Modern Sightings of the Thylacine
— What Do They Tell Us?

by G V Czechura

The large marsupial carnivore, *Thylacinus cynocephalus* (Thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger) has not been unequivocally recorded since a lone animal died in Beaumaris Zoo, Hobart, in September 1936. The date of death of this individual has generally been reported to be in 1934, but Beresford and Bailey (1981) have presented strong evidence in support of a later date. Confusion surrounding the date of death of the last Thylacine is fitting. Confusion also surrounds the life, behaviour, decline and reasons for the apparent extinction of this enigmatic animal. Many authorities (Archer 1979, Smith 1981, Rounsevell 1983) consider that the continued existence of the Thylacine is remote. This view has been strengthened by the failure of all recent attempts to locate populations of this animal and the absence of incontrovertible proof (e.g. specimens, photographs) that living Thylacines are abroad in Tasmania.

Despite prevailing pessimism within scientific circles, sightings of alleged Thylacines abound. Indeed, such sightings have not only been used as evidence for the continued existence of this animal, but have served as a basis for speculations concerning biology and management (Mooney 1984).
Clearly, if we are to address ourselves to the question, "Does Thylacine still exist?", we must examine the available evidence, i.e. the sightings of alleged Thylacines. In a recent report, Smith (1981) has called for the recording and investigation of sightings. Examination of individual reports requires us to establish criteria by which reliability can be judged.

A variety of criteria can be applied to judge sighting reliability. It may be necessary to examine psychological (e.g. do the sightings exhibit dream or hallucinatory features?), physical (e.g. do they result from size-illusion, haze distortion, etc?) and biological (e.g. do they conform to what is known of the Thylacine?) aspects of each report. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that consistent standards need to be maintained from the outset to exclude poor sightings.

The methods, used by ornithological groups to judge acceptability of sightings of rare birds are particularly useful here. To illustrate:

Person A is walking through pasture-land, he suddenly is confronted by a large brown bird with a long tail. The bird immediately takes wing and disappears into a dense stand of trees nearby. The bird is not relocated. Person A consults a bird book soon thereafter and "finds" that he has seen an Albert Lyrebird.

Person B has a good knowledge of birds. He is visiting a remote part of northern Australia. His attention is drawn to a small falcon perched in a tree. It is early evening. The falcon appears to be small, black on the back with a dark hood, it appears to have a white throat. The bird takes wing to pursue a small bat or bird and is soon lost to sight. Further investigation suggests to Person B that he has observed an Oriental Hobby not previously recorded from this country.

The first situation occurs frequently. Observers variously report sightings of rare birds rapidly passing overhead or in poor visibility (e.g. skulking in dense brush, late evening sightings). These reports are usually quite worthless, particularly if no subsequent sightings are made. A further problem exists because the more person A reads on the matter the more likely he is to "colour-in" the sightings. This phenomenon explains how errors in field guide descriptions may be "seen" by field observers - or at least reported by them (Ingram 1984). In fact record scrutineers regularly check descriptions to see if such mistakes have been incorporated. If the mistakes have been included, the record is judged unreliable. On the basis of the original sighting by Person A, Brown Pigeon, Brown Goshawk and Pheasant Coucal can not be excluded from consideration.

Person B's sighting requires further investigation (i.e. literature, specimens, photographs and discussions with observers familiar with Oriental Hobbies). This may take some time, but in the end it too must be rejected. There is no information on underparts colouration - it can be assumed these are dark merely because the throat has been reported to be white (i.e. it is implied that throat and underparts are contrasting). Little has been reported on actual size (i.e. "small" is not good enough). Most significantly, an important diagnostic field-character of the Oriental Hobby has not been reported - the length of wings in relation to tail length (note that the bird was observed at rest thus making this an easy task). Person B may have seen an Oriental Hobby but has not provided sufficient evidence to support acceptance. Finally, the conditions may have been conducive to a mistaken identification of an Australian Hobby or Peregrine Falcon. Indeed, the description fits the latter quite well.

Oddie (1980) has given an excellent, often tongue-in-cheek outline of the identification problem in bird-watching. He notes (p. 73) "Its amazing how many descriptions are written after the birder has decided what he hopes he saw rather than what he actually saw (his emphasis). And it is suspicious how many descriptions seem as if they might have been copied or paraphrased from the text in a field guide".

It should be noted that many of these claims are not necessarily cases of conscious deception or hoax.

Clearly, caution is needed in assessing sight records - we can not assume that they can be taken at face value. This is particularly true where "rare" or "emotive" species are concerned.

The question then arises: How can we judge Thylacine sightings?
Clearly there are two methods:
a) comparison of sighting details with
    known physical appearance e.g. photo-
    graphs, skins, descriptions.
b) comparison with known behaviour.

Smith (1982) provides the best
recent summary of the Thylacine on
which to base comparisons. Taking the
sighting reported by Mooney (1984) we
therefore find two points of contention
(based on description of the animal
only). These are the number of stripes
(12 seen at a distance of 6-7 metres)
and the presence of a strong scent as-
associated with the animal. Smith has re-
corded 15-20 black or dark brown
stripes. Examination of existing pho-
tographs reveals that at least 14
stripes are clearly discernible, even
in poor quality photos. Similarly,
Smith's review and other literature
(particularly early writings) on the
Thylacine make no mention of scent. On
the basis of these two points, at
least, this record would be rejected -
if we used an ornithological razor. Re-
jection of this record does not mean
that Thylacine's did not have 12
stripes or leave an odour. These attri-
butes must be conclusively proved to be
field characters of the animal (via
physical examination of a specimen) -
given that neither attribute has been
reported in pre-1936 records.

