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The World Will End Last Week... or Maybe Next May

Bernard Howard

Our secretary takes a look at issues millennial.

IT IS WELL, at the start of a discussion, to declare an interest. So, I begin by admitting that my fascination with the year 2000 was aroused nearly 70 years ago. Like many mechanically-minded lads of the 20s and 30s, I was a keen reader of "The Mecano Magazine". One issue of about 1930 looked forward to the distant future, and to what life would be like in 2000. I have forgotten the text, but a picture remains in my mind of tall, elegant buildings lining a wide street, along which glided, speedily but noiselessly, clean streamlined trains. The pictures and accompanying description appealed to the young Howard, and I dreamed how wonderful it would be to grow so phenomenally

ancient as to be around at that splendid time.

Well, here I am, undoubtedly ancient, and hoping for at least a few more months, but, I trust, with a more real-

istic expectation of life in the coming year.

To avoid causing disappointment, I make clear at the outset what this talk will not be about:

- ❖ my predictions, even expectations, for the next year, century or millennium,
- ❖ a detailed analysis of all of the 900-plus quatrains of the Prophecies of Nostradamus,
- ❖ the many predictions of psychics, cult members or other mystics.

Instead, I offer some random thoughts

⇒ p3

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Editorial

HEDGEHOGS do not impale fruit with their prickles and run away with it, nor do they steal the milk from slow-witted cows. These are just two of the unsubstantiated rumours and misconceptions that were exploded at the recent Skeptics' conference in Auckland.

It was during morning tea on the final day, and, due to our babysitters spitting the dummy (as it were) we had to bring our eight-year-old daughter Iris to the session. The highlight for her was talking with Dr Bob Brockie, skeptic, cartoonist and probably the only hedgehog specialist present that day. Iris had recently done a project on these spiny creatures and was delighted to chat further about them.

"Skeptics get-togethers can be fun!" proclaimed Iris — reel them in early, I reckon. For myself, I came away from the conference invigorated and reassured that fellow skeptics are a fine, humorous bunch. Truth be told, I've got to say I enjoyed this one more than any of the others. It might have had something to do with seeing my former psychology lecturer Barry Kirkwood saying psychotherapy and counselling were not much more than a racket, and probably do real harm and little good. (Barry, who was senior lecturer in Psychology at Auckland, has now taken up a more intellectual life running a B&B overlooking a nudist beach on Waiheke Island. Discounts for skeptics he says.)

I went for a walk over the old campus when it was apparent that young Iris wasn't going to sit still and listen to the AGM take place — what a shocker that was. They've moved the little grassy knoll where we used to eat our lunch, and done away with the noticeboards where much of one's social life was plotted. You can never go back.

But back to the conference. It was expertly kick-started by magician Ken Ring, who warmed the crowd up so much they were purring by the time my better half David came on to talk about his debate with the creationists. From the contraceptive pill, to little black boxes and a look back at the end of the first millennium, it was an action packed little weekend with many high spots.

Which was why I didn't hesitate when a friend of a friend told me the world was going to come crashing to a halt on or around 2010, that the Mayans had predicted Roswell and that Nostradamus had got it right so far. I dug David in the ribs, grinned widely, and said "shall we tell him how we spent last weekend?"

And within minutes it was all on. Apparently this huge iceberg had broken off some ice

shelf and as it melted it was going to cause huge floods all round the world. David suggested a little experiment, and put some ice cubes in a glass and filled it to the brim. If Barry was right, the glass would overflow and Teresa would get mad at us for wetting her coffee table. But it didn't, because it stands to reason that it won't, as David said.

To his credit, Barry granted us a point. He has promised to send us all the 18 pages written by this raving lunatic who has predicted the end of the world, but as Bernard Howard points out, it's all been done before.

Speaking about the end of the world, David, Iris and I are temporarily relocating ourselves from the tropical Waikato to the chillier climes of Tuatapere. It's somewhere down South, quite a way beyond Tokoroa.

We're looking forward to our experience; David has got himself a six-month contract job with DOC befriending little yellowheads. As for myself, I will continue to brainwash the daughter about the skeptics' way of life, and take this opportunity to plead for you lot out there to motivate yourselves and write some letters for the Forum, or failing that, prepare a good, grunty article for this publication. Of course, if you're going past Tuatapere, feel free to drop by for a chat. (Food parcels containing good coffee and chocolate croissants would be appreciated, but stick to the letters if you wish.)



Contributions

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

Annette Taylor
c/- Department of Conservation
P.O. Box 29, Tuatapere
Email: number8@ihug.co.nz

Deadline for next issue: 30 November 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.

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which have occurred to me as we approach 2000.

Obviously our fascination comes about because any year ending with a zero is seen as a turning point in our lives and history; the more zeroes, the more significant the turn, so we approach the year of the three zeroes with high expectations.

It is hard to imagine what our descendants, if any, will make of the year of the four zeroes (10,000).

Counting in tens is of course quite artificial, and arises from our having two hands with five fingers on each. Five-fingeredness seems almost universal among vertebrates (even the horse, which walks on only one toe per leg, starts life with five).

However, the palaeontologist S.J. Gould points out that this has not always been the case. In his essay "Eight Little Piggies", he describes how Nature, when she first invented arms and legs for

vertebrates, experimented with other numbers of digits, up to eight.

As Gould points out, if this had persisted, having six extra fingers poised over the keyboard would make the playing of a Bach fugue even harder than it is. But, for our present purpose, consider the effect on millennial celebrations of counting in sixteens instead of tens.

Scale of 16	Scale of 10
1	= 1
10 = 16^1	= 16
100 = 16^2	= 256
1000 = 16^3	= 4096

So, thanks to Nature settling on five-fingeredness, we can celebrate a millennium four times more often than might have been the case.

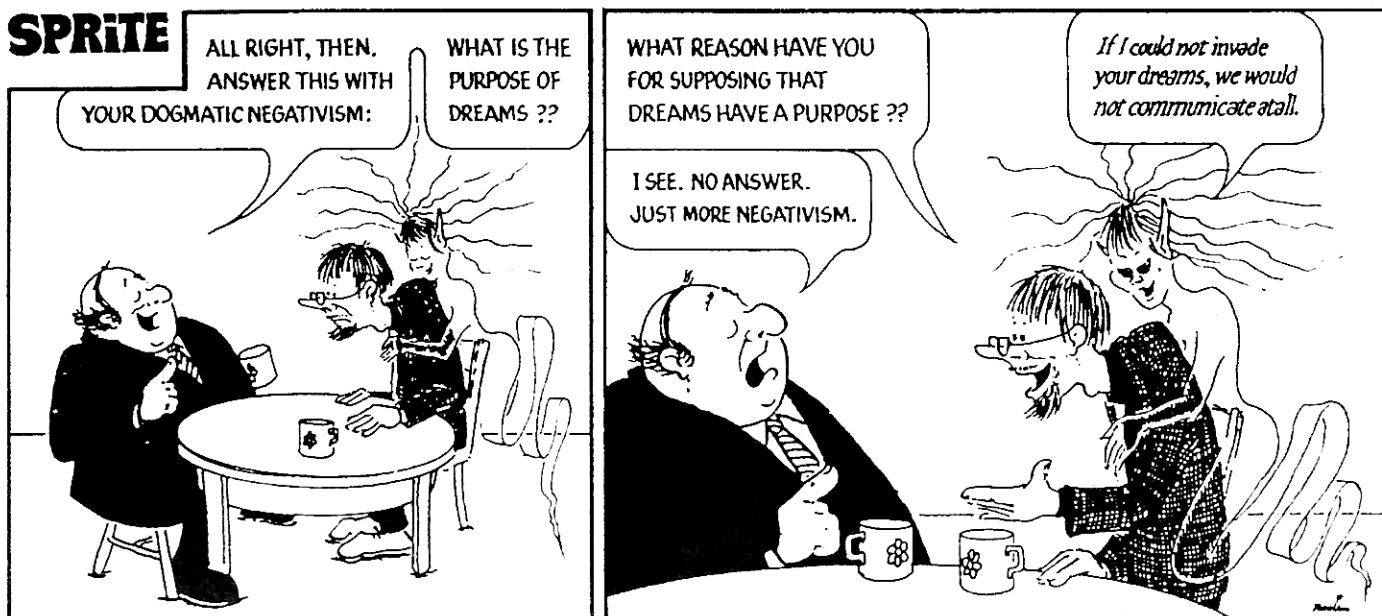
Last Time Round

Many people are wondering at this time what our predecessors were thinking in the year 999? An historian expert in this period, Richard Landes, has given us a rather confused picture. He

considers several problems, and feels the meagre resources available do not yield clear answers. Some problems are:

- ❖ how many people in the 990s knew what year it was?
- ❖ did the literate minority (mainly monks) have a different outlook from the illiterate majority?
- ❖ how far do the written records, which are all we have, ignore this latter group?
- ❖ were other calendars in use then, and so could there have been other years when people were especially fearful or hopeful?

