Challenge test on Jason Worthing (see Bob's article).

We finally did a fair dinkum shoot on Feb 7 with some real scripts. Thanks to Craig Wilson who answered the call for help. I'm not sure he expected to be a Sumerian apprentice to Master Astrologer Steve, but I reckon the Sumerian scenes are going to become classics.

It's much slower than I thought. No wonder TV stars get into so much trouble; all that sitting around waiting for the cameras and lights to get ready, with nothing to do but think up silly things to do. My guess is we won't hit the airwaves till probably mid year. Ah, doesn't matter - it's going to be faaaantastic.

### Challenges

Bob has been run off his feet with Challenges. We had the telepath Jason and three water diviners already teed up and then the Gold

Coast group came up with the brilliant Spotter's Fee idea. Up came a vedic astrologer/palmist who took a lot of talk and produced no real action, although it eventually spawned a challenge from the spotter herself. The diviners are still waiting and we intend using John Foley to publicise it as soon as I can get used to having three weeks holiday.

Meanwhile, we've revamped the challenge documents to reflect the changed circumstances: with Richard Lead's contribution it is now, incredibly, amazingly, strikingly, assertively, the Australian Skeptics \$100,000 Challenge.

### Newsletter

Finally, it is the end of an era for Victoria, lots of eras in fact. We're charging for our newsletter. We simply can't afford to do it for nothing any more. Coincidentally we've changed editor as well. Steve Roberts is taking over from Vince Butler who needs a spell from newsletters. Not only that, it's been the Vic/Tas newsletter for a while to give the revitalised Tasmanian group a hand to get going and even that has now finished. We've had the trauma councillors in and think we can weather the paradigm shifts.

Victorian subscribers will get one more newsletter for free. It'll cost you \$5 for the rest of this year and, if things go to plan, probably \$10 next year.

We thought of combining the paper newsletter and the email newsletter that Greg assembles for the web (ask [contact@skeptics.com.au](mailto:contact@skeptics.com.au) if you're interested) but that is a completely different audience and goes all over the world. The paper newsletter is parochial; a nice friendly, comfy cosy, family read. Besides, there's just something about paper that the electronic media can never replace, don't you think?





## Southerly aspect

Allan Lang

I never cease to be surprised at what particular topic will seize the public interest.

In South Australia the latest is the local appearance of Madonna, the Blessed Virgin Mary. No, not her appearance playing the piano accordion at the Adelaide Festival of the Yarts, but her permanent place of residence as a miraculous image on the wall of the Anglican Church at Yankalilla.

Recently the suburban/rural paper, the Southern Times (January 28) ran a piece that told the readers that the Skeptical view of the Yankalilla image was that it was not a miracle but a mere visual illusion. Not exactly surprising news, but since then the Skeptical phone has been ringing continually on the subject. Well, six calls - but that's more than we've ever got after a media comment in the past - the majority of them highly supportive of our position, welcoming the fact that someone is saying what they have been thinking: that the Yankalilla "miracle" is pretty unimpressive, and the promotion it has been given lacks gravitas.

Since that time, Laurie Eddie has been interviewed for a film being made about the Yankalilla image. Look for it to appear sometime in the future on SBS.

Also on Yankalilla. There isn't just one doubtful image there.

On a photograph has been taken with the church in the background, one of the windows revealed some shadows which some people have interpreted as an image of Jesus holding an Aboriginal baby. One really must exhibit some wonderment at people who can detect Aboriginal features in an unfocussed blur a couple of inches across in size.

\* \* \*

We have now had two functions at the Rob Roy Hotel, both very successful.

The December function featured an On the Contrary discussion on the subject of Dental Amalgam with Roman Lohyn, dentist and dental amalgam critic, and Don Wilson, dentist and skeptic. What occurred to me during the debate was that there is not much dispute about the basic scientific facts, but that the different views on the desirability of use of dental amalgam depend on whether greater weight is given to proven hazards, or to the potential hazards. Personally I regard the century plus use of amalgam without noticeable major adverse effects as reasonable evidence for its safety, but that may just be because of my skeptical outlook.

The February function may have been our most successful yet. Many new Skeptics and skeptically interested people turned up, but the spacious and well-laid out room at the Rob Roy was able to easily accommodate them.

The subject was somewhat lighter in tone than the December function, but the issues behind it were serious ones. Mike Robinson, Editor in Chief of the Messenger newspapers, gave his perspective how the news is filtered through that semipermeable membrane known as "the media". He revealed some of the problems in sorting real news from the misinformation, press releases, urban myths and outright hoaxes that journalists are swamped with daily. And how journalists see that the news we read is more than just entertainment designed to keep the advertisements apart. Or at least it should be: Mike also had some examples of publications which have perhaps not too high a regard for factual accuracy.

\* \* \*

Our next dinner will be held there on the first Wednesday of April (that's April 1) at 7:30 PM.