Comparison of Thylacine sightings
against known behaviour is most diffi-
cult to say the least. Much of the lit-
terature concerning Thylacine behaviour
is contradictory or clearly influenced
by farmers wishing to magnify the ex-
tent of Thylacine damage to domestic
stock. For example, it has been alleged
- and accepted by authorities - that
Thylacines fed on blood. Smith (1982)
reports that these claims were based on
three unusual sheep killings. He notes
(p. 249) "... but it was not proved that a
Thylacine had been responsible, nor do three such killings constitute
evidence for this as a normal prac-
tice." Indeed much of the literature on
the Thylacine seems to bear a very
strong similarity to generalized claims
of predator damage made regarding other
species in other areas. For this reason
alone greater critical appraisal of
early Thylacine reports appears war-
ranted.

It is worth mentioning that early
authors, beginning with Gunn (1838),
report that Thylacines were "usually
nocturnal" but would be found active
during the day "on occasion". Further-
more it seems that the animals were of-
ten observed for relatively long peri-
ods during diurnal activity (at least
giving farmers time to load their guns
or set dogs on to the animal: see anec-
dotal reports in Beresford and Bailey
1981). It is, therefore, not surprising
to find that patterns of modern sight-
ings conform to a pattern expected from
a nocturnal animal which is occasion-
ally active during the day (Rounsevell
and Smith 1982). What is surprising
however, is that the majority
(Rounsevell and Smith 1982, Smith 1981)
have durations less than one minute
(where time has been specified). This
situation appears to conflict with re-
corded sightings of known Thylacines
during the day, despite the fact that
numbers of sightings are on the in-
crease (see Rounsevell and Smith 1982,
Smith 1981). Such conflicts indicate
that closer examination of contemporary
records may be necessary before making
judgments of Thylacine status from
these sightings.

This conclusion finds support when
we consider that most reasonable pat-
tern of Thylacine activity was for hun-
ting to occur during the evening, night
and early morning (Smith 1981).
Analysis of sighting records suggests a
disproportionate number of sightings at
night when compared to late afternoon-
evening or morning, i.e. those times
coinciding with highest human and Thyl-
acine activity and best visibility
(e.g. more sightings occur between
20.00 - 23.00 hrs, rather than between
16.00 - 18.00 hrs). Analysis of night
records would require attention to be
paid to spurious lighting and shadowy
effects rather than simple description
of the animal and its activity. Oddie's
earlier comments concerning observer's
hopes versus what is actually seen must
be borne in mind.

Undoubtedly, much will be continue
to be written on the alleged existence
of the Thylacine. Many conclusions will
be drawn on the basis of these sight-
ings despite the fact that we know sur-
prisingly little of the living Thyla-
cines. Perhaps the cautionary words of
Gunn (1838, p. 102), who was commenting
on reports of Thylacines fishing,
should be heeded: "Deductions are fre-
continued on page 6
Dear Editor,

AIPR, TERBOT AND MAGIC

"The Skeptic" (Sept 84) contains an article, written by Mark Plummer, which claims that the Australian Institute of Psychic Research was hooked by the Terbot hoax. Actually, I feel that the AIPR has come out of the Terbot test with its reputation enhanced. We gave Terbot no publicity, and we ignored all his letters. Eric Weddell (president) publicly repudiated Terbot before an audience of 500, one month before the hoax was revealed.

Consider the following facts:

(A) On Sept 13, 1983, Mark told the NSW Skeptics that he was thinking of inviting Randi to Australia again. In case Randi might pull a hoax here, I wrote to Mark on March 7, 1984, suggesting that a memo be drawn up between the AIPR and AS to avoid unnecessary attacks on each other.

(B) The AIPR received a letter from Terbot, posted in California and dated March 21, stating he wanted to talk to one of our meetings. Both Eric Weddell and I were too busy to investigate; so I sent a copy of the Terbot brochure to Mark, hoping he might investigate.

(C) Mark replied to my March 7 letter on March 27, stating that his committee felt a memo was unnecessary as AIPR and AS were two independent groups.

(D) On the night of the Best meeting at Lane Cove Town Hall (April 14), skeptics distributed Terbot brochures. Eric Weddell stated from the stage: "Ignore this Terbot rubbish; he is not associated with us." This was heard by Barry Williams, chair of NSW Skeptics, who was in the audience. The report by Williams in The Skeptic does not mention this disclaimer.

(E) On Monday May 14 (3 days before the hoax was revealed) I posted a letter to Mark containing the annotation that the AIPR was having nothing to do with this Terbot.

MAGIC

Mark states that "until the AIPR is prepared to try to understand magic.. and deception their psychic research is worthless". I realise that as a scientist I am liable to be fooled because of lack of training in magic. I am working to correct this; any assistance the AS can give is welcome. However, the AIPR is not as innocent of magic as Mark suggests. AIPR Bulletin 1 contains my article on magic tricks and deception used by psychical medium Paul McElhoney during his Sydney sitting in 1982. Bulletin 3 contains a list of recommended books, including 7 on magic (1 by Randi, and 2 by Martin Gardner, writing as "Unah Fuller"). On October 17 this year, we held a Sydney public meeting at which Charlie Parke spoke on ventriloquism and mis-direction. At our public meeting on November 18, conjurer Tom Gleson is due to demonstrate how a magician duplicates psychic effects. Both meetings were arranged earlier this year. Both speakers were contacted through their membership of the AS.

As regards Steiner's clipping trick, I accept that Steiner did not switch clippings. I send out drafts so that mistakes can be corrected. I do not stand by what I write in drafts - only by what finally appears in print. My draft stated that the clipping trick is never used by "genuine psychics", by which I mean a psychic (e.g. Doris Collins) who genuinely believes he or she has a paranormal ability (based on personal experience of visions etc), and who may conscientiously use "cold-reading". This I distinguish from a "fake psychic" (e.g. Uri Geller), who may or may not have such a belief, and who consciously and deliberately uses blatant conjuring tricks. I use words such as "psychic", "ESP", etc, as a convenient general description of the phenomena, without implying an origin, paranormal or otherwise.

