

# NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

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## Thoughts on the Longevity of Superstitions

Peter Münz

*What is it that keeps superstitions going in the face of our increasing knowledge about the world?*

There is no easy, let alone absolute, way of telling the difference between a true belief and a false or superstitious one. In order to be able to label a belief a superstition, one would have to be able to define clearly what kind of belief would not be a superstition; or, for that matter, to call something abnormal, one would have to be quite sure what sort of thing would be normal.

However, people are very ready to insist on these distinctions and they tend to do so on the grounds of what seems to me a very mistaken notion. They think that one can distinguish between true and superstitious beliefs in terms of the method by which the beliefs have been arrived at. There is a correct method, it is alleged, and there are incorrect methods. If the correct method is followed, then the belief it leads to must be a true belief. When pressed such people cite "observation" and/or "reason" as the

characteristics of a correct method. Both observation and reason are very woolly terms. If one wants to observe, one first has to know what one wants to observe. And then one has to make sure that the observation is not a hallucination, and so forth. There is no finality in "observation." The method of reason is equally woolly. People differ very widely on what they suppose to be "rational" and in the end it boils down to

little more than the invitation: "Be reasonable, think as I do!"

The moment we dismiss the naïve notions of observation and/or reason, the notion of "correct" method involves one in a circularity. In order to decide which method would be a correct method of arriving at a true belief about the real world, one would have to know quite a lot as to what that real world is really like. Without such knowledge, there can be no telling what method would be the correct one. But it is precisely our ignorance of that real world and of what it is like that leads us to the search for the correct method.

The history of science provides countless examples of the absence of a  $\Rightarrow p3$

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## Bread, circuses, and garbage

Did you catch TV3's Inside New Zealand documentary programme a few weeks ago on "Satanic Ritual Abuse"? If so, you won't have forgotten it, try as you might to "repress" the memory. It was one of the most sublimely awful hours of television ever to be broadcast in Godzone — silly, irresponsible and sleazy. A middle-aged woman led a camera crew around the North Island to the sites where as a child she claims to have been sexually abused in the late 1940s and 1950s by her mum and dad, the parish priest, town dignitaries, and no doubt the local dog catcher and all the dogs.

Therapists testified that her stories ought to be taken seriously, despite the fact that she only "remembered" them a couple of years ago. The police have not been so gullible, but that didn't stop TV3 from presenting the whole sorry fantasy, defaming the dead (and the lady's mum, who is in a resthome with Alzheimer's) with stories of sadistic sexual rituals, where babies were killed, blood drunk, and a good time had by all.

Two years ago I would have sworn that television in this country had scraped bottom, but when considering commercial television, there is more garbage in heaven and the broadcast day than is dreamt of in your philosophy.

TVNZ squanders two hours of prime time on a pseudodocumentary, apparently on Egyptology, in which Charlton Heston seems to start reasonably enough but which ends with Sphinx-building aliens and the "Face on Mars," and has regular offerings on the paranormal, proving what every New Ager has always wanted to believe about quack medicine, clairvoyancy, and ESP. The "news" goes infotainment whenever possible and any possible decent programming is cleverly scheduled at a time sufficiently inconvenient — say, 7.30 am — that precious few will see it. But TVNZ can always say, "Oh, we do have fine educational programmes — you elitist snobs can tape them."

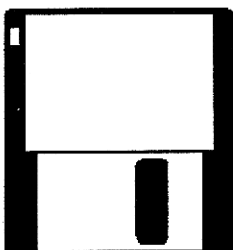
The latest assault on the taste and intelligence of New Zealanders comes at 7.00 pm on weeknights. TV3 is trying to draw viewers away

from TVNZ's Shortland Street and Wheel of Fortune by screening Hard Copy. This deplorable offering is bad enough at any time of day, but it is particularly egregious in this spot, because it carries segments that are rated "AO." Thus the spirit of competition drives TV3 to flout the "watershed" code which requires that Adults Only material must not be shown before 8.30 pm. By their standards it may seem a small infraction, but it is just another symptom of the degradation of public discourse and entertainment.

New Zealand remains the only English-speaking country in the world without an intelligent, noncommercial alternative to junk television. What a tragedy — especially for young people, whose eyes and minds might be opened to worlds of science, history, and cultural understanding were families give a choice away from the cheap game shows, shallow soaps, and violent entertainment that dominates our evening television.

The current Broadcasting Minister, Maurice Williamson, doesn't want the change (he's for competition), and neither does the Labour Broadcasting Spokesperson, Steve Maharey, who doesn't like anything that smacks of "elitism." Both these chaps tell us New Zealand cannot afford a noncommercial television channel, which misses the point entirely. All that's needed is a nightly prime-time band of two or three hours for high-quality programmes presented without commercial interruption in the body of the programme. Such an arrangement is eminently affordable for New Zealand.

Williamson and Maharey, however, are happy for their private reasons that we're to be fed this junk. And every night that passes squanders yet another opportunity to open people's minds to something better, to make a constructive contribution to knowledge and understanding in New Zealand.



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

correct method. Even a cursory examination of the "method" used by Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Darwin or Einstein will show that they had no real method at all. The most recent and best documented example is the history of the discovery of the molecular structure of DNA.

There was Rosalind Franklin who tried to avoid all adventure and kept making X-ray pictures of DNA, putting her trust in old Francis Bacon, that heaps and heaps of these pictures would ultimately yield knowledge of the molecular structure of the substance X-rayed. And all the while, there were Crick and Watson, wildly speculating and inventing haphazardly and making informed guesses and using Rosalind Franklin's X-rays merely to confirm or disconfirm their hypotheses.

What makes us think, in the absence of a correct method, that the conclusions of all these people were not superstitions, is the fact that once they had made their discoveries, these discoveries have failed to be falsified. We owe this paramount insight into and understanding of the growth of knowledge to Karl Popper, whose classic book on

the subject was first published in Vienna in 1935.

Since there is no correct method, there is no absolute distinction between a true belief and a superstition. At best, we can tell the difference *after* the discovery or the proposal of a solution has been made. A superstition, after it has been put forward, is either falsified or it is couched in the first place in such a form that nothing whatever could ever falsify it.

A true belief, on the other hand, is, at best, considered true because, although we know what would have to be the case for it to be false, it has so far not yet been falsified. A true belief is only provisionally and hypothetically true and is, for this reason, not absolutely different from a superstition.

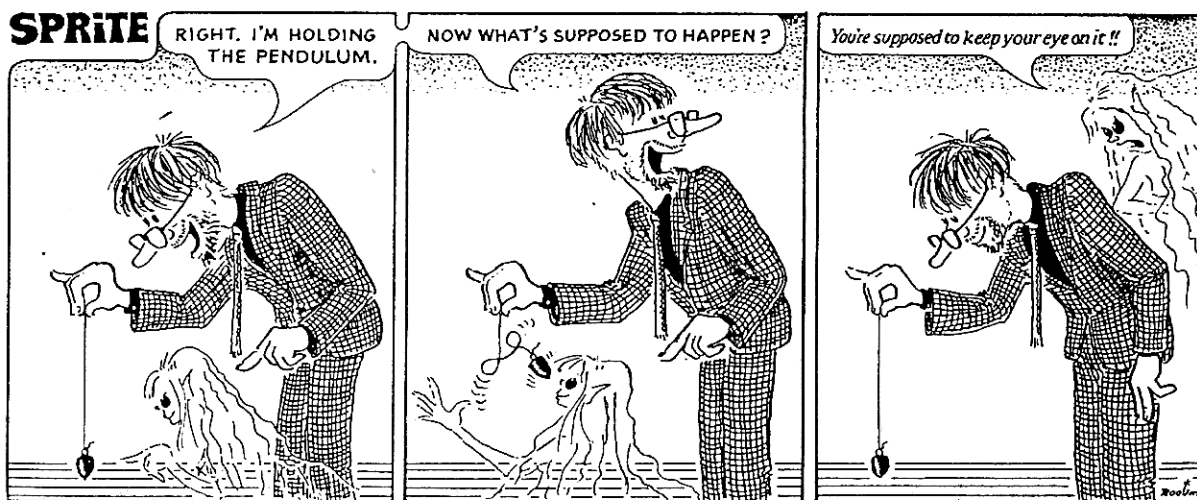
### Postmodernists

Unfortunately this lack of an absolute difference between superstition and true belief has been exploited by a host of contemporary philosophers — the so-called postmodern or post-structuralist philosophers (Feyerabend, Rorty, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, to mention the most famous ones) — who relish telling us that we might just as well hold any belief we like, that there is no difference

at all between superstition and true belief, no difference between science and fiction, and that people who claim their superstitions to be "science" are nothing but arrogant imperialists who use their power to ram their superstitions down their victims' throats.

