

NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

AUTUMN 1998 — NUMBER 47

The Great Zeppelin Scare of 1909

Robert E. Bartholomew

Back in 1909, New Zealanders were seeing strange lights in the sky. But in those days no one believed in Unidentified Flying Objects...

THE YEAR 1909 was a tense time for New Zealanders. For centuries, Britain had the world's unrivalled navy, and an invasion of the motherland was unthinkable. Her colonies and outposts enjoyed similar protection. But all of that changed in 1908, and with an unnerving suddenness, as grave concerns were expressed in Great Britain over Germany's rising military strength which prompted fears a surprise invasion might be launched at any time.

Why the sudden concern? In the wake of rapid aeronautical advancements coupled with Germany's Zeppelin development, the British Empire appeared vulnerable to attack by the air. According to historian Alfred Gollin in his book *No Longer an Island: Britain and the Wright Brothers, 1902-1909* (1984,

London: Heinemann), "It was realized...that as soon as an efficient flying machine made its appearance, England lay open to an invasion from the air, that her traditional reliance upon the Navy and seapower was no longer so valid...(p. 2)"

Early in 1909, two subjects dominated New Zealand

newspapers: rapid aviation advancement and concern over the adequacy of the country's defence from a potential German invasion. Then by mid-year, dominion press discussion changed its focus away from the likelihood of Germany directly attacking the British Isles, to concern that they might instead attack the Empire's more vulnerable, remote outposts. This fostered great anxiety in distant New Zealand. Shortly thereafter, invasion fears intensified as the British announced a new policy to concentrate its naval fleet near the motherland.

It was amid this anxiety that during July and August of 1909, a remarkable social delusion swept

⇒ p3

CONTENTS

The Great Zeppelin Scare of 1909 .. Robert Bartholomew ..	1
Editorial	Annette Taylor2
Political Correctness at the Supermarket	
	Jay Mann6
Newsfront.....	10
Skepsis.....	Neil McKenzie.....13
Forum	15
Counselling, Criticism and Scepticism	
	Gordon Hewitt.....17
Beer and Skittles.....	John Riddell.....18

Keeping an Open Mind While Staying in a Hippy Hole

IT'S nothing short of a miracle that this issue has made it to the mailbox. For the last six months the family, including our cat and retired cattle dog, have been living in a small house-truck. (Just as well we farmed out the rabbits, mice and fish). The reason for our spartan existence is we are in the middle of building a rammed earth house. Not only do we fill buckets with the best of the builders, we, or should I say I, also feed them. (Nothing is too good for our boys.)

In the meantime, here we are, old hippy truck complete with magic mushroom wood-cuts on the side. People are always mistaking me for a New Ager, can't think why... We cook on two gas rings (feeding 10 hungry builders is a buzz), enjoy romantic candlelit dinners and have the best of outdoor plumbing — a longdrop and old bath, heated by wood cunningly laid underneath it. What more could a soul want?

Electricity would be good, as would be a filing cabinet, with an office in which to put it. How I miss the simple pleasures of high technological life. But the other evening, as we sat outside (the house-truck is too small to remain inside too long, not being a Tardis) we took particular delight in the evening sky, lit up, it seemed, for us alone.

Gary, a friend who is helping us with our earth moving project, sipped his coffee and proceeded to tell us about the three or four times he's seen UFOs flitting about of a night. (Having just made our acquaintance, he was not aware of our position on these matters and certainly didn't expect the Spanish Inquisition, but then who does? Actually, we were gentle with him, plenty of time to reel him in later.) It was the standard fare — bright lights in the sky, moving fast and performing natty tricks at the same time.

Having read Robert Bartholomew's excellent article, "The New Zealand Zeppelin Scare of 1909", [see p 1] I could have referred to the autokinetic effect, an illusion discovered way back when UFOs were not trendy. Simply, in a dark environment (being outside at night qualifies) a single point of light can appear to move about, when in fact it's nailed to its perch, as it were. There are also issues of cultural and personal expectation to take into account as well.

I experienced this effect myself years ago, when for some reason I was staring at a blob of paint on a wall with my brother, who agreed with me that the blob was moving. With the

same brother, on a night-time trip from Auckland to Gisborne, we stopped and watched a UFO doing loop-the-loops before zapping off to battle some Klingons. My brother being 10 years older than myself, and therefore one would expect, the wiser, was utterly convinced it was an alien spacecraft. But then he was smoking a lot of hooch back then; this was before he became a lawyer.

Not being unkind, what we have here is good, old-fashioned, lazy thinking. It's a case of grabbing the first, wobbly, seriously dodgy explanation one can cobble ("a ghost must have made me drop it") and running with it. People do this so often, and convince themselves so thoroughly, that it can be quite frustrating to the earnest skeptic. Gary had done this, my brother excelled at it and countless others as well. It hurts to use your brain. It's tedious to search for alternative, more plausible answers.

In the meantime, we're still in our little house-truck and trying to maintain a totally open mind about when our house is to be ready. Who knows, we might have a filing cabinet and flushing toilet by the winter solstice. And manage to get out another issue of the *Skeptic*.



Contributions

Contributions, whether written articles or newspaper clippings, should be directed to:

Annette Taylor
122 Woodlands Rd
RD1, Hamilton
Email: number8@ihug.co.nz

Preference will be given to copy supplied by email or sent on an IBM-compatible disc in ASCII text, Word or WordPerfect formats. Discs will be returned if clearly labelled.

Please indicate the source publication and date of any clippings.

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

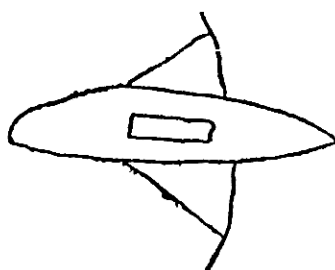
⇒p1 across the entire country. Tens of thousands of citizens were not only convinced that a hostile German Zeppelin or Zeppelins were spying and possibly ready to drop bombs under the cover of darkness, but many were certain that they had actually seen the vessel. While this may seem like an inflated figure (tens of thousands), in many instances the population of entire towns were reported to have filled the streets to glimpse mysterious aerial lights, typically assumed to have been of German origin.

The Sightings

The episode began on the evening of July 11th in the South Island, when according to the *Otago Daily Times*, several Kaitangata residents reported observing the mysterious light of a possible airship for 30 minutes as it bobbed in and out of view to the east over the Wangaloa Hills. The witnesses were prepared to sign an affidavit as to their veracity. The *Evening Star* reported that the German vessel *Seestern*, which had recently left Australia bound for New Zealand, had launched the Zeppelin from its deck to spy on the countryside and then return to the ship.

By the last week in July, a massive outbreak of sightings occurred from one end of the country to the other. There were so many that I will highlight some of the more colourful ones. Perhaps the most spectacular incident took place on Friday July 23rd in broad daylight at Kelso, where 23 schoolchildren and an adult described a Zeppelin-type

airship swooping low over the township, of which several detailed sketches were produced by witnesses. An excited reporter for the *Otago Daily Times* proclaimed it to be "nothing short of dumbfounding." The sketches appear as follows: The 3 drawings below all appeared in the *Otago Daily Times*, August 4, 1909.



Bottom view of the object as described by pupil Thomas Jenkins, consisting of a long cigar-shaped body, a suspended gondola underneath, and two large sail-like wings.



Side view of the object also seen by Thomas Jenkins. He said the propeller-like wheel at the back was revolving rapidly.



George McDuff's object.

At about 5 pm on the next day (July 24th), another student at the Kelso school, George McDuff saw the above vessel near his home. Sixty years after the incident, a reporter for the *Otago Daily Times* tracked down McDuff. He was a farmer living at Weston in North Otago. When asked about the incident, he denied seeing any object and said that it was "imagination, based on what we were reading at the time"

(magazine articles describing airships).

The editors of the *Wanganui Chronicle* were less impressed by these drawings and challenged the *Otago Daily Times* reporter in declaring that "there is nothing convincing to report" about the mass sightings near the Kelso school, and that "the testimony of the children need not be taken very seriously." It was later suggested that they had misidentified a flock of birds.

Shortly after this sighting, a party of young men from Kelso trekked into the nearby Blue Mountains in a vain attempt to locate the vessel, and local police were also searching. This incident received heavy press coverage, and a deluge of reports followed over the next 10 days.

On the evening of July 24th just a few miles away at Kaka Point, another dramatic account was recorded of an airship flying over the beach. A Mr Bates and several boys observed "a huge illuminated object moving about in the air." The *Clutha Leader* stated that the vessel appeared as if it was going to alight, and in apparent fear that it was a German Zeppelin, thinking it was attracted to their lantern, the boys ran off leaving it behind. If the vessel flew within close range again, some of the boys said they would "try to 'prick the bubble' with a bullet."

