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THE REAL

Madame Blavatsky

FANTASIST, FRAUDSTER
OR MOTHER OF MODERN
OCCULTISM?

**DIANA'S
DAMNED
DRESSES**

THE CURSE OF THE
PRINCESS STRIKES

**ANGEL IN
THE FLAMES**

TURKEY'S TEENAGE
FIRESTARTER

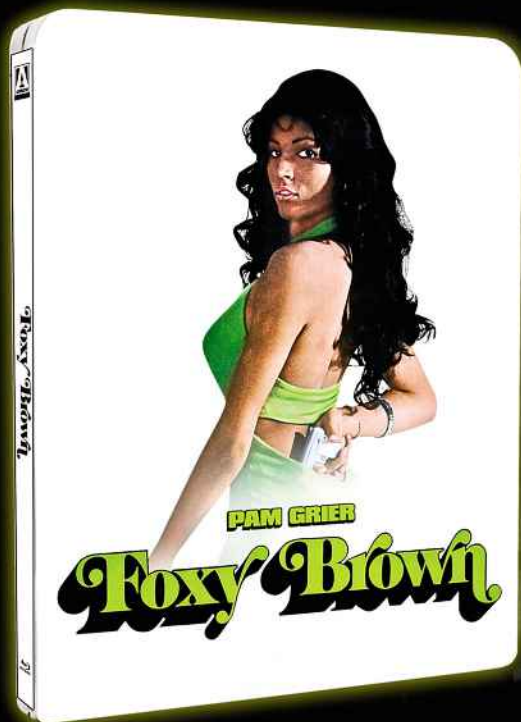
FORTEAN TIMES 302

THE REAL MADAME BLAVATSKY • PRINCESS DIANA'S DAMNED DRESSES • TURKISH FIRESTARTER • JESS FRANCO REMEMBERED • ANIMAL MUTILATIONS

JUNE 2013



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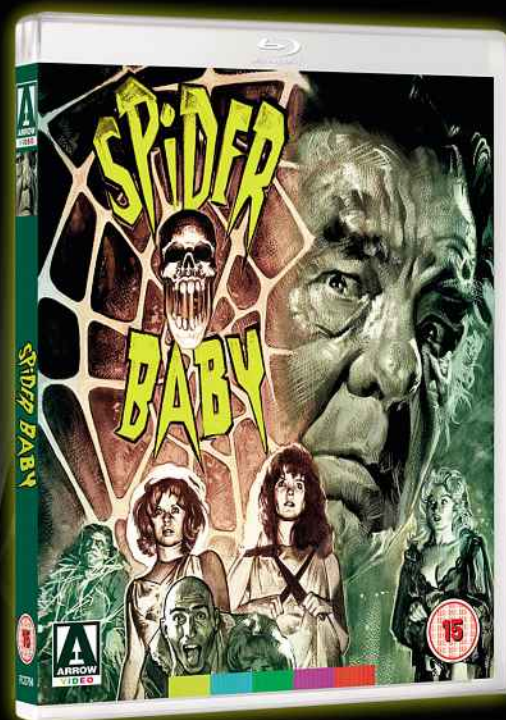
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strange days

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PAUL CROPPER

EDITOR
DAVID SUTTON
(drsutton@forteanimes.com)
FOUNDING EDITORS
BOB RICKARD (rickard@forteanimes.com)
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteanimes.com)
ART DIRECTOR
ETIENNE GILFILLAN
(etienne@forteanimes.com)
BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR
VAL STEVENSON
(val@forteanimes.com)
RESIDENT CARTOONIST
HUNT EMERSON
SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES AND BACK ISSUES
www.subsinfo.co.uk
ForteanTimes@servicehelpline.co.uk

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LICENSING & SYNDICATION

FORTEAN TIMES IS AVAILABLE FOR INTERNATIONAL LICENSING AND SYNDICATION - CONTACT: Syndication Senior Manager

ANJ DOSAJ-HALAI TEL: +44 (0) 20 7907 6132

Anj_Dosaj-Halai@dennis.co.uk

Licensing Manager

CARLOTTA SERANTONI TEL: +44 (0) 20 7907 6550

Carlotta_Serantoni@dennis.co.uk

Licensing & Syndication Assistant

NICOLE ADAMS TEL: +44 (0) 20 7907 6134

Nicole_Adams@dennis.co.uk

YOU CAN REACH FT ON THE INTERNET
www.forteanimes.com



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GROUP PUBLISHER PAUL RAYNER 020 7907 6663 paul_rayner@dennis.co.uk
CIRCULATION MANAGER james.mangan@seymour.co.uk
EXPORT CIRCULATION MANAGER gareth.viggers@seymour.co.uk
SENIOR PRODUCTION EXECUTIVE EBONY BESAGNI 020 7907 6060 ebony_besagni@dennis.co.uk

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT SOPHIE VALENTINE 020 7907 6057 sophie_valentine@dennis.co.uk
DEPUTY ADVERTISING MANAGER CIARAN SCARRY 020 7907 6683 ciaran_scarry@dennis.co.uk
SENIOR SALES EXECUTIVE RYAN GISBORNE WEAR 020 7907 6763 ryan_gw@dennis.co.uk
CLASSIFIED SALES EXECUTIVE JOY LAZENBY 020 7907 6717 joy_lazenby@dennis.co.uk

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GROUP FINANCE DIRECTOR
FINANCE DIRECTOR
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
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IAN LEGGETT
BRETT REYNOLDS
KERIN O'CONNOR
JAMES TYE
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editorial

Weird and wonderful women

DING DONG!

Following the media-fuelled national debate accompanying the death and funeral (or, in some places, burning in effigy) of Margaret Thatcher, our thoughts turned to the feminine side of fortiana - witches, poltergeist girls, cursed couture and female mysticism...

Our original cover girl was to have been the fabled Witch of Scrapfaggot Green, but a last-minute technical hitch (or possibly a hex) put paid to that idea (though she will rise again next issue). Who better to replace her, though, than the magisterial figure of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a woman whose life and legacy have divided the spiritual sphere quite as much as Mrs T did the political? These days, the received wisdom is that Madame was a formidable faker whose parlour tricks (including apports and apparitions) were exposed once and for all by the eagle eyes of the Society for Psychological Research. Gary Lachman - who has recently written a book on HPB - here argues that the time is right for a comprehensive reassessment of one of the key figures in the birth of the modern world. Her approach to religion and spirituality surely paved the way for the multinational approach to faith we see around us today. As to Blavatsky's miracles - well, the evidence against them is far from conclusive. As with Mrs T, the jury on Mme B is still out...



DANCING WITH PLATO AND FORT

Speaking of modern mystics, there will be a chance to explore some of the work of the late John Michell this month when the Tenemos Academy holds a one-day symposium entitled "John Michell - Dancing with Plato & Fort: Crop Circles, Cosmology & Ancient Metrology". John's interests (as most readers will know) ranged far and wide, but the focus here will be on the numerical and geometrical underpinnings of his work, seen through the lens of some of his main collaborators and intellectual heirs. We are promised "forays into the story of the 1992 Crop Circle Making Competition conceived by biologist Rupert Sheldrake; the geometry of the Solar System and post-Keplerian harmonies of the spheres; the New Jerusalem Diagram; and ancient metrology explained as evidence that the ancients knew the dimensions of the whole Earth. We will also ask why such studies are important." The Guest of Honour is Professor Keith Critchlow, and speakers will include Allan Brown, John Martineau, John Neal, John Nicholson and Christine Rhone.

The symposium will be held from 10am-5pm on Saturday 1 June at The Art Workers Guild, 6 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AT.

Further Information and tickets (£45/£40/£25) are available on 01233 813663 or by emailing gen@temenos.myzen.co.uk.

MYSTERY OF THE MISSING CARTOONIST

Regular readers will have noticed the absence of our resident cartoonist, the one and only Mr Hunt Emerson, from this issue (and the lack of his regular Phenomenomix strip from the last). No,

he hasn't been abducted by aliens, sucked into a sinkhole or whisked off by an angry djinni. He has though, undergone an operation which has left his wrist - an essential bit of any cartoonist - under strict doctor's orders to rest. We're hoping that Hunt will be back in our next issue.

MAKING WAVES

Quinton Winter's cheeky round-up of folklore and phenomena from the Kentish town of Whitstable last issue provoked the occasional bemused response from readers. One swore (via Twitter) that the giant frozen wave towering over

the Neptune pub could not possibly have been real, as his girlfriend used to live in Whitstable and had certainly never seen such a photograph. Well, there are some remarkable photos of the sea at Whitstable frozen over (see Douglas West, Portrait of a Seaside Town: Historic Photographs of Whitstable, vols 1-4, Emprint, 1984-91 for some excellent examples), but this particular example indeed involved some 'artistic licence'.

Of course, the Giant Fox of Whitstable was quite real and was reported in the local press and duly mentioned in FT; sadly, the back reference provided was the wrong one, and should have read: FT264:2.

David Sutton
Bob Rickard
Paul Sieveking

Why fortean?
Everything you always wanted to know about Fortean Times but were too paranoid to ask!
SEE PAGE 78

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

strangedays

The missing lynx?

Stuffed specimen found in Bristol Museum could be UK's earliest ABC

About three years ago, zoology student Max Blake came upon a stuffed ABC (alien big cat), twice the size of a domestic cat, in storage at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, and thought it might be significant (FT279:21). Records state that it had been shot after attacking and killing two dogs close to Newton Abbot in Devon, and was given to the museum in 1903. Curators misidentified it as a Eurasian lynx (these once existed in the wild in Britain, but were almost certainly extinct by the seventh century). The exotic beast was stuffed, its skeleton preserved, and the remains tucked away in the museum's stores. These have now been studied by a team of scientists from four British universities, including Dr Ross Barnett, a molecular biologist from the University of Durham, and FT contributor Dr Darren Naish from the University of Southampton. Their report has appeared in *Historical Biology*.

An analysis of the skeleton and mounted skin revealed that the animal was not a Eurasian lynx, but a North American lynx (*Felis lynx canadensis*), a close relative. Its teeth were badly decayed. Ancient DNA analysis of hair proved inconclusive, possibly due to chemicals applied to the pelt during taxidermy. "We think it had probably been in captivity at some point in its life," said Dr Barnett. "It had lost all of its incisors, which would have been a pretty debilitating injury for a wild cat, but not a problem for one in captivity. It also had massive amounts of plaque on its molars, which are an indication of it not having a wild diet."

The researchers believe that



ABOVE: Bristol's stuffed specimen turned out to be a North American lynx.

the lynx had been in captivity for some time, but they were unable to find any records of its owner. "Was it someone's pet? Was it part of a small menagerie that was travelling through the area? There aren't really any zoos nearby where it could have escaped from," Dr Barnett said. They can't tell how long the animal had been at large in Devon before it was killed. Its decayed teeth would have limited its chances in the wild, but the lynx is an adaptable animal, and might have been able to survive by preying on small mammals. It is now on public display at Bristol Museum. They believe this is the earliest recorded example of an ABC on the loose in the UK – at least the earliest example backed up by physical evidence.

There is earlier anecdotal

evidence: William Cobbett recalled that as a small boy in the 1760s, he had seen a cat "as big as a middle-sized Spaniel dog" climb into a hollow elm tree in the grounds of Waverley Abbey near Farnham in Surrey. Later, in New Brunswick, he saw a 'lucifée' (North American lynx) – "and it seemed to me to be just such a cat as I had seen at Waverley" (*Rural Rides*, 1830). A Northern lynx was shot near Beccles, Suffolk, in 1991 after it killed about 15 sheep over a two-week period. Another one turned up in Cricklewood, north London, in 2001; it was tranquillised and taken to London Zoo. At least five leopard cats, three jungle cats and seven assorted ABCs have been shot, trapped, found or run over in the UK since 1975 (see FT167:28-37), including a dead

lioness found in a Lancashire lake in 1980, the same year as a puma was trapped near Inverness and dubbed Felicity. This famous ABC was well groomed, overweight and tame, although analysis of her droppings showed she had been living in the wild. *BBC News*, *telegraph.co.uk*, 25 April 2013.

RECENT ABC SIGHTINGS

Hundreds of ABC sightings across Britain continue to be reported every year, logged by various ABC researchers – although press coverage seems to have declined since 2010.

In mid-January 2013, farmer Lyn Williams in Prince's Gate, Pembrokeshire, reported the loss of seven ewes and a ram over two weeks. "They were being picked off every other night," he said. He was adamant that a puma-like creature, which he had spotted on previous occasions, was to blame. "If a dog had been responsible, there would have been wool about the place." Back in November 2010, there were nine sightings of a huge black cat in the same village.

On 27 February, staff at a caravan site in Norwich, Norfolk, reported seeing an Alsatian-sized black cat, and a dead muntjac deer was found nearby. At 8.30am on 5 April, a terrified woman fled and rang the police after spotting an enormous black cat in a cul de sac near a primary school in New Cross, south London. Around the same time, lorry driver Kevin Fillary, on his way to Bridport in Dorset, reported seeing a "large black panther" in a field adjoining the A35 near Monkey's Jump roundabout. In early March, two sisters, driving near St Martins in Shropshire, saw a huge dark cat-like creature leap over a fence. Returning in daylight, they found enormous paw prints in the mud, indicating a 3ft (90cm) stride, and a strange 'lair-like' structure. *Wales on Sunday*, 13 Jan; *BBC News*, 1 Mar; *Shropshire Star*, 6 Mar; *Sun*, 6 April; *Bridport News*, 10 April 2013.



NO PICNIC FOR TED
Why Sheldrake and Hancock were silenced at the TED talks
PAGE 14



CRYPTO-CLUBBERS
Mermaids and dead ducks at a new London conference
PAGE 22



PAPERBACK WRITER
We bid farewell to British horror fiction legend James Herbert
PAGE 28

Chilean humanoid

The 'Atacama alien' is a human, say scientists – if a very small one

On 19 October 2003, a man called Oscar Munoz, looking for objects of historical value in La Noria, a ghost town in Chile's Atacama Desert, came upon the skeletal remains of a tiny creature wrapped in cloth near an abandoned church. The 6in (15cm) -long "Atacama Humanoid" – nicknamed Ata – had hard teeth, dark, scaly skin, a bulging head with a lump on top, and nine ribs. Its odd rib count and huge head led some to think it was some kind of extraterrestrial creature. Others suggested it was a monkey or an aborted foetus.

However, after studying a DNA sample from bone marrow in one of the creature's ribs, a group of scientists have concluded that Ata is an "interesting mutation" of a male human that had beaten the odds at birth and lived



for between six and eight years. "I can say with absolute certainty that it is not a monkey," said Garry Nolan, director of stem cell biology at Stanford University's School of Medicine in California. "It is human – closer to human than chimpanzees." How Ata survived is unknown; sceptics remain to be convinced he/it is not a hoax. "After six months of research by leading scientists at Stanford University, the Atacama Humanoid remains a profound mystery," said Dr Steven Greer, founder of the Disclosure Project. The test results are included in a recent documentary called *Sirius*, which explores the subject of UFO and ET visitation, the disclosure of secret UFO files, and the investigation of advanced energy and alleged alien propulsion technologies. *Fox News*, 24 April; *Sun*, *D.Mail*, 25 April 2013.

Curiously, another tiny 'humanoid' had allegedly been found in Chile a year earlier, in October 2002. The discovery was made under some bushes in the southern town of Concepcion by a small boy called Julio Carreño. (FT166:7).

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

'Sick people should stay away', say hospital staff

Salisbury Journal (Wiltshire), 15 Nov 2012.

Lions lead Santa on festive tour of town

Somerset Standard, 6 Dec 2012.

Accused shooter says he was sent by Jesus

Toronto Star, 8 Dec 2012.

War is declared on one-eyed monsters

Boston (Lincs) Standard, 17 Oct 2012.

3 million drinkers quit pub

Sun, 12 Dec 2012.

Council push to cut hotel in half

Adelaide Advertiser, 4 Dec 2012.

BEER-DRINKING PONY FALLS OFF WAGON

D.Express, —Dec 2012.

Knitwear to raise cash for hospital equipment

Worcester News, 27 Nov 2012.

Death of newlywed put down to inexperience

Hull Daily Mail, 17 Dec 2012.



LENTICULAR CLOUDS

These spectacular lenticular cloud formations were photographed by John Gibson, who tell us: "They were taken by myself and a friend looking out eastwards over the Sound of Iona towards Mull at around 6pm on 12 March."

PHOTOS: JOHN GIBSON

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*Shazia Fardous,
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SIDELINES...

INEFFECTIVE MAGIC

A group of miners among the 34 shot dead at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, South Africa, on 16 August 2012 used a potion to render them bulletproof. The hardcore gang of 'Makarapa' had a 'muti' medicine made from the tongue and chin of a murdered security guard, which they poured into cuts on their bodies before storming towards armed police with spears and axes, thinking it would render them "strong, invincible and invisible". *Metro*, 12 Mar 2013.

EXPLOSIVE SQUID

When Mr Huang, a Chinese fishmonger, was gutting a squid caught off Guangdong province, his knife hit an 8in (20cm) live bomb. The 3ft (90cm) squid is thought to have confused the explosive for its usual diet of small fish and prawns. The 1.5kg (3lb 5oz) bomb was detonated at another location. It might have been dropped into the sea by a fighter jet, but it could not be dated. *Independent*, 26 Mar 2013.

LATE FOR XMAS

Around 30 firefighters spent two hours rescuing an unconscious 39-year-old man who was trapped naked 30ft (9m) down a chimney in Berlin. *Sun*, 13 Jan 2013.

OBEDIENCE REWARDED

A bank clerk foiled a knife-wielding robber by telling him to "join the queue". He waited patiently for 10 minutes until the police arrived to arrest him in Munakata, Japan. *Sun*, 7 Nov 2012.



Iranian 'time machine'

The future in a small case, and dodgy explosives detectors

IRANIAN TIME MACHINE

Ali Razeghi, 27, a Tehran scientist and managing director of Iran's state-operated Centre for Strategic Inventions, announced that he had invented "The Aryayek Time Travelling Machine". He told the Fars state news agency that the device could predict the future in a printout after taking readings from the touch of a user (suggesting it has something to do with fingerprints – or maybe palmistry). He explained that the device worked by a set of complex algorithms to "predict five to eight years of the future life of any individual, with 98 per cent accuracy".

Razeghi has 179 other inventions registered under his own name. "I have been working on this [time-travelling] project for the last 10 years," he said. "My invention easily fits into the size of a personal computer case. It will not take you into the future, it will bring the future to you... Naturally a government that can see five years into the future would be able to prepare itself for challenges that might destabilise it. As such we expect to market this invention among states as well as individuals once we reach a mass production stage." He claimed the device could help the government predict military conflict and forecast fluctuations in the value of foreign currencies and oil prices.

Razeghi's claims were almost immediately derided on Iranian social media sites, and removed from the Fars website shortly after the story appeared in the British press. Razeghi himself said he had been criticised by friends and relatives for "trying



LEFT: Golfball finder – or bomb detector?

It is entirely possible that the implications of Iranian trans-chronal access are already rippling backward in time across the multiverse, transforming reality in ways that are difficult to comprehend." *telegraph.co.uk*, 10 April 2013.

DOWSING FOR BOMBS

James McCormick, 57, CEO of an explosive detector company that sold £37 million worth of hand-held ADE 651 detectors to Iraq at up to £30,000 each,

was jailed for 10 years on 2 May after being found guilty of fraud. He claimed the gizmo worked from 100ft (30m) underwater or from a plane three miles (4.8km) up, and needed no power except the "electrostatic energy from the human body". In fact, it is a £13 novelty golf ball finder with no ability to identify explosives. McCormick, of Langport, Somerset, is thought to have made £14 million from clients including the Kenyan police, Hong Kong's prison service, the Egyptian army, Thailand's border control and Saudi Arabia. He denied fraud, telling the jury: "I never had any negative results from customers". As David Hambling pointed out [FT301:12], the ADE 651 may be a convenient way of accessing unconscious knowledge through the ideomotor effect, in the same way some believe dowsing rods or Ouija boards work. After all, an inquiry by the Iraqi Interior Minister concluded that the ADE 651 did what it said on the tin. *D.Telegraph*, 24 April, 3 May 2013.

"The device could predict the future in a printout"

to play God" with ordinary lives and history. "This project is not against our religious values at all," he insisted. "The Americans are trying to make this invention by spending millions of dollars on it where I have already achieved it for a fraction of the cost. The reason that we are not launching our prototype at this stage is that the Chinese will steal the idea and produce it in millions overnight."

As Spencer Ackerman commented on the *Wired* website, tongue firmly in cheek: "An Iranian chrononautical effort gives the Islamic Republic a near omniscience: the ability to access, process and utilize data before it even enters existence.

JOE RAEDLE / GETTY IMAGES

Bizarre books

Goblins and tea cosies battle for prize

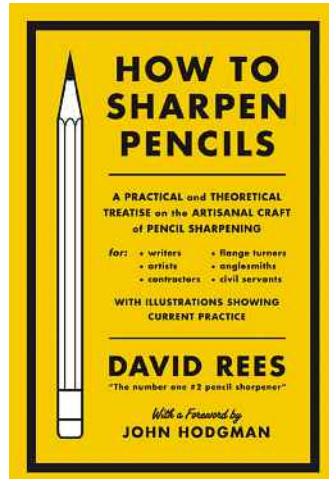


YEAR'S ODDEST TITLE

The *Bookseller's* 35th annual Diagram Prize, for the oddest title of the year, went to Reginald Blakeley's *Goblinproofing One's Chicken Coop*, billed as a practical guide to how to "clear your home and garden of goblins and banish them forever". The book claimed 38 per cent of an online vote. Clint Marsh, Blakeley's US editor, said: "On behalf of Reginald Bakeley and Conair Press, I am honoured to accept this award. Reginald and I take this as a clear sign that people have had enough of goblins in their chicken coops. Our campaign against the fairy kingdom continues."

Other shortlisted titles included *How Tea Cosies Changed the World* by Loan Prior (Murdoch), the follow-up to *Really Wild Tea Cosies*; *God's Doodle: The Life and Times of the Penis* by Tom Hickman (Square Peg), an analysis of the up-and-down relationship between man and his manhood; *How to Sharpen Pencils* by David Rees (Melville House); *Was Hitler III?* by Henrik Eberle and Hans-Joachim Neumann (Polity); and *Lofts of North America: Pigeon Lofts* by Jerry Gagne (Foy's Pet Supplies).

The Diagram Prize receives considerable press coverage every year. In 2008, more people voted for the Diagram (8,500 votes) than for the Best of Booker Prize



(7,800). There's either a magnum of champagne or a bottle of claret for the person who nominates the winning title. *thebookseller.com*, 22 Feb; *Guardian*, 22 Feb, 22 Mar 2013.

NORWEGIAN WOOD

Lars Mytting's book *Solid Wood: All About Chopping, Drying and Stacking Wood – and the Soul of Wood-Burning* spent more than a year on the nonfiction best-seller list in Norway. By February this year, sales had exceeded 150,000 copies. The book inspired *National Firewood Night*, a 12-hour TV programme by NRK, the Norwegian state broadcaster, aired on 15 February. It opened with the host, Rebecca Nedregotten Strand, promising to "try to get to the core of Norwegian firewood culture – because firewood is the foundation of our lives." Various people discussed its historical and personal significance. "We'll be sawing, we'll be splitting, we'll be stacking and we'll be burning," said Ms Nedregotten Strand.

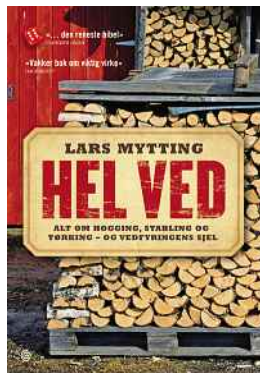
The first four hours consisted mostly of people in parkas chatting and chopping in the woods and then eight hours of a fire burning in a farmhouse fireplace in the west coast

city of Bergen. "We received about 60 text messages from people complaining about the stacking in the programme," said Mytting. "Fifty per cent complained that the bark was facing up, and the rest complained that the bark was facing down. One thing that really divides Norway is bark." In Norway, 1.2 million households have fireplaces or wood stoves, and nearly a million people, or 20 per cent of the population, tuned in at some point to the programme.

Fresh wood was periodically added by an NRK photographer named Ingrid Tangstad Hatlevoll, aided by viewers who sent advice via Facebook on where exactly to place it. For most of the time, the only sound came from the fire. Hatlevoll's face never appeared on screen, but occasionally her hands could be seen putting logs in the fireplace, or cooking sausages and marshmallows on sticks. "I couldn't go to bed because I was so excited," a viewer called niesa36 said on the *Dagbladet* newspaper website. "When will they add new logs? Just before I managed to tear myself away, they must have opened the flue a little, because just then the flames shot a little higher. I'm not being ironic. For some reason, this broadcast was very calming and very exciting at the same time." On Twitter, a viewer named André Ulveseter said: "Went to throw a log on the fire, got mixed up, and smashed it right into the TV."

Solid Wood, the title of Mytting's book, has a double meaning in Norwegian, signifying also a person with a strong, dependable character. Its publication appears to have given older Norwegian men, a traditionally taciturn group, permission to reveal their deepest thoughts while seemingly discussing firewood. "What I've learned is that you should not ask a Norwegian what he likes about

firewood, but how he does it — because that's the way he reveals himself," said Mytting. "You can tell a lot about a person from his firewood stack." *New York Times*, 19 Feb 2013.



SIDELINES...

SNAKE ON A PLANE

Astonished Qantas passengers watched out of their windows on 10 January as a 10ft (3m) scrub python clung to their plane's wing during a two-hour flight from Cairns in Queensland to Papua New Guinea. The snake pulled itself forward, only to be pushed back by the minus 12°C (10°F) high-altitude wind. It was dead by the time the plane landed. Curiously, a week earlier, David R Ellis, 60, director of the 2006 film *Snakes On A Plane*, was found dead in a Johannesburg hotel room. [AP] 10+11 Jan 2013.

TRIAL BY FIRE

Dinesh Parmar of Deria village in north Gujarat, India, lost a local election, so on 5 February he and his campaign manager, Amrut Laxman Parmar, forced about 100 villagers to assemble and dip their hands in boiling oil to prove that they had voted for him. They were assured that if they had been loyal, then they would not be burned – but many needed medical treatment. Both men were arrested the next day. *The Hindu*, 7 Feb 2013.

TWO BY TWO

Tressa Montalvo, 36, gave birth by caesarean section to two sets of identical twins in Houston, Texas, on Valentine's Day – allegedly defying odds of 70 million to one. She and her husband Manuel named them in alphabetical order: Ace and Blaine were first, Cash and Dylan a minute later. She hadn't taken fertility drugs. (Sydney) *D.Telegraph*, 21 Feb 2013.





SIDELINES...

HORSE LOVE

When Andrew Mendoza, 29, of Wharton, Texas, was caught having sex with a horse, he said: "I was trying to make the horse have a baby. I was thinking it'd have a horse-man baby." He was jailed for four months – for public lewdness rather than stupidity. *Sun*, 5 Feb 2013.

LONG WAY FROM HOME

A Giant Atlas Moth with 12in (30cm) wingspan was discovered by the Blackmore family in their garden in Ramsbottom, Lancashire – about 6,000 miles (9,600km) from its south-east Asian habitat. It was taken to Animal World in Bolton, where it laid eggs that turned into caterpillars. *D.Express*, 23 Oct 2012.

'NESSKI' FIND

Divers in Siberia claim to have spotted the jaws and skeleton of a 'devil' creature 80m (262ft) down at the bottom of Lake Labyntyr in Yakutia, one of the world's coldest, using a scanner. Tales of a 10m (33ft) monster in the lake, related by Evenk and Yakut people, pre-date the 1930s accounts of Nessie. *Russia Today*, 1 Feb; *Sun*, 2 Feb 2013.

ASKING FOR IT

The highest paid banker in Wall Street owns a \$24 million glass penthouse in Manhattan – and is called Dick Handler. Feel free to make up your own joke. *D.Telegraph*, 29 Mar 2013.