Skeptics SA invite you to our skeptical wine dinner on at the Rob Roy at 106 Halifax Street Adelaide on April 1 on the topic:

"Skepticism and Wine Myths"

The speaker will be Brian Miller, from The Andrew Garrett Wine Group.

Brian is well qualified to speak on this subject. He is a Skeptic and an active member of Toastmasters International who has represented South Australia in national public speaking contests.

He has had many years experience in the marketing of fine wines, and in wine education.

Brian promises to deal with such questions as:

Do corks breathe? Will a dangling spoon prevent champagne from going flat? Does planting vines by the phases of the moon improve the resulting wine? Should women be allowed into wineries during vintage?

And the one question to which I am not sure I want to know the answer: Is wine good for your health?

Bring along your most fondly held wine beliefs and questions for exhaustive examination. This will not be a dry argument; practical wine demonstrations will complement the purely scientific nature of the event. A Wine Options Game will decide who in the audience has the most finely tuned palate, or the sharpest psychic ability, and there will be a prize for the winner.

Ring me on 08 8277 6427 and tell me that you will be there.



## Tasmanian topics

Fred Thornett

The Tasmanian Skeptics incorporated late last year. We are now the impressively styled "Australian Skeptics in Tasmania Inc.", but you may call us the Tassie Skeptics.

The inaugural committee is Head Honcho, Mr Warren Boyles; Vice-Head Honcho, Mr Alan Bottomley; Moneyer-in-Chief, Dr James Marchant; Lord High Scrivener, Mr Fred Thornett; Extra-ordinary Committee Folk, Mr John Sluis, Ms Annie Warburton and Informal.

\* \* \*

Our first 1998 function was a dinner followed by a mediated general discussion on the topic "How to throw out the bullshit bath water whilst preserving the scientific baby."

We expect to hold such functions every month or two, probably at the Marquis of Hastings Hotel in West Hobart.

The committee hopes that we will

be able to set up a larger public meeting, probably in April, for a forum discussion on, "Does acupuncture really work?" We hope to have speakers both pro and con - mainly medical practitioners, but possibly others with some expert knowledge.

\* \* \*

Tassie Skeptics think that something has to be done to counter the increasing number of pseudoscience and new age "training" courses that are now available to the public.

If Skeptics are not active in giving counter views then, by our passivity, we are actually assisting the propagation of ideas inimical to our views about the need for a more reasoning and scientifically literate society.

If you would like to know more about what we are doing just ask.

\* \* \*

Fred Thornett has been asked by the Hobart University of the Third Age to repeat his ten lecture course, "Skepticism: Opening your mind without letting your brains fall out" This commenced on 3 March 1998. We hope that a similarly structured course will be offered through Adult Education later this year.

Fred has also been asked to lead a series of ten discussion groups about topics of his choice at the U3A, in fields such as science, religion, philosophy, cosmology, medicine/health, art, finance, etc. This will allow a range of topics from, "Why Fred Thornett thinks Karl Popper is really beaut" to "The latest consumer scams are ..."

\* \* \*

This is the last call for persons wishing to be appointed as Masters of Skepticism by joining the new Tassie Skeptics. (Lovely testimonial provided.) See the Skeptics website or email [thornett@netspace.net.au](mailto:thornett@netspace.net.au) for details.



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# 1998 National Convention

## October 31 - November 1

### Canberra

**The ACT branch will host this year's Convention in the National Science Centre.**

**The Skeptics Annual Convention Dinner will be held in Old Parliament House.**

**Details in the next issue.**

# Hunter gatherings

Michael Creech

## On the hunt

The Hunter Skeptics have been in regular contact with Cheryl Freeman, the local ex-nurse who is valiantly exposing the multitude of worthless "therapeutic" and related devices being widely advertised. Two of the devices have been purchased in an effort by the Australian Skeptics to test the claims made on their behalf.

## Pest eliminator

We are saddened to notice a new TV spot featuring the Australian Army endorsing a locally manufactured pest eliminator by smilingly claiming "it works". That has yet to be proved and if we can extend the above funding the Hunter Skeptics would love to underwrite a rigorous series of tests at a competent testing laboratory.

## Those Americans

Colin Keay received a wake up call at 8:30am one Saturday. It was the Californian Skeptics inquiring about his annual subscription. Asked if the time was OK for ringing Colin replied that it was but was taken aback by the next question - "Is it still Friday there?" This is one instance when the yanks were not ahead of Colin!!