Near Gore on July 30th, the *Auckland Star* reported that two mining dredge hands working the night shift claimed to see an airship at 5 am descend in the fog and circle the area, and "that two

figures were plainly discernible on board". The time and location of this sighting suggests that they misidentified the moon. Later that day, the *Evening Star* said that great interest was generated by a rumour that a Zeppelin had crashed at Waikaka, killing two or three Germans. The report by the dredge hands followed other airship sightings in the Gore vicinity over the previous several nights.

The *Geraldine Guardian* reported that on Sunday evening August 1st, a large crowd gathered in front of the Temuka post office, debating the origin of a mysterious luminous orb which was soon revealed as a prank by some boys who had placed a candle in a hollowed turnip and raised it to the top of the High School flagpole.

According to the *Hawkes Bay Herald*, on Tuesday night, August 3rd, in the North Island, a Waipawa man stated that while riding his horse near the racecourse, a large, grey torpedo-shaped vessel with lights at the prow and stern, passed overhead, and one of three visible passengers "shouted out to him in an unknown tongue."

By early August the New Zealand reports began to wane, with the last known sighting of the month reported by the *Geraldine Guardian* near the goldmining community of Waihi on the 9th.

Once the Zeppelin's existence was widely accepted, various past and concurrent events and situations that would have ordinarily received prosaic interpretations, were redefined as airship-related. On the night of

July 14th, Mary Guinan of Kelso observed a gradually dimming "star", but after hearing of subsequent airship sightings, the *Otago Witness* reported that "she at once concluded that it was this she had seen".

When a farmer in the Black Hills found two petrol cans on a remote eminence inaccessible by motor car, according to the *Timaru Post*, it was suggested the oil was used to fuel an airship motor. In the Otama district, another farmer thought an airship may have landed for repairs after finding several screw wrenches in a field.

Many press accounts described the airship's presence factually, especially at the beginning of the episode, when ambiguous aerial "lights" were often depicted as "airships." These include stories in the following newspapers: "Clear evidence," *Evening Star*, July 29, 1909, p. 4; "The Kelso airship. Cumulative evidence," *Otago Daily Times*, July 29, 1909, p. 7; "What the dredge-men saw," *Auckland Weekly News*, August 5, 1909, p. 21. However, as the episode continued, the press generally grew more incredulous of the reports.

Aerialitis

The Wellington *Dominion* characterised some witnesses as suffering from "aerialitis". It was widely noted in many newspapers from late July that sales of fire balloons had increased dramatically, and their remains were often found in the vicinity of sightings.

Press accounts became increasingly sceptical in early August, as numerous re-

ports of mysterious aerial lights were increasingly described as stars, illuminated kites or fire balloons. These latter devices consisted of paper balloons with candles attached near the mouth and made buoyant by the generation of heat.

On July 29th, the *New Zealand Herald* editor described them as "Flights of Fancy", while commentary in the *Evening Post* referred to them as "Hot-air" ships, remarking that a combination of hoaxes and misperceptions of heavenly bodies comprised "the nucleus of an aerial German invasion".

After residents reported seeing what appeared to be a searchlight circling above the town of Nelson, a reporter *Thames Star* quipped: "It has come at last. We have been expecting the dread news for weeks..." Advertisers even capitalised on the airship excitement with one proclaiming in the *Tapanui Courier*: "The latest news by air ship sent to Kelso was that Anderson's selling out sale is still booming..."

After a three-week absence of reports, a final flurry of sightings emanated from Gore, as hundreds reported a dark cigar-shaped object near the Tapanui Hills between 4:30 and 6 pm on September 1st and 2nd. The reports in the *Southland Times* abruptly ended when a press correspondent visited the site and found that the sensation was caused by "repeated flights of thousands of starlings, which, prior to nesting season, were making their temporary homes in a clump of pine trees" at Holland's farm. With the Gore

sightings, this unusual chapter in New Zealand history had come to a close.

Some Final Comments

The Zeppelin sightings can be explained using basic theories of social psychology. Human perception is highly unreliable, subject to error, and pre-conditioned by the observer's frame of reference or "mental set." In ambiguous situations such as looking for an ambiguous object in the night-time sky, "inference can perform the work of perception by filling in missing information in instances where perception is either inefficient or inadequate".

The Zeppelin scare is a classic example of a collective delusion or "mass hysteria." Most sociologists nowadays prefer the former term as most participants in episodes are certainly not hysterical in the clinical sense. The literature on collective delusions indicates the pivotal role of several key factors. These include the presence of ambiguity, anxiety, the spread of rumours and false but plausible beliefs, and a redefinition of the potential threat from general and distant to specific and imminent.

Exacerbating factors include the fallibility of human perception, mass media influence in spreading the fears, recent geo-political events, and reinforcement of the false belief by authority figures and those in institutions of social control (for example, the police and military or a university lecturer).

There was great ambiguity in that despite intense press speculation, no one knew how real the German threat

to New Zealand was, or if the rumours were true and Zeppelins were navigating in the skies. It was not known whether they possessed the motivation, means and resources to launch aerial missions. Recent advances in aviation technology lent plausibility to the rumours. The ambiguous night-time sky was ideal for fostering misperceptions of stars, planets and other natural phenomena. When an observer scrutinises an object such as a star, it can appear to change colour, flicker and move.

Of particular interest is what social psychologists call "the autokinetic effect". This illusion was first identified by social psychologist Muzafer Sherif in 1936, who found that in a dark environment, when people stare at a single point of light, the light appears to move — often dramatically — even though in reality it is stationary. The difficulties in judging distance and movement under such conditions occur because objects such as buildings, cars and people usually provide a familiar frame of reference with which to base judgements. However, in dark settings these cues are either greatly diminished or not available. This situation is similar to New Zealanders staring at the sky in search of Zeppelins at night.

By comparing the New Zealand Zeppelin sightings with modern flying saucer reports worldwide since 1947, we can gain important insights. History can be a powerful tool for skeptics, as it distances observers from events and allows for a less emotional, more contextual

evaluation of seemingly incredible events. Perhaps the most conspicuous difference between the two periods is the absence of a single reported disc-shaped object during the 1909 episode.

The mechanisms that gave rise to the Zeppelin scare of 1909, and modern flying saucer reports, appear to be virtually identical. The only significant difference is the social and cultural expectation or frame of reference of the witnesses.

In 1909, citizens did not expect to see flying saucers, but dirigible or boat-like airships with wings and or propellers. And that is exactly what they reported. Today, no one reports seeing phantom Zeppelins in New Zealand (at least, to my knowledge!), but aliens in flying saucers.

References available from the editor.

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

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

Political Correctness at the Supermarket

Jay D. Mann

Jay Mann delivered this address with accompanying liquid refreshment (with and without MSG) at last year's conference.

A large number of food manufacturers seem to be selling their food on the basis of what it does not contain, rather than on the basis of the actual ingredients. These negative statements, such as "no added MSG" and "no preservatives" are clearly intended to imply some sort of benefit from the omission of such ingredients.

Aside from the question of whether food should be marketed on negative issues, there is considerable evidence that no health benefit whatsoever accrues by omis-

sion of MSG and preservatives.

Since the "no preservative" claim is well-nigh universal on supermarket shelves, I suggest that there is a potential niche market amongst scientifically literate consumers who dislike food wastage.

I mainly want to consider, however, the MSG issue. The first question is why anyone would want to add MSG to food. The next is why the public is concerned about added MSG.

Some historical background. For centuries, traditional Japanese cooking has used "dashi" as the basic sauce ingredient. Dashi is an extract of certain seaweed ("sea tangles") and of dried bonito. Although, to my palate, the flavour of dashi is not particularly attractive, it greatly enhances the flavour of other foods. In 1908, a Japanese scientist showed that glutamic acid, coming from the seaweed, is the main flavour-enhancing chemical in dashi. Monosodium glutamate, a chemically convenient form of glutamic acid, almost immediately became an important flavour enhancer made through fermentation.

Another chemical called inosine monophosphate (IMP), originating in the bonito muscle, was also discovered in dashi. IMP and related compounds such as

guanylic acid (GMP) are characteristic nucleotides found in muscle tissue from both mammals and fish. These nucleotides too are used as flavour enhancers although they are considerably more expensive than MSG (Table 1).

A brief chemistry lesson. Glutamic acid, a naturally occurring amino acid, is a major part of almost every protein. Glutamic acid bound within protein has no particular taste, but free glutamic acid can be released by, for instance, ageing of meat, or by cooking. Thus the presence of glutamic acid in a food is a biochemical hint that the food may contain protein.

In neutral or alkaline solutions, glutamic acid becomes a salt and can now be called "glutamate". Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is a white crystalline powder. In the presence of water, MSG separates into glutamate ions and sodium ions (which may add some salty taste). Foods as eaten have only glutamate, not MSG. The glutamate may come either from added MSG or from other sources.