MARTIN ROSS

Desert highland discs

THE MYSTERY OF NAMIBIA'S FAIRY RINGS IS SOLVED



DR NORBERT JÜRGENS

The so-called "fairy circles" of Namibia and South Africa are discs of completely bare sandy soil anything from 2m to 10m (6ft to 33ft) in diameter, found exclusively along the western fringes of the Namib desert, about 100 miles (160km) inland, in a band stretching 1,500 miles (2,400km) from southern Angola to the Orange River in South Africa. A recent study has estimated that the smaller circles have average life spans of 24 years, rising to 75 years in the case of the largest. They are easy to spot – barren in the middle, yet with unusually lush perimeters of tall grasses, which stand out from the otherwise sparse vegetation of the desert, looking like giant chicken pox or splash marks from giant raindrops. *Fortean Times* featured this spectacular natural mystery in 2004 [FT185:4, 6–7].

Some indigenous tribes believed that each circle marked the grave of a bushman killed in clashes with colonialists, both black and white, who had

The so-called 'fairy circles' look like giant chicken pox

preyed upon them over the centuries. Another story, thought to originate with fanciful tour guides, attributes the circles to the poisonous breath of a dragon living in a crack deep underground. Scientists at the University of Pretoria in South Africa have suggested that natural gases such as methane or other toxins rise to the surface and wipe out vegetation, but test results have been inconclusive. Radioactive soil was suggested as an explanation, but soil samples all tested negative for radioactivity. Toxic debris left in the soil by *Euphorbia damarana*, the poisonous milkbush plant, was another hypothesis, but

the desert grass species *Lolium multiflorum* was found to flourish in soil taken from under milkbushes, both living and dead. Further hypotheses have ranged from "self-organising vegetation dynamics" to carnivorous ants.

Might termites be responsible? When a research team under Gretel van Rooyen, a botanist at the University of Pretoria, dug deep trenches in the circles a decade ago, no signs of termites were found. Last year, Walter R Tschinkel, a biologist at Florida State University, assumed termites were implicated in the phenomenon and looked for nests of harvester termites. Failing to find any, he seemed resigned to a mystery unsolved. Now, however, Norbert Jürgens, a professor of ecology at the University of Hamburg, reporting in *Science* (28 Mar 2013), proposes that the circles are an example of natural ecosystem engineering by the sand termite *Pсамmotermes allocerus*, which transforms much of its desert habitat into an oasis

of permanent grassland.

Dr Jürgens said that Dr Tschinkel was looking for the wrong termite species and that it was easy to overlook the one that was actually living deep beneath the surface of the red sandy spots, feasting on grass roots to keep the patches of land free of vegetation. In this way, the soil is better able to absorb rainfall quickly, with little water loss due to evaporation. The absence of vegetation also means that rainwater is not lost through transpiration, the evaporation of water from plants. It should be pointed out that Dr Jürgens found a few other termite species, as well as three ant species, at fairy circles in areas that get some rain, but *P. allocerus* was the only species found at all the sites he studied.

Dr Jürgens measured the water content of the soil in the circles from 2006 to 2012: more than 5cm (2in) of water was stored in the top 100cm (39in) of soil, even during the driest period of the year. The soil humidity below about 40cm (16in) was five per cent or more over a four-year stretch. The absorbed water spreads evenly in the sandy soil,

which nourishes the surrounding grassland and supposedly accounts for the circular patterns – although some still regard this aspect as unexplained. And Yvette Naude, a chemist at the University of Pretoria, said that Dr Jürgens's paper “does not address the key question as to what is the primary factor that causes sudden plant mortality, i.e. the birth of a fairy circle”.

Dr Jürgens said that *P. allocerus* was “quite clandestine”. The species builds no nests or mounds above ground. Its underground galleries and passages are deep and narrow. “They sort of swim in the loose sand, not leaving tracks,” he said. His team studied the presence of the termites in the earliest stages of a circle's formation, establishing that they were in on its creation, not merely occupying it at later stages. They are also responsible for enlarging the circles, as they steadily feed



on grasses at their outer margins. In dry seasons, the termites remain alive and active by moving out from the circles, still underground, and surviving on roots of the outlying grasses.

The fairy circles are vital to the sparse population of the Himba people, spread over an area about half the size of Italy. They depend on the grasses around the circles to graze their livestock, moving the herds to the best localities through the seasons. They say the circles were made by their “original ancestor, Mukuru” – or, more poetically, that they are “footprints of the gods”. *LiveScience.com*, 28 Mar; *Int. Herald Tribune*, 29 Mar 2013.



SIDELINES...

TUNNEL FONDUE

On 17 January, a truckload of Brunost (caramelised brown goat cheese), weighing 27 tons, caught fire in the Brattli Tunnel at Tysfjord, northern Norway. The high fat and sugar content meant it burned “almost like petrol”. The fire raged for five days and smouldering toxic gases slowed the recovery operation. The tunnel was badly damaged and was expected to remain closed for several weeks. *BBC News*, 23 Jan 2013.

FLYING TRAIN

Swedish authorities dropped charges against a 22-year-old woman who had been suspected of stealing a Stockholm commuter train, saying she might have started it by accident as she was cleaning it. At 3am, the train rolled a mile to a terminus, where it ploughed through the buffers, vaulted a street and crashed into the first floor of an apartment block 25m (82ft) away, missing five sleeping occupants. Only the cleaner was injured. *Sydsvenskan*, *D.Express*, 16 Jan; *D.Telegraph*, 15+23 Jan 2013.

RAINING SPIDERS

Thousands of spiders fell from the sky in the southern Brazilian town of Santo Antonio de Platina on 3 February. Film of the fall was posted online by Erick Reis, 20. A local biologist identified the spider as *Anelosimus eximius*, known for its massive colonies and “sheet webs”. *Brazilian news portal G1*, via *gawker.com*, 8 Feb 2013.

DIAMOND GEEZER

A homeless man who returned a diamond ring that was accidentally dropped into his donation cup a day earlier received more than \$145,000 (£95,500) in donations from 6,000 people around the world. The honesty of Billy Ray Harris, who was begging in Kansas City, prompted ring owner Sarah Darling and her husband to set up an online fundraising page for him. (*London*) *Eve. Standard*, 26 Feb 2013.

TETRACHROMATS

Colour is in the eye of the beholder, new research suggests. **DAVID HAMBLING** looks at human tetrachromats and wonders exactly what they can see that we can't...

In the 18th century scientists were surprised to find that some people see fewer colours than others; in the 21st century they have found that some women can see millions more colours than the rest of us. It has taken so long to discover this because colour is an everyday, ubiquitous mystery: you can describe a dragon or a ghost to someone who had never seen one, but green cannot be expressed in terms of anything but greenness. But does my green look the same as your green?

Humans are trichromats with three types of colour-sensitive cell – red, green and blue – with overlapping sensitivities. We distinguish colours by how much they stimulate the different receptors. Anyone with graphics software will be familiar with the red/green/blue mixing process to generate every possible hue. Humans distinguish about 100 graduations in each colour dimension, so the total is 100 x 100 x 100 – a million different colours.

We have always known colour was slippery. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, great epics composed around the 8th century BC, are curiously lacking in colour words. They repeatedly refer to 'the wine-dark sea' as well as 'wine-dark oxen' and 'dawn in her yellow robe' and 'green honey'. This may be due to changes in colour language – the ancient Greeks do not even appear to have had a word for blue.¹ For centuries colour was purely a subjective experience.

In 1794 the English scientist John Dalton (pictured right) was working with chemical dyes when he discovered something peculiar: colours that to him were indistinguishable looked very different to others.

"My yellow comprehends the red, orange, yellow and



Colours that to Dalton were indistinguishable looked different to others

green of others," wrote Dalton in his paper 'Extraordinary Facts Relating to the Vision of Colours with Observations'. This was the first scientific description of colour blindness, a condition still known in French as Daltonisme.

Different types of colour blindness affect about eight per cent of men but only one per cent of women; nobody seems to have noticed this in the preceding centuries. Widespread colour is an invention of the modern world. Previously newspapers, books, television and cinema and most pictures were black-and-white.

Artificial colour only became common with the invention of chemical dyes, so it may not be a coincidence that colour blindness was discovered then.

Like Dalton, most colour-blind people can distinguish some colours. The

commonest cause is a mutation in one receptor so it covers a different part of the spectrum from the normal (making the person an 'anomalous trichromat'). In some cases the person is an actual dichromat with only two types of receptor.

Colour blindness can be a liability; if you can't distinguish shades of red and brown then you can't see when meat is cooked. But it may give advantages. Research has shown that colour-blind people can see through camouflage more easily,² an ability that was reportedly utilised by the US military in WWII.

Colour blindness differs between the sexes because genes for red and green colour vision are carried on the X-chromosome only. Women have two Xs, men an X and a Y. If the relevant gene is defective or absent on one X-chromosome, women have a backup which men do not.

This raises an additional possibility, first suggested in 1948 by Dutch researcher HJ. de Vries. Because of mosaicing (see **FT254:14**), women with the gene for anomalous trichromacy may have four different types of colour receptor: the red and blue, plus some normal green receptors and some anomalous green ones. These women would be tetrachromats with four dimensions of colour, seeing 100 times more colours

than a trichromat. (In the animal world, tetrachromats are not so uncommon: many species of bird, fish and insect are known to be tetrachromats, although the evolutionary benefits of this are not understood).

Identifying a tetrachromat is a challenge for a trichromat researcher in a trichromatic world. All our methods for reproducing colours on the page or on screen rely on a three-colour system; these are not suitable for producing shades indistinguishable to the trichromat but different to the tetrachromat.

Gabriele Jordan, a senior lecturer in neuroscience at the University of Newcastle, has been pursuing tetrachromats for many years. (She has already shown that colour perceptions are different between individuals: my green may not be your green). In 2012 her team tested 24 women with colour-blind children and so were carriers of the anomalous trichromat gene. In one test they looked at three yellow lights on a screen: to most people they would look the same, but to a tetrachromat one light, a mix of red and green, would look very different to the others which were pure yellow.

One of the test subjects, identified only as subject cDa29, was able to make the distinction – Dr Jordan had finally found her first tetrachromat.³ This validates the previous work, and opens up a whole new area for research: what do tetrachromats see that the rest of us are blind to?

Looking further ahead, one day we might be able to acquire tetrachromacy artificially. Jay Nietz, a professor of ophthalmology in Seattle, is using gene therapy to cure colour blindness in monkeys. He says the same technique might allow humans – even mere men – to become tetrachromats. The world will be more colourful – though we will need new tetrachromatic televisions, display screens and cameras to reproduce what we can see.

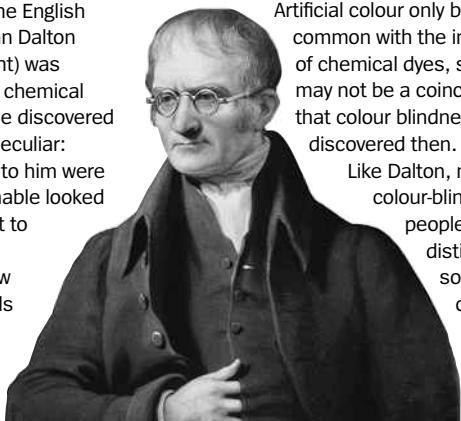
NOTES

1 <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/exchange/node/61>

<http://tinyurl.com/c7e8e4k>

2 www.staff.city.ac.uk/~morgan/Camouflage.pdf (<http://tinyurl.com/cpmaxvb>)

3 **FT295:24**, <http://w.journalofvision.org/content/10/8/12.short> (<http://tinyurl.com/btycwwr>)



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WED 3 **Exeter** Exeter Phoenix
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TED: IDEAS WORTH SUPPRESSING?

When our old friends Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock challenged the orthodox scientific establishment, all hell broke loose as attempts were made to censor them. **BOB RICKARD** reports.

If there's one thing that sharpened the barbs of Charles Fort's wit it was the spectacle of scientists behaving unscientifically – by which he meant when they argued from their own beliefs and prejudices rather than from their vaunted rules of evidence. His particular targets were scientists who sought autocratically to suppress evidence, data, or discussion that they simply disagreed with. In effect, they acted, as Fort would say, like over-zealous priests guarding religious dogma against heresy.

I imagine that, had he lived in our time, Fort would have noted the recent brouhaha that erupted in a part of the modern media in which such authoritarian behaviour was never intended to be part of the agenda. In fact the TED talks (see panel) were conceived as an antidote to elitism and exclusionism, and the vigorous growth in TED's popularity is due to its cachet as a hip forum using the latest social networking technologies to spread news of 'trending' ideas in both arts and sciences. Yet here they were, being accused of cowardly narrow-mindedness. What went wrong?

This year's talks from their TEDx franchise in London's Whitechapel¹ included one by Rupert Sheldrake and another by Graham Hancock, both of whom are well known to *FT* readers. Hancock's discussed death, consciousness and "true cognitive liberty" based upon "how his 24-year relationship with cannabis was brought to an abrupt halt in 2011 after an encounter with *ayahuasca*, the sacred



visionary brew of the Amazon."² Sheldrake's was based on his 2012 book *The Science Delusion*, which questions whether "science already understands the nature of reality."³ Both were videoed and posted on the TEDx channel on YouTube.

It was inevitable that orthodox scientists on the TED advisory team – especially those of a 'skeptical' persuasion – should object to these two talks. Both Sheldrake and Hancock attacked what they believed was the moral bankruptcy of a materialistic reductionist science. Sheldrake outlined 10 'dogmas' of the modern scientific worldview, which, he said, cannot withstand scrutiny and actually hold back the pursuit of knowledge (see **FT286:38-40**). They include the belief that nature is mechanical and purposeless, that the 'laws' and 'constants' of nature are fixed, and that psychical phenomena like telepathy are 'impossible'. Hancock was more specific: "If we want to know about this mystery [life, consciousness and death] the last people we should ask are materialist, reductionist scientists".

In mid-March came the bombshell announcement from TED that their science panel had "grave concerns" about the scientific adequacy of both presentations and "recommended that they should not be distributed". Consequently, they were removed

Protest groups sprang up on Facebook and elsewhere

from TED's sites. Sheldrake was accused of making "serious factual errors", "misleading statements", and "crossing the line into pseudoscience". Hancock's claims, TED declared, were "both non-scientific and reckless" and, adding a touch of mockery, they said it was "no surprise" as his work is "characterised as pseudo-archaeology".⁴

What really took TED by surprise was the number and force of comments condemning the action. Psi blogger Craig Weiler⁵ appeared to speak for many in calling this autocratic move "an act of breathtaking stupidity". As soon as people realised what was happening, protest groups sprang up on Facebook and elsewhere and, like a virtual flash-mob, staged a riot in TED's in-box. Within a couple of days, TED was clogged with more than 700 posts.⁶ Quickly, this rose to more than a million. Not all of them were from supporters of the two, but they expressed dismay that this censorship betrayed TED's own mission of promoting a "broad understanding" of "ideas worth



LEFT: Rupert Sheldrake's attack on scientific 'dogmas' was unwelcome. ABOVE: As was Graham Hancock's attack on "materialist scientists".

spreading".

As news of TED's heavy-handedness spread, noted one commentator, "hundreds of people independently uploaded Hancock's talk to their own YouTube". One critical site even redesigned the TED logo to read "ideas worth suppressing"⁷ – an ironic echo of the notorious review by *Nature* of Sheldrake's first book *A New Science of Life* (1981) that condemned it as "a book worth burning".⁸

On Monday, 18 March, TED responded to the storm by putting up an 'Open for Discussion' page, albeit tucked away in their Blog section. Their original statements were retained – still legible but now struck through with a deletion line – and prefaced by a concession that, in reacting to the criticisms from their science advisors, they "used language that in retrospect was clumsy... We suggested that we were flagging the talks because of 'factual errors' but some of the specific examples we gave were less than convincing. Instead of the thoughtful conversation we had hoped for, we stirred up angry responses from the speakers and their supporters."

For some, these disingenuous words only made matters worse as former loyal TED followers noticed that most of the "angry responses" were actually quite reasonable and coherent; and that TED's examples of the supposed errors were not just "less than convincing" but in

Sheldrake's case, wrong, and in Hancock's, completely fictitious. Nor, to date, has there been an apology to either speaker for these calumnies. How, went the howl, can we trust TED's assurance that "great pains" and "due diligence" were taken in the decision to ban the presentations when so many errors were revealed in their own reasoning? And, if the talks had "strayed well beyond the realm of reasonable science" as TED had said in their judgement, why had they slipped through their supposedly "thorough" screening process?

To their credit, however, the 'Open for Discussion' page also included links to both video presentations so people could judge for themselves; as well as more pages to satisfy the call for further debate on each of the banned offerings.⁹ As a measure of the interest these videos attracted, we note that Hancock's presentation was viewed around 132,000 times on the TEDx YouTube channel in the two months before it was deleted; and more than 27,000 times in the 10 days after TEDx restored it.

In that forum, both Sheldrake and Hancock responded calmly, politely and in appropriate detail. Since then, Sheldrake has accused the TED administrators of "publically aligning themselves with the old paradigm of materialism, which has dominated science since the late 19th century". He also asked TED's Chris Anderson "to invite a scientist from TED's Scientific Board or TED's Brain Trust to have a real debate with me about my talk, or if none will agree to take part, to do so himself... [because] it is not possible to make much progress through short responses to nebulous questions like 'Is this an idea worth spreading, or misinformation?'"¹⁰ So far, no one has taken up the challenge.

Not all the responses came from supporters of Hancock or Sheldrake. Obviously, the banishment pleased the camp of "reductionist materialistic scientists" who were accused of asserting their influence over TED in the first place, while

science journalist Simon Singh wrote: "Having campaigned for libel reform for the last three years, I am a fan of free speech. But quarantining the talks by Sheldrake and Hancock is not a free speech issue. It is a quality and accuracy issue." He went on to say that TED had a right to guard its credibility. "I think TED has made exactly the right decision. The talks are not 'banned'. They are still available. They are flagged with warning signs and an explanation of the falsities in each talk. That seems perfectly fair and reasonable."

Singh does not say what he thinks of the presenters' convincing rebuttals, but goes on to ask "Are there other talks that need to be quarantined in the same way? If so, who decides what gets quarantined? TEDx events are curated, so not everyone has a right to have a platform. That decision is up to the curator. And who decides on curators... well, that goes back to TED."

The suspicion is that this five-man secret cabal is open to abuse. TED keeps the names of the members of their selection and advisory boards secret, which is their right, of course, but the lack of transparency has led to criticisms, not least that by hiding behind anonymity they defamed and libelled the two speakers. However, two were named by Sheldrake¹¹ as Jerry Coyne – professor of biology at the University of Chicago who has declared that religion and science are irreconcilable and incompatible – and PZ Myers – professor of biology at the University of Minnesota Morris, an outspoken atheist and self-avowed "godless liberal" who has a reputation for being highly confrontational. According to Craig Weiler, both are "radical skeptics" who have "inserted themselves into the vetting process at TED for the purpose of pushing a somewhat extreme view of science that is intolerant of ideas they don't agree with."

While declaring that they "respect and support the exploration of unorthodox ideas," TED face a difficult problem:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TED



TED – or 'Technology, Entertainment, Design' – is a global platform for talks disseminating new ideas, new techniques and new insights – in fact for anything new that is also inspiring. It is one of the New Age legacies that has matured into an almost ubiquitous influence upon modern Western culture.

Speakers are selected by special panels from nominations, many submitted by members of the public. They are given up to 18 minutes before an invited audience and the recordings are posted for free viewing on TED's website or YouTube channel, from both of which hang moderated comment and discussion pages where they have accumulated an estimated billion viewings to date.

TED originally sprang from a conference organised by architect and graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman (below), to discuss the convergence of ideas in technology, entertainment and design. That first conference, in Monterey, in 1984, included presentations by Benoit Mandelbrot, Stewart Brand and other 'digerati' along with demonstrations of the latest gadgets. The second event took place six years later and, to accommodate the increasing demand for the (\$6,000) invitation-only tickets, it moved to a larger venue in Long Beach, California. Since then, its remit has broadened to include the sciences, arts, philosophy, music, spirituality and philanthropy among other subjects.

In 2000, Wurman wanted to retire and sought a successor. He settled on Chris Anderson, a keen TED enthusiast and media entrepreneur, who had founded his own non-profit Sapling Foundation in 1996 to foster something very similar ("the spread of great ideas"). Speaking at a TEDTalk in February 2002, Anderson said his vision as a curator was "to provide a platform for the world's smartest thinkers, greatest visionaries and most inspiring teachers, so that millions of people can gain a better understanding of the biggest issues faced by the world, and a desire to help create a better future. Core to this goal is a belief that there is no greater force for changing the world than a powerful idea."

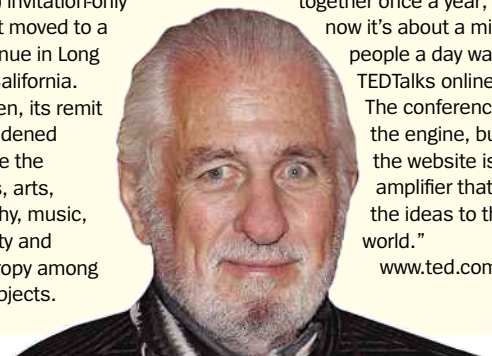
Today, TED has expanded to include many 'departments', among which is TEDx, formed in 2009 to grant licences to third parties to organize independent TED-like events in communities around the world. These franchises – such as the TEDxWhitechapel which invited Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock to speak – are subject to a strict code under which the organisers are vetted, the speakers are not paid, and TED reserves the sole right to edit and distribute the recorded presentations.

At the end of 2012, there had been more than 16,000 talks at over 5,000 TEDx events in 1,200 cities in 133 countries. In March 2012, Anderson said: "It used to be 800 people getting together once a year;

now it's about a million people a day watching TEDTalks online.

The conference is the engine, but the website is the amplifier that takes the ideas to the world."

www.ted.com/





“With that stance we would soon find the TEDx brand and platform being hijacked by those with dangerous or fringe ideas.” Against that TED acknowledges that “There’s a sense in which all scientific truth is provisional... [and] there are also instances where scientific assumptions get turned upside down. How do we separate between [sic] these two?” In the present case, few thanked them for judging that Sheldrake and Hancock were “so radical and far-removed from mainstream scientific thinking that we think it’s right for us to give these talks a clear health warning”. Many commentators were further outraged about being regarded as so child-like that they couldn’t be trusted to think for themselves.

Interesting comparisons were made with campaigns against other scientists who fell foul of scientific orthodoxy. For example, in 2008, Professor Michael Reiss who was hounded from his post at the UK’s Royal Society “as a result of complaints based on newspaper headlines and material he did not write”. According to BBC correspondent William Cawley, who interviewed Reiss after his resignation, some elements in the RS were outraged to learn that Cawley “was trying to give Creationism equal time in the nation’s classrooms”. However, Dr Reiss, an evolutionary biologist who has repeatedly argued against Creationism, is also a part-time priest – an association, Cawley says, that left him “suspect in the minds of some Fellows, including Richard Dawkins”. When Reiss was first appointed, Dawkins likened it to appointing someone from Monty Python as a

DELETED ideas worth censoring



TOP AND ABOVE: Some websites took revenge by creating their own versions of TED’s slick, corporate-style branding, here seen at Edinburgh in 2012.

clergyman. Reiss told Cawley that he took that as a compliment.¹²

The treatment meted out to Sheldrake and Hancock put me more in mind of the drubbing suffered by Professor

Eric Laithwaite at the hands of the Old Guard at the Royal Institution in 1974 when, in his famous Christmas lecture, he demonstrated an apparent loss of weight when a gyroscope is

spinning, hinting at a possible “reactionless propulsion”. This effect seemed to defy Newtonian physics, but rather than investigate the mystery, the members rejected his ideas. This is believed to be “the first and only time an invited lecture to the Royal Institution has not been published”.¹³

TED wound up their clumsy ‘correction’ by appealing for a “calmer, reasoned conversation... if only to help us define how far you can push an idea before it is no longer ‘worth spreading’.”

It seems to me that TED still doesn’t ‘get it’. The main message from Sheldrake and Hancock was not to encourage swigging *ayahuasca* or uncritical belief in paranormal abilities, any more than Laithwaite was promoting anti-gravity. On the contrary, they were all pointing at a mystery, saying: “This deserves investigation. It might be important.”

Unorthodox concepts and ‘damned’ phenomena deserve to be discussed in a mature and inquisitive way. Experiments and investigations should be done to determine what is valid and genuine. That is surely the proper scientific way; not a knee-jerk rejection because it *sounds* like pseudoscience, or because, *ex cathedra*, it is deemed nonsense, or because the speaker is not a scientist, or because he might be a scientist but speaking outside his speciality.

Inspiring curiosity about the world – and our existence – is a noble task. It was inherent in TED’s original mission. They should be encouraged to get back on track. **FT**

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a wealth of links to other reports and reactions – see also <http://weilersiblog.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/ted-not-satisfied-with-current-censorship-tedxwesthollywood-is-taken-down/>.

6. See also <http://www.dailygrail.com/Fresh-Science/2013/3/TED-Deletes-Talks-Rupert-Sheldrake-and-Graham-Hancock/>.
7. www.consciousfrontiers.com/press-release-teds-censorship-problem-ideas-

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FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Craig Shergold's card mountain, more sinkhole surprises and WWII pigeon's mystery message

BUDDY CAN YOU SPARE A STAMP? [FT59:26-27, 141:66]



In 1989, Craig Shergold, a seven-year-old with a brain tumour, wanted to scoop the record for the largest number of 'Get Well' cards – and sent out a round-robin letter. Millions were touched by the dying boy's appeal and cards flooded into the Royal Marsden Hospital, where he was being treated, and later, when the hospital could no longer cope, to his home in Selby Road, Carshalton, Surrey. Among the well-wishers were Bill Clinton, Kylie Minogue and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who told him to "keep on pumping". Craig featured in *The Guinness Book of Records* and was the subject of a television feature called *The Miracle of Cards*.

By 1997, a fully recovered Craig had received 140 million cards and was begging people to stop sending them, a plea seconded by the Post Office. Two years later, a chain letter asked the recipient to send Craig a business compliment slip and forward the letter to 20 other businesses. Craig's name had morphed into John Craig or Craig John, but the address was still (more or less) that of his former home in Selby (or Selsby

or Shelby) Road, Carshalton. By 2013, Craig – now 33 and in good health – had received 350 million cards and business slips. They were still arriving at his old address, now occupied by Diane Haines, who said: "We have lived here for 18 years and [the cards] still come at Christmas wishing Craig well." *Metro*, 8 Feb 2013.

THAMES TORSO MYSTERY [FT155:29, 277:22]



On 21 September 2001, the headless and limbless torso of an Afro-Caribbean boy aged about five was fished out of the Thames near Tower Bridge. He was wearing a pair of orange shorts. The police investigating the case called him 'Adam' and believed he had died in a ritual killing. Forensic evidence showed that he came from the Benin City area of Nigeria. A tip-off led to Joyce Osagiede who, in 2002, was living in Glasgow. Officers thought she was involved in some way, but due to a lack of evidence and doubts about her mental state she was deported to Nigeria.

Osagiede, interviewed in Benin City by the BBC, has now revealed that the name of the sacrificial victim was Patrick Erhabor and that his mother's surname was Oghogho. She said the child was

brought to her when she lived in Hamburg and she looked after him in the weeks before he was trafficked to Britain by Kingsley Ojo, a bogus asylum seeker who used three different identities and first came to London in 1997. Officers investigating the Adam case arrested Ojo in London in 2002. In his flat they found a plastic bag containing a mixture of bone, sand and flecks of gold very similar to a concoction found in the dead boy's stomach. There was also a video marked 'rituals', showing a B-movie in which an actor cuts off a man's head. Ojo said the video and mixture belonged to other people in the house and detectives could not establish a link between him and the Adam case. In 2004, Ojo was jailed for four and a half years for people trafficking.

Retired detective Nick Chalmers, who worked on the Adam inquiry for seven years, said the development with the name given by Osagiede was "really interesting", but cautioned that she had psychiatric problems and had been unreliable in the past. In 2011 she identified a photograph discovered by the police – and shown to her by a journalist – as the dead boy and said his name was "Ikpomwosa". Osagiede now says that was all a misunderstanding and that the photo in question was of "Danny, my friend Tina's son, who lives in Germany". This was later verified. A spokesman for the Metropolitan Police said: "The investigation

remains ongoing". *BBC News*, 8 Feb 2013.