## More intrepid reporting

The January 2 issue of the *Queanbeyan Age*, newsletter of the Canberra's University of the Third Age has right next to their horoscope an article praising a new astrology tome "The Atlantic Seed" by Alison Moroney. According to Ms Moroney astrology has been a science practised for centuries with documented results. She points out that some of history's greatest and most revered scientific minds like Kepler (sic), Newton and Galileo were astrologers. Unfortunately for Ms Moroney's claim it was their contributions to astronomy, not

astrology that made these scientists famous. Ms Moroney apparently has a post office box number in nearby Singleton and claims that data recorded in her book has gained academic support from the University of Newcastle's Physics Dept. Problem is nobody in the Physics Dept. knows anything about supporting Ms Moroney's Atlantic fantasy, least of all the University's eminent astronomer Colin Keay, who knows nowt about Ms Moroney. Indeed he doesn't want to know about any of her baloney! The same article also asserted that her results were endorsed by Prof Pewter (sic) Bicknell of Monash University. Sounds a bit tinny to us!

## Those pesky aliens again

An unknown structure was erected in Birdwood Park late last year and Col Maybury was sent in to identify it and determine its purpose. It was fitting that it was erected in this park as Birdwood was an Australian General who managed to kill many soldiers. Before Col's arrival it had already been determined that it was an antenna aimed at the Star Vega in the constellation Lyrae and of a design unknown to earthly science.

Upon inspection of this wondrous machine Col found it covered in an alien substance similar in many ways to our hessian and it had grass seeds in the weave. Obviously it was designed not only to communicate back to its owners but also beam back vegetative life forms. Within a couple of days not only had the seeds all gone but the structure began slowly disintegrating under our harsh climate and the Newcastle smog. Obviously the superior life forms responsible would not be able to withstand our primitive corrosive environment ... .but... who would take the seed from Birdwood Park? A bird would, of course!



# Darwinian selection

Simon Potter

On the second Saturday of every month, a Darwin phenomenon is drawing interest from passers-by and local media alike. There have been reports of bright lights and a localised temperature decrease in the vicinity of The Roma Bar, in Cavanagh St.

Rationality dictates that the phenomenon is the result of fluorescent tubes and air conditioners, however, we assert that it is a combination of the harsh light of reality and the cool balm of the enquiring mind that is at work. Our committee is working on a submission to this effect, to be forwarded to the Nobel Prize secretariat.

\* \* \*

President, and founding member of the Darwin Skeptics, the revered Margaret Kittson, recently left our fair city for the balmy environment of Queensland. Best wishes from everyone in Darwin go to Margaret and may her library card never expire.

Margaret's position at the helm has been taken by the estimable Dr Richard Giese.

\* \* \*

So, if you need a cool drink on a warm night, or are weary of new age nonsense, pseudoscientific piffle or dogmatic fundamentalist posturing, and would like to meet some like-minded people, drop in to a Darwin Skeptics meeting, for a swift dose of sanity and, of course, a few laughs.

And, we will always welcome visitors from the South who care to drop us a line to let us know they are visiting the Top End.



## Economics I

An economist who sneers at considerations of entropy as “banal” (17/4 p39) is likely to be soon consigned to the dustbin of history; the sooner the better. The concept of the economy as a closed system, or as a system with inputs and outputs (collectively known as throughputs) from and to an infinite system, has been comprehensively demolished by Herman Daly (*Beyond Growth*. Beacon Press, Boston). The view that the economy exists within a finite system (Earth plus solar radiation) is largely common sense. Despite this, it sits uncomfortably with most economists who fear, rightly, that it threatens the very roots of their cherished theories, and so their livelihood.

Entropy is the measure of the degree of disorder of a physical system. In a closed system entropy tends to increase and can only be decreased by increasing the entropy outside the system, which is then no longer closed. Thus fuel, fossil or nuclear, has low entropy. Its potential energy can be turned to high temperature thermal energy or electricity and so do useful work, thereby reducing disorder within the system. But the energy inevitably dissipated to the biosphere during this process is at low temperature. It therefore has high entropy, ie a high degree of disorder and low or zero capacity to do further work. It should be clear that when these fuels run out, then only solar (including hydroelectricity), geothermal and possibly (pie in the sky?) fusion power will stand between us and a rather chilly future.

Assertion of the Entropy Principle or, equivalently, the second law of thermodynamics, is a shorthand way of saying all this. But it also says that the material outputs from our economic system, waste products by the million tonnes, which economists like to externalise as being of no importance, will eventually clog the larger system, the biosphere, and render it uninhabitable, regardless of the continued apparently satisfactory working of the world's economy.

Sustainable growth may not as yet

## Letters

### **An opportunity for readers to air their views, vent their spleen or just sound off on issues that have appeared in the magazine, or anything else that takes their Skeptical fancy**

be an oxymoron but certainly will become one as available raw materials, and places to dump waste, diminish. Growth can be divided into growth of throughput and growth of efficiency of use of that throughput. So we can have growth without increased throughput or, better, “sustainable development” in which diminished throughput is balanced by increased efficiency of use. It is vital also to understand that replacement of raw materials by investment in capital goods is only a limited possibility. Daly (*ibid*) gives the cogent example that you cannot continue to build houses at the same rate by using more saws as the supply of wood runs out.