FALKENSTEIN

Mark cites my short note in Bulletin 1 about stage performer Glenn Falkenstein. My source, an article by Rosenberg, was of interest because R. postulates vocalisation (a naturalistic hypothesis) as an ESP mechanism. R.'s article makes no mention of magic. My note states that some of F.'s stunts are similar to magic tricks. I describe a stunt where F. correctly recites the serial number of a banknote held at the other end of a telephone line. I stated that this rules out a magic trick, although we are not told by R if the
phone call was pre-arranged. (I intended this to leave open the possibility of magic.) However, I was not aware at the time that F. was a well known magician.

EMORY ROYCE

In Zetetic Scholar 11 (1983), skeptic Richard Kamman describes his study of NZ psychic Emory Royce, who is reputed to have made several correct prophecies. His name is similar to that of NZ psychic Colin Amery, who often makes ridiculous claims. I summarised Kamman’s article in Bulletin 2. I then checked with Kamman, who said he had since determined that Royce was a blatant fake, and that I had done well to report the article with the minimum of interpretation — this would place me in good stead when I read the next ZS. Unfortunately ZS 12 is greatly delayed, and Kamman has since died. Plummer has refused point-blank to comment on the Royce episode. I can only suspect that the Royce story might have been planted to test researchers. If so, the AIPR has survived it well. Both the Falkenstein and Royce episodes show the need [despite the good deal of excellent investigation we have done] to be forever vigilant in cross-checking.

MAGIC TOO FAR

There is a danger in taking magic and fraud too far as hypotheses. The good magician can duplicate, with prior practise, just about anything. Also, consider the medium using clairvoyance. Mark implies, by omission, that it is all self-deception and fraud. Mark concentrates mainly on two aspects: cold-reading, and the high failure rate of prophecy. This is far too narrow a characterisation. He ignores the naturalistic interpretation of dissociation, especially dual or multiple personality (DMP). Perhaps many psychics do see visions, which come from a dissociated fragment of their own minds. The famous medium Eileen Garrett (a firm supporter of scientific study of psychic phenomena) came to accept that dissociation was an explanation of her own ability. There was a great deal of interest in DMP early this century; but then scientists got sidetracked into regarding it as trickery. Only recently has DMP been accepted as a real phenomena, DMP is one of several topics (hypnosis is an-other) that were brought to the attention of science by psychic researchers — and then absorbed into mainstream psychology.

Mark’s critique coincides with the recent publication of Bulletin 4, which contains a critique of the Tenbot hoax and a review of the AS [available from AIPR, P.O. Box 445, Lane Cove NSW 206; $3]. I state that, although the AS has done a lot of excellent investigation, some individuals are guilty, at times, of sarcasm and overstatement of the case against the existence of psychic phenomena. At least 6 of the 11-person AS national committee are either humanists (promoters of non-religious alternatives) or rationalists (who actively confront religious beliefs). Most humanists are atheists or agnostic. Can the independent observer be certain that the humanist or rationalist, because of his anti-religious beliefs, is not overrating the case against? This is just as legitimate a question as whether religious person (who is attracted to AIPR) is prone to overstate the case for.

The AIPR does not hold any corporate views on psychic phenomena. We try to objectively report both the evidence for and against. Because we recognise that beliefs are a basic human need, we do not play hoaxes on people for the purpose of a scientific experiment or public education. Mark asserts there is no evidence for psychic phenomena. I prefer not to be so dogmatic — I prefer not to make a pre-judgement either way. Even should no evidence of new laws emerge, psychic phenomena is still an important subject of study. About 35-6% of the population report religious/psychic experiences, often traumatic. It is a matter of concern that psychic experiences are little mentioned (even from the naturalistic viewpoint) in most [behaviorist and cognitive] psychology courses. This lack is one of the basic reasons why groups like the AIPR exist.

Michael Hough

Mark Plummer comments
Mark Plummer comments:
I did not tell Dr Hough how Bob Steiner does the clipping trick as I was sworn to secrecy by Bob Steiner as to his techniques.
I would be most interested to know how Dr Hough can tell which psychics genuinely believe they have paranormal abilities and which psychics are fakes. If certain psychics genuinely believe they have paranormal abilities then why do they not come forward to be tested for our $20,000 offer as do water diviners who appear to genuinely believe they have paranormal abilities?
Dr Hough states I have refused point blank to comment on the Royce episode and for good reason - I have absolutely no knowledge on the Royce episode whatever it may be. I can see that in Dr Hough's mind the fact that I refuse to comment on it assumes conspiratorial significance.

Two comments from James Gerrand:
Humanists and rationalists foster a scientific approach rather than relying on religious or other dogma to solve our human problems. The scientific investigation of claims of the paranormal are part of this solving of human problems.

Bob Steiner (Steve Terbot) in his address to psychologists at Monash University reported that from his experience in investigating clairvoyants, any who were professional, i.e. made their living from it, were frauds. Even if they started believing they had a gift for clairvoyance they soon found to make money from it they had to tell the public what the public wanted to know.

Dear Editor,
The Skeptic was brought to my attention as a serious, scholarly journal worth subscribing to. I myself remain skeptical.
I like to believe that scholarly journals make an attempt to rectify published errors.
Phillip Tanna, who should know better, is in error when he states: "The historical record shows astrology beginning 5000 years ago in Mesopotamia. (See: The Skeptic Sept. '84, p23). (Paul, what is your understanding? Editor)
I nearly fell off my chair when I read about the newspaper prediction trick mentioned in the Sept.'84 issue of The Skeptic (Project Hook's Final Catch - AIPR). I am completely amazed at the statement: "Even some Skeptics after considerable practice have been able to master the trick".