The vital point is that although "MSG" might be added to a food, what is found in the food is "glutamate". Even scientific authors have confused the issue. For instance, Rhodes et al. (1991) analysed foods

Table 1: "E-Numbers" of approved Flavour Enhancers

- ❖ E620 Glutamic acid
- ❖ E621 Monosodium glutamate
- ❖ E622 Monopotassium glutamate
- ❖ E623 Calcium diglutamate
- ❖ E624 Monoammonium glutamate
- ❖ E625 Magnesium diglutamate
- ❖ E626 Guanylic acid
- ❖ E627 Disodium guanylate
- ❖ E628 Dipotassium guanylate
- ❖ E629 Calcium guanylate
- ❖ E630 Inosinic acid
- ❖ E631 Disodium inosinate
- ❖ E632 Dipotassium inosinate
- ❖ E633 Calcium inosinate
- ❖ E634 Calcium 5'-ribonucleotides
- ❖ E635 Disodium 5'-ribonucleotides

for glutamate yet reported their results in terms of "MSG", without even having confirmed whether enough sodium ions were present.

Why Add it?

Why add glutamate to food? The answer is simple: it makes most foods (except sweets) taste better (Yamaguchi 1991). You can confirm this yourself by adding about 0.1% MSG to a sample of soup or stew. Even at low concentrations where its "meaty" taste cannot be detected, glutamate can enhance the flavour of other ingredients.

Words such as "more pleasant", "more savoury" and "more satisfying" have been used (Rogers and Blundell 1990). Both Japanese and Australians have similar responses (Prescott et al 1992). Glutamate concentrations of about 0.1 to 0.3% are recommended by MSG manufacturers (Table 2). Older folk have duller taste buds, requiring about three times higher levels of added MSG than younger people (Schiffman et al 1994). Perhaps that is why older people have such poor appetites; MSG in rest-home cafeterias may improve the nutrition of the elderly (Bellisle et al 1991).

Is there some biological reason why we should prefer food with higher levels of this particular amino acid? Since finding food with adequate levels of protein has generally been a problem with our animal ancestors, any mechanism whereby an animal can pick out foods with higher levels of protein might be advantageous. Glu-

tamate can be liberated when the protein is partly hydrolysed by ageing, fermenting, boiling, or possibly even during chewing.

If glutamate is so common, why do we have to add MSG to our foods? In fact, sometimes we don't. A number of common food ingredients such as tomatoes, mushrooms, and parmesan cheese (Table 3) have high levels of free glutamate.

Is it only a coincidence that these are common cooking ingredients? Unlikely. The US Food and Drug Administration reported in 1995 that Italian food contains higher levels of free glutamate than any other ethnic food. If glutamate were the real cause of Chinese restaurant syndrome, it would be called "Italian restaurant syndrome".

The absence of "Italian restaurant syndrome" confirms the laboratory findings clearing MSG of blame. (Alternatively, we shall now see an American epidemic of

damage claims against Italian restaurants.)

Food manufacturers are well aware of the taste-en-

Table 2. Recommended Usage Rates for MSG and IMP (mg/100g)

Ingredient	MSG	IMP/GMP
Canned soups	120-180	2-3
Canned fish	100-300	3-6
Canned poultry, sausages, ham	100-200	6-10
Sauces	1,000-2,000	10-30
Ketchup	150-300	10-20
Mayonnaise	400-600	12-18
Snacks	100-500	3-7
Soy sauce	300-600	30-50
Processed cheese	400-500	5-20

Table 3. Natural Glutamate Content of Foods (mg per 100 g)

Ingredient	Total glutamate	Free glutamate
Cow milk	820	2
Human milk	230	20
Cheddar	3665-4665	?
Edam	6020	?
Gruyere		1330
Parmesan	9850	1200
Camembert	4787	?
Eggs	1600	23
Chicken	3300	44
Beef	2850	13-88
Pork	2325	23
Cod	1200	9
Mackerel	2380	36
Salmon	2215	20
Peas	5585	200
Corn	1765	130
Beets	255	30
Carrots	220	33
Onions	208	18
Spinach	290	39
Sun-dried tomatoes	5200	?
Tomatoes	240	140
Green peppers	120	32
Mushrooms, dried		175-635
Mushrooms, canned		240
Meat & yeast extracts		450-18,930
Green tea		260-640

Table 4: Symptoms Of Food-related Illness

Chinese Restaurant Syndrome

- ❖ Burning Sensation on back of neck, forearms, and chest
- ❖ Facial pressure or tightness
- ❖ Tingling & weakness in face, temples, upper back, neck, arms
- ❖ Chest pain, headache
- ❖ Nausea, vomiting

Histamine Poisoning (scombroid poisoning)

- ❖ Flushing
- ❖ Urticaria (hives)
- ❖ Pruritus
- ❖ Gastrointestinal complaints
- ❖ Bronchospasm

Amine Poisoning (tyramine, phenethylamine)

- ❖ Severe headache
- ❖ Hypertension

Sulfite Poisoning

- ❖ Extremely rapid onset (minutes)
- ❖ Flushing
- ❖ Bronchospasm
- ❖ Hypotension

Food Allergens

- ❖ Peanuts, egg, fish, walnuts

hancing properties of added glutamate. Although pandering to the general public's fear of "chemicals" by slapping a "no added MSG" claim on the label, they add ingredients like soy sauce, fish sauce, yeast or meat extract, and especially hydrolysed vegetable protein, in order to increase their product's glutamate level. The hydrolysed vegetable proteins typically provide 10-30% of their dry weight as glutamate.

Why Not Add MSG?

There is no doubt that a large proportion of the gen-

eral public is afraid of MSG. How did this arise? (The interested reader should look up the detailed reviews published by Taliaferro 1985 as well as Pulce et al 1992.)

In 1968, a Chinese-American, Dr Robert Kwok, wrote a letter to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, in which he described some mild but uncomfortable symptoms experienced after dining at certain Chinese restaurants. This was the origin of the catchy phrase "Chinese restaurant syndrome", often abbreviated as CRS. Because Dr Kwok got symptoms only from some but not all restaurants, he suspected that the cause might be an ingredient not used by all chefs. Among his list of possibilities was MSG, together with

soy sauce, cooking wine, and high sodium.

A year later, well-publicised experiments from a St Louis laboratory claimed that injections of about 2g MSG per kg bodyweight resulted in temporary behavioural changes and brain lesions of newborn rhesus monkeys. Although there has been considerable discussion as to the physiological significance of such high doses (equivalent to 150g MSG for an adult man), the issue is moot since no one has been able to reproduce the original experimental work.

It has been suggested that either Dr Olney's monkeys were kept under very poor conditions, or that the methods for preparing the brain tissue for microscopic examination were themselves responsible for causing tears that were misinterpreted as brain lesions (Taliaferro, 1995). (Mice, which are the most sensitive mammals to glutamate, show behavioural changes — but not brain lesions — when forced the equivalent of 120g glutamate for a 30-kg child. Three-generation studies of mice fed lower levels every day showed no effects of glutamate.)

These two reports started a new MSG-bashing career path for many scientists. Rather than go into details of the dozens of studies reported, I will summarise their conclusions:

1) Certain severe asthmatics can experience asthma attacks about 6 hours after ingesting gram quantities of MSG (Allen et al, 1987). Moneret-Vautrin (1987) concluded that "a very small subset of patients with intrinsic asthma might present with an intolerance to MSG if high doses are consumed". About half of such asthmatics are also sensitive to salicylates (in aspirin as well as foods like tomatoes). What percentage of the population is affected by MSG-induced asthma is not known, and no one has suggested that MSG is important in most asthmatics.

2) Some people may develop headaches after eating MSG on an empty stomach (Scopp 1991). This is not a normal way to eat MSG.

When MSG is consumed with other foods, it has no effect on blood glutamate levels (Stegink et al 1983). It is not clear whether headaches can be caused by eating MSG mixed with food, nor is the percentage of the population so affected known.

3) MSG does not cause the symptoms of Chinese restaurant syndrome (Kenney 1986). To the extent that we can be sure of anything in an uncertain universe, this is a fact! Although 20-40% of the population believe they have a food intolerance, the correct figure is probably about 5% (Young et al 1994; Somewhere between 0.2% and 1% of the population suffer from CRS-like symptoms, generally not linked with Chinese food (Kerr et al 1979). No MSG-induced flushing could be found in volunteers, including 18 people subject to CRS (Wilkin 1986). When the flavour of MSG is concealed there was no significant difference between the number of reactions reported to MSG versus placebo capsules. The strong role of suggestion is shown by the fact that about 15% of both groups reported "symptoms" (Tarasoff and Kelly 1993). In 1995, the FDA sponsored an extensive review carried out by the Federation of Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB). This review concluded that there was no evidence for a link between CRS and MSG.

The "classical" symptoms of CRS are as shown in part 1 of Table 4. Many people who occasionally get uncomfortable sensations after eating Chinese food may be sensitive to histamine (Part 2, Table 4). Histamine, pro-

duced from another natural amino acid histidine, is not ordinarily absorbed from the gut. Temporary minor damage to the gut lining may let histamine enter the circulation.