In a socioeconomic study of Brazil, Daly draws the firm conclusion that reduction in fertility of the lower economic classes resulted primarily from more openness about sex and greater availability of contraceptives, and that it preceded, rather than followed, an increase in per capita income. It is, therefore, at least questionable whether it is necessary, though it is clearly desirable, to raise standards of living, in order to achieve population stabilisation. Equally clearly, the average standard of living can't go on rising, except very locally, so that either the well off must take some cuts, or the world population must be drastically reduced. The alternative, to attempt to raise the standard of living of the present world population, to even our own average level, let alone that of the USA, would certainly cause the carrying capacity of the planet to be exceeded. This then is the fallacy of prescribing continuing growth as a panacea for all economic woes. In the first place, the gains go to the already rich and the poor stay poor or get poorer (“trickle down” is a myth). In the second place, unhindered growth will inevitably bring

us up against the limits imposed by the Entropy Principle.

Economists, if they are to be more than bean counters, should be actively seeking solutions to the problems of unemployment and maldistribution of income under conditions of sustainable development, ie without the luxury of growth in throughput. Blind application of current theories merely ensures that the rich will have the best deck chairs when the ship goes down.

**Bob Entwistle  
Dunedin NZ**

## Economics II

Mr McGuinness writes interestingly and well on his subject and related ones. But his finale is a bit of a wail - “Nobody understands us. Nobody loves us”. He says, correctly, that one should be cautious in criticism of an activity which one does not understand. Yet while I would be quite unable to find the flaws in an engineer's calculations, I would be certain they were there if his bridge collapsed.

Thus, we have been told by all the experts that the Asian economies were a model for us. Suddenly the bridge collapses and the same experts tell us they knew all along that it was rotten. Consider a wider picture, which must jumble economics, politics, sociology and more, as does Mr McGuinness. For nearly 200 years the advanced countries have shown a continuing rise in the average standard of living, together with an increase in egalitarianism. This seemed so assured that in 1945 all those countries moved to systems offering security from the cradle to the grave. These worked reasonably well for another 30 years, but met ever greater difficulties from changes rising out of new technologies. The most serious was that machines had made male muscle almost unnecessary, with little market value except on the sporting field. We are all familiar with the spreading consequences of this, and no one has been able to suggest a workable solution.

The economists, and those they influence, say that the solution can be left to the great god Market, who

moves in most mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. Deregulation has caused clear-cut losses for many sections of society, but every section has lost much of that security which was common in 1945. We're assured that prosperity is just around the corner but most people are sure that we will move further and further into a two or three tier society,

I'm told that many WWII soldiers, who had known the Great Depression, were puzzled by the ease with which war made money and jobs easily available. The scientists, academics, ABC people and others who earn sneers from Mr McGuinness are possibly similarly puzzled by a distorted economy which shrinks their funds, but enthuses about ten trillion Australian dollars being gambled on the currency exchanges. (The figure, from 1995-96, excludes necessary exchange for imports, exports etc). The commission for the money changers would be \$10 billion. The undesirable hogs listed above might well like to get their snouts into that trough.

The economy and the market are human devices, so mankind has long hoped that they might work for the 'greatest good of the greatest number'. With material supplies now assured, one might rationally expect that this could happen. Mr McGuinness has made a number of points clear in defending economists, including the obvious one that they are not solely responsible for the state of the nation. But they have a big responsibility and "by their fruits ye shall know them" and I think Sceptics can reasonably be dissatisfied with this Science.

**J T Wearne  
Fremantle WA**

## Computer bombs

The article "The great year 2000 bomb hoax" (*Forum*, 17/3) shows the danger of attempts at scepticism by those with a superficial knowledge of a subject and a flippant rather than objective view.

Brian Robson obviously has only a limited understanding of the problem and its causes. I have consulted to over 100 of the largest computing installations in Australia about

the Year 2000 issue. Please allow me to join this discussion.

Only one of the causes is programs that "subtract dates to calculate elapsed time". Another is programs that receive two-digit input dates from screens or from feeds from other systems, and then infer the missing century by some windowing algorithm. Another is programs that sort data (for scrolling screens, for report control breaks...) using a two digit year. Another is programs that incorrectly believe that 2000 is not a leap year. There are more. But more than this, these are only the cause of the problem. Fixing the code is indeed simple. The problem is the amount of code that needs to be checked to see if it has these issues, the amount of code that will need to be changed, the management of change in the complex interdependent world of business IT, and most of all the consequent testing that needs to be done to identify the inevitable errors that will be introduced. Since automated tools mostly address only making changes to the code and not the real issue at all, it is no wonder that "the estimated cost of conversion has not come down".

The cheap shots the writer takes at the Year 2000 industry show no understanding of the scope of the problem. I don't have time to answer every point (being busy assisting clients who are better in touch with the realities of business computing), but I would like to address a few.

