

# NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

AUTUMN 1999 — NUMBER 51

## Real Memories of False Facts

Maryanne Garry and Kellie Fitzmaurice

*Research is revealing how people can develop memories of things that never really happened.*

*The most common cause of wrongful convictions in the judicial system is mistaken identification — US Department of Justice*

Jennifer Thompson's nightmare began when she woke up. It was three in the morning when a man jumped on her, forced her arms down and held a knife to her throat. He warned her to be quiet or he would kill her. First she thought he was a prankster, then she thought he was a burglar. And then she realised he was a rapist.

In a documentary on the US public television network PBS (*Frontline: What Jennifer Saw*), Jennifer describes that she knew she would get away, and she knew she would make him pay. "My first plan was to try to get information, and to try to look at him so that if

there was any type of mark or a tattoo or a scar that I would have a better idea of how to identify him. My second plan was to just try to get out." With amazing presence of mind, Jennifer was determined to commit his face to memory.

*I was trying to see as much of him as I could to see if there was any tattoos or any*

*scars or unusual jewelry or a part in the hair, anything that I could use for information to identify him. And so once my eyes became adjusted to the darkness, I was able to use light sources such as coming through my, my blinds and my bedroom window. A night light that I had. At one point he bent down and turned on my stereo and a blue light came off of the stereo and it shined right up to his face. And I was able to look at that. When I went into the bathroom I shut the light on, and he immediately told me to shut it off, and again in the kitchen, I was able to turn that light on and there were lights coming off* ⇒ p3

## CONTENTS

### Real Memories of False Facts

*Maryanne Garry and Kellie Fitzmaurice* .....1

Editorial.....2

The Sirius Mystery ..... *Peter Sharp*.....7

Newsfront .....9

Skepsis ..... *Neil McKenzie*.....13

Forum.....14

The Tarot Scam ..... *Derek Rompot*.....15

Richard Pearse ..... *Jim Ring*.....17

Beer and Skittles..... *John Riddell*.....19

# The Importance of a Good Cup of Coffee

IT'S A funny old world, I was thinking to myself on the way home from coffee with a friend. Except, it wasn't coffee, it was decaff, and, to add insult, instant. During which she'd helped me to a generous serving of the state of the universe as she saw it.

I tread warily around her because I have often heard her talking about her time spent meditating and her devotion to one Sigh Bar-Bar, who has the answers to absolutely everything. At home I got the Internet Consultant (husband David) to search out information on Mr Barbar, and now we've got lovely pics of him on our computer screen, obviously palming an object he's supposed to be materialising.

For the record, his real name is Satyanarayana Raju, born in 1926 and now going by the name of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He is believed to be divine by himself and his followers. He claims to have paranormal powers and works miracles. Two of his favourite "miracles" are to make ashes materialise for poor folk and jewelry materialise for rich people — doesn't seem quite fair, does it? For more detail, you can go to the Indian Skeptics' website at <http://www.indian-skeptic.de/html/>

Not a week after this, I had a call from a friend who was distressed at finding a friend of hers going down the Sigh Barba road — it seems to sucker gullible folk in completely. This person was in the process of arranging a trip to India to bask in his presence, and leaving her young children with their dad while she did it.

Back to my friend with the coffee problem — one of her favourite theories is reincarnation, that wonderful little idea where we all get to come back and back and back.

Talking to anyone who is into it, and looking at various accounts, an awful lot of people were Egyptian princesses and strapping young conquerors. What about all the millions of debt collectors and chimney mucker-outers? But never mind. There are some obvious flaws with the theory, least of all the mathematics of it. A couple of thousand years ago there were only a few hundred million people in the world, today it's pushing six billion, so where have all these modern souls come from? Perhaps they're just being recycled faster and faster.

Then we have the fuss over Glenn Hoddle and his much reported comments on the subject. Until this came out, I'd never heard of the man, not being up to speed with my world netball — it was netball he was the coach of, wasn't it?

Anyway - everyone knows the story - shock horror, English coach Hoddle says disabled

people are being punished for their sins from a previous life. "You and I have been physically given two hands and two legs and a half-decent brain. Some people have not been born like that for a reason. The karma is working from another lifetime."

Many would argue the above statement is clearly not the result of a half-decent brain, and who would argue with them? Inane philosophies aside, should Hoddle have been chucked out as a result? If he'd been responsible for the team failing to sink enough baskets, maybe yes. This incident did seem to be the straw that broke the camel's back — Hoddle had been huddling with a faith healer woman and forcing his players to take her medicine, and frustration with the pair had been growing for some time.

But while it's a relief to see these ideas are regarded as silly, the incident is a reminder they still carry enough emotional weight for people to be upset by them. In the end, Hoddle was sacked for expressing an opinion on something which had nothing to do with his ability to do his job, and however much we may disagree with him, the free expression and exchange of ideas are vital to the health of a free society.



## Contributions

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

Annette Taylor  
122 Woodlands Rd  
RD1, Hamilton

Email: [number8@ihug.co.nz](mailto:number8@ihug.co.nz)

### Deadline for next issue: 20 May 1999

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.

Permission is given to other non-profit skeptical organisations to reprint material from this publication provided the author and *NZ Skeptic* are acknowledged as the source.

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.

*from the back of my apartment. So there were really several sources of light that I used and tried to manoeuvre him in different positions to where I could use that light. I also made sure I stood near him when I got up, knowing that I'm five foot one, so to assess how tall he was, how big he was. Noticing his clothes, just anything that I could to use.*

Eventually, Jennifer escaped. Shortly afterwards, she was able to use all the information she collected about her rapist to identify Ronald Cotton in a lineup. She recognised his mannerisms, his build, and his voice. Ronald Cotton was convicted.

But Ronald Cotton was innocent. After more than ten years in prison, Cotton was later exonerated by DNA testing carried out by the Innocence Project at the Cardozo Law School in New York. The real perpetrator, Bobby Poole, was convicted on the basis of a new DNA test. And what does Jennifer Thompson say about who she "sees" when she remembers the incident?

**Q:** *And when you think of the rapist - who do you see?*

**A:** *I still see Ronald Cotton. And I am not saying that to point a finger. I am just saying that is who I see. And I would love to erase that face out of my mind. I would do anything to erase that face out of my mind, but I can't. It is just in my head. Sometimes it is more fuzzy than others because my mind now says "Well, it's Bobby Poole," but it is still the face I see.*

Jennifer Thompson was so careful, so confident, and so wrong.<sup>1</sup> But Jennifer is not alone: as many as 8,500 people a year may be wrong-

fully convicted in the US (Rattner, 1988). Surely this figure stems from inherent flaws in the US criminal justice system, you say? Probably not as much as you'd think: Rattner also found that in half the cases in which convicted people were later exonerated, inaccurate eyewitness identification was the major reason for the conviction.

### **Memories Untrustworthy**

Thus, it should not be surprising when we learn that David Dougherty may have been wrongfully identified by a neighbour. Or that Guy Wallace, the Marlborough Sounds water taxi driver, swears he dropped Ben Smart and Olivia Hope off at a 12 metre blue and white ketch with portholes. That couldn't have been Scott Watson's boat — it was brown at the time — but a Carterton man later came forward and said that he owns a 15-metre two-masted scow with portholes, which was in the Sounds.

The fact is, our personal experiences aren't accurately and permanently laid down on some mental videotape we call "memory". Although that's the prevailing belief about human memory, it's a myth. We tend to remember the gist of experiences. We distill out the basic essence of an event, and what we extract doesn't stay pure for long. With every retelling we toss in more contaminants: we make inferences, confuse imagination with reality, shade the truth, or even exaggerate for the sake of the punch line.

Since the mid-1970s, hundreds of experiments around the world, including here in New Zealand, have led psychological scientists to conclude that memory can be moulded into a shape that bears little resemblance to its source. And sometimes memories can be moulded out of nothing at all.

A hypothetical example will make my assertions clearer. Suppose that when you finish reading this article, you decide to go for a walk. When you get to a main intersection, you see a car speed past a stop sign, hit a parked car, and take off. Let us skip over the complicated process of how event information gets inside the head, and just assume that you've extracted information about this unsettling experience. You call the police, and wait for them to arrive so that you can tell them what you've witnessed.