These "thinkers" maintain that "science" is nothing but the mythology of Western people. They sum all this up by saying that all beliefs, including those we call scientific beliefs, are social constructions and that their chief purpose is not to understand the world, but to act as ideologies which legitimise the exploitation and oppression of minorities, other races, or, in general, of whatever people we dislike. Bigoted heterosexuals construct beliefs which legitimise the persecution of homosexuals, male chauvinists construct beliefs to validate the oppression of women, and so forth.

In New Zealand we have to be specially wary of these postmodern "thinkers" because if we follow them we will end up believing that there is no difference between the myth of Kupe and the theory of Continental Drift. In the so-called minds of these postmodern "thinkers" the



Skeptic (UK), Donald Room



theory of Continental Drift is nothing but a belief employed by Europeans to put down people who believe that the North Island was fished up from the bottom of the ocean by Maui.

In spite of the faddishness of these so-called thinkers, who are now riding on a wave of popular acclaim because they make any group with the weirdest superstitions feel "culturally safe", there is a very hard way of telling the relative, though never the absolute, difference between a superstition and a true belief. The more a belief coheres with other beliefs, the more scientific it is likely to be. The less it coheres and the more parochial it is, the less scientific it is likely to be.

By this standard, the concept of, for example, "Maori Science" (a course of which is part of the curriculum at Victoria University in Wellington!) is a contradiction in terms. If it is parochially Maori, it can, by definition, not be science; and if it is science, it cannot be specific to Maori. This is not to say that Maori had no science, but such science should be called "science among the Maori" not "Maori Science". People who think of "Maori Science" ought to be reminded of the genocidal mischief caused in the middle of our century in Europe by the notion of "German (i.e., non-Jewish) Physics".

A belief which claims to be scientific must always be open to criticism, and can never be shielded from criticism on the grounds that it ought to be respected because it is culturally ensconced in an ethnic group. The real obstacle to the progression of scientific knowledge, therefore, is not the absence of a correct method of finding it, but the demand that certain beliefs

ought to be exempt from criticism on the grounds of cultural safety.

Superstitions which are parochial, however, do fulfill a social function. They function as charters of societies and hold those societies together as co-operating units and promote solidarity. This is, of course, more true of tribal or primitive societies than of modern, urban and industrial societies. In primitive societies we get the almost paradoxical situation in which a parochial superstitious belief is socially, though not cognitively, more efficient than a non-parochial, scientific belief.

### Social Climate

The reason for this seeming paradox is quite easy to grasp. A society has to have boundaries and exclude lots of people. A parochial superstition is more likely to function well as such an exclusion principle than a more scientific belief which coheres with lots and lots of other beliefs.

A scientific belief can never function as an exclusion and boundary-defining principle. There is only one truth, but there are at least as many false beliefs as there are societies. One society could form itself around the belief that insects have nine legs; another, around the principle that insects have ten legs, and so forth. The society which, on the other hand, consists of people who believe that insects have six legs would include just about everybody. The true belief about insects could never be used as a boundary defining principle.

By the standards of evolution, one would expect that societies based on subscription to false belief would not last long,

because they might waste their energy praying for rain rather than digging trenches for irrigation. But here again we come across another seeming paradox. The society based on the belief that rain comes from prayer is likely to be a society with strong social bonds and a good feeling of solidarity. That solidarity will make it more able to fend for itself and to compensate for its lack of true knowledge. It may lack food because prayer does not bring rain, but it will make a solid fighting force which can rob food from other people.

Parochial, false beliefs are not a good adaptation to the environment, but they are obliquely or indirectly adaptive because they are a good cement for the formation of the solidarity of robber gangs which can help themselves to food by other means. Such superstition-based societies have great staying power even though they are not good adaptations to the environment. Hence myths and superstitions are not likely ever to die out. Faith-healing may not be a cure for cancer, but it makes a good support group for cancer patients. Table-rapping may not be a suitable form of communicating with departed spirits, but it does make for conviviality.

For further discussion see two books by Peter Münz: *Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge*, London, Routledge, 1985; *Philosophical Darwinism*, London, Routledge, 1993; and the following papers: "Popper's Contribution to the 20th Century", *New Zealand Science Review*, 48, 1991; "What is Postmodern, Anyway?" *Philosophy and Literature*, 16, 1992; "Anne Salmond's 'Two Worlds' in Postmodern Fancy Dress", *New Zealand Journal of History*, forthcoming, 1994.

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# Predicting the End of the World

Jim Ring

Vicki Hyde suggests (*Skeptical* 30) that we are in for a lot more doomsday predictions as we approach the year 2000. I am afraid she is right, but why should fundamentalists get so excited about a round number of years?

They believe that the world was created in six days, and a very ancient prophesy is that it would last six thousand years because "... one day is like a thousand years" (2 Peter 3:8). That seems logical enough.

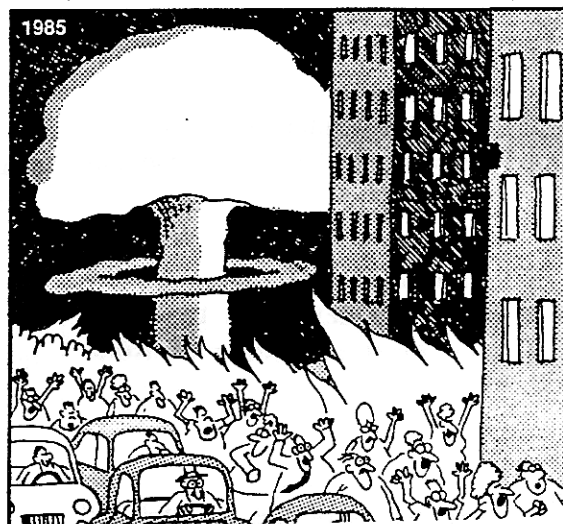
This prophecy originates from the first century when it was believed that the world was already around four thousand years old. It is contained in the Epistle of Barnabas<sup>1</sup> chapter 13, and The Secrets of Enoch<sup>2</sup> chapter 33. The former letter had as good a claim to be in the New Testament as several books that were included. Some early Christian writers believed it had the same author as the Epistle to the Hebrews.

This is thus a very ancient prophesy, but it is difficult to decide just when the 6,000 years are up. Our system of dating which identifies this year as AD 1994 was invented in AD 525 by Dionysius Exiguus. He tried to start his system from the birth of Jesus but miscalculated.

The Roman republic had counted years "AUC" (Ab Urba Condita, the year of the city). Afterwards they counted "in the year of the Emperor." Dionysius added all this up, but missed the four years from

when Octavian won the battle of Actium (31 BC) until he accepted the title of Emperor Augustus (27 BC).

That is the real reason why Authorised Versions of the New Testament claim that Jesus was born in 4 BC. If Dionysius had counted correctly he would have started his system four years earlier. Of course, that means that the world should end in 1996 rather than 2000. It is later than you think.



Relax again, that is not the only alternative. Dionysius's near contemporary, Victorius, produced a system of dating years from the Passion of Jesus. This was taken to occur in the year we call 28AD, and the system should have great appeal to fundamentalists (although I doubt that any have heard of it), the Passion being much more important than the birth of Jesus.

Consequently, many old dates may have an error of 28 years, because it is not known which system was being used. And the end of the world may not be due until 2028 — what a relief!

The popular idea that there was an end-of-world panic

around AD 1000 is almost certainly a myth. There are (so far as I am aware) no contemporary references to such agitation. But at that time probably nobody knew the date. Although the system of Dionysius was nearly 500 years old it was rarely used. The world of Islam counted the years since the Hegira. Much of Europe counted "in the year of the Emperor," and the Catholic church counted "in the year of Pope."

In Western Europe few outside the church were literate or numerate. According to Barbara Tuchman<sup>3</sup>, even as late as the fourteenth century in Western Europe no two writers ever agree about the date.

To go back to the beginning — literally — all these predictions are based on the world's being created in six days. We know this is not true.

It is not just geology and biology that refute the biblical creation story, geography does too. Try reading Genesis 1. The creation account *assumes* a flat Earth, for only a flat Earth can experience the "mornings and evenings" described. A spherical world has neither a date nor a time. There is always a morning somewhere, and always an evening somewhere else.

1. English translation in *The Lost Books of the Bible*, New American Library

2. English translation in *The Forgotten Books of Eden*, New American Library

3. *A Distant Mirror*

Jim Ring is a skeptic from Nelson.

# Multiple Personality Disorder

Paul R. McHugh

*What can events 100 years ago tell us about a modern disorder?*

Students often ask me whether multiple personality disorder (MPD) really exists. I usually reply that the symptoms attributed to it are as genuine as hysterical paralysis and seizures, and teach us lessons already learned by psychiatrists more than a hundred years ago.