What an absolutely silly statement. The trick is quite easy. Are your Skeptics slow learners or of low IQ? Magicians are only separated from non-magicians by familiarity and practice. I first read of the newspaper trick in Close-Up Magic For Beginners, by Harry Baron and successfully performed it before friends without any prior practice.

Why should such a supposedly serious journal completely misrepresent such things?
I have yet to be convinced that your journal is worth subscribing to.

Paul McGahan
(The Australian Skeptics honour a commitment to professional magicians not to reveal any secrets of the profession. This sometimes may involve some misdirection when we comment on magical tricks. James Gerrand, Secretary.)

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is an apparently rational question it is nevertheless based on sleight-of-hand logic. An honest, but very brave answer, must be "anything". If the lessons and admonitions of the bird-watching world are to be taken to heart, we have to realize that even the best observers make mistakes.
AN APPRECIATION OF THE ESP EXPERIMENT

AUSTRALIA SCIENCE IN SCHOOLS WEEK

by James Gerrand B.Sc. B.E., Secretary, Australian Skeptics

Introduction

Three students of the Brighton Technical High School - Kristin Barty, Nicki Burr and Jan Hill - with the encouragement of their science teacher Mr Daryl Lyons, arranged an ESP experiment in which some 3000 students from some forty schools were to participate. The form of the experiment was for students in classes of twenty of the schools were to think of the one picture out of five that had been previously selected at random (by a blind student at a Blind Institute) whilst at the same time students at the other twenty schools were to tick whatever of the five pictures (or none) that first came to their mind on the checklist provided. The test was carried out at 12 noon on Thursday 18 October 1984.

As part of the test, a control was arranged. Classes at other schools were to record similarly pictures at a time one to two days before the test time.

Results were telephoned to a Hawthorn (Victoria) computer company, The Australia Beginning, which kindly computed the results.

On behalf of the Australian Skeptics (AS) I provided some advice including copies of an extract from James Randi's book "Test Your ESP Potential" to the students during the planning stage of the experiment. I also attended the computer centre to observe the recording of results. The following is my appreciation of the experiment including an analysis of the results.

The format of the experiment

The format of the experiment whilst good for the learning experience was not so good in terms of identifying ESP. The choice of pictures - face, tree, ship, light bulb, koala - appears to have been chosen for their appeal to students. The use of the standard Zenner of similar symbols - circle, lines, triangle, square, star - would have reduced this subjective attraction. In particular the association of a light bulb with the selection by the Blind Institute may have led to a conscious or unconscious bias in some students' selection.

A good feature was the arranging of control sets of reception when there was no transmission. This was a useful check on the randomness of choice.

Having only one transmission was the weakest part. At least 30 transmissions of one picture randomly selected each time out of the five would have been needed to appreciably reduce the subjective bias in the students' choices. But with the limitation of time and interest this was not possible. As it was, only 636 students from 11 of the schools who agreed to send in results did so. If any serious tests are envisaged for the future this criterion of at least 30 tests would need to be applied.

THE RESULTS

The criterion used for evaluation is the standard deviation, \( \sigma \), from the mean \( m \), where \( \sigma^2 = spq \) and \( m = sp \). (\( s = \text{number of tests}, \quad p = \text{probability of success} \quad \text{and} \quad q = \text{probability of failure}.\))

There is statistically for random distribution two chances in three that a result will lie within the standard distribution. The chances that results will lie outside multiples of \( \sigma \) are:

- \( 2 \sigma = 1/20; \quad 3 \sigma = 3/1000; \)
- \( 4 \sigma = 6/10,000; \quad 5 \sigma = 3/10million. \)
The results have been analysed after deleting the OTHER (no picture noted) figures.

Looking firstly at the control results from the five school centres we find that the totals for the five schools show a reasonably random result with choice 2, tree, showing the greatest variation from the mean of some 1.6 \( \sigma = 9\% \) or one chance in eleven. However there were one abnormality in the individual school results with the SA Control School having a picture 5, koala, choice of some 4.3 \( \sigma \) or 2 chances in 10,000. There would appear to be some strong bias here favouring the koala. It was a pity that more schools did not provide control results.

The test results for the eleven school totals did show the selected picture No 4, light, the most reported, 138, and with a large deviation of 3.9 \( \sigma \), equal to 1 chance in 10,000. However picture No 1, face, with 136 reports had almost the same deviation at 3.7 \( \sigma \) equal to 2 chances in 10,000. And there was picture No 5, koala, with only 60 reports had an even greater deviation of 4.8 \( \sigma \) equal to 2 chances in 1 million.

The very small chances of these three deviations occurring, strongly suggest subjective bias influencing the results. This is to be expected with just one test being carried out, particularly with the widely differing types of the five pictures - face (human, in classroom), tree (nature), ship (construction), light bulb (modern, in classroom), koala (animal). At least thirty tests with a random selection of the picture to be tested each time is needed to reduce the bias from subjective mind reactions.
REPORTS OF THYLACINES AND OF UFOs: SIMILARITIES AND PATTERNS

by Dr R E Molnar

Smith (1981) contains an analysis of the reports of sightings of Thylacines in Tasmania. As sightings are so far the only evidence put forward for the continued existence of the Thylacines in Tasmania they are all that can be examined. Such an examination, however, is more enlightening than might at first be supposed, for checks on the reliability of reports independent of their content may be proposed. These checks relate to the properties of reports in the aggregate, such as the relation between the number of reports and population, or time of day. I shall here suggest that reports with a high proportion of misidentification show different aggregate relations than those with a low proportion.

In 1980 the Australian Mammal Society conference was held in Sydney, immediately following the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales Marsupial Carnivores Symposium. At both meetings papers were read that dealt not with living mammals, but with reported sightings of living mammals, an interesting methodology otherwise employed largely only in UFO research. At the Marsupial Carnivores Symposium, D E Rounsevell presented a paper (Rounsevell & Smith, 1982) on reported sightings of Thylacines in Tasmania, while at the AMS conference M J S Denny presented a paper (yet unpublished) on reported sightings of kangaroos in New South Wales.