D-DAY PIGEON [FT296:20, 297:21]



After GCHQ (Government Communication Headquarters) in Cheltenham were stumped by a 1944 coded message found on the leg of a dead pigeon in a Surrey chimney, Gord Young and other researchers at Lakefield Heritage Research in Peterborough, Ontario, claimed to have cracked the code in just 17 minutes, using a Royal Flying Corps (RFC) artillery code book from World War I. The message was sent by Sgt William Stott, 27, a paratrooper from the Lancashire Fusiliers who was parachuted behind enemy lines on a reconnaissance mission. He was killed in action a few weeks later. Part of it supposedly reads: "Found headquarters infantry right here. Final note, confirming, found Jerry's whereabouts. Go over field notes. Counter measures against Panzas not working. Jerry's right battery central headquarters here. Artillery observer at 'K' sector Normandy. Mortar, infantry attack panzers."

However, Michael Smith, the author of *The Secrets of Station*



PLUMMETING MAN [FT297:29]



On 9 September 2012, the body of a man landed in Mortlake, southwest London, on the flight path to Heathrow airport about 10 miles (16km) away. It was assumed he had fallen from the undercarriage of a plane, and police originally thought he was

Angolan because of currency found in his pockets and the fact that flight BA76 from Luanda, the Angolan capital, passed over west London shortly before the body was found. However, officers found a SIM card in the man's jeans and after contacting the phone numbers stored on it they established he was Jose Matada, 30, from Mozambique. He was also carrying a coin from Botswana and a second SIM card

from Zambia, which suggested he had travelled through those countries before crossing the border into Angola. There, his hopes of finding work seem to have been dashed and in desperation he tried to reach Europe. Under cover of darkness, he eluded security at Luanda airport and stowed away in the plane's undercarriage. *22 Dec 2012; (London) Eve. Standard*, 12 April 2013.



KONSPIRACY KORNER

ROBIN RAMSAY, EDITOR OF LOBSTER,
REPORTS FROM THE BUNKER ON...
THE MEDIA'S POLITICAL INHIBITIONS

What shall we consider? Well, yes, there is a recent video claimed to show that a shape-shifting alien has joined the US Secret Service's presidential detail. (It certainly shows a man with a quite extraordinary jaw-line!)¹ But much more significant (and more interesting) is the recent discussion of Richard Nixon's 1968 conspiracy with the government of South Vietnam to prolong the Vietnam war for political reasons. Faced with the possibility that the peace talks between the US and North Vietnam might succeed in time for the presidential election that year, in which he was the Republican candidate, Nixon got intermediaries to contact the South Vietnamese government who were persuaded to walk out of, and thus halt, the peace talks.² This used to be known as treason, and is an example of an 'October surprise' (US presidential elections are held in October); or, more accurately, the prevention of an October surprise. There have been several other examples of such 'surprises',³ and the 1980 version, in which the Republicans are alleged to have persuaded the Iranians not to release the American hostages held in Tehran before the presidential elections in October that year, which would have boosted President Jimmy Carter, is strikingly similar to that of 1968.⁴

Little of this kind of material ever gets into the major media until many years after the event, if ever. The American media are reluctant to report material which makes America look bad (this is apparently the reason that then President Johnson did not publicise Nixon's treason, even though he knew about it in detail) and the UK media are reluctant to offend our powerful 'ally'.

But there is a wider inhibition on this side of the Atlantic. Take former Foreign Secretary David Miliband's announcement in April that he was moving to America to head the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Miliband described it as "a global humanitarian aid organisation based in New York" and mentioned that Albert Einstein was among those who founded it.⁵ The mainstream British media blandly reported it to be an international charity. But a couple of minutes on Google would have shown that the IRC was little more than a front for the CIA during the Cold War⁶ and that more recently it was funded by the US Government's National Endowment for Democracy, which was set up to finance the kind of propaganda and political warfare activities that the CIA used to run covertly.⁷ Among the corporate figures on its boards of directors and overseers are former Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs Condoleezza Rice, Madeleine Albright and Henry Kissinger.⁸

None of this was difficult to find out and, apart from a tiny snippet in the *Guardian* diary, none of it made it into the British major media reports on Miliband's move. Are we not supposed to learn that David Miliband has gone to work for an arm of American foreign policy? Or did the British media decide that this wasn't worth reporting? Or did our journalists simply not do a quick Google on 'International Rescue Committee'?

1 www.wired.com/dangerroom/2013/03/secret-service-reptile-aliens/

2 See www.dailykos.com/story/2013/03/17/1194862/-What-s-new-in-BBC-report-on-Nixon-s-treason-on-Vietnam-Not-much

3 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_surprise

4 See <http://archive.truthout.org/article/robert-parry-part-i-the-original-october-surprise>

5 In his letter to the chair of his constituency party <http://labourlist.org/2013/03/david-milibands-resignation-letter/>

6 At <http://liberalengland.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/the-international-rescue-committee.html>. The 1995 Eric Chester book, *Covert Network: Progressives, the International Rescue Committee, and the CIA*, is discussed.

7 www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=International_Rescue_Committee#Funding

8 www.rescue.org/board-and-overseers



GETTY IMAGES



GETTY IMAGES

SINKHOLE PANIC [FT301:25]

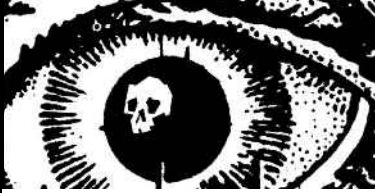
The bizarre death of Jeff Bush, swallowed by a sinkhole that opened up under his bedroom in suburban Tampa on 28 February, unleashed a wave of sympathy, and not a little fear. The Bush tragedy was followed by another Tampa sinkhole and ones in Allentown, Bethlehem and Rockledge, Pennsylvania. The Rockledge hole swallowed a creek and drained a duck pond. A 10-acre (4ha) sinkhole in Assumption Parish, Louisiana – caused by the mining of a salt dome by a brine-making company – drew a visit from environmental activist Erin Brockovich.

Then on 11 March, just as sinkhole madness was starting to die down, one 10ft (3m) wide opened up on the 14th hole at Annbriar Golf Course in Waterloo, Illinois, swallowing a mortgage broker. Mark Mihal, 43, was investigating an unusual depression when the earth gave way. He was hauled out of the 18ft (5.4m) deep hole with nothing worse than a dislocated shoulder. Such holes are common in south-western Illinois, where old underground mines frequently cause the earth to cave in. According to Sam Panno, a senior geochemist with the Illinois State Geological Survey, there are as many as 15,000 sinkholes in the region. On 12 March one opened up in the Adams Morgan neighbourhood of Washington, followed the next day by one 16ft (5m) deep in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Actually, sinkholes, both natural and man-made, are quite common, but they have garnered more attention than usual following the Florida tragedy. See thesinkhole.org, a website that bills itself as "the world's largest collection of sinkholes". *BBC News*, 13 Mar; *NY Times*, via *(Melbourne) Age*, 17 Mar 2013.

X about Bletchley Park, the centre of British code-breaking in WWII, said: "The idea that a World War I code would have been used during the Second World War is just silly. It wouldn't have been used because it would have been well known to the Germans and insecure... You don't have to take my word for it. GCHQ have looked at it. They are very good at diagnosing codes and ciphers as the people at Bletchley Park were in the war. They can be

pretty specific about it." He added that Mr Young "has taken the string of 27 five-letter groups and decided on the basis of this World War I code that individual letters stand for something. So for example HVP is 'have panzers'. This is nonsense." Here's another example to ram the point home: CMPNW is supposed to mean "Counter measures [against] Panzers not working". *BBC News*, 16 Dec; *D. Telegraph*, 17+27 Dec; <i> 27 Dec 2012.



GHOSTWATCH

ALAN MURDIE reports on another TV row about whether we should scare the children...



JAYEMBEEL969 / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Chatham Dockyard – home to a number of restless spirits say workers. OPPOSITE PAGE: Medium Derek Acorah's "contorted face" as he channels a dead child.

PAINTED DEVILS

'Tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil', wrote Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, Act 2, Scene 2). In March this year, the UK broadcasting regulator Ofcom agreed with the Bard, reprimanding *Pick TV* (carried on the Sky TV platform) for showing an edition of *Most Haunted* when children might be watching. The offending show was transmitted at 6pm on 17 October 2012 and was a repeat of a programme first broadcast in 2009 featuring a supposed investigation at the haunted Chatham Dockyard in Kent. Ofcom found that the decision to air the programme at 6pm was a breach of the Broadcasting Code, deeming it too frightening to be broadcast before the 9pm 'watershed'. This is the hour at which it has been long presumed that children of tender years have been put to bed or shielded from unsuitable material on TV by conscientious parents.

According to the programme, the Chatham Dockyard contained a colourful collection of spectres, noted by Ofcom as including "a headless drummer boy; duelling cavaliers; a dark shadow that walked towards people; a grey lady with no feet who hovered; a woman smelling of lavender; the ghost of a woman called Mary who had committed suicide, the ghost of a woman looking out of a window; and the ghost of one of the port's commissioners, Peter Pett, who had later been killed in the Tower of London..."

The episode featured a séance in which

ACORAH SPOKE IN A RASPING AND AGGRESSIVE VOICE: "WHAT'S YOUR NAME, LEPER?"

self-proclaimed medium Derek Acorah contacted and was supposedly possessed by a nine-year-old boy called 'Barney Little' and another malign entity called 'Lizzie' who in life had supposedly whipped Barney. Contorting his face, Acorah was shown speaking in a rasping and aggressive voice: "What's your name, leper?" Bleeps were used to mask offensive language. This performance reduced an employee of the dockyard to tears (presumably of distress) because she recognised "Lizzie" as the person responsible for the death of Isabelle, a child who had allegedly once resided in the building.

Acorah also claimed to have contacted other spirits including a military man, a female child murderer, the spirits of six or seven children and a man called Leonard (also evil) whom he heard running around.

Ofcom first considered whether the material was suitable for children. In the episode, the investigators declared that the majority of spirits in the dockyard were "benign" but the show concentrated upon the

"malevolent" ones, which were supposedly responsible in life for mistreating or murdering children in their care. There were also several reports from current staff working at the dockyard of the presence of these evil spirits chilling the air, appearing as dark shadows, and pushing them over or off chairs, as well as poltergeist activity, such as the movement of objects. In particular, Richard Felix, introduced as a historian, mentioned "dark evil shadows wandering around... People get this horrible feeling of foreboding... Whatever haunts that building doesn't want them to be there". There were also reports of spirit children inside the building, including a murdered and decapitated boy wandering the site and a young girl who hanged herself on the stairway. These elements were considered upsetting for children.

Sky TV sought to justify the broadcast saying that the scenes – shot on night cameras giving them a green colour – were "not very distressing or upsetting." Acorah's alleged possession "was only visually apparent from his contorted face and the different tone and pitch to his voice and what Derek says was not gruesome, distressing or shocking".

However, in Ofcom's view, the cumulative effect of the malevolent nature of the entities that supposedly manifested through Derek's "possessions" or were described in the experiences presented, and the repeated references to children being harmed, mistreated or murdered, had the potential to

cause distress to younger viewers.

Also in its own defence, Sky TV referred to Ofcom's decision of 5 December 2005, which ruled that the format of *Most Haunted* was "for entertainment purposes" and contained "a high degree of showmanship that puts it beyond what we believe to be a generally accepted understanding of what comprises a legitimate investigation [into psychic phenomena]". On this basis, Sky TV argued that the audience would have understood that "the intended purpose of these programmes was for entertainment" and it would thus not be taken seriously.

This plea was also rejected by Ofcom, which considered that although the closing five minutes of the show provided a final signpost to the viewer as to the entertainment nature of the programme, it was not explicitly suggested that events were not real or that the investigators might simply be performers. Indeed, the concluding section featured Dr Matthew Smith declaring that there were three possible explanations for the alleged possession of Acorah – it was a fake, it was real, or some unusual psychological process was involved.

Consequently, Ofcom found the broadcast was a breach of paragraph 1.27 of the Broadcasting Code which provides:

"Demonstrations of exorcisms, occult practices and the paranormal (which purport to be real), must not be shown before the watershed (in the case of television) or when children are particularly likely to be listening (in the case of radio). Paranormal practices which are for entertainment purposes must not be broadcast when significant numbers of children may be expected to be watching, or are particularly likely to be listening."

Whilst the Chatham Dockyard episode did not feature any *demonstrations* of exorcisms, occult practices or the paranormal, Ofcom took the view that "it did include *paranormal practices*, such as 'possessions' and a séance shown when a significant number of children were likely to be watching (Ofcom – *Broadcast Bulletin Issue number 226*, 18 Mar 2013).

Ofcom's ruling seems entirely sensible, even in the age of reality television when it appears almost anything short of overtly criminal acts can be performed live and broadcast on a TV channel somewhere. Although it may appear Ofcom is being oversensitive (and fighting a losing battle in the age of the Internet), spirit possession is certainly a subject that many people find upsetting, and exorcism even more so. Certainly, no responsible psychiatrist, priest or worker in the field would invite TV cameras along to film a serious exorcism for entertainment purposes, not only because of the intrusive nature of cameras but because of the possible effects upon gullible and suggestible individuals viewing any resultant broadcast. Both age and experience in life result in different degrees of resilience, as do the effects of changing wider cultural and broadcasting norms. Some material in



teatime shows like *Dr Who* would have been 'X'-rated in the 1960s, although the show has become so politically correct and soppy now that many traditional science fiction fans must despair. Fortunately, almost all casual and regular viewers of *Most Haunted* with whom I have ever spoken have expressed strong doubts as to the reality of the proceedings, a wholly justified scepticism shared by actual observers on the spot (see *Will Storr v The Supernatural*, 2006, by Will Storr concerning a show recorded at Canewdon in Essex).

Like that of adults, the individual sensitivity of children exposed to ghost and horror stories varies enormously. Just over a week after the Ofcom ruling, the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* (27 March 2013) was reporting how primary school children at Wyke, Yorkshire, "have been hunting a headless horseman, said to ride through Judy Woods at dead of night". The headless horseman is said to be a certain "Captain Beavers" and the children were being encouraged to develop a ghost heritage trail through the area. Project leader Malcolm Hanson told the paper there were plenty of spooky myths around Wyke, and the enthusiastic pupils gave a presentation on what they had learned to parents and teachers.

It has long been recognised that ghosts have great appeal to children and a yet greater capacity than adults to scare them. Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* imagined the fear-filled conversations of his flying island of Laputa as being comparable to the way "that boys discover in delighting to hear terrible stories of spirits and hobgoblins, which they greedily listen to, and dare not go to bed for fear".

In 1970 schoolboys from Arnold School, a private school in Blackpool, formed an 'Occult Society'. However, they scared themselves with ouija board séances when messages came through purporting to be from a hanged sailor and a woman murdered with an axe. The hysteria over the events became national news, with warnings being issued by local clergy and John Cutten of the Society for Psychical Research commenting: "When people begin to believe messages are coming from the spiritual world and get frightened it

is time to leave the board alone" to calm the situation (*Sun*, 17 Mar 1970).

The mother of writer Sophia Kingshill suffered a severe shock as an eight-year-old child by being told a blood-curdling traditional Scottish ghost poem by the folklorist Katherine Briggs. "My mother was so frightened that she was ill for a fortnight" (*The Lore of Scotland*, 2008, by Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill).

According to the late Susan Elliot, wife of British actor Denholm Elliot, their daughter Jennifer never really recovered from the childhood trauma of being read extracts from *The Exorcist* as a bedtime story by a thoughtless babysitter in Ibiza. (see *Denholm Elliot: Quest for Love*, 1994, by Susan Elliot). Jennifer Elliot later became addicted to drugs and hanged herself in 2003. The broadcast of the infamous BBC television play *Ghostwatch* in 1991 was blamed for causing post-traumatic shock in children.

Yet at the same time, many children joyfully play games based around the idea of ghosts and hauntings (several traditional games called 'Ghosts' are recorded) and even create phantoms for themselves as dares and hoaxes. At Harrow School in the 19th century, a game called 'Jack O' Lantern' was played on the "darkest, foggiest nights". This involved chasing a boy carrying a lantern to impersonate a glowing ghost or "Willow the Wisp". In King's Lynn in Norfolk children climbed into a box tomb in St Nicholas's Churchyard to 'moan and howl' until at least one poor boy or girl had run away crying in fear (see Owen Davies in *The Haunted*, 2007).

In Cambridge, at Cutter Ferry Path in 1928, gangs of boy scouts went after the ghost, a strange light seen moving around the area whilst young pranksters hung a sheet and a box painted with a face from a tree to scare passers-by. This was swiftly detected as a hoax and another juvenile trickster was pelted with missiles when he appeared dressed up in a sheet. Harry Price condemned teenagers who came into the grounds of Borley Rectory in Essex before its destruction to peer in windows and make noises (Price, *Most Haunted House in England*, 1940). Ten years earlier, he had to put up with 'Battersea hooligans' who had threatened to break the windows of a haunted property in Eland Road unless allowed to 'investigate' the phenomena themselves (Price, *Poltergeist Over England*, 1945).

Perhaps the last word should be given to Lord Halifax. In his introduction to *Lord Halifax's Ghost Book* (1936), the son of the noble compiler recalled how his father faced opposition when wanting to read the stories to the children of the family. "My father, however, used to justify the method as calculated to stimulate the imagination, and the victims themselves, fascinated and spell-bound by a sense of delicious terror, never failed to ask for more... Apart from the moralities, few charges in his eyes were more damaging to persons than that they should be devoid of imagination".

THERE BE BEASTS

MATT SALUSBURY grabs his pink-headed duck lure and reports from a mini-conference organised by the London Cryptozoology Club

It was a full house in the basement at Treadwell's 'esoteric beliefs' bookshop in Bloomsbury for 'There Be Beasts', the first London Cryptozoology Club (LCC) mini-conference in April. James Newton, founder of the LCC and one of the conference's organisers, introduced the day's proceedings before allowing Richard Freeman, zoological director of the Centre for Fortean Zoology, to kick off, resplendent in a waistcoat emblazoned with gold dragons. His pet hate is Hollywood's tendency to depict dragons as having only two legs, when they should have four.

The two-legged versions aren't dragons, they're wyverns, he says. "People who put wyverns in films and pass them off as dragons" drive self-described "cryptozoological pedants" like Richard into a murderous rage.

He reeled off a list of mystery animals, a list that until 1904 would have included the gorilla, then regarded as just "a hairy ogre from 'native' folklore". Richard feels that *Gigantopithecus* – a huge fossil Asian ape whose fragmentary remains suggest it walked upright – is a good candidate for the identity of a current cryptid, the yeti.

While earlier researchers perceived Bigfoot – North America's manimal – as an ape akin to *Gigantopithecus*, "armchair cryptozoologist" James Newton introduced us to current trends in Bigfoot research which suggest we're dealing with something much closer to us humans. James worked as a volunteer at South Dakota's Cheyenne River Youth Project with the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, a division of the Lakota Nation. Over 20 years of experience in youth work means he's good as spotting when children are trying to pull his leg, but he was struck by how the Lakota kids he worked with described their attitudes and encounters with Bigfoot in a matter-of-fact way. Like the time in 2006 when, out of the blue, a



LEFT: Burmese children examine Richard's pink-headed duck lure.

ABOVE: The only way you're likely to see a P-HD: as a plate in a book.

BELOW: Scanning the Horniman Museum's monkey-fish mermaid.

RICHARD THORNS

It was sighted by a Dutchman atop a hired elephant



girl named Misti Bad Warrior pointed to an illustration of Chewbacca in a *Where's Wally?* book and said: "That's Bigfoot".

Recent takes on Bigfoot, by the likes of researchers Autumn Williams – herself a childhood Bigfoot witness – and the 'Tennessee Bigfoot lady' Mary Green, describe "habituation scenarios" – years of interactions between rural families and Bigfoot communities. The witnesses "were people who lack the sophistication to make it in cities... but were tuned in to their environment". Encounters could take the form of gift exchanges – missing animal feed,

'artwork' gifts like knotted stalks of grass left in return, or a mother looking out of the kitchen window to see her child handing some biscuits over the fence to their "big hairy friend".

London's Horniman Museum has in its collection a specimen known as 'Japanese Monkey-Fish; Merman (Ningyo)'. Paolo Viscardi, the Horniman's natural history curator, took us through an "unnatural history of mermaids". It seems that in 19th century Japan, small representations of nature spirits were made – from a monkey and a fish – for shrines. When the first Western sailors turned up, a monkey-fish mermaid cottage industry grew up in response to demand.

Everyone assumed the Horniman mermaid, and all other mermaid 'gaffes', were made from the head, arms and torso of a monkey sewn on to the back end of a fish. It transpired the Horniman 'monkey-fish', while it probably has the back end of a carp, contains no monkey parts at all. It has wire for fingers, a clay and papier-mâché head, fish jaws, bamboo neck, and arms of wood and wire. Under X-Rays or put through medical scanners, most 'monkey-fish' mermaids display an absence of actual monkey bits. Leiden's Blomhoff Specimen is the only mermaid that actually has the front end of a monkey.

Richard Thorns, the "pink-

headed duck guy", has been on three trips to Burma in search of that elusive and supposedly extinct bird – a large, mallard-sized diving duck with a long, ramrod-straight neck, chocolate brown in colour with a "bubble-gum pink" head (a gentler pink in the females). The duck was shy and solitary, preferring deep pools in wetlands. We're unsure if it was a species of pochard or a genus all of its own. It was always a rare bird. A 1920s captive breeding programme in Surrey failed, and the last recorded pink-headed duck (P-HD) was seen in 1935, in the north Indian state of Bihar. The wetland habitats around India's mega-cities have gone the same way as the P-HD, but numerous marshes resembling those "vanished ecosystems" still exist over the border in Burma. Richard's first Burma trip took him to Kachin State, three days upriver from Mandalay. Eventually, witnesses (often reluctant to come forward) reported two P-HD sightings at one lake, and Richard heard about an unconfirmed sighting – lasting only a few seconds – by a Dutchman atop a hired elephant during a 2003 expedition to a lake at Naung Kwin. One fisherman said of the mystery duck: "It was here once". A broken hand from a motorbike accident cut short Richard's most recent expedition, while the Kachin

A^Z ALIEN ZOO

KARL SHUKER presents his regular round-up from the crypto-zoological garden

Independence Army insurgency meant “unauthorised contact with foreigners” would land his guides in jail. He thinks one of the photographs he took just *might* show a P-HD on the lake. Time may be running out for the duck, if it does still live in Burma. Saffron and mustard cultivation are encroaching on the wetlands. Says Richard: “if Burma opens up, it would be very bad news for the pink-headed duck.”

London Fortean Society co-ordinator Scott Wood described the legendary parakeets of London and friends (including the new ‘Fordham Park panther’, sighted by a woman in that south London neighbourhood earlier in the week.) Ring-necked parakeets are now endemic to a 19-mile (30-km stretch of west London (and Ramsgate), while south London is home to the Monk parakeet. Scott is fascinated by the urban legends and far-fetched “escape scenarios” surrounding the parakeets’ arrival in the capital. These include Jimi Hendrix’s two parakeets escaping from his Portobello Road flat at the moment of his death, fugitives from the Twickenham aviary of the exiled King Manuel the Unfortunate of Portugal (still commemorated in Twickenham’s Manuel Road), and break-outs during the filming of *Anthony and Cleopatra* and/or *The African Queen* at Shepperton Studios (except the latter was filmed in Isleworth). Parakeet lore has turned the birds into a metaphor for immigration panic, a celebration of London’s multiculturalism or a harbinger of global warming. The problem with these “scenarios” is that a DEFRA report says parakeets have been kept in English captivity since 1855, and are known to have been “naturalised” by 1960, well before the demise of Hendrix.

Plans are afoot for “a bigger event in 2014” and for a summer expedition to Dorset searching for traces of British big cats.

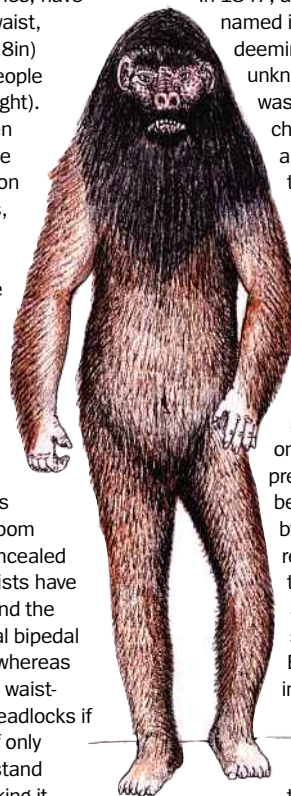
Email: london.cryptozoology@gmail.com
Twitter: @WeAreTheLC



DR DONALD STEWART

DREADLOCKED MINI-PYGMIES

The tribe of pygmies first reported on 17 March of this year by forest rangers in southern Sumatra’s Way Kambas National Park in Lampung Province are nothing if not distinctive. According to the rangers’ testimony, they don’t wear any clothes, have dreadlocks hanging down to their waist, and stand no more than 50cm (1ft 8in) tall, making them more like Little People than pygmies in stature (pictured right). A group of about 15 have been seen moving out of the forest towards the PT Nusantara Tropical Fruit plantation by several rangers using binoculars, for about 15 minutes and at a distance of just under 40 yards (37m). They were possibly after the plantation’s fruit crops, but when the rangers tried to approach them, they swiftly ran back into the forest. The rangers glimpsed them again on 20 March, but for less time and at a greater distance. This national park has an area of just under 500 square miles (1,300 km²), so there is plenty of room here for such entities to remain concealed very effectively. Some cryptozoologists have speculated that they may be one and the same as Sumatra’s cryptozoological bipedal man-beast, the orang pendek. Yet whereas the latter does allegedly possess a waist-length mane that may resemble dreadlocks if tangled in clumps, and especially if only seen from a distance, it is said to stand 3-5ft (90-150cm) high, thereby making it considerably taller than the tiny mini-pygmies of Way Kambas. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/03/30/rangers-sight-pygmies-way-kambas-national-park.html> 30 Mar 2013.



BIG FISH RECOGNISED

Sometimes exceeding 8ft (2.4m) long and weighing up to 440lb (200kg), the arapaima or pirarucu *Arapaima gigas* of the Amazon basin is one of the world’s biggest species of freshwater fish. Since 1868, this is the only species of arapaima to be recognised by science, but it wasn’t always the

case. In an illustrated monograph of 1829, Swiss biologist Louis Agassiz (later to become an eminent professor in zoology) described in detail an arapaima specimen that had been collected in the Brazilian Amazon a decade earlier, which he had examined. In 1847, a French zoologist formally described and named it *Arapaima agassizii* (Agassiz’s arapaima), deeming it to represent another, hitherto-unknown arapaima species. This classification was based upon a number of morphological characteristics relating to its eyes, teeth and fins, considered distinct enough from those of *A. gigas* to warrant taxonomic delineation.

In 1868, however, this classification was discounted in a major ichthyological catalogue, since when *A. agassizii* has languished in scientific obscurity – largely due to the rarity of the obscure monograph in which Agassiz’s original description had been published.

Moreover, this species’ type (and only known) specimen, which had been preserved in a German museum ever since being described by Agassiz, was destroyed by an Allied bomb during World War II. In recent times, however, while researching the arapaima, fisheries expert Dr Donald Stewart (pictured above with an arapaima skeleton) from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) in Syracuse, New York, came upon a copy of Agassiz’s ultra-rare monograph and recognised that this long-forgotten species fully merited its distinct

taxonomic status. Accordingly, after 145 years, Agassiz’s arapaima has finally been reinstated by Stewart as a valid, second species of arapaima in the March 2013 issue of the scientific journal *Copeia*. Yet because the collector of its only known (and now lost) specimen died before recording its precise provenance, no one knows where it lives in the wild (or even if it still survives). So although its taxonomic status is now accepted, Agassiz’s arapaima remains very much a mystery fish, albeit an exceedingly large one. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/04/130422111110.htm> 13 April 2013.