"Any company that will be seriously affected by the millennium bug has already been affected". One of the most common type of dates (after birth dates) is today's date, and last time I checked it wasn't 2000 yet. Anyone working in the real world knows that few core business systems handle dates more than three years ahead, and the majority only look one year ahead or less. The real surge of year 2000 bugs will come over the next two years.

There are not "1065 days to go": programs could fail any time "00" pops up in the data. Therefore the "simplest strategy" of putting all the helpdesk on duty on 3/1/2000 is based on ignorance of the issues and ignorance of the scale of the fix. This idea has to come from academia. In the real business world helpdesk

people don't write code. Programmers do, and then they have to test the changes and migrate them through quality assurance and user testing before they ever get near production. So even if all the bugs will hit on 1/1/2000 (which they won't, as discussed above) there aren't enough programmers alive to fix them in the first months let alone days of the century. Besides some of my clients measure the loss due to down time in millions of dollars per hour.

"All modern databases store the date internally including the century", but this does not stop occurrences of dates stored as character text occurring even in systems based on these databases. Huge quantities of data are exchanged daily via EDI and exchange of flat files, with dates in text format. More importantly, most of the really big, high volume systems do not use "modern" databases. They use VSAM or IMS. If they do use DB2, or have been downsized to another "modern" database, the data structures come to them from legacy systems and often retain their original formats.

Most Year 2000 conferences are very useful for the attendees. They network with other companies at a similar stage as themselves, they assess available tools, and most of all they get many useful tips on the detail of Year 2000 projects (believe me the devil is in the details). Very few companies spend the time and money involved in these seminars without good reason.

Which brings me to my main point: there have been many hoaxes in history, but how many fool the CEOs and CIOs and the technical staff of almost every major corporation on the planet? There are only a few stubborn individuals out there prepared to risk the business by ignoring this problem. I think the analogy is strong with the acceptance of evolution as obvious fact by the vast majority of the scientific community, even though it is essentially based on inference not quantifiable experiment.

Most of the major business data processing that runs our world is still done on mainframes (taxation, social security, law enforcement, insurance, banking, finance, telecoms, primary resources, airlines...) and most of that is in

COBOL. Most of this software lasts a lot longer than "four to seven years". The core systems were there ten to fifteen years ago and will probably still be there for ten to fifteen years to come. These companies do not idly commit tens of millions of dollars each on a hoax. They are not "simply taking it in their stride". They are taking it very seriously and acting to prevent loss and disruption. (See the very same webpages referred to in the *Forum* article). The last "meltdown of the world financial system" was in the 1930s. I don't think a repeat would be a "good thing".

**Rob England**  
Clifton Hill VIC

## Not the full quid *pro bono*

John Stear's review of Wendell Watters book *Deadly Doctrine: Health, Illness and Christian Godtalk* in the Spring issue repeats the usual secular humanist stereotype of religion as a cause of assorted problems, including mental ill health. Stear does not ask the obvious: what is the comparative incidence of mental health problems and prejudice amongst secular humanists and other atheist groups?

Although many social scientists are non-believers they do not research this question. I cannot answer it, but I have some clues. For years I have observed local humanist groups and have formed the opinion that the members tend towards depression and obsessiveness. A psychologist friend who worked amongst them as a counsellor formed a similar opinion and suggested that atheists would tend towards depression. Indeed, one society even had a self-help group for depressed persons. The same society failed twice to create a charitable group to visit fellow humanists in hospital.

This sad failure is symptomatic of the inertia and lack of involvement of depressives. Perhaps also, lacking the efficient defence mechanisms of religion against the idea of death, they could not readily cope with others on the brink. After all,

the ranks of helpers in the wards of the dying seem to attract Christians rather than secular humanists.

I believe that secular humanists are also delusion prone. It is hard to reconcile what appears in their obsessive journals, caught in the rut of left wing anti-clericalism, with secular humanist ideals of critical thinking and open mindedness. Paranoia and delusions of self-importance are also present. One group fancied that it was being penetrated by ASIO and Special Branch, a suspicion never shown to be objective.

The rite of selecting a Humanist of the Year, usually an underachieving leader, is delusive. Surely this accolade brings no more status than "Miss Watermelon" at a county fair in Kentucky. Secular humanists tend to be elderly. Their philosophy has failed to attract many youngsters to their ranks.

Other things being equal, this suggests that secular humanist groups would tend to have more of the mental problems typical of the aged. This "senility bias" has led to rigidities of belief and group-think such as you would find amongst fundamentalists.

Because of the uncritical humanist acceptance of homosexuality and gay propaganda, gays tend to join secular humanist societies. In the U.S.A. gays have sexually transmitted disease rates many times the national average, and have proven high rates of drug abuse, in-group violence and paedophilia. Judging by the recent renaissance in psychotherapy for homosexuality *per se*, they also have their share of mental problems. Assuming that humanist gays are typical, we have to be honest and ask if their presence adversely influences the health averages of secular humanist groups. If so, this would be an example of secular humanist beliefs having undesirable in-group effects, just as religion is supposed to.