Consider the dramatic events that occurred at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris in the 1880s. For a time, the chief physician, Jean-Martin Charcot, thought he had discovered a new disease he called "hystero-epilepsy," a disorder of mind and brain combining features of hysteria and epilepsy. The patients displayed a variety of symptoms, including convulsions, contortions, fainting and transient impairment of consciousness.

A skeptical student, Joseph Babinski, decided that Charcot had invented rather than discovered hystero-epilepsy. The patients had come to the hospital with vague complaints of distress and demoralisation. Charcot had persuaded them that they were victims of hystero-epilepsy and should join the others under his care. Charcot's interest in their problems, the encouragement of attendants, and the example of others on the same ward prompted patients to accept Charcot's view of them and eventually to display the expected symptoms. These symptoms resembled epilepsy, Babinski believed, because of a municipal decision to house epileptic and hysterical patients together (both having "episodic" conditions). The

hysterical patients, already vulnerable to suggestion and persuasion, were continually subjected to life in the ward and to Charcot's neuropsychiatric examinations. They began to imitate the epileptic attacks they repeatedly witnessed.

## Babinski Vindicated

Babinski eventually won the argument. In fact, he persuaded Charcot that doctors can induce a variety of physical and mental disorders, especially in young, inexperienced, emotionally troubled women. There was no "hystero-epilepsy." These patients were afflicted not by a disease but by an idea. With this understanding, Charcot and Babinski devised a two-stage treatment consisting of isolation and counter-suggestion.

First, "hystero-epileptic" patients were transferred to the general wards of the hospital and kept apart from one another. Thus they were separated from everyone else who was behaving in the same way and also from staff members who had been induced by sympathy or investigatory zeal to show great interest in the symptoms. The success of this first step was remarkable. Babinski and Charcot were reminded of the rare but impressive epidemic of fainting, convulsions, and wild screaming in convents and boarding schools that ended when the group of afflicted persons was broken up and scattered.

The second step, counter-suggestion, was designed to give the patients a view of themselves that would persuade them to abandon their symptoms. Dramatic counter-sug-

gestions, such as electrical stimulation of "paralyzed" muscles, proved to be unreliable. The most effective technique was simply ignoring the hysterical behaviour and concentrating on the present circumstances of these patients.

They were suffering from many forms of stress, including sexual feelings and traumas, economic fears, religious conflicts, and a conviction (perhaps correct) that they were being exploited or neglected by their families. In some cases their distress had been provoked by a mental or physical illness. The hysterical symptoms obscured the underlying emotional conflicts and traumas. How trivial a sexual fear seemed to a patient in whom convulsive attacks produced paralysis and temporary blindness every day!

Staff members expressed their withdrawal of interest in hysterical behaviour subtly, in such words as, "You're in recovery now and we will give you some physiotherapy, but let us concentrate on the home situation that may have brought this on."

These face-saving counter-suggestions reduced a patient's need to go on producing hystero-epileptic symptoms in order to certify that her problems were real. The symptoms then gradually withered from lack of nourishing attention. Patients began to take a more coherent and disciplined approach to their problems and found a resolution more appropriate than hysterical displays.

The rules discovered by Babinski and Charcot, now embedded in psychiatric textbooks and confirmed by decades of research in social psychology, are being overlooked in the midst of a nationwide epidemic of alleged MPD that is wreaking havoc on both patients and therapists. MPD is an iatrogenic behavioural syndrome, promoted by suggestion, social consequences, and group loyalties. It rests on ideas about the self that obscure reality, and it responds to standard treatments.

To begin with the first point, MPD, like hystero-epilepsy, is created by therapists. This formerly rare and disputed diagnosis became popular after the appearance of several best-selling books and movies. It is often based on the crudest form of suggestion. Here, for example, is some advice on how to elicit alternative personalities (alters, as they have come to be called), from an introduction to MPD by Stephen E. Buie, MD, who is director of the Dissociative Disorders Treatment Program at a North Carolina hospital:

*It may happen that an alter personality will reveal itself to you during this [assessment] process, but more likely it will not. So you may have to elicit an alter... You can begin by indirect [sic] questioning such as, "Have you ever felt like another part of you does things that you can't control?" If she gives positive or ambiguous responses, ask for specific examples. You are trying to develop a picture of what the alter personality is like... At this point you may ask the host personality, "Does this set of feelings have a name?"... Often the host*

*personality will not know. You can then focus upon a particular event or set of behaviours. "Can I talk to the part of you that is taking those long drives in the country?"*

Once patients have permitted a psychiatrist to "talk to the part...that is taking these long drives," they are committed to the idea that they have MPD and must act in ways consistent with this self-image. The patient may be placed on a hospital service (often called the dissociative service) with others who have given the same compliant responses. The emergence of the first alter breaches the barrier of reality, and fantasy is allowed free rein. The patient and staff now begin a search for further alters surrounding the so-called host personality. The original two or three personalities proliferate into 90 or 100. A lore evolves. At least one alter must be of the opposite sex (Patricia may have Penny but also must have Patrick). Sometimes it is even suggested that one alter is an animal. A dog, cat, or cow must be found and made to speak! Individual alters are followed in special notes for the hospital record. Every time an alter emerges, the hospital staff shows great interest.

The search for fresh symptoms sustains the original commitment while cultivating and embellishing the suggestion. It becomes harder and harder for a patient to say to the psychiatrist or to anyone else, "Oh, let's stop this. It's just me taking those long drives in the country."

The cause of MPD is supposed to be childhood sexual trauma so horrible that it has to be split off (dissociated) from

the host consciousness and lodged in the alters. Patient and therapist begin a search for alters who remember the trauma and can identify the abusers. Thus commitment to the diagnosis of MPD is enhanced by the sense that a crime is being exposed and justice is being done. The patient now has such a powerful vested interest in sustaining the MPD enterprise that it almost becomes an end in itself.

Certainly these patients, like Charcot's, have many emotional conflicts and have often suffered traumatic experiences. But everyone is distracted from the patient's main problems by a preoccupation with dramatic symptoms, and perhaps by a commitment to a single kind of psychological trauma. Furthermore, given that treatment may become interminable when therapists concentrate on fascinating symptoms, it is no wonder that MPD is regarded as a chronic disorder that often requires long stretches of time on dissociative units.

Charcot removed his patients from the special wards when he realised what he had been inventing. We can do the same. Close the dissociation services and disperse the patients to general psychiatric units. Ignore the alters. Stop talking to them, taking notes on them, and discussing them in staff conferences. Pay attention to real present problems and conflicts rather than fantasy. If these simple, familiar rules are followed, multiple personalities will soon wither away and psychotherapy can begin.

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# Dr Jekyll and Mrs McPherson

Carl Wyant

*Our intrepid correspondent finds himself suffering from that most fashionable of psychological afflictions, Multiple Personality Disorder!*

The Jekyll/Hyde character has been used to express duality in human nature for so long it's become a cliché. And like most clichés, it's true.

Everyone has at least one extra personality, and usually more. For example, I seem to be the field of activity for three distinct players — the amiable Dr Jekyll, the despicable Mr Hyde and, much to my consternation, Mrs McPherson, apparently a Scottish Presbyterian.

None of these characters have much in common. Jekyll doesn't like Hyde and views McPherson as an unimaginative busybody. Hyde hates everyone's guts and thinks Jekyll and McPherson should be dumped in the knacker's yard. Mrs McPherson considers Jekyll an impractical dreamer and vociferously wants Hyde consigned to the pits of hell.

Actually, I'm thankful for Mrs McPherson. She's the only one with the gumption to deal with Hyde. Jekyll is too warm and caring and holistic to wrestle with a degenerate bastard like Hyde. But no one argues with Mrs McPherson.

For the most part this unlikely crew bubbles along in inexplicable harmony, doing good and bringing happiness upon the land. But every so often a defection occurs and one or another goes ape.

It doesn't much matter if Jekyll gets loose. I mean, what harm can he do? Bore someone to death by telling them to be here now? Scare a neighbour

with a bean salad? I like Jekyll, but let's face it — he's a wuss.

It's more nerve-wracking when Mrs McPherson gets out. Mrs McPherson does not tolerate horseplay! Hard work, prudence and the fear of God are her mottoes, and you can either like it or have it taken out of your hide with a hickory stick.

But woe upon us when Hyde escapes! You've heard the phrase, "...it's like the devil gets into him," well, that's Hyde. Hyde is the devil. The deceiver, the pillager, the glutton. When Hyde appears, disaster and degradation follow.

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**Hyde is the devil. The deceiver, the pillager, the glutton. When Hyde appears, disaster and degradation follow.**

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You can see why I'm thankful for Mrs McPherson. Jekyll doesn't have a hope in hell of quelling Hyde's insane rampages. He'd probably suggest breathing exercises or something. Leave it to Jekyll to try stopping Godzilla with a tennis racket.

These insurrections are usually short-lived, and balance and order are soon restored.