Rounsevell reported that alleged sightings of Thylacines in Tasmania bore no relation to population distribution or to roads (Rounsevell & Smith, 1982:234), while Denny reported that kangaroo sightings were indeed related to population distribution, especially to droving and trade routes (Denny, pers. comm., Aug. 1984). In UFO research it is traditional wisdom that reports, particularly of close encounters, do not reflect population density, but tend to occur in isolated regions (Hyneck & Vallee, 1975; Hyneck, 1977; and especially, Ballester Olmos, 1976), as do reports of Thylacine sightings in Tasmania (cf. Smith, 1981). Close encounter UFO reports are used here because analyses are readily available, and they seem more similar to Thylacine reports in terms of reporting seeing objects at or near the ground at relatively close range (as opposed to in the sky at potentially great distance).

But in order to deduce anything useful from these patterns of relation to populations some information about the accuracy of the reports needs to be known. Denny's presentation is critical here - there is no doubt that kangaroos did exist in nineteenth-century New South Wales. On the other hand it is generally accepted that most UFO reports are due to misidentifications of known objects (Hyneck & Vallee, 1975:21; Hyneck, 1977:258-259), a relation that may be used even if some small percentage should turn out to represent either an unknown natural phenomenon or an extraterrestrial visitation. Thus we may conclude that reported sightings of an objective, or better, a consensual (sensu Ziman, 1978) phenomenon reflect population distribution, specifically travel routes, and thus such sightings may be confidently accepted. Reported sightings that involve a high proportion of misidentification do not directly reflect population distribution but tend to occur in isolated locales. This makes sense in that an objective (consensual) phenomenon will be observed at a rate proportional to the number of observers, but that misidentifications may be expected to occur more often in small groups or with individual observers (but see also Hendry, ch. 14, who reports in essence that people always make mistakes).

The concurrence of the pattern of Thylacine sightings (Rounsevell & Smith, 1982) with that of reported UFO sightings indicates that both sets of reports include high proportions of misidentifications. Thus they cannot be used, in the absence of other evidence, to support the existence of the phenomenon in question - here the Thylacine in Tasmania.

This result suggests further investigation: not only does the relation to population distribution need to be further substantiated, but also the

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(Melbourne Sun Sept 25th 1984)
question of further shared features between UFO and Thylacine reports arises. There are three other classes of features that may be checked: 1-duration of sightings v. number of sightings; 2-number of observers v. number of sightings; 3-time of day sightings v. number of sightings. For reported Thylacine sightings such information is graphically presented by Smith (1981), while for UFO's such information is presented largely by Hendry (1979), but also in other works (e.g. Hyneck & Vallee, 1975).

The data for sighting duration indicates that most sightings last for only a short period. Hendry (1979:248) presents graphically two sets of data indicating that the curve of number of UFO sightings vs. duration peaks of between one and fifteen minutes (one hundred and one thousand seconds), and a significant number last less than five minutes. Vallee & Vallee (1966:175), present graphically similar data showing the only substantial peak for durations of less than one minute, but this is older data than that of Hendry and may be expected to be less complete. The data for Thylacine sightings is given by Smith (1981:62), showing that the curve peaks for durations of less than five minutes or less. Thus for both UFO and Tasmanian Thylacine sightings the greatest number last for only a brief duration. Obviously the chance for misidentification is greater, the shorter period of observation. This again suggests a high proportion of misidentifications in the Tasmanian Thylacine reports. Reports of known animals of known habits should show no such numerical dependence on duration of sighting; the duration of sighting, if anything, should depend more upon the stamina of the observer.

Data on the relation of the number of observers to number of sightings is available both for UFO (close encounters) and Thylacine reports. Hyneck & Vallee (1975:23) present such data for UFO's in tabular form, while Smith(1981:60), presents them for Thylacine reporting in graphical form. For ease of comparison the data of Hyneck & Vallee (1975) is here re-presented in graphical form. Qualitatively, both graphs are very similar. One-observer reports are about two to three times as frequent as two-observer; two-observer
reports about thrice as frequent as three-observer reports; three-observer reports about twice as frequent as four-observer reports, etc. This is in spite of there being over twice as many UFO reports (878) as Thylacine reports (315). This again brings to mind the previous comments on the relation of the number of observers to ease of misidentification.

Finally consider the relation of time of day report to number of reports. This information has been taken from several sources in the UFO research literature, where it is presented graphically. Vallee & Vallee (1976:173) present two graphs, both peaking from 1700 to 2300 hours (to use the twenty-four hour system here for uniformity), Hynek & Vallee (1975:20) present data peaking at about 1800 to 2400 hours. Hendry (1979:249-250) presents three sets of data peaking from 1900 to 2400, 1800 to 2400, and 2000 to 2300 hours. Rutledge (1981:218) presents data collected by his group that peaks at 1800 to 2200 hours.

Thylacine data Smith, (1981:58) peaks at 1900 to 2400 hours, with a smaller, narrow, supplementary peak at 1600 to 1700 hours. Other lower peaks occur at other times in all the graphs, but the major peaks of all graphs include the hours of 1800 to 2200. These are evening and early night hours when, 1-people tend to be active (as they do not for dawn and the immediately preceding hours), and 2-visual perception is poorest. Seargent (1978) makes the promising suggestion (albeit in a slightly different connection) that temporal patterns of sightings may reveal more about the process of observation than about the phenomenon. Thus it is providential that Hendry(1975:251) presents a similar graph for 1,158 IFO reports. IFO's are reported UFO's that turned out to have definite identifications, that is, they are reports of misidentified objects. Thus Hendry's IFO graph may be interpreted as a graph of the tendency to misidentify objects v. time of day. This graph, too, has its peak at about the same critical time, 1900 to 2400 hours.