As you wait, the decay process has already begun. Information about what you've seen fades away quite rapidly. As it fades, your memory becomes increasingly susceptible to suggestions. Perhaps another eyewitness says to you, "Wow, did you see that? I can't believe that guy just took off like that! I have to admit, he was pretty scary looking, with that big beard and moustache. Perhaps then you realise that you didn't actually notice whether the driver had any facial hair, but perhaps you don't.

By the time the police show up, you do remember the beard and the moustache—at least you believe you

do, and you tell the police about them. Your memory is changed now, the visual images altered by verbal suggestions. Mental pictures changed by words.

### Leading Questions

In one of the earliest studies of the impact of misleading information on event recall, Loftus and Palmer (1974) showed films of car accidents to experimental subjects who later answered a series of questions about them. Embedded in the stem of a particular question was a word designed to lead the subject into a certain type of response.

For example, when they were asked "About how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?" subjects reported greater speeds than did subjects who were asked the same question when "hit" or "collided" took the place of "smashed". Additionally, subjects asked the "smashed" question were more likely to claim they had seen broken glass in the accident scene, although none existed.

A similar study, also using a filmed automobile acci-

dent, presupposed the existence of certain plausible items in questions designed to mislead subjects (Loftus, 1975). For instance, some subjects were asked "How fast was the white sports car going when it passed the barn while travelling along the country road?" when there was no barn at all.

For the other subjects, a similar question served as a control: "How fast was the white sports car going while travelling along the country road?" Whether in the misleading or the control form, the subject's estimation of speed was unimportant; the question was basically designed as a vehicle for misinformation. Later, all the participants were asked whether they had seen a barn in the film. Those who had received the misleading information in the earlier question were more likely to say they had seen a barn.

These examples are only some of the many experiments providing empirical support for the idea that we can be wrong about what we have witnessed, even when those events are unusual or stressful. But what about

events we have participated in, and not merely observed? These kinds of memories are what cognitive psychologists call autobiographical memories. Can people come to have false autobiographical memories, even for stressful, unusual or unpleasant experiences? Again, scientific research suggests the answer is yes.

Take Loftus and Pickrell's (1995) study as one example. They used close relatives as the source of both true and false suggestions, and asked subjects to recall events described by the relative. Three of the events were true, but one was false.

The gist of the false event was the same for all subjects: they got lost in a shopping mall when they were five years old, an elderly lady found them crying, and helped reunite them with their families. The sibling provided the experimenters with idiosyncratic detail, such as what mall, why the child might have wandered away, and what the parent's reaction was once the child was returned safely. The subjects read the suggested events in booklets, wrote



Donald Room, *Skeptic* (UK)



down what they remembered, and were interviewed twice over a couple of weeks. About a quarter of the subjects (29%) remembered at least some of the suggested false event.

Here is what one woman remembered about being lost at the Hillsdale Shopping mall. During the second interview, she said:

*I vaguely, vague, I mean this is very vague, remember the lady helping me and Tim and my mom doing something else, but I don't remember crying. I mean I can remember a hundred times crying...I just remember bits and pieces of it. I remember being with the lady. I remember going shopping. I don't think I, I don't remember the sunglasses part.*

Even after she was debriefed, she still had the memory. "...I totally remember walking around in those dressing rooms and my mom not being in the section she said she'd be in. You know what I mean?"

### **The Power of Suggestion**

More recently, my colleagues and I have developed a much less labour-intensive method for creating what is probably the germ of a full blown false memory (Garry, Manning, Loftus & Sherman, 1996). It takes only a few minutes, not a few weeks, and instead of relying on older siblings and parents, we simply rely on the power of imagination.

First, we ask subjects how confident they were that they experienced various childhood events such as "broke a window with your hand" or "got in trouble for

cutting a playmate's hair" before the age of 10. Second, in a seemingly unrelated experiment weeks later, we ask them to imagine some of those events, but not others. For instance, one event subjects might be asked to imagine is accidentally breaking a window.

*Imagine that it's after school and you are playing in the house. You hear a strange noise outside, so you run to the window to see what made the noise. As you are running, your feet catch on something and you trip and fall. As you're falling you reach out to catch yourself and your hand goes through the window. As the window breaks you get cut and there's some blood.*

Sometimes we ask subjects to write down what they imagine, and sometimes they merely imagine. In the third stage, we obtain new confidence reports from our subjects. The typical result? Depending on experimental variations, we find anywhere from 45% to 70% of subjects become more confident that at least one imagined event actually happened to them before age 10. This confidence-boosting effect of imagination is called "imagination inflation," and we suspect it is one way to plant a seed that can grow into a fully-developed false memory.

Here at my lab at Victoria University, my graduate students and I have found imagination inflation effects in some unusual instances. Recently, my graduate student Seema Assefi and I collaborated with Charles Manning and Elizabeth Loftus of

the University of Washington, and found that even when we ask people to imagine the event happening to other people, they become more confident that the event happened to them, not to the other person. The other doesn't have to be a person with whom subjects identify; chosen protagonists range from a child aged Bruce Willis (a small ray of hope for this country that no subject identified with him) all the way to the Muppet Miss Piggy.

In other research, Julia Hayes and I have discovered that the timing of the hypothetical event is important: adults experience imagination inflation for childhood events, but not for events from five years ago. Children show similar timing effects. Eight to 10-year-old children experience imagination inflation for events from when they were aged 3 to 5, but not for events from as recently as yesterday. The results of these timing experiments lead us to wonder if there is something about the relatively weak quality of long-ago memories that makes them more confusable with imagined long-ago experiences.

Consider now the application of imagination inflation research: the potential memory-distorting influence of imagination in some real life situations. You don't have to be in one of these experiments to imagine what could happen if a well-meaning but uninformed therapist asks a client to use imagery in an attempt to recover long-buried memories of childhood sexual abuse.

This paper is a quick survey of a vast experimental literature. I have tried to provide some empirical evidence that we can come to have false memories of little details, big buildings, and whole events, whether we simply witness those events or actually take part in them, and whether those events are from long ago or more recently.

But the study of human memory — especially false memories — is a complicated, contentious issue. Psychological scientists like me often find ourselves defending the politics of our research. We are accused of being clueless academics whose work in laboratories (read out loud in scathing tone: not real life) helps rapists and child molesters go free.

In a March 2, 1991 hypnosis workshop at Parkwood Hospital, Atlanta, the infamous psychologist Cory Hammond charged that scientists who are skeptical of those with memories of, for instance, satanic cult abuse,

are untrained, naive, or intellectualising — or cult members themselves.

A few years later, apparently unsatisfied with his failure to halt the progress of science, Hammond discarded his McCarthy era allusions and tried out this hunting one:

*In closing, I want to say that I'm an academic, and a clinician. I'm a full professor. But you know, it's been open season on clinicians with the false memory movement. I think it's time somebody called for an open season on academicians and researchers. In the United States and Canada in particular, things have become so extreme with academics supporting extreme false memory positions, so I think it's time for clinicians to begin bringing ethics charges for scientific malpractice against researchers, and journal editors — most of whom, I would point out, don't have malpractice coverage — when they grossly over-generalise, overstate,*

*and selectively review research.*

Hammond closes with this:

*You know, this week I've actually heard an academic make what I consider a very extreme statement: that all clinicians using hypnosis should videotape and save all their hypnosis sessions to document and control for bias. Well then, I think we ought to ask all researchers to videotape every experimental session, every pre- and post-hypnotic experimental session with every one of their subjects and save them for seven years to document the kind of uncontrolled bias that is occurring in the laboratory. Thank you. (June, 1997)*

I bet Ronald Cotton wishes he had been in one of Corey Hammond's hypnosis sessions, or one of my experiments, or even at an ATM the night Jennifer Thompson was raped. Any place that had a video camera.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a talk at the new The New Zealand Skeptic Society conference in Wellington, August, 1998. Additional material is based on a chapter from the upcoming book *Mind Myths*, by Wiley Books, expected out in February. For more information on this paper, or related research, contact:

maryanne.garry@vuw.ac.nz

Full references are available from the editor.

1 For more information on this fascinating case, visit the PBS Frontline web site at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/dna/>

Maryanne Garry and Kellie Fitzmaurice are at Victoria University of Wellington.