Some possible sources of histamine are fermented sauces such as soya sauce and fish sauce. Soya sauces made by chemical hydrolysis would have little histamine, in contrast to more expensive soya sauces made through fermentation. Thus one Chinese restaurant might use ingredients with free histamine while another might not.

Histamine effects are so common that they have been called "scombroid poisoning" when they occur in people who have eaten inadequately refrigerated red-meat fish such as tuna, albacore, herring, and mackerel. Bacteria in the fish muscles can form significant amounts of histamine during storage without the fish being spoiled or off-taste. For someone suffering from histamine-induced symptoms, the obvious remedy is to take an antihistamine.

Allergies to food ingredients are also common (Part 3, Table 4). Some of the most common foods causing allergic reactions are shrimp, peanuts, and members of the parsley family (such as coriander) (de Maat-Bleeker, 1992; Settupane 1987). Since some Chinese recipes call for addition of dried shrimp to vegetable dishes, a dish's name may not define the kinds of potential allergens in it. Once again, antihistamines are the recommended treatment.

What's Wrong with the "No added MSG" label?

1) The rare victims of CRS are being actively misled by the "no added MSG" labels on foods. Avoiding foods with MSG in no way improves their chances of avoiding symptoms. (Ignorance is not bliss.) Foods with "no added MSG" often contain hydrolysed fish or bean sauces, which are more likely to contain CRS-inducing chemicals.

2) People with glutamate-caused asthma may be deceived by a "no added MSG" label into eating foods with high levels of glutamate, either from natural ingredients such as tomatoes and cheese, or from addition of hydrolysed vegetable protein.

3) Some people who are sensitive to proteins from wheat or from soy may unknowingly ingest them from "hydrolysed vegetable protein".

4) The "no MSG" label claim is deceptive in all but the most narrow legal interpretation, where glutamate has been added intentionally through other means. If a manufacturer is so willing to use "sharp practice" in this aspect of his labelling, why should I trust his honesty in regard to other claims, such as taste and quality? (I have nothing against a manufacturer who does not use MSG, as evidenced on the ingredient listing of his product, without pandering to popular prejudice with a "no added this - no added that" claim.)

(References available from the editor.)

Jay Mann is a Christchurch skeptic with a life-long interest in food.

"Tel
Christi
sp

By Malcolm



SPECTRE – A section of the photo shows the image, top centre.

Skeptic doubts ghost in photo

Evening Post

16 JAN 93

Skeptics Society spokesman Denis Dutton remains unconvinced that a photo published in *The Post* yesterday shows a ghost.

Mr Dutton believes there is a rational explanation for the image.

In the background of a family photograph taken by New Plymouth's Stephen Bailey, there is an image in the window.

Some family members believe the image is the ghost of Stephen's grandfather, Harold Bailey, who died of a heart attack in 1978.

But Dr Dutton, a senior philosophy lecturer at Canterbury University, said there had been a lot of ghost photos in the past and he remained unconvinced.

"I'm perfectly willing to believe in ghosts if someone

showed me the evidence, but ghosts will have to do more impressive things than knocking over tins of beans in the pantry or showing up as smudges in pictures," Dr Dutton said.

"Either it's a perfectly explained aberration in the emulsion, or it's a trick, or it's a ghost.

"The only thing you can say for certain is that people who believe in ghosts will prefer the last explanation to the first two."

He said countless photographs had unexplained smudges and shadows and "most of these go unnoticed".

"Occasionally one shows up in a picture of a car at a funeral or in the window behind a family gathering. If people want to believe it's a ghost that's their privilege." – NZPA

Kapiti Observer 2 Horoscope poll

Guess what, readers? The Poll result has turned out to be way.

A total of 719 telephone answer to the question: do you use the Observer?, 353 people (49%) voted NO.

The editor has declared that he therefore made the decision to publish, but only for the opponents.

The poll via an 0900 number from 19 to 5pm January 28. It was a telephone number at a cost of 40c per minute. People called to protest that the poll allowed divided households to vote with bars on 0900 call numbers, that voting by fax or letter was better; some did not vote on principle because someone was making a profit.

No-one except Telecom actually cost Kapiti Newspapers 40c and 40c was the minimum for the Telecom Televote service.

Anything other than a simple poll allowed anyone to vote more than once.

The horoscope is on page 10. Paekakariki retailer. It will be available from 10am.

An eye on iridology GP Weekly

Dear Editor 26 Nov 91

I was saddened to learn that the Kiev University provides training in eye iris diagnosis at the subfaculty for eye diseases at Kiev State Medical University. (see 'Immigrants qualify but not for registration' – *GP Weekly* 29 October).

Iridology differs from most unorthodox systems of medicine in being extraordinarily easy to check out for validity.

It must be 10 or 15 years ago that friends of mine encouraged their oldest daughter, then a fourth form student in Wellington, to do the following experiment:

With the patients' consent she obtained photographs of the irises of patients in the urology ward in Wellington Hospital and she also took photographs of the irises of the healthy girls in her form at school.

The two sets of photographs were coded and checked against several iridology textbooks.

When the code was broken it was found that patients with renal problems such as stones, renal failure, pyelonephritis, etc had 'healthy' irises, and girls from the class at school were said to have kidney problems.

There was no correlation between iridology and diagnosis.

The work obtained the prize in that year's secondary school science fair. It was written up for publication, but a literature search showed that others had done the same experiment with the same results.

May I share with you one of my favourite quotations? It comes from a nineteenth century

mathematician, Clifford, and is quoted by Bronowski in his book *Science and Human Values*.

"If I steal money from any person, there may be no harm done by the mere transfer of possession; he may not feel the loss, or it may even prevent him from using the money badly. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself dishonest.

"What hurts society is not that it should lose its property, but that it should become a den of thieves. This is why we ought not to do evil that good may come; for at any rate this evil has come, that we have done evil and are made wicked thereby.

"In like manner, if I let myself

believe a
evidence
harm do
it may b
never ha
ward act
ing this
Man, th
lous. Th
not me
believe
that is g
should b

th gets hotline 'psychic' dumped

Northern News 27 Jan 98

them you are a
n operating in the
ritual realm..."

McMillan

50-50 each way

Observer Horoscope Phone
e almost exactly 50-50 each

votes were received in an-
want a weekly horoscope in
10%) voted YES; 366 (50.90%)

result inconclusive. He has
himself: the horoscope will
tightly, as a concession to the

er ran from 8.30 am January
as limited to one vote per
of 40c per vote. A number of
the one-call limit did not
vote fairly; that subscribers
rs were unable to vote at all;
ould have been allowed as
ncipal because they thought
t from the poll.

ade money from the poll. It
ers \$170 to set up and oper-
um charge allowed by the

gle phone vote would have
than once, thus corrupting

e 14, now sponsored by a
ext appear on February 16.

anything on insufficient
there may be no great
e by the mere belief;
true after all, or I may
e to exhibit it in out-
But I cannot help do-
great wrong towards
I make myself credu-
danger to society is
ely that it should
rong things, though
eat enough; but that it
come credulous.'

Dr Jim Hefford
Wellington

Special force set up to monitor cult

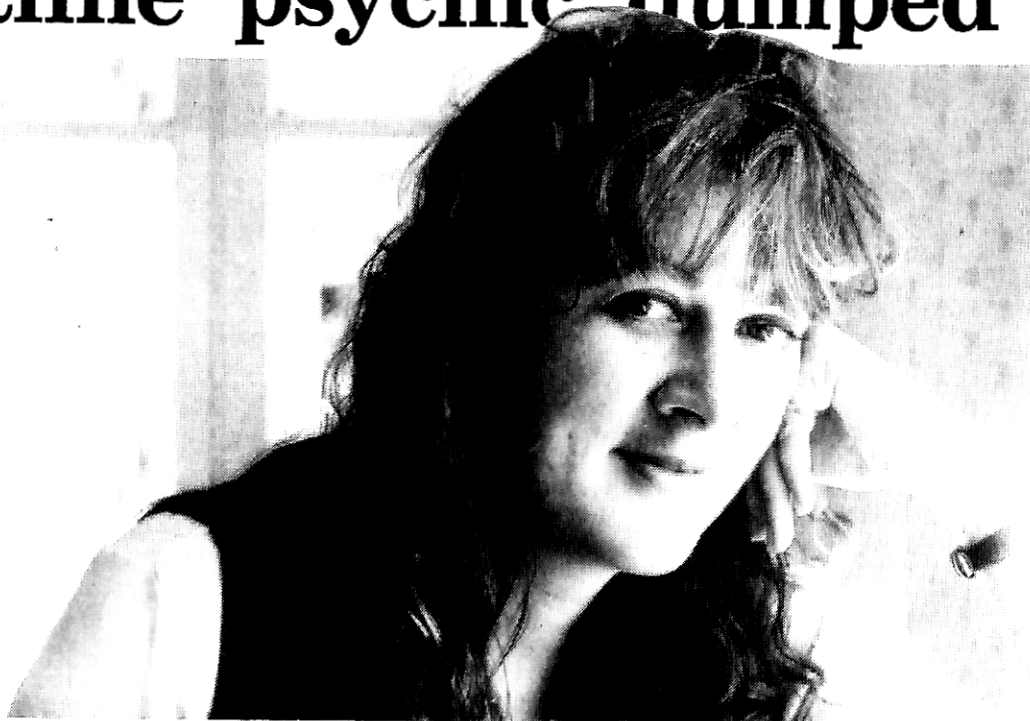
TAIPEI, Dec 22. - Taiwan has set up
a special force to investigate a cult at
the centre of accusations of fraud and
features of a mass suicide plan.

