

EDITORIAL

By all accounts the first annual meeting of the Society at Dunedin recently was a great success. This edition of the Skeptic has been designated as a conference special as we thought that members would welcome a permanent record of an historical occasion. The timing of the conference was determined by David Marks' departure and this meant that several of us were unable to go. I could not go because I had to supervise the dress rehearsal of the school play (If you want to know, Rhinocoeros by Eugene Ionesco and a great success).

We made arrangements for all sessions to be recorded on tape but unfortunately the microphone functioned only spasmodically with very variable results. Nothing of Mark Plummer's talk was preserved but he has given us a copy of his paper. Dennis Dutton on Cold Reading was completely lost and we reproduce a press report. (Trying to hear the tape was one of the most maddening episodes of my life. All I got was a word here and there, usually followed by peals of laughter). I have tried to transcribe the other talks as best I could. The errors are all mine and I apologise to the speakers for mauling their ideas.

I have had a good response to my appeal for articles and cuttings and I will keep them for a later issue. However, one can never have too much and I ask new members to send more material. I am planning an issue on fringe medicine and I would be grateful if anyone could supply me with something on their personal experiences, on how one determines what is fringe. (Can anyone say exactly what happens to the body in acupuncture?) Something on why fringe medicine appears to be more successful than conventional (does anyone know why that seems to be so for the Auckland firemen who inhaled toxic gases?) On why fringe medicine is flourishing at a time when standard medicine is beginning to be scientifically based, or on any other aspect of this intriguing business. Please write to me, Keith Lockett, 72 Awanui St, New Plymouth.

SKEPTIC'S ALERT We are interested in monitoring the activities of Mr Emond Harold, who is currently touring New Zealand. He energises crystals with thoughts of love, and helps alleviate the effects of repetitive strain injury and leukaemia, while turning a bob or two for himself. Though he knows lots about people heating their homes (with volcanoes) in Atlantis, we doubt if he has read the medicines act of 1981. Please send any news or cuttings regarding Mr Harold to Bernard Howard, P.O. Box 13, Lincoln College, Canterbury.

Psychic pretender pleases sceptics

Former *Star* news editor Josh Easby has collected an award for journalistic excellence for his "psychic duel" with an Auckland clairvoyant.

The newly formed New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, also known as the New Zealand Sceptics, has honoured Easby for two articles he wrote in 1983 challenging self-professed "psychic" Don Dewson.

In a "psychic duel" with Mr Dewson before a lunchtime audience at an Auckland club, Easby, merely simulated "clairvoyancy," but was voted the true psychic.

The committee describes Easby's story on psychics and clairvoyants as "outstanding."

The committee's "Bent Spoon" award for journalistic gullibility has gone to the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* for an article which claimed that a method of "radiating power and energy" from the palm of the hand could cure multiple sclerosis, cancer, alcoholism and a number of other ills.

The awards will be presented at the group's first annual convention in Dunedin on Saturday.

REPORT

FROM THE NEW CHAIRPERSON

Denis Dutton

In the after glow of our first annual convention, NZCSICOP members will have to feel pleased by the progress of our organisation. The meeting itself attracted considerable media attention, all of it favourable, and discussion of our aims and purposes continues to reverberate in letters weeks later. Our membership now stands at just short of a hundred and it is still growing. And well it must, for a group such as ours has much work to accomplish. Unless we have enough people scattered nationwide who are willing to take an active part in our projects we cannot flourish.

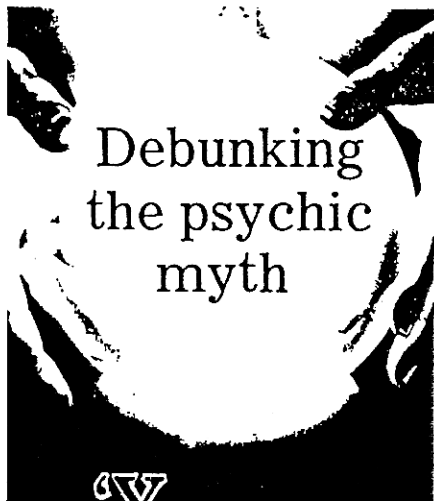
If there is one thing that sticks in my mind following the Dunedin convention, it has to do with the character of our members so clearly displayed there. It is quite apparent that the New Zealand Skeptics are a group to be taken seriously. Their opposition to fraudulent exploitation and victimisation so often involved with paranormal claims is formidable. But at the same time, it is also clear that they do not dogmatically reject a priori all paranormal claims, or regard them as invariably as disingenuous. Many paranormal claims are made in good faith, and while sincerity does not entail validity, there is always the possibility of substance in such claims. Open-mindedness is, we seem to all agree, a necessary ingredient of our approach to matters paranormal.

Another characteristic of our membership became clear by its absence in the atmosphere of the Dunedin meeting. NZCSICOP members are not interested in censorship or stifling the expression of innovative or outlandish ideas. The free expression of unconventional or zany beliefs, whether in religion, science, or any other field of human endeavour is necessary for creative progress. But not only do we welcome new ideas, we also recognize that they must be able to prove their worth under critical scrutiny. If there are areas where repeated claims are made which have not stood up to testing and open criticism, it is our job to bring that fact to public attention. It is inevitable that some people will misinterpret such well-earned skepticism as dogmatic closed-mindedness. But we must make it clear that the onus is on the proponents of the paranormal to demonstrate the worth of their claims.

Except then in areas of the most vicious criminal exploitation (e.g. bogus claims to cure cancers), where in any event there are already laws in to page 3...

Well, I see in my crystal ball that you will be shot by your mother-in-law!





Debunking the psychic myth

You have as much to gain by showing that someone has paranormal powers. David [Marks] and I would win a Nobel Prize if we could prove that. We've nothing to gain by just refuting another case.

By HOWARD WARNER

I LEARNT the Secret of the Universe in David Marks's office over a glass of sherry. "It's so simple it bores me to tears," he said.

"Would you possibly bore yourself one more time and show me?" I asked.

"Sure." He crossed to the mantelpiece and picked up a teaspoon. He returned to his chair by the window and rubbed his finger above the handle, not actually touching the metal. Gradually, miraculously, it began to bend until the spoon and handle were at a perfect right angle.

"Amazing," I said. "Fantastic."

"Not really," said Dr Marks. "Actually, I bent it when you were looking over there. At the mantelpiece, or something."

"But what about the...?"

"It was already bent by then. I was covering part of it up. Like this. You only saw what I wanted you to see. If you'd been a bit sharper I was ready to use Dennis here as a distraction." The other man nodded.

"Maybe I'd ask him something," Dr Marks said. "But you made it easy for me. I didn't need to."

I've read about this spoon-bending act, but never imagined it to be so obvious. David Marks had first seen it 10 years ago at a Dunedin performance by Israeli-born self-proclaimed psychic Uri Geller.

He chased the Israeli all over the world trying to disprove the existence of psychic powers in his act.

Now he can duplicate Geller's entire ragbag of tricks.

THE two fellows in the office were in Dunedin to speak at New Zealand's first annual sceptics conference, at the University of Otago.

Seven disbelievers had started the New Zealand Sceptics — officially the New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal — earlier this year.

David Marks, a psychology lec-



Dr Dennis Dutton
... the archetypal philosopher.

turer at Otago, and Dennis Dutton, a Christchurch academic philosopher, provided the initial impetus.

The others were Gordon Hewitt, a lecturer in zoology at Victoria University; Professor B H Howard, head of biochemistry at Lincoln College; Ray Carr, an Auckland businessman; Jim Woolnough, a retired doctor from Auckland; and Kerry Chamberlain, a psychologist at Massey University.

They based themselves on the US sceptics organisation, whose members include astronomer Carl Sagan, science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, and escapologist-magician James (The Amazing) Randi.

The New Zealanders state their aim as investigating and scientifically testing claims of paranormal or psychic powers, and encouraging a more critical attitude from the public and news media to such claims.

The four sceptics organisations — in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and the US — have together put up \$232,000 for any medium who can demonstrate communication with spirits under controlled conditions, and \$160,000 for any proven case of extra-sensory perception (ESP). These amounts include \$25,000 from David Marks's own pocket.

But the New Zealand Sceptics have so far had only one candidate — Auckland tarot card reader Colin Amery. He failed.

THE two-day conference attracted about 70 people, fewer than expected. Dr Marks also invited all psychics "by telepathic message," but none turned up.

Dutton opened on the subject, "What Is Pseudoscience?" Apparently, it means "bogus beliefs held for political or religious purposes, but dressed up as science" — such as creationism and Nazi anthropology.

Dennis Dutton is a Californian who came to New Zealand two years ago with his German wife for a change of scene. They both love the country and plan to settle here.

