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APOLOGIES

We regret that this issue is late. A month long business trip by the editor, and its aftermath, are the reasons for the delay. We are pleased to advise that the next issue is on schedule.

Editor: Philip Bradley
Box 10-428,
The Terrace,
Wellington.

Opinions expressed in the *New Zealand Skeptic* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of NZCSICOP or its officers.

1989 Conference Issue

Early on Saturday, 2 September, on a bright but cold Christchurch day, over one hundred and fifty members and others met at the University of Canterbury for NZCSICOP's Fourth Annual Conference. After Chairman Tony Vignaux's welcome and introduction, Dr Bridget Robinson of the Christchurch Clinical School opened the programme with a talk on "Alternative Medicine, Cancer and Quackery". Mr Hugh Young of Radio New Zealand followed with "Cashing in on Gullibility". Other speakers were Dr Denis Dutton, "I know they're out there—The Psychic Universe of the UFO Believer"; Dr Matt McGlone, "On This Planet Skeptics are the Real Aliens"; Dr Colin McGeorge, "The Psychic Dog of Fendalton, the Horrible Severed Hand, and Other Colonial Wonders"; and Dr John Campbell, "Strolling Across the Coals—Physics Takes a Cool Look at a Hot New Age Fad".

The latter lecture demonstration was an introduction to the highlight of the Conference, the **firewalk**. As members will know from the wide publicity the event received, this was highly successful, and confirmed all that has been claimed about the phenomenon by Skeptics in USA, Australia and elsewhere.

No Conference would be complete without a dinner and after-dinner speaker. We were fortunate to have Brian Priestley to address us, asking "Are You a URI?".

B.H. Howard

INSIDE

Nine pages of Conference news
— and more

Next issue will feature Matt McGlone's
"On this Planet Skeptics are the Real Aliens".

Shaky Step to Realm of Skeptics

John Gardner

The following article appeared in *The New Zealand Herald* of 6 September 1989. It was the most comprehensive coverage of the 1989 Conference to appear in the national press.

Logic and the laws of physics are all very fine, but when experience insists that beds of hot coals are for cooking rather than leisurely strolls, rationality curls itself into a small ball at the back of the mind.

But if you aspire to be a Skeptic, rationality is of the essence. And so inwardly whimpering, I stepped on to the glowing embers. Stepped is, I admit, something of a misnomer. It was more of a prancing charge, like Ben Johnson on speed.

Yet, like all the other volunteers, I emerged from the fiery pit unscathed without the benefit of any spiritual preparation, no concentration of my psychic aura, no astral level meditation or, indeed, any thought at all other than that a cold beer would go down well.

Another small victory to the Skeptics, New Zealand's band of dedicated debunkers.

The firewalk was the publicity highlight of the fourth annual convention in Christchurch of the New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal and the brainchild of its chairman, Dr Denis Dutton[†], whose distaste for media gullibility is matched only by his willingness to exploit that gullibility.

It was a distinctly odd spectacle. The members of the Skeptics are not a homogenous bunch and, indeed, my neighbour for several of the sessions had to keep nipping off to feed her lambs. Nevertheless there is more than a random sprinkling of doctorates and professorships among the ranks.

And here they all were; along with the television men who will do anything for good footage, and the pen-carrying hacks, solemnly rolling their trousers and hoisting their skirts less as a demonstration of a belief in the principle of differential rates of heat transfer than a show of peer pressure and of willingness to take a risk (and there were those who admitted later to the odd blister) in the cause of the Skeptics.

What that cause is may be read in their six point statement of aims of which probably the most crucial is "To encourage a more critical attitude to pseudo science and to bogus paranormal claims, and to alert people to the dangers of uncritical acceptance of such claims."

The aim may be to correct ignorance, but the driving moral force is to stop exploitation. They are consumer watchdogs of the mind.

The firewalking exploit, while entertaining, encapsulated the approach. The exposition of the physics which allow the feat was coupled with a demonstration of how firewalking is sold commercially, surrounded with mystique and exploiting the weakness of the client.

One potential walker [in a British firewalk recorded on video tape] was a cancer sufferer who believed if she could gain sufficient control over her mind, through the agency of the firewalk guru, it could conquer her illness. Another believed the mental power thus invoked would revive her ailing business.

No Skeptic would deny the virtue of confidence building, but their ire is raised by the apparatus of hocus-pocus used only to inflate the status of the guru and to turn a dishonest dollar.

In another of the conference presentations far removed from the knockabout firewalk, Dr Bridget Robinson, of Christchurch Clinical School, soberly outlined the ferocious grip which bogus therapies have on the treatment of cancer.

There is a view, not wholly unrepresented within the ranks of the Skeptics for whom smugness, is an ever-yawning trap. That it might not really matter if the poor deluded peasantry think their future is revealed by the creases in their palms. After all, what harm does it do?

But most Skeptics will not have a bar of this benign and condescending view. It is obvious that if alternative therapy delays early diagnosis and treatment of many cancers it can have damaging, possibly fatal results.

Less obvious is the distress that may be caused by clairvoyants and spiritualists who inevitably encounter people at their most desperate and vulnerable.

With a mixture of amusement and exasperation one conference member told how he discovered that a woman was still conducting part of her life, refusing to go on boat trips, in deference to a piece of advice he had given in a forgotten and totally bogus palm reading many years before.

The urge to proselytise is clearly as strong for logicians as for believers in the Archpriest Zang from the secret plant Berk. But if the Skeptics are to be judged by the hard rules of evidence to which they subscribe it is difficult to concede that more than a few minor skirmishes are being won in their quixotic battle against credulity.

In a wry study of the gullibility of the New Zealand public over many years, Dr Colin McGeorge pointed out that as long ago as 1908 a Quackery Prevention Act was passed. With the possible exception of reading lumps on people's heads, all the lunatic fringe remedies that were around then still flourish undiminished.

Quackery prevention failed in 1908 and it will fail now. Who wants to believe statistics when you know personally that your granny's neighbour's piles were cured by a brisk rubdown with a quartz crystal?

In some curious way exposure of fraud often reinforces belief. Spiritualist literature abounds in mediums who have gone to even greater public acclaim having been caught red-handed with the speaking trumpet tucked into their knicker

[†]Editors note: Dr Dutton is a former chairman and is currently the media spokesman for the NZ Skeptics.

elastic. Carbon dating has left the faith of believers in the Turin Shroud completely undiminished.

After years of experience one suspects this still comes as a sad shock to many investigators who find that they are not treated with gratitude by those from whose eyes the scales should have been removed.

Humans cling to irrationality with a fervour that, self evidently, defies rational analysis. Dr Matt McGlone, scientist and apostate astrologer, admitted as much, when he classed his fellow Skeptics as aliens and the rest of population, the overwhelming majority, as normals.

As in the best science fiction movies the aliens, hidden among us, are trying to take over the world. Even if they can walk on hot coal they won't make it.

The Psychic Dog of Fendalton, the Horrible Severed Hand, and Other Colonial Wonders

Colin McGeorge

One of the highlights of the 1989 Conference was an entertaining history of the paranormal and pseudo-science in New Zealand. Part of Dr McGeorge's talk follows, beginning with his account of an attempt early this century to control quackery by legislative means.

Advertisements for patent medicines, imported and local, with effects ranging from nil or placebo to malign, spattered newspapers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the *Quackery Prevention Act, 1908*, was a vain effort to chase the worst of them off the market. It would be tedious to make a parade of hyperbolic advertisements for all the compounds of soap, sugar, water, aloes, alcohol, cochineal and tinctures of opium offered to the credulous or desperate. One case will do.

"Viavi" was the invention of Hartland and Herbert Law of the United States. It was compounded, they insisted, only of pure vegetable ingredients and was "the most brilliant achievement of science that modern times have witnessed." (H. Law and H. Law, *Viavi Hygiene for Women, Men and Children*, British Viavi Company, London, 1899, pp.33-4.)

In careful reading of their 600 page treatise on Viavi fails to disclose what the brew actually consisted of, but it was clearly a wonderful remedy. It could be obtained in vaginal and rectal suppositories, as an ointment, a tonic and a liquid for external application, as a laxative and in three different coloured tablets; and it cured almost everything (Law and Law, p.506)

Dr Mason [the Chief Health Officer of New Zealand] thought it utterly worthless. Viavi, he said, "had as much virtue as did the King's touch for scrofula." (*Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives [AJHR]*, 1907, 1-14, p.13) But Monte Holcroft's Aunt Annie, who secured the agency for it and opened offices in Christchurch and Wellington, had no doubts. She used it freely herself and called for it to be brought to her as she lay stricken and dying. (M.H. Holcroft, *The Way of a Writer*, Whatamongo Bay, Cape Catley., 1984, pp.9-10. For advertisements for

free talks to ladies about Viavi treatment, see *The Lyttelton Times [LT]*, 19-5-1910; *LT*. 12-10-1907.)