"We are looking into the case to see
whether there is any irregularity on the
bank accounts of the group," said pro-
secutor Chu Fu-mei.

Police have already raided four

properties of the God Saves the Earth
Flying Saucers Foundation.

The Government was alerted by re-
ports that about 100 members had fol-
lowed cult leader Chen Heng-ming to
Dallas, Texas where they were to wait
for flying saucers to pick them up. -
AFP



Fiona Cockburn (above) is concerned at the people
using phone-in clairvoyant services.

A Pakaraka woman has lost her job because she
told the truth.

Less than a week after being employed by Nu
Concepts to answer 0900 calls as a 'clairvoyant',
Fiona Cockburn was sacked after admitting to a
caller she was no such thing.

"I was employed over the phone after respond-
ing to a local newspaper advertisement.

"I told Nu Concepts I'd always been interested
in things like astrology, meditation and relaxa-
tion, and I enjoy reading Tarot cards and doing
people's Chinese horoscopes. It's a bit of fun and
never to be taken too literally," Fiona said, claim-
ing the company did not ask her if she was a
clairvoyant and said all she needed was a caring
and friendly telephone manner.

Working from home, Fiona said she started to
have serious doubts after the first few calls.

"I began to feel very uncomfortable. Even
though the small print in the advertisement said
the 0900 line was for entertainment only, people
phoning were paying up to \$50 for psychic read-
ings. A lot were emotionally distressed and really
needed counselling," she said.

"I had bankrupts wondering if they'd get jobs,
lovers wondering about partners and some deeply
disturbed people."

Fiona said she gave callers 'readings' from her
Chinese horoscope book, although the company
had apparently disallowed that.

In case she was challenged on whether or not
she was a clairvoyant, Fiona says she was instruc-
ted to use common sense phrases like "I'm a
Christian and I'm operating in the spiritual
realm".

A number of callers said they had felt much
better after just chatting to her.

But one caller became angry after recognising
his Chinese horoscope being read to him and told
Fiona he'd called for a psychic reading. That's
when she owned up. After the caller complained to
Nu Concepts, Fiona was sacked - again over the
phone.

"I told them I think they're running a bit of a
scam really," said Fiona, adding she had never
met the principals of the company or been paid for
the 10 or so calls she responded to.

"They'll probably say I'm an unhappy employ-
ee, but I don't care about the job.

"It's sad really and just a money thing. The
longer people talk the more they pay. There's
some sort of minimum time Telecom allows on
0900 calls, about 10 minutes I think which is
around \$50. We had to warn people at about eight
and a half minutes their time was up, or just
quickly cut them off.

"A lot would call back and be charged again.

"Anyone with the slightest knowledge of being
companionable on the telephone knows you don't
cut off someone with worries.

"It means you haven't listened to them."

William Abbott of Nu Concepts in Whangarei
said it was a storm-in-a-tea cup and a case of a
disgruntled employee.

"The lady bluffed her way in. She told us she'd
been doing 'readings' since she was 15 years old,"
Mr Abbott said.

"There's a lot of people out there, pseudo-spirit-
ual types, who think they're super gifted but when
it comes to the crunch they can't hack it.

"I'll be honest with you - I slipped up with this
lady. She was super confident on the phone. We
usually call up and run a check. You've got to
judge it by the fruit, as it were.

Mr Abbott admitted there were "a lot of cranks
in the psychic business" but said his hotline ser-
vice was used by people from all walks of life
including lawyers, judges, businessmen and
housewives.

"This is only the second complaint I've had in a
year. I gave the caller in this case a \$50 credit and
that's the end of it."

Pardon spelt out for war witch

EVENING POST 3 Feb 93

LONDON. - Britain's last woman to be jailed for witchcraft may be offered a posthumous pardon more than 40 years after her death.

In 1944, Helen Duncan was jailed for nine months under the 1735 Witchcraft Act for claiming to have conjured up the spirit of a sailor killed on a battleship. At the time, the ship's sinking was a State secret and not publicly known.

British authorities believed Duncan could be a wartime security risk. They feared she might "see" and reveal the sites for their forthcoming D-Day landings in France.

Officials say British Interior Minister Jack Straw is now prepared to consider a pardon for the psychic, who was convicted at London's Old Bailey.

She was jailed under an Act that abolished the practice of drowning, hanging or burning women convicted of consorting with

the devil, but retained the offence with lesser penalties.

Campaigners are using the 100th anniversary of Duncan's birth to push for her pardon.

Duncan sparked the security panic after apparently conjuring up the spirit of a sailor from HMS Barham who told a seance: "My ship has sunk."

The British Navy had suppressed all news of the ship's sinking off Malta for fear it would dent British morale.

Duncan's case, which attracted packed crowds in the court's public gallery, made her the most famous spiritualist of the day. Police said she was "an unmitigated humbug who could only be regarded as a pest".

Prime Minister Winston Churchill was outraged. He dismissed the case as "obsolete tomfoolery to the detriment of the necessary work in the court".

On his return to the premiership in 1951 after the war, Churchill was instrumental in ensuring the Act was repealed.

The current Fraudulent Mediums Act can be used in cases of deception, carrying penalties of up to two years in prison or fines of up to £500 (\$NZ1413).

After her release from prison, Duncan's popularity as a spiritualist soared. She was said to conjure up the dead in both spiritual and physical form.

Duncan, a diabetic with a heart condition, died in 1956 - five weeks after police raided a seance she was conducting.

The London Times reported that campaigners seeking her posthumous pardon said they had managed to contact Duncan at a seance and asked if she supported their campaign.

The psychic is said to have told them: "It seems to matter a great deal more down there than it does up here." - Reuter

● NZ On Air has allocated \$636,126 for a second series of Epitaph; among the mysteries it will investigate is a bleeding headstone.

EVENING POST 5 Feb 93

Astrologer faults timing of Black Caps

EVENING POST 29 Jan 93

By TRACEY PALMER, Sports staff

A new name won't change the beleaguered New Zealand cricket team's fortunes, Wellington astrologer Alison Maciver said today.

The team's new name - the Black Caps - was announced last night in Auckland.

She said the announcement fell in the "breakdown" phase of the moon - in gardening terms, the "rotting-down phase".

"They're trying to break down the old situation ready for a new beginning. I'm not certain that they're going to change their luck as much as they would like.

"Diana and Charles got married on the same sort of phase of the moon. Does that tell you enough?"

Saatchi and Saatchi Wellington general manager Kim Wicksteed today described the new name as "OK".

"Well, I guess it's in keeping with our international sporting colour.

"But it's like any brand name. It's got to be created," he said. "If they don't create the brand, then the Black Caps just won't go anywhere."

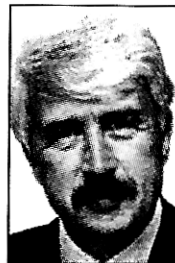
Former New Zealand captain and "Young Gun" Martin Crowe hadn't heard the name when contacted by The Post. However, he said he liked it. "Let's hope they don't give too many away too cheaply."

Wellington and Kiwi cricketer Gavin Larsen, who is sidelined after an injury, said today the name would "give the team an identity. I was positive when I first heard it. I think it will stick pretty quickly."

Cricket commentator and former international John Morrison said today the name didn't matter.

"I'm not too fussed whether it's the Black Caps, or the Blue Caps or the Polka Dot Underpants. Now what they've got to do is back it up with performance and give it some richness and some meaning.

"Because I think at the end of the day it will only be good if they are good, and it will be bad if they're no good."



John Morrison

Ghost prowls Cambridge college

EVENING POST 20 Dec 97

LONDON, Dec 19. - The ghost of an 18th century suicide victim is stalking the corridors of a Cambridge University college and perturbed professors want to call in an exorcist.

The Peterhouse college bursar and two butlers have reported seeing the mysterious figure in an oak-panelled dining room.

"That something took place in that room is, in fact, beyond question," the Reverend Graham Ward, dean of Peterhouse, told BBC Radio.

"I saw the absolute terror on the faces of those two butlers, so I don't doubt something happened. In a college full of unreliable people, they are completely reliable."

Bursar Andrew Murison said he came across the spirit while working late one

night. "The first thing I noticed was the room was very cold even though the fires were lit," Murison said.