TIM MORRIS

SAVED BY MONKEYS

Paul Sieveking considers the most detailed first-hand account of growing up with wild animals ever published

Marina Chapman of Bradford, West Yorkshire, has long been reluctant to reveal her exotic life story to anyone beyond her closest family, but a ghost-written memoir, *The Girl With No Name*, has now been published, to raise funds for charities that combat human trafficking and child slavery in Colombia. Marina's daughter Vanessa James, a 23-year-old film score composer, spent six years talking to her mother and piecing together her memories of jungle life. She was born in about 1950, either in northeast Colombia, or maybe over the border in Venezuela, so is now about 63. Colombia had yet to plunge into *La Violencia* (its long civil war beginning in 1964), but abductions for ransom were common and children were frequently snatched by ransom gangs. This appears to be what happened to Luz Marina (a name she chose for herself at the age of about 14).

According to her account, she was snatched shortly before her fifth birthday. All she can remember is being chloroformed with a hand over her mouth; and all she can recall of her life before that is her black dolly and the fascination of splitting open peapods. She regained consciousness in the back of a truck with other children before blacking out again. Then she recalls being carried by a man running through the jungle with another man, before being abandoned and finding a hollow tree to sleep in. Sitting in a clearing on about the third day, she realised she was surrounded by a troupe of about 30 monkeys – which, judging from her description, were probably weeper capuchins. Two of the senior monkeys came and knocked her over, after which the troop gradually came to accept her. She copied some of their eating habits: seeds, nuts, and fruit (small green bananas, figs, guava, tamarind, etc) – but not lizards, flowers, grass, insects,

grubs or brightly coloured berries. She copied one clever monkey's technique of cracking nuts by putting them in a hollow and whacking them with a branch or rock.

She lost all sense of time and imitated monkey vocalisations to stave off loneliness. Like them, she whistled to scare off snakes, and gradually learnt to vocalise a wide range of feelings. She told *Fortean Times* that she still has simian mannerisms but her memory of monkey language has largely faded after almost half a century. She added that her sense of smell remains acute; for instance, she can tell from a distance when fruit is ripe.

In the most astonishing episode in the book (pp49-52), she became very ill after eating poisonous fruit (described as tamarind's 'deadly twin'), but was cured by 'Grandpa monkey', who pushed her through the undergrowth to a water hole and held her under the brackish water until she swallowed some and vomited. "I will never know for sure what it was that had

poisoned me, just as I'll never know how Grandpa monkey knew how to save me. But he did. I am convinced of it." Though this seems hard to believe, primates have been observed picking effective medicinal plants and self-medicating.

After her recovery, the monkeys befriended and groomed her; by this time she was crawling with lice and other insects. She learned to appreciate spiders and use moss to wipe her bottom. Like her simian companions, she learned to climb up to the forest canopy during the day. One

time, she found a tiny shard of mirror and was startled to find her face was not the same as those of the capuchins. Not long afterwards, she lost this precious talisman. The reaction of feral children to mirrors is curious. Neither Kaspar Hauser nor Victor of Aveyron could recognise their reflections; anthropologist Jean-Claude Auger observed the gazelle boy of the Spanish Sahara looking at his reflection in a pool of water

as if it were a stranger; and a girl confined to a lunatic asylum in Bursa, Turkey, in the 1930s, who had reportedly been raised by bears, would sit for hours gazing at herself in a mirror.

Marina reckons she had been in the jungle about three years when she saw an indigenous woman going into a thicket and emerging with a baby. She followed her back to a group of huts. Shooed away by the dominant male, she thereafter made furtive raids to steal cooked food, such as snakes and spiders; she was particularly fond of juicy ants. She made pigments from seeds, nuts and flowers to decorate her skin, as well as bark, rocks, and branches. She made orchid and vanilla pod chains as 'jewellery' and as decoration.

One day, she saw a man and a woman collecting butterflies and other wildlife and, coming out of hiding, she approached the woman and touched her hand. She was driven away in a truck with caged animals. She was naked and black with dirt, with hair down to her knees. Years later, she calculated she had lived with the monkeys for about five years, judging by rate of hair growth – about 7in (18cm) a year. The couple sold her for a parrot and a fistful of "leaves" (banknotes) to a fat woman in the village of Loma de Bolívar, who turned out to be the madam of a brothel. 'Gloria', as they called the wild child, learned to walk upright, eat off plates and twist door handles, and was forced to mop floors and do routine menial tasks. "Why did humans have so many things that weren't fit for purpose?" she mused years later. "Windows that got dirty, floors that got dusty and things to eat and drink from that broke if you dropped them?" She got used to the bitterness of coffee, the 'lardiness' of butter, the strange rubbery texture and blandness of pasta.

When her sexual services were offered to a client, she ran away and made it to the



LEFT: Weeper capuchin monkeys of the kind that Marina says she lived with.

city of Cúcuta, where she slept in a park with other homeless children, learned to scavenge from bins and steal food from restaurants, as well as set up temporary car parks with cones and collect fees. As she was small and dark, the other *gaminas* called her “Pony Malta” after a malt drink in a small dark bottle. She is still only 4ft 9in (145cm) tall. To escape life on the street, after a couple of years she became a servant for a family who turned out to be gangsters. They fed her scraps and kept her locked in the house. After more adventures (you’ll have to read the book), she was taken in by the family of Maria and Amadeo Forero Eusse and their five children in Bogotá, where she remained as maid.

Marina’s story sounds far-fetched, but she relayed the main details to Nancy Forero Eusse soon after her adoption by the Eusse family. Both Ms Eusse and her cousin Carlos Velásquez, who had not coordinated their stories before being interviewed last year by journalist Philip Sherwell, separately noted that Marina showed both great agility, demonstrated by her penchant for tree-climbing, and strength, despite her small physique, after her years in the jungle and on the street.

The detail of Marina’s recall of her jungle life is unprecedented in the annals of feral children, and ultimately has to be taken on trust; determined sceptics will believe she made it all up, or at least embellished her account. It’s true that we have to be cautious; the present writer accepted the account of Misha Defonseca, who claimed that, as a Jewish orphan between the ages of seven and 11, she had wandered through occupied Europe in World War II, living on wild berries, raw meat and food stolen from farmhouses, and occasionally teaming up with wolves (*Misha: a Mémoire of the*



OPPOSITE PAGE: The earliest known photograph of Marina Chapman, aged 17. **LEFT:** Marina says she still retains some simian characteristics.

Her memory of monkey language has largely faded

Holocaust Years, Mount Ivy Press, Boston, 1997.) Several years later, Defonseca was exposed as a fantasist.

The jungle area where Marina lived was probably around Catatumbo, in recent years controlled by the Marxist guerrillas who have waged Latin America’s longest insurgency. Antonio Ramirez Rodriguez, chief biologist and Catatumbo veteran, thought a small child could learn to scavenge from capuchin monkeys. “They are omnivores who eat anything, from fruits and vegetables to insects, lizards and rats,” he said. “They organise hunting parties, have social structures, they protect, help each other and follow a group leader. It’s possible that a child could have adapted to those structures.”

Monkeys are known to accept young humans into their fold. For example, John Sesebunya, a four-year-old Ugandan boy, was left in the jungle for more

than a year (maybe three) and lived with vervet monkeys – or possibly black and white colobus monkeys, according to some sources (*FT*130:18, 161:39). Now approaching 30, he adapted well to life with humans after his rescue in 1991. He has been studied by a number of experts, all of whom are convinced by his behaviour and interaction with monkeys that he is a genuine feral child. Another boy, this one deaf and dumb, had been found living with a troupe of vervet monkeys in Uganda in 1982, and named Robert at the Naguru orphanage in Kampala. Then there was ‘Bello’, a two-year-old boy found by hunters in 1996, living with a family of chimpanzees in Nigeria’s Falgore forest. When first brought to a children’s home in Kano, he walked like a chimp, moving on his ‘hind legs’ but dragging his arms on the ground (*FT*161:20). The earliest ‘monkey boy’ that *FT* is aware of was found in Sri Lanka in 1973, and named Tissa (*FT*161:38).

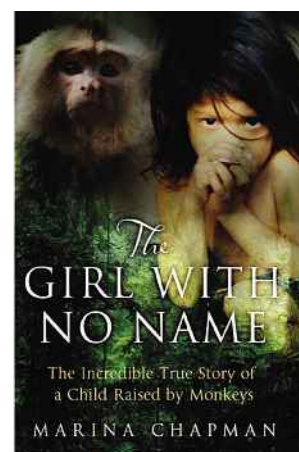
Mr Velásquez said that Marina worked for his family as a maid in Bogotá for about 10 years; then his father’s textile business went bust and he moved to Yorkshire, taking Marina along to look after the children. The family worshipped at the evangelical

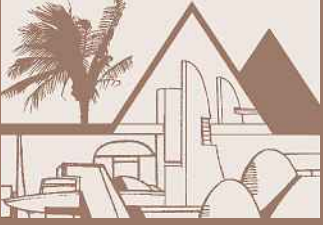
Abundant Life Church in Bradford, near their house in Shipley. Here, Marina met John Chapman, a 28-year-old bacteriologist, and they married in 1978. Their daughters were born in 1980 and 1983.

“Part of the wild child is still very much with her,” according to her literary agent, Andrew Lownie. “She has spent much of her time in England embarrassing her children by scaling trees in seconds, catching wild birds and rabbits with her bare hands, as well as milking the odd passing cow.” In Bradford, Mrs Chapman is known for once cooking a quiche at a local fair for the Duke of Kent, who apparently declared it the best he had ever had. She recently started her own business called Marina Latina Food. *Sunday Times*, 21 Oct; *D.Mail*, 22 Oct; *Sunday Telegraph*, 28 Oct 2012.

All pictures courtesy of Mainstream Publishing.

The Girl With No Name: The Incredible True Story of a Child Raised by Monkeys by Marina Chapman with Vanessa James and Lynne Barrett-Lee (Mainstream Publishing, Edin., 2013). ISBN 9-781-780-575797.





ARCHAEOLOGY

Our archaeological round-up is brought to you by **PAUL DEVEREUX**, Managing Editor of *Time & Mind – The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* (www.bloomsbury.com/timeandmind)



over an Iron Age mine on a prominence known locally as Dwarfs Hill. Here a farmer unearthed a clay tablet inscribed with a curse by a Roman, who petitioned the god to ensure the return of his stolen ring from someone he apparently knew. The Latin curse translates as: "Among those who bear the name of Senicianus to none grant health until he bring back the ring to the temple of Nodens".

The third part of this curious story slotted into place in 1929, when Lydney was being excavated. JRR Tolkien was called in as a consultant regarding the Nodens dedication in his role as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford; he apparently visited the site a number of times. The obvious speculation, therefore, is that the possibly cursed Vyne ring was the inspiration, or *an* inspiration, for the magical, inscribed ring the hobbit Bilbo Baggins found in Gollum's cave. *Guardian*, 2 April 2013.

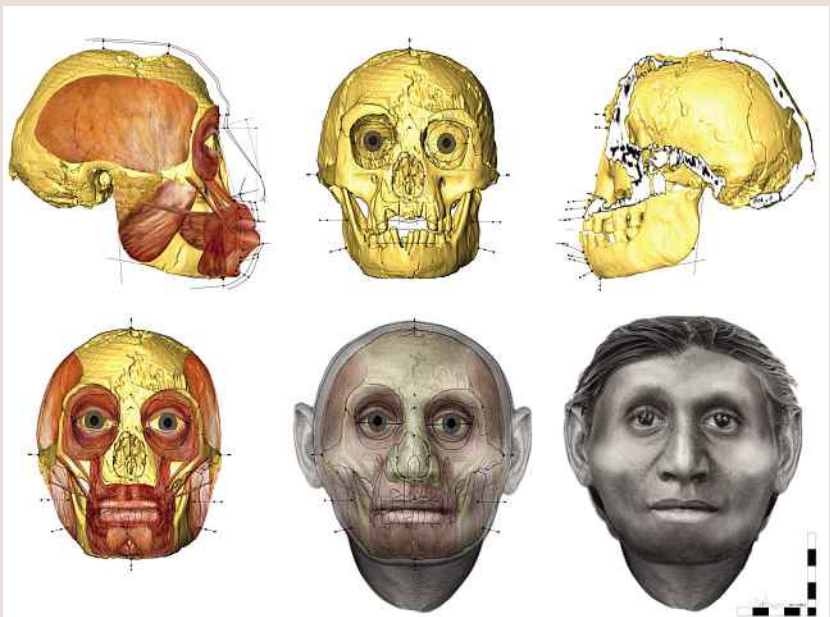
TALKING OF HOBBITS

We have mentioned *Homo floresiensis* in previous editions of this column: skeletal remains of the diminutive creature were discovered on the Indonesian island of Flores in 2003, and it is now generally thought to be a previously unknown species of small hominin that lived until c.18,000 years ago. Unsurprisingly, it was quickly nicknamed "the hobbit". Now, Dr Susan Hayes and colleagues of the University of Wollongong's Centre for Archaeological Science have used forensic technology based on CT scans of the creature's skull to model fat and skin, giving a pretty good idea of what *Homo floresiensis* would have looked like. This is the closest you will get to seeing a real hobbit! *The Australian*, 6 April 2013.

BILBO'S RING?

An intriguing golden ring features in a special display mounted with the help of the Tolkien Society at the Vyne, a Tudor mansion in Hampshire. The ring is thought to have been discovered in the 18th century at Silchester, a Roman and indeed pre-Roman town abandoned by the 7th century. It seems that it was then acquired by the family who lived at The Vyne, the Chutes, who had antiquarian interests. It is a substantial piece that only fits on a gloved thumb. It has a Latin inscription reading: "Senicianus live well in God".

Decades later, and some 100 miles (160km) distant at Lydney, Gloucestershire, an apparent link to the ring occurred. Lydney was a Roman version of the earlier Greek Aesculapeia, where dreaming was used for healing purposes. Lydney, though, was dedicated to the local god Nodens rather than Aesculapius, and dogs were used to lick the afflicted parts of patients rather than harmless snakes as in ancient Greece. Lydney is located



CLASSICAL CORNER



FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

164. ANCIENT IRON LADIES

COSMIC BLAST IN THE PAST

Examination of Japanese cedar tree rings dating back to AD 774-5 have revealed higher levels of radioactive carbon-14 than would have been normal. Scientists deduce that this was caused by a gamma-ray blast that impacted on the Earth caused by the collision of two black holes or two stars somewhere in our own Milky Way galaxy. "Over the last 3,000 years this was the most energetic event to have hit the Earth," Professor Ralph Neuhauser of Germany's University of Jena is reported as saying. Fortunately, the blast was so short-lived and sourced so far away it did not cause any species extinctions. But this, along with the recent meteorite impact in Russia and near-miss by an asteroid (**FT300:7**), reminds us that we live in a larger and busier neighbourhood than we usually appreciate. <i>21 Jan 2013.

MYSTERY IN GALILEE

A curious cone-shaped feature has been found on the bed of the Sea of Galilee in Israel. It is a cairn-like stack of basalt cobbles and boulders, some over 3ft (90cm) in length, and is estimated to weigh about 60,000 tons as a whole. It is almost 32ft (10m) tall and has a base diameter of approximately 230ft (70m). Its purpose is unknown.

The structure was actually first detected in 2003 during a sonar survey (below), and divers have been down subsequently to make a preliminary observation. Although it is considered to be a deliberate construction, the boulders are unworked, and no sign of a retaining wall or arrangement of rocks was noted. It is thought the feature was originally built on dry land, but was submerged by a rise in the water level of the Sea of Galilee. Researcher Yitzhak Paz (who has been published in *Time & Mind*, incidentally), of the Israel Antiquities Authority and Ben-Gurion University, reckons it could be more than 4,000 years old (there are Stone Age structures in the general region). Paz states that an underwater archaeological expedition will hopefully be sent down in the near future to see if detailed, expert investigation can yield more information about the nature of the structure. *LiveScience*, 9 April; *Yahoo! News*, 10 April 2013.



"Queen Elizabeth – well, whatever she was doing – maybe it wouldn't be any too discreet to inquire into just what she was doing" – Fort, *Books*, p725.

Our former Prime Minister was not averse to being compared to Gloriana, and must have envied QE1's power to decapitate such real or imagined enemies as Essex and Walter Raleigh – fluting Shall We Withdraw Our Love was hardly an adequate substitute.

Attila the Hun would, though, have scorned the royal motto, *Video et Taceo* (I See and Remain Quiet): Q. What were Denis's last words? A. None. She was with him to the end.

By now, Mrs T will have privatised God and stoked high the fires of Hell in readiness for Heseltine ("The trouble with Michael is that he has had to buy all his own furniture" – Alan Clark). Admirers are promoting her metallurgical status to gold. Detractors are not echoing Rod Stewart's "Wake Up, Maggie..." But, from either point of view, how does the Lady from Lincolnshire stack up against ferrous females of the past?

Egypt had Queen Hatshepsut (1508-1458 BC). In traditional Pharaonic male style, she wore a false beard – no sign of a handbag, though. Despite her military exploits, she declined the title of 'Strong Bull' – hieroglyphic for Iron Lady? After her death, attempts (political or popular) were made to eradicate all physical symbols of her rule.

Despite Greek mythological accretions, Semiramis was based on the historical (820-806 BC) Assyrian Queen Shammuramat. Supposedly the daughter of a fish-goddess rather than a Grantham grocer, she was (Ammianus, bk14 ch6 para17) the first to castrate youths of tender age for the eunuch market – can see Geoffrey Howe wincing. Additional accusations of home-wrecker and harlot, she was also – topical touch coming up – reputed to be a witch.

Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum) brought five ships to assist Xerxes's Greek invasion. At Salamis, she aroused the King's admiration by ramming a ship – GOTCHA! Snag was, neither she nor he realised it was one of theirs.

Amestris, Xerxes's wife, earned notoriety (Herodotus, bk7 ch114) for burying alive 14 children of Persian nobles – drying out some 'Wets'? She also mutilated her daughter-in-law's mother after seeing her parade around (prefiguring Edwina Currie) in an eye-catching dress.

Alexander the Great's ferocious mother Olympias (she was Albanian, which explains a lot) is no stranger to this column, hence I content myself with this unimprovable



capsule description by Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon* (1974, p107): "A woman who committed at least five political murders (including roasting a baby over a brazier), and ordered over a hundred executions, can hardly be called squeamish" – milk-snatching hardly compares with baby-barbecuing.

Neither could Boudicca (aka Boadicea; cf. Antonia Fraser's *The Warrior Queens: Boadicea's Chariot*, 1988), whose anti-Roman uprising caused 70-80,000 deaths, with captured noblewomen impaled, their breasts lopped off and sewn into their mouths (Dio Cassius, bk62 ch7 para2) – her Falklands factor.

Fredegund (d. AD 597; cf. Gregory of Tours, bk9 for the full story), Queen of Frankish King Chilperic, got into the royal bed by strangling the incumbent Galawintha. She may have wearied of hubby, mysteriously assassinated in 584. After procuring or attempting the murders of various inconvenient royal allies and relatives, she and son Clothar II took their long-deferred revenge on Brunhilda, sister of Galawintha and sworn enemy. Having racked the hapless sexagenarian for three days, they had her torn to pieces by a quartet of four wild horses – a fate our beloved hippophile Queen Mum managed to escape.

Byzantine Queen Irene (797-802) usurped the throne by having her son Constantine's eyes gouged out, thus disqualifying him for office – as well for Mark he never stood in the way of Mummy's ambition, though he was of course the apple of Her eye. A 17-day solar eclipse and total darkness followed, supposedly signifying Heavenly horror at this expression of maternal affection.

–Irene, Goodnight!



NECROLOG

This month, we say ta ta to two sons of London market traders – one a writer who changed the face of modern horror, the other the creator of his own offshore principality



Jim was born on 8 April 1943 in the East End of London, the son of street traders. His family lived at the back of Petticoat Lane in Whitechapel, once the stalking ground of Jack the Ripper, and just around the corner from the Krays. "Ours was the only Catholic household in the street," her recalled. "All the rest were Jewish." He

JAMES HERBERT

I knew James Herbert from the 1980s – first as a young book reviewer and then as a friend. Although he basically created the modern mass-market horror genre with the publication of his first novel, *The Rats*, in 1974 (for the record, Stephen King's *Carrie* was published a few months later), he was always wary of the "fandom" aspects of the genre (although not of the fans themselves, whom he embraced with genuine enthusiasm and affection). It was therefore something of an achievement when I convinced him to be a Guest of Honour at the World Fantasy Convention in London in 1988. As always, he was friendly and garrulous with everyone he met and over the years I managed to persuade him (albeit always with some initial scepticism on his part) to participate in several other such events, most notably the World Horror Convention 2010 (where we presented him with the convention's Grand Master Award, which he was incredibly proud of) and, more recently, FantasyCon in Brighton just last September.

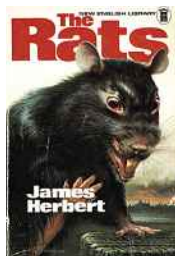
While I was researching my 1992 book about him, *James Herbert: By Horror Haunted*, I was a guest in his Sussex home on a number of occasions, and I was lucky to attend several events in his honour over the years, not least his 25th wedding anniversary to his wife, Eileen, who survives him, along with their three daughters.

won a scholarship to St Aloysius Grammar School in Highgate, and at 16 went to Hornsey College of Art, where he studied graphic design. Then he joined a London advertising agency, where he worked his way up to become Group Head/Associate Director.

Feeling there was more he could do, at the age of 28 he started secretly writing a novel. Ten months later he had completed *The Rats* – inspired by his childhood upbringing and depicting a London overrun by monstrous, flesh-eating rats of unknown origin. He submitted the manuscript to six publishers on the same day. Within three weeks he had received three replies. Two publishers turned the novel down, while the other accepted it enthusiastically.

New English Library published *The Rats* in 1974 with a first printing of 100,000 paperback copies. He was paid an advance of £150 with a royalty of five per cent. Within weeks that first printing was completely sold out. The book has never been out of print, and from that point on he reigned as Britain's undisputed number one author of horror fiction, with 23 novels to his credit.

Jim's list of best-selling titles includes *The Fog*, *The Survivor*, *Fluke*, *The Spear*, *Lair*, *The Dark*, *The Jonah*, *Shrine*, *Domain*, *Moon*, *The Magic Cottage*, *Sepulchre*, *Creed*, *Portent*, '48, *Others*, *Once*, *Nobody True* and *The Secret of Crickley Hall*. His final novel, *Ash* (2012), was the third in a trilogy



featuring psychic investigator David Ash, which began with *Haunted* and *The Ghosts of Sleath*.

Alongside the full-length works, *The City* was a graphic novel in *The Rats* sequence illustrated by Ian Miller, while *James Herbert's Dark Places: Locations and Legends* was an atmospheric collaboration with photographer Paul Barkshire.

James Herbert's books have sold more than 54 million copies worldwide and have been translated into more than 35 languages, including Russian and Chinese. *The Rats*, *The Survivor*, *Fluke*, *Haunted* and *The Secret of Crickley Hall* have all been filmed, the latter as a BBC mini-series in 2012. He was awarded an OBE in 2010.

Jim died peacefully in his bed, aged 69. It was far too early. He had more books in him (although he recently admitted to me that he was beginning to slow down – not surprisingly, since he wrote them all in longhand). He was one of the genuine nice guys in the genre. I'll miss him more than I can say – but so too will his millions of fans around the world.

James Herbert, author, born London 8 April 1943; died Sussex 20 Mar 2013, aged 69.

Stephen Jones

PRINCE ROY OF SEALAND

Roy Bates, the son of a Smithfield meat market salesman, travelled to Spain aged 15 to fight for the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. During World War II he became an infantry major and saw action in Africa, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, narrowly escaped a Greek fascist firing squad in Rhodes, and took part in the battle of Monte Cassino in Italy. Wounded several times, he survived malaria, sandfly fever, frostbite and snakebite. When a German stick grenade smashed his jaw and showered shrapnel in his face, an Army surgeon told him he would never find a wife as he would be so badly disfigured – but as his wounds healed, he met Joan Collins, a former beauty queen from Essex, at a dance, and within three months they had married.



After the war Major Bates imported meat from the Irish Republic to the rationed North, and rubber from Malaysia to make frogmen's flippers. He then built up an inshore fishing fleet on the Essex coast, and ran a chain of butcher's shops, a wholesale meat depot and, at one time, an estate agency. In 1965 he established Radio Essex on Knock John fortified tower in the North Sea off the Essex coast, claiming it as Britain's first 24-hour pirate pop station – but it was swiftly closed down by the Labour government.

After taking legal advice, Bates bought Rough Sands or Roughts Tower, another derelict artillery installation, anchored to a sandbar just outside British territorial waters; but before he could revive his radio transmissions, the Marine Broadcasting (Offences) Act of 1967 outlawed the employment of British citizens by pirate stations. Embracing the ancient legal doctrine of *ius gentium*, Bates declared independence on 2 September 1967 (his wife's birthday). Henceforth, he announced, he would be known as Prince Roy and his principality would be Sealand. He refurbished the platform, abandoned by the British military in the 1950s, and moved there with his wife and two children. Soon his bleak windswept hulk, with its twin towers of steel-reinforced concrete spanned by a 5,920ft² (550m²) rusting iron platform just over seven miles (11km) off Felixstowe, became not only *res derelicta* but *terra nullius*



– effectively disputed territory. When the rival Radio Caroline claimed the platform for itself, Bates and his crew repelled a boarding party with Molotov cocktails and warning shots. After a Royal Marine vessel was sent off in similar fashion, Bates was summonsed under the Firearms Act and in November 1968 appeared in the dock at Essex Assizes. The judge decided that since Sealand was outside British territorial waters, the courts had no jurisdiction. Bates saw this as Sealand's first *de facto* recognition.

During the 1970s Bates created Sealand's own constitution, flag (red and black with white diagonal stripe), passports, stamps, currency (the Sealand dollar, bearing the image of his wife 'Princess Joan'), national anthem and motto: *E Mare Libertas* ("From the Sea, Freedom"). In 1978, while Bates and his wife were away on business, German entrepreneur Alexander Achenbach staged a *coup d'état*, but within days Bates had retaken the platform in a dramatic predawn helicopter raid of his own. For many years, to make ends meet, he sold aristocratic titles ("Lord, Lady, Baroness – from £29.99"). He stopped issuing Sealand passports in 1997, to counter widespread fraud. His tiny fiefdom became a magnet for people seeking sanctuary from the law, from gambling operators (whom Bates rejected) to, more recently, Wikileaks, which was reportedly exploring the possibility of moving its computer servers to the principality.

Roy and Joan Bates retired to Spain in 2006. Their son Michael, latterly "Prince Regent" and acting head of state since 1999, opted for the *terra firma* of Essex, leaving the platform in the hands of a lone caretaker. In 2007, a Spanish property company valued the platform at around £500 million. With Michael having appointed his own son James as Prince Royal, Sealand remains one of the few micro-nations to have established a viable dynasty. In a 1980s television interview, Major Bates said: "I might die young or I might die old, but I will never die of boredom."

Paddy Roy Bates, 'Prince Roy of Sealand', born Ealing, London 29 Aug 1921; died Leigh-on-Sea, Essex 9 Oct 2012, aged 91.

For other micro-nations, see **FT98:34-39, 160:12, 242:22-23.**

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



An angler in Belarus died after a beaver bit him on the thigh, severing a main artery. The unnamed 60-year-old and two friends encountered the rodent near Minkovichi as they headed out on a fishing trip to Lake Shestakov in the region of Brest. The victim tried to approach it to be photographed, but it attacked and bit him twice. He bled to death before an ambulance could reach him. Beaver attacks are rare and fatal cases almost unheard of. The animal was possibly rabid, or a young beaver seeking new territory after being forced out by its parents. **The attack was filmed by the victim and the disturbing video can be seen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq_BEh1dhEw** *D.Telegraph, Metro, 12 April 2013.*

A British woman, believed to be a grandmother in her late fifties and of Asian origin, was bitten by a puppy on a visit to India and died from rabies at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in London in late May last year. She was bitten about two months earlier, but only sought help after seven weeks. She had twice visited Darent Valley Hospital in Dartford, Kent, with mild and indistinct symptoms, but was sent home. She failed to inform medical staff there that she had been bitten – but the delay in diagnosis is highly unlikely to have made any difference to her chances of survival. Unless those bitten by rabid animals have received prior vaccination, or get an emergency vaccination, the disease is usually fatal. *D.Telegraph, Metro, 29 May 2012.*

Brannigan, a 10-year-old Rottweiler, was given a bravery reward for saving landlady Lesley Banks when fire broke out at the Three Horseshoes pub in Wheathill, Shropshire, in October 2009. The dog woke his owner as the pub living quarters filled with smoke. "I am so grateful to Brannigan," she said. "I was asleep and he jumped on the bed. He began to pull at my arm, which normally means something is wrong."