Considering knowledge of the year, an impulse to being informed on this point was the fact that Easter is a movable feast. The main defining element of Christianity was the Resurrection, so that Easter, above all other festivals, was to be observed by all who valued their immortal souls.



Donald Rooum, *Skeptic* (UK)

Because of its movable nature, knowing when Easter occurred required one to know the year. So-called "Easter Tables" were first drawn up by the Venerable Bede in the eighth century, so we can be sure that the year was widely known wherever monks and missionaries were active.

There is a common view that the approach of the end of the first millennium caused widespread panic. If the world was created only a few thousand years ago, it seemed not unlikely that it could end fairly soon. We are offered a picture of rich and poor mingling in vast outdoor congregations waiting for the end, and of the rich giving all their wealth to the Church to buy salvation. This access of riches is supposed to have financed the building of the cathedrals to which tourists flock today. Other authorities suggest that this picture is a fabrication of nineteenth century romantic historians.

One critic has pointed out that arabic numerals were not in use in tenth century Christendom, so the advent of AD1000 would have no obvious significance. This criticism is hardly valid — imagine yourself a monastic scribe of the time; you would welcome the change from DCCCCLXXXVIII to M!

Further confusion is possible when we note that other year-counting systems beside the familiar one were in use, even excluding those used outside Christendom.

One such, in vogue before and during the reign of Charlemagne, was called

Anno Mundi (AM), Year of the World. This supposedly counted from the Creation, in what we would call 5199BCE. This fitted in with the chronology of the Book of Revelation, which speaks of seven Ages, each of one thousand years. The last Age would be a rather unpleasant one, ruled by Satan and the Anti-Christ, and would begin in 6000AM.

This date corresponded to 801AD, so that anxiety and panic had their opportunity a whole 200 years before the millennium. Fortunately for the world, Charlemagne had himself crowned Head of the Holy Roman Empire in Rome in 801, and this happy event left the forces of darkness gnashing their teeth in impotent fury.

Enter Nostradamus

Enough of AD1000. You will be agog to hear the words of the sixteenth century "prophet" Nostradamus. He was notoriously shy of mentioning dates and places, but note that he claimed in the preface to his "Prophecies" that they ran up to the year AD3797. So only one fifth of the period covered has passed up to the present. Can we therefore conclude that about four fifths of the events he describes have still to happen? If so, which could these be?

I quote a translation of comments by a German author who publishes copiously on "New Age" topics. Surprisingly, his views on Nostradamus are penetrating and verging on the skeptical:

Certainly he applied himself, with his prophetic annual almanacs, to using to his own

advantage the weaknesses, small and large, of his contemporaries. For who would not be interested to read what could happen tomorrow or the day after, how one could acquire better fortune in love, health or business, and how one could achieve the healing of infirmities and the fulfilment of cosmetic wishes.

Naturally, Nostradamus was flattered that Catherine de Medici inclined her ear to him, and he was gradually able to slide into the role of a Rasputin at the French Court. And when one is placed in the role of a prophet, perhaps initially on the basis of a few good guesses, it is then not at all easy to renounce it, without great damage to reputation and income. A pressure is thus created to demonstrate ever more insights.

So, Herr Von Rohr. I may add that once Catherine de Medici, who was number one in France at the time, had "inclined her ear" to you, renunciation of your role could damage not only your reputation and income, but your health, and even life, as well.

Much has been said recently about the very rare quatrain in which Nostradamus mentions a definite date. Here is a translation of quatrain X, 72:

The year one thousand nine hundred ninety nine seventh month

*From the sky will come a great King of Terror,
To revive the great King of Angolmois,
Before and after Mars to reign in food fortune.*

Despite the apparent clarity of the beginning, even this quatrain slides into obscurity; where or what is Angolmois? And to what does the last line refer? There is no satisfactory answer to either question. Although this quatrain claims to see 440 years ahead, Nostradamus failed to spot that only 20 years into the future Pope Gregory would "steal" ten days in his reform of the calendar.

So we could stretch a point and allow up to 10 August for this "prophecy" to come true. Some of his "disciples" looked to the total eclipse of the sun over Europe on 11 August for fulfillment, but as we are still here we must conclude that this prophecy has failed.

Other quatrains are much less specific even than X,72, and successive interpreters have tied themselves into knots trying to unravel them. Unwisely, many of these interpretations relating to the near future have been published in book form, and, as they are overtaken by time their foolishness is plain to see.

For example, Hewitt and Lorie in 1991 "discovered" that Nostradamus had forecast the following:

- ❖ the Pope would die in 1995 (he still lives)
- ❖ Prince Charles would become King in 1992 (Her Majesty still reigns)
- ❖ an earthquake in California would cause San Diego to slide into the sea (still there)

Hewitt and Lorie say nothing of 1999 and X,72.

Another "interpreter", Nolan, found in quatrain I,22 a

prophecy of hail and snow in midsummer 1999, and the start of another ice age. The northern summer just ending has been unusually warm in Europe and North America. In quatrain III, 13 Nolan found reference to the sinking of an ark. He worked hard at this one:

- ❖ Believing that the last word of a quatrain had special significance, he picked on *Nagera* (means "will swim" in French, I think).
- ❖ He changed letters into numbers according to the following scheme:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	
- ❖ Nolan had no success transforming *Nagera* into a number, but a friend suggested he reverse the word.
- ❖ *Aregan* yields 195715
- ❖ Subtract "key number" 4713, giving 191002
- ❖ Discard zeros: 1912
- ❖ Year *Titanic* sank. QED

Can anyone believe that torturing Nostradamus's writings in this arbitrary way tells us anything about their meaning?

Coincidental Conjunction

Finally, the dreaded planetary conjunction of May, 2000. The old astrologers recognised seven wandering stars, or "planets", Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, with Sun and Moon. (Neptune, etc. are not included, as they are invisible to the naked eye, and do not enter into older astrological discussion.)

At 8h UST, on 8 May, 2000, all seven will be in the same part of the sky. This "conjunction" does not imply a true alignment; they will be spread across almost 26 degrees of arc.

Conjunctions of two planets are common, of three uncommon, and the more planets involved the rarer the event, since the movement of each planet about the sky is independent of the movement of any other. While astrologers view this event as having great significance for humanity, it is not important astronomically. Even when the planets are at their nearest to Earth, their gravitational effects (proportional to their mass times the inverse square of the distance) are minute, and their tidal effects (proportional to their mass times the inverse cube of distance) are quite negligible.

Note too that, because the orbits of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn are outside that of Earth, and those of Mercury and Venus are inside, when all five appear in the same part of the sky, the three former are near their furthest from Earth.

The effect of this conjunction on earthly life will be nil; it has been compared with the action of a fly landing on a speeding ten ton truck. I shall NOT be selling all my possessions and taking to the hills on 8 May 2000.

Bernard Howard has been secretary of the NZ Skeptics since time immemorial.

Wellington's Healing Touch

When the Holmes programme showcased the new "healing touch" service operated by Wellington Hospital, we swung into action with the following fax:

September 21, 1999

Dear Mr Holmes,

In your item on Wellington Hospital's "healing" hands, I noted that Dr John Carter said that there is no evidence to prove that such practices cause healing, yet he permits his staff to make precisely that claim in media publicity, in patient discussions and on signs. What would the Fair Trade Commission have to say about this? And what position does the Health Funding Authority take on paying for such nursing time?

Like any form of extra caring or positive interaction, from a basic smile to a relaxing massage, such laying on of hands may well make patients feel better. But it is not ethical to take advantage of a common psychological reaction and dress it up as some form of special treatment when it is not.

If my recent experience of Middlemore Hospital is anything to go by, the public health system would do better to concentrate on ensuring that their nursing staff know how to adequately lift, turn and move patients without causing them undue distress or dropping them on the floor! Nursing staff seem to be a scarce resource and it is frustrating to see time taken up with this sort of deception, however well-meaning, when basic patient care is often inadequate.