He heard a knocking noise but thought it was the central heating system rumbling.

"Then I became aware very much of a presence, and I turned around and, in the distant corner of the room, there was very distinctly a figure - perfectly benign and friendly," Murison said.

"But it's not the sort of thing that bursars like to talk about too much because we're supposed to be the sort of chaps who have our feet on the ground. People might think I'm a complete fruitcake."

The ghost of Francis Dawes, who hanged himself after a controversial col-

lege election in the 18th century, is thought to haunt the college at the elite university.

Dawes is buried in a churchyard beside the college which has already been the scene of two exorcisms - one to banish a poltergeist in the 18th century and the other when a dark presence was seen in a courtyard overlooking the cemetery.

Ward said a Requiem Mass might be held to exorcise the ghost, but that would require all college staff and tutors to attend.

"I haven't seen it, but I'm not being a sceptic on this. I'm just being simply agnostic," he said.

"I would quite happily believe and endorse miracles, or angels for that matter." - Reuter

Skepsis

Quack Croaks

Perhaps it's a coincidence, but many experts in non-proven schemes fall on their own swords. For example, Hoxsey died of cancer, and recently a Lower Hutt clairvoyant went bankrupt (due to unforeseen circumstances). Dr Rajko Medenica, the Yugoslavian specialist whose unorthodox treatments created devoted patients and determined enemies, died at the early age of 58 (*Bay Of Plenty Times* December 3 1997). He practised in South Carolina and drew patients from around the world, including Muhammad Ali, the late Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran and the late Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia. He served 17 months in a Swiss prison two years ago for fraud, many saying that his unusual methods were not based on science, but that he preyed on those that had lost hope. He obviously didn't do the three guys mentioned much good either.

Overdose of Spirits

Oxford and Cambridge Universities are the embodiment of educational excellence. Yet even their bosses can make fools of themselves. Peterhouse College (Cambridge) professors are convinced they have a ghost lurking in their midst (*Bay Of Plenty Times*, December 20 1997).

"I saw absolute terror on the faces (of those) who saw the ghost, so I don't doubt that something happened," said dean Graham Ward.

"But it's not the sort of thing that we like to talk about because we're supposed to be the sort of chaps who have our feet on the ground, and people might think I'm a terrible fruitcake."

Ward said a requiem mass to exorcise the ghost would be held, requiring all college staff to attend. Perhaps they should put less sherry in the fruitcake.

Royal Horror

Princess Anne should be given honorary membership of NZ Skeptics. She's so much more in the real world than her peers. No colonic irrigation or iridology for her. Recently, while opening a careers centre, she enquired brightly about what some teenage girls were doing (*International Express* January 27 1998).

"We're doing horoscopes," replied one eager youngster.

"Horoscopes, horoscopes!" exclaimed Anne, her darkened countenance suggesting something deeply unpalatable had been swallowed. "Life's too short for horoscopes!"

The Duchess Of York makes frequent use of stargazers to bolster her spirit in time of crisis. She recently had several consultations with the unconventional Madame Vasso. Perhaps it was visions of Fergie sitting beneath Vasso's blue pyramid that prompted Princess Anne's outburst — this month's Skepsis special award winner.

Desert Delusion

Dozens of protesting British Gulf War veterans

handed in their medals at the Ministry Of Defence last month (*International Express* January 20 1998). They were angry at alleged Government inaction over Gulf War syndrome, the name given to the wide variety of illnesses suffered by ex-servicemen after the conflict. Some 160 are said to have died since returning, and another 6,000 are sick. Illnesses include fatigue, skin disorders, muscular pains and shortness of breath.

I believe they have yet to prove either that they suffer more illness than the ordinary population, or that there is any link between their symptoms and any aspects of the war environment, which was a brief breeze compared to most conflicts. Many experts believe that it is just another example of mass hysteria.

Fool Britannia

The last woman to be jailed in Britain for witchcraft may be offered a posthumous pardon, more than 40 years after her death (*Bay Of Plenty Times*, February 2 1998). Helen Duncan was jailed for nine months in 1944 under the 1735 witchcraft act for claiming to have conjured the spirit of a sailor killed on a battleship. The ship's sinking was a state secret and not publicly known, so it was thought that she might "see" and reveal D-Day landing sites.

The then Prime Minister Winston Churchill was outraged. He dismissed the case as "obsolete tom-foolery to

the detriment of the necessary work in the court". On his return to the premiership in 1951, he helped ensure the act was repealed, and now British officials are considering a pardon for the convicted psychic.

I was also relieved to see that that country's college of psychiatry has banned the use of recovered memory methods in sexual abuse cases. About time! (NZ Skeptic, last issue.) New Zealand will almost certainly follow suit, and young Peter Ellis, like Helen Duncan, will get his pardon. Hopefully this will occur in his lifetime.

Still in Britain, the health chiefs are returning to institutionalising their violent mentally ill patients. Again, about time. It really is high time the New Zealand's health service got rid of its plague of advisors and put control back into the hands of the medical profession. It is quite clear that the public is sick of experiments implemented by temporary overpaid quango quacks.

Another Magic Box

A South African Telecom linesman has created what

some people are calling a "magic box" for pain relief (GP Weekly, November 19 1997). Gervan Lubbe developed the APS therapy (achon potential simulation) and it's made him a millionaire.

Using electric currents that simulate the body's natural nerve impulses, the therapy is used by thousands to relieve anything from arthritis and sports injuries, to migraines and bedsores. The phone book sized device is now available in New Zealand for a mere \$3,300.

Mr Lubbe says he is coming back here next year with a team of medical professors to seek ACC approval. He says that he expects some published research to come out within a few months. He has been made South Africa's Young Businessman Of The Year.

Isn't it funny how these heroes make a pile and fade into obscurity, always saying that they "expect published research to come out ..." etc. The genuine geniuses publish their studies first, and even if they don't become millionaires, their names live on in history. I wonder where Mr

Lubbe's name will appear in 20 years?

Jesus Christ

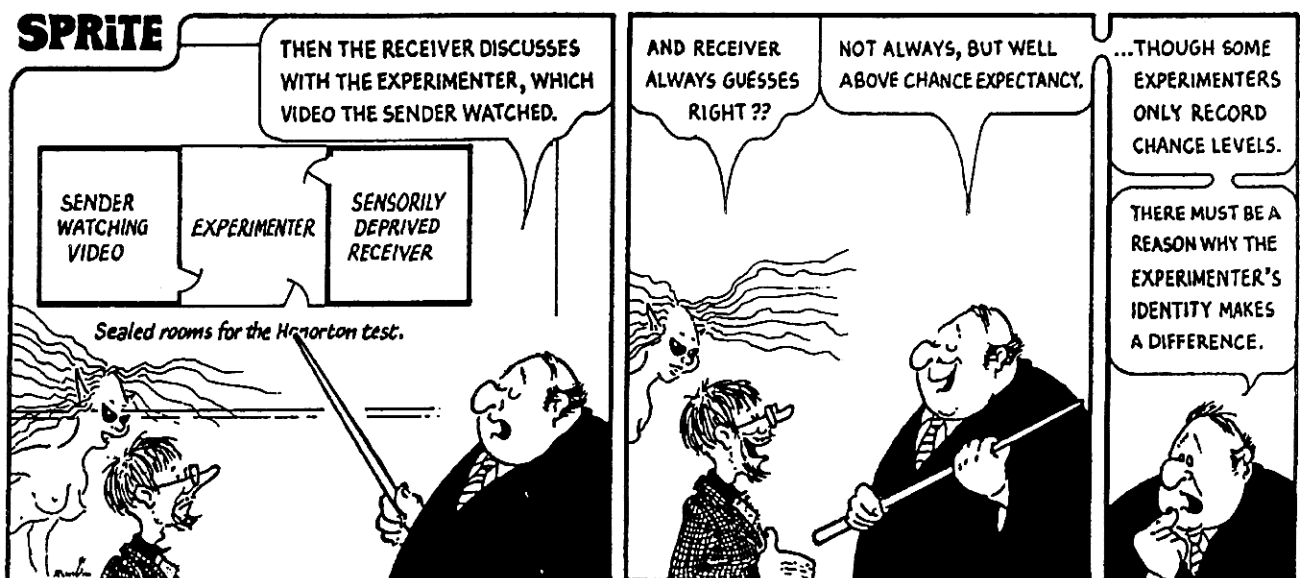
Cleaning lady Patricia Cole was polishing a brass banister when something amazing happened. There, on her cleaning cloth, appeared what she and others firmly believe to be the face of Christ (*International Express* January 20 1998). Now a stream of pilgrims is expected at her semi-detached home to see "the miracle of Pat's duster," which is being compared with the Turin Shroud.

"I had been using," (not drinking), "the council's metal polish, and the face on the cloth really spooked me out."

Her priest Monseigneur Anthony Boylan said "I told Patricia to regard this as a blessing. I've never seen anything like it in my 34 years in the priesthood."