He is perhaps the archetypal

philosopher: effusive on any subject that takes his fancy (at the moment it's the Shroud of Turin — he's writing a book on it), absent-minded in a Maxwell Smart way, and with a permanent twinkle in his eye.

He told me he was jolted into awareness of the dangers of clairvoyancy by the suicide of his studenthood friend, Jay, in Santa Barbara in the 1960s.

The two had gone to a medium, at first out of curiosity. Jay continued his visits for two years before becoming convinced that the spirits were calling him to the other side.

"Certainly he had suicidal tendencies and was very depressed at that time, but the medium pushed him over the line. I realised then there was a very real possibility of other people dying, because many people who go to psychics are depressed, recently bereaved or extremely emotional.

"If I had had access to the information I have now, I'd probably still have my friend."

Dr Dutton says he has no axe to grind these days. "You have as much to gain by showing that someone has paranormal powers. David [Marks] and I would win a Nobel Prize if we could prove that. We've nothing to gain by just refuting another case.

"We want to find someone who's real. But you get increasingly sceptical."

He says that for him it is mostly "academic study, not chasing ghosts. Sure, it can be fun, but I think it can do some social good."

Gordon Hewitt, who has his own sceptics group in Wellington, talked on his pet subject of creationism. Armed with coloured slides of human skulls, scientific cartoons and a portrait of Darwin ("the arch-enemy"), the part-time marriage counsellor waged battle against all who dared refute the evolutionary process.

Mark Plummer, a Melbourne lawyer and founding chairman of the Australian Sceptics, discussed the "Australia-New Zealand Stop-over For International Psychics."

His delivery was breathless, like a schoolboy describing his first view of a naked female. Scepticism is principally "a lot of fun," he had told me as soon as we'd met.

Mark Plummer was introduced to fraudulent claims by a journalist and encouraged by The Amazing Randi in the United States to set up an Australian watchdog body.

Like David Marks, he has ferreted out and can now reproduce many of the tricks favoured by "mentalists" — those performers who use sleight of hand, accomplices and illusions under the guise of psychic feats.

I watched him send a cigarette skidding across a table by power of concentration, mind-read conference members who had selected lines from a newspaper clipping, and straighten a bent spoon — Uri Geller in reverse.

These tricks are always good for a "line" at parties or winning drinks in the pub, he reckons.

Mark Plummer is concerned about the legal implications of psychic fraud. He wants to help people sue where they have suffered as a result of psychic advice, or to recover large sums of money spent on psychics.

Dunedin lawyer and sceptic Ricky Farr, who has just opened a street-level community-law concern, will represent similar cases in New Zealand.

David Marks's topic was "Psychics I Have Known," and he has encountered a few. His hunting of the big-name performers, the Gellers and Kreskins, is like assembling pieces of a jigsaw, he says. "You put them all together, and in the end you're compelled towards one solution."

Ironically, the quality that draws him to self-proclaimed psychics (he never says "psychic" or "clairvoyant" without the qualification) is their charisma — a term many people apply to Dr Marks himself.

"As a psychologist, I'm interested in the mind, in consciousness, problem-solving," he says. "If ESP exists, it would alter our whole way of thinking. So it's a very important to us."

The fair-haired Englishman has been in New Zealand 17 years, but is shortly heading home to take up a job as head of psychology at the Middlesex Polytechnic in London. He has also been offered the chairmanship of the British Sceptics.

Other conference showpieces were a videotape of Colin Amery predicting a psychology student's future (the Aucklanders turned down an invitation to give a live showing), and recordings of Radio 2ZB clairvoyant Mary Fry.

But the highlight for most of the audience was Dennis Dutton presenting the do-it-yourself psychic kit, or layman's guide to telling fortunes.

This is "cold reading" — a technique widely used by counsellors, detectives, salesmen, barristers, psychiatrists and confidence tricksters.

According to American psychologist Ray Hyman, the cold reader can "persuade a client whom he has never before met that he knows all about the client's personality and problems."

He uses a stock spiel which can fit any individual in a general category, for example, young unmarried woman, senior citizen. He also relies on a good memory and acute observation.

Hyman has compiled 13 golden rules of cold reading:

- 1 Be confident.
- 2 Make creative use of the latest statistical abstracts, polls and surveys.
- 3 Set the stage: Be modest about your talents. Make no excessive claims.
- 4 Gain the subject's co-operation in advance. Let them know they may have to reinterpret some messages in terms of their own vocabulary and life. (Ray Hyman says this is the most crucial rule: As well as ensuring a good flow of information from the subject, it will give the reader an alibi if the reading isn't accurate.)
- 5 Use a gimmick, such as a crystal ball, tarot cards, tea leaves.
- 6 Have a list of stock phrases at hand.
- 7 Keep your eyes open.
- 8 Fish for details.
- 9 Listen well.
- 10 Dramatise the reading.
- 11 Always make out you know more than you are saying.
- 12 Flatter your subject.
- 13 Tell your subject what they want to hear.

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page 4

from the Conference.....

SCIENCE AND PSEUDOSCIENCE by Denis Dutton

Pseudoscience in its various manifestations is now enjoying enormous popularity, is increasingly well organised and politically powerful. We can not identify pseudoscience by its errors. Seven hundred years ago Astrology was as strong as now but was not pseudoscience, we might call it protoscience. the discovery of Polywater and the rush of confirming experiments was not pseudoscience. We know now that it was due to contaminated apparatus and wishful thinking and no one now has any evidence for it, so eventually its errors became known.

We detect by the fact that it is not falsifiable. Sir Karl Popper was struck by the fact that Freudians and Adlerians could account for every quirk of human behaviour in their theoretical schemes. In fact, everything provided more evidence for their theories and it was impossible to find any fact that could possibly gainsay them. Pseudoscience may be distinguished by the fact that nothing they say can be falsified, it is impossible that they may be wrong. Thus is you catch an astrologer having made a false prediction (in the rare case where it is not so vague as to be untestable) he will say that there was a further refinement of the theory which he did not take into account. Astrology is indeed complex and there will always be one more planet whose influence was not allowed for. Or if you tell a creationist that the fossil record shows a graduation of creatures with the simplest at the bottom and the more complex at the top he will blithely say that in the Noachian flood, men were better swimmers and floated to the top. Or again, if you tell a believer in the authenticity of the Turin shroud that it is remarkable that the face of Jesus shows drops of blood which would surely have been wiped away by the disciples he will say that it was Friday evening and they were in a hurry. Darwin was well aware of the need for falsifiability. He pointed out on many occasions what experimental evidence would completely invalidate his theory. Editor's note: many contemporary evolutionists and especially sociobiologists seem to be falling into error here, every physical and behavioural trait is taken as evidence of natural selection at work).

(name inaudible) has taken Popper's ideas a stage further. For something to be a pseudoscience there must also be a better, well-known account. Thus those who accepted the Ptolemaic theory of the planetary orbits were not pseudoscientists because the Copernican theory was not available and because the scheme of Ptolemy was remarkably successful in predicting the paths of the heavenly bodies.

The main characteristics of Pseudoscience:

1) they are now more sophisticated and are prepared to say that their views are falsifiable but that it is very difficult to do so in practice. Thus it is very hard to determine if a man has the qualities that the astrologer had predicted. Again the Shroud Crowd are prepared for the carbon dating of the material to give an unfavourable result and ready with the excuse that it has been contaminated by recent handling.

2) They make big conclusions from small data. An example is the claim that the dinosaur footprints at Paluxy are intermingled with human prints and so are contemporary. In discussion later, it was pointed out that the creationists no longer cite the Paluxy prints and that perhaps that they are beginning to abandon some of their poor experimental methods. However, one speaker was not prepared to give them much credit. Erosion has worked on the so-called human prints and now they obviously have three toes. Even so, credulous a digger as Rev Carl Baugh can no longer regard them as human.

3) They cheerfully disregard basic laws of Science. Thus ESP effects are held to be independent of distance in their efficacy, i.e., they do not follow the inverse square law (which follows from the fact that we live in a three dimensional world). Again, UFO buffs are happy to talk of space ships 'breaking the light barrier' in the same way that airplanes break the sound barrier.

4) Although they claim to be scientists, they delight in headlines like "Science Baffled". "Mysterious" and "Break Through to New Realms". Thus creationists argue that as there are so many faults in Biology and geology, the only alternative is the miracles of Genesis. They look for completely new effects and accept them on the minimum of evidence.

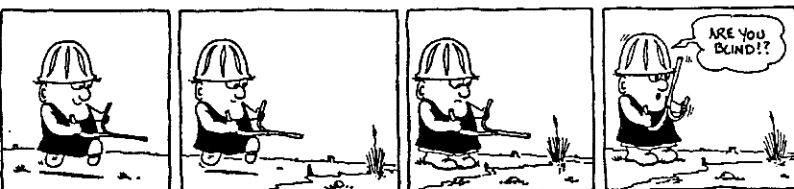
5) When the evidence is too difficult, they ignore it. Thus creationists have largely given up trying to fault radioactive dating techniques, certainly to bridge the difference between their age for the earth compared to the dated one. Again, there is a man in Kentucky who is prepared to make another "Turin Shroud" for anyone who wants one.