In August 2011, after a pheasant shooting trip in Craswall, Herefordshire, Brannigan bit Ms Banks's right hand as she put him back in her car. She refused to seek medical help, convinced that the dog would be confiscated or destroyed, and tried to treat the wound using bleach and antiseptic wipes. It appeared to be healing at first, but she developed septicæmia and began suffering from vomiting and diarrhoea. A friend called an ambulance that rushed Ms Banks to hospital, but she died hours later. The bite still

showed no signs of swelling or pus. A year later, the coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death. Brannigan was put down. "He was a gentle giant," said a friend. "He never meant any harm and Lesley would never hear a word against him." *D.Mirror, Sun, 11 Aug 2012.*

Gary Richardson, 57, was killed by septic shock after his terrier CeeCee bit him on the finger. The plasterer had owned the tiny dog for three weeks when it began fighting with his Jack Russell at his home in Canterbury on 20 February 2011. He tried to separate the animals and received the nip on his finger. The bite was so small it didn't draw blood. His health deteriorated and two days later he went to a doctor, but was diagnosed at first with food poisoning. The next day he was taken to hospital but died from the bacterium *capnocytophaga*, found in the saliva of cats and dogs. A verdict of accidental death was recorded in May 2012. *D.Telegraph, Metro, 1 June 2012.*

In January 2012, Bhoop Narayan Prajapati, 65, was attacked by a bull after he hit the animal with a stick, and spent more than a month in hospital recovering from a leg injury. Then on 26 July, he threw hot water on the same bull for sitting in front of his thatched hut on the main road of Deori Township in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, India. The furious animal kept watch and attacked him the next day while he was having his morning tea. Prajapati ran inside his hut to escape, but the bull followed him, pushed him to the ground twice and gored him. Neighbours Bhura Khan and Nikhil Soni beat the bull with sticks to drive it away and rushed the victim to hospital, where he was pronounced dead from internal injuries. Shortly afterwards, the bull turned up at the hospital – and as Prajapati's remains were consigned to the flames, the bull also turned up at the crematorium. "It's something strange and surprising," said Deori police inspector RP Sharma. "We are going to write a letter to the civic body to put this bull in a government shelter." *Times of India, 31 July 2012.*

THE FORTEAN TIMES BOOK OF STRANGE DEATHS VOL 2

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THE HOTTEL MEMO GOES VIRAL

Two years ago, we reported how mainstream media got itself worked into a lather about the 'release' of an FBI memo in which a field agent relayed an unconfirmed rumour about crashed flying saucers and their occupants recovered in New Mexico (**FT276:30**). Dated 22 March 1950 and addressed to FBI Director J Edgar Hoover, the memo, written by Guy Hottel, has been in the public domain since the late 1970s. The rumour-legend passed on by Hottel's informant refers not to Roswell but to the crashed saucer hoax perpetrated by conman Silas Newton that was exposed by investigative reporter JP Cahn in 1953 (see Nick Redfern's feature in **FT181:30-36**). But as every fortean knows, you can *never* kill off a good story, particularly if it appears to confirm what many people want to believe.

Since the Hottel memo was uploaded to the FBI Vault in April 2011 this single page has become the most popular document in the agency's entire online reading room. In March, an FBI press release revealed Hottel's memo had 'gone viral' and had been viewed nearly one million times. A spokesman pointed out that, contrary to press reports, it had not posted proof of the legendary Roswell crash and Hoover had ordered his agents to stop collecting UFO stories four months after the memo was sent, "suggesting that our Washington Field Office didn't think enough of that flying saucer story to look into it". Indeed, the lack of interest is underlined by Hottel's memo; it ends by saying that no further evaluation of the rumour was deemed necessary. Hoping to draw a line under this urban legend the FBI said: "The memo does not prove the existence of UFOs; it is simply a second or third hand claim that we never investigated... Sorry, no smoking gun on UFOs." *Times*, 6 Apr 2013, quoting: www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2013/march/ufos-and-the-guy-hottel-memo

BREAKTHROUGH IN BRAZIL

Something of a breakthrough appears to have occurred in relations between ufologists and government agencies in Brazil. On 18 April, the Brazilian Ministry of Defence formally invited UFO researchers to discuss the subject at their headquarters in Brasilia. Over 20 people attended the meeting, including the Minister of Defence and representatives from the Brazilian Air Force, Navy and Army. The meeting followed the 4th World UFO



ABOVE: Brazilian *UFO Magazine* editor AJ Gevaerd meets military personnel at a meeting on 18 April to discuss a project to make official documents concerning UFOs available to the public.

Forum held in December 2012, where a communiqué demanded Brazil's secret government UFO archives be opened and an official committee for UFO investigations created under the country's air force. AJ Gevaerd, Brazilian *UFO Magazine's* editor, sees this official disclosure as a major step forward, noting: "Many questions remained unsolved about famous incidents such as the Varginha Case, the Mearim corvette incident and the Trindade Island sightings". The Brazilian Government's offer seems genuine, with the Secretary for the Ministry's Institutional Coordination and Organization, Ari Matos, announcing that any cases in which information was not publicly available were exceptions: "The general rule is to make all documents accessible." Unsurprisingly Brazilian ufologists were jubilant. "Today is a day to remember in the history of ufology," said Fernando Aragão Ramalho. "We are optimistically standing at the door that has been opened to us, and we expect to move forward with our discussions."

So far, so good. Flying saucery suspects that the honeymoon period will be over when released documents do not reveal any evidence of extraterrestrials or their craft.

This much vaunted government transparency will then be reframed by ufologists as further evidence of conspiracy and cover-up. As Margaret Thatcher said: "*You can't tell the people*". www.ufo.com.br/public/carta_foz/iguassu_falls_letter.pdf; www.ufo.com.br/documentos

'STRAY MISSILE' OR UFO?

Staying on the subject of cover-ups, in January Italy's top criminal court ruled there was clear evidence that an unidentified "missile" had caused an Italian airlines jet to crash near Sicily in 1980, killing all 81 passengers. The cause of the Itavia DC-9 crash during a flight from Bologna to Palermo has never been explained, but an appeal court has now ruled that Italy must now compensate families as its air defence system had "failed adequately to protect the skies". Theories about the cause have ranged from a bomb on board to the aircraft being caught in a dogfight with Libyan jets, but so far UFOs have not been mentioned despite many sightings of "mystery missiles" by pilots during this period. NATO officials have always denied there was any military activity in the sky that night. *Guardian*, 29 Jan 2013.

FIRE FROM THE SKY

Over the past few weeks I have been working with Peter Hough to publish an e-book version of an investigation that we carried out into the mystery of SHC (Spontaneous Human Combustion) and the ensuing debate over potential natural and more extraordinary causes that might explain what occurs in these cases.

We were fortunate to be able to work with coroners, scientists, fire officers and witnesses. However, during one investigation into the possible science of SHC we were led, somewhat unexpectedly, into contact with UFOs. This is not a major feature of the book, but I wanted to say something here about the connections that emerged, as they warrant further consideration.

Our research revealed the idea that 'super carriers' of static electricity might potentially 'overheat', resulting in an electrochemical reaction inside the body. It is not that unusual for people to 'store' static charge, only to discharge it with a jolt or spark when they touch something metallic. Indeed, I often experience this myself when using the ceiling tracker hoist during my caring duties. However, we looked into a number of extreme cases where people became so supercharged that almost every piece of electrical equipment they touched went haywire.

We had instances where house sweepers would overheat and burn, or cases where irons would catch fire when the 'super carrier' held them. One woman from Stockport made TV sets switch channels just by walking past them when 'charged up' and had even produced small electrical fires when she plugged something into a wall socket and sparks emerged.

It is not difficult to recognise the possible links here with UFO witnesses during close encounters. For example, one man returning from a late night shift at a car plant in Halewood, Merseyside, told of how a white 'balloon' appeared alongside him on an open path. As it came very near to his face, his skin began to tingle. But only when his wife greeted him at home did he discover that his arm was a mass of 'goose bumps' and his hair was standing on end, full of static. So severe was this 'charge' that it took 48 hours to dissipate.

Such cases are quite common, as are sunburn-like rashes that appear on exposed parts of the skin after close encounters. For instance, in the very impressive car-stop episode at Loch Raven Dam near Baltimore, Maryland, on 26 October 1958, a lens-shaped object caused an electrical failure that led to the two frightened occupants getting out of the vehicle whilst the object glowed brightly. It was now surrounded by a cloudy mist and exploded with a bang. As they looked on, the witnesses felt a sensation on their faces that "didn't seem like the heat of a burning object but something like an ultraviolet light". After calling police and being taken to hospital, they were found to have a reddish coloration akin to sunburn that faded over several days.

Other clues in UFO reports include puzzling holes in clouds. There are a number of



As it came very near to his face, his skin began to tingle

cases where glowing balls have appeared to physically alter the atmosphere in this way. An example occurred on 30 December 1977 at Exhall, Warwickshire, when several witnesses saw a golden ball surrounded by a fuzzy mist or aura. This hovered over electricity pylons for a short while before streaking away. In the totally overcast sky immediately above this spot the witnesses now spotted an oval hole that took a few minutes to close.

I think there are significant clues in the science here. The hair standing on end effect occurs because hair has become charged from an external source and each strand, carrying the same charge, repels the others, just as magnetic poles push one another apart. The hole in the cloud effect suggests a large-scale version, in which the charged particles of the glowing object repel similarly charged particles within the clouds, creating the temporary hole. The fact that UFO witnesses also often describe the glowing ball as being surrounded by a mist suggests that this ionised vapour has formed by attracting opposing charged particles from within the air during the same process.

Another interesting pointer involves watches: people who are 'super carriers' of static electricity often have great problems wearing them. They tend to go haywire or stop working. Exactly the same thing occurs

in a number of close encounter reports. For example, service engineer Ken Edwards saw a glowing white mass cross the road in front of his vehicle as he returned home late one night at Risley, Cheshire, in March 1978. His radio receiver 'exploded' as if absorbing a discharge, his fingers on the steering wheel exposed to the light were left with the familiar sunburn effect for days. And his watch stopped at the moment of encounter and would no longer work if he tried to wear it. But when someone else picked it up the watch operated normally – indicating that the 'charge' inside Ken remained after his encounter and was causing this long-term reaction.

I received an excellent close-up description of this phenomenon from a man who had served in the RAF for many years. In 1953, when based at Changi, Singapore, he and his wife and another service couple were in their bungalow at Katong. Suddenly, an 'orange' ball appeared atop telephone wires; it rolled along the wires, floated into the air and passed through the shutter windows into the house. At very close proximity, all four watched it move through the house making a fizzing noise as it travelled about one metre above the floor.

They were now able to view it in great detail, noting that it was actually bluish-white but had yellow patches like soap bubbles moving about inside it. The description is very suggestive of a plasma ball. That it had an energy that could be inducted into the environment (or people) was further illustrated when it passed the fridge, which then started to overheat, causing the motor to react violently. The house lights (all switched off) turned a dull orange until the ball left the room and shot off over the phone wires. A fluorescent light tube in the kitchen had also illuminated as the ball passed underneath; its induced charge presumably excited the gases in the tube, as normally occurs when electric current is applied.

There are many other cases that cement this link between balls of light and physical/physiological effects being inducted into the surroundings. Whether SHC is caused by high levels of static charge being input into the body of unfortunate 'super carriers', leading in extreme cases to tragedy, is an arguable theory, but not one that I am advocating here.

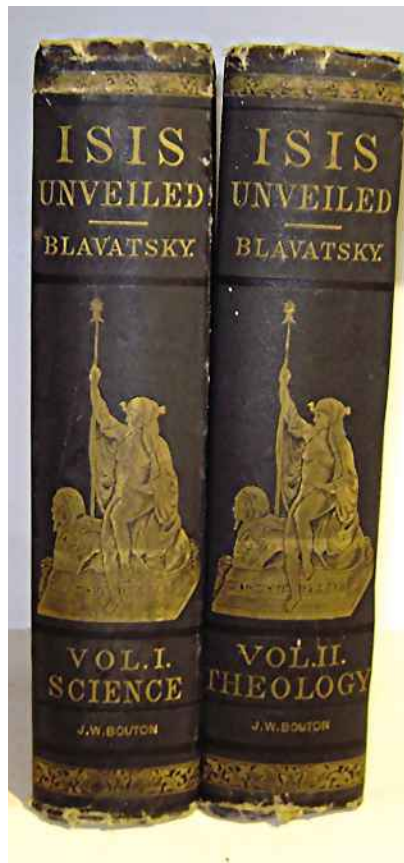
Rather, I am suggesting that we appear to have accidentally discovered some science that illuminates the physics of UFO close encounter cases in which an energetic UAP (unidentified aerial phenomenon) or atmospheric phenomenon forms spontaneously and introduces charge into the surrounding atmosphere or into a susceptible human who comes into close proximity.

Perhaps people who are 'super carriers' may prove to be especially prone to undergoing hyper-reactive close encounters, whereas others would just report seeing a light in the sky. So perhaps we should add a question to our case investigation reports and ask whether or not a witness suffers from recurring electrostatic shocks in daily life or has unusual problems using electrical equipment. It might provide important data.

THE MADAME AND HER MASTERS

To most people, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky is a colourful fake who fooled gullible occultists until she was rumbled by the Society for Psychical Research. **GARY LACHMAN** argues that this received wisdom is based on an oft-repeated lie that disguises a far more complicated truth, and that it's time to reassess the legacy of the legendary HPB.

One of the most controversial figures of 19th century occultism was the remarkable Russian noblewoman Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), or HPB, as she was known. A political and social radical, world traveller, magician, and author of hugely influential occult tomes such as *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky is probably best remembered as one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, a spiritual movement that had a profound impact on the esoteric and mainstream cultural currents of modern times. Beginning in New York City in 1875, the Theosophical Society soon spread around the world, and by the early 20th century could claim many key cultural figures of the modern world as followers. Blavatsky's message of a universal brotherhood, devoted to the study of the world's religions and the hidden powers of the human mind had a wide appeal. The inventor Thomas Edison, the poet WB Yeats, the composer Alexandre Scriabin, the painters Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, the American Civil War hero and purported inventor of baseball Abner Doubleday, the creator of *The Wizard of Oz* L Frank Baum, and the future leader of the Indian independence movement Mohandas Gandhi: all embraced the Theosophical



creed. Practically all the major figures of modern esotericism and spirituality – names like Rudolf Steiner, PD Ouspensky, GI Gurdjieff, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Dion Fortune, RA Schwaller de Lubicz, and many more – emerged from Theosophy's ample folds. TS Eliot lampooned her in his modernist masterpiece *The Waste Land*; Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was initiated into the Theosophical Society; and there is even suspicion that Albert Einstein kept a well-thumbed copy of *The Secret Doctrine* by his bedside.¹ Small wonder, perhaps, that the esoteric historian Christopher Bamford questioned why Blavatsky was not counted, along with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, as one of the “creators of the twentieth century”.²

We may think this pitches Blavatsky's claims too high; but even with this caveat, it is clear to any unprejudiced reader that Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society were an important influence in shaping the modern world. Our own multicultural, multi-faith, pluralistic sensibilities were one of the central aims of the TS, as it was often called. Sometime after its founding, the society produced a ‘mission statement’ that informs its different branches today:

LEFT PAGE: *Isis Unveiled*, one of the influential occult tomes penned by Madame Blavatsky.



1. To form the nucleus of a universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour.

2. The study of ancient and modern religions, philosophies, and sciences, and the demonstration of the importance of such study.

3. The investigation of the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man.

One central manifestation of the first, and for Blavatsky, most important, of the Theosophical Society's aims was the World's Parliament of Religions, held in 1893 during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. There, for the first time, Buddhists, Jains, Bahá'ís, Muslims, Hindus, and Theosophists shared a platform with Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. Although, by then, Blavatsky herself was gone – she died of Bright's disease, overwork and a medley of other ailments in London in 1891 – she would have regarded this gathering of different faiths as an important step in the evolution of the human race. Our current grassroots interest in a direct, immediate knowledge and experience of spiritual reality, with us now for some half a century – and unfortunately too often associated with the amorphous term 'New Age' – is another result of Blavatsky's earlier work, as is our lingering, if underfunded and over-criticised, research into parapsychology. Whatever we may think of Blavatsky or Theosophy, it is difficult to deny the impact both have had on who we are today.

MEETING THE MASTERS

Why is it then, you might ask, that outside of the esoteric/spiritual community Blavatsky is little known, and her influence on the modern world so unrecognised? It was in order to answer those questions that I wrote my book, *Madame Blavatsky: The Mother of Modern Spirituality*.³ Aside from the fact that until relatively recently practically anything to do with esotericism or spirituality has been ignored by mainstream historians, the



LEFT: A sorcerer; just one of the spirits manifested to Henry Steel Olcott by HPB in 1874.

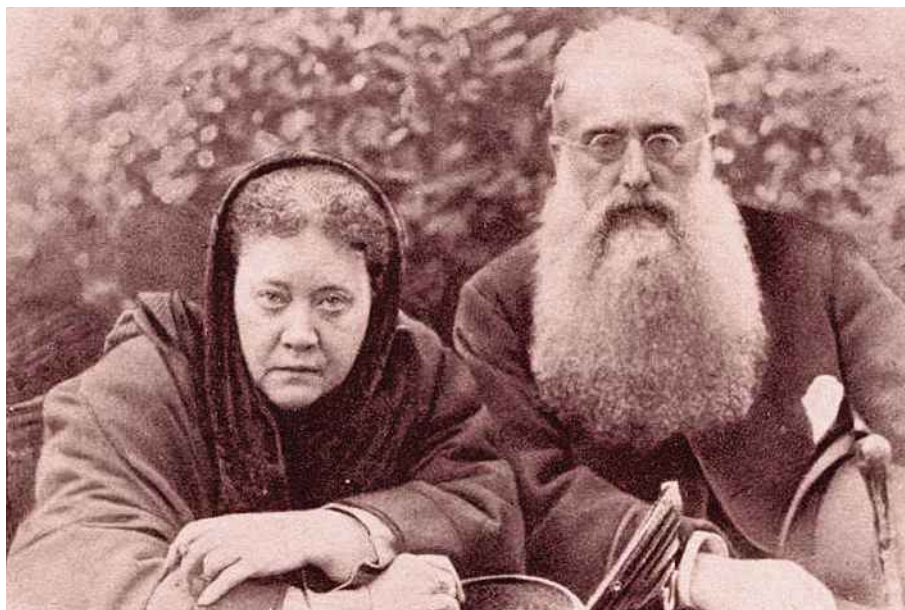
SHE CLAIMED TO BE ABLE TO MANIFEST SPIRITS AND ELEMENTALS

short answer to this question is that, for most people who know anything about her at all, Blavatsky was, to put it simply, a fraud.

One has to admit there are ample reasons for this suspicion. Blavatsky, and the people around her, made some remarkable, often unbelievable, claims. For example, Blavatsky claimed to be able to manifest and command 'elementals', the sylphs, salamanders, gnomes, and undines of magical legend. She was also said to be able to manifest spirits of a more

human type, at séances and other mystical gatherings. It was in fact her ability to do this that so impressed her colleague Colonel Henry Steel Olcott at their first meeting in 1874 at a 'haunted' farmhouse in Chittenden, Vermont, that the Colonel was reporting on for a New York newspaper, *The Daily Graphic*. Until HPB's arrival, the spirits in question were relatively unremarkable for the time and place, mostly dead relatives and Red Indians. But when the crimson-bloused and ostentatiously jewelled Blavatsky turned up – specifically intent on meeting and wooing Olcott – suddenly the farmhouse was full of Russian, Georgian and other exotic spooks, seemingly shipped in from the Caucasus. Blavatsky also claimed to be able to 'de-materialise' objects and to 'materialise' them elsewhere, rather like *Star Trek's* 'transporter'. The most famous items in question were a teacup and saucer that Madame obligingly materialised during a picnic in Simla, India, in 1880, while a guest of the journalist and future Theosophical leader Alfred Percy Sinnett. When an unexpected guest joined their party, the servants were embarrassed that they were one tea setting short. Madame was importuned to set things right. She agreed and after some time she asked one of the party to dig at a particular spot. Lo and behold, six inches (15cm) below the hard surface, caught in roots and sunk into the dark soil, was a cup. A little further down was the saucer. How she could have done it is, I admit, difficult to explain, and I go into some detail about the incident in my book. But she was also known to materialise brooches, cigarettes, handkerchiefs and other items, and the number of independent reports of this phenomenon make it almost as impossible to believe in fraud and collusion as in her magical powers. It was one type of materialised article, in fact, that led to her downfall, and I will return to it shortly.

Another of HPB's claims is that she spent considerable time in Tibet, in an era when its borders were sealed and even white men had little luck getting into the Forbidden Kingdom. Most likely she never crossed its borders, and she often fudged about being in 'Little Tibet' – Ladakh and other neighbouring lands – but there is just enough circumstantial evidence to support her claims. More than one report of a lone white woman travelling in the area at the time she claimed to be there seems to lend some credence to her tales, although the idea of a 200lb (90kg) HPB trekking up the Tibetan trail makes them seem doubtful (she was for most of her life what we would nowadays call 'obese'). Yet one of her lasting legacies is that the Tibetan Buddhism embraced by many in the West today made its first popular entry into Western consciousness via Blavatsky and her followers, through texts like her late work *The Voice of The Silence* (1889). Some of the earliest exponents of Tibetan and Mahayana Buddhism (or their variants), such as Christmas Humphreys, Edward Conze and DT Suzuki, were either Theosophists or



TOP: Madame Blavatsky pictured with Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, first president of the Theosophical Society.

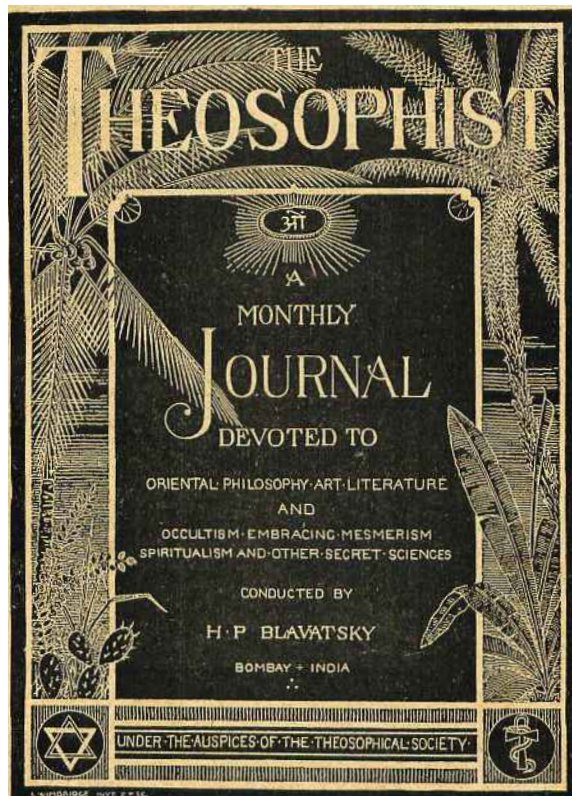
Theosophical fellow travellers. WY Evans-Wentz, who gathered and edited the Tibetan funerary texts that we know today as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, was a Theosophist, and Theosophical ideas run through the work.

Yet perhaps the most unbelievable of Blavatsky's claims is that while in Tibet she learned how to master her psychic powers, through the mystic tutelage of the strange individuals she called 'the Masters', and who, in her later, Indian years, came to be called 'the Mahatmas'. The two best known of these enigmatic characters were called Morya and Koot Hoomi. It was at the Masters' behest, Blavatsky said, that she was sent to the West to stop the modern world's drift into materialism. To claim to have magical powers and to have entered Tibet was bad enough. To claim to have been sent into the modern world by mysterious Hindu Masters in order to battle with a repressive religion (Christianity) and a narrow-minded soulless science was, one has to admit, pushing it.

Although Blavatsky claimed that the Masters, in one form or another, were with her since childhood – there was more than one occasion in her early years, she said, when “the mysterious Hindu of her dreams” saved her life – her major meeting with Master Morya took place in London, in 1851, during the Great Exhibition. As with much else in Blavatsky's relentlessly eventful life, there is more than one version of this encounter. The upshot, however, was that Blavatsky was given a mission: to reach Tibet, where she would enter a secret monastery and be tutored in the mastery of her psychic abilities. After she had gained complete control over her powers, she would be sent back into the world in order to prevent the increasingly materialistic West from sliding into perdition. One bulwark against this fate was the founding of the Theosophical Society.

A PASSAGE TO INDIA

By early 1879, for various reasons which I discuss in my book, Blavatsky and Olcott had upped stakes in New York and decamped to India. There, they were an immediate success. To have two distinguished Westerners reject their own culture and teachings for the ancient wisdom of India, at a time when Christian missionaries were busy converting Hindus, was a triumph for the natives. Blavatsky made no bones about her dislike of the Raj and of the Christian missionaries, and soon after their arrival, both she and Olcott took *pansil* and converted to Buddhism – albeit Blavatsky's Buddhism was always of a peculiarly eccentric sort. For the next five years, the Theosophical Society grew in stature and importance, and Blavatsky and Olcott were feted and celebrated throughout the subcontinent. But then, disaster struck. In 1884, a disgruntled old friend of Blavatsky's called Emma Coulomb, then employed with her husband Alexis as caretakers at the



LEFT: First issue of The Theosophist, published by Blavatsky from Bombay.

them through 'precipitation'. Then the Masters would reply, their answers arriving in the same 'precipitated' manner, often in a matter of moments. Sometimes Blavatsky 'transmitted' the questions telepathically. Along with the letters, there were also many sightings of the mysterious Masters by many of Blavatsky's Theosophists. In his account of the history of the Theosophical Society and his association with Blavatsky, *Old Diary Leaves*, Olcott provides many such sightings. One has to admit that some are quite unbelievable, but there are others where a 'rational' explanation simply won't work.

Emma Coulomb's alleged letters from HPB made clear that these sightings – at least the ones that had taken place in Adyar – were a hoax. The letters explained, she claimed, that the Masters were either Coulomb's husband dressed up in Hindu garb, or a cloth dummy of Morya that either she or her husband carried about when HPB wanted to fool one of her yokels. Later

Society's headquarters in Adyar, told the editors of a Christian missionary newspaper that she possessed letters, allegedly written by Blavatsky, spelling out in detail her plan to fool her followers about the reality of the Masters. Coulomb had various grievances against her one-time friend, and was not on good terms with others at the headquarters, where she was seen as a troublesome Nosey Parker meddling in everyone's affairs. Coulomb was also believed to have been dipping her fingers in the Theosophical till and often made veiled remarks about "telling everyone" what was "really going on" unless she was treated with more respect.

For some time now, Blavatsky had been receiving mysterious letters from the Masters. Although their contents, usually profound teachings about recondite occult matters, were unusual enough, what was even more remarkable was their method of delivery. They would literally appear out of thin air, floating down from the ceiling, or turning up in other equally inexplicable ways. They were, as she described it, "precipitated", materialised somehow through the superhuman powers of the Masters. In my book I provide several accounts of these 'precipitated' letters; they are now known as the 'Mahatma Letters' and several volumes of them, part of a correspondence between the Masters and AP Sinnett, are available at the British Library. In Adyar, Blavatsky had set up a space she called the "occult room". Here she installed a cabinet, which she called "the shrine". Behind its lacquered doors Blavatsky put 'precipitated' portraits of her Masters Koot Hoomi and Morya, a statue of the Buddha and other sacred *objets d'art*. Followers would place letters to the Masters in the shrine, and Blavatsky would then magically 'deliver'

Emma admitted that she had destroyed this mysterious dummy in a fit of pique, so it was never available as evidence. Other 'evidence' against Blavatsky was equally unforthcoming. The so-called incriminating letters themselves were routinely unavailable for study; only selections of them were shown to Blavatsky, and neither she nor anyone else ever had an opportunity to examine them properly. What Blavatsky did see of them she dismissed as forgeries. A long-time critic of Blavatsky, the spiritualist William Emmette Coleman, gave them to a renegade Theosophist named Elliot Coues, who hoped to use them against HPB. Coues is believed to have destroyed them when he realized they were forgeries; at least they were never heard of or seen after he had them in his possession.