Thus it is fair to conclude that this characteristic indicates, yet again, reports that carry a high proportion of misidentifications, and which cannot be used as evidence of a
phenomenon. Graphs of this nature for known animals of known habits should allow no dependence on time of day, as the researcher should be able to find the beast at any time of day. Even in cases where this is not possible, or the researcher prefers to look at certain times, there should not be the same dependence on time of day. For kangaroos, for example, it is common knowledge among mammologists that they may be seen not only at these same evening hours, but also at the hours from dawn to about 0900, so that the curve would be bimodal not unimodal.

Further work, as always, needs to be done. "Calibration" data for well known animals or objects needs to be gathered and analysed graphically. Who, for example, worries about how often possums are sighted by multiple observers, or for how many minutes one can observe a koala? Yet this kind of data could be very helpful in assessing cryptozoological reports.

In sum, it is clear that reported Thylacine sightings - based on the data of Smith(1981) - share significant similarities with reported UFO sightings. These similarities include similar dependence on isolated areas, time of day, number of observers and sighting duration. Such similarities are explicable in terms of the inclusion of a high proportion of misidentified objects or phenomena. Therefore such reports cannot be used as evidence for the continued existence of Thylacines in Tasmania.

References:


Psychic surgery 'patients' were sceptics, SM told

BY OLGA FERNELEY

A Filipino man and a Doncaster couple appeared in the Box Hill Magistrates Court yesterday on charges relating to obtaining money by deception after alleged psychic surgery on two members of the Australian Skeptics' Society.

Joseph Rubinstein, of Glen Waverley, an engineer and treasurer of the society, said he went to the home of Margaret and Colin Kingsland, of Paula Crescent, Doncaster, on 17 July, complaining of stomach pains. He told the court he had lied about the pain — he had none — and that he had just been examined by a medical practitioner at the Doncaster police station.

He said Mrs Kingsland told him to remove his jacket, shirt and singlet, and lie on a bench. A Filipino, whom he identified in court as Laurence Cacteng, recited a prayer and then began massaging his stomach, Mr Rubinstein said.

"I heard a pop like a little balloon bursting, and immediately liquid began to run over my abdomen. This liquid was wiped off with a towel by Mrs Kingsland," Mr Rubinstein said.

The procedure was repeated, there was another "pop", and then Mr Cacteng "raised his hand and showed me a piece of meat. It was not a fresh piece of meat. It looked rather unpleasant. It was brownish instead of red and in my opinion it looked like a piece of chicken liver," Mr Rubinstein said.

Mr Rubinstein said he had been in a forced-labor camp in Germany and had seen people blown up.

"I know what human tissue looks like. It certainly was not fresh and it certainly was not my time," Mr Cacteng, 44, residing at Paula Crescent, Doncaster, while in Australia, and Mrs Kingsland, 48, face charges of dishonesty obtaining $30 by pretending they performed psychic surgery on Mr Rubinstein, and $30 by pretending they performed psychic surgery on another member of the Australian Skeptics, Miss Janet de Silva.

Mr Kingsland, 49, is charged with aiding and abetting the case, being heard by Mr Lionel Winton-Smith, SM, was adjourned to 30 January.

MARK PLUMMER OVERSEAS

Our National President Mark Plummer is attending the CSICOP meeting in San Francisco this month. He will be speaking at the workshop session on the development of local chapters and following Bob Steiner's description of the hoax. Mark will also be addressing meetings of the NorthWest Skeptics — our sister organisation in Washington and Oregon and on a talent hunt for future speakers.

Mark's airfare has been paid for by our patron Dick Smith and accommodation is being covered by the NorthWest Skeptics, the Bay Area Skeptics and CSICOP. We expect a full report in the next Skeptic.

We badly need representatives in Tasmania and the Northern Territory and if you have any friends of a skeptical persuasion in either place, please let us know and we will send them some literature.

NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

After the appeal for new National Committee Members, two volunteers came forward and both were accepted. They are John Lattanzio (M.Sc.), tutor in astrophysics at Monash University and Pam Williams, technical writer.
FIREWALKING AT GEELONG

by James Gerrand

There is now no need to go to Fiji, Sri Lanka, India, Greece, Spain or Bulgaria to witness firewalking: for a fee motivator Dr David Knowles will demonstrate his ability to walk over a bed of red-hot coals without being burnt.

Following such a demonstration reported by the "Geelong Advertiser" (13/9/84), Jan Ratcliffe, Senior Tutor in Psychology at Deakin University, arranged for David Knowles to address a departmental seminar on this subject on 16/10/84. I attended by her kind invitation to represent the Australian Skeptics.

Before the day I consulted the literature to find out what research had been carried out on this centuries old practice. Surprisingly little I discovered. "As a ritual of purification, healing and reverence, firewalking has been associated with divine worship in many parts of the world for centuries. ... Today, firewalking is still being performed more or less regularly in" many countries. (Science Digest, Aug'82). I had personally seen such a performance in Sri Lanka in the 70s.

The best of the few scientific investigations I found was that by Chas R Darling ("Fire-walking" Nature Sep 28 1935 p521). "Observations made at the first performance indicated that the feat was merely another form of the fireside experiment of picking up a hot cinder and returning it to the fire, when the fingers are not burnt if the action is performed quickly." "...at the second trial ...observations ...comprised the measurement of the total time of contact with each foot with the hot surface; counting the number of steps; and then pressing a thermal junction on to the fire intermittently so as to imitate the period of contact of each foot and the interval between each step ..." "The arrangement was equivalent to a sensitive walking thermometer ...

"...a number of separate trials showed a rise of 15-20°C in the junction. This was conclusive proof that the feet of the performer would not become hot enough for blistering to occur." "Firewalking is really a gymnastic feat, and the agile way in which Kuda Bux walked across the fire ...would be difficult to imitate without much training."