It was hoped that the 1908 legislation against quackery would stamp out a particularly nasty group of "specialists" who preyed on ignorant boys. They offered boys and young men "free copies of valuable books about themselves" i.e., information on sexual matters. At a time when parents were reticent and schools and schoolbooks were mute about sex, these books were very tempting. The quack pamphlets told their ignorant, furtive readers that nocturnal emissions or having one testicle hang lower than the other were serious abnormalities requiring special treatment by mail. This treatment would be spun out as long as possible, and when the dupe finally stopped sending money, usually to Melbourne, he would get a very solemn letter from the "doctor". It was so dangerous to stop now that the "doctor" would be obliged, in the lad's own interests, to write to his parents, clergyman, doctor or headmaster unless the sufferer came to his senses and resumed the course of treatment.

After 1899, newspaper proprietors refused to publish the advertisements of the worst of these rogues and in due course the Post Office drew up a blacklist of firms whose mail it would not handle. Most were Australian firms, in Sydney or Melbourne, but the list included the Dr Austin Improved Electric Belt Company of Dunedin and Herr Rassmussen of Wellington. (This dodge is dealt with in C. McGeorge, "Schools and Socialisation in New Zealand 1890-1914, Ph.D. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1985, pp.528-30. The Post Office blacklist is given in Mason's evidence to the committee on the Quackery Prevention Bill, *AJHR*, 1907, 1-4, p.10)

The *Quackery Prevention Act, 1908* was soon recognised to be ineffective against worthless patent medicines.

The essential section read:

2. Every person commits an offence who publishes or causes to be published any statement which is intended by the defendant or any other person to promote the sale of any article as a medicine, preparation or, appliance for the prevention, alleviation or cure of any human ailment or physical defect and which is false in any material particular relating to the ingredients, composition, structure, nature or operation of that article, or to the effects which have followed or may follow the use thereof.

This act quickly proved ineffective. (F.S. Maclean, *Challenge for Health: a history of public health in New Zealand*, Government Printer, 1964, p.169.) The charge that one had advertised a remedy which did not work could readily be met by producing a respectable person to testify that the preparation or treatment in question had done him or her a power of good.

Section 240 of the *Criminal Code Act, 1893*, on the other hand, should have given fortune-tellers pause for thought. Unlike the present legislation on this matter, it did not exempt entertainments; and the maximum penalty was severe.

Everyone is liable to one year's imprisonment with hard labour who pretends to exercise or use any kind of witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment or conjuration, or who undertakes to tell fortunes, or pretends from his skill and knowledge in any occult or crafty science to discover where or in what manner any goods or chattels supposed to have been stolen or lost may be found.

Successful prosecutions were, however, rare and the penalties imposed were mild. In 1909 the Auckland police, after vain attempts to secure convictions, had a stroke of good fortune. A woman mislaid or was robbed of a valuable brooch and she wrote to "Madame Urania" who offered a mail order service for a shilling. Madame Urania's reply was as helpful as such things ever are.

The brooch appears to be in the possession of a dark, thick-set female who appears to be making a change of some sort in a few days. I do not see that you will recover it, as there appears to be some mystery about the matter or secrecy. I have taken the question as theft. If it should have only been mislaid, it would be found concealed under other things such as papers, books, etc. (LT, 3-9-1909)

What Madame Urania had not foreseen was that the recipient would march into a police station in triumph demanding action in following up this fresh lead in the case. Madame Urania did not get twelve months; she was fined £2 and 14 shillings costs and was unrepentant.

Spiritualism was a newsworthy novelty in New Zealand in the 1870s. Twenty five pamphlets pro and con spiritualism were published between 1870 and 1889 (A.G. Bagnall, ed., *New Zealand National Bibliography to the Year 1960*, vol 1) and there were numerous public lectures and letters to the daily papers. In Dunedin, the first spiritualistic experiments were made in 1870, and the Mutual Improvement Society sponsored a series of lectures on this subject. (J. Dakin, Contemporary public opinion and the secular provision of the Education Act 1877, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 21 (2) 1986, pp.189-194.

See also P.J. Lineham, Freethinkers in nineteenth century New Zealand, *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol 19, no 1, 1985, pp.61-81.) A Dunedin society for investigating spiritualism was formed in 1872. It included firm believers in spiritualism as well as those who kept an open mind; and Robert Stout, who became in due course Minister of Education, Prime Minister, Chief Justice and Chancellor of the University of New Zealand, was a leading light. (Dakin, 1986) The churches eyed all this askance and a deacon of Knox Church was excommunicated for appearing on the platform at a spiritualist lecture on a Sunday. (Dakin, 1986).

Most published criticism of spiritualism came from outraged Christians rather than sceptics in the modern sense. Consider this brisk exchange of pamphlets:

In 1879, Matthew Green published *The Devil's Sword Blunted: or spiritualism examined and condemned out of the mouths of its own advocates*. (G.T. Clarke, Dunedin, 1879.)

In reply Mrs Emma Hardinge Britten fired off *Spiritualism Vindicated and Clerical Slanders Refuted: In answer to Mr M.W. Green, Christian Minister of Dunedin. Given in the presence of 1800 people in Garrison Hall, Dunedin...* (G.T. Clarke, Dunedin, 1879.)

Green riposted with *Mrs Hardinge Britten in the Crucible: Being a lecture delivered by M.W. Green, Christian Minister ... in reply to "Spiritualism Vindicated and Clerical Slanders Refuted."* (G.T. Clarke, Dunedin, 1879.)

Counterblasts from orthodox Christians might have limited the spread of spiritualism, but they did not stop it. In 1886, in newly formed Spiritualistic Association in Wellington conducted New Zealand's first spiritualist funeral, attended by two representatives of a Palmerston North association; and one of the mediums present went into a trance to deliver the funeral oration. (LT 6-11-86)

In the same year, a Sydenham group made what may have been the first recorded New Zealand attempt by spiritualists to assist the police in their enquiries. In 1885, Arthur Howard went missing, presumed drowned while bathing at Sumner. Howard, it transpired, had recently insured his life for £2,400, the premiums on this sum amounting to more than half of his annual income. The insurance companies were understandably reluctant to settle with his widow.

Two months after Howard disappeared, two brothers called Godfrey found a severed hand on the beach at Taylor's Mistake and Mrs Howard identified a ring on it as her husband's. The hand was carefully examined by Christchurch medical men who concluded that it was a woman's and that the wrist bones showed the marks of a sharp instrument.

The Godfreys and Mrs Howard were arrested for conspiracy to defraud and a little later Howard himself was nabbed in Petone wearing a wig and a dyed moustache. After trials in packed Christchurch courtrooms, the Godfreys and Mrs Howard were acquitted and Howard got two years for attempting to defraud an insurance company.

So, where did the horrible severed hand come from? Seven bodies were exhumed in the Wairarapa where Howard had been hiding out and one from the Addington cemetery in Christchurch; but none of them had been mutilated.

(This account is drawn from *The Severed Hand or the Howard Mystery—with portraits of Mr and Mrs Howard, the Messrs Godfrey, and the Mysterious hand* [1886] facsimile edn, Capper Press, Christchurch, 1974.)

The Sydenham seance, with four men and two women initially present, was held in August, 1886, four months after the trials. The spirits were coy until the ladies withdrew; then, although they would not give a name, they were very helpful. It was the hand of woman aged 31, buried in the Catholic section of the Lyttleton cemetery on the right hand side of the gateway. She had been married twice and had died in childbirth ten months earlier. One of the spirits present was that of her first husband who volunteered that her second husband was in the North Island, and he was a member of the Salvation Army and a "bad lot". (LT, 18-8-86.) The police, as far as I know, did not act on this information. There may still be a headstone in that cemetery to match the spirits' information. Look around. If you find a candidate, charge Berlitz or Playfair plenty.

The results of a number of other, seances were recorded in books and pamphlets or posterity's edification. Theodore King, who was Postmaster in Gore in 1902 (*Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory* 1902, p.1457) published his *Occult Research* in 1899 and a much expanded "revised edition" in 1909. (T. King. *Occult Research: reincarnation, life on other planets and antiquity unveiled by spirit intelligences*, printed by Southland News, Invercargill, 1909)

King's book is full of interesting news, for example, that there are canals on Mars, retained by sand walls (p.76) and the inhabitants, who are telepaths, operate large vessels propelled by electricity drawn from the atmosphere.

King's "Southern Cross Circle", which operated in Gore and, apparently, in Dunedin, had a long list of spirit visitors including Helen of Troy (p.36), Hercules (pp.36-37) and Minnehaha (p.162). Charles Dickens was still at work on the other side and writing "Slum Life in Spirit Land" (p.64). As testimony to Dickens's creative powers on this side of the veil, Sarah Gamp spoke briefly to the circle (p.115).