# The Sirius Mystery

ROBERT Temple's book *The Sirius Mystery* suggests that astronauts from Sirius visited Earth in ancient times, 5000 years or more ago. These beings were amphibious humanoids, with the lower body fish-tailed. The evidence for this amazing assertion hangs largely on legend and folklore plus one piece of very puzzling astronomical evidence.

The Dogon people of Mali, West Africa, allegedly had knowledge about the Sirius star system ahead of discoveries by Western astronomers. The Dogon knowledge of Sirius is deeply embedded in their rituals, religious carvings and ceremonies. Chiefs and priests are the custodians of that knowledge, given to the Dogon, they say, by amphibious beings, the Nommo, who visited Earth from a planet in the Sirius system long ago.

The anthropologists were Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, who lived with and studied the Dogon for 20 years from 1931. Their paper covering the Sirius matter was published in 1950, and a translation from the original French is given as Appendix 1 in the 1998 edition of Temple's book.

It was only in 1946, when he had won the total confidence of the Dogon, that Griaule learned the inner secrets of the Dogon, which included the teachings that the Nommo had given them.

The most puzzling thing is that the Dogon priests say correctly that Sirius is a tri-

ple star comprising Sirius itself (Sirius A), a small very heavy star the Dogon call Digitaria (Sirius B) that rotates around Sirius A in an elliptical orbit with a period of 50 years, and a third small star, Emme ya or Sorghum-Female, (Sirius C) which is four times lighter in weight than Digitaria and also rotates around Sirius A.

The Dogon also knew that Saturn has rings, Jupiter has four large moons and the Earth's moon is a dead world.

Our astronomical concept of white dwarf stars, such as Sirius B, only goes back to the mid-1920s, and it is difficult to see how that concept could have reached the Dogon and become so deeply embedded in their lore and ritual as reported by Griaule and Dieterlen. However, there is a university at Timbuktu, and Dogon soldiers served with the French forces in the First World War, so opportunity was there for a Dogon to learn some advanced astronomy — but it's a very long shot. Consider, too, that the existence of Sirius C was only confirmed in 1995 and was earlier pooh-poohed.

We have to ask if there is any supporting evidence for the hypothesis that the Dogon people handed down by word of mouth, a record relating to a visit to earth by extraterrestrials thousands of years ago?

Temple has eagerly seized upon a legend covered in some detail by I.S. Shklovskii and Carl Sagan in their book

*Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1966). These authors say, "Taken at face value, the legend suggests that contact occurred between human beings and a non-human civilisation of immense powers on the shores of the Persian Gulf, perhaps near the site of the ancient Sumerian city of Eridu, and in the fourth millennium BC or earlier."

There follows historical accounts, each of which, according to Shklovskii and Sagan, can be traced back to Berosus, a priest of Bel-Marduk in Babylon at the time of Alexander the Great (356-323BC). This is 3000 years or more after the contact but, as Shklovskii and Sagan point out, Berosus had access to cuneiform and pictographic records dating back several thousand years.

The accounts, which Temple includes in his book, are of a being, Oannes, who had a fish's head and below that a man's head; a fish's tail with feet like a man's below. He taught mankind how to construct buildings, the principles of geometry, how to frame laws and so forth. This is remarkably like the Dogon legends, and Temple suggests that the legends of contact with fishtailed beings reached Egypt and that it was from there that the Dogon people learned of them before they migrated to where they live today.

It is important to point out that the accounts going back to Berosus do *not* involve the Sirius star system nor is Oannes said to be of the race of beings named Nommo.

Sirius was a very important star for the Egyptians, as its rising just before the Sun heralded the annual Nile floods. Temple makes much of this, seemingly the better to link the Dogon legends with those of Egypt and back to the Sumerian civilisation and Oannes.

In addition to the knowledge of the Dogon's Sirius system, Temple digs out a pile of myths and legends of fish-tailed beings to support the assertion that such creatures visited Earth millennia ago. We may well ask, why only one visit in 3000 or more years? Where are they now?

The Dogon also refer in their legends to "the star of the tenth moon". Instead of interpreting that as a nova or similar object sighted in the tenth lunar month of the Dogon year, Temple postulates that it refers to Phoebe, a moon of Saturn. He goes further, and claims Phoebe is, in fact, artificial and is a base of the aliens from Sirius. He suggests this because it has a retrograde orbit and is quite small (having a diameter of about 160km) and it is the tenth moon of Saturn. (Even in that, he has to discount some small moons).

If Phoebe is a space station, the question of why the Sirians have not revisited us in 5000 years becomes pressing.

Early pictures of Oannes show a man-like creature wearing a hat in the shape of a fish head, and around the shoulders hangs a cape of fish scales that reaches almost to the ground. In later depictions, the figure becomes closer to the classic merman; the upper body is that of a man and the lower

body is like a fish's tail. In this form, he is often associated with the Babylonian water god Ea or the Philistines' god, Dagon.

The representation of Atargatis, the Semitic moon goddess, was initially a being having human extremities emerging from under a fish-scale cloak. Later she, like Oannes, was shown as the classic mermaid.

Why did early civilisations represent Sun and Moon gods and goddesses as having fish tails? Was it because they came to visit Earth in a space ship from a watery planet in the Sirius system?

Surely the answer is quite mundane. Many heavenly bodies, particularly the Sun and Moon, were gods. Does the sun not rise from the sea at dawn bringing wondrous light and descend back into the waters at sunset plunging the world back into darkness? The moon similarly rises from the waters only to return to them.

Sirius was a special star for the Egyptians as its rising just before dawn heralded the Nile floods on which the Egyptian crops depended.

Today, our knowledge is such that it is difficult for us to imagine the impact on everyday thinking of these early concepts of the universe. They held popular sway, backed by a powerful priesthood and the belief that the head of state was divine. As late as the 16th century, echoes of such beliefs lingered on; for example many Elizabethans believed that dying men lost their grip on life as the tide ebbed.

When the Sirius Mystery is all boiled down, Temple has

added little, if anything, to the core issue of the Dogon revelation. In the 1998 edition of his book, he goes into great detail of how he has not only been shunned by some former friends since the first edition appeared in 1976, but tells us that American security agencies have launched a campaign against him. Temple claims his files have been doctored to blacken his reputation and he was blackballed in some organisations.

*In my opinion, based on both instinct and information, it was the Soviet Union which was most active in suppressing serious study of both extraterrestrial intelligence and paranormal phenomena. It may seem ironical that although the American CIA persecuted me for so many years, I lay much of the blame for this with the Soviet Union, acting through their agents...*

*I believe the CIA was both duped and manipulated by Soviet agents in its midst.... The Soviet Union was absolutely determined to have a monopoly on paranormal research, for instance, and would stop at nothing. I believe they actually "took some people out", by administering drugs to them which damaged their brains, leaving them alive but in such confused state that they would discredit themselves.*

On reading that language of the Cold War in a work published in 1998 I suspect that Temple, too, has received a dose of brain damaging Soviet drugs.

Peter Sharp is a retired industrial chemist with a life-long interest in astronomy and related subjects.



## Spiritualists face trial after devotee dies in care

EVENING POST 16 DEC 98

BRISBANE. - Two spiritualists who believe humans can survive on air have been committed to stand trial for the alleged manslaughter of a woman who followed their programme of not eating or drinking.

Jim Pesnak, 60, and his wife, Eugenia Pesnak, 58, both of Ormiston, Brisbane, are facing a charge of manslaughter some time between June 12 and July 2 this year.

The couple were arrested after Lani Roslyn Morris, 53, of Melbourne, died on July 1 after being hospitalised.

Ms Morris had been on the Breatharian programme promoted by the Pesnaks as a detoxification and purification process that enabled devotees to survive on light and air.

Ms Morris came to the Pesnaks to undertake the course after reading about them in a book.

Her condition deteriorated after a week of not eating or drinking. The Pesnaks continued to care for her until she was hyperventilating and barely conscious before calling an ambulance on June 24.

Magistrate Gordon Dean described the case as "somewhat unusual and difficult" in that Ms Morris had voluntarily - "and some may think unwisely" - undertaken the process.

Mr Dean said for the the charge to be proved it must be shown the Pesnaks were grossly negligent in omitting to obtain medical help sooner.

He said the prosecution must also prove the approximate cause of death.