Dr Carter also seemed unconcerned at having nursing staff who appear to subscribe to the ideas of the "human energy system" promoted by the enthusiasts of this latter-day form of faith healing. Good grief, a 10-year-old girl was able to demonstrate that the claimed detection of human energy fields underpinning such practices was bunkum — she even co-authored a paper in the Journal of the American Medical Association along with her mother, a registered nurse herself and a member of the Questionable Nurse Practices Task Force of the US National Council Against Health Fraud!

Frankly, I would be dismayed to be treated by a doctor or hospital who doesn't recognise the important ethical or professional questions here — delusion or deception is not an acceptable basis for something claiming medical support and public funds.

Sincerely,

*Vicki Hyde
Chair-entity*

P.S. I would be happy to provide you with any amount of information on the whole therapeutic touch field should you wish to take an informed look at the implications of our health system adopting this sort of approach to medical care. I can be contacted at (03)

*384-5137 or via
nzsm@spis.co.nz*

Mr Holmes actually read selected portions of this fax the following evening (missing out the comments on Middlemore Hospital), and castigated at length Yours Truly, demanding that Skeptics "get a life" and that we white-skinned, chardonnay-sipping academic elitists should scuttle back to our holes in the Arts Centre and not bother real people! (N.B. I'm proud of my Tainui whakapapa and prefer Pinot Noir, but we elitists don't respond to ad hominem attacks.)

Mr Holmes then went on to indicate his displeasure at receiving the "wooden spoon" (sic) from us for his sensitive, caring coverage of the Liam Holloway-Williams story. It looks like we hit a nerve there....

In recent years we've seen an increasing number of Bent Spoon nominations for the "Holmes" programme and a sorry decline in Bravo Award nominations for his team. Your committee had thought of consigning "Holmes" to the same "uncredible" basket as "Women's Weekly" and "Truth" — we reserve the Bent Spoon for news and current affairs sources which are expected to maintain some degree of professionalism and credible journalistic ability. Sadly, the dominant position of "Holmes" means that, regardless of its content, it

serves as a major "news" source for many in this country, so we will continue to persevere with monitoring its performance and calling into question stories which we do not consider meet adequate standards of disinterested reporting, however much this may irritate Mr Holmes.

And just to show that we're not always reactive, here's a copy of a proactive notice we sent out in October last year when we first heard that Wellington Hospital was planning to introduce "therapeutic touch".

**Attn:
Health Reporter**

We understand that Therapeutic Touch has been introduced as a form of "treatment" at Wellington Hospital. While initial reports have been unclear as to the amount of resources (both time and financial) being devoted to this, we would be keen to ensure that health reporters have a good understanding of this question-

able practice and its implications for the New Zealand health system.

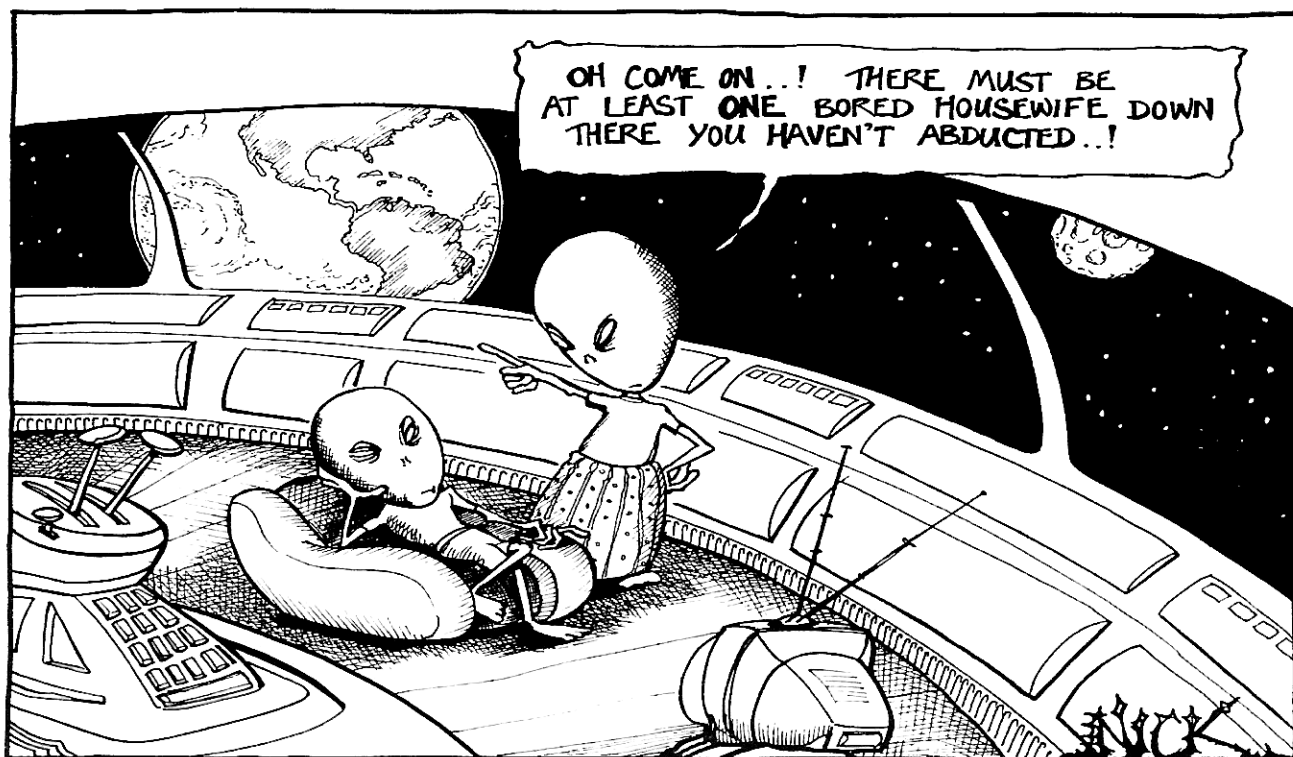
We therefore enclose some of the background information from our files concerning Therapeutic Touch, as well as a couple of print-outs from some diverse sources on the Web. Should you be following up this story, this will give you some idea of the concerns and questions such an approach raises.

As the NZ Skeptics, we are well aware of many different approaches to healing, both conventional and alternative. Therapeutic Touch concerns us because, as far as we can ascertain, there have been no demonstrable, consistent efficacious results in its use. Should its teaching and applications detract from other areas of proven medical care, we would consider the use of such an approach unethical and unacceptable. This is particularly so given the already stretched resources of our current medical system.

A further concern results from the way in which Therapeutic Touch makes claims which are paranormal in that they rely on an undemonstrated, undemonstrable energy system. We would not accept this from a used-car salesman; we certainly should not accept this from our health system.

We understand that the use of TT can be attractive in that it does not require any expensive equipment or extensive training — something that would no doubt appeal to any cash-strapped hospital. Like any form of extra caring or positive interaction — from a basic smile to a relaxing massage — TT may well make patients feel better. But it is not ethical to take advantage of a common psychological reaction and dress it up as some form of special treatment when it is not.

You are welcome to quote any material from this, or to contact us for further information or comment.



Unwrapping the Shroud Again

Joe Nickell

NEW CLAIMS that pollen grains on the Shroud of Turin link it to pre-eighth-century Jerusalem were made in August by researchers at the International Botanical Congress in St. Louis. In fact, the claims are based on earlier, scientifically discredited data.

Here is a brief review of some of the claims that were reported uncritically by the Associated Press and other media sources.

Pollens: It was reported that pollens on the shroud proved it came from Palestine, but the source for the pollens was a freelance criminologist, Max Frei, who once pronounced the forged "Hitler Diaries" genuine. Frei's tape-lifted samples from the Shroud were controversial from the outset, since similar samples taken by the Shroud of Turin Research Project in 1978 had comparatively few pollens.

As it turned out, after Frei's tapes were examined following his death in 1983, they also had very few pollens — except for a particular one that bore a suspicious cluster on the "lead" (or end), rather than on the portion that had been applied to the shroud. ("Skeptical Inquirer" magazine, Summer 1994 pp. 379-385.)

Floral images: Accompanying the unscientific pollen evidence were claims that faint plant images have been "tentatively" identified on

the shroud. These follow previous "discoveries" of "Roman coins" over the eyes and even Latin and Greek words, such as "Jesus" and "Nazareth", that some researchers see, Rorschach-like, in the shroud's mottled stains. The floral images were reported by a psychiatrist who has taken up image analysis and made other discredited claims about the shroud image.