From now on, I'm not allowing our cleaning lady at the surgery to throw out any used dusters. I've already recognised the haunted features of the American President on one cloth.

Neil McKenzie is a skeptical GP from Tauranga.



Donald Room, *Skeptic* (UK)

Forum

Creationist Tactics

I am sure Jim Ring is correct when he says we are on the winning side of the creationist battle [Forum, Summer 1997], but there is no room for complacency. As he says, the castrated form of biology taught in American schools has resulted in a minority of Americans believing organic evolution has occurred.

While I haven't seen any figures, I hear stories of fundamentalists stacking school boards in this country and attempting to influence the content of science classes, or enrolling as teacher trainees to the same ultimate end. A sixteen-year-old I spoke to recently had been given the clear message by her biology teacher that evolution was "only a theory" and that if it conflicted with the beliefs of anyone in the class they didn't have to accept it. The American experience, very quietly, may be starting here.

I well remember the prominent visits overseas creationists used to make. I attended a couple of lectures myself, by Duane Gish and Richard Bliss. Both were well-publicised, and well attended by people with opposing views. There was lively debate, and the creationists in this climate did not fare well. I was out there fighting too, Jim, and I agree we won most of the battles.

The point of my article was that the creationist tactics have changed. The visits and the tours continue, but with a very low profile. Audi-

ences consist almost entirely of the converted, and if a skeptic does manage to hear of a meeting and get along to it, it is as a lone voice easily silenced. The faithful, awash in a righteous glow, then go forth to spread the creationist word on a one-to-one basis.

The creationists have recognised that their old tactics were not working. It is too early to say how the new approach will fare, but we need to be aware that the change has occurred, and not assume they are in retreat merely because they have lowered their profile.

David Riddell

Skepticism and the Liberal State

So now we have politically correct skepticism (David Novitz Summer 1997 No. 46). His choice of John Rawls as the arbiter for the ethics of skepticism is surprising. No mention is made of Rawls' critics such as Robert Nozick.

Rawls' book is an attempt to justify the restrictions that a socialist government must place upon its citizens. Rawls wrote in the tradition of Plato and Marx, favouring the state against individual freedom. I wonder how George Orwell would have reacted, particularly to such phrases as "liberal theories of the state"? I know it sends a shiver down my spine.

Novitz writes, "[Rawls's] view of the liberal state is widely held." Now this may have been true when Rawls published (1971) but since

then we have seen socialism all but defeated. Communism has collapsed and the milder forms of socialism that Rawls favoured have almost disappeared. If restrictions had been placed on skepticism, none of this might have happened.

Rawls wanted citizens to have the "freedom" to hold and propound beliefs without fear of persecution or ridicule. I am in favour of no persecution, but to link this with ridicule is a slippery argument, chilling in its implications. Consider how much easier it is for church or state to control minds if no one is allowed to ridicule a ridiculous idea.

An adult human must take responsibility for his or her own belief system. We can help holding our beliefs. We can change them and, presented with facts or a rational argument, we should be prepared to do so. Sincerity is no virtue on its own.

The basis for a selective approach to skepticism should be pragmatic not ethical, let us keep going after the testable claims and ignore the woolly beliefs.

Novitz wants to set us four new targets:

The Bell Curve etc: But this has drawn such a vigorous debate in America skeptics are hardly needed. In any case it seems a specifically American issue.

Evolutionary Psychology: does this mean sociobiology? However sociobiology is a respected part of science. Attacks on it as a "pseudos-

ciences" have come from a small group of academics with Marxist affiliations.

Received medical practices which are under-researched and of dubious value: This was a major target for Dr John Welch's excellent column.

The Spurious Science of Economics: Could this be because economists have done much more than philosophers to demonstrate the falsity of Rawls' arguments? A word of warning however. There is quite a collection of Nobel Prize winners on the other side. Are we going to line up with the nutters this time?

Jim Ring

David Novitz replies:

Mr Ring is mistaken about Rawls, as he is about political correctness. Rawls's aim is to ensure that the state remains neutral on issues of conscience. Politically correct people want to ensure that the state does not remain neutral, and insist at every turn that it should enforce their views on race, gender, the economy, and whatever.

There is all the difference in the world, Mr Ring should know, between a liberal state that tries to remain neutral with respect to different ideological and metaphysical views, and an illiberal state that tries to inflict its views on its citizens. In part, Rawls writes in defence of liberal democracy. The claim, therefore, that his "book is an attempt to justify the restrictions that a socialist government must place upon its citizens" is just about as accurate as the claim that the Bible is a novel about a rugby match.

Mr Ring writes in order to defend and advance a particular political point of view that would require the State to enforce particular economic views. Well and good. But he should notice that his

view is much closer to the socialism he fears so greatly than anything Rawls has ever written.

David Novitz

Knocking Homeopathy

John Riddell's demolition of homeopathy (NZ *Skeptic* No 45) went so far, but he left out the keystone of his argument: succussion. Homeopaths (homeopathologists?) maintain that the power of their ingredients persists through the multiple dilutions because they bang the mixtures between dilutions.

This apparently knocks the vital force of the ingredients into the water molecules, which continue to knock it into each other after the ingredient is all gone, rather as gramophone records used to be pressed through several generations from a mould of the original cut recording, or as type is cast and used to print many copies.

Now when someone bangs a bottle of fluid, they can only bang it so hard without breaking it. It's a long time since I did chemistry, but I'm sure that at room temperature the water molecules hit each other already with accelerations that are many, many orders of magnitude greater than that.

Perhaps someone would work it out for us, but I'm reasonably sure that banging the bottle would make

an appropriately infinitesimal difference to the banging the water molecules get all the time.

Hugh Young

Divining Recalled

I have just been reading Great Aunt Molly and Her Magic Hazel Rods [NZ *Skeptic* 46]. In the mid-thirties, when I was about 15, my French mother and I used to spend part of the summer holidays in her villa just out of Boulogne.

The local parish priest claimed to be a water and precious metal diviner. Not only that, he also claimed to be able to divine diseases. He would stand the patient between himself and vials of different illnesses; when the rod shot up, that would be the complaint. In my mother's case it was colitis, fashionable in those days amongst neurotic women.

The thing that interested me most was that my aunt's chauffeur, a very strong man, claimed he could not keep the rod from rising. Treatment was by various herbs, and no charges imposed, just a donation.

Need I say that mum was cured.

Jan Fleming, Rangiora

Interesting to see the similarities between this diviner and modern day kinesiologists or "muscle testers" - ed.

Visit NZSM Online

for eight years of *New Zealand Science Monthly*

<http://nzsm.spis.co.nz/>

Skeptical visitors are welcome to use the temporary subscriber ID of 7UT (with no password) to gain access to "subscriber-only" articles. Those Skeptics who are *New Zealand Science Monthly* subscribers should instead use the subscriber ID printed on their April NZSM magazine labels.

Counselling, Criticism and Scepticism

Gordon Hewitt

As a counsellor and psychotherapist also trained in science and in scepticism I have been disappointed in the apparent lack of depth to the sceptical analysis of counselling that seems to be present from time to time in the *NZ Skeptic*. This lack of rigour in analysis goes back some way. In June 1995, for example, an article appeared in this publication saying counselling was no use. This judgement was based on a single study conducted in 1939.

More recently, in the Summer 1997 *NZ Skeptic* is an article critical of counselling reprinted from the *Times*. The article is based on a single report.

I am not claiming that counselling or counsellors should be immune from critical analysis. In fact I think it is essential. However my previous experience of examples of such shallow analysis has been in the form of criticism coming from either:

1: fundamentalist Christians who believe all problems can be solved by consulting the Bible

2: the new right, whose supporters have replaced the Bible by the writings of Ayn Rand and a small group of economists and whose doctrine is that everyone should be able to solve their own problems. I have been surprised to find it in the *NZ Skeptic*.

Careful critical analysis can only be helpful to psychotherapists, counsellors

and their clients. Martin Seligman's book *What you can change and what you can't* (Random House, 1994) is a good example of writing by someone who has believed that most forms of counselling are ineffective and yet has produced a useful survey of what works and what doesn't. Members of CSI-COP genuinely interested in research into the outcomes of counselling and psychotherapy could do worse than read Brett Steenbarger's study "Toward Science-Practice Integration in Brief Counselling and Therapy" *The Counselling Psychologist* 20 (3): 403-450.

For a more lengthy discussion of the techniques involved in outcome studies and some of the research findings I would suggest Bergin and Garfield's *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavioural Change* (4th Ed. John Wiley 1994).

Seligman himself has become more impressed with the outcomes of psychotherapy following his role as clinical advisor for a survey by the American Consumers' Union (*Consumer Reports* 1995, November, Mental Health: Does Therapy Help?). This survey found that members who had been to psychotherapists were overwhelmingly of the view that psychotherapy was helpful.

It is true that many studies of counselling and psychotherapy are subject to criticism (as are most studies in astronomy or botany). This

is a very difficult field in which to do research.