The Pesnaks were committed to stand trial in the Supreme Court beginning on December 28.

They entered no plea and their bail was continued. - AAP

## Newsfront

EVENING POST 11 JAN 99

# The ups and downs of predictions

By HAYLEY BROCK

The bad news for New Zealanders in 1999 is that rail accidents will increase and unemployment will rise.

The good news is that the All Blacks will win the Rugby World Cup.

That's the prediction of retired Wellington accountant Norman Spencer, who claims a track record of 90 percent accuracy.

Mr Spencer began work on his predictions model in 1968 and it is based on looking at trends.

His predictions for 1999 include:

☐ New Zealand will not experience any earthquakes above seven on the Richter scale.

☐ Labour will win an election early this year and the seats in Parliament will be distributed Labour 65, National 35, Alliance 9, ACT 7, New Zealand First 4.

☐ The United States sharemarket will suffer a large reverse during 1999. Share investments generally will become less popular and most commodity prices will fall.

☐ New Zealand medical scientists will make further significant advances in gene



Norman Spencer

therapy using oral medication.

☐ Public disquiet concerning genetic science will reverse with realisation of potential for the public good.

☐ New Zealand's unemployment figures will rise to 8.8 percent.

☐ Interest rates will rise and the 90-day bill rate will reach percent a year by the end of 1999. They were 4.7 percent today.

☐ Rail accidents will increase.

☐ The All Blacks will win the World Cup.

So how did some of Mr Spencer's 1999 predictions shape up?

He was right to say the Resource Management Act would be revised, El Nino would dump more rain in some places and prisons would fill to overflowing.

But Mr Spencer was off the mark when he said there would be a general election.

Mr Spencer's last 1999 prediction is that there will be "very windy sailing conditions" for the America's Cup in Auckland later this year.

## Moon dates out - expert

EVENING POST 15 JAN 99

Those who fish by the moon finally have an excuse for being unlucky.

The phases of the moon carried in most calendars and diaries are out of kilter with New Zealand, Southland Astronomical Society member Lloyd Esler said yesterday.

Full moon dates in British and US calendars and diaries were a day out in New Zealand and as a result people had been looking for it a day too early.

"Every year we seem to get the shortest day wrong because it has been calculated in another country," he said.

It was reported last week that stargazers would miss out on their full moon next month.

But Mr Esler said no account had

been taken of the fact New Zealand was the first country to see the sun.

"We will be one of the few places worldwide to have a full moon in February - at 5.06am on February 11."

"This same instant in time is on January 31 in most parts of the world."

Rather than rely on incorrect calendars, Mr Esler recommends astrologers, anglers and those who plant by the moon get their dates and times right by referring to the Astronomical Handbook.

He said a similar discrepancy arose with equinoxes and the longest and shortest days. This year's winter solstice would be at 7.49am on June 22, yet a US or British calendar would show June 21 as a summer solstice. - NZPA

## Sex-hungry ghost assaulted me - witness

EVENING POST 16 JAN 99

### BRITAIN

DERBY, Jan 15. - A woman being sued for default on a house payment is countersuing the sellers, claiming they left behind a sex-hungry ghost that assaulted her in her bed, a court heard today.

Josie Smith, 36, told Derby County Court that after the incident she felt as though she had been raped.

She and her husband Andrew, also 36, are being sued by two sisters for refusing to make the final £3000 (\$NZ9328) instalment on their cottage

in northwest England. In their counterclaim, the Smiths contend the former owners failed to warn them when they bought the house in 1994 that it was haunted.

Josie Smith testified she had seen visions of a little boy with bright red piggy eyes, weeping walls, objects being moved about and strange sounds at Lowes Cottage in the village of Upper Mayfield.

On one occasion, she said, "I felt something touching me beneath my nightdress. It was very cold. It only stopped when I shouted 'No'."

A priest who specialises in the paranormal, and from whom the couple sought help, told the court he thought there was a paranormal presence in their house.

For the former owners, lawyer Thomas Dillon said the Smiths had simply invented the story to avoid paying the outstanding £3000. - AFP

See Skepsis (p14) for more on this story.

# Atlantis hunter has a lot on his Plato

EVENING POST 9 JAN 99

By TOM CARDY

For a holiday you'll never forget, how about joining an expedition to Greenland to find the lost continent of Atlantis?

That's what a construction worker from Rongotea near Palmerston North hopes to do if he can get help from people in the Wellington region.

In a recent advertisement, John McGinty said he had uncovered the site of the mythical land that supposedly disappeared in an earthquake thousands of years ago. Mr McGinty now wants help to either mount an expedition to the area or write a book on the subject.

He said he expected some people to dismiss his ideas as silly.

"They think that [I'm a nutter] or they think 'even if he isn't a nutter he's probably wrong. The chances of him being right are a million to one so why bother'," he said.

"I would be there now if I could afford to go. I know I am right. I would put money on it. I know what I've found is real. The amount of proof I've got is unbelievable."

Mr McGinty said he had worked out that Atlantis was roughly where Greenland was, based on descriptions given by Greek philosopher Plato and a 1968 survey map of the Atlantic Ocean. Plato described Atlantis as an island beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, known as the Pillars of Hercules.

Mr McGinty said it was in a different position. "The map shows the Atlantic without the water. [It shows] two structures on the ocean floor which are the Pillars of Hercules without doubt," he said.

Mr McGinty said he was also convinced other geographical features fit Plato's descriptions.

He decided to advertise for help after trying for 18 months to convince museums, universities and other researchers who had turned him down.

"If I can get someone to invest in an expedition I would even be willing to sell my house and pay them back [if I'm wrong]. That's how sure I am."

Mr McGinty, who is married with three children, said his wife supported him, although "she doesn't understand it very much".

Scientists have disputed Plato's account of the existence of Atlantis. Scholars believe his description is based on ancient Egyptian records of a volcanic eruption on the island of Thera about 1500 BC.

# Diviner warns of uncontrolled drilling

CHRISTCHURCH STAR 17 MAR 99

By Nick Tolerton

Drilling for water spasmodically in Christchurch is likely to cause trouble for the city's water supply, says diviner Dennis Limmer.

Mr Limmer, who has located water for councils including Selwyn and Banks Peninsula, said Christchurch had two huge untapped underground waterways that could supply the city for the next 100 years.

However, pincushion drilling risked contamination of Christchurch's water, he said.

"They are just willy-nilly drilling and upsetting the strata system, breaking up the whole system."

Mr Limmer has often worked with councils to find water. In the early 80s he was asked by the old Malvern council to find water for Kirwee — "they'll never need another bore for the township, even if it trebles in size in the next 20 years" — and recently finished work for the Selwyn council for a town supply for Darfield.

Ninety per cent of the production bores in Kirwee-Darfield were divined ones, and all the big ones by him, said Mr Limmer.

This year he's also worked for the Banks Peninsula council, backing up conventional work by hydrologists and drillers in the Grehan Valley.

As well as working all over New Zealand (the drought has meant many more calls from farmers), Mr Limmer also works overseas, Fiji in particular, because of its drought. His company,



Dennis Limmer: "They are just drilling willy-nilly."

Waterfinders NZ, has its own well with 10,000 hits since it was set up in August.

He does 40 water searches a month. "There have been failures, but when it is a success, it's 20-30-40 finds in a row."

He grew up in the Lower Moutere. "I was always interested in divining, and he became interested in it," he said.

Later he studied for six years reading about divining — called "dowsing" in America — and during the big drought in 1997, he put a small ad in the *Christchurch Star* and got 40 calls the first night.

He's divined professionally since then. "While the drought has meant even more calls, he says his results have been good while for farmers."

# Reborn to live forever?

REBIRTHERS Pauline Avis and David McNab believe people could live for hundreds of years — with the right breathing techniques and attitudes.

Avis, a New Zealander, and McNab, an Australian, have moved to NZ after touring Australia three times with their rebirthing message.

They teach people how to breathe continuously, rather than with the breaks that punctuate most people's breathing, and how to use this technique to relive experiences in the womb and at birth.

By bringing out suppressed memories, they believe people can deal with long-hidden resentments and anger. For example, Pauline Avis found that

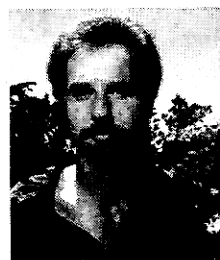
her mother had tried to abort her in the womb with a knitting needle.