In discussion, it was pointed out that New Zealand universities are hot beds of pseudoscience. How can people have areas of belief immune to rational discussion? Denis said that the only fault in our educational system is that undergraduates are not taught to think, they can not evaluate evidence.

The talk concluded with warm applause.

BOGOR

by BURTON SILVER



place, the New Zealand Skeptics have no desire to censor or constrain expression or activity. What we can be expected to engage in is open, rational criticism. We want to know the truth about paranormal claims, whether that knowledge tends to confirm or overturn whatever suspicions we may have.

There are a number of intriguing new projects we have in mind.. If you would like to help with any of these, please contact the organiser.

Iridology. Can the principle of iridology be used for a better than chance diagnosis of disease or bodily condition? We would like to organise a test. In particular, we would need the help of an ophthalmologist or someone else capable of making a series of photographs of patients with known complaints/diseases. If you can help in any way, get in touch with B.H. Howard, P.O. Box 13, Lincoln College, Canterbury.

Astrology. Some might feel it hardly necessary, but it might still be very useful to run an improved variation on the astrology test published in *Nature* last year. We also wish to renew our campaign to have newspapers include a disclaimer with daily horoscopes to make it clear, especially to their younger readers, that astrological predictions are without value. (So far, incidentally, two newspapers in New Zealand have altered their horoscopes in response to our requests.). If you can help, contact Errol Higgins, P.O. Box 2565, Christchurch.

Serious Diseases. if you come across any advertising, whether leaflet, poster, paid display ad or media announcement (including news interview) in which some questionable person purports to cure or successfully treat a serious disease, especially cancer, please contact Bernard Howard, P.O. Box 13, Lincoln College, Canterbury. If possible, send a dated cutting or photocopy.

Bent Spoon/Excellence Awards. It is crucially important for all members to keep their eyes peeled for print articles or radio/television programmes which deserve awards for high excellence or high gullibility. Keep your scissors handy when you read the newspaper. (And thanks to M.Sutton and D.Cleal for their nomination of an *East Coast Bays News* article for the bent spoon. Except for their effort, none of us would have seen this gem!) Send nominations to Denis Dutton, School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch.

Letters to the Editor. While for legal reasons only the chairperson, secretary and treasurer can speak officially for NZCSICOP, we encourage all members to write to publications they read, whenever criticisms or general enlightenment is called for. (There are some splendid examples in this newsletter.) Always remember H.L. Mencken's dictum that one horse laugh is worth a thousand syllogisms. Keep the tone light and the only enemies you'll make are the ones you'd probably enjoy having anyway. And one again, send a cutting or photocopy of your letter to Denis Dutton.

Other ideas. What would you like to see NZCSICOP do? Let us know.

Finally, our most heartfelt thanks goes to our founding chairperson, David Marks. David arranged the Dunedin meeting in his last months in New Zealand and was in fact engrossed in details of the convention only days before he and his family left. We are grateful to him for his vision and rare devotion to our cause and we wish him the very best in his new position as Professor and Head of Department at Middlesex Polytechnic in Britain. We are delighted to offer him Honorary Life Membership in the New Zealand Skeptics. We've lost a national asset, but we console ourselves with the news that the British Skeptics have gained a dynamic new Chairman. Good luck, David, Elsie, and Michael!

Skeptics want disclaimer with astrology columns

A group called New Zealand Skeptics has called on newspapers and magazines in New Zealand to carry a disclaimer with their astrology columns.

The group, whose full name is the New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, is holding its first annual meeting in Dunedin this week.

A founding member, Professor B. H. Howard of Lincoln College, said most educated people treat astrology as a joke, or at best as harmless entertainment.

"But there are many less sophisticated readers who take it quite seriously."

"Despite the fact that scientific studies continue to indicate there is no scientific foundation for astrological predictions, overseas polls show an increasing belief in horoscopes, especially among youth."

The Skeptics would like to see run with every astrology column a disclaimer which reads:

"These forecasts are provided for entertainment. They have no reliable basis in scientific fact."

Professor Howard said that by running the disclaimer newspapers can show a sense of responsibility towards their more naive or impressionable readers.

"The disclaimer embarrasses no one, but it would show journalistic integrity. It will rebound to the credit of those newspapers that use it without spoiling the fun of those who enjoy reading their horoscopes."

The Skeptics praised the *Otago Daily Times* for recently including the phrase "For entertainment" with each of its astrology columns.

"The ODT has demonstrated good journalistic sense by including this gentle, good-natured reminder with its astrology columns," Professor Howard

said. "We hope that other responsible newspapers in New Zealand will follow its example."

The foundation president of Australian Skeptics, Mr Mark Plummer, who is in Dunedin for the conference, and the Skeptics are not out to stop anyone having a good time.

But a study of Australian newspapers showed the horoscopes say different things on the same day.

He said people go along to parties, chat someone up, discover they are a Virgo and they are not compatible and do not follow up.

"But I suppose I'm sceptical because I'm a Virgo myself," he said tongue-in-cheek.

Hard fact or cold reading?

Enlightenment or deception? Illusion or delusion? HOWARD WARNER paid \$25 for 30 minutes to find out.

GAEL SNOW runs a shop in Wellington's Grand Arcade where she sells books on astrology, vegetarianism, fringe medicines and the occult. Above the counter is a shining brass zodiac. And to the side hangs a lace curtain, through which the small office where she performs tarot readings can just be seen.

No, she couldn't give a comprehensive picture of the long-term future, she had told me. But the next 12 months, certainly. And yes, I could bring a tape recorder.

I went as a member of the public, with a genuine curiosity about myself. She did not ask about my occupation in advance.

We sat on either side of a modern table. She placed the card pack on a red velvet cloth.

Gael Snow is dark-haired and immaculately groomed. She speaks in a well-nurtured voice, with a hint of Australian and an offhandedness I initially found disconcerting.

I shuffled and cut as instructed. She dealt the cards carefully in haphazard piles.

"Okay, there's a lot of indecision showing up here," she began.

Then, she talked loosely about "pressure," "unsettled feelings," "emotional content."

I could sense her nudging me towards telling something about myself — just what, I wasn't sure. She pressed her fingers to her temples and gazed into the middle distance, searching, I presumed, for signals.

"I get this feeling that there's . . . I don't know why I get this feeling, but there are things you could give, opportunities that come along which you could grasp, but for some reason it's like you can't break out and do that . . ."

She spoke with her hands, kneading the air to describe my inner ferment.

" . . . or not being able to make up your mind, but I feel as if there's something there at the moment which suggests some change coming for you . . . (pause) . . . hopefully positive."

I said nothing, waited for more. She rearranged the cards. The figures and symbols meant nothing to me.

We started again. She mentioned walls. I couldn't see where walls fitted in, I told her.

She shook her head. "It just doesn't seem to be right. Most people come to a tarot reading when there's a specific problem, there's something there, and the cards just fall out with the answers . . . I feel at the moment as if things are holding you back. Usually, everyone who comes through here is absolutely bang on."

I racked my brains for some humdinger to feed her, some deep-rooted mania or quirk or suicidal tendency. Nothing.

A man came to the counter. She served him while I shuffled again. The cards were worn and stiff.

Now question time: I could ask "anything virtually, just as long as you phrase it so you get a yes or no answer." I trotted out vague, unpointed questions about family, health, job, prospective love affairs.

Her replies revolved around words like positive, negative, change.

"— looks unfavourable, but on the other hand . . ."

"— can be worked through . . ."

"— keep plugging away . . ."

The only time she showed excitement was when I asked about finances and she turned up the "money card." Well, I don't know maybe it's like the chances of getting, say, a pair in a hand of poker.

Lastly, the calendar reading. I discovered that September would be "quite good," late October I'd be in for a struggle, November a decision, January a change, February a lot of pressure which would ease in March.

In April I'd be disappointed — "a negative sort of situation." May was something to do with living, a home.

"The cards are really quite

good through the next 12 months."

"When's the big romance?" I asked.

"Possibly November. Or March maybe. Yes, November or March, I think."

"I feel things," she had said, tapping her temples, when I asked about methods. The cards were only a tool, a focal point. Then something about her higher plane meeting with my higher plane.

I PLAYED the tape recording of my tarot reading to Dr Dennis Dutton, the Christchurch philosopher who made a name for his challenging of Radio 2ZB "clairvoyant" Mary Fry.

We checked the reading against the 13 rules of cold reading — a rudimentary test for establishing the existence or otherwise of psychic powers.