Blood: The Associated Press reported claims that the shroud bears type AB blood stains. Perhaps this erroneous information has its origin in other fake shrouds of Jesus, since the Shroud of Turin's stains are not only suspiciously red (unlike genuine blood that blackens with age) but have failed batteries of tests by internationally known forensic experts. The "blood" has been definitively proved to be composed of red ocher and vermilion tempera paint.

Oviedo cloth: Uncritical reportage suggested the Shroud of Turin gained credibility by being linked to another notorious cloth, the Sudarium of Oviedo, which some believe was the "napkin" that covered Jesus' face.

Unfortunately, like other "relics" of Jesus (some 40 shrouds, vials of his blood and tears, and other products of medieval relic-mongering), the Oviedo cloth is of questionable provenance. It has no historical record prior to the eighth century

and, in contrast to the shroud, lacks a facial image.

The supposed matching of bloodstains on the Turin and Oviedo cloths is but another exercise in wishful thinking. As to the alleged matchup of pollens, once again the evidence comes from the questionable tapes of Max Frei.

Dating: The assertion that blood and pollen matching prove the Shroud of Turin dates to at least the eighth century is, based on the evidence, absurd. The shroud cloth was radiocarbon dated to circa 1260-1390 by three separate laboratories. The date is consistent with a fourteenth-century bishop's report to Pope Clement VII that an earlier bishop had discovered the forger and that he had confessed.

Conclusion: As in the past, claims that the Turin cloth may be authentic are simply based on "shroud science" — an approach that begins with the desired answer.

In contrast, genuine science demonstrates emphatically that the shroud image is the work of a medieval artist and that the cloth never held a body, let alone that of Jesus.

Joe Nickell is a Senior Research Fellow with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and author of "Inquest on the Shroud of Turin".

The truth WAS really out there

DOMINION 23 AUG 1991

A bungling CIA often caused concerns about a possible government cover-up as it investigated sightings of UFOs. Michael Smith reports

THE CIA has issued a secret history of its investigations into UFO sightings, revealing that there was more truth in the popular television series *The X-Files* than is often believed.

The highly critical report describes often bitter debates between real-life *X-Files* investigators who believed that "the truth is out there" and their sceptical bosses. It records tales of bumbling undercover agents whose activities fuelled a widespread belief that the government was covering up what the agency described as "extra-terrestrial visitations by intelligent beings".

The problem was eventually passed to the agency's physics and electronics division where in true *X-Files* style just one analyst investigated UFO phenomena. But the 50s equivalent of Fox Mulder was constantly undermined by his boss, described by the CIA history as "a non-believer in UFOs", who tried but failed to declare the project "inactive".

While the CIA investigations eventually concluded all the sightings could be explained, the report concludes that "misguided" attempts to keep them secret led to widespread belief of a government cover-up.

The report, written by Gerald K Haines, the official CIA historian, was commissioned by the then CIA director James Woolsey in 1993 in the wake of renewed claims of a CIA-led cover-up. The report was completed in 1997 and has been released at the request of the British academic journal *Intelligence and National Security* and is published in this month's issue.

United States intelligence began investigating UFO sightings in 1947 when a pilot claimed to have seen nine discs travelling at more than 1000 mph (1600kmh) in Washington state. The claim was backed by other sightings including reports from military and civilian pilots and air traffic controllers.

The first investigation, Operation Saucer, was carried out by United States air intelligence which initially feared that the objects might be Soviet bombers. But some officers became convinced that UFOs existed and in a top-secret report concluded many of the sightings were "interplanetary". Air force chiefs had the report rewritten to



Fox Mulder had a real-life counterpart at the CIA

conclude that "although visits from outer space are deemed possible, they are believed to be very unlikely".

The CIA initially dismissed the investigations as "midsummer madness". But an agency committee decided they could be used by Moscow either to create mass hysteria or to overload the air warning system, making it unable to distinguish between UFOs and Soviet bombers.

In 1955, claims by two elderly sisters to have had contact with UFOs attracted widespread publicity. A CIA agent describing himself as an air force officer spoke to them and reported that he appeared to have stumbled upon a scene from *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Analysis of a "code" which the women believed aliens were using to make contact with them while they listened to their favourite radio programme was morse code from a United States radio station. But when UFO enthusiasts heard of the "air force" officer's visit they became suspicious that he was a member of the CIA trying to cover up the affair. One enthusiast pursued the CIA conspiracy theory and was visited by another CIA officer, who claimed to be in the air force and even wore an air force uniform. The ruse failed, making the conspiracy theorists even more suspicious.

— *Daily Telegraph*

World nuclear self extinction not on cards

CHCH STAR 22 SEP 99

Sir — Contrary to Larry Ross's belief that the world faces nuclear self-extinction, this can never happen.

Former airline pilot and mathematician Bruce Cathie is a world renowned New Zealand author of a series of books which have scientifically proven that nuclear weapons can only be detonated under specific conditions.

These conditions relate to the earth's geometric harmonic structure and mathematical alignment to the sun.

Nuclear weapons are unlike conventional bombs in that they cannot be fired or dropped at random and so cannot be used in an all out war.

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was mathematically calculated months in advance down to the last second. This explains why no nuclear device has ever gone off by accident when lunatics attempt to construct their own home-made nuclear bomb. It won't work.

Global thermonuclear war is scientifically impossible.

And before anyone rushes to judgment in dismissing this fact, I suggest you study Mr Cathie's works thoroughly. Our own government has, when Mr Cathie could accurately predict the timing of French detonations in the South Pacific. — J CLEAVER.

UFO calls, 100 disappear

Evening Post 9 JUL 99

CARTAGENA, July 8. — At least 100 members of a religious cult were missing in northern Colombia after they went to rendezvous with a UFO that they believed would save them from "the end of the world", relatives said today.

"My daughter told me she had to leave because a cataclysm was going to occur and that she had to go to a high place to meet extraterrestrials who would save them from the end of the world," Andrea de Echenique, whose daughter, Maria Bernarda, is among the missing, said.

The followers of the so-called Stella Maris Church, which describes itself as a Gnostic organisation, headed out to the Sierra Nevada mountains in two groups on Friday and over the weekend.

A police spokesman in the Caribbean resort of Cartagena, where most of the cult members lived, said they had received reports that the group had disappeared.

No doomsday cults are known to be operating in Colombia. But in 1978 South America was the scene of the worst mass suicide ever when more than 900 Americans followed of the so-called People's Temple killed themselves. — *Reuter*

COLOMBIA

Sceptic's challenge: put the gold w

DOMINION 29 JUL 99

WELLINGTON businessman Lawrie Cornish is praying for a miracle of his own — for anyone who has received a miraculous gold tooth or filling at a church service to collect his reward.

After claims in the United States, Canada and Britain that gold teeth have miraculously appeared in the mouths of certain faithful, similar claims have surfaced in Wellington since last month's Elim Congress in Wellington.

There were also reports of "dental healings" at a spillover meeting at the Rock City Church and at

By ERIN KENNEDY

other Wellington services held since the congress.

Mr Cornish has increased his reward from \$100 to \$1000, but said on Sunday he had still had no takers. The reward would be handed over only if a healing could be verified by dental records. Despite extensive inquiries and the help of other investigators, he had not been able to find anyone.

He said he continued to attend services, despite being asked last week by a church official to stay

away from the men's prayer meeting.

Along with other Wellington Christians, Mr Cornish said he was concerned that the miracles were being faked in the name of the church, and that they were obviously fooling some of the faithful.

According to Moriel Ministries, which has been publicly debunking the "miracles", last month's events caused congregation members to give more than \$100,000 in cash and pledges, the clothes they were wearing and jewellery toward a revival fund at the conference.

As recently as last week, a wo-

man at the Elim Church in Wellington testified to having received gold teeth. No verification was offered.

A Hutt Valley pastor contacted *The Dominion* about the same miraculous happenings at the same church. He said gold teeth had fallen down from the ceiling of the church, and that faithful, who had collected bits of sticky tape, had found gold fillings in the tape.

Asked if those involved in the miracles had been photographed or interviewed, he said he would have to check personally. He has since been unavailable.

Monopole magnetic fuel tre

NZ ENGINEERING NEWS JUL 99

Magnetizer, a patented monopole magnetic device, has recently been released on to the local market by Eco Energy NZ, of Wanganui, the New Zealand and South Pacific distributor. The devices can be successfully used to change the valence of hydrocarbon fuels, a spokesman said.