Jesus, King and his associates were told, would appear in the United States—in 1976 (p.92) or 1977 (p.41). France, they learnt, would be a monarchy again in about thirty years time (p.56). And the spirits had the occasional commercial tip: "If you care for speculation, go in for petroleum at Gisborne; it is one sea of petroleum" (p.174).

All told, King's book is a fascinating catalogue of the cuckoo, much of it still in circulation. *Inter alia*, it discusses or mentions Atlantis, the third eye, healing crystals, visitors from other planets living unknown among us, reincarnation, telepathy, astrology, pyramidology, phrenology and palmistry.

Another useful source is T.J. McBride's *Glimpses into Spirit Life* (Christchurch, Whitcombe and Tombs, [1927]) which includes spirit messages received in Christchurch through Mr and Mrs Rienzi Owen of Linwood. There are messages from Bishop Grimes of Christchurch, Lord Northcliffe, William Fergusson Massey, the recently departed Prime Minister of New Zealand, and Tommy Taylor, Mayor of Christchurch and a notable campaigner against

alcohol.

The other side is a nice place where the buildings, copies of the best architecture on earth, are made of ectoplasm. There are excellent free concerts where the music produces beautiful colours. There is neither money nor commerce; work consists of giving or listening to lectures on "useful subjects such as sound, light, music, vibrations and magnetism" The spirits can travel to other planets and they take a keen interest in earthly affairs. Massey haunts Parliament and Taylor is still working as enthusiastically as ever for Prohibition—an ardent spirit, one might say.

McBride had been ill, but he was restored by a "Healing Golden Rain" (p.108) and the spirits congratulated him on this. Early in 1926 a spirit commented "He has made a marvellous recovery and will remain on earth quite a while yet." (p.106). Early in 1927 another spirit was pleased to see him looking so well. McBride, who was in his seventies, died in September, 1927 (LT, 12-9-27).

One of the spirits also commented:

Another thing I notice is that what Spiritualists you have here are not keen enough... I may be wrong, but the people of New Zealand, especially in the South Island, seem very much behind in this work. A good medium to start things is what is wanted. Of course, I know that finance is a big handicap everywhere, and unless the people can afford to pay a good salary to a good medium, they cannot expect to get good results or good mediums. (p.98).

McBride, a Canadian, had been one of the directors of the Massey—Harris company and retired to New Zealand in 1902: Owen was a clerk. (*Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory* 1926, p.1913.)

In 1920, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle beat the drum for spiritualism throughout New Zealand on a lecture tour (Sir A.C. Doyle. *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist*. Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1921). His published account of his travels provides a useful "who was who" of local spiritualists. In Auckland, for example, he met the Rev Jasper Calder, Mr Pearson (a medium), Mrs Stables (President of the New Zealand Association of Spiritualists), Mr Poynton (a stipendiary magistrate with a longstanding interest in spiritualism) and Clement Wragge who told him that missionaries from Atlantis had been all over the Pacific and left traces everywhere (Doyle, pp.182, 188, 191).

In Christchurch he met, amongst others, Mr Peter Trollove, to whom he gave one of his photographs of fairies. Poynton had told Doyle of a wonderful psychic dog owned by Mrs McGibbon of Christchurch and Doyle duly went to see the amazing beast. Unfortunately, "Darkie", a terrier, was old, blind and deaf and Doyle had to rest content with assurances that Darkie could once bark out the answers to sums and operate on numbers that people were only thinking of.

Doyle's tour was financially rewarding; and he learnt that there were fairies at the bottom of some New Zealand gardens too, evidence he later used in defending his general belief in little folk. Mrs Annie Hardy of Te Kuiti had seen eight or ten little figures, the size of toddlers, ride past on tiny ponies (*Press*, 30-10-22, Horace Leaf, *Under the Southern Cross: a record of a pilgrimage*, Cecil Palmer,

London, 1923, pp.166-7.) Another unnamed woman had "seen fairies in all parts of New Zealand, but especially in the fern-clad gullies of the North Island." She was also a medium and used to ask the fairies to help make her plants grow. (*Press*, 30-10-22.)

A year later, Horace Leaf, armed with information and introductions from Doyle, made very much the same tour to keep the fires of spiritualism in the dominion fed. He too called on Wragge and Poynton and on mediums and officers of spiritualists' associations. He too went to see Darkie, now seventeen years old, blind, deaf and afflicted with goitre so that Leaf, like Doyle, could not put the wonderful terrier's powers to the test (Leaf, p.195). In Dunedin he met "Mrs R" a powerful medium whose first name was Johanna and who had been told that she was a reincarnation of Joanna Southcott. Leaf remarks that, indeed, there was a "fairly close resemblance" between Mrs R. and "a photograph of the famous visionary"—who died in 1814, a little early for photography (Leaf, p.219).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, snake oil men and flim-flam merchants were able to operate freely and profitably. The *Quackery Prevention Act, 1908* did not drive dubious remedies off the market and no fortune-teller as far as I know incurred the maximum penalty provided for in the *Criminal Code Act, 1893*.

At the 1896 Census there were some "sceptics" under the heading "No Religion"—two of them—along with 5 Altruists, 1 Anarchist, 1 Chartist, 3 Egoists, 1 Fatalist, 1 Kalazoist, and 1 Universal Hedonist (*Census, 1896, Religions of the People*, p.89); and there were diverse associations of freethinkers, but neither sceptics nor freethinkers offered any substantial critique of claims of the paranormal. The severest strictures against psychics were from outraged orthodox Christians, working on premises of doubtful superiority to those of King, McBride, or Doyle. Worthington's most relentless opponent was the Reverend Hosking of the Christian Evidence Society. Doyle's sternest critics were clerics; in Christchurch his views were condemned by Bishop Brodie and other clergymen and he later wrote that *The Press* "represents the clerical interest and also the clerical intolerance of the Cathedral city" (Doyle, p.199).

The most common source of genuinely sceptical comment on amazing claims was the daily press. It is instructive to compare Doyle's reaction to an Australian medium with that of some New Zealand reporters some years earlier.

In Australia in 1920, Doyle attended a demonstration by Charles Bailey, an "apport medium", but the results were not impressive. Bailey produced some spirit hands but Doyle was for once actually suspicious: "there was a disturbing suggestion of cuffs about those luminous hands" (Doyle, pp.101-102)

In New Zealand in 1909, Bailey, with the president of the Wellington Spiritualist Society present, demonstrated his psychic powers to a group of reporters who were unimpressed (*LT*, 16-8-1909). At his second sitting for Doyle, Bailey managed to produce a nest with an egg in it; on his second performance before the New Zealand reporters he produced "a native mat from Sumatra and a small live wild bird from Malaya" (*LT*, 21-8-1909).

At this point the creator of Sherlock Holmes concluded that Charles Bailey was "upon occasion a true medium with a very remarkable gift for apports" (Doyle, p.104-105). The New Zealand reporters asked if the spirits could produce a copy of that morning's Melbourne *Argus*, a request Bailey ignored.

Has New Zealand made any unique contribution to nonsense? The list of possibles looks a bit thin and unoriginal: a psychic dog, some lost pets, a phantom canoe, some spooks, a weeping headstone, and divers lights in the sky. If there is to be a distinctive Kiwi contribution, I think we must invent one—one that will benefit us economically, of course. We could announce that lost virility may be restored by eating kiwifruit—as long as they are grown in the Southern Hemisphere on wires precisely aligned north and south. Or we could tout the remains of the Clyde dam as incontrovertible evidence of Atlantean civilisation—and then run expensive conducted tours of the site, secure in the knowledge that in a few years time no one will admit to having any connection whatever with it or to knowing anything at all about it.

Although I have dealt with a sorry succession of mountebanks and self-deluders, we have no reason whatever to feel generally superior to Edwardian New Zealanders. With the exception of phrenology, all the beliefs and activities King mentions are still in play; and whereas King almost certainly paid to have his book published, many authors are now raking in royalties from stuff like that. Advertisements for palmists, astrologers and Tarot card readers are more common in Christchurch papers now than they were in the 1890s.

Sadly, there are still plenty of people who could, with a bit of effort, be persuaded to pay for sheepshit sandwiches. But are there fewer now or more? Phineas T. Barnum is supposed to have said that there was a sucker born every minute. Well, the birthrate has gone down, but the total population is much greater now—so I would think it is about one every twenty seconds.

Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight

John Campbell

Dr Campbell's lecture at the 1989 Conference was an excellent piece of science education. The following article has a little physics, but is mainly a behind-the-scenes exposé of scientific show biz. It was prepared for *The New Zealand Physicist*.

The Skeptics were coming to town. What better opportunity to run a firewalk to debunk the mystique enshrouding this act?