But supposing one of these characters got the upper hand, or broke off and declared himself independent. Holy mackerel! What if Mrs McPherson seized control!

Imagine being possessed by a Bible-belting, turn-of-the-century, galleon-shaped, prohi-

bitionist women's rights activist! The very thought makes me nervous.

Heck, if Hyde staged a coup, most likely I'd just end up dead or in jail. But if McPherson managed a takeover I'd have to do really weird things like dynamite disco joints and drive money-lenders out of the temple and stuff like that. It's too much to even think about! Thanks to Jekyll's goofball influence I just don't think I'm emotionally prepared for demolishing bar-rooms with axes and driving harlots into honest work.

But worse still, spirit mediums and New Age journalists would proclaim me a legitimate case of possession and write books about it and make me talk about sin and redemption and magnetic healing on talk-back radio.

It's like *Flash Gordon Versus the Psychic Vampires*, except worse. Flash's foes were little more than mind-draining bat people. Anyone could deal with that. But what in the name of all that is merciful do you do about Mrs McPherson?

The terrible thing is, I know she's in there. Waiting. Waiting to escape. Waiting to ban tobacco and catch kids chewing gum in class.

First she'll take my mind, then yours, then the country, the planet, the solar system, the...

Make no mistake; Mrs McPherson must be stopped.

Carl Wyant is not now, nor has he ever been, detained under the Mental Health Act.

# Family denies woman's abuse claims made on TV

The Dominion  
18/2/94

By ALAN SAMSON

THE family of a woman who made claims on television about satanic and other abuse at their hands yesterday denied her every allegation and upbranded TV3 for putting them in the spotlight.

Though the woman had changed her name — to Eunice Fairchild — her face and voice were unmasked and she spoke freely of abuse she said occurred in the small North Island towns of Te Aroha and Waiapu in the 1940s and 1950s.

Yesterday her brother, John Saunders, calling all the allegations pure fantasy, said he was seeking advice about what action could be taken against the station.

Among a bizarre set of claims on the *Inside New Zealand* documentary, *Satanic Memories*, the woman and her two sons described memories of torture, group sex, animal torture and infanticide.

The woman said she had had many babies killed in satanic rituals. Her sons gave equally extraordinary accounts, including one of forced fellatio by their mother.

Among an array of people interviewed, Ritual Action Group worker Jocelyn Frances, also known as O'Kane, said ritual abuse occurred everywhere in New Zealand — except in the West Coast of the South Island, but it happening there too was only a matter of time.

Mr Saunders said his sister's account was the product of a disturbed mind. Their bank manager father had died of cancer in 1989 and their mother was suffering so severely from Alzheimer's disease that she could not read, speak, watch television, walk or communicate at all.

He described to *The Dominion* a "normal upbringing, growing up happily together" in Te Aroha.

But he said his sister had suffered from depression from her early 20s and had become involved with a fundamental church. In 1992 she had had a traumatic separation from her husband.

During her troubles, the brother said he had helped her with finding

accommodation and in getting counselling; it was after counselling she had discovered she had been sexually abused. His sister had become "totally obsessed" with the subject, researching it and exaggerating her original claims to include reference to a satanic cult, which included the local minister and family doctor. She said she had been raped by both of them.

"Te Aroha was, and still is, a little country town," the brother said. "If there had been any such cult operating, everyone would have known about it."

The difficulty was, apart from himself, all the alleged perpetrators of abuse were either dead or incapable of defending themselves.

He also said Ms Fairchild had taken her claims to newspapers and magazines, as well as police and the Social Welfare Department.

At one stage, Social Welfare had called his daughter and her five-year-old son into the local welfare office, telling them of the dangers of being abused by him.

"Maybe I should be angry but my whole reaction is open-mouthed amazement."

Skeptics spokesman Dennis Dutton yesterday called the documentary "the most disreputable bit of television I've ever seen".

TV3's head of production, Geoff Steven, yesterday defended the programme, saying it was "not current affairs but one woman's story".

Nor was it intended to comprise an investigation; if parts of it didn't hang true, people could make up their own minds.

John O'Leary, the head of producers Word Pictures, also insisted the intention had only been to present one person's story within a limited time frame. "We very specifically avoided saying whether we agreed or disagreed with her."

Asked about the effect of such accusations on accused people, he said: "I can't comment on that."

# Loch Ness monster photograph 'a hoax'

1974  
MARCH

LONDON — A famous photograph purporting to show the mythical Loch Ness monster was a hoax, the "Sunday Telegraph" reported.

It said the 1934 picture, which shows the long neck and head of the fabled beast rising from the murky lake in Scotland, was staged using a toy submarine.

The newspaper said the last of several men involved in creating the fake monster, Mr Christian Spurling, confessed his role just before dying last November.

Reports of a sea monster in Loch Ness date back to the third century, but feverish speculation about its possible existence broke out when the photograph was published in a London newspaper in 1934.

Experts have examined the fuzzy black-and-white plate photograph and said that it could be a plesiosaur (an extinct dinosaur), a tree trunk, or an otter.

The photograph was reported to have been taken by a doctor, Colonel Robert Wilson. But the newspaper said it was fabricated by Mr Marmaduke Wetherell, a film-maker and self-styled "big-game hunter" who had been hired by the "Daily Mail" newspaper to find the monster.

The "Sunday Telegraph" credits Mr David Martin, a former zoologist with the Loch Ness and Morar scientific project, and fellow researcher Mr Alastair Boyd with digging up the story.

Mr Spurling was Mr Wetherell's stepson and he told the pair of his role in the 60-year-old deception, the newspaper said.

"All I got was a message from Wetherell saying: can you make me a monster?" Mr Spurling was quoted as saying. "I just sat down and made it. It was modelled on the idea of a sea serpent."

He used a 35cm toy submarine and used plastic wood to build the long neck and small head.

"In a quiet day the monster was floated out into the shallows," the newspaper said. Wetherell's son, Ian, took the photographs.

A friend recommended Colonel Wilson as front-man. The newspaper said the men were overwhelmed by the fuss their trick aroused and were afraid to confess.

Meanwhile, Mr Adrian Shine, of the Loch Ness Project, said the search for Nessie would continue. —Reuters

In early March the young man who had made the accusations against Cardinal Berardin withdrew all the charges, admitting that he may not have remembered correctly

# Pursued by the Puritan f

EACH American generation Eeruns the witches of Salem in modern dress. Whether as Prohibition or McCarthyism, or the still-blossoming cult of "sexual harassment", the ghost of some lost Puritan cohesion seizes the nation and sends it a little mad.

Americans hate Europeans treating these ghosts as a norm. But how to react when false memory syndrome is the cover story on both *Time* and *US News & World Report*, and when the press is daily filled with cases to make any European liberal's hair stand on end?

*US News* published an eight-page investigation of the kind normally reserved for war or serial killing. It concerned a 38-year-old ethics professor with midlife marriage woes who had "something like a dream".

He related how he suddenly "recalled" being indecently fondled by a member of staff at a San Francisco choir camp 25 years ago. He duly traced other boys at the camp with similar "recollections" and finally pursued the hapless 55-year-old, now a minister, to a small town in Oregon.

After demanding that the latter now "register as a sex offender", the professor sued the choir that had run the camp for \$450,000.

Not to be outdone, *Time* magazine had more of the same. In its case, a 39-year-old woman was induced under therapy to believe she had suffered incest by her father during childhood. She was told to confront him, sever

False memory syndrome is a plague that is demeaning psychotherapy in the United States, writes Simon Jenkins

all links with her family, and form an "incest survivors' group".

This she did. She also took a college course in psychology. She then changed her mind, asked her father to forgive her and sued her therapist.

These are not isolated cases. Since the publication of books on the subject, 200,000 cases of false memory abuse have been documented in a year.

Therapy is largely unregulated and, as one lawyer remarked, a cunning therapist can turn a \$2000 eating-disorder patient into a \$200,000 multiple-personality-disorder one. Small wonder *Time* quoted the chairman of the psychiatry department at Johns Hopkins University that such cases are "the biggest story in psychiatry in a decade... a disaster for orthodox psychotherapists".

Most cases of the syndrome are of women, who possess at present an astonishing legal potency in the United States. Terrified state supreme courts are falling over themselves to abolish statutes of limitation on long-forgotten child-abuse accusations. Courts and juries seem to demand no corroborative evidence for a conviction, merely a graphic recollection. No sexual act need be involved. Many accusations include tales of satanic ritu-

als, as in Britain's notorious Orkney case. Teachers, priests, foster parents, anybody who has ever supervised children, live in terror of some fickle finger turning on them.

The Catholic Church has proved most immediately vulnerable. It admits that it has paid out half-a-billion dollars in "compensation" rather than face more than 500 priests being brought before a court.