Explaining the process, the spokesman said that as hydrogen possesses only one electron, it has the valence of positive 1. Even though hydrogen is the simplest of all elements, it possesses two distinctive forms: ortho-hydrogen and para-hydrogen.

To secure conversion of para-hydrogen to ortho state, it is necessary to change the energy of interaction between nuclear spins. The molecules of the two gases, para and ortho-hydrogen, differ in the relative orientation of the nuclear spins of the two protons. In para molecules, the spins of the protons are anti-parallel, while in the ortho molecule, the spin is parallel. The parallel molecules occupy the even rotational levels, and the ortho molecules occupy the odd levels.

The orientation of the spins has a pronounced effect on the behaviour of the molecule. In fact, ortho-hydrogen is unstable and more reactive than its para-hydrogen counterpart. The liquid hydrogen fuel that is used to power the Space Shuttle is stored in the para-hydrogen form which is less volatile, for safety reasons, but converted to ortho-hydro-

By applying monopole magnetiser treatment to hydrocarbon fuel lines, users can convert the hydrogen in that fuel to ortho status. This results in a more complete burn, with reduced emissions, producing substantial savings in consumption for the user.

gen as it travels to the motors by passing through a magnetiser type device.

By applying magnetiser treatment to hydrocarbon fuel lines, users can convert the hydrogen in that fuel to ortho status. This results in a more complete burn, with reduced emissions, producing substantial savings in consumption for the user.

In traditional fuel utilisation situations, a burn of the hydrocarbons of 65-68% is normal. After magnetizer treatment, the burn of hydrocarbons can be complete, or higher than 95%. This has the effect of substantially reducing emissions in exhaust gases, and producing up to 35% more calorific value from the same amount of fuel.

The need for catalytic converters under the new standards under the Kyoto accord to air emissions.

Liquid fuels respond to the conductivity available. The units should be placed to the burner as is possible. NASA tests confirm the results.

At local installation, the conversion of fuel for trawlers, 15% in natural gas.

The spokesman said that the conversion of fuel pressure regulators can be converted, especially for fuel pressure regulators. The savings can be 20%. The savings can be 20%.

For further information, call 344 5195 or Fax: 0

Brace yourself! Nostradamus

NZ HERALD 3 JUL 99

LONDON — We stand on the threshold of the Apocalypse. Tomorrow, on July 4, the "King of Terror" is due to make a catastrophic appearance in the skies, according to Nostradamus, the most famous clairvoyant of all, in the form of a protracted world war.

Thousands of believers around the world now confidently expect that an unspecified Great Slayer will wreak havoc at the onset of a 27-year world war.

The period of destruction has been billed as featuring fiery hail, the death of all heretics, and the demise of a third of the world's population.

There is a little hope, however. The third Antichrist will be defeated and Nostradamus suggests that, for those who manage to make it into the next millenni-

um, an unprecedented era of peace will begin. The French seer's collected prophecies — in which he predicted the French Revolution and both world wars — have sold more than six million copies, second only to the *Bible*.

The approaching Armageddon described in them has already prompted believers and cult groups around the world to adopt a siege mentality.

One Japanese couple have been building a survival bunker, while on the West Coast of America mass earthquake fever has kicked off in earnest.

Nostradamus' works have been reprinted in most countries in an attempt to make a grand profit from the grim prophet in the short space of time that remains. In Japan, one poll showed that 20

per cent of people believed that before the end of July a war would break out which would destroy a third of the world's population. Two dozen Japanese books on the predictions were published last year alone.

Most of the Japanese pre-millennial literary enterprises have deliberately come out in time to beat the July 4 deadline, rather than the end of the year itself. The hype is much greater this time than for the approach of any other putative apocalypse because, for the past 400 years, only one of the predictions made by the 16th-century mystic has been beyond all question of interpretation: the date for the arrival of the King of Terror. In his prophetic verses, *Les Propheties*, the date of July 1999 is specifically named.

Nostradamus concocted his predictions

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Moriel Ministries said similar claims had been debunked overseas. In Canada, Winnipeg television preacher Willard Thiessen had to admit that a gold tooth in his mouth had been planted there by his dentist brother. Web sites promoting the miraculous teeth still abound, though, and in Canada, the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship has equipped elders with torches for checking the mouths of the faithful. Psalm 81:10 is cited in its Web site: "Open wide your mouth and I will fill it."

Another Elim member who has expressed doubts about the gold

fillings said of the move: "Has Christianity sunk to a new low, where the spiritual darkness is so marked that we must issue elders with torches?"

Pastor Mike Knott, of Wellington's Elim Church, whose assistant rang to find out why *The Dominion* wished to talk to him, has not returned any calls.

Wellington pastor Richard Liew, of Celebration Fellowship, confirmed that his church had had reports of gold teeth, but said they had not yet been verified.

Those involved were seeing a dentist for verification.

atment

converters is eliminated. Meeting compliance terms of the Resource Management Act, in re-

more easily to the treatment, because of the liquid. However, significant savings have Gas installations. Care is required in the place-der to achieve the best result with Natural Gas. ced on the supply line as close to the gas-entry ticable. Cutting is not required as the devices outside of the fuel line, and has an indefinite life. loss of power as being 1% in 125 years.

Eco Energy NZ, has reported savings in con- dling 30% in diesel-fired boilers, 15+% in diesel Gas burners, and 18-25% in LPG.

led: "Many users are sceptics at first, but soon ecially when they run out of adjustment on their is, and require to downsize burner nozzles 15- be observed within minutes of application in

n, contact: Eco Energy NZ, Wanganui. Tel: 06 344 5186

No dental blessed claim \$1000 reward

Dominion 1 Sep 99

WELLINGTON businessman Lawrie Cornish has had no takers for the \$1000 reward he put up for anyone who received a miraculous gold tooth at recent Elim church conferences.

After similar claims in the United States, Canada and Britain, claims that gold teeth had miraculously appeared in the mouths of certain faithful have been made in Wellington.

Such claims have been debunked overseas. In Canada, Winnipeg television preacher Willard Thiessen had to admit that his gold tooth had been planted there by his dentist brother.

Mr Cornish said some people had come forward to say they had received the miraculous teeth, but were unable to have the claims verified because "their dentist was overseas" or "their records had been lost".

GOLD FILLINGS

We are seeking independent verification of the gold fillings miracles that took place during the Elim Congress 14-17 June 1999.

Should you have received one of these gold fillings or know of someone who has - please write to:

The WATCHMAN
PO Box 15-159, WELLINGTON

**Note: All expenses paid,
plus \$100 reward
(Conditions apply)**

*EVENING
POST
17 JUL 99*

†7G3301100



I'm a doctor, fly me

As a Defence Force medical officer, I was taken by the report on Dr Lovell-Smith and his yogic flying (*GP* July 28). This could be just the thing we are looking for in the Defence Force as it has huge potential for mine-clearance operations. Yogic flyers could hover over the area while taking care not to indulge in any uncommanded bounces.

Specially trained medics (yogi-bearers) could evacuate casualties over even the roughest ground.

Leaflet drops could be carried out to call for peace and if this failed a yogic strike force could disrupt their 'field of consciousness' with cluster bombs.

I take this message very seriously.

*Dr John Welch
Hobsonville*

is says tomorrow's the day

after sitting on a brass pole in a trance and staring into a bowl of water. He then wrote notes in a demotic mix of Latin, Provencal and medieval French, with a few anagrams thrown in for good measure. Nevertheless, the original lines in question are explicit.

The 72nd stanza of the tenth book of his prophecies reads:

3/5 M4 3/5 MOL'an mil neuf cens nonante neuf sept mois Du ciel viendra un grand Roy d'effrayeur Resusciter le grand Roy d'Angolmois.

Avant apres Mars regner pour bon heur.

An accepted translation is: In the year 1999 and seven months, From the sky will come a great King of Terror, He will resurrect the King of Angelmois. Before and afterwards Mars rules happily.

Angelmois is believed to be either an

anagram of Mongolois (Nostradamus referred to Paris as Rapis) or to mean the region Angouleme. Historically, one would point to Genghis Khan and the other to Attila the Hun. A resurrection of either would be bad news.

There is also room for doubt about the exact day disaster will strike.

From studying the alignment of the stars and planets, many believe it to be July 4, others suggest July 24 or 28, the date of the full moon.

While books on the man tend to play down his failures, he is said to have fallen at the feet of a young Italian monk, proclaiming him the Holy Father.

Forty years later the monk, Felix Peretti, was elected Pope Sixtus V.