Denis Dutton, the organiser of the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Skeptics (officially the New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal Inc) does a fantastic job debunking pseudoscience, quack medicine, clairvoyancy, the occult etc; stepping in where scientists fear to tread. We owe him a lot. How better to repay him than for myself and the third year physics class to lay on a firewalk during the conference dinner?

First a few parameters needed sorting out. How long should the walk be? How much firewood? How long will it take to burn to charcoal. Many other queries flocked through the mind. Obviously a sly trial was called for. If I was going to do this again next year for the Science Teachers Conference (SCICON 90) why not make a portable pit? Hell, what if someone tripped on the edge and pitched face down in the coals? Better stick with a hole in the ground. What if some coals stick to people's feet? Better come out onto longish, wet grass. **Lesson One** had been learned—the organizer of a firewalk cannot be a fussbudget—just get on with it.

The third year physics students were intrigued. Keen. A couple of second year students clamoured to be involved. Why not? They can form the nucleus of next year's walk. Where to hold the event? It had to be near the Conference dinner at the Students' Union. Why not the small, tiered, so-called amphitheatre right outside? The creek was less than 10 paces away—instant first aid.

Hang on—what if it rains—really belts down? Better shift to the other side among trees where a tarpaulin can be rigged. The pre-event publicity creates phenomenal interest. Now there are 80 attending the dinner, 100, 120, 130—the limit. We cannot fit them around one pit. Back to the tiered amphitheatre. **Lesson Two**—a spectacular event attracts customers to a conference.

The Sly Trial

The trial run was carried out in great secrecy. Denis, 15 students, the University's information officer, the University's photographer, a Sunday Times reporter and photographer (their paper was next due out a day after the main event), half the Physics Department, my wife and kids...well almost secret. Only tell those you can trust.

Three days before the dinner the trial fire was lit. **Lesson Three**—next time use more kerosene—want an impressive conflagration at the start. Just before the Sunday Times photographer arrived, Denis, the arch-publicist, went and changed into a snappy blazer and tie combination. I was in shorts, boots and rough shirt—working clothes. **Lesson Four**—dress for the occasion.

The roaring inferno subsided to a bed of hot coals. Time for the off. Denis insisted that as chief shebang of the Skeptics he had to be first. Who was I to stand in his way? A few nervous approaches to the edge.

"Do you think it's ready?"

"Sure, get on with it".

He knew the principles as well as I did. Although the coals were glowing at around 700°C the parts in contact with the foot would go out and the surface quickly cool. Charcoal has low heat capacity so the first contact is hardly felt. The inside of charcoal is not burning and its thermal diffusivity is poor so that heat transfer to the foot is far slower than when standing on hot metal. One second of contact per foot is OK so there is no trouble getting in two paces per foot during this time.

A tentative touch of one foot on the coals. A nervous hop across the pit and he was ready. Carefully posing and waiting for all camerawomen to get focussed he stepped off into the front page of the Sunday Times. As a physicist I was quite confident about the principles so had no hesitation about stepping off carrying a small placard, courtesy of Colin Hooker, displaying the thermal diffusivity equation. Damn! I had caught the camerawomen unaware and missed photographic fame. **Lesson Five**—pay attention to the media.

The students went across in various degrees of haste, then the kids, various strays and repeats. Archie Ross walked confidently, for the second time in 40 or so years. (The first time had been on a beach in Ireland, after taking Scottish anaesthetic and tuition from an African prince no less.) I walked three times for no burns. Denis stood on something sharp which he mistook at the time for a burn. A few received small burns which blistered but had gone by the next day. We had determined the parameters to run a successful firewalk that looked effortless and well planned.

The Conference Talk

The Conference opened on Saturday September 2nd and I was scheduled for the last talk of the day. At the outset I asked who was going to walk that night. Of the 150 or so present only six tentatively raised a hand. For this talk, the highlight of my show business career, I dressed carefully in white trousers, red and black blazer and boater. That got me onto Holmes' TV show.

During the talk I discussed pub tricks, baked a cake, passed burning charcoal around for people to touch and showed video examples of the hype that accompanies commercial firewalks. At the end of the talk the audience were again asked, "Who will walk tonight?" Half raised a hand. **Lesson Six**—an illustrated talk is definitely needed.

A quick interview with the Holmes team and then home to change into working clothes and prepare the pyre.

The Walk

A pit 3 metres long, 1 metre wide and 5 centimetres deep suffices for a novice walk. This allows 4 paces in all, each foot contacts the coals twice. The turf is carefully stacked well away from the fire. Turfing another 20 cms on each long side helps to minimise the scorching of the surrounding grass. Burning logs placed here during the walk add to the effect. Planks or split logs laid all around the pit help protect the grass as does an occasional spray with a hose which has to be present as a safety measure anyway. Make sure there is longish (a few cms) grass at the exit end of the pit and keep it soaked but not muddy and slippery. This takes care of the odd coal which sticks to an unlucky foot.

Two cubic metres of pine were carefully stacked (three would do a regiment, two a conference of a hundred or so and one a class of twenty). Five or so litres of kerosine ensure a start to gladden the heart of any pyromaniac. It will be two and a half hours before the fires burn down to a useable bed of charcoal so there is time for story telling.

"Have you heard of the punk method of firewalking? First, set fire to your house."

An old fellow lay dying. Two mates came in and looked down on the lifeless form. "Hell", says one, "he's dead". "Maybe not," says two, "feel his feet. Nobody dies with warm feet". The "corpse" agonizingly raised its head and croaked, "You're wrong, Joan of Arc did!"

The Skeptics emerged out of the darkness to view the frightening pyre prior to going upstairs for their dinner and liquid courage. Finally there is just me, the students and two TV crews. TWO! So, a firewalk rates higher than a serial murder. Damn, and here is me in my work clothes. Back home to change.

The students and I have to stay sober. Discreet safety instructions are issued—half are to have their shoes on at all times in case someone trips—one on either side, run them to the creek and throw them in. Denis, between courses, pokes his head out of an upstairs window. The fire looks awesome. "What time will it be ready, John". "When we arranged". The students and I cook our sausages on the fire. The time between nervous consultations decreases as F-hour approaches. 30 or so stray spectators had gathered for the festivities. On cue the Skeptics troop out.

The coals are raked and all large burning lumps removed. At night the sight is scaring. Denis is apprehensive. I don't blame him. Small jets of flame are still visible. We stall for time. The jets subside.

"Should we wait a bit longer?" asks martyr no 1.

As a loyal lieutenant it is my duty to give him encouragement. "Stop pissing about—get on". I know I don't have to go until he is safely across. He tries a foot in one corner. Physics works.

Denis stands at the far end of the glowing red bed. A student and I tamp it down using flat shovels. We can only spend 5 seconds or so near the bed because it is so hot. Sweat pours off us. Denis fights off a potential laundry problem and is ready. So are all the cameras. I surreptitiously drop a firework into the coals. It lands on its side, wick uppermost and does not go off. I quietly delay Denis,

not wanting to give him a vasectomy in mid-stride. The banger goes bang.

Denis psychs up again, poised ready. A student (Graeme Plank) with 80 watts of stereo in his van opens up both barrels with The Ritual Fire Dance. Denis loses concentration. Finally all is ready. We spray some hot logs with water to produce ghostly steam for the TV cameramen. Denis steps off the grass verge and into the Holmes Show.

He has no burns. Me next. I hoist the icon, a very large placard displaying the thermal diffusion equation, and adjust my tie, bonnet and kilt. Holy cow, if this doesn't get me on TV I will streak next time. For the glory of physics I stride off to obscurity.

The students were organized to follow, to use the lemming effect to entice the Skeptics onto the coals. Amazingly they are elbowed aside by people fighting to get on while the TV cameras are rolling. Ladies first. A student and I pack the bed down after every ten or so people. In the dark those embers sticking to feet show clearly. Denis dashes across to brush one off one oblivious person. This only goes to show how poor the thermal diffusivity and heat capacity of charcoal are.

Around 100 people walk that night, some up to five times. Eventually, satiated, the spectators drift off until finally just the students, the Holmes crew and me are left. We cook some potatoes and we yarn. After midnight we flood the fire, tidy up and go home.

At nine on Sunday morning the conference reconvenes. Of those present 63 walked and 11 received a small burn. But as one said, "I walked four times but had only one small blister". The first session of the morning on "The Homeopathic Treatment for Minor Burns and Blisters" is cancelled.

Denis is elated. Never before have the Skeptics received such publicity. In the following 3 days he goes on some six radio programmes. Reuters interview him. The Press sort through all their photos and illuminate their front page with a large, colour one of 11 year old Benjamin Dutton in mid-stride and with a look of agony on his face. This is crummy as Benjamin walked fearlessly and without injury both days. Two radio-stations phone him. "Did your Dad force you to walk?"

So what are the final lessons? **Lesson Seven**—nothing beats a spectacular stunt to attract customers and publicity. A firewalk is a must for the next SCICON and NZIP conferences. Or maybe a compulsory bungee jump. Back in the 1890's staged head-on collisions between railway locos packed them in.