"I found out that that alone was making me very, very ill," she says. "I had epilepsy and diabetes and was diagnosed with a brain tumour." After finding what had happened to her, all these ailments disappeared.

"We don't claim to heal people," she says. "What we do claim is very rare, specialised expertise in guiding people on their own healing process — they heal themselves."

They believe an Indian friend, whose photo hangs on the wall of their Brooklyn flat, is hundreds of years old.

"Our experience in this has pushed us into seriously questioning the so-



David McNab and Pauline Avis

called inevitability of death," says McNab.

"We have rebirthed people who have gone away and come back looking 10 or 20 years younger, unrecognisable. That's our acceptance of rebirth."

• Pauline Avis/David McNab 0430.

# Hoddle battles load of bad karma

EVENING POST | FEB 99

LONDON. - As calls for him to resign get louder, the Football Association wants England soccer coach Glenn Hoddle to explain his reported remarks about the disabled being punished for "the sins of an earlier life".

David Davies, the FA's acting executive director, said today that acting chairman Geoff Thompson wanted to set up a meeting with the England coach to explain what appeared in Saturday's Times of London.

The move comes amid calls from disabled groups, lawmakers and some newspapers for Hoddle to resign in the light of what he was quoted as saying.

Hoddle, who sometimes talked publicly about his strong Christian views, said he was a believer in rein-



Glenn Hoddle

carnation.

But he maintained in an interview with the BBC that the Times report had misinterpreted what he meant.

"You and I have been physically given two hands and two legs and a half-decent brain," Hoddle was reported to have told the Times reporter. "Some people have not been born like that for a reason. The karma is working from another lifetime ... What you sow, you have to reap."

Interviewed by the BBC yesterday, the England coach said he was

"outraged" at the way his reincarnation comments had appeared.

"The man asked me about reincarnation - that is a personal belief of mine - but I tried to give him an example of why people are sometimes born into poverty.

"There is an imbalance, an injustice, which I have also said people born disabled coming into life have."

Hoddle's reaction didn't stop the calls for him to resign.

"I have listened carefully to Glenn Hoddle's views ... They are totally unacceptable," said Sports Minister Tony Banks.

"Anyone who feels that a disability is somehow being visited on you from another time in another life frankly is coming from another world." - AP

DOMINION, 12 FEB 99

## Straight tongue

Tainui have straightened the tongue in the Auckland Warriors' league logo. The tribe, which now has a 70 per cent stake in the club, believes the change to the stylised Maori warrior may bring good luck. The logo was originally designed with a straight tongue but the club changed it to curl to the right. Maoris complained this was an ill omen.

## Bad year forecast for PM

Taranaki psychic and astrologer Sylvia Neems is predicting a good year for New Zealand but a terrible one for Prime Minister Jenny Shipley.

She foresees an election in March, followed by "an increase in status" for Labour leader Helen Clark.

Mrs Shipley could also experience unexpected illness.

United States President Bill Clinton will see out his presidency this year, May and June will see world-wide health problems and hiccups on the financial front, but in July power and strength will flow for the whole world.

And the All Blacks will put their dreadful 1998 behind them and scrape home to win the Rugby World Cup. - NZPA

# Soothsayers gloomy about 1999 prospects

EVENING POST 28 DEC 98

JAKARTA, Dec 27. - Punishment for former President Suharto, the emergence of a charismatic new leader and continued economic strife can be expected in 1999 according to Indonesian soothsayers, the Jakarta Post reported today.

Although divided over the country's political future, Indonesia's top four astrologers and mystics unanimously agreed Indonesians could expect the economic crisis of 1998 to carry over into the year of the rabbit, the Post said.

"There is nothing (International Monetary Fund director) Hubert Neiss can do," said Permadi Satrio Wiwoho, referring glumly to the economic crisis, which he said would worsen.

Former President Suharto and his allies, Wiwoho said, would "reap what they have sown" and be punished.

Predicting that "the worst is yet to come", Wiwoho attributed the current turmoil to disrespect for the sacred Javanese month of Suro, when he said no important decisions should be made.

Suharto held the 1997 general elections in a Suro month and was ousted in May 1998, also Suro. His successor, BJ Habibie, was sworn in during Suro and would suffer the same fate, he said.

On a more optimistic note, Wiwoho

predicted the emergence of a new, charismatic leader who was not a politician.

Astrologer Jymmy Kawijaya agreed on the arrival of a new leader, saying he saw a "strong, young leader" emerging within the year.

Kawijaya also predicted that 1999 would see the death of "several national figures, including high-ranking Government officials". Fraud would reach new heights in the year.

Astrologer Putri Wong Kam Fu was gloomy on the monetary front, predicting five years of hardship before the economy began to turn around.

But despite a "very dark" year, she expected the political scene to "return to normal".

Far more pessimistic was soothsayer Laurentia Pasaribu, who said the year of the rabbit would be better described as the year of the "golden giant cat which will eat all our resources".

Three floods would sweep Indonesia in 1999, Pasaribu said - one from the sea, one from broken dams, and one of blood.

She said the promised June 7 election would not take place because of bloodshed and turmoil in April and May, "instead a presidium will be formed to govern the country". - AFP

# Healer arrested for 146 deaths

WAIKATO TIMES 9 JAN 99

SHANGHAI — Police have arrested a phoney doctor blamed for at least 146 deaths among patients who came to him for magical cures.

Hu Wanlin, a 50-year-old ex-convict, was wanted by police in two provinces when he was caught in Shanghai on December 8 on a tip from a hotel employee.

Police in Chang'an County in

the western province of Shaanxi blame Hu for the deaths of 146 people. There were no details of his treatments or patients' illnesses.

Hu spent 1970-80 in prison for manslaughter, and was convicted again in 1983. He reportedly claimed after that to have acquired magic healing powers, and attracted a "huge crowd" of patients. — AP

# Moon plays major role in disasters, man claims

EVENING POST 2 JAN 99

Ken Ring believes many lives could be saved if people paid more attention to the cycles of the moon.

The former maths teacher thinks the moon's monthly cycles have an impact on the world's weather and tragedies such as the disastrous Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race could have been avoided by taking warnings from the phases of the moon.

Although the theory is frowned on by the scientific establishment, he claims the moon's two cycles cause upheavals in the weather.

The full and new-moon cycle occurs as the moon moves around Earth and as both travel around the sun. The other perigee-apogee cycle occurs as the moon approaches Earth and then moves away. At its perigee, the moon can be about 363,000km from Earth and at its apogee it is about 405,000km away.

The moon was in its perigee phase on Wednesday and the full moon was yesterday, a close enough correlation, according to Mr Ring, to have affected the weather during the yacht race and cause storms in the Pacific, Britain and Ireland.

The big blow at the end of November occurred within days of the two cycles coinciding.

The full moon and perigee also fell some days apart two years ago, when New Zealand was hit by Cyclones Fergus and Drena.

A recipe for disaster occurs when the two cycles coincide on the same day or within a day or two of each other. The Wahine disaster, Tangiwai disaster, Napier earthquake, Abbot-

ford landslide and last year's Hurricane Mitch catastrophe occurred at such times.

Mr Ring said when the moon was in perigee there was a greater lunar or gravitational pull on Earth's tides and winds.

He also believes the moon accelerates as it approaches Earth and the weather can be thrown into turmoil before a perigee and full moon.

"I am not saying that you can predict exactly where and when storms and cyclones will hit because the point of proximity of the moon to Earth is a changing factor.

"But fishing trips and school camps held at iffy times could be avoided, potentially saving lives and thousands of dollars in rescue operations."

Mr Ring said the moon's cycles have been the basis of fishing and planting calendars in many cultures for thousands of years but nowadays they appeared to be largely ignored.

He said people should watch out for bad weather around January 25, two days before the perigee and five days before a full moon.

After that the next crucial period would be in late September.

MetService spokesman Stephen Harris said because the moon caused tides and the movement of water it did have an influence on the weather but only on a small scale. It did not cause storms and cyclones.

"There are more important things that influence the weather. The moon is a very, very small player," he said. — NZPA

By ALAN SAMSON

WELLINGTON'S own exorcist doesn't expect much change in his business after the Catholic Church revised its rules on demonic possession for the first time in almost 400 years.