CHICAGO'S Cardinal Joseph Bernardin is having to fend off a US\$10 million suit from a 34-year-old former seminarian for reducing him to "sexual compulsion" as a teenager, as a result of which he later caught Aids. The cardinal fiercely denies the charge. Medical negligence, also much abused by litigation, is firm ground compared with this morass.

What on earth can a sensible person make of all this? At one level, the cases are no more than a new version of the "fourth American freedom", freedom from unhappiness, enforceable at law. The much-vaunted American hatred of lawyers is really a form of love.

Those down on their luck might once have turned to family, church or glum resignation. They now turn to a thousand therapies, and if not completely

satisfied, they sue. The lawyer is thus the backstop, the vehicle of blame, retribution and revenge, the friend in the lonely crowd. And the American court system, like the Ritz hotel, is happily open to all.

At one level this is an extreme form of the shift from individual to group rights seen in some British universities and local councils in the 1970s and 1980s.

It was in part a response to genuine discrimination against certain minorities. In part, it re-

flected a truth known to syndicates down the ages, that power can be pursued more effectively as a group. Trade unions are not dead, merely reborn as interest groups with legal advisers. If the outcome is to treat merit as evil or free speech as gender fascism or civil rights as cultural dominance, then too bad.

Each time I visit the United States these days, I look in vain for the checks and balances that ended, for instance, Prohibition and McCarthyism. The Supreme Court recently ruled that, just as "recalled abuse" needs no evidence of assault to be actionable, so "sexual harassment" now covers not just offensive language but a "sexually hostile environment". No intent to harass and no harm need be proved. Cases registered by the Equal Opportunities Commission have duly

The Dominion 11  
soared 30 per cent in the months.

A worker who sent of the Folies Bergere was sacked on the company female postroom work now-celebrated Antioch with its "Womyn of code, students must obcit consent to any con the opposite sex on per "sexual offence advocate

The result is a terror institutions into protectionism. "Diversity polic

The lawyer is the backstop, the vehicle of blame and revenge, the friend in the lonely crowd

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Some Americans distr incidents as marginal. T

As a comment on the accuracy of psychic predictions, we present a story saved from the Press, December 30, 1992

## Soothsayer brings bad news for E

PA Wellington The brief return to Wellington on holiday of one of New Zealand's grand old clairvoyants should send shivers down the spine of the Prime Minister, Mr Bolger.

"National's definitely out in November," Sydney-based Johnny Sheridan, aged 69, the soothsayer who for 31 years toured the country with the Mahon Carnivals and the old Barry Langden shows, told the "Dominion" yesterday.

And if that seems an easy pre-

diction, how about this: "Labour's not going to win; no, I can't see it. There's a third party..."

A fourth party will also figure, gaining at least some seats.

Sheridan, a feature of many of the country's A & P shows, tells the tale of how as an eight-year-old he woke up screaming before the 1931 Napier earthquake.

He concedes hindsight, of course, but he remembers calling out: frantically, "The cliffs and buildings are falling."

Also with the benefit of hindsight, he is able to say he pre-

dicted the Mount Erebus crash (on his advice a group of publicans changed the date of their trip to the Ice), the Wahine disaster, and the sinking of the Mikhail Lermontov.

He also, he says, predicted the recent Sydney hotel fire.

But what about the future? Mr Bolger and the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Paul Keating, are going to have a "ding-dong battle" over New Zealand dumping cheap produce in Australia.

Unemployment will become an even greater issue in Australia,

and Mr Keating will be replaced by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr John Hewson.

Also, Australia will introduce a goods and services tax.

There will be a strong earthquake, probably felt most in the Wairarapa, between now and April. The next winter will be a lot less harsh than the last.

Abruptly grabbing the reporter's hand, he predicted rapid-fire a change of address, travel, more children, and a new car. Also a renewed love-life, with someone with brown hair, hazel

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ging optimist. Arthur Schlesinger says in *The Disuniting of America* that the pendulum of intolerance always swings to extremes. Already the false-memory therapists, like the scientologists and pentecostalists, are finding the biter can be bit. A handful of negligence suits against therapists from patients who found that love rather than the law was the best route to happiness has stopped some therapy abuse in its tracks. These as yet are small straws in the wind.

What is extraordinary is that the professions do so little by self-regulation to protect their reputations. The result is not by litigation. Professionals are unable to admit fault. Negligence insurance invites huge suits, and thus huge fees. The trust that used to underpin dealings between professional and client, including the acknowledgment of error, is destroyed.

I suppose what has really gone, and I doubt if this is recoverable, is the idea that life can be cruel without there being anybody to blame. America is not unique in this respect. There are no longer acts of God. From physical harm to emotional upset, humans demand the right of redress. Apology is no good. Accidents are no longer to be taken in one's stride. The hypersensitive people involved in so many of these cases are unable to take a deep breath and attack life afresh. Misery is an un-American activity. It is unconstitutional.

George Orwell would have smiled. But then, Orwell was a gloomy old pessimist. I guess it will all pass. — *The Times*

## Policeman says abuse doubt cost him job

A Christchurch police officer yesterday said his scepticism about the credibility of a 14-year-old abuse complainant was a major factor in his removal from the city's child abuse unit.

Sergeant Anthony Greig made the comments under cross-examination during a depositions hearing in the Christchurch District Court into charges of incest and rape against the girl's father. The charges were dismissed after Judge Andersen found the girl's evidence so inconsistent and unreliable as to make her no longer credible.

Mr Greig said his inclination when he first interviewed the girl was not to believe her. When he

conveyed those doubts to a specialist interviewer at the Department of Social Welfare, he received an angry reaction.

Ms Cathy Crawford had told him he was jeopardising the whole relationship between the police and the specialist unit, and her attitude was that a child always had to be believed. She told him not to express doubts to the specialist unit, and later complained to his supervisor.

After further information was obtained he expressed his doubts about the case to the child abuse unit. His views had had an "overwhelming involvement" in his no longer being in the unit, he said.

The Children and Young Persons Service's executive manager (southern region), Mr John Wallis, said yesterday that the service would study the court transcript before considering a response.

The child abuse unit's head, Detective Sergeant Jan Edge, said comment would be inappropriate.

Investigations into child sexual abuse are done jointly by police and service staff.

Court report, page 16

## Father discharged after judge faults girl's case

A 49-year-old man was yesterday discharged on charges of serious sexual abuse against his daughter after a District Court judge found the complainant unreliable.

The man, whose name was suppressed, faced charges of incest, assault, injuring with intent, rape, sexual violation by unlawful connection and indecent assault. The charges resulted from allegations made by his 14-year-old daughter when she was interviewed by police in October last year.

The daughter alleged her father began having sexual relations with her after she moved into her own room at the age of nine. The abuse had continued for the next five years, she alleged.

After police had presented the evidence against the man at yesterday's depositions hearing Judge Andersen ruled the likelihood of a jury finding the man guilty so slight he should not be

put on trial. The judge said several matters made him uneasy. There were serious inconsistencies between the girl's first and second interviews with Department of Social Welfare and she had made no allegations against her father until late 1993. She had first accused her sisters of abuse. Other exhibits showed clear inconsistencies with her testimony and her "imagination and stories" were matters of grave concern.

The court heard that in addition to the allegations made about her father the girl had at various times in conversations, letters, and diary items claimed: she had been attacked on at least 12 different occasions by males; she had been blackmailed by males into leaving her bedroom and having sex with them; she had run away from home and been found in a North Canterbury town where the policeman had had sexual intercourse with her; she had been sexually abused by

her two sisters; she had fallen pregnant and had a miscarriage; she had nearly blacked out in the shower and a girl baby "had come out".

Other evidence showed the girl was having a sexual relationship with a 27-year-old man when the allegations were made. Detective Sergeant Anthony Greig said the man initially denied the relationship, but later admitted it.

The defendant's wife had told him the girl was making the allegations up so she could leave home and "be with the man". A doctor had said her vaginal condition was consistent with penetration before she reached puberty. No evidence of a pregnancy was found.

Judge Anderson said the girl's evidence was "so slight, so inconsistent" that the court was entitled to rule out her creditworthiness despite not hearing from the defendant.

## olger

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# Hokum Locum

Dr John Welch

## Arthritis and Placebos

In *Skeptic* 30, John Britten outlined the tragic results which can occur when patients fall into the clutches of quacks. In this case, a man with rheumatoid arthritis was not only starved but ended up paying for expensive and useless medications. Most doctors can relate similar examples.