Lesson Eight—what whimps academics are—giving away for free what scam artists charge \$300 per head for. Hmmm. 100 people at, say \$250. That's umm. This is John Campbell at the Presidential Suite, Acapulco, signing off until next year.

The 1989 Conference gained front page publicity in New Zealand. It even made a little impact overseas:

From London—

Fire-walkers are caught on hop

A group of New Zealand rationalists claim to have debunked fire-walking. No spiritual powers are needed—just nimble feet, they say. About 80 members of the New Zealand Skeptics have hopped barefoot across a bed of red-hot coals. Only 11 were slightly burned.

"It is possible as long as you don't exceed two seconds per foot," said Mr Denis Dutton, group leader and a philosophy lecturer, yesterday. "It is quite astonishing, but that's physics." — Reuter

(The Daily Telegraph 5/9/89)

to the Chatham Islands—

Footnote

OUR spy on the Chatham Islands has reported in with this gem. Recently there was a large twenty-first birthday party over there, and in the course of the revelry a young man, inspired by efforts to debunk the mystique of firewalking, decided to show that anyone could do it. Our spy says he did so, walking through a bed of coals in his bare feet, and emerging unscathed. Then he trod on a piece of broken glass and bled everywhere.

(The Press 20/11/89)

The house journal of the New Zealand public service gave the conference some publicity too.



Skeptical hotfoot

It's enough to make you skeptical whether there is such a thing as good luck.

One person with a skeptical outlook on life is (DSIR scientist) Matt McGlone who features in the Greenhouse Effect article.

Matt is a member of the Skeptics Society which at its recent annual conference in Christchurch tried firewalking as an after dinner entertainment. (In fact they walked on the embers previously used for barbecue).



Excelsior!

The shades of night had fallen fast,
When o'er a Kiwi campus passed
A sage, who bore mid smoke and flame,
A sign, which did this truth proclaim,
'We walk on fire!'

(With apologies to HW Longfellow.)
B.H.H.

1990 MEDIA AWARDS

At the Annual Dinner on 2 September media excellence awards were made to the following:

Peter Calder, *The New Zealand Herald*
David Cohen, *The Evening Post*
Colin Feslier, *Radio New Zealand*
Tapu Misa, *The New Zealand Herald*
Shelley Vercoe, *The Nelson Evening Mail*
Hugh Young, *Radio New Zealand*.

A bent spoon was teleported to *The Sunday News* for its article about an Auckland psychic who had contacted the spirits of the Swedish tourists missing in the Coromandel and obtained information from "beyond the grave" about their murderer.

New Chairman of NZCSICOP

Warwick Don was elected at the AGM to succeed Prof. Tony Vignaux as Chairman of the New Zealand Skeptics. Mr Don, a senior lecturer in Zoology at the University of Otago, was a founding member of the society. However his experience as an advocate for science and the scientific approach goes back much further. My personal collection of clippings contains two articles he had published in Otago University's student newspaper in 1966 and 1967 responding to attempts to recast evolution in a religious mould. He is also a formidable debater against creationism—as was evident from the letters in *The Nelson Evening Mail* (27/5/87 to 30/7/87) in which he and Jim Ring presented the skeptical viewpoint. Mr Don's special concern at the moment is the draft Form I-V science syllabus—in particular its inclusion of non-scientific elements.

P.A.B.

NZCSICOP FIFTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Massey University
Palmerston North
August 17,18,19, 1990

If you have ideas for presentations, or wish to offer one yourself, please let us know. We would want a summary of your paper by March 1, 1990. Write to Kerry Chamberlain, Psychology Department, Massey University, Palmerston North.

1989 A.G.M.

The 1989 Annual General Meeting of NZCSICOP was held at the Science Lecture Theatre, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, on 3 September 1989.

Reports of the New Zealand Skeptics' work countering the paranormal was a feature of the A.G.M.

Bill Morris, convenor of the Medical Sub-Committee, told the meeting the sub-committee had prepared a "truth kit" on homeopathy and was preparing others on iridology and acupuncture.

Media Representative, Denis Dutton, reported on the success of the Whitley Strieber "truth kit". He had twice been invited by the media to present a sceptical viewpoint on Strieber's claims. He said there was a need to do repeat distributions to the media of the "truth kits".

"Psychiatry and the Courts" was a suggestion from the floor for a future "truth kit" topic.

Ray Carr reported on his representing the Skeptics at a meeting of the media in Auckland with the visiting Mr Vogel who claimed crystals had paranormal effects.

The Chairman, Tony Vignaux, thanked retiring editor Keith Lockett, and the newsletter producers for their work and complimented them on the quality of the New Zealand Skeptic. He reported that the outgoing committee had appointed Philip Bradley as the new editor.

The following officers were elected:

Chairman: Warwick Don;
Secretary/Treasurer: Prof. Bernard Howard;
Committee Members: George Errington, Rosalind Evans, Maggie Holmes, Heather Mackay, and Cynthia Shakespeare.

It was resolved that the 1990 Conference and A.G.M. be held in Wellington.

(Since the A.G.M. Mrs Shakespeare has resigned from the committee and an offer by Palmerston North members to host the 1990 Conference has been accepted.)

The matter of a suitable logo was referred to the incoming committee.

Finally, the New Zealand Skeptics upheld their tradition of "believing in something": The A.G.M. recognised and applauded the valuable paranormal role of the Wizard of Christchurch and encouraged him and his assistants in many more years of powerful psychic effects, especially on the temperature.

Message to Members from Denis Dutton & Bernard Howard

To all those who came to the Annual Conference in Christchurch—thank you for your support, and for making the event such a great and satisfying success. To those who could not come—we missed you. To all members—we hope to meet you at the Fifth Conference next year in Palmerston North.

SCOOP! New Truth Recycles Old Rubbish

"Three Kiwi soldiers' shock claim 'ALIENS TOOK GAL-LIPOLI REGIMENT'". So declared the front page of *New Truth*'s 25 August 1989 issue.

Inside we read that at Gallipoli in 1915, a British regiment, the First Fourth Norfolk, marched into a low-lying, "almost solid looking", cloud which was shaped like a bread loaf. When they were inside it the cloud moved away to join similar clouds which had been overhead all day. The clouds then moved off in the direction of Bulgaria and out of sight, but left no trace of the regiment.

The claim was made in an affidavit signed by three New Zealand veterans at an ANZAC reunion in 1965.

Edward Rooney's article said this eyewitness account of the event has "Just been revealed"—it had been "uncovered as part of investigations into similar unexplainable (sic) abductions by Quest International, an English organisation which investigated the paranormal".

Rooney is mistaken. Charles Berlitz included the story in *Without a Trace*, (1977), the sequel to his *Bermuda Triangle*, and it was widely publicised by other writers of Berlitz' calibre.

New Truth tried contacting the descendents of the "eyewitnesses". The 1 September issue reported an interview with the son of the soldier who instigated the affidavit: "Bill Reichart said his father had never suggested the incident was the work of aliens". Well, it is true "aliens" were not explicitly mentioned in the affidavit. (So much for the sentence in quotation marks on *New Truth*'s 25 August front page!)

Bill Reichardt† told *New Truth* "It's a pity it's taken so long for someone to investigate (the disappearance) because the old boy would have lapped up talking about it". While the latter part of this statement may be accurate, an investigation was actually done ten years ago. What is more, Bill Reichardt knew of it.

Prof. Colin McGeorge, in his talk‡ at the 1989 New Zealand Skeptics, conference, made a timely reference to Melvin Harris's treatment of the story in *Investigating the Unexplained* (Prometheus Books, 1986). The book's British edition entitled *Sorry, You've been duped!* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson) also appeared in 1986. But an earlier investigation of the "disappearing regiment" had been undertaken by Paul Begg and the results included in his *Into Thin Air* (David & Charles Ltd, 1979). A version of his account appeared in the periodical *The Unexplained* (1980-83) and was included in a compilation of selected articles from *The Unexplained* in 1984. A letter from Bill Reichardt responding to Begg was published in the periodical in 1982.

† *New Truth* spells the surname 'Reichart'. The Rotorua phone directory and other accounts of the story give 'Reichardt'.

‡ See page 3. Dr McGeorge's reference to the Disappearing Regiment is omitted in our abbreviated version.

I sent a copy of Begg's article to the editor of *New Truth* and asked for a contact for Quest International. The paper has not replied.

It would be interesting to know more about Quest International. According to the *New Truth* article "further research by Quest International reveals that when Turkey surrendered in 1918, Britain demanded the return of the lost regiment. The Turkish Government replied that its troops had not captured or engaged the First Fourth Norfolk." It should be pointed out these findings of Quest International's "further research" are lifted straight from the affidavit.