EXPOSURE

While Blavatsky and Olcott were away in England, making contact with the newly-formed Society for Psychical Research, the Couombs, so the story goes, tried to blackmail the Theosophists at Adyar with threats about going public with the letters. They asked for large sums of money. The Theosophists staunchly refused. In Blavatsky's absence, Alexis Coulomb was allegedly making 'improvements' to her room as well as the occult room – the two were separated by the wall on which the 'shrine' hung – and he refused to allow anyone access to either. By this time Blavatsky had been told of what was happening and had informed the Theosophists at Adyar that no such incriminating letters existed. She was sorry her old friend was stirring up such trouble, and bid her good luck in her future affairs – in other words, it was time for her to go. By May 1884, the managing committee at Adyar formally charged the Couombs on

a number of counts. They were expelled and asked to return the keys to Blavatsky's rooms. The Coulombs eventually agreed, but not before they 'revealed' to the board the odd discoveries they had made in the occult room and the shrine. A strange hole in Blavatsky's wall led into the occult room, and some mysterious sliding panels opened directly onto the shrine. The Theosophists saw that the hole had been freshly made and that the sliding panels hadn't been used. Alexis's handyman skills had indeed come in handy. After pointing out these embarrassing details, the Coulombs again asked for money. The Theosophists declined, but it was clear that the Coulombs intended Alexis's 'improvements' to serve as evidence that HPB was faking her 'precipitated' postal service. (How they could account for the numerous other 'precipitated' letters that didn't arrive via the shrine is unclear). When the Theosophists refused to bargain, the Coulombs took their alleged letters from HPB to the Madras *Christian College Magazine*. Its editor was only too happy to print an attack on Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society, who had been thorns in the missionaries' sides since their arrival in India. In September 1884, the article 'exposing' HPB, 'The Collapse of Koot Hoomi', hit the newstands, and suddenly Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society were involved in a very damaging scandal.

The story quickly, as we'd now say, went viral. A *Times* correspondent had cabled the news back to London, and from there it went around the world. Blavatsky was staying with friends in Germany when she heard about it. She immediately wrote to the *Times*, denying the accusations, and headed to England, en route to India, where

she intended to refute the claims in court. But the crisis couldn't have come at a worse time. While in England, Blavatsky had made a good impression on FWH Myers and Henry Sidgwick, two of the founders of the SPR. Blavatsky may have referred to them as the "Spookical Research Society", but she and Olcott knew that a good report from the SPR would help Theosophy and its mission, and they accepted the Society's idea of sending one of their investigators to Adyar to look into the stories about the Masters and their remarkable letters. In December, when Blavatsky finally arrived in Adyar, fuming at the course of events, she was surprised to hear that only two days earlier Richard Hodgson, whom she had met in London, had arrived, authorised by the SPR to check out the Masters.

Hodgson himself was not in a very friendly mood. He had been refused access to the occult room until HPB's arrival, and when he asked to see the shrine was told it had been destroyed by one of the Theosophists. Why remains unclear. When he finally got into the occult room, he saw that the hole between it and Blavatsky's private

chamber had been hastily plastered over. If the Coulombs had arranged things so that HPB would appear a fake, the actions of her followers in her absence only made things worse. HPB soon came to feel that Hodgson's attitude was hostile. The upshot was that he never really investigated any phenomena, merely took down the reports of others. In the end, he accepted the Coulombs' account lock, stock and barrel. When his report was finally published a year later, he concluded that Madame Blavatsky was, among many other things, "one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history". He also said that she was most likely a Russian spy. This was the time of the 'Great Game' between Russia and England over influence in India, and Hodgson was convinced that Blavatsky was in some way aiding her countrymen.

Blavatsky herself was prevented from taking the Coulombs and the *Christian College Magazine* to court by the Theosophical Society, who felt that a legal battle would only give their enemies fresh opportunity to ridicule them. She had, in fact, become a liability to the movement, and in May 1885 she left India for Europe, never to return. To many of her followers and to the rest of the world she had been exposed as a fake, and that is pretty much how things continue to stand today. Yet till the end of her days, HPB asserted her innocence and defended the honour and the reality of her Masters.

REHABILITATING BLAVATSKY
Most histories of spiritualism or the occult site Hodgson's report as conclusive proof that Blavatsky, lovable rogue that she was, was after all a phoney. It is routinely

SHE IMMEDIATELY WROTE TO THE TIMES, DENYING THE ACCUSATIONS



ABOVE: The Masters, Morya and Hoot Koomi. HPB claimed she had learned to make contact with them in Tibet. OPPOSITE PAGE: Blavatsky and Olcott in India.

stated that the SPR ‘proved’ that Blavatsky was a fraud. So, in her otherwise excellent history of the SPR, *Ghosthunters*, Deborah Blum applauds Hodgson’s report for “demolishing a medium’s reputation”.⁴ And in his recent attack on spiritualism and belief in the survival of bodily death, *The Immortalization Committee*, John Gray states that: “It was only after a thoroughgoing SPR investigation that Sidgwick recognized that Blavatsky was a charlatan and impostor”.⁵ But the reality is that this is simply untrue.

What these and other debunkers of Blavatsky leave out, either through ignorance or conscious omission, is the fact that the SPR *itself* had serious second thoughts about Hodgson’s work and eventually *retracted* his report, stating its validity was “in serious doubt” and that Blavatsky herself was wrongly charged. In 1986, a century after Hodgson’s report first appeared, the SPR issued a worldwide press release headed “Madame Blavatsky, Co-Founder of the Theosophical Society, Was Unjustly Condemned”. Although both Blum’s and Gray’s books appeared well after this revelation, neither refer to it when discussing Blavatsky’s ‘exposure’, nor do any of the other books that have reiterated that Blavatsky was ‘found out’ by Hodgson, even after the SPR’s retraction. Peter Washington’s highly critical but very readable *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*, for example, which appeared in 1993, makes no mention of it. One can only assume that the idea that Blavatsky was a fraud is so ingrained in the collective consciousness that people writing about her simply accept it as read.

Yet, ever since it first came to light, Hodgson’s report had been subject to much criticism pointing out its flaws, its omissions, prejudice and bias. It was argued that Hodgson’s belief that Blavatsky was a Russian spy was motivated by his own loyalty to the Crown. These salvos, however, came mostly from devotees, who would be expected to take up arms to defend their teacher. What prompted the SPR to retract Hodgson’s report was something quite different. Vernon Harrison, a forgery expert and past president of the Royal



Photographic Society, examined Hodgson’s work in detail and his conclusions were damning. According to Harrison, Hodgson was “prepared to use any evidence, however trivial or questionable, to implicate HPB”. He “ignored all evidence that could be used in her favour,” and his report, Harrison argued, “is riddled with slanted statements, conjecture advanced as fact or probable fact, uncorroborated testimony of unnamed witnesses, selection of evidence and downright falsity”. Harrison concludes that “the Hodgson report is not, as has been widely believed for more than a century, a model of what impartial and painstaking research should be: it is the work of a man who has reached his conclusions early on in his investigation and thereafter, selecting and distorting evidence, did not hesitate to adopt flawed arguments to support his thesis”. Harrison’s examination so moved the SPR that it issued a statement clearly distancing itself from Hodgson’s work, which it insisted was his alone and had no bearing on the SPR’s opinion. Leslie Price, a member of the SPR’s Library Committee, even remarked that “any writer or speaker who says the SPR exposed Madame Blavatsky is only exposing his own ignorance”.⁶ Has John Gray caught wind of this?

In his classic history of parapsychology *Natural and Supernatural*, Brian Inglis points out the motivation that may have been behind Hodgson’s work. For much of its history, Inglis argues, the SPR adopted a highly defensive attitude and was determined to show that it wouldn’t be fooled by any fraudulent activities. This resulted in an overly critical and suspicious approach to its material. Inglis argues that on many occasions, perhaps most, the SPR

began its investigations with the determination not to be fooled; which suggests that they began with the belief that the people involved *were* out to fool them. But if that were so, would Blavatsky and Olcott purposely woo the SPR and invite them to come to India to investigate? Blavatsky may have thought they were fools, but she knew they weren’t idiots. Blavatsky was one of Hodgson’s earliest cases, and Inglis also points out that Hodgson’s report on another famous medium, Eusapia Palladino, was also highly flawed.⁷ Ironically, in the end, Hodgson himself came to believe in the reality of spirit communication.⁸

In making these points I am not trying to ‘prove’ that the Masters were real or that Blavatsky had magical powers or that she never pulled the wool over anyone’s eyes. I keep an open mind on all these matters. In his books on the subject, K Paul Johnson has done some groundbreaking research into who might have been the flesh and blood models for Blavatsky’s Masters. He tells a remarkable, if controversial, story and I suggest interested readers look into it.⁹ My interest here is to show that the received knowledge that the SPR ‘exposed’ Blavatsky as a fake, like much else said about her, is a myth that has acquired the status of fact simply because of its lazy repetition. It’s lamentable that scholars and historians who should know better still echo such inaccuracies as truth. In Blavatsky’s case, this is important because she had a tremendous influence on modern culture, both esoteric and mainstream, and she deserves due credit for this. As long as the accepted perception of her as a fake continues unchallenged, we are, I believe, doing her and ourselves a disservice. **FT**

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GARY LACHMAN was a founding member of *Blondie*, is a regular contributor to *FT* and the author of numerous books. His latest is *Madame Blavatsky: The Mother of Modern*

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6 For more on the SPR, Vernon Harrison and the Hodgson report see [www.](http://www.blavatsky.net/gen/refute/sprpress.htm)

[blavatsky.net/gen/refute/sprpress.htm](http://www.blavatsky.net/gen/refute/sprpress.htm), also Michael Gomes, *The Coulomb Case*, Theosophical History Occasional Papers vol. X, 2005.

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DIANA'S DAMNED DRESSES

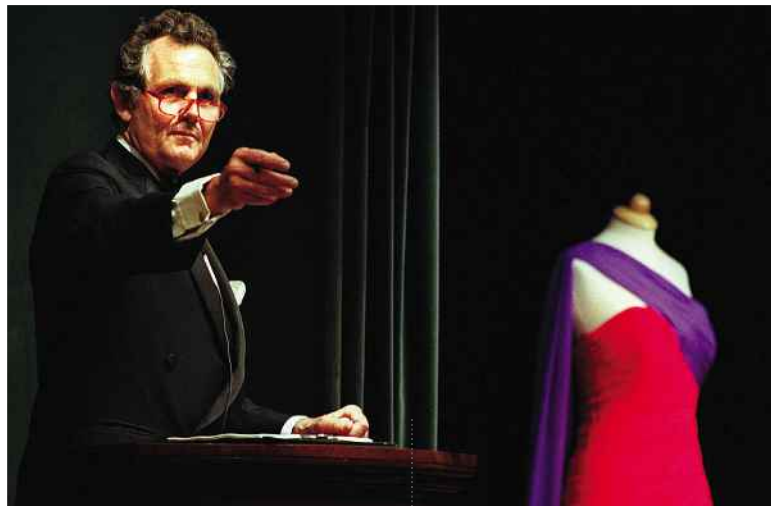
Is Princess Diana reaching out from beyond the grave to blight the lives of those who bought up her wardrobe in the hope of exploiting it commercially or indulging their daydreams of celebrity? **TED HARRISON** reports on the curse of Diana's dresses...

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Princess who was famous the world over for her amazing magical clothes. Then one day she decided she'd had too many of her dresses for far too long. What if I sell them, she said, and give the money I raise to the people who really need it?"

In real life, however, fairy tales do not always have the traditional happy ending. When the New York glitterati gathered at a Christie's charity auction to bid for Princess Diana's surplus wardrobe, it was the most glamorous occasion of the city's 1997 social calendar. Yet 10 weeks later Princess Diana was dead, killed in a car-smash in a Paris underpass with her lover. The dresses that had been bought in a spirit of glamorous joy became instant relics of death.

The successful bidders discovered that instead of being the happy owners of world-famous fashion garments they were now custodians of sacred souvenirs of a world-shattering tragedy. The clothes leapt in value, monetary and sentimental, but so did the owners' sense of responsibility. They now had care of irreplaceable items of the Diana heritage.

In the dark days that followed the princess's death, as conspiracy theories were hatched and spread, sinister and mysterious rumours began to surface about the dresses. They were not just reminders of an untimely death, it was hinted, but might themselves harbour bad karma. Were they in some way cursed? Stories were told to justify the rumours – tales of misfortune.



JON LEVY / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: The 1997 Christie's auction at which 80 of Diana's dresses were sold.

"DRESSES TO DI FOR"

Initially, it was buyers who had invested in dresses for commercial reasons who had most reason to wonder if their purchases had bought them bad luck.

Television executive Kate McEnroe had bought three dresses for a total of \$185,000 and was planning to take them around the country in a travelling exhibition. Through August 1997 her television company had been planning a high-profile publicity campaign. They had chosen a clever catchy slogan: 'Dresses to Di for'.

Then came the news from Paris. Kate had no option but to abandon the entire project and write off the investment. "The truck was all lined up with the slogan painted on it," she recalled. "I got a call on the eve of the tour; Diana

had been in an accident. We pulled everything. Hid the truck, cancelled the marketing. We had to move quickly – it was in such horrible taste."

And so began six tough years for the TV industry high-flier. During that time her marriage collapsed and she lost her job – fired in a very public move by her bosses. She and 13 of her staff at AMC were dismissed amidst allegations that they had been involved in improper accounting of expenses.¹

When McEnroe walked out of her office, she left behind all responsibility for the dresses she had bought on behalf of the company – thankful never to have to see them again. The last she heard was that they had gone into storage. She later said, "I don't know if there's a curse, but life has been difficult. Just like Diana I



went through a messy divorce. I lost my job. I don't think I would like to see the dresses again. It all brings a sadness to me looking back at the tragedy of her death."

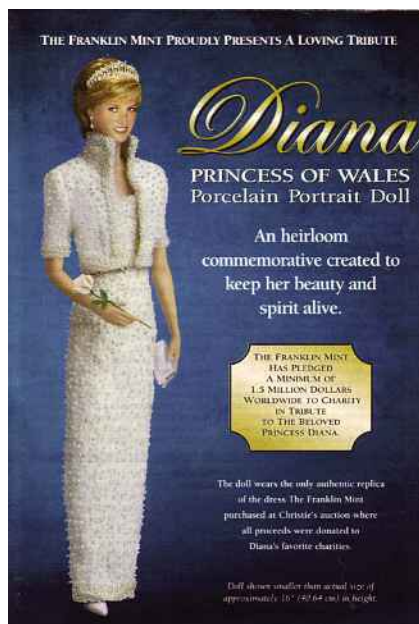
While, in the long term, Kate's reputation recovered and she found a new top media post, the owner of the Fashion Café chain (a sort of 'couture' version of the Hard Rock Café) was far less fortunate. Tommaso Buti also planned to use Diana's dresses to publicise his business. He had paid out \$120,000 at the auction and hoped to entice customers to his restaurants by putting the dresses on display. Diners in London, New York or Milan, he hoped, would admire the princess's fuchsia pink silk evening dress as they ate their up-market burgers and fries. He convinced several big-name fashion models such as Elle Macpherson, Claudia Schiffer and Naomi Campbell to back his idea, before the rumoured curse of Diana's dresses struck.

By 1998 the cafes were in deep financial trouble. Tax agents issued warrants against the New York branch for failing to pay taxes for months, forcing the restaurant to find immediate payments or face seizure. Next, legal action was taken against the business for both failing to pay premiums on unemployment insurance and to collect back rent and utility fees owed to the café's landlord, the Rockefeller Center.²

The final blow came in 2000, when Buti's business partners accused him of milking the cafes' takings to fund his extravagant lifestyle. The business collapsed. Buti was arrested and found himself in court facing charges of conspiracy, fraud and money laundering.

The Franklin Mint was another business that mistakenly thought that the princess's magic would lift their balance sheet, and then, arguably, fell a victim to the curse of Diana's dresses. The company paid \$151,000 for a high-collared number known as the Elvis gown.

However, after Diana's death the Mint became embroiled in a bitter legal battle with the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund,



DUNKEL HAD A PLAN TO TAKE A DOZEN DRESSES ROUND THE WORLD

a trust set up in the late royal's honour. The Franklin Mint had a popular line in Diana dolls wearing replicas of her most famous outfits. The trust accused the company of exploiting the image of the dead princess, "like vultures feeding off the dead". The Mint successfully defended its right to use the princess's image, and then counter-sued. It was not a popular move with Diana fans. The case was eventually settled out of court, but

not before the Mint experienced an alarming slump in sales. Two hundred staff were laid off and its once bustling headquarters and museum in Pennsylvania closed. When I visited the site it was like a ghost town. It was a sorry episode all round. The Memorial Fund suffered as well and at one stage had to delay payment of funds due to charitable causes. Eventually, the Franklin Mint's gown came to Britain under the terms of the legal agreement and has been exhibited at The Victoria and Albert Museum.

DUNKEL'S DRESSES

The owner of the greatest number of Diana gowns was Maureen Rorech Dunkel from Florida. She bid at the auction and later sought out more Diana memorabilia for her collection. Mrs Dunkel had had an ambitious plan to take an exhibition of over a dozen dresses around the world to raise money for a charity she had set up to raise funds for victims of Aids, cancer and land mines. They were indeed shown at several locations ranging from Kensington Palace to the Flying Monkey Movie House at Mill Falls, New Hampshire. But the exhibition was expensive to mount and debts began to accrue. Her ambition was her undoing and eventually she faced the public humiliation of selling her entire collection to pay her creditors following bankruptcy.

In 2010, after taking her road show to Branson, Missouri, Dunkel ran up a bill of \$64,000 with a company that built display cases to house the exhibition.³ When she failed to settle her account, the company's owner, Tom Gass, applied to the local courts. A law officer took a Catherine Walker creation, which Diana had originally worn on a 1992 trip to India, and held it until the debt was settled. It was not the first time Mrs Dunkel had faced legal debt-collection actions. A year earlier her bank claimed she had defaulted on a £1 million loan. Frantic behind-the-scenes negotiations prevented a dress from being taken by bailiffs from Kensington Palace, where it was on temporary display. On that

LAWRENCE LUCIER / GETTY IMAGES



TOP: The Franklin Mint ended up embroiled in a legal battle over Diana. ABOVE LEFT AND CENTRE: Unhappy bidders Kate McEnroe and Maureen Rorech Dunkel.

ABOVE RIGHT: The bizarre wax effigy of Princess Diana, sporting one of her dresses, placed by celebrity-hunter Frans Billen in the museum above his car showroom in Belgium.

occasion, however, feathers were smoothed before the bailiffs were called in.³

Mrs Dunkel acquired minor celebrity status through her ownership of the gowns. At the same time as she was racking up Diana-debts, she was getting into further deep financial water through her business activities as property developer. She invested in a project called the Enclave at Palma Ceia, using the dresses as collateral for loans. Then the market collapsed. In June 2011, a forced sale of the dresses was arranged. Mrs Dunkel hoped that the hype surrounding Prince William's marriage might raise interest and attract bids. However, at the first attempt many of the gowns failed to sell and the auction attracted much criticism when the auctioneers were left with unsold lots, including the most famous dress in the entire collection, the one worn by Princess Diana at the White House when she danced with John Travolta.

"Amid legal wrangles and a bitter dispute over ownership," the *Sunday Telegraph* reported, "the dress never sold at all. Nor did a further nine gowns, all once owned by Princess Diana, which were said to have been sold at the same auction for a little over £2 million. Their ownership is now in dispute and is likely to lead to a flurry of further legal claims against the Florida-based businesswoman who tried to sell them. The reputable auction house, meanwhile, is being accused of holding a 'fake' sale."⁵

"Turns out it was a bogus, sham deal," Al Gomez, an attorney for the creditors, later told Florida newspaper the *Tampa Bay Times*.⁶ "The owner of the dresses is still Maureen Dunkel."

True, said Mrs Dunkel's Tampa attorney, Jeffrey Warren, but "she's very disappointed that all of the dresses weren't sold." The auctioneers explained that only four of the dresses had found buyers and the other 10 "failed to meet the reserve price set by the consignor."

Eventually, the dresses were sold and the latest owner of the iconic dress from the White House dance paid £240,000 for it at an auction in London in March 2013 as a surprise present for his wife. He is no doubt hoping the curse, if there is one, does not transfer to him.

FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

The idea for the 1997 auction had been Prince William's. Princess Diana, by then an ex-HRH, is said to have wanted both to raise money for good causes and discard memories of her old marriage and royal lifestyle. She was herself a great believer in fate and fortune and psychic healer Simone Simmons, her spiritual adviser, says she asked her to help choose which of the royal gowns were to be sold. They selected 79 of her most photographed dresses to auction to raise money for charity. On the day lots 1 to 80 were sold for a combined sum of \$3.26 million. There was no lot 13 lest it brought the sale bad luck.

While many of the successful private bidders remain, despite sad associations, happy with their dresses, several talk of misfortune over recent years. Since buying their dresses a number have experienced illness of various kinds and broken marriages.



LEFT: The Victor Edelstein evening gown worn by Princess Diana when she danced with John Travolta at the White House in 1985.

One owner will not touch her five dresses without wearing gloves, lest she contaminate them. Another will only allow her dress out of her house accompanied by a security guard.

The exception to these tales of worried and cautious owners is celebrity-hunter Frans Billen. His hobby is collecting photographs of himself standing with the famous – actors, musicians, politicians, or whoever he admires and can persuade to pose with him. He met Princess Diana and bought the dress she was wearing at the time, bidding by phone. He had a life-size wax effigy of the princess made to wear the dress, which he put on display in the museum of celebrity souvenirs he set up above his car showroom in Belgium.

Every dress Diana sold at the 1997 auction was a memory she may well have been attempting to exorcise. At the time of the auction, even before her death, one observer noted darkly that the bidders were really buying into her unhappy life, and warned: beware the curse of Diana! It certainly appears that many misfortunes have come the way of the new owners, in particular those who attempted to mix ownership with commercial activity.

"Is she reaching out from beyond the grave like Tutankhamun?" asked the experienced royal reporter Susan Maxwell Skinner, who knew and followed Diana in her lifetime. "For some it's a romantic concept. They like to think of Diana's story as full of intrigue and espionage, but this is just a charming fantasy."

However the strangest story of all has nothing to do with illness or financial disaster. It is told by Nancy and Frank Zacharias, who paid \$43,000 for Lot 46, an Ivory satin gown with a bodice adorned with simulated pink pearls, glass beads and sequins.

They kept the dress carefully wrapped in a double box and some time after the auction Nancy was showing the dress at her home.

"I was opening the box to show a friend and the outer box started to shut by itself. I was spooked."

"I have no explanation," said her husband Frank, "it was like a coffin closing." **FT**

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- ¹ *Hollywood Reporter*, 19 Jun 2003.
- ² *New York Times*, 12 Dec 2000.
- ³ *Branson Tri-Lakes News*, 15 Apr 2011.
- ⁴ *Daily Mail*, 19 Jan 2013.
- ⁵ *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 Sep 2011.
- ⁶ *Tampa Bay Times*, 13 Sep 2011.

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TED HARRISON is a former BBC religious affairs correspondent, regular *FT* contributor and author of a number of books. His latest, *Apocalypse When?*, is out now from Darton, Longman and Todd.



ANGEL AND THE FIRE DEMON

A series of unexplained fires has plagued a family in south-eastern Turkey for almost eight months. FT correspondent **PAUL CROPPER** tracked the family to Cizre, on the Syrian border.

The terror began in the town of Siirt, on the night of 13 August 2012, when street vendor Zeki Toprak, his wife and four children were woken by the smell of smoke and discovered a fire in their simple three-room residence.

Although firemen quickly extinguished the blaze, they were baffled as to how it started – because it had, most unusually, broken out on a bare ceiling, well away from readily combustible material. Power company technicians also attended and found nothing wrong with the house’s wiring.

Over the course of the next few months, scores of other small fires broke out, during both day and night, on walls and ceilings, as well as on clothes, prayer mats, carpets, plastic tubs and inside closed cabinets.

Terrified of being incinerated, the family moved their bedding and most precious belongings onto a balcony, where they slept for nearly two weeks – until the fires followed them outside.

Although not as frightening as the fires, plenty of other strange phenomena disturbed the tranquillity of the home. Clothes and other objects repeatedly disappeared, only to reappear in unlikely places. A washing machine also got in on the act, plugging itself into a socket and beginning its cycle.

Desperate to escape the potentially lethal weirdness, the family moved to a relative’s house – but the fires again followed.

FIRES BROKE OUT ON WALLS AND CEILINGS, CLOTHES AND PRAYER MATS

WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

Feeling, not unreasonably, that something decidedly uncanny was going on, the Topraks appealed for help to the local imams, who declared the phenomena to be the work of mischievous *djinn*, and attempted to cleanse the site with prayer.

Djinn (*djinn* is the plural; the masculine singular is *djinni* – or genie) have featured prominently in Middle Eastern folklore since time immemorial and many of the tricks they reputedly play are identical to those attributed, in other cultures, to poltergeists.¹

Each time the family called the clerics, however, the fires flared up even more frequently, seemingly aggravated by the religious ritual.

The imams having failed, Mr Toprak appealed for help to the Siirt District Governor, Ahmet Aydın, who, accompanied

by a Kanal 56 television crew, promptly visited, interviewed the family and inspected the damage. Although the *djinni* refrained from starting any major fires, cameraman Soyler Ozan, on leaving the residence, felt a burning sensation and found that a section of the sole of his shoe had melted. Duly impressed, the Governor declared the problem a “transcendent (i.e. paranormal) event”.

By now the story had reached the mainstream Turkish media, and dozens of reports soon appeared in regional and city newspapers, on television and radio.²

DR ERMAN INVESTIGATES (‘SIIRT OF’)

As interest peaked, the Rector of Siirt University, Professor Murat Erman, decided to see if science could shed some light on the situation. In late December, his team, including a psychiatrist, a sociologist, a physicist and several engineers, interviewed the family and, together with the police, set up cameras to monitor key points throughout the house. Frustratingly for the scientists, the poltergeist, *djinni* – or hoaxer – refused to perform on cue, and all the fires that occurred during the month-long investigation flared up just outside the cameras’ limited fields of view.

In late February, in a three-page report that addressed only the fires and ignored the other strange aspects of the case (such as the cameraman’s hot foot), the boffins presented their predictably sceptical conclusions: “This commission believes that: possibility of metaphysic involvements is negligible. Wholly



ABOVE: The Toprak family (Melek at far left) at their home in Cizre on the Syrian border.

comprehending the problem requires a long time observation of a socio-physiologic nature of all members of the Toprak family.”

The clear suggestion was that the family was hoaxing the phenomena. Most damningly, the report stated, falsely, that the Toprak children had been caught with cigarette lighters.

Deeply insulted, and exhausted by the attention, the family packed up and moved 140km (87 miles) south to Cizre, hoping once again to outrun their demon.

By March 2013 they'd lived in six different residences, but each time they moved the fiery nightmare dogged their steps. In the seven months since the terror began, it was claimed, no fewer than 300 blazes had occurred.

MEET THE TOPRAKS

Just as Dr Erman was endeavouring to stifle it, an English language report of the case arrived in my inbox. Its similarity to the 2010-11 Kota Bharu, Malaysia, case ³ was so striking that I decided to follow the advice of Brazilian researcher Hernani Guimaraes Andrade, as quoted by Guy Lyon Playfair in *This House is Haunted*: “When spontaneous cases come up, we drop everything and go after them. They will not wait for us.”

So, after a 21-hour flight from Sydney to Istanbul, two connecting flights to Siirt, and a three-hour bus ride across the barren, snow-covered mountains of southeastern Turkey, I arrived at the border town of Cizre.