The Vatican has ruled that evil isn't so much a demon with a tail and a pitchfork but a "pervasive force that tricks people". It is the Church's first revision of exorcism guidelines since 1614.

However, Wellington's Church-approved, "but not official" exorcist — he prefers the term "deliverer" — Marist priest Father John Rea, 67, is convinced that demons take possession of people.

He doesn't use exorcism rites, he says. Rather he prays to subjects, making sure they are looking him directly in the eye.

"Often these people have opaque eyes — it's true that eyes are mirrors of the soul. Once you've driven the demon out the eyes clear immediately."

The announcement last week by Cardinal Jorge Medina, Vatican prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, emphasises evil as a pervasive force rather than a demon that possesses people.

It follows a decree last month that said God the Father was no longer to be imagined as "an old man with a white beard", and it is seen as important for acknowledging that psychological disturbances and illnesses such as epilepsy and schizophrenia have often been misinterpreted as diabolic.

Under the new ritual, priests will be asked not to refer to "the Prince of Darkness" or "the Satanic Power" but to keep to looser terms such as "the cause of evil".

But Father Rea says the instruction does not rule out personal demons taking possession, as he believes happens.

"I'd do deliverances every month," he says. Subjects range from haunted houses to people writhing or speaking in strange voices, and sometimes involve a demon speaking from within.

"It's no big deal. I tell the thing to go and it goes."

Usually, the demon accedes to his orders in the name of Jesus, "sometimes they resist and I have to keep at them".

He says they are often received by people who make themselves vulnerable, whether through drugs or religious cults.

Auckland Marist theologian Neil Vaney says the new rite does not deny the existence of an evil force, but recognises possible psychological and psychosomatic causes of behaviour. "Everyone acknowledges psychological causes but it is difficult to find the balance ... some behaviour can be attributed to the power of evil."

Each diocese has one priest authorised to conduct exorcisms and each would have to deal with about two in a year, he says.

Cases had to be referred to a bishop, who would decide if exorcism was warranted.



# Skepsis

## Fat Chance

I START with another example of chemists' lack of ethics and the gullibility of the public. In November 28 issue of the *Listener*, the ever suspicious Pamela Stirling did a good expose on Cellasine, the new herbal cellulite "remedy", which sold out in a few days when it came here.

The Australasian distributor, Bionax, admitted that Cellasine had been a "god-send", rescuing the company from financial strife. Ms Stirling then systematically exposed the stuff for what it is: phoney. There is absolutely no evidence that it has the slightest effect on those growing wads of fat that appear on our thighs and bums as we get older.

It's the usual story of the masses being desperate for a substitute for exercising and eating less. I don't blame the public; they've always been a pushover for unproven remedies.

However, Dr David Russell, chief executive of the Consumers Institute, who has evaluated a lot of preparations sold for cellulite ("they've all proved hopeless"), believes that, in the absence of rigorous clinical trials, New Zealand chemists should not be using their reputations to promote such products. It is "singularly unethical of chemists to be promoting this sort of stuff, given their claim to be health professionals that people can trust". I can't improve on those comments.

## Wonder DOC

This edition's Skepsis award for going beyond the call of nature goes to Dr Mark Austin, a Nelson GP who has "taken a sideways step and declared myself to be practising essential functional medicine" (*New Zealand GP*, 2 December 1998).

In the half page article on "dietary supplements", he makes himself out to have discovered a better way than the orthodox "Western male biochemical way". In fact, he typifies many of the quirks of the quack, which include:

- ❖ it's "natural", no need for therapeutic trials, it's got to be good for you.
- ❖ orthodox practising doctors do not treat the "whole person".
- ❖ orthodox practising doctors are in the pockets of the pharmaceutical companies.
- ❖ orthodox doctors conspire against the alternatives.
- ❖ alternative doctors are "environmentalists, holistic, whole person specialists, nutritionalists, functional therapists" etc.
- ❖ they're not interested in money.

Welcome to the Magic Circle, Dr Austin.

## I've Been Framed

In the same issue of *New Zealand GP*, another stalwart anti-medical establishmentarian, Dr Tessa Jones, who featured in an earlier Skepsis article, bleated on about her unfair exposure by *Consumer* magazine. She also received harsh criticism from the

New Zealand Ethics Committee because of her selling unproven products to terminal cancer victims. She is now saying that it's "ethical as long as your patients know you stand to gain from them taking what you are recommending".

I can't say I'm surprised that she is now being assessed by the Medical Council Disciplinary Tribunal.

## Healthy Scepticism

This is the name of a magazine being sent to New Zealand doctors, and could be a great ally to our society. It is written by the MaLAM (Medical Lobby for Appropriate Marketing Inc) secretariat and funded by PHARMAC.

In Volume 2, No. 1, January 1999, there is an item "Be Aware of Experts and Conflicts of Interest". This warns of the very real danger of specialists endorsing drugs because of incentives such as drug company funded research.

However, MaLAM should itself be careful not to be hung by its own noose. PHARMAC also has an interest in promoting drugs that cost the New Zealand taxpayer less. This is already causing doctors and their patients great problems. For example, PHARMAC has prevented heart disease sufferers from receiving vital blood pressure and cholesterol-reducing drugs.

So until MaLAM rids itself of PHARMAC, I will urge my colleagues to regard any-

# Forum

I AM looking for ideas. For the last four years, I have had a challenge to psychics for them to find a promissory note with a value of \$50,000. For the first six months, it was located within five kilometres of my tourist activity - Stuart Landsborough's Puzzling World in Wanaka. I had two serious psychic challenges, each of whom seriously failed!

For the last three and a half years, the note has been located within a two hundred

---

thing they have to say with "healthy scepticism".

## The Sceptic Arm of the Law

There was a delightful story in the *International Express*, 26 January 1999, entitled "The Ghostbuster Judge". It concerned a couple trying to get out of their house loan because they claimed they had not been informed that their cottage was haunted. They had the support of their local vicar.

The judge gave them short shrift, dismissing the wife as hysterical and the husband as devious. The evidence of the vicar he described as "deeply flawed and unacceptable", and found against the couple, dismissing their stories of ghostly happenings as a figment of their imagination. Amazingly, they had legal aid. Pity this judge wasn't on the Peter Ellis case here.

Neil McKenzie is a GP with his eye out for dodgy medical claims.

metre radius — along with a lock of my hair, just in case they need that dead body connection. Also another object, which I will not name — they can tell me.

In the last three-and-a-half years, I have not had one challenge even though it has been on TV news, many newspaper articles and numerous radio talk-backs. The psychics must know about the challenge.

I have created this challenge for three reasons. The main reason is to create a little balance to all the so-called psychic revelations that constantly assail us through the media. Another reason is to create an interesting and unusual display for my business theme of puzzling. The third reason was to get a lot of free publicity for my attraction! For an initial investment of \$2000 for artwork and a new display cabinet, I have received at least \$50,000 worth of free publicity!

I am looking for another similar challenge for the same three reasons. Has anybody any ideas?

I would like to do another challenge soon. The end of the year will be the millennium — there are going to be a lot of crackpot predictions. I want to create a little balance.

What about Nostradamus — perhaps somebody could let me know exactly what he predicts is going to happen this year. Are there any sects that believe the end of the world is going to happen in the near future? Will they

want to give their money away before that time to save their souls?

I am thinking of opening a new bank account with the name Armageddon. They can save their souls by giving their money to me!

Any ideas out there? If so, write to me at Stuart Landsborough's Puzzling World, Main Highway, Wanaka, Box 95.

Stuart Landsborough

## More on Heretics

Jim Ring may have a wide ranging interest in skeptical topics, but knows bugger all about English politics of the seventeenth century, if he thinks William Laud was executed for persecuting heretics. That's the historical equivalent of calling the sun the big fire in the sky. In fact his death was just as much a result of his attempted financial reforms and reputation as a theological innovator. All sides in the religious debates of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were firmly convinced of the necessity of burning heretics - they simply disagreed as to whom to burn. Toleration possibly was essential for the development of science, but it was quite limited in its application at this time.

Why do scientific and medical Skeptics always make such a point of criticising those who stray outside their discipline, while at the same time feeling free to plunder history whenever they choose?