My own view is that the development of effective techniques in counselling is at an early stage. One study suggested that the variation in the models we use accounts for only 10% of change (Beirman, B.D. et al, *Am J. Psychiatry* 146 (2) 138-147, 1989) (most of the rest seems to be based on the client's desire to change and the quality of the relationship between the counsellor and client) and this is obviously unsatisfactory.

A recent critic suggested that counselling was only about as effective as giving the client a pill. For those who know about placebos, that isn't bad in terms of relieving misery. My personal aim is to be as effective as giving an injection (maybe even, one day, as good as a surgical intervention).

In making these criticisms of the quality of the articles above, I am not attacking the *NZ Skeptics'* campaign against the excesses of so-called "recovered memory" or "ritual abuse" therapy. While some correspondents to the *NZ Skeptic* have taken a somewhat extreme stand at times, I think this has been necessary to counter some of the excesses that developed in this area.

Soon after the *Skeptical Inquirer* started publishing in this area, I talked to people running "ritual abuse" workshops in New Zealand and they frightened me. It seemed to me that they were

working with extremely disturbed people and using methods likely to make them even more disturbed. I gave talks on these topics at meetings of both the NZ Association of Counsellors (NZAC) and NZ Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP) expressing my concerns and encouraging my fellow practitioners to be cautious.

Unfortunately most of the extremists involved in these activities were not members of the NZAP or NZAC and therefore not bound by their ethics or accountable through their complaints procedures.

In conclusion I would make a plea for the maintenance of high standards of scholarship in our sceptical endeavours. Lack of rigour in any area damages our credibility in all areas.

Gordon Hewitt is a counsellor and psychotherapist in private practice. He has previously taught genetics and evolutionary biology at university.

Stop Press

1998 Skeptics' Conference

We have just received notice from the organiser that the 13th Annual Skeptics' Conference (we're not superstitious) will be held in **Wellington** on the **28th-30th August, 1998**, at Victoria University.

For more information email Mike Dickison, mike.dickison@vuw.ac.nz

Registration forms and further details will appear in the Winter issue of *NZ Skeptic*.

Beer and Skittles

May the Force be With You and Your Dead Rat

When I was young enough to think *Dr Who* was scary, I remember thinking it was good to live in times when people didn't believe in superstitions anymore. Recently, US taxpayers coughed up US\$350,000 testing the effectiveness of Therapeutic Touch. It's one of those alternative therapies. The practitioner waves his hands over the patient, without touching them, while thinking gooey thoughts.

It shouldn't surprise anyone that people who think this could work are not very good at designing experiments. The experiment lacked decent controls and the results were meaningless. If they want to be taken seriously, they should at least try to eliminate the placebo effect.

Initially I asked myself rhetorically, "What did they think they were doing?" As in, what a waste of money. But the question is not a silly one. Why would anybody think that moving their hands over a sick person might make him get better?

The answer is that the practitioner thinks he (or she) is manipulating the patient's aura.

Their what?

Their aura, their spiritual energy, life force, as in "Use the Force, Luke". The stuff that's left when you take away the atoms and photons and stuff. I don't know all the details of what these practitioners are supposed to be doing, but then I haven't spent \$14,000 to learn

the techniques. They believe this energy can be manipulated to benefit a sick person. But if illness is an imbalance or a lack of this energy, why take antibiotics?

There are many types of energy and it is possible, I suppose, that there is a thing called spiritual energy. The forms of energy that science is familiar with are detectable, usable, and often measurable. I can detect my body's stored chemical energy by pinching a wad of skin around my waist. I could use it by driving to the gym and riding the exercycle, if I wanted to. I can detect electrical energy by turning on the television. I can increase my body's stored energy by drinking beer. Who ever said science isn't fun?

What about this Life Energy? Can it be detected? Some people say they can see auras. Apparently the life energy tends to leak out of our bodies and the psychically aware can see a sort of glowing fuzzy bit around our outline. The bigger the aura and the more colourful, the better. It can also be used to assess good versus evil, and political correctness.

Crystals also, allegedly, have an aura. They can be charged up by thinking good thoughts at them, or leaving them in the sun for an hour.

The good news is that this is a testable claim. A person with a large aura should be easy to spot hiding behind a corner in the dark. Unfortunately, muggers have small, black auras.

A simpler test that I saw in a *Skeptical Inquirer* a while back was to use a crystal and some empty matchboxes. If you have someone who claims to be able to see an aura around a crystal, try this on them. Once you have been assured that a particular crystal (a diamond engagement ring should do) has a good aura, place it in one of many empty matchboxes. Open all the boxes just a bit. You should be able to tell which box has the ring in it by the aura shining out of the box. A person's ability to see an aura appears to be suppressed by this test.

For those of us who can't see auras, there is always technology to fall back on. Go to any Newage (rhymes with sewage) fair and there will be someone offering to photograph your aura. For a fee. The method they use is called Kirlian photography. Some even use the Kirlian photos to assess the health of your aura, and treat any imbalance with some natural therapy. For a fee. The photos can be impressive. If you use colour film you can get a beautiful pattern around the photographed body part.

It works on anything that conducts electricity. A dead rat can have a lovely aura. So can a paper clip. Semyon Kirlian, a Russian, accidentally discovered/invented Kirlian photography in 1939. If you want a Kirlian camera of your own they can be bought from: <http://www.cebunet.com/kirlian/cameras.htm>

The cheapest ones are US\$180, but there are also links to sites that provide schematics for Tesla coils, the important part of the Kirlian camera. A competent

electrician could probably make one from spare parts in a couple of hours.

The Kirlian camera produces an alternating current with a very high voltage and frequency. If you place any electrically conductive material close to this, the electrons in the conductive material get excited. I mean, who wouldn't? They produce light. In a dark room, you can see a glow, called a coronal discharge. If you place light-sensitive paper under your hand, the light emitted from your hand, exposes the paper. If you then develop this, you get a pretty picture.

It is sometimes claimed that Kirlian photography will show the missing part of a torn leaf, something known as the "phantom effect." It doesn't actually happen — the electric field moves around quite a lot, and because the shape of the field changes, it can occasionally appear to outline areas of the subject that never existed in the first place. This can create the illusion of the phantom effect.

The important point is that the Kirlian camera does not detect your aura. It produces it. There is no aura until the machine is turned on. The Kirlian corona can be altered by a whole range of variables, such as voltage, frequency, how hard you press on the plate, moisture on your hand, and humidity. It therefore seems unlikely that a Kirlian photo could be used to diagnose illness the way some claim (see *Skeptical Inquirer*, Spring 1986 and Winter 1989).

If you wanted to make a bit of money, you could take a

photo at a low voltage, producing a poor aura. Then, tell your victim, er, I mean patient, you are going to give him a psychic healing. Pass your hands over the patient and say "Hmmm" a few times. Then take another photo. This time turn the voltage up to maximum. The aura should be much bigger at the higher voltage but your patient will give all the credit to the "healing". Fortunately, no self respecting tree hugger would ever risk the bad karma that would result from such a confidence trick.

There are some who think they can feel this life energy stuff through their fingers. They get a tingling sensation when they pass their hands through someone's aura. While I'd like to see them do it with a blindfold, they may just be sensing body heat. We have pressure sensitive nerve endings, and heat sensitive ones, but not aura sensitive ones. Just thinking about a body part may cause you to become aware of the sensations from that part. Pick a body part, any body part. Wave it about in the cold air for a few minutes and concentrate on whether it is tingling or not. It makes me tingle just thinking about it.

It doesn't seem as if anyone has reliably seen, touched, heard, tasted, smelt or even photographed an aura. So why on Earth did they spend \$350,000 testing Therapeutic Touch?

John Riddell finds his vital energies are greatly restored by a few cold ones at the Hillcrest.

If undelivered, return to:

Prof Bernard Howard
150 Dyers Pass Rd
Christchurch 2

POSTAGE PAID
Christchurch, NZ.
Permit No. 3357

Subscription Reminder

For the eventual convenience of all concerned, the Skeptics Society has moved to a new financial year in 1998, running from January to December, and collecting all subscriptions at the start of the year.

Thanks to all those who have paid promptly. If you receive a reminder notice with this issue, it is for the 1998 year. We regret we will be unable to supply future editions of the *NZ Skeptic* to those who fail to re-subscribe.

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

Chair-entity: Vicki Hyde (Christchurch)

Secretary/Treasurer: Bernard Howard (Christchurch)

Media Spokesman: Denis Dutton (Christchurch)

Editor: Annette Taylor (Gordonton)

Committee: Heather Mackay (Auckland)
Robert Woolf (Auckland)
Mike Houlding (Tauranga)
Warwick Don (Dunedin)
Annette Taylor (Hamilton)

Bill Cooke (Auckland)
Phil Spencer (Nelson)
Mike Dickison (Wellington)
Ian Short (Christchurch)
Mike Clear (Wellington)