I was fortunate to be accompanied by two very friendly and helpful government officials, Arzu and Faik, who would act as translators.

Our first point of contact was the Sirnak District Governor, and, just as I walked into his office, Mr Toprak, whom I recognised from the media reports, walked out. The confounded fires, as he'd just informed the Governor, had started yet again, on 21 March, at his latest residence.

The well-spoken, intelligent man readily agreed to escort me to his new home, an unfurnished three-room, ground floor

dwelling. As we sat outside on soft mats, he told me how the family's reputation had preceded them to Cizre, and how as a consequence they'd had trouble finding a place to rent. Their first night had been spent on the street.

He was adamant that no family member was starting the fires: “We bought all our own furniture; I worked hard for it – why would we burn it?” He didn't want money or notoriety, just a peaceful place to live and work.

“We always pray,” he said, with evident sincerity, “that nobody else will have to experience this.”

His wife and children eagerly confirmed all the facts as reported in the media, and provided interesting additional details.

Shortly before the first fire, they'd had to call a locksmith when a key inside the front door of their original house had, seemingly impossibly, turned and locked them all outside.

Mrs Toprak described how, on another occasion, she'd set out plates for breakfast,

stepped into another room, and returned moments later to find them gone. They were discovered arranged neatly in the garden. A TV remote, a mobile phone and other appliances also vanished from closed rooms and were, apparently, teleported outdoors.

As at Kota Bharu, food was often interfered with: salt mysteriously appearing in a sugar bowl and a water bottle filling with vinegar.

Perhaps the weirdest of all the fires broke out *inside a refrigerator*: “It was empty and [when] we looked inside... there were clothes in there, burning.”

Family members found and extinguished most of the fires, but, interestingly, all of the others *extinguished themselves* before major damage was done: “We sometimes smell smoke and look around and can't find anything, and later find something has been burnt.”

THE MIRACLE

Mr Toprak was still very annoyed about Dr Murat's report, particularly his allegation that the children had been caught with cigarette lighters. The truth was somewhat different.

“One night in Siirt,” he explained, “we were all sleeping in the same room because we were so scared, and all of a sudden we smelled smoke and searched the other rooms. We found nothing, but when we returned to our bedroom we saw our beds burning. Then I found a lighter under my pillow – but where it came from we don't know.”

So the academics would never have known about the lighter if Mr Toprak hadn't mentioned it – yet they gave a different account of its discovery and implied that the entire family were mentally disturbed hoaxers.

While I found the detail of the lighter a little disconcerting (why would the spook, apparently capable of all kinds of supernatural feats, have needed it?) this wasn't the first time I'd heard of a polt employing one. When a colleague, Squadron Leader Ken Llewelyn, was investigating a polt-plagued brothel in Canberra in 1996, he watched as a lighter sailed slowly across a



ABOVE: A carpet in the Topraks' home burned by the pyro-poltergeist.

room, lighting itself as it passed him. (He'd just taken out a cigarette and was looking for a match).⁴

Mr Toprak was also exasperated that the academics focused entirely on the fires and ignored the other strange phenomena: "We told them, but they didn't publish what we'd said." He had also told them the fires probably wouldn't happen for their cameras: "Because even we never see them start. We are at home always and nobody saw it in 300 times. It happens at our back, in another room; we smell it, then we realise. I think whatever happens doesn't want to be seen."

Though sceptics may scoff, it seems that refusing to perform for cameras is standard operating procedure for polts. This was certainly the case during the 1998 Humpty Doo episode where Tony Healy, myself, and several professional cameramen tried in vain to film the many objects that fell and flew all around us.⁵

I was somewhat surprised to find that the family, rather than being emotional and disturbed, appeared quite calm – serene even – considering what they'd been through.

They had, they admitted, been very frightened at first, but, as no one had been even slightly injured, they'd slowly become used to living with the nuisance. They also found comfort in their religion: "Allah will protect us... and we had a miracle, that's why we are not scared."

The 'miracle' occurred when they found a blanket covering their sleeping three-year-old son engulfed in flames a metre high. "We had only a cup of water to put on it, but when we took him out there was no injury to him – not even his clothes – nothing!"

ANGEL IN THE FLAMES

Students of poltergeist lore will be completely unsurprised to learn that the fiery phenomena seem to be focused mainly on one particular family member – and that that person is an adolescent girl. In this case it is the Topraks' eldest daughter, 11-year-old Melek, whose name translates as 'Angel'.

In case sceptics are tempted to assume that Melek must therefore be hoaxing the



PAUL CROPPER

ABOVE: Government officer Zaik examining fire damage at the Toprak house in Cizre.

THE PHENOMENA SEEM TO BE FOCUSED ON AN ADOLESCENT GIRL

entire episode, I should mention that after the first blazes, when Mr Toprak sent his family away from the original house for safety, fires continued to occur when he was home alone.

It seems rather appropriate that this case should involve both an 'angel' and a possible *djinni* because, according to Muslim tradition, God first created angels, then *djinn*, and only later, as an afterthought, human beings.

In any case, I found this young angel to be a polite, good-natured child, but with a sometimes intense manner and rather piercing eyes. She was certainly intelligent: her conversation and style of speech, according to the translators, "seemed far older than her actual years".

It seems that Melek's own guardian angel had been kept very busy these past few months, shielding her from serious harm.

One day she arrived at school to find that all of her books had moved from the top of her desk to the floor beneath and were then scorched by an unexplained fire. Her teacher, Erhan Stars, later moved them to his own table, from which they promptly disappeared, only to be found smouldering under Melek's desk once again.

In another bizarre incident, Melek returned home with her favourite jacket, only to have it suddenly vanish. In the morning she was told that her teacher, while working after hours, had found it smouldering on a peg in his classroom. When Mr Stars searched all the children for matches he found none, and, as he later told a journalist: "These events have ruined the children psychologically. They don't listen, they don't pay attention. The whole school is affected."

In view of all the weirdness that whirls around her, Melek is remarkably calm and seemingly well-adjusted – quite different, it seems, from the troubled tweenagers at the centre of many other poltergeist episodes. She is no longer, she says, at all afraid: "At first I was scared, but now I've got used to it and I don't even feel surprised any more." Everything that had happened was simply "the will of Allah". A little angel, indeed.

When, after hearing their story, I told the Topraks about the remarkably similar Kota Bahru episode and showed them several pictures I'd taken there, their interest and excitement seemed entirely unfeigned. "Yes, yes," they kept exclaiming, "Just like here! Just like here!"

As I departed his weirdly beleaguered dwelling, Mr Toprak asked me if the fires would ever end. I told him that while some such episodes run their course within a couple of weeks, others, like this one, last for months. All, however, eventually wind down and fade away. (I didn't add to his worries by mentioning the few cases where fiery persecutions have culminated in dwellings being razed to the ground).



PAUL CROPPER

ABOVE: Zeki Toprak holding a scorched prayer mat.

REASONS TO BELIEVE

During the long drive back to Siirt I concluded that the events being endured by the brave and stoical family constituted a genuine fire-poltergeist case.

That wasn't only because of the Topraks' quite evident honesty (plus the testimony of the Kanal 56 cameraman) but also because their story corresponded, in six significant ways, to events recorded during other well-attested fire-polt episodes:

- None of the fires spread to cause major damage, as would be expected from conventional blazes.
- Some broke out, improbably, on bare walls and ceilings.
- Objects inexplicably vanished and reappeared.
- Foodstuffs were interfered with.
- Religious ritual aggravated, rather than ameliorated, the situation.
- The invisible tormenter followed the family from house to house, and from town to town.

POLTERGEIST GIRLS

In *Wild Talents* (1932) Charles Fort examined several cases in which adolescent girls were at the centre of similar outbreaks. The common elements that intrigued him are very reminiscent of the Toprak case: the fires were always highly localised, the damage rarely spread, most took place during the day and they often broke out, improbably, on ceilings, floors and walls.

He speculated that the power to spontaneously generate fire might be a latent human ability:

... we can think of a fire-inducing power appearing automatically in some human beings, at a time of its need in the development of human phenomena. So fire-geniuses appeared. By a genius I mean one who can't avoid knowledge of fire, because he can't help setting things afire.

Steven King's 1980 novel *Firestarter* featured a young girl with the ability to generate fire hunted by the US military, eager to turn her unique abilities into a weapon.

Fort, too, toyed with the notion of units of adolescent female fire-starters being deployed on the battlefield:

Girls at the front – and they are discussing their usual not very profound subjects. The alarm – the enemy is advancing. Command to the poltergeist girls to concentrate... and under their chairs they stick their wads of chewing gum. A regiment bursts into flames, and the soldiers are torches... The little poltergeist girls reach for their wads of chewing gum.

So, are the Topraks' fires the work of – to use Fort's term – a fire genius (Melek) or a genie (*djinni*)?

Some polt researchers suggest that all



ABOVE: Melek ('Angel') Toprak

poltergeist phenomena, including fires, are generated by the externalised angst of adolescents via recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK). Others believe disembodied spirits really are involved, at least in some cases. It is speculated that to intrude from the 'Other Side' and mess with us hapless mortals, those mischievous spooks might need to draw strength from the seething emotions of natural mediums, usually adolescents like Melek.

But no less an authority than Guy Lyon Playfair cheerfully admits that after many decades of research, he and his Society for Psychical Research colleagues are still far from understanding just what poltergeists are and why they engage in such seemingly pointless mischief.

So, in the weird field of poltergeist research, where uncertainty is the name of the game, I think it would be very rash to engrave any particular theory in stone.

Although many poltergeist episodes in my files don't involve adolescent girls, many others, including all three apparent fire-polt cases that I have investigated at firsthand – in Malaysia, Vietnam and now Turkey – certainly do. Why this should be so is still anybody's guess, but I suppose we should, at least, be grateful that spontaneous blazes don't occur every time an anguished adolescent throws a hissy-fit – otherwise every second house in the world would be engulfed in flames! **FT**

NOTES

1 For more on *djinn*, see **FT138:17**, **147:30-33**, **268:8**, **291:16-17**. For a discussion of the links between *djinn* and poltergeists, see Paul Cropper and Tony Healy, 'Pyro-Poltergeists', **FT281:40-44**. For a round-up of other cases of firestarters and pyrokinesis, see **FT290:20**.

2 Various video segments of the Siirt outbreak can be viewed on Turkish media web sites including CNN Turkey, Zaman and Haber. Use the Google search terms SIIRT & TOPRAK.

3 See **FT281:40-44**.

4 *Caressa, From Call Girl to God's Child*, Sandstone Publishing, Leichhardt, NSW, 2002 and **FT170:62**.

5 Tony Healy and Paul Cropper, 'Stone Mel!', **FT116:34-39**, Nov 1998.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



PAUL CROPPER has investigated all manner of strange phenomena since the mid-1970s. With Tony Healy he co-authored *Out of the Shadows – Mystery Animals of Australia* (1994) and *The Yowie* (2006). In 1998 they witnessed the remarkable Humpty Doo poltergeist episode. Their next book, *Australian Poltergeist*, will be published later this year.

The Fortean Times

Random Dictionary of the Damned

compiled by the Hierophant's Apprentice



No 50: ANIMAL MUTILATIONS

Two kinds of animal mutilations have interested forteans. One is mentioned, almost in passing, by Charles Fort. In Chapter 7 of *Wild Talents*, Fort dealt with only two instances: the first, as reported by the *Daily Mail* of 18 May 1925, was an “alarming epidemic of sheep-slashing and cattle ripping” that “for some years... had been breaking out, in the month of April, on Kenya stock ranches.” Fort implicitly derided the *Mail* correspondent’s explanation that chacma baboons were responsible. But he didn’t say, perhaps because he didn’t know, that Kenya’s native baboon is actually the olive variety (*Papio cynocephalus*), or seem to realise that the creatures are omnivorous and might, perhaps, have reason to take advantage of the lambing and calving season following the Long Rains. Instead, as the context makes clear, Fort wanted his readers to wonder whether these were a species of vampire attack. Thick presumptions based on thin evidence got off to an early start in the history of this phenomenon.

Fort’s second instance is of a kind familiar enough to country lawyers and their drinking companions. He concentrates on the ‘Great Wyrley Outrages’ of 1903 in Staffordshire – a series of slashing attacks on sheep, cattle and horses – and its unfortunate upshot. Local solicitor George Edalji was wrongfully convicted of the outrages, although eventually pardoned after a campaign (and even some actual Holmesian detective work) led by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and others. Fort was led off his already tenuous point into a rant against this gross miscarriage of justice, and that shouldn’t detain us here.¹ The Kenyan and Wyrley events and, in Chapter 9 of *Wild Talents*, a 1927 case of tortured and mutilated chickens in Soho, London, constitute the whole of Fort’s expressed interest in anything resembling the current sense of the phrase ‘animal mutilations’. In Chapters 13 and 14 of *Lo!*, Fort catalogued various reports of large-scale killings of livestock, variously attributed to rogue dogs, lynxes, wolves and jackals – culprits whose guilt he inevitably begged leave to doubt. But these were not mutilations.

However: while the deprivations of Britain’s depraved may be only marginally fortean,² the assumptions made about them form a curious contrast to those made about animal mutilations in the USA. For the emergence there in the mid 1970s of a more obviously fortean – more fortean than Fort – animal mutilation phenomenon is another matter altogether.

FROM ALAMOSA TO THE STARS

The waves of mutilation reports that spread through the prairie States from Spring 1973 and tailed off in 1979–80 had a much earlier founding event – the mysterious fate of Snippy the Horse, found dead on the King ranch at the foot of Mount Blanca, near Alamosa, Colorado, in September 1967. Written in miniature here is the pattern of the reports and claims to come. The bald outline: Snippy (also reportedly named Lady) was a three-year-old Appaloosa mare (or gelding) who hadn’t been seen for a couple of days when Harry King found her dead, the flesh and skin missing from the shoulders to the ears, and the exposed bones clean and white. Mr King thought that it had been cut away. The horse’s owner, Mrs Nellie Lewis, thought the same. There seemed to be no blood in the body. Whether there was anything more that was apparently unusual about the carcass at that point is moot, as tales about it have grown over the years. Mrs Lewis was a UFO buff, however, and some crushed bushes and what she thought were ‘exhaust marks’ near where the horse was found decided her that the aliens had done it. And Mrs Lewis’s 87-year-old mother said she had seen “a large object” fly over her cabin at tree-top level on the night Snippy/Lady was presumed to have died. (She was not wearing her spectacles at the time.) A Forest Service ranger tested the carcass and its surroundings with a Geiger counter and claimed it gave unusually high readings. Mrs Lewis’s boots were also said to be radioactive. A later test, perhaps conducted by someone who knew how to calibrate his equipment, failed to replicate these results.

About a month after Snippy's death, Mrs Lewis, a stringer for the *Pueblo Chieftain*, published her particular take on things in the paper, and Associated Press picked up the story. There were further reports of UFOs seen in the area. On 9 October, a then-unnamed pathologist performed an autopsy on the unfortunate Appaloosa, and found the animal's innards and brain were absent. He was particularly struck by the lack of blood.³ Press stories caught the eye of Dr Edward Condon's UFO-debunking project at the University of Colorado, which called in UC's Dr Robert O Adams, head of Colorado State University's College of Veterinary and Biomedical Science School.

"Bacteria, birds, and coyotes were responsible for the absence of organs in the abdominal cavity... predators had eaten away part of the horse's rump," Dr Adams reported. And: "Because all tissue was gone from the skull, the opening in the back was exposed to the air. Since the brain, after death, liquefied in hours, the fluid evaporated quickly in the warm prairie air... I know it's going to pop the bubble, but the horse was not killed by a flying saucer." Dr Adams also found signs that there had been a severe infection in Snippy's right flank, and evidence that her throat had been cut – by someone, he speculated, who wanted to put her out of her misery.⁴ Mrs Lewis objected that none of this accounted for the lack of blood, a feature of animal mutilations that continues to fascinate ufologically-oriented researchers. Robert Low, co-ordinator of the Condon study, tracked down the unnamed pathologist – who turned out to be Dr John H Altshuler, later to become a pillar of MUFON – who (*pace* Low) was a pathologist as well as a hematologist, but not a veterinary one. However, he did broadly agree with Adams's findings and had been "widely misquoted".

Snippy's carcass lay where it had fallen until December 1967, when veterinary surgeon Dr Wallace Leary acquired it to skeletonise and use in his practice. When he boiled the flesh off the bones, he discovered two bullet holes in the left pelvis and right thighbone. Leary theorised in 1968: "I think a couple of kids hit the horse with a couple of .22 rifle slugs. Then, the horse is scared and she takes off at a high lope and runs through a barbed wire fence. I've seen it before. That wire can clean an animal like a knife slicing cheese."⁵ So the 'infection' in the hindquarters and neck incision found by Dr Adams were most probably accounted for. Although Dr Adams was a veterinary surgeon, not a veterinary pathologist, he did know a bit about equine behaviour.

So it was that a certain *image* of deceased livestock – whose grisly *post-mortem* state looked peculiar to people who hadn't looked very closely at such things before, or



LEFT: Dr Wallace Leary with Snippy's skeleton. BELOW: Snippy, pursued by his alien murderers on the cover of the February 1968 issue of *Flying Saucers* magazine.

just had never seen them, and least of all were animal pathologists – entered the collective ufological consciousness, alias folklore. The animals may have died, but the *phenomenon* had been born. It pupated for a few years before emerging full-blown to distress the innocent, and divert the deluded, and arouse the unscrupulous.

SYMPTOMS OF STRANGENESS

The first waves of cattle-mutilation reports surfaced in 1973 in Minnesota and

Kansas. In 1974, in Montana, Nebraska, Iowa, and eastern South Dakota there was a rash of reports, plus some from Oklahoma. In 1975, the 'mute phenomenon' hit Colorado, with 203 reports between April and December. The following two years were quiet: a handful in Idaho, a mere three in Illinois; and the first reports emerged from New Mexico. Arkansas was struck in 1978 and 1979; New Mexico too suffered a wave of reports in those years, most of them emanating from Rio Arriba County, in which lies Dulce, later to become notorious as the alleged site of a massive underground 'alien base'.

What, one might ask, is a 'mutilation report'? A 'classic' one includes all or most of the following features:⁶

1: *Certain parts of the animal are removed 'with surgical precision'. Parts most commonly removed are the sexual organs, one eye, one ear, tongue and, in female animals, the udder.*

2: *A perfectly cored anus, as though a large cookie cutter was used to perform the operation.*

3: *The carcass is devoid of blood, which is taken to mean that the animal has been deliberately exsanguinated.*

4: *The unusual rate of decay of the carcass, which decays either extremely slowly or extremely rapidly.*

5: *The deliberate selection of the best livestock.*

6: *The absence of human or tyre tracks at the scene.*

7: *Other animals deliberately avoid the carcass. Animals that do approach usually circle at a safe distance.*

8: *The sighting of strange lights or aircraft – variously described as UFOs or unmarked helicopters – within the vicinity of a reported mutilation.*

9: *Family pets react unusually – for instance, on the night a mutilation occurs, the family dog, which usually barks at everything, is exceptionally quiet.*



THE STRANGE STORY OF SNIPPY

I WAS BURNED BY A UFO

WHAT DOES THE AIR FORCE REALLY KNOW ABOUT FLYING SAUCERS?

There are occasionally more exotic aspects, such as the steer discovered dead in a tree, or various animals found with broken legs, as if they had been dropped from a great height, supposedly from UFOs or helicopters. Or unusual drugs (for instance, mescaline) are found in the carcass. Not only cattle are savaged: sheep, goats, horses, swine and other domestic animals suffer. Linda M Howe's slide presentations have included a photograph of half a cat (the front half, most neatly severed).⁷

Before exploring the accuracy of these reports, it's worth looking at some numbers. Howard Burgess, a former instrument designer and 'independent researcher', calculated that between 1973 and 1979, some 10,000 animals had been mutilated. Actual reports, however, rarely amounted to more than a few dozen in any year, and represented a tiny percentage of the US national herd (132 million cattle in 1975). In Colorado, for example, the 1974 USDA farm census shows there were 3,087,884 cows and calves in the State; in 1978 there were 3,174,161 – so the 203 reported mutilations of 1975 represented no more than 0.0066 percent of the cattle population. Of those more than 150,000 might be expected to die of natural causes in the course of a year, so apparent mutilations did not amount to what you might call a plague.⁸ So one may well ask why various cattlemen's associations put up large rewards (in Colorado the total fund reached \$25,000) for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the culprits, vigilante committees were formed, and the occasional helicopter was fired on by nervous ranchers. Whence this disproportionate fear?

The short answer is ignorance, but it was an ignorance fed to and promulgated by the media. A small number of reporters in cattle-raising States retailed accounts by puzzled ranchers, deputy sheriffs, and vets and, worse, stirred into the mix the febrile rationalisations of the phenomenon emanating from an equally small but enthusiastic group of 'independent researchers', soon to be known as 'mutologists'. The latter were variously suggesting that aliens (in their oft-reported UFOs) were hacking at animals for their own unseemly reasons; that the US military (or its contractors) or the CIA were conducting biochemical, microwave or laser weapons experiments; that a vast, rich, highly organised Satanic cult was taking animal parts for rituals; or that mining and prospecting companies were secretly sampling the flesh for deposited traces of exploitable metals, minerals and oil. In 1976, in *Cattle Mutilation: The Unthinkable Truth*, Frederick W Smith, a devout Swedenborgian, proposed that the mutes were "symbolic messages from the spirit world", warning us all of our failures and shortcomings. Mr Smith's theory did not catch on among independent researchers or, indeed, with anyone else.⁹

This network of feedback loops probably had its ultimate origins in a folk memory of Snippy the horse. One shouldn't expect ranchers, deputy sheriffs or vets – who deal in the business of the living – to be veterinary pathologists, but one might expect reporters to be a little more enquiring. Essentially, ranchers and farmers don't examine dead animals that closely; they have no call to. The feverish press reports, though, made them look

BELOW: A cattle 'mutilation' from 2009 – note the 'perfectly cored' anus. **BOTTOM:** The cover of ex-FBI agent Kenneth Rommel's 1980 investigation into animal mutilations.



carefully for perhaps the first time, and what they saw surprised and worried them, and the sheriffs who came in their wake. At least one of those lawmen (a State trooper) came to believe in the weirdness of it all, and, in spirit at least, joined the ranks

of the mutologists. The veterinary surgeons on whom both the media and the researchers tended to rely to reinforce their sense of strangeness were not pathologists – a specialism for which it takes about twice as long to qualify – and not surprisingly were often as baffled or confused as anyone by what they saw.

And this brings us back to the numbers. The mutologists (it turned out much later) were constantly treating reported mutilations as *confirmed, classic* ones, and besides had hugely inflated the numbers of reports on the evidence-free presumption that mutilations were under-reported.¹⁰ But of the 203 reports in Colorado in 1975, for example: "Thirty-five suspected mutilations were examined by Colorado State University, 19 of which were found suitable for tests. Of these 19 animals, the

university determined that 11 died of natural causes.

In the remaining eight cases, the cause of death could not be determined. Five cases were confirmed as predator attacks and nine as willful mutilations. Three incidents were thought to involve a possible combination of the two. The university also determined that in all mutilations involving the use of sharp instruments, the cuts were made following the animal's death."¹¹

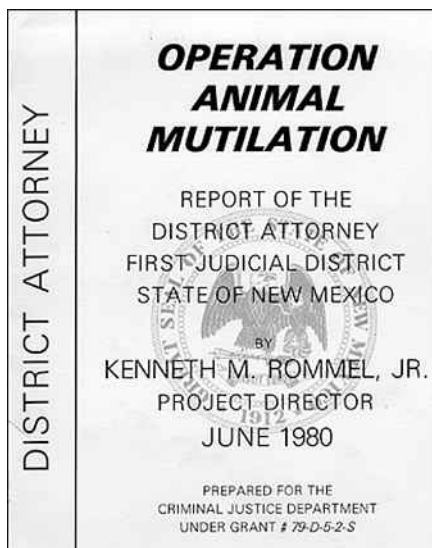
In other words, perhaps five per cent at most of reported cases involved actual mutilation, and in none of those was that the cause of death. The pattern was repeated in other states in other years.

A POIROT MOMENT...

If the numbers touted by mutologists were wonky, so were their claims about the nature of 'classic' mutilations. In May 1980, the district attorney for New Mexico's First Judicial District published a report on former FBI agent Kenneth Rommel's year-long investigation into animals allegedly mutilated in New Mexico. Rommel explained, with all the meticulous pedantry of Hercule Poirot gathering his suspects in a library, each of the traits of a 'classic' mutilation.

The 'surgical precision' of the mutilations, where it could be found, was actually the work of predators' teeth. Once the skin has shrunk and contracted – as it does – only microscopic examination will determine whether the hair around an incision has been cut with a blade or bitten by animal scavengers. (It hadn't

occurred to anyone that people might be biting chunks out of cows, and not even the mutologists had suggested that aliens were chewing them to death.) Likewise, the 'perfectly cored' anus of the carcasses was the work of scavengers, who naturally set about a dead animal's softer portions first. As for 'surgical precision', a mantric cant-phrase among mutologists, Rommel had asked a distinguished Santa Fe surgeon about the term. Said the



doctor succinctly: "Well, it means I try to cut in a straight line."¹²

Blood was absent in the carcasses simply because lacking a heartbeat it will rapidly pool, coagulate, and dry out at the point nearest the ground. Apparently unusual rates of decay of carcasses depend "upon a number of factors, such as the disease from which the animal died, the temperature, the weather conditions, and the types of scavengers present in the area. Depending on which factors are present, the carcass may appear to decay more rapidly or more slowly than normal." The impression that the 'best' livestock were 'chosen' for mutilation has a tiny germ of truth, in that some diseases (such as blackleg) do strike animals in top condition; but Rommel found no *general* tendency for the healthiest to appear in mute reports.¹³ That other animals avoided apparently mutilated carcasses must, logically, have been observed only *after* the carcasses had been found: and it was the odour left by *people* that they were avoiding. The association between UFOs and mute reports was tenuous (some UFO or helicopter sightings were made weeks apart from the supposed mutilations), while the theory that extraterrestrials were involved "has no evidence to support it".¹⁴ There never was a steer found in a tree, or a cow found with legs broken from a fall, and those 'drugged' with mescaline had probably eaten peyote growing freely on the range. Of the last on the list of 'classic' signs, Rommel wrote: "One common claim... is that the night a mutilation occurs, the family dog is unusually quiet. I have no quarrel with this observation, for... it's hard to bark when your mouth is full of fresh meat."

Rommel's conclusion that "the vast majority of livestock mutilations are caused by nothing more mysterious than nature's own ecologists hard at work" calmed ranchers and inhibited the sensationalist press. It did not go down well with mutologists, who accused him of being mentally ill, susceptible to bribes, a liar and a fraud, and generally part of the Great Cover-Up.¹⁵ Unfortunately for the buffs, an exhaustive (re)examination of the phenomenon by Daniel Kagan and Ian Summers (see note

7) both confirmed Rommel's verdict (but not without picking some holes in his findings beyond New Mexico) and went much further, and in excruciating detail – lacerating the irresponsible media, demolishing the mutologists' credentials and claims, deconstructing numerous individual cases, and calling on the USA's most prestigious animal pathologists in support. They debunked the biochemical experiment/government conspiracy mythos, and found only sporadic evidence linking the mutates to Satanic cults (and those only local ones); in each case, police never garnered enough evidence to prosecute. Kagan and Summers also put the budding and florescence of the phenomenon squarely in its historical and psychosocial context. A telling fact they uncovered: *none* of the major ranching operations in the affected States reported mutilations. By the mid 1980s, the mute phenomenon had faded from public concern in the USA and shrivelled into minor if somewhat fanatical branches of ufology and conspiracy theory.¹⁶

No doubt there are people, some callous copycats, others perverts and deviants and pagans of various stripes, who found, and find, entertainment in hacking at dead animals. There remains a small puzzle. In the USA, it was assumed, sometimes accurately, that Satanic-or-similar cults – that is, organised groups, or maybe one huge, covert and wealthy one – were responsible for the mutilations. The notion that individual weirdos, other than copycat pranksters, might be at work seems not to have crossed anyone's mind. But in the UK that is the default assumption. FT's 1996 analysis of horse-ripping (see note 2), for instance, contains no comment on possible cult activity either by the writer or by the many experts he interviewed. Given the thoroughness of the piece, one would infer that there isn't any on this side of the pond. It's curious that in Europe, home of syndicalism and socialised medicine, that this kind of depravity appears to be a personal bent, while in the USA, home of rugged individualism, it's the collective that's fingered first. Make of that what you will. **F**

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 George Edalji was probably the victim of racism, a leading exponent of which was Staffordshire's chief constable. He seems to have loathed Edalji's father Shapurji, a Bombay-born Parsi turned parson: he had converted to Anglicanism, taken Holy Orders, and in 1876 became the incumbent at Wyrley. To the county's white nabobs it was probably bad enough that the Rev. Edalji – who was well loved by his parishioners – was both dusky and a former heathen; but he no doubt compounded these errors of destiny by having the gall to marry an Englishwoman. See Gordon Weaver, *Conan Doyle and the Parson's Son*, Vanguard 2006, and Roger Oldfield, *Outrage: the Edalji Five and the Shadow of Sherlock Holmes*, Pegasus Elliot MacKenzie, 2010. See also **FT21-8-9, 94-27**.