— OBSERVER



Skepsis

Neil McKenzie

Menopausal Madness

In the wake of the green-lipped mussel debacle, the Australian Menopause Society (AMS) convened an expert panel of doctors to discuss controversial areas of menopausal medicine. Alternative therapies are a boom industry in Australia and New Zealand (worth in excess of \$1 billion in Australia) with menopausal women the highest users.

There have been few randomised trials examining the impact of those medicines. Evening primrose oil and Dong Quai have both been shown to be ineffectual. Women should be warned that no alternative therapy has been shown to provide any protection against osteoporosis (thinning of bone), and women using it should be encouraged to have regular bone density testing.

The AMS says that many alternative therapies claiming to offer benefits to menopausal women contain extracts of isoflavone, found in soy beans and red clover. The argument in favour of this is that in Asia, India and South America, where soy products are the main protein source, women experience fewer menopausal symptoms. However, the link remains unproven, and no clinical trials have shown beneficial effect.

Finally the AMS condemns the extensive promotion of progesterone and Wild Yam

creams for menopause symptoms. Again there is lack of proof of efficacy.

In fact, Dr Barbara Gross, principal scientist at the Sydney Menopause Centre goes further. She says "given the present state of knowledge...it is unethical to promote the use of a progesterone cream alone for treatment of a serious disorder such as osteoporosis".

Strong stuff. It's a pity the New Zealand Medical Council doesn't take a similar, public stand against quackery. Their president, Dr Tony Baird, said in *GP* on 16 June, "Alternative treatments should be subject to scientific testing no less rigorous than that required for conventional treatments."

I wrote in the same publication on 14 July that these brave words are useless without action, and that the council has done nothing to stop the awful proliferation of quackery.

It was quite worrying to see another letter on this by respected Hamilton GP Bill Reeder on 11 August calling my letter "emotional outpouring" saying that present conventional methods were once unconventional. Presumably he thinks that all present quackeries will one day become conventional. And that from a GP of 30 years' experience. Is there any hope for any of us?

Quack Of The Month

This issue's shining heroine exposed herself in *NZ*

Doctor magazine on 21 July 1999. She is one Monika Clark-Grill, whose Nelson practice sign reads "general practice and homeopathy". It's like someone claiming to be an astrophysicist and astrologer, and is quite ridiculous. Like many of her ilk, she felt as a student that "traditional medicine never had all the answers". This implies that conventional doctors believe it has. More nonsense.

She says she took postgraduate training in Austria in homeopathy. This lends her some assumed specialist status. Nonsense again, no such training is recognised here. "I'm a doctor foremost," she says. This is dangerous. It is the perfect deception for a vulnerable public. "She must know what she's doing, she's a doctor," many will think.

She actually concedes that some of her patients think homeopathy is absolute quackery. At least she's honest about that. She says homeopathy works by "stimulating the organism to bring it into balance but what actually happens is not known...it doesn't make sense scientifically but it might make sense in quantum theory thinking".

What utter bunkum! She then describes the way sick organisms recognise the infinitely diluted ingredients of homeopathic medicine. Hopefully her patients will recognise a sick doctor when they see one.

Neil McKenzie is a GP dedicated to providing *real* cures.

Nuts and Bolts of the Annual Conference

Peter Lange

THE 1999 Skeptics Conference in Auckland was a conference looking for a theme, and in the end none presented itself. We ended up with an eclectic mix of papers, ranging from "Reading Cats' Paws" (Ken Ring) to the paper on philosophical skepticism based on the work of David Hume (James Allan).

We'd rather hoped a theme would arrive by default, and for a while during the planning sessions when the four of us (Heather Mackay, Robert Woolf, John Welch and myself) under John's leadership, got around the kitchen table on a weekly basis there seemed to be a bit of a trend towards "risk" and "safety" as the papers firmed up. That proved unable to be sustained, and in the end the variety was what made the weekend enjoyable.

The title for the conference, "You Are Not Alone", also arrived slightly limply by elimination, having put aside "Bollocks To Nostradamus" as too blunt, and "The Effect of the Resource Management Act on Crop Circles" as too long, but it kind of grew on us and it had an ironic but reassuring tone.

Apart from a rather optimistic attempt to get Peter Williams to speak to us for no fee on the legal aspects of recovered memory, everyone responded very generously, and we quickly had a full programme of speakers prepared to give us their time and opinions. Hugh

Young's theatrical and witty approach to ritual eased us through those times when things needed to be loosened up and kicked off. We are grateful that his religious period can still be called up, recovered and reconstructed.

Friday night's Rife Generator promotional talk was a bit weird. I can't help thinking the two presenters came along assuming the "Skeptics" must be sceptical of orthodox medicine. They were upbeat and the language was slick, the machine glowed and gave out a cocktail of waves, bringing on quite a thirst, and the video contained excellent images of coagulated blood stickily impairing the progress of the good and decent cells. At some stage of the treatment 12 metres of bituminous flotsam was removed from the bowel, at which point I decided to postpone my dinner.

It was the only time I can recall when the conference has had real live pseudo-scientific, alternative practitioners actually front up. From that point of view it was extremely interesting, a bit depressing, and also frustrating, as good manners outweighed the desire to dismantle their third-form biology and smash their machine against the wall.

The Saturday evening dinner was also in the spectacular but acoustically disastrous Railway Station. The food was a notch up on the old NZR menu (but only a notch), and we seemed to be

heading for a real problem as David Lange's booming voice bounced all round the tiled walls and arches. Some sensible person then decided to move closer and a minute later we were all gathered around like a Primer One class at the feet of the Fun Doctor. Still a bit hard to catch every word, but we all heard enough to realise that we are not the only interest group confronting the irrationals and eccentrics of the world — politicians face adversaries with equally strange world views. A successful and enjoyable evening after a difficult start.

The "Think Tank" (Skeptic Tank?) at the end of the weekend was added to the programme as a wrapping-up device, and it was a pity that there was no time for it to happen. Perhaps at future conferences there could be an hour or more put aside for debate from the floor focused on the group of speakers from the previous 1 1/2 days. We did try to leave enough time after each paper to give the audience a chance to respond and that seemed to work well.

The organising quartet put in regular lumps of time over a few weeks getting the event under way, but the success of the weekend was really the result of the generous and good-humoured input of the various speakers and presenters. All done for free. In fact they actually paid to be there.

See you in Dunedin 2000.

Chair-entity's Report

WELL, that's another year in the "hot" seat, and more "interesting" times. I've had over 250 messages in my Skeptics email folder build up since January, and that's only the ones I wanted to keep. It provides a form of diary for what we've done throughout the year.

As always, there have been stories that appalled us — the exploitation of little Liam Holloway-Williams by both the media and alternative healers was a shocker, and it was sad to see yet another cancer "cure" touted well before any useful testing had taken place. We keep our fingers crossed that both stories will have happy outcomes. Sadly, I suspect that awarding the Holmes programme the Bent Spoon this year for their uncritical coverage of these stories will do nothing to deter their enthusiasm for "entertainment" of this nature.

Your committee members have been on the case in a variety of ways throughout the year, organising meetings, bearding the creationists in their dens, advising journalism students on the difference between skepticism and cynicism, corresponding with French researchers regarding New Zealand's skeptical and paranormal history, talking to would-be physics teachers about the difference between science and pseudoscience, and generally trying to put a human face to the Skeptics. We've got a foothold on Radio Pacific now, with a whole five minutes

every Sunday devoted to counteracting the remaining material that's broadcast the rest of the time (ah well, every bit helps).

We're sorry to lose Mike Dickison to the wilds of North Carolina, whence he heads in search of a doctorate. Mike's been an all-round helpful fellow on the Wellington scene for some time now, and he will be sorely missed. And Clare Simpson has had to relinquish the Treasurer's position, so please put your hand up if you're able to help in this regard.

The big project this year was the Skeptical Primer, that cheerfully yellow (!) guide to critical thinking, which you should have received along with your 50th NZ Skeptic.

My thanks to all those involved in producing this, not to mention all the "Skeptic" editors who have ensured that we had 50 issues with which to celebrate! We've sent the primer out to libraries and media outlets around the country, and it's proven invaluable as a resource for those seeking to understand what drives us to question things. We'd welcome suggestions for further places to distribute the primer to spread the Skeptical Word, or any other sugges-

tions you may have on what we should be doing.

I was sorry I was unable to make the conference this year, as it is always a highlight in my calendar, most notably for its good humour and reaffirmation of the good that we can do.