I have also speculated on the rate of sociopathy amongst secular humanists. You have to ask about that when you hear a secular humanist praise abortion clinics as performing a public service, clinics that destroy several million foetuses a year worldwide for reasons no one knows.

Stear says that religion has always been a foe of true education. "Al-

ways"? We should remind him that many esteemed US universities and colleges, Yale and Princeton for example, were founded under the auspices of churches. In the U.S.A. half the social scientists subscribe to religious beliefs. The rate for physical scientists is also substantial. Scientists in the non-religious group tend to be indifferent to religion rather than hostile. Those social scientists who are non-believers tend to be that way prior to entry into a university. Lewis Feuer, in his book *The Scientific Intellectual* has demonstrated the high incidence of religious belief amongst scientists in past centuries. This suggests that immersion in the critical thinking of empirical science does not readily turn intellectuals against religion, as secular humanists wishfully think. Nor does it restrain the stream of anti-religious halftruths coming from secular humanists posing as fair-minded skeptics. Secular humanist cliches about the past warfare between science and religion are simplistic and dated. Scholarship since the 1950s shows a complex, often positive relationship.

Stear has also misrepresented the Batson and Ventis study. They said that their conclusions were tentative, that their route was circuitous, that there were test validity problems. Their text is hedged with ifs, buts and maybes. Their book cannot be used as an atheist cudgel against religion. Contrary to what Stear says, the authors seem to have overlooked relevant research, also their concept of prejudice is dated and the concept of mental health is still embattled by warring definitions.

A more contemporary text is *Why America Needs Religion* by Guenter Lewy (Eerdmans, 1996). The author is an agnostic who set out to refute claims about the civil and moral benefits of religion. On looking at current evidence in social psychology he changed his mind. He is honest. The book will not impress the humbugs of secular humanism.

But what can you expect from a movement whose "rational" ethics is so indecently partisan that it protests the fire-bombing of a single abortion clinic, but not the arson of several hundred African American churches; that still whines about the Inquisition, but never protested the persecution of Christians under

communism or their dhimmitude under Islam; that denounces paedophile priests but diligently ignores public links between gay and paedophile activists; that opposes creationism in schools, but promotes feminist cant rather than the scientific theory of universal patriarchy?

**John Snowden  
Tarragindi QLD**

## More creationists' errors

Once again creationists have shown their ignorance. But this time they seem to have excelled themselves by displaying their ignorance about religion!

Sir Jim R Wallaby's article "Gullible's Travels" in *the Skeptic* (17/4) revealed the trials undergone by one Bryce Gaudian when he visited Australia in company with Ken Ham. Sir Jim was kind enough to pass me a copy of the November 1997 issue of *Prayer News* put out by Answers In Genesis which contained this article.

Mr Gaudian was shocked to discover that Australia was "awash in evolution", to quote part of the headline of the article. Mr Gaudian believes that he has found the reason for this nasty state of affairs. As Sir Jim reported, Mr Gaudian revealed "... the tragic facts told to us: less than 2% of the population of 17 million Australians attend church regularly (and many of those churches are liberal and embrace theistic evolution)."

When I read this my first reaction was "Hang on a bit! It's closer to 20% than 2%. Has Ken Ham (or whoever told Mr Gaudian this "fact") gone off his rocker? Or is this just another bit of creationist misinformation?"

Before I got around to checking (you should always check any claim made by creationists for accuracy) the issue of *the Skeptic* including Sir Jim's article had arrived. And here I discovered, not to my surprise, that skeptics are better informed about the state of religion in Australia than creationists.

Richard Lead's convention paper "An oasis of privilege" provides us

with the correct figures, and, in so doing, defines what is generally understood by "attend church regularly". The National Church Life Survey, conducted widely throughout Australia has shown that, overall, about 18% of Australians attend church once a month, or more frequently. So my memory was more accurate than creationist "facts".

Now there may be some dispute about the precise meaning of "attend church regularly", and the accuracy of results obtained by asking people about their habits, but the true figure for regular church attendance is not likely to be less than about 10%, far higher than the misinformation passed to Mr Gaudian by his fellow creationists.

So once again creationists have been revealed as misrepresenting the facts. We are accustomed to misrepresentation about scientific matters, but this takes the cake. It is probably quite fitting that in the same issue of *Prayer News* which informed us about their change of name we have our local creationists making a massive blunder about religion in Australia.

**Ken Smith  
Graceville QLD**

## Drifting around

Michael Creech ("Getting the drift", 17/4) presents a good summary of the theory of continental drift. It's surprising that the creationists have taken some 40 years to adopt their version of this theory since it "answers" a couple of their difficulties with Noah. They had already accepted that the evidence demanded more than a flood, even if it were a whopper. About the only help was Gen. 6, 11 "...the earth was filled with violence", but this clearly refers to sinful Man, not the solid earth. But the break-up of Pangaea into continents moving at least 3km a year would certainly have given a supercataclysm.