Uncontrolled trials claimed to show dramatic improvements in rheumatoid arthritis patients following laser treatment. However, a placebo-controlled trial showed that sham treatment (placebo) gave just as good results as the laser. (*BMJ* Vol 307 30 Oct 1993 p1154)

A placebo-controlled trial of diclofenac (an anti-inflammatory drug) for osteoarthritis of the knee, found that half of the patients allocated to placebo stayed on this treatment for two years without any worsening of their symptoms! (*BMJ* Vol 307 Aug 1993 p394)

Reports of pain relief from subcutaneous injections of water drew a sharp reply from Skrabanek writing in the *Lancet* (April 3 p905). He pointed out that a historical perspective of such "counter-irritation" methods can help prevent over-enthusiastic adoption of such unlikely treatments. In fact, I seem to remember that water injections were one of the scams exposed in the novel by A.J. Cronin, *The Citadel*, which should be required reading for any doctor of medicine.

## Gulf Gas Mystery

An article in *Time* magazine (Nov 22 1993) outlines how 8,000 veterans of the Gulf War

have claimed that they were exposed to chemical agents producing such symptoms as diarrhoea, aching joints and difficulty in breathing. It is alleged that "multiple chemical sensitivity" may be the cause but nowhere is there any mention of psychological causes such as stress. Many of the claimants have been dismissed as malingerers.

War is hell and it is a terrible experience for some soldiers. Stress-related disorders are common and resulted in shell shock and effort syndrome in WW1, anxiety neurosis after WW2 and alleged Agent Orange poisoning after the Vietnam war. History shows that such claims will continue to occur, as in this case, but I would prefer to see psychological causes included in the differential diagnosis.

## Sick Building Syndrome (SBS)

Researchers have finally got around to acknowledging that SBS may be due to "a high level of job stress among individuals with symptoms" (*GP Weekly* 19 Jan 1994 p15). As would be expected there are now concerns about "sick plane syndrome" (SPS) reported in *New Scientist* (7 Aug 93 p7). Several cabin attendants reported difficulty breathing, dizziness, fatigue, nausea and headaches during a cross-country flight. "The cause was never determined."

I wonder if they considered mass hysteria, which is the most likely scenario for both SBS and SPS. Hysteria is not the best word to use — perhaps mass conversion disorder is less

pejorative. Essentially, groups of people under stress tend to develop similar symptoms in the face of a common stress. A good example which I have seen myself is mass fainting occurring in military recruits awaiting both blood tests and vaccinations.

## Child Abuse

Christian "Scientists" believe that illnesses can be healed with prayer and Bible readings. The religion's founder, Mary Baker Eddy, was described by Mark Twain as the "queen of hypocrites." There are numerous examples of people who have died from lethal but eminently treatable conditions. I have no problem with deluded adults who want to be treated in this way but children are entitled to a standard of medical care expected by any reasonable parent.

As would be expected from common sense, there is no evidence that faith has ever produced a cure of any illness. Is it at all likely that faith can produce insulin secretion from a failed diabetic pancreas? In the US, a couple killed their diabetic son by withholding treatment for his diabetes (*Lancet* Vol 342 Sep 4 1993 p610). Incredibly, the parents were not criminally prosecuted because of "a state law that protects from child neglect statutes, parents who rely on prayer to heal their children." However, the child's estranged parent filed a civil suit and the Christian Science church has been ordered to pay US\$11.3 million in damages.

The law in the UK seems more rational. A Rastafarian couple refused on religious grounds to allow their diabetic daughter to have insulin and she duly died. As any reasonable person would expect, the parents were charged with manslaughter and convicted (*Lancet* Vol 342 Nov 13 1993 p1189).

### More on Dental Amalgam

As I have previously explained, there is no evidence to implicate mercury in amalgam with significant human illness. An article in the *Marlborough Express* (24/8/93) outlined an illness which caused weight loss, stomach cramps and nausea in a 34-year-old man. After paying more than \$2,000 in medical bills he was no better. As a doctor I know straight away that there is only a slight chance of a significant organic illness (e.g., cancer) either occurring or being overlooked in a 34-year-old.

I have seen this combination of symptoms before in many patients and they all turned out to have depression and were cured with appropriate treatment. However, as I have mentioned many times, psychological causes for illness are seen as somehow inferior to a "physical" cause. To quote the patient: "I was getting worried that it was something psychological. The medical profession was giving me ideas that it was depression, stress, bodily changes."

In this case, the patient received a diagnosis of "mercury poisoning" following an assessment with a quack "black box" involving electroacupuncture. He then paid \$1,000 to have all his amalgam fillings replaced and is reported to be slowly improving. Truly another remark-

able example of the placebo effect which is very powerful with any kind of surgical or operative treatment.

### Conversion Disorders

These are symptoms or signs produced by notional beliefs (e.g., mass fainting due to a perceived chemical or environmental threat), and are the basis of occupational overuse syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, sick building syndrome etc.

"Retractor" is an expatriate Kiwi living in Australia who wrote an interesting article on allergy to local anaesthetic (LA) (*NZ Doctor* 16 Sep 1993 p7). He found that patients demonstrated their "allergic" reactions even when injected with normal saline solution.

One 12-year-old had fits after dentally administered LA and was investigated with two electroencephalograms (brain-wave recordings), a CT scan and a MRI scan. Following an injection of normal saline (which the patient believed was LA) he had a fit and was incontinent!

"Retractor" was mostly successful in helping patients deal with their subsequent embarrassment but some had trouble and went so far as to dispute the matter. Descartes was certainly completely wrong when he proposed his theory of complete separation between mind and body. Clearly the mind (belief) can have a potent effect on the body.

### Pond Scum Scam?

Pro-algal quacks claim that algae harvested from a pond "may be beneficial" for the treatment of AIDS, cancer, heart disease, etc. The product has re-surfaced since the FDA

shut down the marketing company, Cell Tech, in 1986.

Note the absurd range of indications of the product, in contrast to the specific use of drugs for particular diseases.

The FDA faces an uphill battle in countering this sort of quackery, as the law is vague on whether such items should be classified as drugs, foods or dietary supplements. A sensible law was passed by Congress in 1990 which prohibited any health claims about such products unless approved by the FDA. The powerful quack lobby has managed to introduce another law which dilutes scientific standards and shifts the burden of proving safety onto the FDA!

### C is for Cancer

Linus Pauling's faith in Vitamin C is undaunted by his cancer (*NCAHF* Vol 15, No4). Despite it being out of his field (nuclear physics), Pauling has championed the anti-cancer benefits of Vitamin C. Sadly, he has been diagnosed as having prostate cancer but, despite being poorly, his faith in Vitamin C is unshaken. "He credits his high-C regimen with delaying the disease until his present age of 91 yrs." The physiology of Vitamin C is well described, and excessive amounts are simply excreted in the urine. Prostatic cancer occurs more often with increasing age and if men live long enough there is an almost 100% incidence.

Pauling has helped keep Vitamin C as the number two on the list of the top dietary supplements in the US. Dietary supplements are worth \$1.4 billion US annually and are currently 37% of all health food sales.



## Oil Strikes Out

The film *Lorenzo's Oil* concerns the efforts of a family to save their son from a rare genetic disorder using a highly purified cooking oil of the same name. Thanks to the media there is now a new popular mythology that the oil is effective and that attempts to use it have been obstructed by the unreasonable medical profession.

A French team of scientists have tested the oil and found no evidence of any clinical benefit. Once again, extravagant claims are found wanting when subjected to critical scrutiny.

## If You Can't Beat 'em?

Bernard Howard first drew my attention to worrying trends towards the inclusion of unorthodox therapies into conventional medical practice.

The BMA has acknowledged that acupuncture, osteopathy, homeopathy etc. are "indeed a good thing" provided the practitioners are "properly qualified members of their crafts." In an article in *New Scientist* (31 July 1993), Donald Gould comments on this

Pauline conversion and accuses the medical profession of a change prompted by concern over the loss of patients to alternative medicine. A "properly qualified homeopath" is still a quack peddling water, and professional registers simply give quackery a spurious respectability.

The NCAHF has already shown how licencing of quackery is soon followed by that body actively lobbying for an expanded scope of practice. In New Mexico, the state Acupuncture Board allows acupuncturists to order tests and procedures such as MRI scans, writing prescriptions and performing bone and muscle manipulations. Chiropractors were predictably indignant and two doctors on the Board resigned in protest. (*NCAHF* Vol 16, No 5).

I briefly commented on this trend in *Skeptic* 30 ("Quackery in the US"). The Office of Alternative Medicine has been set up within the US National Institutes of Health at the instigation of a former congressman, Bedell, who claims to have been

cured of a "possible recurrence" of prostate cancer by an unconventional "nitrogen enhancement" therapy (unspecified). What Bedell does not say is that he was also receiving conventional treatment for prostatic carcinoma and "possible recurrence" is an example of the meaningless terms and vague language that permeates alternative medicine.