Running along the bottom of the *New Truth* page which had the "disappearing regiment" story was the following: "STARTING IN THIS WEEK'S TRUTH: UNEXPLAINED MYSTERIES—P.30". Using the rhetorical question, a device so beloved by writers on the paranormal: Was the ANZACs' story revived merely to promote the paper's new series?

Incidentally, the "unexplained mystery" on *New Truth*'s P.30 sounded as dubious as the home-grown effort. We are investigating it.

P.A.B.

WHAT NEW TRUTH DIDN'T TELL ITS READERS.

- The First Fourth Norfolk was a battalion of the Royal Norfolk Regiment and not itself a regiment. The First Fourth never disappeared.

- The First Fifth Norfolk battalion was virtually wiped out at Gallipoli in an advance which took place on 12 August 1915, and it did seem as if it had vanished. However, 122 bodies, those of slightly less than half the participants in the advance, were recovered in 1919. (According to *New Truth* the date of the "disappearance" in the affidavit was 28 August. Other accounts say 21 August.)

- Of the 34,000 British and Empire troops who died at Gallipoli 27,000 have no known grave.

- Official war records show that Reichardt's unit, even if it was where he says it was, was more than four miles away from the scene of the First Fifth's advance, and the two other "eyewitnesses" were evacuated from Gallipoli because of illness on 5 August and 21 August.

- No account of the kidnapping cloud predated the affidavit signed in New Zealand 50 years after the event.



BRITAIN

Going Forever Around on Circles

Who or what is responsible for those puzzling crop-field rings?

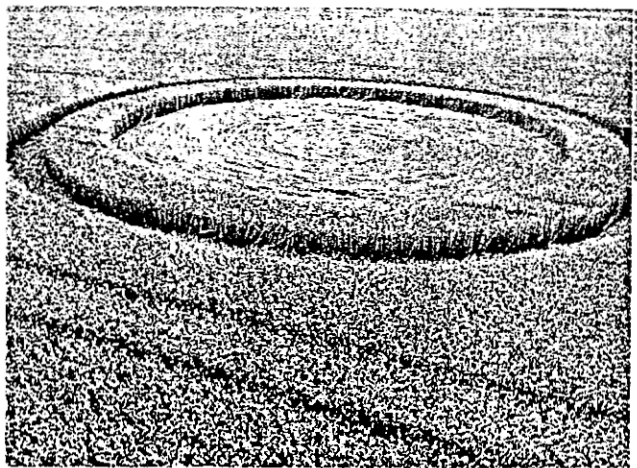
Finally Britain has an issue that cuts across social, economic and political lines: something very odd is going on in the farmlands of southern England. Strange circular depressions, up to 100 ft. in diameter, have appeared in crop fields throughout the area, leaving no clues about what made them or even how they are made. These puzzling circles—large sweeping areas of a crop neatly flattened in a swirling pattern—do not exhibit the kind of rough damage caused by harsh weather, animals or humans. Researchers studying the phenomenon have convincingly ruled out man-made hoaxes, yet they differ bitterly on how to explain the occurrences. The search for answers has sparked interest in Parliament, where two M.P.s have called for the government to investigate the bizarre formations.

The first recorded sighting of the circles took place in 1976, when a farmworker at Headbourne Worthy in Hampshire noticed a large circular pattern in a field near the A34 highway. Since 1980, when serious research into the mystery began, more than 600 circles have been reported in Britain, including almost 250 this year. While there have been reports of circles from as far away as the Soviet Union, Japan and New Zealand, by far the greatest number have appeared in Hampshire and Wiltshire. To some, it does not seem to be coincidence that this area of southern England is also home to the similarly

mysterious stone formations at Stonehenge and Avebury.

Whatever the cause, the circles are particularly intriguing because they are beautiful geometric formations that sweep the crop flat in a precise pattern. The plant, usually a grain, although mustard, soybeans and sugar beets have also been affected, is laid down in a distinctive swirl; nonetheless, it continues to ripen until ready for harvest. The circle formations range from single rings to more complex quintuplets and even a "Celtic cross" of four circles linked by one large ring. This year two new patterns were spotted: a ringed circle with swirls in op-

Strange but true: circular depressions dot southern England; top left, examining a gentle swirl; right, a complex formation; bottom, a rare double ringer



posite directions, and the "tadpole," a single circle with a long curling tail.

The recent upsurge in circle sightings coincides with the publication of two new books on the subject. The most carefully documented is *The Circles Effect and Its Mysteries*, by Dr. Terence Meaden, a physicist who has been tracking the puzzling formations since 1980. Meaden speculates that the circles may come from what he calls the "plasma vortex phenomenon," a previously unknown form of atmospheric disturbance with associated electrical effects. He contends that a "spinning ball of air" that is highly charged with electricity hits the crop field and marks out the circle.

The other book, *Circular Evidence*, by Pat Delgado and Colin Andrews, is handsomely illustrated but largely anecdotal. It attempts to link the circles to such paranormal events as UFOs and luminous apparitions. The authors, founders of the Circles Phenomenon Research group, speculate that the circles could be the result of an intelligent force being directed toward earth.

Humbug, responds Dr. Meaden. "Those who like to fantasize that something from outer space is responsible can be excluded," he insists. "What *does* cause these circles is better than fiction." But with or without government research funding, it may be a while before students of the phenomenon come up with a totally convincing explanation. Indeed, some suspect that circle researchers and the locals may enjoy their novel oddity so much that another ring is more interesting than a conclusive answer.

—By Sally B. Donnelly. Reported by Lisa Distelheim/London

News wanted on crop circles

Sir,

You may be aware that 'crop circles' have been much in the news recently in the UK. In case you have not seen them, they are perfect rings or discs of flattened crops which apparently form overnight, sometimes in groups.

Personally, I am not entirely convinced that they are not a hoax. As a scientist, I would like to know for certain whether or not they are genuine, and perhaps have a simple physical cause. Unfortunately, their study has been largely 'hijacked' by believers in UFOs and ley-lines.

I am, therefore, conducting an independent literature survey to discover whether such circles have been mentioned in earlier times, and I wonder if any article in your magazine has ever mentioned them, even if only peripherally.

I would also appreciate the help of readers in my research. I would be interested to hear of any mention (no matter how peripheral) of the circles in scientific journals, textbooks, published diaries, novels, or newspapers (in that order, and the older the better). No anecdotes or hearsay, please. Any help will be gratefully acknowledged.

(Dr) David J. Fisher
secretary, UK Skeptics
27 Elderberry Rd,
Cardiff
CF5 3RG

(from New Zealand
Farmer 30/8/89)

A New Zealand Crop Circle?

Is it the influence of New Age vegetarian extremists?: the latest paranormal enthusiasms are cress seed-sprouting (it's a more growing experience than metal spoon-bending) and crop circles. We have *Time Magazine's* authority for crop circles having occurred here, and not only the British Skeptics but the New Zealand Skeptics would welcome any information about the crop circle phenomenon in this country.

When newspapers throughout the world were giving front page treatment to the Kaikoura UFOs, *The Marlborough Express*, the daily of the area favoured by the UFOs, made the lead story of its 3 January 1979 issue an article about—a flattened pea paddock. (It is true the Kaikoura UFOs were also on the front page and the lead story did make a passing reference to those mysterious lights.)

Was the anonymous farmer's flattened pea crop New Zealand's first (or only) crop circle?

The flattened area actually wasn't circular. It was "a track about 4m wide" which appeared across a field and ended in "a circular impression, 4m in diameter". 4m may seem rather wide for a "track". We are not told how long it was and so can't be sure whether this was the true, original "tadpole" pattern (see *Time* article, opposite) or perhaps a sort of "sperm" pattern.

The peas were undamaged which made the farmer doubt that a whirlwind was responsible, and shows the occurrence exhibited at least one characteristic of the classic crop circle.

Mervyn Dykes in his *Strangers in Our Skies* (INL Print, 1981) refers to the *Marlborough Express* story and it seems to be his sole source of information except that he adds four new elements:

- the track was "winding";
- the track ended "at some trees";
- the track finished in an "anti-clockwise swirl";
- the crop was later harvested normally.

The third of these points will be of interest to crop circle buffs, but I could detect no evidence of any swirl from *The Marlborough Express's* photograph. The fourth point may be merely an extrapolation by Dykes since the paper's story made it clear that in the day following the discovery of the track/circle the field had been irrigated and the flattened area become considerably less visible.

Dyke's book also refers to a "flattened perfect circle of water weeds just over 4 metres across in a dewpond" at Puketutu in the King Country which appeared in 1969 and 1970. Since this clockwise swirl was not in an arable crop this may be considered a peripheral case. The famous Ngatea circle of dead scrub (1969) is definitely beyond the perimeter.[†]

P.A.B.

[†] P.S. No it's not! I have sighted Delgado and Andrews' "Circular Evidence". They refer only to the Ngatea circle.