Secondly, it helps with the kangaroo problem. How did they, and the sloth and armadillo, get to the Ark and how did they get from Mt Ararat to their final homes? I'd always felt sorry for the poor little platypuses having to swim 12,000km, diving down to the sea-bed for some worms to keep them go-

ing. Now, of course, I realise that they were all together on the one super-continent. I'm still not sure how they got from their wrecked world to Oz, but perhaps they just rode the speeding continent like a surf-board.

Being catty, why did genuine geologists take so long to accept the drift theory which was around for quite some time. I guess the first reason was emotional, rejecting the idea of the solid earth moving under one. Then, most of the earlier papers were from the Southern hemisphere, where the evidence is easier to see. The pundits of Oxbridge and the Ivy League would not accept fanciful ideas from damn colonials. The official reason was that no one could suggest a mechanism and energy source for this spectacular earth-moving job. When the evidence became overwhelming the interest switched to finding the mechanism. What convinced the Establishment were the discoveries on the Atlantic sea-bed. These were powerful, but as well they came originally from the God-fearing US Navy in its holy war against the Evil Empire.

**J T Wearne  
Fremantle WA**

## Nuclear answers

I thank Roderick Shire for his multitude of questions (*Letters*, 17/4) stemming from my Convention paper, "Nuclear fears questioned" (17/3).

I apologise to all readers for omitting the words of clarification which I delivered verbally with my presentation but omitted to include in the written version.

The figure in question was taken straight from A V Nero's 1979 paper *Earth, Air, Radon and Home*. Mr Shire is correct in assuming that the scale on the right is exactly equivalent to the one on the left. The figure should be viewed as a whole. This means that three of the homes tested had radon-222 concentrations of 1,000 becquerels per cubic metre, which delivers a risk of one in ten of lung cancer being developed during a lifetime. This corresponds to an equivalent annual dose of half a Sievert, which is the

occupational dose limit. One Sievert in one dose (within a few days) will induce radiation sickness and six Sieverts is fatal. So the radon hazard in those homes is verging on the danger level. The centre of the cluster of dots representing radon levels in dwellings is 50 becquerels per cubic metre, leading to an annual radiation dose of three milliSieverts. This is somewhat high for most parts of Australia and for the type of dwellings in this country. Here the average is around two and a bit milliSieverts from all sources. The figure of one milliSievert for "Other natural radiation" is about right, depending on what you count as "natural" (exposure by sleeping close to your radioactive partner, maybe?)

Four of the five lowest indoor radon-222 concentrations equate to what the average northern hemispherians (if that's the right word) would have received from one Chernobyl disaster (or equivalent) per year. The contribution of the world's nuclear power industry is off the scale at the bottom, which is a graphic way of saying that the citizens of Earth, including members of Greenpeace International, have far more to fear from the continual radon-222 exposure within the safety and sanctity of their own homes than from the total contribution from nuclear power generation. As for Mr Shire's many other questions, they are mostly answered in my forthcoming book *Australia in the Dark*. But I may answer them in a further article for the Skeptic if the Editor indicates an overwhelming demand for same.

**Colin Keay**  
New Lambton NSW

## Putting on the Ritz

To John August (Letters, 17/4). If Ritzian theory were to become the accepted theory, what puzzling side effects of relativity would no longer be needed? I am wondering about dark matter, parallel universes, time travel, worm holes etc.etc.

**John Winckle**  
Currumbin QLD

## Secular greeting

I would like to congratulate my telecommunications carrier, WorldxChange Pty Ltd for not having any "Christmas" promotions or insulting me with religious greetings specific to one religion, and without knowledge or consideration of what religious or non-religious belief systems I may subscribe to. This is an issue I have addressed in these columns in the past.

Rather, recognising that this time of year is the end of the Gregorian calendar and that many people take their vacation at this time of year (unfortunately, in part, due to State-enforced official religious holidays) they described their current promotion as pertaining to the "End-of-Year" period.

I hope many more companies follow their example in the future and that government agencies will also do something about the plethora of religious decorations appearing on official government property at this time of year.

It's about time that people recognised that Australia is a secular state, that numerous other religions and non-religions apart from Christianity are observed, and that there is a very good chance that a company's customers are not Christian (although if they are known to be of that religious persuasion, they should receive appropriate greetings, by all means).

**David Maddison**  
Toorak VIC

## Congratulations

I'd like to congratulate Richard Lead (17/4) on his well documented article about tax exemption of church institutions. It's so well written that it deserves to be read by a wider circle than readers of the Skeptic. I therefore request permission to duplicate the article for distribution among my friends and suggest that other subscribers do the same.