Most of the rules were, or could have been, in evidence: Setting the stage, gaining my co-operation in advance, using a gimmick (the cards), stock phrases, observation, fishing, listening, flattery, giving the impression of knowing more, and telling me what she thought I might want to hear.

There was a noticeable lack of confidence and dramatising, however, which made the performance a yawn rather than fun and diverting. But then my unco-operativeness may not have been confidence-inspiring.

And as to use of statistics and surveys, who knows? Or about any of the methods, for that matter? One can only guess.

AFTER the New Zealand Skeptics Conference last weekend, I returned to Mrs Snow. Was she a psychic? I asked.

"Well, I use certain intuitive or, if you like, psychic abilities."

Did she use cold reading?

Never heard of it.

She said she promised to help people with problems. It was unfair for anyone to come to her out of curiosity, although she felt a certain amount of scepticism was healthy.

She agreed I had been right not to disclose my job and motivations beforehand, as "it would have distorted the reading."

How did she feel about charging \$25 for a reading which failed to give any specific or accurate information?

Not happy, she said. The reading had been hard; it had upset her. Maybe if I had come at a different time or had my astrological chart done instead, it would have been different.

But she was running a business. That was why she worked from an office, not from her home. "I'm trying to make it a little more professional for people."

She would not agree to undergo scientific tests because she did not trust them. "I don't feel you need to prove it, the proof's in the need for people to receive help."

But she did offer to find some satisfied customers willing to talk to me. Most were more than happy with their readings, she said, and many had returned.

A nurse when younger, Mrs Snow began studying astrology 12 years ago and the tarot cards five years ago. She has been in business three years.

She always knew she had special powers, she said. People would always come to her with problems. "Maybe I'm a good listener or I have some natural talent for trying to help people."

A FEW minutes after this conversation, she rang me back and offered a free astrological reading to "get the full picture." I accepted.

The chart was interesting, even entertaining, but did not alter my doubts about the tarot reading.

As Wellington astrologer and columnist Garth Carpenter says, "You can't validate a tarot card reading by astrology, because they involve different aptitudes."

Astrology, he says, is a collection of informed guesses based on symbolism, but it can be reduced to mathematics. It does not involve psychic powers, as tarot readers claim to use.

JEAN WAUGH, an MA student in psychology at the University of Otago, is investigating belief systems — what makes people have faith in things unknown. She also helped organise the Skeptics conference.

For part of her BA, she conducted tarot reading tests on other students and members of the public, rating each according to accuracy, suggestibility and how credible they found her.

The results showed that "you can say anything and people will believe it."

"Basically, the people who were more vulnerable to suggestion would always find the readings more accurate."

Jean Waugh received a tarot pack for Christmas when she was working at a pub during her holidays. While still "reading a book" she would try it on patrons. All were amazed at the results, although she knew she was doing little more than elementary cold reading.

She now says: "After experimentation and a lot more reading on the topic, I do not believe there's anything supernatural or paranormal about the ability to read the cards. It's all cold reading."

Not that tarot cards are intrinsically bad. "When I do a reading, I use it for a tool as, say, running, meditation, relaxation. If I have a problem, it forces me to focus on it and maybe get new ideas from the images that come up on the cards." □

'After experimentation and a lot more reading on the topic, I do not believe there's anything supernatural or paranormal about the ability to read the cards'

CREATIONISM AND THE MISUSE OF BIOLOGY

Gordon Hewitt

This tape was very intermittent and parts of this account will seem disconnected and bitty. In addition, Gordon had some excellent slides and diagrams which obviously we can not reproduce here.

- 1) Characteristics of Creationist arguments.
 - a) Misquoting; especially of Stephen J. Gould, who might seem to be a Creationist from his statements dragged out of context. They must know they are doing this as it is so very common; it is basically dishonest.
 - b) Evolution is not science as it is not amenable to experimental verification. But there is another kind of science, historical. Along with paleontology and Geology Darwin introduced the study of Biology, in this way. There are three ways it works, Classifying, Comparing and Inaudible.
 - c) There are gaps in the fossil record, but there are bound to be. If there were none, classification would be impossible. There are plenty of examples of intermediates - intermediates within one organism, a bird with a combination of feathers-intermediates between insects and worms, a segmented creature but with a trachea-Archaeopteryx (Creationists say it was a bird, they are wrong, they would have been much better to have said it was a reptile. Modern birds have no holes in the skull) as perfect an example of an intermediate as one could hope to find - the range of human predecessors, from Australopithecus onward.
 - d) The chance of protein evolving is negligible. Here they quote the words of Fred Hoyle and Wickramasinghe (they do not mention that these worthies think that insects are more intelligent than humans and choose to hide their inferiority). The calculation assumes that modern protein is simple and evolved one go. With this assumption, Hoyle correctly calculates the chance as 1 in 10,000. However no one believes that this is what happened, a primitive protein, however inefficient, was able to evolve by natural selection to the more complex version we now have. Gordon here made a very important point about the average length of DNA that codes for protein before the stop code is about 600 units long. Also the length of introns are also 600 units long. Unfortunately, the tape here was very distorted and I have not got Gordon's point at all firmly. Gordon said that on the Creationist argument each of us could not exist; for, we all get one from each of the 23 pairs of our mother's chromosomes, similarly we got one from each of our mother's 23 pairs. Hence the chance of us being us, is (one half) to the power of 23 x (one half) to the power of 23 and this is near enough equal of 10 to the power of minus 13.
 - e) Creationists always bring up the second law of thermodynamics, which clearly they do not understand. They mention Entropy but forget Enthalpy, the energy needed to restore the degradation of order which occurs in all natural processes.
- 2) Evidence that creationists ignore:
 - a) Gaps in the fossil record are a much greater problem for Creationists than for Darwinians, for on their theory human fossils should be found at all layers in the geological strata. There are no human remains in what Creationists say are ante-diluvian rocks. Creationists cite 22 cases where they say fossils have been found in the wrong layer (however, this should happen a number of times on the creationists argument). In fact there are good reasons for each of these reversals, for example where trilobites are found too high in the fossil record they are always upside down, showing that there has been tilting of the rocks.
 - b) The argument from homology; this is well known. A recent fine example is the discovery of haemoglobin in plants. When we compare the structure of this haemoglobin with that of animal haemoglobin there is a certain number of differences in the structure. If we make reasonable assumptions for the time for a number to have occurred by the standard processes of natural selection, we get the time of two billion years and this is exactly the time since we think plants and animals diverged. So far from being an example against evolution, it is seen to be another piece of confirmatory evidence.
 - c) Processes now going on, here the classic example is that of industrial melanism in moths. These have changed colour according to the degree of pollution of British trees. It is not generally realised that this has happened in over 80 species.
 - d) The age of the earth. Creationists make minor points about inaccuracies in the radioactive dating methods but are silent about the million year difference between their age for the earth and the measured one.
 - e) Continental drift. The speed of the movement of the continents has been measured using satellites and turns out to be about 2 cm per year (the rate of growth as that of our finger nails). This exactly matches the predictions from the dating of similar rocks in widely different continents.
 - f) Creationists still believe in a literal interpretation of the Ark. Gordon pointed out some of the many inconsistencies in the story. He noted that while there is enough room for the two elephants of the story. There is not enough space for their food. (Editor's note, it is fascinating to read, this week, that James Irwin has been detained in Turkey on a charge of spying. His excuse that he was looking for the remains of Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat was seriously regarded as too fatuous, even for a spy.)

There were many questions at the end of Gordon's talk but they have been lost. There was evidence of warm applause at the end of the presentation.

Oh, I see a 'George' in the Spirit World... he is telling me he still loves you and is watching over you.



THE AUSTRALIAN-NEW ZEALAND STOP-OVER FOR INTERNATIONAL PSYCHICS by Mark Plummer

5

I would like to thank Dr David Marks and the Committee of the N.Z. Skeptics for inviting me over and to Dr Dennis Dutton and Ricky Farr for their hospitality. I am glad to be at the first convention of the New Zealand Skeptics. Having organised the first two conventions in Australia, I know how much work is involved and am glad someone else, Dr David Marks, is organising this one.

I arrived in New Zealand a week ago. This gave me time to become acclimatised to the colder weather and to tune my ear to English as it should be spoken. It has also given me a chance to read about the latest developments in alternative medicine here, I refer to the lead story in last week's Truth—Sex romp with healers. I look forward to a full investigation by the N.Z. Skeptics. Before landing in Christchurch, I read in my guide book about a man who arrived almost one hundred years ago; one Arthur Bently Worthington. He claimed to be the reincarnation of the God Osiris. He convinced many that he had "the Truth" and built a hall to seat 1600. Like many claimants to the paranormal, he had a fascinating love life, having bigamously married eight times. When life became too hot for him in New Zealand, he departed for Melbourne. There he was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for swindling a widow. He ended his days in New York. Since his stop-over in Australia and New Zealand many people claiming to have the "Truth" and/or paranormal powers have come to the antipodes to convince Aussies and Kiwis of their claims. These days, modern communications means claimants of paranormal powers can be seen and heard by millions around the world. Yet they are at their most persuasive in the same format as Arthur Bently Worthington - the large hall filled by believers or face-to-face contact with a customer. Consequently, we find these International Psychics flying in from the US and UK. They aim to get local media coverage to publicize their public meetings and private sittings. In the six years since the formation of the Australian Skeptics, we have noticed many International psychics who visit Australia and New Zealand.