Bob Metcalfe

# The Tarot Scam, or Cold (Frosty) Readings

*Tarot readings really do work — for the reader.*

## The Confession

AFTER the July REALL meeting, my dirty little secret is out. Yes, I admit that I used to do Tarot readings back in my college days. OK, I still do Tarot readings, but I do them for the noblest of reasons: to meet women. After all, eight out of 10 people who consult psychics are women.

It all started back in my college days, when, about once a month, my friends and I would “pull a Tarot Scam”. At that time, I had developed my own style of Tarot readings. I was doing cold readings, but (at the time) I didn’t know what the term cold reading meant.

## The Players

It took at least three people to “pull a Tarot Scam”, and each person had a specific job to perform in the course of the evening. My job was obvious enough — I did the Tarot readings. I made sure that I dressed semi-exotically for the occasion, usually wearing a brightly coloured bandanna or black overcoat. I dressed differently enough to stand out from the crowd. The high visibility made it easy for potential clients to identify me, as word of mouth would spread that “a big guy with a beard and bandanna is doing Tarot readings over in the corner.”

Tom was the second player in our little Tarot scam. Tom

is basically a nice guy, which is the only thing that keeps him from becoming a damn good con man. Tom can talk just about anyone into doing anything. Tom was our barker.

We also needed a third body to be our shill. The shill didn’t need any special skills, except for the ability to look and act normal, and to keep a straight face. Joe was our shill.

## The Setup

The Tarot Scam was always performed at a local drinking establishment, which are plentiful on a college campus. We arrived at the bar around 9pm so we could grab a good table.

A good table is a necessity to pull the scam. A good table needs to be visible from the majority of the bar, but actually be located in a corner or away from the main flow of traffic through the bar. In addition, the table has to be located in a relatively quiet part of the bar. People need to know that you are doing readings, but the table needs to be removed from the rest of the bar so that people are willing to have their cards read.

## Pulling The Scam

The three of us would get a round of drinks, and wait. Once the bar had a good crowd, we would start the scam, and it would go something like this:

Tom leaves the table, goes to the bathroom, makes a circuit or two around the bar and otherwise kills some time. I wait for Tom to get some distance away from us, and then I do a reading for Joe. Joe verbally agrees with my reading, regardless of what I say, and comments about how accurate it is. At this point, people in our section of the bar notice that I am doing a Tarot reading, and it piques their interest.

Tom comes back, takes notice of Joe’s reading (which is almost finished at this time), and, in a voice that carries nicely across a crowded room, would state: “Oh, you’re having your cards read. Does that actually work? Is he actually telling your future?” At which point Joe agrees that the reading was very accurate, but he doesn’t want to talk about it.

I know it sounds kind of lame so far, but a Tarot scam is beautiful when its done right. At this point in time, people around us are aware that I am doing a Tarot reading, and somebody is getting ready to come over and ask me to read the cards for them.

Tom wanders off and buys another beer, and just happens to mention to the bartender and the crowd waiting to be served, in a voice that carries nicely across a crowded room, that some big guy with a beard and

bandanna is doing Tarot readings over in the corner.

With Tom gone, I finish Joe's reading. Joe then asks "How much do I owe you for the reading?"

"I don't charge money, don't worry about it. I am just glad to have helped you out."

"But come on, you read my cards, let me do something for you."

I sigh. "Okay, I'm empty, how about buying me a beer?" Joe leaves to buy me a beer.

When Joe gets up to get a beer, someone nearby asks to have their cards read. Tom has also been keeping an eye on the action, just in case no one asks for a reading. If that happens, he talks someone into coming over to have their cards read.

I start to do the next reading when Joe comes back from the bar. Joe gives me a beer, and thanks me for reading his cards. All this is conspicuously done in front of the mark, er, excuse me, the client. The beer for a reading sets the precedent, and the current client assumes that he will buy me a beer as payment for the reading.

While I'm reading the cards for the client, Joe and Tom go to the other side of the room (or upstairs or downstairs) and, in voices that carry nicely across a crowded room, talk about the really accurate Tarot reading that has just been performed. You know the reading by some big guy with a beard and bandanna sitting over in the corner.

I finish reading the cards for the next person, and they feel obligated to me, but I won't take money, so they go up to the bar to buy me a drink. While they are gone, the next client comes over to have their cards read, and by the time they are done shuffling, the previous client returns from the bar with a beer, and thanks me again for the reading.

The readings continue throughout the night, following the same pattern as above. But since I am talking during the readings, I'm only drinking one beer for every three that the clients buy me. Throughout the evening, Tom and Joe stop back at the table, say hi, and prevent the drinks from accumulating by grabbing drinks from the table before they head off and make another circuit.

By the end of the night, the three of us each have had six or seven beers. We only bought two rounds, the remainder having been bought by clients. In addition, I also have the names and phone numbers of a couple of clients who didn't have their cards read that night, but want them read sometime in the next couple of days. Some clients want a private reading, and remember, eight of ten people who consult psychics are women.

### The Moral

Every time the three of us pulled a Tarot Scam, clients ended up buying us \$50 worth of beer, and I got to flirt with beautiful women. Not bad for a night's work. We had a good time, and no harm was done. So what?

The three of us are basically nice, decent guys. What if we weren't so nice? What could we have gotten away with? We looked at pulling a tarot scam as our night's entertainment and as a way to get free drinks when we were short on cash. Even when we treated the scam as recreation, we had a plan, a routine, and didn't leave anything to chance. We each had our little part to play in the scam. Tom was always around to rope in the next client if business got slow. Joe got the whole ball rolling and set the pattern for payment. None of our clients had any idea how much effort was spent making sure that they would come to the table and have their cards read.

What would happen if I started reading cards for money? If my friends and I went to great lengths just for free beer, who knows what we would do for money? Reading the Tarot is the easy part, everything else is hard.

One thing is for sure, our clients would never know what we would do to take their money away from them. And if three basically nice guys had a Tarot scam that they would pull for free beer, what do professional Tarot readers do to make money?

*Reprinted by permission from the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land website ([www.reall.org](http://www.reall.org)). REALL is a skeptical organisation based in central Illinois.*

Derek Rompot is the Vice Chairman of REALL and is only prevented from becoming a full-time Tarot card reader by the fact that he has a conscience.



# Richard Pearse

*Did he or didn't he?*

THROUGH various articles, books, radio and TV programs, most New Zealanders will be familiar with the name Richard Pearse. Many are convinced that Pearse flew before the first official flight in history, made by the Wright brothers on 17th Dec 1903. Some are indignant that Pearse has not received the recognition that he deserved. The best book on the subject is *The Riddle of Richard Pearse* by Gordon Ogilvie first published in 1973 and revised in 1994. Ogilvie provides an objective account and he personally discovered some of the most important evidence in this case. Nevertheless he draws some strange conclusions at times.

When Pearse died in 1953, there had been little interest in his activities. In 1955, George Bolt acquired an old aeroplane built by Pearse (but not Pearse's original plane) and publicity about this brought out a number of people with amazing stories to tell. Some of these indicated that Pearse had flown his first machine, and the earliest flight might have been in 1903. As the Wrights flew only at the end of that year, there was a possibility that Pearse had flown first.

Interest grew through the 1970s culminating in a TV program in December 1975. This was an early version of the "drama-documentary", one of those programs that combines fact and fiction to thoroughly muddle the audience's perceptions.

Since then, there has virtually been a Pearse industry in New Zealand. A government building, an apartment building, a street, an airport, and at least one restaurant have been named after him. He has featured on a postage stamp, in a play and in more TV programs. By the roadside near where he is supposed to have made his early flights stands a memorial, a replica of his plane on a pedestal.

Over 20 witnesses were found, who gave evidence (some on oath) that they had seen Pearse fly his plane in the early years of the century. Unfortunately, much of the evidence was contradictory, and nothing was actually written down until after Pearse had died.

Thus all these statements are about events which had occurred at least 50 years earlier. Some described the plane in such detail that it is possible to see that they were describing pictures of early planes that flew overseas — the described item being nothing like the plane built by Pearse.

Most descriptions of the distance varied from about 40m to 400m, although they did not all claim to be observing the same flight. John Casey described a flight in March 1903 in which Pearse flew two and a half circuits of a field at a height of about 18 metres in a flight lasting about 10 minutes and covering about 2.5km.