I would also like to congratulate our full-time editor, Barry Williams, on the excellence of the latest issue. So much interesting news and many interesting articles. I particularly

like Harry Edwards as the gifted clairvoyant (p 11), and as the accomplished con-man (p 26).

It may not be a bad idea if readers write letters to the editor pointing out which articles they particularly fancied; such letters could be useful leads for the editor.

**Hans Weiler**  
Croydon NSW

## Bent Spoon

I wish to nominate the Hon Jean McLean, Victorian state MP for Melbourne West for the next Australian Skeptics "Bent Spoon Award".

As reported in Melbourne's *Herald Sun* of 12 December, 1997, she has "resorted to sticking pins in a voodoo doll to conjure up black magic forces against the Kennett government". It continued, "she believed the positive power of black magic could help Labor". "I believe it is quite a valid and practical tool." "Ms McLean, who said she had studied black magic since childhood, said the power of positive thought generated by voodoo dolls would help the fight against changes to workers compensation and the auditor-general."

Now, I don't expect very much from our politicians, finding them to be dull, uninspired, poorly educated, totally amoral and self-interested, but I do really think this is going too far. What hope have the Skeptics got of bringing reason to "the masses", when their leaders themselves practice things like voodoo? In any case, since the Honourable Member apparently really believes this stuff works, surely, in her mind, she is intentionally wishing to "assault" another person. This mode of behaviour alone, is not fit and proper for an Member of Parliament. Her party, and the parliament, should reprimand her in the strongest possible terms for this irrational and improper behaviour.

**David Maddison**  
Toorak VIC



# About our authors

## Would you like to remember the Skeptics in your will?

The Australian Skeptics Science and Education Foundation, a non-profit trust, established by a bequest from the late Stanley Whalley, supports scientific and educational programmes, including the Eureka Prizes, Young Scientists Awards, the Mt Stromlo Exploratory, the operations of the Australian Skeptics branches, and makes grants to worthwhile scientific and educational projects and individuals.

If you would like to help this work continue you may consider naming the Foundation, or any other Skeptics organisation, as a beneficiary in your will.

The address of the Foundation is:

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PO Box 331  
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**Robert Bartholomew** is a sociologist at James Cook University in Townsville. He is co-author of the book *UFOs and Alien Contact: Two centuries of mystery*.

**Sydney Bockner** is a psychiatrist who lives in Adelaide. That should give him plenty of scope to practise his skills.

**Scott Campbell**, by his own admission, a boyish, fresh-faced philosopher, is completing a PhD at UNSW. He is also a member of the NSW committee.

**Trevor Case**, winner of the 1996 Skeptics Eureka Prize for Critical Thinking, is completing a PhD in psychology at Macquarie. He is a member of the NSW committee.

**Shaun Cronin** claims to be a "lay skeptic, who dabbles in computers, the web, music and beer". He hails from Sydney.

**Harry Edwards**, wit, *bon vivant*, curmudgeon, is chief investigator and secretary of the NSW Skeptics.

**James Gerrand** is a founding member of Australian Skeptics and a member of the Vic committee. He is also editor of the *Australian Humanist*.

**Allan Lang**, cineaste and bibliophile, is seeking treatment for both disorders. He is on the Skeptics SA committee.

**Richard Lead**, treasurer of the NSW committee, is an international tax consultant, which he thinks sounds better than accountant. We don't.

**Roman Lohyn** is a dentist and president of the Australasian Society of Oral Medicine and Toxicology. He lives in Melbourne.

**Bob Nixon** is the challenge coordinator for the Vic committee. His enthusiasm for the job leaves some of us gasping in his wake. In real life he is a business analyst.

**Clive Robbins**, now enjoying his ninth decade, has been a long time subscriber and life-long Skeptic.

**Roland Seidel** is a mathematician, president of Vic Skeptics and has been on holidays lately, hence his multiple representation in this issue.

**John Stear**, a Gold Coast Skeptic, claims he, like his home town, is "good one day, perfect the next". This claim is both paranormal and untestable.

**Barry Williams** is a man of whom it has often been said.

**Don Wilson**, Adelaide dentist, member of Skeptics SA and, past president of the Australian Dental Assn (SA Branch). He claims that he is either spot on with his analysis or is suffering intellectually from chronic, low-dose, occupationally-induced mercury poisoning. 🌀

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The Australian Skeptics' Science Symposium at Scienceworks, Newport, Melbourne,  
5.30 pm, Tuesday, August. 11.  
(For details, see p 61)

Please send [ ] tickets at \$25

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From the Australian Skeptics' 1997 Science Symposium at Scienceworks. If you couldn't get there, you haven't quite missed out altogether!

Audio tapes of Ian Plimer (Sinking the Ark: the story of his legal fight with Creation "Science" from Roberts to the trial) and Graeme O'Neill, (Skeptical science: why it's so hard to get good science in the newspaper. A science writer laments) \$5 ea

From the 1996 Convention

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