BOOKS

COMMUNION, by Whitley Strieber, Arrow Books, \$12.99.

David Riddell.

A true story? That's what it says on the cover. When I first heard that horror story author Whitley Strieber (*The Hunger*, *The Wolfen*, among others) had written of being abducted by extraterrestrials, my first thought was that this was yet another flying saucer hoax. From Adamsky to von Daniken, there have been plenty over the years, after all. After reading *Communion*, though, I would say that if it is a hoax it is a very strange one.

Strieber himself seems unsure of what's happened to him. He considers a range of possible explanations for his visitors, including his own imagination. However he eventually discounts this.

His repeated visitations seem senseless, following no particular pattern. Things go bump in the night, or wake him by poking him in the chest before running off. A thing like a giant mantis hits him on the head with a silver nail. He is floated away to a UFO where he is examined medically and has a needle fired into his brain. There are too many loose ends, too many possible interpretations. Hoaxes are generally much more coherent than this.

So what are we to make of this book? We have to rely almost entirely on Strieber's own memories of events. These memories first started to come into focus on January 3rd, 1986, after a period of psychological instability apparently arising from incidents on October 4th and December 26th, 1985. Only after undergoing hypnosis did he begin remembering other bizarre incidents in his life, going right back to childhood.

The only independent witnesses are two house guests who were present the night of October 4th. They reported (on February 6th) hearing a bang, seeing a bright light, and hearing the scuffling of small feet. On October 5th, they made only a casual remark about being 'bothered by the light'. Later, they added further confused and conflicting details. Or at least Strieber says they do—there is no documentation. Nor is there any independent corroboration of the minor physical injuries Strieber says he suffered at the hands of the extraterrestrial visitors. His wife, Anne, to whom he is very close, has had almost no contact with the visitors that she recalls. This is probably so that she can be a stable psychological anchor for him, Strieber believes. Others claim to have had similar abduction experiences. Many, if not most, have come to light through the work of Budd Hopkins, whose books *Intruders* and *Missing Time* tell stories similar to Strieber's. Hopkins was present at Strieber's hypnosis sessions, asking questions and keeping records.

The general pattern is for the abductees who suffer from nightmares or have had a 'missing time' experience, or both, to approach Hopkins. He encourages them to believe their dreams are actual memories, hypnotises them and gets them to recall further 'forgotten' details of their experience. The danger of using hypnosis in this way is well-known to

psychologists (Hopkins has no formal psychological training), for hypnotic subjects are highly suggestible. Not only are they likely to recall things that never happened, but they often tailor their accounts to the expectations of the hypnotist. Moreover, once these stories are generated under hypnosis, they can become pseudo-memories, as real to the subjects as actual events in their own past.

While Strieber emphasises the similarities between the abductees' stories, there are significant differences. Generally, the aliens are pretty much like the ones in *Close Encounters*—pale and hairless with big eyes, either small and plump, or tall and very slender. Some abductees describe them as grey, others as white. Strieber's small forms are about three and a half feet tall, in other cases they are five feet tall. Some tell of humans collaborating with the visitors, others describe apparent hybrids between us and them. In many cases, there is sexual interaction between the two species, and one of Hopkins' chief subjects believes she was impregnated by them, then had her foetus removed before term to be incubated elsewhere. The sheer impossibility of viable hybrids between superficially similar but unrelated species should be obvious to anyone with the most basic knowledge of genetics—more implausible, say, than birds mating with bats, or dolphins with sharks. In fact, with all the forms a creature can take, why should these aliens look so human at all? The details of the abductees' stories would indicate that they do not represent actual encounters with physical beings but originate in the minds of their tellers, taking their form from the science fiction films and books we have all grown up with.

Strieber has made a successful career out of his fantasies. This time, though, I think his imagination has run away with him. Anne Strieber seems to have some inkling of this. When the hypnotist asks her if she looked for the giant crystal in the sky Whitley had told her he'd seen, she replied, "Oh, no. Because I knew it wasn't real."

"How did you know it wasn't real? Whitley's a fairly down-to-earth guy."

"No, he isn't...he has a very unique head."

FORUM

Emin-ent Silliness

We want to be active Skeptics but there is always something real to do and anyway the lunatic fringe aren't daft enough not to charge admission. (Our scepticism has financial limits.) But, one hot holiday evening, a free talk sponsored by the "Emin Foundation" was announced. With joy in the feeling of joining a jihad we went along—only to fail!

Looking back, perhaps we should have stuck it out but the Emin Foundation has found a new way to cleanse an audience of all but the converted—boredom.

We started 10 minutes late in an unventilated room meant for 40 but packed with 114 folk (91 of them women). An unidentified little guy started a monologue. He wasn't prepossessing. Casually dressed, he paced his arena, holding forth fluently though with no detectable coherence.

Then he lit up! The lady who challenged him on this was slapped down: "Go and sit near a window." Then he apologised: "When I give these talks, I smoke. I know I shouldn't."

Early on he played his one visual aid, a whiteboard with



"You will see this as a pentagram, but I see a human wiring diagram! Look—head, arms, legs—the bits that jut out." With only five bits that jut out no wonder he was confused. And confusion reigned: from outright contradiction ("Our problem is that we no longer are as we were when children" was followed a few minutes later by "Our problem is that most of us don't grow up") to rambling assertions that Kirilian photography "proves" palmistry.

Perfection in humans was defined as "...shining and floating 3 feet in the air." We were told charges run out of (and not in) hands and feet—positive ones on the left for men, which apparently proves women have finer sensitivities (as their finer hair also demonstrates).

Thinking of women led to the evening's highlight: a rewrite of English history in which knights of King Arthur's court were declared Noble when they proved they were able to say 'no'—apparently, 'no' to sex, corruption and, especially, homosexuality. Don't worry your dictionaries, this etymology is unique to the New Agers. And once more he asked "What's wrong with us?" Well, we are poisoning our "fire food" by letting in a flood of uncensored impressions, and cats are more intelligent than us because they don't ask what their purpose is.

This mishmash was actually quite impressive—he didn't pause for 50 minutes. Then he announced that he had completed the warm up and would discuss the ways we could overcome our (unspecified) problems. He couldn't find his list! But no matter:

"I can remember them." (Brief look at ceiling.)

"Reincarnation! Always popular."

We do it every 7 years when we replace our physical components and the knights of King Arthur had to astral travel to prove they had spirit and so were fit to become warriors instead of just gardeners.

Even this startling revelation of the militaristic tendencies of the New Agers couldn't rescue the evening. It was too hot and dull and every bit as silly as we'd imagined. So we walked out politely and went home giggling.

A week later another newspaper ad invited those who had signed up, and any others interested, to attend the first training workshop of the Emin Foundation. Payment would not be due at this session.

Paul King
Bob Metcalf

LETTERS

Dear Sir,
David Shanks' report on Mr Beta and Filippino psychic surgery reminded me of Brian Edwards' investigations of this on his Saturday night TV show many years ago. He used a Filippino magician to present a very convincing demonstration of the bloodless removal of offending growths from a sufferer. He then revealed the true identity of the "surgeon" and they gave a detailed demonstration of the trickery used in the operation. It was a very powerful presentation and must have been seen by thousands of viewers.

If support for the Filippino psychic surgeons is again developing in New Zealand a reminder of the Edwards demonstration—perhaps a repeat showing—would be timely.

Denis Hogan

Dear Sir,
In view of our activities at the recent Conference, I suggest the following quotation from the Roman poet Horace as a motto for NZCSICOP:

*Incedis per ignis
suppositos cineri doloso.*

[You tread over fires hidden under a treacherous crust of ashes.]

G. A. Vignaux

Philippics

According to the *Otago Daily Times*, 19 June 1989:

"British pathologists have challenged the palmist's belief that your hand can reveal the secret of how long you can live. Examining 100 bodies in a hospital mortuary in western England, they compared the length of lifelines on palms with the ages of the deceased, the Daily Mail newspaper said. 'It didn't matter which hand was examined, the lifeline appeared to have no bearing on how long the patient lived', pathologist Dr John Bradfield was quoted as saying."

However according to *New Truth*, 7 July 1989:

"... Dr John Bradfield and three colleagues at Britain's Bristol Royal Infirmary have been studying the lifelines of 100 people who died between the ages of 30 and 90... 'We wanted to see if there was a trend related to length of lifelines examined on dead people. We were all surprised to find there was one'..."

Very curious. *New Truth*, incidentally, went on to quote gypsy palmist, Leah Petulengro: "Dr Bradfield's got it all wrong. The lifeline has nothing to do with your life expectancy. It tells you more about your character—whether you are short-tempered, open hearted...that sort of thing". (My thanks to Mag Holmes for the O.D.T. clipping.)