From what I've heard, the Auckland conference committee did us proud with a thought-provoking (not to mention just plain provoking!) gathering.

As for the future, I predict that this year's skeptics versus psychics match on Holmes won't be as successful as last year, when the score ran 80% to 0% in our favour. I have to take the blame for that, having made the rather rash forecast that the All Blacks will not be in the final of the World Cup. Oh well, if they do continue in form and win, at least I can say I'm pleased I was wrong for the sake of the country's mental health....

Vicki Hyde

FREE ENERGY #11

NATHAN STUBBLEFIELD

Here is practically all the information available on Nathan Stubblefield. This incredible man discovered a method of harnessing earth energies in great quantities. He was able to light arc lamps for days, and used these same earth energies to send wireless messages (actual speech) years before Marconi (before 1888). Here is one of the most interesting stories of all on free energy and radio. Many very old documents and photos. 68 Pages.

Code : F24 - Free energy #11 \$19

FREE ENERGY #17

THE ORGAN ENERGY MOTOR

Here is a report about this amazing motor that the Wilhelm Reich ran on organ energy and apparently after it was started was able to run completely by itself even after it was disconnected it somehow extracting energy directly from the atmosphere around it. 18 Pages.

Code : F39 - Free Energy #17 \$8

FREE ENERGY #18

PERRIGO

Cover in this file is all you can get on one of the most amazing free energy devices ever invented. Perigo detailed his "Etheric wave accumulator" in the Kansas City post as early as 1916. Extracting electricity from the air in enormous amounts his device was able to light 8,000 100 watt bulbs as easily as one. He demonstrated a car with his device powering a large electric motor in the place of the normal motor. All this from a device with no moving parts and only one foot and a half in diameter. A true must have file!!! 16 Pages.

Code : F42 - Free Energy #18 \$7

Mail order can be just as weird as the Internet!

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

Income and Expenditure Account for the Year Ended 31 December 1998

Income

Donations received	Note 2	505.00
Interest Received		1,249.28
Members' Subscriptions		8,772.53
Miscellaneous		10.00
Surplus from Conference		2,144.77
Surplus from Conference		<u>263.78</u>

Total Income 10,800.59

Expenditure

Audit fees		50.00
Clerical and secretarial		558.33
Donation: Peter Ellis Trust		35.00
Educational publications	Note 3	2,015.32
Interest paid		62.87
Newsletter production and distribution		<u>5,757.48</u>

Total Expenditure 8,479.00

Excess Income over Expenditure 2,321.59

Balance Sheet as at 31 December 1998

Members Funds 1/1/98	27,447.00	Bank Account	29,411.39
Income over expenditure	<u>2,321.59</u>	Books	<u>357.20</u>
	<u>29,768.59</u>		<u>29,768.59</u>

Notes to the financial statements

1. The financial statements have been prepared on a cash basis, i.e., they reflect cash receipts and payments for the period under review. Amounts due to or by the Committee at 31 December 1998 have not been accounted for in the financial statements.
2. Donations received: these include a legacy from the Estate of Eric Grimes.
3. Educational publications: these consist of the printing of the Truth Kit, the Critical Thinking article in Starters and Strategies Teachers Magazine and the purchase of rare journal articles.

Auditor's Report

I have audited the financial statements of the Committee for the year ended 31 December 1998 in accordance with accepted auditing standards, and have carried out such procedures as I have considered necessary.

In common with other organisations of a similar nature, control over income prior to it being recorded is limited, and there are no practical audit procedures to determine the effect of this limited control.

Subject to the above, in my opinion the financial statements give a true and fair view of the Committee's financial position as at 31 December 1998 and the results of its activities for the year ended at that date.

Dr S H Weil CA (SA)
24 August 1999
Christchurch

Forum

Complaints Process Then and Now

I found it interesting to read Bernard Howard's article on complaining to the authorities. I myself complained about an incident that happened some years ago, when someone who was promoting a book he was trying to sell to a school library maintained that the author was "working with the health department on a cure for AIDS". The book was called *Magnetic Healing and Other Realities*. I complained to the Department of Trade and Industry, where I was in fact treated with the utmost courtesy and consideration.

Over a period of six months, while they tracked or tried to track the itinerant bookseller down, I received a number of letters and phone calls keeping me in touch with progress to that point. Of course, after six months when the person was finally found, he denied he ever mentioned the Department of Health. The witnesses to this statement apart from myself, having no great interest in this case had forgotten what went on.

Whatever case there was was dropped for lack of evidence. The point being, though, that even with the difficulties inherent in this case, the department did eventually track down the person who made the statement and questioned him without the necessity for me to fill in complicated forms, rather on a phone call and a formal letter.

I recently complained to the same department about a section of an advertising booklet put out by a local chemist. In it a section advertised the fact that an extract from the olive oil tree was able to "prevent AIDS" (or perhaps HIV).

I fail to see much practical difference. I phoned the department and again was treated with courtesy and consideration. I was asked to ring the Ministry of Health which I also did. I had to leave a message at the Ministry because the person responsible was not there. However that seems to be the end of the matter with both departments. No follow-up calls, no letters, no nothing.

I suspect that government restructuring has meant such complaints are now treated with less urgency. People are basically getting away with no less than practising medicine without a licence — or am I too old fashioned?

Bob Metcalfe

Burning Issues

Bob Metcalfe, (Forum No. 51) makes three points to which I would like to reply.

1. *"All sides in the religious debates of the 16th and 17th centuries were firmly convinced of the necessity of burning heretics".*

But most Christian groups never burnt anybody, and the last heretic to be burnt at the stake in England was not executed because he belonged to a "side", but because he made skeptical remarks.

2. *William Laud was not executed for persecuting heretics.*

Correct, but I never said otherwise. Oxford University, led by Laud and Neile (the future Archbishops of Canterbury and York), burnt a man at the stake for the dreadful crime of denying the Trinity (although he seems to have complicated matters by also denying that humans have an immortal soul).

Parliament became determined to end the arbitrary powers held by the Monarchy, the Anglican Church and Oxford University, of which this was just one example, minor in itself but of great importance in a discussion of skepticism and toleration. Laud lost his head in that power struggle; later, so did King Charles.

After the Restoration, Parliament continued to be the supreme power and the church eventually found that not only could it not prosecute heretics, it could not even excommunicate them without Parliament's permission. By the time of Hobbs (whom some bishops wanted to burn), the University and Church could reflect on the fate of Laud (and Charles) if they felt any ambition to exercise any of their earlier powers.

3. *"Toleration.... was quite limited in its application at this time."*

Not so; the 17th century saw a remarkable advance in England as the power of the church was curbed. There were presumably some children who heard that Oxford University had just burnt a heretic (may even have witnessed it) and then lived through the turmoil of the

Civil War to the Restoration. They could then have heard that Cambridge University, Parliament, the King, (and finally the Anglican Church if they lived a very long life!) honoured Newton (who privately held to the same heresy). In 1689 they would have heard that Parliament had passed an Act of Toleration.

This change of attitude in the 17th century is surely as amazing as the technological advances that have occurred in my lifetime.

I do not see why those with a scientific or medical background should not read history. I may know "bugger all about English politics of the 17th century" as Metcalfe claims, but my interest is in

intellectual history not politics. For those who would like to know more about this, I recommend two professional historians on whose work I have drawn: Henry Kamen "The Rise of Toleration", and the essays of Hugh Trevor-Roper collected as "Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans".

Jim Ring

Holmes Rapped with Bent Spoon

TVNZ's Holmes show has taken this year's Bent Spoon Award from the New Zealand Skeptics for promoting extraordinary and untested claims regarding cancer treatments.

"We were appalled to see the uncritical promotion he gave to the Rife quantum booster business," says Skeptics Chair-entity Vicki Hyde. "Judging by more informed media reports, these people have very little knowledge regarding the actual workings of the human body, beyond being well aware of people's incredible capacity for hope and desperate self-delusion."

The Skeptics were particularly saddened to see the case of small boy Liam Holloway-Williams turned into a cause celebre.

The Holmes show repeated a number of times that the decision in this case to drop medical treatment in favour of what has been described by US experts as "health quackery at its worst" was an informed one. The family cited the book "Suppressed Inventions and other Discoveries" as a reference source. As its name

suggests, this book deals with a vast range of conspiracy theories, from NASA's suppression of evidence for intelligent life on Mars through to the perpetual fruitless quest for free energy sources.