Such a feat would have been remarkable. If this story is true, Pearse has suffered a serious injustice. But an average flight speed of 15kph is clearly ridiculous.

Casey was about 7 when this event is supposed to have happened. Most of the attention has centred on trying to determine the date on which Pearse was first seen to fly. Was it early in 1903? Such a date would require a serious historical revision.

All such attempts are futile because Pearse never flew at all. At least, he never made a controlled flight of the type needed to get him into record books. It is not necessary to consult witnesses about this (they are all dead anyway) because documentary evidence is available.

The *Temuka Leader* published a story on 14 December 1909; the reporter, after interviewing Pearse, wrote:

*He has already made some trials and has been off the ground several times, but it is not easy to balance her. He has improved on past performances every time and in his latest effort flew about 25 yards.*

Bleriot had already flown across the English Channel.

Pearse himself wrote letters to newspapers setting out clearly what he had done (and not done). George Bolt discovered newspaper cuttings in 1958, and Gordon Ogilvie later traced them. The first was to the *Dunedin Evening Star* in 1915. The sec-

ond was to the *Christchurch Star* in 1928. This states, in Pearse's own words:

*At the trials it would start to rise off the ground when a speed of twenty miles an hour was attained. This was not sufficient to work the rudders, so, on account of its huge size and low speed it was uncontrollable and would spin around broad-side-on directly it left the ground. So I never flew with my first experimental plane.*

What could be clearer than that?

So where does this leave the eyewitnesses and their detailed accounts of events which never happened? There is no reason to suppose that these people were anything but sincere. They provide an excellent example of how false memories can seem real to those who possess them.

The Richard Pearse affair should be of great interest to skeptics. It illustrates the unreliability of old memories and what is optimistically called "oral history". It also shows how uncritical reports in the media can convince large numbers of people that events that never occurred had actually happened.

Without bothering as to who flew first, try asking people, "Did Richard Pearse build his own aeroplane and fly it in front of witnesses about the beginning of this century?" We have Richard Pearse's own opinion as to the correct answer. It is "No".

Jim Ring is a skeptical Nelsonian with piercing insight.

## Firewalk Firm Escapes Court Action

A company which made staff walk barefoot over burning coals in a training exercise has escaped prosecution. Seven sales trainees suffered burns during the "motivational" session run by insurance giant Eagle Star. Two of the workers needed specialist treatment at a burns unit.

The accident happened at the Cheltenham and Gloucester Moat House Hotel in Brockworth last July. The embers were supposed to have been glowing, but in fact were burning.

Environmental health officials from Tewkesbury Borough Council launched an investigation, and legal officers are understood to have recommended court action, but councillors voted to rule out prosecution. Instead, they will send warning letters to Eagle Star and the event organisers, Infinite Breakthrough Technologies.

Council chief executive Howard Davis said they believed there was sufficient evidence to prosecute Eagle Star and Michael Carroll of Infinite Breakthrough for breaches of health and safety legislation.

"But having taken into account the steps taken by the company and the fact that Mr Carroll no longer works within the firewalking field, it was considered more appropriate to issue warning letters," he said.

Eagle Star spokesman Jeff Wagland said: "Obviously we are pleased that they are not going to prosecute, but we are certainly not complacent about the effect this has had on the company. Our main concern then and now is that the seven people should recover as soon as possible and I am pleased to say that is the case.

"This is a lesson we are going to learn by. The chances of us doing something like this again are on the far side of zero."

The company said at the time that the exercise was not compulsory. All the workers involved have since returned to work.

BBC, 23 February 1999

## Correction

Bernard Howard has pointed out a typing error in his Summer editorial: there were seven founding member of the NZ Skeptics, but only five were named. The piece should have included Mr Ray Carr and Dr Jim Woolnough (both of Auckland and both now deceased). Dr Howard goes on to say that Dr Woolnough was a distinguished physician who put his career on the line by carrying out an abortion in the "bad, old days", and Mr Carr was a long time humanist and skeptic. Sincere apologies for the omission.

# Beer and Skittles

## The Greedy and the Needy

*In which we look at another easy way to make money from home.  
No training or prior experience required!*

DID YOU hear that the Oxford English Dictionary has removed the word "gullible" from its latest edition? Nobody uses it any more.

Turning to a not entirely unrelated matter, I had to check to see if it was the first of April yesterday. It wasn't. TV One reported that a New Zealand company, Right Baby Ltd, claims it has a calendar method that can allow parents to choose the sex of their children. If you give them \$600.00 and fill out a questionnaire, they will give you a calendar that tells you which days are favourable for the conception of a boy or a girl.

They claim it has a 95% success rate, and promise to refund the money if you don't get the gender you wanted. Now you can call me a sceptic, but I don't think they can do it. I mean, if all you had to do was bonk on different days, surely somebody would have noticed by now. Mind you, it's still a bloody good idea from a financial point of view.

Say 200 couples each year fall for the con. At \$600 per couple, that's \$120,000 per year. If their predictions are completely useless, they will get it right half the time. The company will only have to return half of the money, leaving them with \$60,000. And before they give the rest back, they can earn interest on the money. It may take

three months to get pregnant, plus nine months before the baby is born, and then a few more months before they get the birth certificate to show they didn't get the result they were after. The company has had the use of the money for more than a year. And even then they may not pay up until someone takes them to court.

Tracey Perkins of Right Baby Ltd is quoted saying "I don't think it is a con at all, otherwise I wouldn't be marketing it." (Oh yes, that follows). "But they did a study originally in France on 155 couples and the results from that were that only two couples didn't get the gender they wanted." She doesn't say who did the study, nor where the results were published.

They claim that the membrane surrounding the ovum is positively charged on some days, and negatively charged on others. They are implying that the male sperm has a positive charge and the female one negative. (Or the other way around.)

Forget about people for a moment. Animal breeding companies like Livestock Improvement are very interested in this. Dairy farmers want to breed replacement females from their best cows. At the moment, you artificially inseminate your

best cow with semen from the best bull. You will only get a female calf every second year, on average. You don't want males. Bulls don't produce milk. A lot of money is being spent trying to sex sperm economically. It can double the rate of genetic improvement in a herd.

If male and female sperm were charged differently, all you would have to do would be to pass the sperm close to a charged plate and remove the sex you didn't want. It is not only farmers that want to choose the sex of offspring. In China they are encouraged to have only one child. They do an ultrasound and if it is a girl, they abort. Many couples might decide it's worth it to try to choose the sex before conception. (Although \$600 is a lot of money in China.)

What does it matter, you might ask? Who cares if the scientifically illiterate are conned out of a few dollars? Well, I do. It's money they could spend on teaching the next generation about biology. But more than that, it is another example of the needy being ripped off by the greedy. Besides, I wish I'd thought of it first.

Caveat emptor.

John Riddell is obviously too nice for his own financial wellbeing!

*If undelivered, return to:*

NZ Skeptics  
PO Box 28-097  
Christchurch

**POSTAGE PAID**  
**Christchurch, NZ.**  
**Permit No. 3357**

## **Heads Up!**

Pick up your diaries and write this down:

**Skeptics' Conference 1999**  
**August 27-29**  
**Auckland**

More details in the Winter issue of *NZ Skeptic*!

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

**Chair-entity:** Vicki Hyde (Christchurch), [nzsm@spis.co.nz](mailto:nzsm@spis.co.nz)

**Secretary:** Bernard Howard (Christchurch)

**Treasurer:** Clare Simpson (Christchurch)

<b>Committee:</b>	Heather Mackay (Auckland)	Bill Cooke (Auckland)
	Robert Woolf (Auckland)	Phil Spencer (Nelson)
	Mike Houlding (Tauranga)	Mike Dickison (Wellington)
	Warwick Don (Dunedin)	Ian Short (Christchurch)
	Annette Taylor (Hamilton)	Mike Clear (Wellington)
	Peter Clementson (Wellington)	John Welch (Auckland)

**Media Spokesfolk:** Denis Dutton (Christchurch), Heather Mackay, Mike Dickison

**NZ Skeptic Editor:** Annette Taylor, [number8@ihug.co.nz](mailto:number8@ihug.co.nz)