David Knowles credits his ability to firewalk not to gymnastics, nor to religion (at least not to the old-time) but to "neurolinguistics", that one has one's "belief systems, mental syntax, and physiology" working together, that all fears have been conquered.

David learnt firewalking as part of a personal growth seminar he attended with 270 others in Massachusetts several years ago. There are now thousands who have learnt to firewalk through such a course.

David has a diploma of business studies from RMIT and is a qualified chiropractor, gained in the US, in the Geelong Chiropractic Centre in North Geelong. He has set up the Centre for the Advancement of Regenerative Potential at his Wellington home.

David's presentation of his neurolinguistics impressed neither me nor his psychologist audience. His talk was long on buzzwords: holistic, synergetics - but short on science apart from some mystical invocation of quantum mechanics. His main message was that he could overcome a person's fear. Firewalking was a personal demonstration of one such victory.

Motivating football teams to victory is a growth industry in Melbourne. Perhaps we shall see firewalking being used to gain a premiership flag. But the firewalking part is not likely to change what is known about the effect of heat on human tissue.

DID YOU RECEIVE OUR LAST ISSUE?

Five copies of the last issue were returned to us as undeliverable as the labels had come off in the post. If you did not receive the last issue - Sept 84 with the front page story on the British Dowsing Challenge and centrefold of the Bob Steiner hoax - please let us know and we will forward a copy. We regret the inconvenience.
BOOK REVIEW


United under the banner of New-Age medicine in the USA, is a growing movement, whose leaders proclaim that a radical revision of the underlying thinking of the theories of health and disease is required. This revision, it is said, "necessarily includes reunifying modern medicine with its mystical traditions, as well as opening it up to paranormal phenomena", and the name the advocates use for this New-Age medicine, is "holistic health".

The concern of the authors of "The Holistic Healers" is less with the erosion of basic scientific and medical theory, but more with the underlying anti-Christian messages of occultism and Eastern mysticism. It is from this angle that they examine, with great sagacity, the myriad forms which go to make up the alternative universe; from the common or garden variety naturopathy, through to the more exotic and perverted varieties such as Rolfing (works perhaps in the same way as when one hits one's head with a hammer: it feels so good when it stops), and Orgonomy (the word Orgone was derived from orgasm - please draw your own conclusions).

At the outset of the book, the authors make the statement, "We view the Old and New testaments as authoritative in all matters of life, including physical and spiritual health. Much of our critique will therefore be derived from biblical principles. Our goal will be to identify the many forms of chaff, which need to be separated from some very important wheat".

Having thus stated their position as vigilantes, the authors proceed with a fascinating and comprehensive listing of alternative healing techniques; a veritable fruit salad of mysticism, a cold collation of the paranormal, interspersed with humorous asides and observations.

The word "holistic", is defined as having stemmed from the Greek "holos", meaning whole or entire, and is a relative of the roots for our words heal and health.

If you are looking for a good breakdown of the alternative healing therapies, this book is an excellent starting place. An outline is provided of the many basic ideas and presumptions of the "New Medicine", and these are subjected to a critical analysis. The point is made that, "Healing methods which have no basis in reality or common sense, which openly defy well-established principles of biology, and which in some cases tamper with dangerous realms of the occult, have acquired respectability by being referred to as natural".

Acupuncture and acupressure, kriillian photography and bong han corpuscles, chiropracty, osteopathy and homeopathy, all flow through this book. Iridology and mediumiumology, zone therapy, polarity therapy and thymus thumps, behavioral kinesiology and psychic surgery - whatever your favorite poison, it's sure to make its appearance here. With insight and wit, the authors provide a guided tour through this panorama of pomposity, the proponents of which are frequently making vast sums of money as a by-product of accusing orthodox medicine of an anti-territory.

For the skeptic, it is interesting to observe the subtle distinction the authors make in their evaluations, dependent upon whether the message conveyed is anti-Christian, "all is one, you can be God", or whether the idea is that the psychic is an instrument of God. The authors reveal a distinct bias in their criticism. Any healing which encompasses a Taoist philosophy is dissected from a strictly logical point of view, ("No acupuncture text book explains what to do for an amputee"); whereas the psychics who claim to be instruments of God, are subjected to a somewhat more neutral analysis. A well-trained eye for the non-miraculous is recommended as a valuable asset for the skeptical person, although the "hard-boiled" skeptic's position is queried, with a short note on the questionable "open-mindedness" of the contributors to CSICOP's Skeptical Inquirer; and a warning is sounded against "deceitful miracle makers" (as opposed to Jesus). It is interesting to recall the words of Elbert Hubbard on the subject of miracles: "A miracle is an event des-
cribed by those to whom it was told, by men who did not see it”.

However, the narrative is virtually untainted by the dogma of biblical perspective, and it is not until the valedictory pages that the authors attempt to give a good push to their own barrow. After offering a guide to the principles of self-education and a sharp kick in the pants to orthodox medicine (fixated on crisis care), they invoke some scriptural counselling for orienting one’s thinking along biblical lines. Having been conspicuous by its absence, a short dissertation of this kind is no barrier to the usefulness of the volume as a reference tool for the inquiring skeptic, or for anyone interested in an appreciation of the various alternative therapies.

BEYOND THE JUPITER EFFECT by John Gribbin and Stephen Plagemann. Macdonalds & Co. L7.98 reviewed by Keith Rex

If some skeptics thought the "Jupiter Effect" would go away simply because nothing happened, then they are novices indeed. Cataclysm predictors using the Bible have for years been able to adjust to the end of the world not happening by the simple expedient of announcing that they have just discovered a slight error in their calculations and that the correct date is ten years later. This device can be used decade after decade indefinitely.