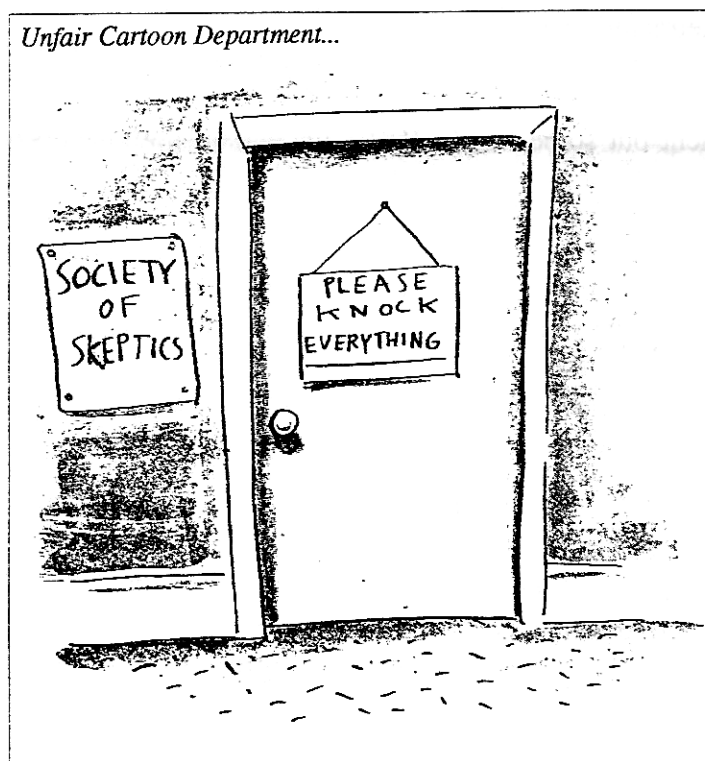
The director of the Office holds establishment credentials and describes himself as a skeptic, yet favours simple outcome studies rather than the proven double-blind, placebo-controlled trial. Outcome studies are weak and will allow for all sorts of extravagant claims. The reason that quacks hate proper clinical trials is that they usually show that quack beliefs are a delusion.

Members of the Office of Alternative Medicine can use their affiliation to advertise their quackery because, as an ad hoc body, they are not subject to normal regulations. One of the members has already claimed to have cured AIDS using herbs. No evidence was offered to support such an extravagant claim.

In New Zealand the ACC will pay for acupuncture, which is an unproven treatment, on the referral of a doctor. I had a patient with a severe neck injury which required (on the advice of a specialist neurosurgeon) an MRI scan but ACC does not pay for this test because it is "not an approved investigation"! This is a good example of politics controlling medicine, instead of science.

Dr John Welch is a medical officer at RNZAF Woodbourne.

Unfair Cartoon Department...



# Book Review

*The Facts of Life: Shattering the Myths of Darwinism*, by Richard Milton; Transworld Publishers; \$15.95

*Reviewed by Peter Lange*

Richard Milton has written this book as a “hang on a minute” reservation about Darwinism and its apparent unquestioned acceptance by mainstream science from geology through to biology (and in one chapter political science) in the manner of the small boy who questioned the reality of the Emperor’s new clothes — “Look Mummy, all those university professors, all those Nobel Prize winners, have got no actual proof to cover their hypotheses with.”

To this reader, familiar with these matters only to the level of a wobbly School Cert. result, the book provides persuasive arguments against the theory of Darwinism, believing it to have evolved itself as a theory that succeeding scientists have simply forgotten to question, claiming serious flaws concerning the critical “missing links,” [see following page] and detailing circular arguments and apparently illogical aspects, to the point where he refers to the theory as much an act of faith as that of any religion.

He claims he is not a creationist but rather an agnostic waiting for proof either way, and he has no idea how it all happened. On the other hand, having questioned the credibility of most of the current scientific community, he goes on to hint at the age of the Earth being possibly no more than 10,000 years instead of the generally accepted 4.6 billion years

(a conclusion taken in part from his claim of absolute unreliability of carbon-dating techniques) and also drops in the occasional mention of a life force that could stir up biology in the way that quantum theories have derailed 19th century mechanistic physics, and which sounds vaguely theological.

“Biological telepathy,” “metaphysical psychic blueprints” and an “intelligent cosmos” get a mention towards the end of the book and detract from the generally non-paranormal emphasis of the bulk of his ideas.

I enjoyed at least his link between Darwinism and the New Right references to “winners and losers (Darwin’s struggle for survival),” the cruel, stark grandeur of the free-market policies, natural economic selection, and the assumption by many in the business community that for some to succeed, others must go under. “The fit survive and those who survive are the fit.”

But what about luck, chaos, chance — why do share prices go up and down unpredictably even for the bluest chip? Why are some of the companies that survive well ultimately found to be not too fit at all? Milton asks these questions to counter the flawed theories of the New Right, the political version of Darwinism.

From time to time he targets a neo-Darwinist, Richard Dawkins, a reader in zoology at the University of Oxford, implying that his research is misguided and his conclusions faulty. Dawkins in his review of this book in the *New Statesman and Society* retaliates bluntly,

both about its contents (“drivel,” “twaddle”) and about its author (“disingenuous or — more plausibly — stupid”) but in between these colourful outbursts refutes with some authority the arguments put forward. It was with some relief that I was reassured that rather than evolution being noted more for its gaps (“missing links”) than for its slender fossilised evidence, Dawkins is quite clear that the “fossil links between humans and our ape ancestors now constitute an elegantly continuous series.”

Phew! Books like this are trouble to an armchair scientist and skeptic. It is written well enough, suitably dry in places and avoids unseemly popular language, and you find yourself thinking, “Maybe the Earth really is only 10,000 years old, maybe there was a great flood (it occurs to me that anyone who assumes the Bible to be literally true will believe they are descended from not only Adam and Eve but also from Mr and Mrs Noah), perhaps the original life force did come from outer space, and why should the Himalayas not be formed in a matter of minutes and within living memory.”

All of these claims and many more are put forward either as original theories or borrowed freely from other scientists — none is researched to the point of adequate proof, they simply add up to another theory.

Perhaps the little boy who embarrassed the Emperor hasn’t realised that his Mum has forgotten to put his own trousers on.

Peter Lange is an Auckland potter and skeptic.

## Finding Fossils

*Peter Lange mentions in his review a common creationist claim — the lack of intermediate fossil forms. Someone whose name I've lost, recently wrote the following on sci.skeptic about the subject:*

We have fossil records of transitional forms out the wazoo [i.e., there are lots of them - translator]. The reason that this fact hardly causes a creationist neuron to fire is that they play a little game with an unfalsifiability engine, sometimes called Gish's Law.

It goes a little bit like this:

E: A evolved into B.

C: Hah! There is no transitional form between A and B.

E: Sure there is. It's called A1.

C: Hah! There is no transitional form between A and A1.

E: Sure there is. It's called A1a.

C: Hah! There is no transitional form between A and A1a.

...

and so on. There are three termination conditions to this game:

1) The subdivision goes on to the point where, by random chance, there is no corresponding form in the fossil record. The creationist wins.

2) The subdivision goes on to the point where the two forms being compared are close enough for the creationist to decide that they are the same "kind." The creationist wins.

3) The evolutionist decides that the creationist is an insufferable blithering idiot and gives up. The creationist wins.

*Phil Anderson*

## Clock Watching

*The following message from James Randi was posted to the Usenet newsgroup sci.skeptic on February 4th by Jim Kutz.*

A few years back, Philadelphia "psychic" Judith Richardson Haimes was awarded US\$1.6 million by a less-than-bright jury when she claimed she'd lost her powers from poor medical treatment. The attorney for the defendant hospital was instructed by the amazed judge to appeal that verdict, and Haimes summoned up all her psychic powers to predict to the press that the appeal would lose. The appeal was successful. Exit Haimes.

I recall that "psychic" Uri Geller said, on a live CBS-TV show a couple of years ago, that his psychic powers enabled him to predict that he'd win the case against me. So far, that prediction looks as if it might not be fulfilled, with \$200,000+ in sanctions presently against Mr Geller... But these powers work in strange ways, we're told. Take the example of Big Ben.

Yes, that's the actual name of the famous London clock, though originally it was the name of the bell that was to have struck the hour. That bell broke and was re-cast. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* says that the clock itself is now properly named Big Ben, so I'll go along with that. The clock is stopped regularly twice a year for maintenance, and it has stopped periodically over the years from simple mechanical defects.

Enter Uri Geller. On November 2nd of 1986, he announced that he would stop the mighty clock by his psychic powers. It ticked (boomed?) on and the public yawned; seems Mr Geller had failed to announce just when the miracle would take place. A couple of years later, it stopped, and Mr Geller claimed credit for the event. More yawns. Then on December 18th, 1989, he declared that he would be "laying off Big Ben" because he might have to pay the enormous repair bill if his powerful psychic energies twisted the innards.