We have collected material on these and today I will concentrate on some of the most interesting, starting with the Doris twins, Doris Collins and Doris Stokes. Both are English mediums. Mediumship has been around since the 1840s, right from the start, women dominated the field. It offered them an opportunity to break out of their home bound existence in a socially acceptable manner. They come in all shapes and sizes, but the most famous have the image of a trusted aunty or grandmother. They are not considered to be intellectual, but their advice comes from years of experience. They can be trusted like an old fashioned remedy for colds or a recipe for scones. The two Dorises have proved to be the most popular. Each has been preceded by wonderful publicity as to their paranormal powers, thus ensuring large audiences in halls in middle class suburbs. Both are in their late sixties, have similar large figures which they both wrap in large flowing gowns. Both have been mediums since their teens and both have written books about their successes. Both appear to be humble, down-to-earth working class women. They introduce themselves as ordinary mothers or grandmothers and refer to the audience as 'my dear', 'darling' etc. Any mistakes they make are forgivable as they continually talk, covering them up with loveable comments. They both have a good sense of humour and are quite entertaining to watch, skeptic or not.

Britain's most famous medium, Doris Stokes, who says she gets over 2 000 letters each week, says she owes her success to the publicity she received on her visits to Australia. In her own words, 'she never had two pennies to rub together until she came to Australia in the late 70s'. She was a big hit on Television and returned to Britain with glowing press reports. On television and stage, this white haired lady rests comfortably in her chair and relays messages from spirits to their loved ones. She makes calculated guesses and follows the rules of cold reading. According to Stokes, sometimes the spirits are clearer than at other times. She says working as a medium is similar to working on a telephone exchange. When pressed to explain some obvious mistakes, she retorted "Have you ever tried working on five telephone lines at once.". She has been attacked in the newspapers over her claims to have helped British Police solve four murders by using her psychic powers. The police have categorically denied her claims. She has also made false claims to have helped in the Mona Blades murder enquiry.

Let's turn to Doris Collins. She claims to heal everything from cancer to hepatitis. She claims to assist police in solving murder cases and to contact dead people. She says she can levitate and has travelled in a flying saucer. When she came to Australia, she played to packed houses. Her show is in two parts, cold reading followed by healing. She bounces cheerfully on to the stage looking like the happy, comfortable housewife she is. She stands still for a moment, rubs her eyes and points to an eager recipient. She usually contacts 4 or 5 spirits who have relatives in the audience. Her faithful followers assist with cries of 'ooh' and 'aah'. They ignore her mistakes and accept her cover ups. In Perth, she even had the gall to say to a member of the audience "I believe him" (the supposed spirit) more than I believe you". In the second part of the show, she calls up those sick people with obvious afflictions. Her performance consists of manipulation, handling and moving limbs, she persuades patients to say they feel better. When the healing is not obvious, she says "I think I have started something off". She tells her patients to think of her each evening at a certain time. Australian Skeptics arranged for James Randi to confront her on a television talk show. After this, she was somewhat rattled and spent a lot of time attacking skeptics. At one Perth show, she became so upset that a skeptic was taking notes in the front row that she moved down into the audience, stood over him and poked him in the chest before asking him to leave. In her book, 'Woman of Spirit' she mentions her early life. She first married a drunk and gambler. Next she married a man who was mentally ill. Most of the famous people she talks about are now dead. She claims that Peter Sellers was an intimate friend and often took her advice. Yet she is not mentioned in any biography of Sellers despite his known interest in psychics. She also claims to have helped the police in Bath, England to solve a murder. She says they contacted her after she had described the murderer and the victim. The Bath police say that they made no approach to her, in fact, she came to them. She said the murder was committed with a hammer and hatchet. In fact, the victim died of knife wounds. She says too that she was instrumental in getting the Arthur Thomas case re-opened. The official inquiry made no mention of her. It was David Yallop who caused further ballistics tests to be made and which made way for the release of Thomas. Australian Skeptics have investigated many more of the claims of Stokes and Collins and found them all to be false.

We can now move to the British medium, Albert Best. His publicity quoted extensive testing by Professor Roy of Glasgow University. In fact, these were of no scientific value, being merely examples of cold reading of no great success. Albert Best arrived in March 1984. Four days later the Melbourne Sun repeated the false claim that Best had been tested at Glasgow University, under scientific conditions. I wrote to Best and received a reply from Mrs Joan King,

over/

who described herself as the organiser of the tour. She asked that we establish our credentials. Albert Best finally replied stating that, "I have made no claims of any kind" and "have already sat a test, sitting in Hobart on television". In my next letter I noted that while he had not made any claims, others had certainly made remarkable claims about him in promoting his tour. I stated that I felt certain that he would be able to find time to be tested by the Skeptics. He refused to be tested and asserted that he could no longer afford to answer letters without a stamped addressed envelope. As the tour grossed an estimated \$30 000-\$40 000 it appears that the organisers must have been awfully tight with their purse strings. Meanwhile back in New Zealand the 'Psychic Gazette' was hinting at dark clouds over the Best tour. The May 1984 issue stated, 'while the tour has done the public image of what we stand for a great service, many spiritualists found a disappointing shortfall between their expectations and what they experienced. Surely with so many clairvoyants at their disposal, they should have known what was going to happen. The June issue backed down even further. First, they printed a letter from James Randi which corrected the false publicity about Best. The editor, Ron Gibbs, apologised to his readers for any misleading statements about Albert's testing. Yet, the same issue of the Gazette published an advertisement for video tapes of Best, stating (!) 'If you were one of the lucky ones to have a reunion with some of your loved ones, re-live that moment again by watching it on your own video! Price \$70'. To prevent a repetition of the embarrassment caused by the bad publicity, Australian Skeptics extended this offer to Mr Best 'The next time he comes to Australia, he should allocate his first three days for rigorous scientific tests by scientists using the most modern equipment available. If he passed, Australian Skeptics undertook to do their utmost to obtain the sort of favourable publicity that will ensure a highly profitable tour.'

The talk concluded with questions and discussion. The whole was most enthralling and was greatly appreciated.

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New Zealand's No. 1 Woman's Magazine

15 August 1986

Dr Denis Dutton
Chairman
NZCSICOP
School of Fine Arts
University of Canterbury
Christchurch 1

Dear Dr Dutton,

I return this born-again spoon to you as a symbol of the power of the press. I assure you I have no knowledge of what sleight of hand unbent it. I only left it in the newsroom for a few moments, too.

The editor and I and the eight journalists on the Woman's Weekly staff firmly believe the formerly-twisted object belongs in the NZCSICOP canteen of cutlery for a number of reasons.

1. While we agree that Josh Easby's investigative feature was excellent, I cannot stress too strongly it was a different style of journalism. If we were to exclude topics and subjects that are quirky, different and even fantastic the bookshelves and magazines of this country would be sadly depleted. To exclude such subjects, just because we do not hold such beliefs ourselves, comes dangerously close to censorship, a point I meant to make on the programme. Also, in a democratic society minority groups and religions have a right to be heard, which is another point I meant to make.
2. To accept this bent object was to accept that we are journalistically irresponsible, and that we very firmly refute. As a journalist with 20 years experience on publications that include the Christchurch Star, the Listener, and the Financial Times in London, journalistic responsibility is something I care about deeply. I have never been accused of being irresponsible before and with a million readers perusing our publication every week, I worry constantly about accuracy and responsibility. I take your point about the number of exploitative charlatans around. They are constantly in contact with us and get a short shift.
3. I have been aware of Mahikari since I did a three part investigative series some five years ago about the new cults. At the time I uncovered no whiff of scandal or extortionate behaviour among them, although I did with one of the cults, who later slapped a writ on me. You mention a woman who says her marriage was destroyed by her husband's involvement in Mahikari. As I am not aware of the circumstances I can't really comment on that, except to say that my husband, a lawyer, is currently working out a separation for a woman who says her marriage has been destroyed by her husband's obsession with marathon running. The obsession has taken over his life and his behaviour has become irrational...