That Mr Gribbin is a man of "science" in no way restricts him from making similar adjustments. In fact there has come to be a new understanding of what good science is all about. It is not like the old days when the value of a theory was decided on its capacity to make accurate predictions. Accuracy today is highly suspect. It looks much better if correlations are rather marginal. Rutherford once said that that if you needed statistics to justify results, what was required was a more exact experiment. No longer is this so. The sloppier the fit the better. The most convincing thing about Uri Geller is that his powers do not always work. If they did, then you would know he was faking, wouldn't you.

This book though is well worth careful study by avid skeptics as it is a fine example of a genre which I would hesitate to classify simply as pseudoscience. I will call it semi-science for want of a better name. Mr Gribbin is a rising star in this genre. There are already quite a few famous exponents and it is sometimes difficult to tell when semi-science departs from legitimate scientific speculation.

The principle behind semi-science is to be found in the book trade. It is a fact of nature that well written books about orthodox science do not sell well. They hardly sell at all unless some gimmick is used.

Another fact of nature is that practically any sort of junky book about astrology or the occult sells like mad. As to why this is so would require another article.

There is a third curious fact and that is, if a qualified scientist with some sort of reputation writes a book in which astrology is "proved" by "science", then it sells extra well.

A book of this sort tends to develop in the reverse manner to those of legitimate science. One starts with an idea the buying public wants to believe and then frantically tries to dig up some figures and some shaky sort of theory to support it.

The next step is to see that one's scientific reputation is not totally demolished. This is accomplished in the book in question (and many like it) by including a good deal of orthodox scientific material and by attacking cranks like Velikovsky.

Gribbin is an experienced science reporter and is quite good at it. The greater part of the book is composed of this latter material and is first class. This has the additional advantage of being much easier to write and fills up the book with material that would be relatively uncommercial without the astrology "come on".

The book in this respect reminds me of an even more blatant example titled "Was Jesus an Astronaut?". This turned out to be a well-informed book on Higher Criticism etc. The provocative title was deep in the book and then
dismissed in a few words to the effect that "no, he was just a myth".

So bearing all this in mind we will have to consider Mr Gribbin for the Steve Terbot award of excellence.

While Gribbin points out that science has come a long way since the 50s when Velikovsky wrote, he curiously states that the "mystery" of the frozen mammoths with grass in their mouths has not been solved. It never was a mystery. Is this just Gribbin's ignorance, or a sop to the occultist? After all you can't afford to offend the customer too much.

The original Jupiter effect predicted that a grouping of the planets would by tidal forces trigger an outbreak of sun-spots which would shoot out a particle storm which would minutely slow the earth's rotation - the shock of which would trigger off earthquakes, especially in California.

The new or "real" Jupiter effect requires that most of the planets be grouped on the opposite side of the sun to earth and that the most important effect would be bad weather. The new predictions are much more general and numerous; other planetary configurations are proposed as the "right ones". He will probably be right this time as there is every reason to expect that the world's weather will be worse in the closing years of this century. Good weather is an oddity. The first half of this century was the best in a thousand years.

I think we can trust Mr Gribbin's figures as, although it is hard to check them, they can be: he seems to be particularly careful about them. Rather than cooked data Gribbin relies instead on using question begging, emotive terms and omissions to make his arguments.

He implies untrue concepts rather than making false statements. For instance, the whole substance of his earthquake theory rests on an unstated assumption that the earth's crust is entirely uniform in composition and that earthquakes are always poised on the brink of being triggered off. While the forces of continental drift are fairly constant, the resistance of the plates is uneven which makes earthquakes so unpredictable.

A typical example of omission is the statement that the planets can cause a 20 metre tide in the surface of the sun. The general public probably thinks that this surface is something like molten lava. Gribbin does not inform that it is in fact a rather hard vacuum!

In the early part of the book Gribbin fails to mention the great volcano Tambora which was probably the most powerful explosion ever witnessed by man and produced the bitterly cold winter of 1816. Perhaps this omission was because it did not fit into his volcano theory. He knows of it though and brings it in later to prove that volcanoes can change weather.

His system of measuring the intensity of earthquakes seems to be based on the number of people killed! Very powerful pleading but hardly scientific.

I recommend this book as good training material for the apprentice skeptic. It must be remembered that the dividing line between the legitimate and the illegitimate is very hazy. Back in 1917 when Einstein published his theory of general relativity it was believed that the Milky Way was all there was to the universe and that it was static. In order to make his theory fit what was believed to be reality, Einstein invented a fudge factor which he called the "cosmological constant". This involved the absurdity of a force that became stronger with distance. I understand psychics are still calling on this amazing idea to support their fantasies. Years later when it was proved that the astronomers of 1917 were very wrong, Einstein confessed that this psychic-like constant was "the greatest blunder of my life".

It is not easy to be a skeptic; it is not the same as being a nihilist and we should be a little more wary of some of these nice scientific popularisers who tend at times to pontificate about fields far away from their area of expertise.

* * * * * * * * * *
A prize of a Prometheus book will be awarded to the person who can identify the location of this claimed Australian pyramid by 1/2/84. Alternatively this prize will be awarded to the most original location submitted. Now read below.

Dear Sir

Please find enclosed Xerox-copies of what is claimed to be photos taken in Australia, showing Australian pyramids.

The photographer is a Norwegian "Daniken-fan" and he tells us that there are 10 (ten) registered pyramids in Australia. The government is well aware of this he says, but keeps it secret because it would change the world history.

The photos shall have been taken west of Brisbane last summer.

A professor at the University of Oslo refused to talk with the photographer about the matter....

Would you please look into this case and give us your comments?

As you know it seems to be a pseudo-scientific claim and therefore hope we will be possible to refute the assertion.

Yours faithfully

Mr. Mark Plummer
CSIRO-Committee
AUSTRALIA

Enclos.