Alas. Last week the clock stopped again, and Mr Geller said he did it. Will he get a bill from Westminster? Will anyone believe that he really did it. Answers: No and yes. You see, Mr Geller missed his big opportunity back in August of 1976, when the clock stopped and remained stopped for almost nine months. He doesn't seem to now have much luck with time-pieces; he lost the very large suit he had against the Timex watch company, and now he can't seem to time his Big Ben stoppings. Do you suppose that all those psychically-changed watches all over the world are putting out a general psi signal to get revenge?

Nahhhhhhh. The psychic superstar appeared by phone on the Ron-and-Ron radio show here in Florida a few days ago, and they bawled out their producer, on-air, for having put him on at all. They declared that he'd been ——— as a ——— "15 years ago" and they did not treat him at all nicely. (Vetting done to avoid legal problems, though that's what they actually did say.)

I'm indebted to my crack UK researchers, Lewis Jones and Michael Hutchinson, for their work on this item. Dependable chaps. And a smaller piece may follow this after I get further data. Stay tuned.

*James Randi.*

# What Does Quantum Mechanics Show Us?

Taner Edis

*Attempts to interpret the results of quantum mechanics in ways people can understand can themselves lead to confusion.*

Some physicists and philosophers conspire to waste intellectual resources on pseudo-problems with no empirical consequence — notoriously, quantum interpretations. In the process, it is perhaps not surprising that some more ancient conceptual cul-de-sacs put in an appearance.

Some of the words that get thrown around often are “determinism,” “causality,” “reality” and so forth. Some pictures, like Bohmian hidden variable interpretations, are best seen as attempts to preserve the viability of certain labels, though empirically the whole enterprise remains vacuous. However, since interpretations are useful only as conceptual tools if at all, certain conceptual perversities introduced can be grounds for criticism of an interpretation beyond its inconsequentiality.

Bohmian pictures typically preserve a classical-like sense of reality, universality of causation (there are no fundamentally uncaused events), and, provided standard quantum mechanics is retained, determinism. Note, however, that these terms refer to nothing of any possible empirical consequence, and are but descriptive of a particular language used to describe the physical content. The conceptual perversity enters in confusing idiosyncratic features of descriptive language with information content.

To illustrate, let us go back to some venerable theology (ac-

tually quite an apt comparison for some pathologies of theoretical physics). One of the classical “proofs” of God invokes the notion that everything must have a cause. This would appear to be a perfectly good generalization from our experience, and we would of course like to extend this to a universal statement instead of having unseemly exceptions to the picture. Even if all in the universe is in a causal chain, it as a whole cannot be explained by causes internal to it.

So, instead of leaving the totality of everything uncaused, we declare it to have an external cause, and equate this to God. To terminate the potentially infinite causal series there, we call on the total self-sufficiency or self-causedness of God. This is basically the classical cosmological argument. There are many reasons for its failure, one being that no coherent self-sufficient God-concept can be found.

## Is “God” Useful?

But let us ignore such problems for a second, and ask if any information is being conveyed by the God explanation for “it all.” The answer is none: the whole argument is driven by the principle that everything must have a cause, and “God” merely serves as an empty label to provide us with a cause, within this argument. Instead of inventing spurious entities to save principles, it is better to acknowledge the notion of un-

causedness. It is intimately related to patternlessness, i.e., randomness, and it is inescapable. The cosmological argument merely points to a deficiency in our conceptual equipment.

It is not only theology that ties itself into knots over causes, but philosophy as well. Interpretations of quantum mechanics that have no empirical consequence whatsoever, but restore the notion of full causality by invoking permanently hidden variables and non-communicative superluminality, similarly convey no information while preserving the universality of causation.

The necessity of causation is a conceptual deficit that has been embodied in theology, which has regularly offered pseudo-explanations for cases where no pattern existed. Randomness is one of our psychological blind spots, in areas having little to do with religion as well; even a so-called “hard” science has its troubles with it (not only in QM, but in statistical mechanics also).

It is in this sense that interpretations can be pernicious, beyond being a waste of time. Taking them seriously as anything but inessential conceptual tools dictated by convenience leads to the pretense that predictions of consequence can be obtained from them.

Consciousness or holistic connectivity can be invoked in consequence-free ways, but it is



regularly stretched to the point where one can pretend that empirically relevant forms of these words naturally have a place in the physics. They do not, unless some very important modifications are made in quantum mechanics. It will not do to propose revolutionary ideas merely by resorting to information-free, obfuscatory philosophizing.

In his *Minority Report* (1956), H.L. Mencken summed it up well:

"Astronomers and physicists, dealing habitually with objects and quantities far beyond the reach of the senses, even with the aid of the most powerful aids that ingenuity has been able to devise, tend almost inevitably to fall into the ways of thinking of men dealing with objects and quantities that do not exist at all, e.g., theologians and metaphysicians ... of all men of science, they are the most given to flirting with theology."

Taner Edis is a graduate student in physics at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, manager of the Skeptics e-mail discussion group and curmudgeon at a premature age.

### So They Say

It is a profound and necessary truth that the deep things in science are not found because they are useful; they are found because it was possible to find them.

R. Oppenheimer

A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything.

Nietzsche

## A Skeptic's Bibliography, Part III

John Thomas and James Rusk, North Texas Skeptics

*Continued from Skeptic 28. Prices are in US dollars.*

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# Forum

## Where Were the Hunters?

The account of the meeting between the Moa hunters and the Christchurch Skeptics was interesting, but contained some very odd statements. How many skeptics had done any hunting, I wonder? The account reads as though there were no experienced hunters present who could challenge some of the statements made. That is rather like examining key-benders without a magician present. However, the account, like many UFO sightings, contains several inconsistencies which are not obvious to the inexperienced.

I have shot many hundred deer, plus pigs, goats, chamois, wild cattle and sheep so I count as an experienced hunter.

While hunting, one sees difficult-to-identify objects all the time. It is very hard to spot animals unless they move, even when cover is light. Any bush, rock or shadow that is approximately the right colour needs to be scanned. Many a deer or pig turns out to be something inanimate when examined through binoculars or telescope. It will perhaps astound the inexperienced to be told that this applies even to objects which are very close.

Sometimes one could swear the thing moved.

One of the odd things about the story is that there is no mention of binoculars or telescope; were they not used?

"His rifle didn't even go near his shoulder." This implies no telescope and suggests he is not a very serious hunter. My rifle, on a hunting trip, would be constantly at my shoulder — not to

shoot but to carefully examine objects through the 'scope. It is essential not to shoot until one is certain of the identification.

"The beast was unmistakably not a deer." That is simply the voice of inexperience. If the party had no binoculars and no telescope then their story cannot be taken seriously however close the object was. Anyone with moderate experience in looking at wildlife should know that the human eye without the aid of magnification is incapable of such assessment.

To my horror, I once found I had shot a goat, not a deer. I had wrongly identified a very close goat with a distant deer in excellent light! The bullet had struck high of course. But I was certain of my target; I was just wrong. The diagnosis was simply that I needed to start wearing my glasses and have done so ever since.

In a long career of shooting there will inevitably be a number of targets which were allowed to escape because positive identification was impossi-

ble. I can think of several — I am still not sure what they were. But I never thought they were extinct birds. I suggest it takes a particular mindset to make such an identification.

If this is the first Unidentified Running Object the party had seen then they simply lack experience, however many years they claim.

*Jim Ring, Nelson*

## Missing Address

In the December *Skeptic* you have a note by B. Premanand asking New Zealand skeptics to help their Indian counterparts by subscribing to *Indian Skeptic*. However, he does not give an address. Do you have one?

*Gordon Hewitt*

*Apologies for omitting the address. It is:*

*B. Premanand  
Convenor, Indian CSICOP  
10 Chettipalayam Road  
Podanur 641-023  
Tamilnada  
India*

## NZCSICOP 9th Annual Conference

**Massey University, 19-21 August, 1994**

Please let us have your offer of a paper. We need a title and summary by April 18. If you cannot offer a paper, please tell us what you would like to hear about. Any suggestions for speakers?

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### **Changed Address?**

If you've shifted, if you've got a new Private Bag number, or if your organisation has just changed its name — you know who you are and where you are. **Let us know too!**

"This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit of our own behavior—we make guilty of our own disasters the sun, moon and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion..." Edmund, in *King Lear*.

### **New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (Inc.)**

*NZCSICOP is a network of New Zealanders—including scientists, educators, health professionals and many others—dedicated to increasing public awareness of the dangers and inanities of pseudoscience and bogus paranormal claims. Through meetings and its regular periodical, The New Zealand Skeptic, the group encourages informed, critical examination of the claims of fringe and quack medicine, astrology, so-called creation science, supposed extraterrestrial visitations, psychic phenomena, and associated "New Age" gullibility.*

*Annual membership is \$25; students and unwaged \$10. For further information, write to B.H. Howard, Secretary NZCSICOP, 150 Dyers Pass Road, Christchurch 2.*