Both you and George Balani seemed surprised that I put up a spirited defence. I was merely doing my job and I also believe we have a professional and capable staff. I am fed up with the Woman's Weekly journalists being regarded as a pack of bimbos when we have won places in three reputable journalistic awards this year. Our Wellington writer, Jane Westaway won a medical journalism award two weeks ago for one of the first sensible and sober articles on AIDS. One or two of us even have sensible degrees (more than half the staff do, in fact). Mine comes from the very venerable University of Canterbury.

We would be most interested in doing an investigative article on the pitfalls of practising palmistry, astrology and so forth, and to that end, I shall ask our Christchurch writer Glensy Bowman to get in touch with you. In the meantime, if you have any red hot revelations, she can be contacted at phone: 856 722.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Pauline Ray

Pauline Ray
NEWS EDITOR



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PSYCHICS I HAVE KNOWN by David Marks

David gave an account of three psychics he has studied, Kreskin, Geller and Colin Amery. It has taught him a great deal about human nature.

Kreskin is affable, pleasant, self-assured, he always works in semi-darkness. He has a standard offer of \$20,000 to anyone who can show that he uses an accomplice or assistant, so clearly he does not need such help. However, that does not mean that he does not cheat in other ways. His accounts of his methods are artfully designed to appease both skeptics and believers in psychics. He says at the start of each performance that everything can be explained by natural means, but wants the credulous to think that he has magic powers. He is a thoroughly competent stage magician, known in the trade as a 'Mentalist'. His act includes cold reading. With each member of the audience he carries on until he makes a mistake, then he says 'thank you' to fervent applause. He also gives readings of very specific information, such as a six figure cheque account number. He gets it right because he gets the member of the audience to write it down and then he palms the card by standard conjuring technique. It is done with great aplomb. David was able to learn the precise way the trick is done by tracking down members of the audience after the show.

Geller is a very competent stage magician who claims to be a psychic. He says that he got these powers as a result of being struck by lightning at the age of four. In some accounts this was painful and he was conscious throughout. In other accounts the incident was painless and he was rendered unconscious. His own main claim to psychic power is his ability to start broken clocks and watches. David has shown that most 'broken' watches are jammed through dust and warming in the hand is enough to start them again, a fact well known to watch menders. Seven Dunedin watchmakers got 50-60% of watches given to them going again without anything more than shaking and arming. David then told the hilarious tale of his attempt to film Geller bending a spoon at a press conference and Geller's determination that he should not record the precise instant the spoon was bent. The technique is to bend the spoon some time before, while the audience is distracted, conceal it bent and then reveal it after stroking. David also recounted the way Geller bent the handle of a soup ladle in the kitchen of the Southern Cross Hotel. Again, he was able to conceal the fact that he had bent it manually for some time before revealing it in its bent state. Most remarkable is the way that Geller was able to fool two trained scientists, Targ and Putthoff, at the Stanford Research Institute. Geller was to receive messages in a room believed to be totally secure from outside influence. In fact, David has shown that there were several loopholes, in particular a hole in the wall through which an electric cable passed and in which the extra space was covered by cotton wool. Moreover, Geller was left quite unsupervised while he received the psychic messages. Geller must have an engaging personality in view of the fact that he has been able to get \$500,000 from an Australian mining company for allegedly indicating where gold may be found.

The case of Colin Amery is much simpler and much sadder. He is a self-proclaimed psychic who agreed to take part in two tests. He agreed to the conditions beforehand and was quite happy with them until the results came out. In the first test, a friend in another building was to 'send' him a series of numbers. In the other, the friend was to look at a set of highly coloured pictures and Amery was to say what he saw. In both tests, the results were no better than chance might suggest. For example, when the picture was that of the Pope talking into a microphone, Amery 'saw' a flower, corrected to the sun.

David has devised a test to grade psychics on a delusion/illusion scale, there are ten points on it. Does the candidate

- a) claim to be psychic
- b) Use sleight of hand
- c) Use sleight of mouth (fast talk)
- d) Use ordinary perception
- e) Use accomplices (Geller does)
- f) Use population stereotypes (select the numbers, like 37, which we all tend to think of.)
- g) Use cold reading
- h) Perform on stage
- i) seek scientific validation (Geller is the only one to succeed at this, bearing in mind the approval of Targ and Putthoff and their infamous paper in 'Nature'). On this scale a high score indicates illusion, a low score means delusion. Then Geller scores 9/10 and Kreskin 8/10, both are illusionists. Amery gets 4/10 and is clearly deluded.

The talk by David was followed by questions which unfortunately could not be heard properly. However, it was clear that the talk had captivated the audience who were most appreciative of it.

Rewards offered for paranormal 'proofs'

Any medium who demonstrates communication with spirits under controlled conditions will be able to collect \$232,000, Dr David Marks, the chairman of New Zealand Skeptics said yesterday.

For a "psychic" who demonstrates ESP clairvoyance or divination under controlled conditions the reward is \$100,000. These awards are the total money prizes on offer world-wide for any person who can "prove" paranormal powers. "This prize money is a genuine offer being made collectively by sceptics in several countries." New Zealand Skeptics is holding its first annual convention at the University of Otago this weekend. Its full name is the New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. The group includes scientists and investigators with special training in the detection of fraud and fakery. The challenges have been arranged in association with sister organisations in the United States, Britain and Australia.

Dr Marks himself is offering \$25,000. Others included in the challenge list are United States magician James Randi and the Australian electronics entrepreneur Dick Smith. Dr Marks, who is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Otago, said if psychics feel they would rather not perform for the money, it can be given to charity. "GOOD INVESTMENT" "I would be willing to part with this much money to be associated with what would have to be the scientific discovery of the century," Dr Marks said. "And since the persons making such a revolutionary discovery would be strong candidates for a Nobel prize, I would consider it a jolly good investment." Those with "genuine" claims would apply. They would pass preliminary tests in New Zealand and then be invited to the United States or Britain to demonstrate their ability in front of an international committee of investigators. "Based upon our experience with self-proclaimed psychics such as Israeli spoon-bender Uri Geller and New Zealand Tarot Reader Colin Amery our money is quite safe."

'DELUSSION'

Dr Marks himself "discovered" how Uri Geller bent spoons and Mr Emery was tested at the University of Otago.

"The tests revealed Mr Amery mistakes confidently-formed guesses for ESP. He suffers from what I call the 'Psychic's Delusion'."

"The normal label for a person who claims to have psychic powers should be 'self-proclaimed psychic'."

"When television, radio or newspapers describe a person as a 'psychic', this

TWO MESSAGES FROM THE TREASURER

1. We now have nearly ninety subscribing members. When I divide them according to their addresses, and also for the difference in population between the North and South Islands, it appears that South Islanders are about four times more skeptical than are North Islanders.

Come on, you gullible North Islanders!

2. Our recent National Convention attracted a pleasing level of publicity and the challenges we threw down to psychics to come forward to be tested are likely to tempt a number of them to try to convince us of their powers. To set up such tests could prove to be expensive and possibly overstrain the finances of our organisation in its infancy. To avoid the embarrassing and damaging publicity which would follow either having to refuse a test a volunteer psychic, or setting up a test which is deficient in some way, we need to accumulate funds additional to the income from our modest subscription.

Donations to our funds would be gratefully received and acknowledged. If you wish your gifts to be tagged specifically to your pet project, this could easily be done.

B. H. Howard



Hey, no wonder you knew so much, you're my sister!

'Blame Halley's Comet'

An Auckland astrologer who predicted the space shuttle accident says the American space shuttle accident says the American space programme will face further disasters this year.

Manurewa stargazer Jim Hull says the passing of Halley's Comet will cause all manner of technological breakdowns in March and April, including some that will directly

affect the shuttle project. In the first week of 1986 Mr Hull prepared a prediction chart for the Star.

Included in the forecast was a warning that there would be a space shuttle accident around March 9. Today Mr Hull said the comet had triggered the disaster earlier than he expected but said further problems were inevitable for the US space programme this year. Mr Hull labelled 1986 as

the year of international bad news. Among his other predictions are:

- Terrorist attacks, revolution and plane crashes in March.
- The assassination of a female political leader in late March.
- A June summit meeting between the superpowers.
- The death of a world leader in late June.
- A spate of violent crime worldwide in October.

Mediums with a message — life on the other side is dead boring

By Helen Brown

I wedged the car between two others. We'd found a park at last. It was an orderly suburb. Street lights flickered to life. A boy swished past on a skateboard.

Liz and I joined a drove of middle-aged women, cardies draped over their shoulders, who were heading for the community hall. They were the sort who worked on themselves with make-up, hair dyes, high heels, beads and handbags.

Although they had gone to so much trouble, nothing could hide the disillusionment in their eyes. The downturned mouths betrayed a lifestyle few would envy. Too much boredom, too many soap operas and cigarettes. Not enough loving.

They set their jaws and focused on some point on the horizon. They were too excited to talk. I got the feeling that tonight, they hoped something would change. Someone — or thing — would tap them on the shoulder and wash away their sorrow faster than a new brand of bath cleaner.