Of course, Skeptics don't believe all they read in newspapers. Do they believe what they read in *New Scientist*? The "Inside Science" feature of the 18 March 1989 issue was about extra-terrestrial life. A box headed "Spacecraft from another world?" began:

"On 30 December 1979, an Argosy freight plane took off from Wellington, New Zealand. During this routine flight, the captain spotted something he had never seen in 23 years of flying—an unidentified flying object (UFO). By chance, an Australian TV crew was on board the plane and managed to film it."

and ended:

"...the New Zealand UFO turned out to be the planet Jupiter."

Many Skeptics will recall that New Year when the eyes of the television-viewing world were focused on New Zealand. Some details, however, may be worth emphasising in view of the *New Scientist*'s remarks.

1) The TV crew's presence on the plane was not by chance but was with the expressed intention of filming for a documentary on UFOs. The only thing due to chance was the presence in New Zealand of Quentin Fogarty, a reporter for a Melbourne television channel. He was on holiday in his homeland when his employers asked him to investigate the UFO reports that were coming from New Zealand. He arranged to fly in the Argosy for that purpose.

(In addition to Fogarty, on board was a husband and wife camera team he had hired locally. The wife preferred

not to be on the flight back and a Christchurch journalist took her place. Since they were working for an Australian television channel they could possibly be called "an Australian TV crew".)

2) Not one, but a variety of UFOs were spotted and filmed.

3) A variety of explanations have been advanced for for the UFOs seen. The Jupiter hypothesis is among them. It is considered in the two detailed investigations of the Kaikoura UFO flap which do not incline towards an extra-terrestrial hypothesis. To quote from its abstract, the DSIR Report *Unfamiliar Observations of Lights in the Night Sky* (1979) suggests that "... the lights were generally unusual views of either terrestrial sources, such as light houses, navigation beacons, and city lights, or of the planets Venus and Jupiter, seen through an unusually clear atmosphere. In the most widely publicised case the most likely source was a squid boat seen under quite normal viewing conditions".

Robert Scheaffer in *The UFO Verdict* (1981), P.230, says "It is possible that Jupiter may have played a minor role in the incident". (There is, however, universal agreement that the "UFO" filmed a few days later by a New Zealand TV crew was the planet Venus.)

The "Inside Science" pages of the *New Scientist* are intended as an educational supplement for schools.



Brushing up on my history of local ufology, I was reminded of a documentary short on the Kaikoura UFOs which the Wellington Film Society screened in August 1981. Entitled *UFOs—A True Story* (pre-echoes of Whitley Strieber?), the audience found it side-splittingly funny. It had something of the sublime crassness of *Plan Nine from Outerspace*. (For those who aren't cult-movie addicts, *Plan Nine from Outerspace* is "one of the two worst movies of all time". A clip from it appeared in *UFO Cover-up*, the documentary of comparable tackiness which Television New Zealand broadcast direct from the U.S. via satellite, in October 1988.)

UFOs—A True Story was a 1979 production of V & F Productions. Skeptics might find it worth tracking down.



Wellington Central Library has 16 shroud books. Is this a record?

The 16 consist of 12 different texts and a spare copy of four of them. Perhaps needless to say, the library has only one book which does not favour the cloth's being the shroud of Jesus of Nazareth. It is Joe Nickell's *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin*. Yet Nickell's book is not the only non-pro-authenticity book to have been published. *The Image on the Shroud* by H. David Sox (a clergyman and former secretary of the British Society for the Turin Shroud) is an inexpensive, scholarly book published in 1981 by the reputable Unwin Paperbacks. It was available in Wellington for a considerable period before I bought it.

How did Wellington Central Library manage to avoid snapping it up?



For me, the most interesting shroud news item to follow the announcement of the carbon-dating test results was in *The Evening Post* of 15 October 1988. In it, William Meacham, an archaeologist at the University of Hong Kong, informed us that an earlier carbon dating of the shroud had been done in 1982 at the University of California by the Shroud of Turin Research Project (STURP).

"The two tests...were conducted with techniques identical to those used yesterday, on separate halves of a piece of the shroud removed in 1973, and known by shroud experts as the 'Reis sample' (sic) after the Belgian textile expert it was given to, he said. One half of the thread was dated at 200 AD and the other at 1000 AD, Mr Meacham said. The results were never announced because the test was conducted without the permission of the Turin church authorities."

About a STURP workshop assessment at Los Alamos in October 1979, Sox, in *The Image on the Shroud*, P.27, says:

"Portions of the Raes' samples were brought form Turin to the meeting by Professor Gonella for chemical analysis by Rogers. Attached to the samples' container was a legal document stating that under no circumstances were they to be carbon dated!"

It therefore looks as if the STRUP carbon dating tests of 1982 were not merely, as Meacham says, "without the permission of the Turin church authorities", but contrary to those authorities' expressed wishes. STURP has a preponderance of committed Christians. I am intrigued by the possibility that in their eagerness to support their religious beliefs by a hoped-for authentication of the shroud, they may have breached the bounds of propriety.



A recent letter from a New Ager in a Wellington paper referred to that "leading physicist", Fritjof Capra. What Capra's contribution to physics has been the writer neglected to tell. True, the American feminist magazine *Ms*, in its 10th anniversary edition (August 1982), included Capra amongst the "Men who've taken chances and made a difference"—but this was "for recognising the need for radical social and economic change, in his international best seller, *The Tao of Physics*; and for identifying the current wave of feminism as central to change, in his latest book, *The Turning Point*". Nothing here about his contribution to physics.

In the May 1989 issue of the New Zealand feminist magazine *Broadsheet*, Cushla Dobson ended her article with a footnote explaining that some of her "resources" have come from (amongst others) "Fry of Capra" (sic). The other "resource" sources with which Capra had the honour of being grouped included Lazaris, Seth and Jane Roberts. Lazaris and Seth are discarnate spirits, and Jane Roberts is Seth's channeller. She was probably included as a make-weight.



You've got to hand it to the modern crop of spirits. The spirits which so entranced the eminent Victorian physicist Sir William Crookes and his contemporaries seem to have been fun-loving, even sexy. "Modern" spirits, however, are "deep".

Seth turns up again as a spiritual mentor of Dr Fred Alan Wolf, author of an extraordinary book, *The Body Quantum* (Heinemann, 1987). Seth inspired him to believe quantum physics can explain the human ego. In an earlier book Wolf had explained hate "as a quantum statistical property of electrons" while love was explained "in terms of the quantum statistical behaviour of light particles". Whether Seth was also responsible for these insights is not indicated.

In *The Body Quantum* quantum physics are used to account for our body's health as well as the working of the mind. The author is a quantum physicist, not a medical doctor or psychologist. Any misgivings about this extra-disciplinary approach will be amplified by Wolf's endorsing the views of the astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle on natural selection. Strangely, the physicist also endorses the physics of the renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. Well, he doesn't quite endorse Reich's orgone energy—he thinks "Orgone is not really an energy but a quantum wave of probability".

The National Library, from whom I obtained *The Body Quantum* on interloan, said there was a heavy demand for the book. Thus I had less than three weeks to read and digest it—an impossibility. Yet the due date stamps indicated that, apart from mine (due 8 August), there had been only two other borrowings—both in March. Does this signify the book has recently had a quantum jump in popularity? One shudders at the thought.



Transcental Meditation is currently being promoted in Wellington by a Dr Deepak Chopra as "Quantum Healing". P.A.B.

Contributors to the New Zealand Skeptic No 15

Dr Colin McGeorge is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education of the University of Canterbury.

Dr John Campbell is a senior lecturer in the University of Canterbury's Physics Department.

David Riddell holds an M.Sc. He farms in the Waikato.

Paul King and Bob Metcalf are secondary school teachers.

Paid your '89 subscription?

The Treasurer notes with regret that some members have not yet paid their subscription for 1989, and hopes that this reminder will persuade them to make themselves "financial" before the end of the year.

Changing Your Address?

We don't want to lose touch with members. Please tell us if you are going to move. It is depressing for our mail to you to be returned marked "Gone away, no address".

New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (inc.)

Chairman:

Mr. Warwick Don, Zoology Department, University of Otago, Box 56, Dunedin.

Secretary/Treasurer:

Prof. Bernard Howard, 150 Dyers Pass Rd, Christchurch 2.

Committee Members:

Mr. George Errington, 9 Kiteroa Place, Christchurch 2.

Ms. Rosalind Evans, 3A Snowdon Rd, Christchurch 5.

Ms. Margaret Holmes, Invermay Agricultural Centre, Mosgiel.

Ms. Heather M. Mackay, 2/54 Takatai Avenue, Bucklands Beach, Auckland.

Dr. Denis Dutton, (Media Representative), School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch.

Mr. F.M. Farr (Solicitor), Farry & Company, Barristers and Solicitors, Dunedin.

Mr. Philip A. Bradley (Editor, *The New Zealand Skeptic*, Archivist),
Box 10-428, The Terrace, Wellington.