"This is the sort of stuff of which fortunes are made by those prepared to rip off the vulnerable, and you can't get much more vulnerable than being the parent of a child diagnosed with cancer," notes Hyde.

"Certainly we all should question what the medical establishment does and doesn't want to do. But you also have to question those claiming to have cures through alternative routes. They should be held up to the same scrutiny and the same evidential and ethical standards. If we can demand proof of a dubious-looking odometer, why on Earth can't we ask for proof from people who want to take the lives of our children into their hands?"

The Skeptics contend that, as a national current affairs programme, the Holmes show should have looked beyond the entertainment

value of a sick child and desperate parents and asked those questions.

Those sorts of questions, indicating well-researched, informative journalism, were prominent in the winners of the Skeptics' 1999 Bravo Awards.

Brian Rudman of the New Zealand Herald was one of the few people to look at the sorry history of the Rife quantum booster business — described in his article of May 11 as "health fraud in its darkest form".

Pamela Stirling of the Listener gained a Bravo Award for an article examining the claims of quantum booster proponents (May 29, 1999) and showed that her critical thinking was well developed in a piece on the herbal cellulite remedy Cellasene (November 28, 1998).

Dr Roderick Mulgan was also recognised with a Bravo Award for his Wellness column in Grace, covering a variety of subjects of importance to a greater understanding of health and risks, including the placebo effect (December 1998) and cell-phone health scare stories (August 1999).

Beer and Skittles

Genetically Modified Food for Thought

John Riddell

There are three types of people in this country. Those that can count and those that can't. It is common to blame the education system for this.

One of the consequences of a poor education is we end up being poor critical thinkers. People who didn't learn a lot of maths play Lotto, and those who didn't like physics go to psychics. But it is more than this. Every day we are expected to make judgements about things.

The latest subject on talk-back radio is Genetically Modified (GM) foods. A large number of people are very frightened of Genetic Engineering (GE). But they appear to be frightened for the wrong reasons. For example, it should soon be possible to add genetic material to a virus or bacterium which is then used to infect a possum. When possum A meets possum B the infection is passed on. Pretty soon even possum Z is infected. The genetic material produces a protein. This protein causes the possums to produce antibodies against their own sperm and ova.

The result is a disease that renders possums sterile. While this is a pretty neat solution to the possum problem in New Zealand, it would be a natural disaster if it got loose in Australia.

Now this is a good reason to be careful with GE. But this isn't the sort of reason that most people bring up when talking about GE. The big concern for many people is GM foods. "Are they safe?" they ask. Well of course not. Nothing is safe, so why should GM foods be any different? If you are going to refuse to eat things because they might not be safe, you are going to starve to death. If you eat too much fish and chips cooked in non-GM oil, you'll still get fat.

So I ask, "What do you mean 'Is it safe'?"

"Well," they say, "does it contain toxins or not?"

Now this might seem like a reasonable enough question, until you realise that most things are toxic if you have too much of them. Take trace elements as an example. Selenium is essential for survival. If you eliminate it from your diet you will not live very long. But you mustn't have too much either. Most vitamins will be toxic if taken in too large a quantity. But try getting by without them.

GM foods, like all foods, contain things that can be toxic if you eat too much of them. But this doesn't mean they "contain toxins". Not in the sense the scaremongers mean.

If you keep asking "Why are you frightened of GM

foods?" you will get a couple of standard responses. After the "Is it safe?" reply, you'll get the "We don't know the long term effects of eating GM foods." This is just a rewording of the "Is it safe?" question. And the answer is similar. We don't know the long term effects of eating anything. The irony is that the same people who worry about the long term effects of eating GM food are quite happy to use echinacea and any other herbs even though we have even less idea of the long term effects of eating those. For practical purposes, GM food is as safe as normal food, but that apparently is not good enough.

Because GM food is *unnatural*. But so what?

There is an ad for shampoo on the TV at the moment which shows a naked woman wandering through the jungle past strategically placed leaves and the voice-over says "The healthiest way to live is close to nature." I don't know about you, but if I were to wander around naked in a rain forest, I would probably get sick, or arrested. I can't be certain — after all, I have never actually done it. And I'm not going to either. I prefer to wear clothes, live in a house, and use hot water and shampoo when I wash my hair. It may not be natural, but why would I want to be natural?

And what does this have to do with GM foods?

The answer centres around the word "natural". The idea that "the healthiest way to live is close to nature" is so ingrained in popular consciousness that very few question it, even though it is false. This belief has reached the level of a religion. Like all religions, it is an attempt to gain control in an uncontrolled world. But it isn't true. Natural is not always good. Nicotine is natural and carcinogenic. Apple seeds contain a natural chemical that reacts during digestion to produce hydrocyanic acid, otherwise known as cyanide. Do not eat a cupful of apple seeds, even if they are organic. Natural, but not safe. But facts are unimportant in religion.

When they say that genetic modification of food is

unnatural, they are assuming that you and everyone else knows that unnatural is bad. Now I personally do not know this. My life was saved by a very unnatural removal of my appendix.

If you doubt that "natural" is a religious belief, watch TV for a couple of hours, and listen to the ads. It doesn't matter how unnatural or diluted something is, if it was once on a shelf next to something that was made from a plant, they will call it natural. From pills containing a few milligrams of garlic extract to the full range of feminine hygiene products. All claim to be natural. If something really is natural, like a lettuce, simply being natural isn't good enough. It has to be organic. Organic food is grown in one of two ways. Either it is grown using totally natural herbicides and pesticides (as if these are

somehow less toxic), or it is grown using conventional methods, and then someone writes organic on the box.

Which brings up the issue of food labelling. If you write "organic" on the box, some people will pay more for it. If you write "GM" on the box, some people will not buy it. Do you think some dishonest greengrocers might relabel GM lettuces as being organic?

The only good reason for labelling GM foods, that I can think of, is a religious one. If you put genes from a pig into an apple, are Jews or Muslims allowed to eat them? If we put human genes into cows, are we cannibals if we eat the meat?

Do you think the world's starving millions really care?

John Riddell has been watching his diet lately.

Help offered to exorcise ghost

CHCH STAR 3 SEP 99

By Lois Watson

A Shirley woman's tale of things that go bump in the night has Christchurch ghost-busters primed for action.

Several people, who claim to have exorcised ghosts in the past, have contacted the *Star* offering to help Mareesa Dannielle and her three-year-old son Anthony.

Since moving into their house six months ago, the pair have been haunted by what they believe is the ghost of a former tenant. Night after night, they

have been woken by strange noises. Their floorboards mysteriously creak and strange lights flicker on the wall.

Anthony is too scared to venture into the kitchen at night and Ms Dannielle feels she is constantly being watched.

A man describing himself as a minister of the gospel contacted the *Star*, saying that over the past 18 years he had been frequently called in to exorcise ghosts.

He performed between four and 10 cleansing ceremonies each year and believed the ghost would leave the

Dannielle's house if he could perform a similar service there.

While many Europeans found it hard to accept the presence of ghosts, other cultures widely accepted the paranormal. He often dealt with "manifestations of the supernatural".

Another self-described minister of the gospel said he could detect spirits and had helped several people in the North Island cast out ghosts.

And a woman offering to help said she had twice succeeded in laying ghosts to rest.

Psychic help for ghostly problem

CHCH STAR 8 SEP 99

By Lois Watson

A Shirley mother is sleeping easier thanks to the efforts of local ghost-busters.

Mareesa Dannielle contacted the *Star* last week because she believed her red-brick home was haunted by the ghost of a former tenant. Since sharing her story, Ms Dannielle has received offers of help from ministers of several churches and from people claiming to have a connection to the spiritual world.

Ms Dannielle, who lives with her

three-year-old son Anthony, said that on Friday night she had received a visit from a woman who ran a radio show on paranormal experiences and haunted houses.

The psychic had detected a "very strong male energy" in the house. She had stood in Anthony's bedroom and become breathless and "white like the snow".

"I had the impression that she was going to have a heart attack," Ms Dannielle told the *Star*.

"Then she said: 'Somebody had a fulminating heart attack here. He became ill here in the bedroom and

ran off to the kitchen to get the phone and reach for help. By the time he got to the kitchen it was too late'".

The psychic believed the man's spirit kept returning to the house out of concern for his beloved pet cat, which still roamed the neighbourhood.

Ms Danielle said she had resolved to befriend and feed the cat in the hope it would put the ghost to rest.

▲ The phone lines at the *Star* have been ringing hot with offers of help from ghost-busters.

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