"You'll have to wait," said the woman who took our \$5 ticket money. "We're short of chairs."

The atmosphere tensed. No one was going to be turned back this close to salvation. Before we knew it, Liz and I were being carried along in a stampede into the auditorium.

Cigarette smoke snaked through the hall. Liz and I split from the herd and made our way across the stiletto-scarred floor to a couple of seats near the front.

The place was packed with the sort of audience I hadn't seen anywhere else — not in a church, or at a concert, or even at a circus. Although most of them were older women, there were elderly couples, solitary teenagers and young women with toddlers on their laps.

If they had anything in common, it was that downtrodden sadness that makes you wonder why humanity bothers.

"Nervous?" Liz said, fixing me with a piercing blue eye.

"Course not," I lied.

A bearded compere escorted the two mediums up some steps to the stage. The mediums sat at a table and eyed the audience — or was it the spaces around the audience? — while the compere delivered a speech about this "voyage of exploration."

I wasn't sure if the audience was reassured or disappointed that the performers looked so ordinary. The famous ex-radio clairvoyant, Mary Fry, was extremely well-groomed in a coral dress. Her golden hair was folded back neatly from her pretty, but unremarkable, face.

Joseph Martin (advertised as an itinerant) was wearing a cream jacket and shirt, nicely set off with a chocolate tie. The compere explained that Mr Martin was a tohunga who had the gift of healing and who could help

people understand their relationship with their God.

The audience was longing for some action. At last the compere sat down. Mr Martin stood up and pointed out a woman in the thick of the audience. "Yes, you, dear. With the blue dress and the handbag on your lap." The rest of the crowd, half-envious, half-relieved, craned their necks.

"Who was the man who liked drinking?" Mr Martin asked her. She didn't reply, but smiled. "Well, he's brought a flagon with him. He keeps making me want to hold my hand like this..." Mr Martin put one hand behind his back. "He's a bit of a hard case. What?"

The medium addressed the air beside him in an insulted tone. "I can't say that! He's using a lot of bad language. He says have you looked into that piece of land yet? He says all will be well."

As Mr Martin waved his arms like a conductor, the spirits seemed to roll in with vaguely benign messages. One presented a mystified member of the audience with invisible white carnations. Another, who used to play the guitar, told a man he'd get some good mail soon. A cheque for a lot of money in return for something he shouldn't have done. Mr Martin could see the exact amount, but it wasn't his policy to disclose figures.

The ghosts were all there on the other side drinking, playing cribbage, laughing and swearing as much as they always had. It began to sound depressingly like life on this side. I wondered if they had television over there, too. Was there no peace in dying?

Sometimes, a member of the audience would seem to recognise one of these spiritual characters. Other times, they'd look confused and, frankly, spooked.

Mary Fry specialised in more poetic ghosts. She would often clasp part of her body to indicate how the person had died. Heart attacks, stomach pains, childbirth. It got a bit gruelling after a while.

The highlight came just before the interval when Mary Fry turned to a young Maori woman in front of me. A chief in a cloak with a bone ornament on the left shoulder offered the young woman a white dove. He said there had been trouble with a boy in the family and that the boy should go back to the marae.

The young woman seemed to find the message relevant and deeply moving.

As the night wore on, the spirits seemed to have more gruesome, fatal illnesses. A morose feeling hung over the hall and finally engulfed us.

Maybe it was because most of the audience realised their spirit had overlooked them that night, or hadn't been pushy enough to get a message through.

Tomorrow, it would be back to the snaps.

Geller's gold for fools, say Australian Skeptics

By JEFF HAMPTON

An Australian-based mining company is in turmoil after recent revelations by the Australian Skeptics that it paid the magician, Uri Geller, to search for gold.

The Skeptics' founding president, Mr Mark Plummer, said in Christchurch this week that shareholders in the company and the public were told of the payment to Mr Geller after investigations by the Skeptics.

Mr Plummer, a Melbourne lawyer, cited the revelations as an example of how the Skeptics, a non-aligned voluntary group, could protect the public interest.

He was in New Zealand at the week-end for the first annual convention of the newly formed New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or New Zealand Skeptics.

Mr Plummer believes the Skeptics have a role to play in society by questioning the claims of psychics and others who say they have extra-normal powers, and who often demand payment for their "services."

Targets for the Skeptics were people "who have no expertise and base their advice on mumbo-



URI GELLER

jumbo," he said.

In Australia, shareholders of the mining company, Zanex, are upset that the company sought the advice of Mr Geller, a magician and mentalist who gained acclaim for his "spoon-bending" tricks.

The Skeptics revealed in June that Mr Geller was asked by the company to look for gold in the Solomon Islands and near Maldon in Victoria.

They assert that for his advice Mr Geller was paid more than \$Aust350,000 and was given an option to take up 1,250,000 Zanex shares at 20c each by June, 1987.

Shareholders were told

that the company was using "innovative methods" to find gold.

A senior Zanex executive confirmed to the "Sydney Morning Herald" newspaper in July that the company had hired Mr Geller. However, he said that it was for a much smaller fee than claimed by the Skeptics.

Mr Plummer said that Mr Geller had no qualifications as a geologist, but was "a talented magician with a reputation for being able to convince people he has psychic powers."

"Geller came to the Solomon Islands after Zanex had already located a potential goldmining area downstream from Gold Ridge on Guadalcanal Island," said Mr Plummer.

"At the opening of Zanex's mine, Geller entertained the guests with magic tricks and even bent a spoon held by the Prime Minister of the Solomons, Sir Peter Kenires."

The hiring of Mr Geller incensed a number of Zanex shareholders, and at least one director, and moves are afoot to have two of the present directors replaced and another three elected.

"One wonders if Geller foresaw these develop-

ments," said Mr Plummer, who gave numerous examples of how confidence tricksters tried to make money by claiming to have extra powers.

In Melbourne, the Skeptics investigated claims by a meditation group that it could teach people to levitate, at a cost of \$5000.

The group had photographs to "prove" its pupils could levitate. The photographs showed persons sitting cross-legged in the air above a mattress.

"The people were jumping up and down on the mattress and having their photograph taken while they were in the air," said Mr Plummer.

Then there was the alchemist who claimed to be able to turn the fillings in people's teeth to gold.

The man made almost \$40,000 before he was arrested and charged with fraud, said Mr Plummer.

He also urged New Zealanders to beware of self-styled psychics who come from overseas and make extravagant claims such as helping to solve murder inquiries.

Mr Plummer said that these claims were easily checked, often by making a telephone call. The claims were invariably debunked.

SOCIETY MAY TAKE HEALER TO COURT

By Nick Early

Claims that energy from quartz crystals can treat diseases may be illegal, says the New Zealand Skeptics Society.

The newly formed society is considering its first legal action as a result of claims by touring healer, Mr Edmond Harold.

Mr Harold, the president of the Spiritual Venturers' Association, is travelling the country promoting his book, "Focus on Crystals."

However the Skeptics (the committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal Incorporated) has taken issue with Mr Harold's assertions.

Members of the society say Mr Harold may have broken the law by publicly claiming to have alleviated leukaemia with the aid of crystals.

"We suspect that to make this sort of claim is against the law," said one Skeptic, Professor Bernard Howard.

However, until they have had the Medicines Act 1981 thoroughly examined, the society is reluctant to commit itself.

Mr Harold has said that energy released by crystals can help cure people of serious health

problems, stress, tiredness and depression.

"It's completely incredible that anyone could talk such nonsense," Mr Howard, a retired Lincoln College bio-chemist, said today.

"There's a smattering of scientific information in what he says, but most of it is quite inconsistent. He advocated controlled tests on the healer's methods."

If the Medicines Act supported the Skeptics' fears that the leukaemia claim was illegal, the society would seek advice from the Health Department.

The society's chairman, Dr Denis Dutton, said the Act listed a whole range of diseases which could not be named in claims of the ability to cure.

These included cancer and leukaemia. The leukaemia comment has been described as borderline by the Health Department's deputy medical officer of health, Dr Mel Brieseman.

The law prohibited treatments being advertised, he said.

For someone to claim they had once cured a person of leukaemia was probably not illegal, but to encourage sufferers to come forward for treatment was definitely against the law, he said.

Chch man leads 'psychic' sleuths

8

By MIKE STEEL

A Christchurch expert on the Shroud of Turin, Dr Denis Dutton, was yesterday elected chairman of the New Zealand Skeptics Society, which investigates psychic claims.

The society, which held its first annual convention at Otago University at the week-end, chose two other Canterbury skeptics to lead the group.

A senior lecturer in history, Dr Chris Connolly, was voted secretary, and a barrister, Mr Errol Higgins, elected to the governing board.

About 50 skeptics attended the two-day convention, and were entertained with a variety of mock "psychic" performances. These included the coaxing of a cigarette across a tabletop and the mysterious straightening of a bent metal spoon without touching.

But the tricks were all

explained by the five invited speakers, who included Dr Dutton, a lecturer in fine arts at the University of Canterbury.

Dr Dutton, who is writing a book debunking the Shroud of Turin, succeeded a Dunedin psychologist, Dr David Marks, as chairman of the Skeptics.

Dr Marks founded the group in February after 10 years of testing such psychics as Uri Geller. He will leave on Friday to teach in Britain.

Dr Marks played videotapes to the convention showing tarot card readings by a self-proclaimed Auckland psychic, Colin Amery. Mr Amery is so far the only psychic who has agreed to sit the Skeptics' rigorous tests for paranormal powers.

Earlier this year he tried to prove his telepathic powers, but according to Dr Marks, Mr Amery did worse than if he had guessed blindly.

Two other prominent New Zealand psychics have declined to be tested and others have yet to come forward. But Dr Marks believes that the Skeptics' latest offer of \$252,000 for proof of communication with spirits will be a strong incentive.

He told the convention that he was personally putting up \$25,000 for anyone who could prove a psychic ability under controlled conditions. He will pay the money to anyone who can transmit by telepathy 10 randomly chosen numbers between one and 100, and get at least half right over two trials.

"If they could do that twice, I would give them \$25,000 without a shadow of doubt," said Dr Marks.

Such a performance, under controlled conditions, would convince the hardest sceptic and win a \$160,000 prize for proof of E.S.P., clairvoyance or di-

vination, he said.

The convention also featured tape-recordings of radio talkback performances by Mrs Mary Fry, a self-proclaimed medium.

Dr Dutton spent weeks analysing the tapes, and concluded that Mrs Fry's apparent supernatural ability had an ordinary explanation. She succeeded by "cold readings," where likely and often flattering guesses were pursued according to how the subject responded.

He also found some unusual features in Mrs Fry's performances.

"One of the things I have noticed is a tremendous tendency for the dead to give out barking tips," he said.

After Dr Dutton advised Radio New Zealand of his research and his concerns about the type of advice that Mrs Fry was giving, officials decided not to



MR DUTTON

renew her contract.

The Skeptics were not trying to tell people what they should believe, or stop them having fun, said Dr Dutton. The group's concern was where unsupported and often dangerous psychic claims were asserted as fact.

The gathering also featured an address and psy-

chic tricks by an Australian lawyer, Mr Mark Plummer, who founded a Skeptics group in Australia.

Mr Plummer said that international mediums visiting New Zealand often claimed psychic successes in Australia, which did not "check out."

He said his group would help the New Zealand Skeptics to check the extraordinary claims by some "psychics" on their Australasian stop-over.

The Skeptics had planned for a genuine psychic to address the convention, but none of those approached accepted the offer.

Dr Marks said the reluctance of psychics to co-operate with the group was one of the main problems that it faced.

Ironically, Dr Marks was once inundated with volunteers for his experiments — between 1971 and 1977 he was testing the clinical effects of can-

nabis. "We had hundreds of volunteers. Now we can only get one a year," he said.

Some psychics claim that their powers disappear in a sterile laboratory, including Mr Amery, even though he was confident that Dr Marks' E.S.P. tests were going well at the time.

But while the Skeptics scoffed at these excuses, even Dr Marks once wondered if the spirit world was finally having its revenge.

He was on the telephone talking about spirit mediums when an eerie female voice suddenly broke through the conversation.

The woman introduced herself and added, "I'm sorry you can't reach me."

The voice turned out to be his colleague testing her new telephone answering machine on his extension.

RADIO
NEW ZEALAND

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

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16 September 1985

Dr Denis Dutton
Lecturer in the Philosophy of Art
University of Canterbury
Private Bag
CHRISTCHURCH

Dear Dr Dutton

Thank you for your letter of 21 August and your expression of concern about our "Tonight Show" broadcasts by Mary Fry.

In the two years that Mrs Fry appeared on Station 2ZB in Wellington we did not have one complaint or indication from any listener that Mrs Fry's advice was injurious. Before we took the decision to expand her broadcasts to the full network on the basis of their clear popularity with 2ZB listeners, we did, in fact, consult both a theologian and a Clinical Psychologist, neither of whom raised any objections, having listened to Mrs Fry's broadcasts, to what she was doing.

Since Mrs Fry has been on the network there has been criticism emanating pretty much exclusively from Christchurch, from yourself, from four members of our own staff, eleven members of the Spiritualist Church of New Zealand and from some members of the Associated Churches of Christ in Dunedin. That is not to say we do not take the concern you raise seriously. We do, but we are not in the business of censoring the free expression of alternative viewpoints and lifestyles simply because they offend the susceptibilities of one segment of our audience. You will be aware that Radio New Zealand broadcasts daily, claims by Ministers of Religion of the existence of God, and exhortations to place ourselves in His care for a variety of purposes. It will not surprise you to know that a substantial body of our listeners regard that as pernicious in the extreme and about as harmful as you regard Mrs Fry's activities. They also would claim that the assertions made are not susceptible to logic or rational proof. It does not, however, deter us from continuing to reflect in our programmes material which has relevance and meaning for our listeners.

There is another question and it is this — the extent to which a Public Broadcasting body such as ourselves should be dealing with matters which are, as it were, on the fringe and should, by giving a platform, appear to support or condone practices which may be debatable. The Statute is not very helpful here. It says we must broadcast a range of programmes which cater to all sections of the community. There are programme rules which speak about good taste and decency and community norms and standards (however one can get at those). In the end, one can only use one's good judgment and occasionally experiment to see where the frontiers of acceptance and tolerance are for particular programme forms.

When the present contractual arrangements with Mrs Fry are completed at the end of November the current series will come to an end and the series will not be renewed.

Yours sincerely

Beverley A. Wakem

Beverley A Wakem
Director General

Psychic sad over communication lack

The first Wellington psychic Mary Fry knew of her terminated contract with Radio New Zealand was when a friend rang up and said her husband had seen it in the newspaper.

She still has had no official notification. However, Radio New Zealand's director-general, Ms Beverley Wakem, has written to one of Mrs Fry's strongest critics, Mr Denis Dutton, a University of Canterbury lecturer, telling him of the decision.

Ms Wakem's letter, parts of which were published earlier this week, said the contract for the series would be completed in November and would not be renewed.

Mrs Fry said that was incorrect. Her contract for October arrived yesterday. After reading of the show's termination she refused to sign it. She would not be going on air again this year. She feels she would not be helping anybody, biding her time under surveillance.

Mrs Fry believed the producer of the show and 2ZB's station manager had also been unaware of the cancellation of the show.



Mrs Mary Fry... "I believed in what I was doing."

Mrs Fry said she was certainly not angry about the end of the series but was saddened at the lack of communication between herself and the hierarchy.

Mrs Fry said most of the criticism of her and the show stemmed from Christchurch through Mr Dutton and Mr Brian Prestley, host of the television programme "Fourth Estate."

Mrs Fry started work in radio two-and-a-half years ago as a "one-off." She was part of a series on alter-

native thinking. Her programme got the most feedback and radio asked her to continue.

It started off monthly for 2ZB, then fortnightly.

Mrs Fry said she had not been upset by the Christchurch criticism. "They were within their rights to voice their opinions."

She believes they made some valid points. "They made me look hard. Sometimes I may not have been clear enough to people. Okay you guys (the spirits) we must be more specific we must get deeper," she said.

Other criticism levelled at her was that she gave medical advice. Mrs Fry said she did and would continue to discuss herbal and natural remedies but she always stressed people should continue with their own medical programmes and advice.

She has had offers from private radio but would not be taking those up.

She said radio was a small part of her life. She had plenty of other requests to keep her going. "I will respond to the work that comes up."



Randi: amazing good fortune

Since 1981, recipients of MacArthur Foundation grants, the "genius awards" that permit five years of financial freedom, have included poets and composers, scientists and even a mime. But a prestidigitator? Last week James Randi, a.k.a. "The Amazing Randi," whose sleight of hand has exposed psychic gimmicks, hoaxes and claims of the paranormal, was among this year's 25 winners, picking up \$272,000 for his crusade to protect sick people from unscrupulous faith healers. The award came as a total surprise. "You can bang your head against the wall, call Sophia

Loren or take it soberly," he notes. "It takes about 48 hours to settle in. All the time I was saying, 'I really won?'" Now that the question has been answered, Randi, 57, is wasting no time in putting the money to work, expanding his office, hiring a full-time researcher, and planning for a college scholarship so that more debunkers can be set to work. The Great Doubter has become a true believer in his benefactors: "They reached very far out, perhaps dangerously so, in giving it to a magician instead of some academic. I feel a great responsibility to the foundation."