2 See Rob Irving, "They Rip Horses, Don't They?", **FT94-22-28** and Paul Sieveking and Dennis Stillings "Poor Cow", **FT68-23-29**.

3 See Frank Duran, "The Exciting Mystery of Snippy the Horse", <http://snippy.com>; Wikipedia, "Cattle Mutilation"; Kenneth M. Rommel, *Operation Animal Mutilation*. Report of the District Attorney, First Judicial District, State of New Mexico. District Attorney,

1980, pp172-5.

4 Rommel, *op. cit.*, p174, quoting the *New Mexican*, 14 October 1967.

5 Duran, *op. cit.*

6 Adapted from Rommel, *op. cit.*, pp9-10.

7 Between presentations at a conference at which this picture was shown, we were entertained by Lionel Beer's hilarious account of his attempt to persuade Ms Howe that horse rippings in the UK (then in full spate) were *not* the work of alien butchers – even if their perpetrators might be slightly less than human. Daniel Kagan and Ian Summers (*Mute Evidence*, Bantam 1984) devote a devastating chapter to her tendentious film *A Strange Harvest* and elsewhere (pp375-6) refer to her as "an experienced distorter of the truth". Ms Howe remains one of the few promoters of alien involvement in animal mutilations.

8 Figures from US Department of Agriculture census of 1978 (<http://agcensus.mannlib.cornell.edu/AgCensus/censusParts.do?year=1978>); "Beefacts", *Cattle Feeders Annual 2008*, Texas Cattle Feeders Association, p117 (www.tcfa.org/beefacts/beefacts.pdf); Frank Garry, "Current Mortality Rates on US Dairies", www.cvmbs.colostate.edu/

ilm.proinfo/cdn/2006/DairymortalityJan.pdf. These papers give the mortality rate for beef cattle in Colorado as averaging 1.5 per cent, and that for dairy cattle as 9.1 per cent. Kagan and Summers (*op. cit.*, pxiv), however, cite USDA figures for Minnesota in 1973 that suggest a 30 per cent mortality rate. This seems implausibly (not to say unprofitably) high and may be based on a misreading.

9 Two more entertaining explanations:

• Thomas Bearden: "The mutilations are the physical manifestation of the whole human unconsciousness which is somehow aware that the Soviets will, probably within three years, invade and destroy the Western world. ... Cattle are female symbols representing the U.S., and the surgical precision of the mutilations indicates the precision of the military operations to come. The removal of genitals and organs signifies the end of children in the Western world and the cutting off of ears and tongues predicts the end of free speech." (Quoted by Cecil Adams, *The Straight Dope* 27 April 1984 [www.straightdope.com/columns/read/519/whats-the-story-with-cattle-mutilations]). See also Thomas Bearden: "Species metapsychology, UFOs and Cattle Mutilation", **FT26:14-20**.

• Philip S Duke: "The mutilation body materials taken all correspond with sites of HIV transmission or replication (blood) in humans, except for the ear, which may contain a locator device. Circumstantial evidence suggests cattle are mutilated [by extraterrestrials] primarily to harvest HIV antibodies and virus from blood in quantity, and to obtain information relating to possible HIV transmission in humans, by study of the materials taken from corresponding cattle mutilation sites. The left ear is always taken, presumably to facilitate locator retrieval." ("Cattle Mutilation Phenomenon and HIV", 1999, www.angelfire.com/wa/UFO/page39.html) Both the above gentlemen rejoice in having been awarded Ph.Ds.

10 See Kagan & Summers, *op. cit.*, p396.

11 Rommel, *op. cit.*, p175.

12 Kagan & Summers, *op. cit.*, pp93-4

13 Mutologists maintained that these cattle were selected by marking them in a manner that showed only under ultra-violet ("black") light. So many substances fluoresce under black light that the marks found could have been picked up in yards or barns. And there is no known case of any of the live animals so identified having been subsequently mutilated.

14 In nailing the role of hysterical press reports in spreading the mute panic, Kagan & Summers (*op. cit.*, p39) note that Dorothy Aldridge's article "UFO Pilots Not the Cause of Cattle Mutilations" in the *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph* was printed at a time when no UFO sightings had been made in Colorado at this time. So what, they ask, was the article rebutting? They also report (p95) Kenneth Rommel noting at a press conference that an article in a New Mexico paper had made a connection between UFOs and mutates when UFOs had been seen, but no mutilations reported.

15 As Kagan & Summers remarked (*op. cit.*, p175) of the mutologist network, "The whole thing was... a closed system, self-referential, solipsistic, which allowed no fresh information to enter unless it was properly polarized to support the prevailing attitude of mystery, conspiracy, weirdness, and/or UFOs and space aliens."

16 In recent years the Animal Pathology Field Unit has been doing its not wholly successful best to revive the mute panic on the Welsh Marches, repeating most of the rabble-rousing strategies and exotic claims deployed in the USA in the 1970s. See www.latest-ufo-sightings.net/2010/04/aliens-are-attacking-our-sheep-ufo.html.

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The real Arthur?

STEVE MOORE ponders the ever-increasing literature on the 'real King Arthur' and finds it older and stranger than it first appears.



STEVE MOORE is a longtime *FT* contributor, has edited many volumes of *Fortean Studies*, and written quite a lot of stuff. His novel, *Somnium*, was published in 2011.

Reading and reviewing (p60) Guy Halsall's thorough debunking of books seeking to identify a 'real, historical' King Arthur,¹ started me thinking about the whole unreal, unhistorical business, particularly with regard to what the attraction might be, and just how long ago the pursuit of this curious chimera first began. Of course, popular history books aimed at the general reader have become enormously fashionable in recent years, and works about Arthur have an extra frisson of lost tradition and unsolved mystery. There may also be something of a nationalistic desire to restore a strayed British king to his 'rightful' position in history, though it has to be said that both authors and readers of this material seem to spread across the whole of the English-speaking world, and often beyond as well.

In some ways I'm reminded of 'Biblical archaeology' where alleged finds such as Jesus's house, Joshua's altar or even one of Judas's silver pieces (all at **FT51:30-31**) are somehow thought to validate Christian belief and demonstrate the literal truth of the Bible. But perhaps a nearer parallel (with additional batty conspiracy theories and apparent secret societies) might be the Rennes-le-Chateau industry, with its historical and religious mysteries and lost treasure, besides. Where's the lost treasure in the Arthurian tradition? Why, the Holy Grail, of course.

We'll come back to these parallels later, but for now let's turn our attention to just how long this 'real Arthur' tradition has been around. Personally, I think a good case could be made for 1136, when Geoffrey of Monmouth gave us the first major exposition of the Arthurian legend

in his *History of the Kings of Britain*.² Whatever his sources may have been (and if there ever was an 'old history in the British tongue', supposedly given to him by Walter the Archdeacon of Oxford, no one's ever seen it), Geoffrey basically offered his readers an Arthur portrayed as a real, historical king, rather than a vague figure of fable. That he was promptly called a liar by the more conservative historian William of Newburgh (c.1136-1198) is neither here nor there. For Geoffrey's readership, Arthur was someone who really lived, fought the Saxons, invaded Europe, and was taken, dying, to Avalon in the year 542.

To modern readers, it's quite plain that Geoffrey was writing a 'Romance of the Kings of Britain', but mediæval romance falls in a strangely nebulous area somewhere between fact and fiction. For all that the romances may have borne the names of authors such as Chrétien de Troyes and Gottfried von Strassburg, that didn't mean they were necessarily thought to be fictional; these were simply the *versions* of the narratives produced by those writers, and particularly so when the romances featured characters known to be real, such as Charlemagne or Alexander the Great. We know that during the Middle Ages, Merlin (as full-blown magician, rather than half-remembered bard) was believed to have been a real person,³ and similarly it was plainly assumed that Joseph of Arimathea had brought the Holy Grail to Britain.

Given obvious reader demand for more material about this apparently historical King Arthur, writers of the 12th and 13th centuries responded with further romances, filling in the story and adding extra characters, ending up with the vast, anonymous collection of



ABOVE: Detail from a tapestry showing King Arthur as one of the Nine Worthies, c. 1400.

French Arthurian romances known as *The Vulgate Cycle*, which was considerably abridged by Sir Thomas Malory in his *Morte d'Arthur*. That by then the stories were plainly fictional hardly mattered; the narratives were important, and characters such as Arthur, Guinevere and Merlin were believed to have lived and walked the Earth. That was before the Age of Reason, of course.

That Arthur continues to have a hold on our imagination is obvious from the vast amount of literature still being published about him, to say nothing of his appearances in films and television series. But now that we realise that the Arthurian romances are plainly fictional, we're back in the same position as readers of Geoffrey's day: we have an eager audience

for an alluring character about whom there is virtually no certain information. To fill the gap, we now have the 'real Arthur' industry, with its conjectural Sarmatian cavalry and obscure (and far too early) Roman commanders called Lucius Artorius Castus, its Scottish, German and pagan kings (and so on, *ad infinitum*), so brutally exposed by Halsall.

I'd suggest that, rather than writing these books off as nonsense, it might be more useful to regard them as 'modern romances'. They purport to be factual while having virtually no factual basis; but once again, it's the *narrative* that is important, providing as it does a key to ancient mysteries and a discovery of something wonderful. I'd go further and suggest the modern romance label could be applicable across a broad range of fortean topics, from the 'Holy Blood' literature to ancient astronauts, crashed saucer retrievals, alien abductions... and so on, once more, *ad infinitum*. Perhaps it's not really important whether these notions are 'true' or not. Instead, these are narratives that we want to be true, and so they tell us something about ourselves, our desire to escape from mundane reality, and our wish for the wondrous. They are, quite simply, romantic ... and that, no doubt, is the greatest part of their appeal. **FT**

NOTES

1 Guy Halsall: *Worlds of Arthur*. Oxford UP, 2013.

2 Geoffrey of Monmouth [Trans. Lewis Thorpe]: *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Penguin Books, 1966.

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Boston bombing conspiracies

CHRIS SAUNDERS considers the conspiracy theories that quickly sprang up in the wake of events in Boston



CHRIS SAUNDERS is a London-based journalist and sometime *FT* contributor who also writes fiction as CM Saunders. His latest novel, *Rainbow's End*, is available now from Flarefont Publishing.

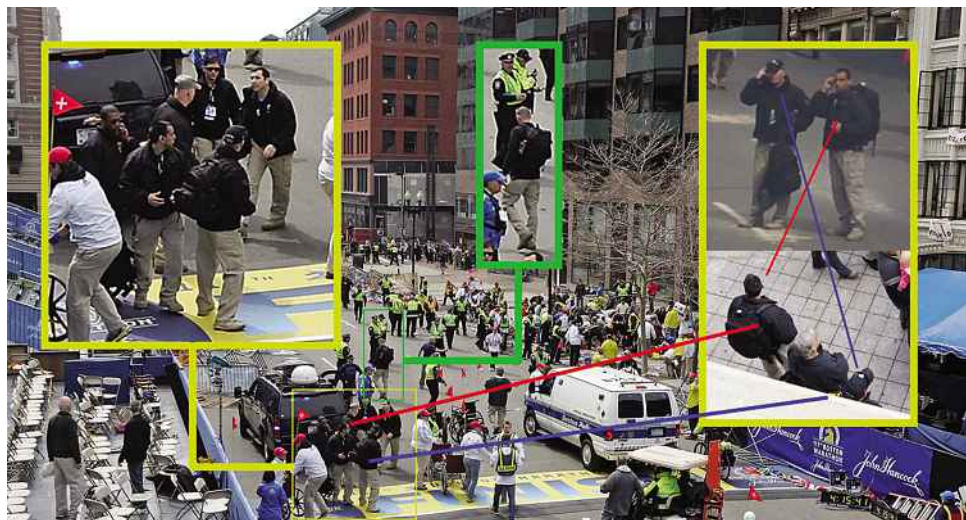
At 14.49pm EDT on 15 April 2013, millions watched on TV, thousands competed, and thousands more lined the streets for the climax of the world-famous Boston marathon. The winners had already crossed the finish line, but around 5,700 participants were still being cheered on by the crowds when there was a flash of light accompanied by a deafening crash. Thirteen seconds later, as bystanders struggled to comprehend what was happening, there was another explosion 190 metres (620ft) away.

The twin blasts caused three deaths; those of Krystle Marie Campbell, a 29-year-old a restaurant manager, Lü Lingzi, a Chinese graduate from Boston University, and eight-year-old Martin William Richard. A further 282 were injured. In addition to the human cost, the explosions caused damage that could run into millions of dollars. However, perhaps the biggest blow was a psychological strike on the Western psyche – arguably the whole point of terrorism. As the dust settled, so did the realisation that the American public's worst nightmare had been realised: Terrorists had struck again.

Or had they?

Within hours of the incident, the first conspiracy theories began to circulate on the Internet. The initial wave suggested that the attack was a 'false flag' operation – a staged event to enable an expansion of governmental power. In a televised press briefing, Dan Bidondi, a reporter for the controversial website *Infowars.com*, asked the Governor of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick: "Is this another false flag staged attack to take our civil liberties and promote homeland security?"¹ The answer was a terse "No"; but as was pointed out on several message boards, it would be, wouldn't it?

Another popular theory centres on an account by runner Alastair Stevenson, who said a bomb drill was held before the event. "At the starting line this morning, they had bomb sniffing dogs



Was Boston "another false flag staged attack?"

and the bomb squad out there. They kept announcing to runners not to be alarmed, that they were running a training exercise".² In the absence of other testimony, despite the sheer number of people in the area, this theory would seem to rest solely on the words of one traumatised individual. However, many conspiracy theorists used it as a key piece of evidence indicating that the authorities knew the attack was going to happen; clearly, these commentators were unwilling to let the fact that sniffer dogs and trained bomb crews are a common fixture at major public events in the US get in the way of a good conspiracy theory.

Social media were also abuzz with reports that the *Boston Globe* had tweeted about the explosions *before* they happened. However, a little digging soon establishes that while the *Globe* did indeed tweet extensively about the incident in an effort to reassure the residents of Boston, it didn't foresee an explosion. Observers simply become

ABOVE: Conspiracy websites have provided helpful graphics pointing out the apparent presence of Craft International 'mercenaries' at the scene.

FACING PAGE:

Ex-Navy SEAL and Craft International founder Chris Kyle.

confused about the timing of events. "Twitter displays tweets in your local time zone. So a 3:53pm tweet in Boston looks like a 12:53pm tweet on the West Coast."³ Two Facebook pages memorialising the attack were allegedly created before the explosions occurred. This theory can be swiftly debunked by the fact that Facebook allows creators to choose the date when their page is supposed to have been created – leaving plenty of room for human error, and, yes, for malicious trolls to plant misleading information. Perhaps the most bizarre theory of the they-knew-it-was-going-to-happen variety was that the bombings were predicted in an episode of the Fox animated show *Family Guy*.

Back to reality, and after a manhunt and subsequent shoot-out which left a police officer, Sean Collier, and a suspect, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, dead, a second suspect, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, younger brother of Tamerlan, was wounded and taken into custody. It later emerged that the authorities had acknowledged at least one of the brothers had been identified as a clear security threat.⁴ While raising questions (such as, "How was a terror suspect still able to assemble, plant and detonate a bomb. Twice?"), such acknowledgment is still a world away from having prior knowledge of a specific attack which could have been prevented. One theory suggested that the brothers were CIA agents who had "gone bad", another that Tamerlan

Tsarnaev was still alive (sometimes backed up by pointing to the news footage of a naked dark-haired man being apprehended by police officers).

Another theory surrounds one of the victims, Jeff Bauman, captured in a wheelchair with a femur protruding from what was left of his thigh in a now-iconic picture released to the media. Conspiracy theorists point to the fact that for a man who has just had both his legs blown off, there is surprisingly little blood at the scene. It has been suggested that the wounds were cauterised by the blast; but surely, if this were the case, there would be scorching and other evidence of extreme heat elsewhere on the victim or in the immediate vicinity. To play Devil's advocate for a moment: granted, the victim could be suffering from shock, but he looks remarkably calm for a man in such an awful situation. And what is he doing in a wheelchair, anyway? Isn't it standard practice to transport casualties on stretchers? And wouldn't somebody think to at least put a blanket over him? It's almost as if the photo was... rigged.

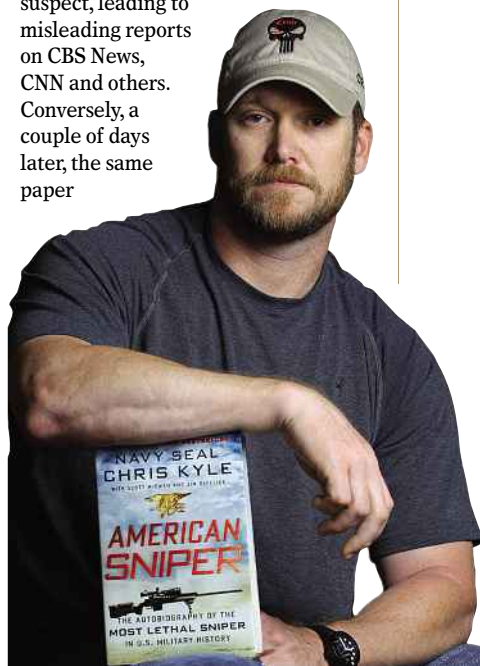
That's what Florida Atlantic University Professor James Tracy – yes, the man who believes that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was a hoax – thinks. “In short, the event closely resembles a mass-casualty drill, which for training purposes are designed to be as lifelike as possible,” Tracy wrote on his blog. In a variant theory, Sandy Hook principal Dawn Hochsprung didn't die in the (fake) shooting, but was an actress who turned up again in Boston. A supposed screen grab from Fox News was put up as proof that the Boston Marathon bombing was also a staged event.⁵ And all this is before we even touch on the uncanny similarity between Bauman and double-amputee Nick Vogt, who lost both legs in an IED attack in Afghanistan in November 2011. A full and graphic account of this particular theory, complete with pictures, is provided on B'Mans Blog.⁶ Be sure to check the comments at the end; they make for interesting reading.

If there was some kind of cover-up, the obvious question is... why? Was it meant to stir up anti-Islamic feeling? Or might there be more practical motivations? An anonymous Twitter user claiming to work on a “security commission” said in a mysterious post that the bomber used gunpowder in making the bombs, and that “they” wanted to limit and tax the amount of such materials members of the public could buy. Earlier in the post, the user said the crime was going to be “pinned on someone in his late teens

or early twenties (who) did it because he was unstable”, which turned out to be somewhat prophetic.⁷ He seems to have been unnervingly accurate about those gunpowder laws, too; in the aftermath of the tragedy, US Senator Lautenberg announced plans to introduce background checks on anyone buying even small amounts, which would push up the price.⁸

There is a growing belief in some online communities that the Tsarnaev brothers were little more than stool pigeons and that a group of government-funded mercenaries called Craft International were heavily involved in the atrocity (if there was one). Numerous pictures taken that day seem to show individuals wearing items of clothing emblazoned with the outfit's distinctive logo.⁹ Incidentally, Craft International was founded by Chris Kyle, retired Navy SEAL and author of *American Sniper*; in another strange twist, Kyle was shot dead on 2 February at a Texan gun range by a fellow veteran suffering from PTSD.¹⁰ Could the anonymous tweeter be a member of Craft International, who have so far neither confirmed nor denied their presence in Boston that day?

A growing trend surrounding these kinds of public tragedies has been inaccurate press reporting. The *New York Post* initially reported that 12 had been killed in the explosions and that a suspect, a Saudi Arabian male, was in custody and being questioned.¹¹ In fact, at that time three were dead and no suspects had been apprehended. In later articles the *Post* backtracked to claim, “[An unspecified] law enforcement source told the *Post* that (the death toll) could be as high as 12,” but did not retract the story about the suspect, leading to misleading reports on CBS News, CNN and others. Conversely, a couple of days later, the same paper



draw considerable flack for running a headline: “BAG MEN: Feds seek these two pictured at Boston Marathon”, along with an image of two men. The problem was that neither man was being sought by the FBI, or anyone else, in relation to the bombings, and again the story led to widespread false reports.¹² In a society that prides itself on the quality and transparency of its news coverage, should these ‘mistakes’ be happening? Is this plain incompetence? Or is something else going on?

We should remember that Western media work on a consumer-driven, free enterprise model. In the most basic terms, this amounts to generating sales or boosting viewing figures in order to increase profit. And in the world of news journalism, sensationalism sells. That said, when there has just been a fatal terrorist attack on the Boston marathon – a shocking headline-maker in itself – is there any real need to push the envelope further? When considering all this, one should keep in mind that a basic tactic of political media manipulation is the use of disinformation, whereby some controlling power floods the public domain with so many lies and untruths that a decidedly unsavoury (but true) element is effectively buried. Perhaps the real question raised by these conspiracy theories, though, is what is it about modern society that makes citizens so distrustful of their governments – the very people they voted into the corridors of power?

NOTES

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- 2 http://blog.al.com/live/2013/04/boston_marathon_explosion_univ.html
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Jesús versus the other Franco

MARIA J PÉREZ CUERVO celebrates a maverick grindhouse director's escape from the censors of Fascist Spain



MARIA J PÉREZ CUERVO is a Bristol-based Spanish journalist whose interests include history, popular culture, Victoriana, rock and roll and doppelgängers. She tweets from @mjpcuervo.

The cult horror director once described by the Vatican as “the most dangerous film-maker alive” passed away in April at the age of 82 in Málaga, Spain. Affectionately known as *Tío Jess* (“Uncle Jess”) among his fans, Jess Franco was one of the most prolific directors of all time (the exact number of his films, around 200, is the subject of much debate), adopting several pseudonyms to avoid, as he put it, being hated by his colleagues. His films, a concoction of horror, fantasy, eroticism and the surreal, were at the same time the subject of controversy and international censorship and the focus of a cult following, with Quentin Tarantino citing them as a huge influence. Franco is best known for the films he made with British producer Harry Alan Towers and Christopher Lee and for those that featured the infamous mad scientist Doctor Orloff.

Along with Paul Naschy, the Lon Chaney of Spain, who died in 2009 (see FT259:54-55), Franco was a seminal figure in Spanish horror. Both of them were true mavericks who dedicated their lives to exploring a genre that was consistently repressed in their country of birth by the other Franco – the dictator who ruled the country from 1939 until his death in 1975 and who, ironically, shared his surname with the subversive director.

As a teenager, Franco, born Jesús Franco Manera in Madrid, was already a cinema lover who went to the pictures almost every day. He went to music school and learnt to play piano and trumpet, dreaming of becoming a jazz trumpeter. Eventually, he decided he preferred “the glorious life of a moviemaker” and enrolled in the Instituto de Investigaciones y Experiencias Cinematográficas while simultaneously working as an actor and writing pulp novels under the pseudonym of David Khume. He moved to Paris to escape the dictatorship and complete his training as a cinematographer. He often recalled



ABOVE: Jess Franco receives his honorary Goya at Spain's Goya Awards ceremony in 2009.

Horror was a recurrent element, as was eroticism

how delighted he was to discover those films that were forbidden by the Fascist regime in his native country being screened at the French Cinemathèque and the Sorbonne. When he returned to Spain, he got his first job in the industry as a composer. Soon he was working as an assistant director on several Hollywood projects shot in Spain, such as King Vidor's *Solomon and Sheba* (1958). He directed his first feature in 1959, the teenage comedy

Tenemos quince años, as well as several documentaries in subsequent years.

It wasn't until 1961 that he directed his first genre film, *Gritos en la noche*, also known as *The Awful Doctor Orloff*. The film was a French-Spanish co-production, and a rarity in his country of birth (the only other references were the forgotten silent films of Segundo Chomón and the 1944 Gothic mystery *La torre de los siete jorobados*, which featured a group of sinister hunchbacks terrorising the daughter of a deceased archaeologist). *Gritos en la noche* was the first seed of *fantaterror*, the genre that blossomed in Spain during the 1960s and 70s, influenced by Hammer Horror and Italian *giallo* and cultivated by legendary names in the horror industry, such as Franco, Paul Naschy, Ibáñez-Serrador and Armando de Ossorio. Part of the reason it was possible for Franco to produce the first Orloff film were the changes in film-making policy in the country, intended to help the economy through foreign investment and thus encouraging international co-productions.

The plot of *Gritos en la noche* revolves around a mad scientist named after the character played by Bela Lugosi in *The Dark Eyes of London*, an adaptation of an Edgar Wallace novel. Franco's Orloff is a former prison doctor who kidnaps young girls and skins them to repair the face of his daughter, scarred after a fire. The film's premise is clearly taken from the haunting French classic *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) that also inspired Michael Myers's mask in *Halloween* (not to mention the Billy Idol song of the same name).

Orloff would be a recurring character in Franco's filmography, often played by Swiss-born Howard Vernon, one of his regular actors. Vernon's last appearance as the mad doctor would be in *Faceless* (1987), officially considered a gory remake of *Eyes Without a Face*, though it could also be defined as another take, and not the only one in his career, on *Gritos en la noche*.

Horror, especially of the surgical kind, was clearly a recurrent element in Franco's *oeuvre*, but so was eroticism. In the early days of *fantaterror*, it was usual to produce at least two versions of each film: one with nudity, destined for the

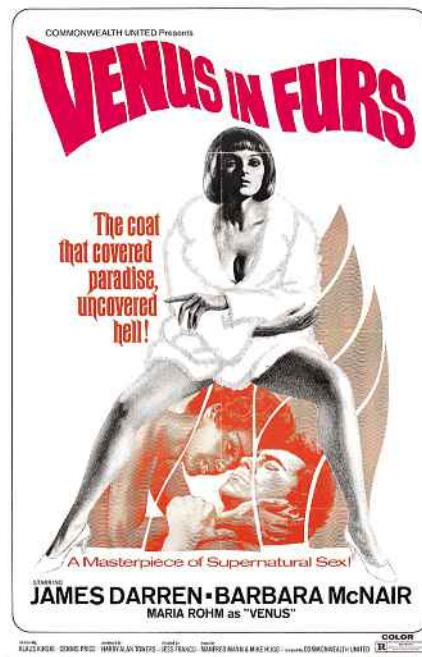
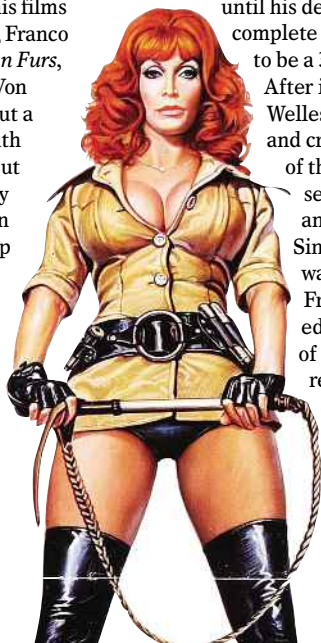
more open-minded European market, and a chaster version that would escape the sharp scissors of the Fascist censors. Franco's sadistic, voyeuristic gaze is already noticeable in his early films, such as the first Orloff and *The Sadistic Baron Von Klaus* (1962).

Later in the Sixties, the director worked with Christopher Lee and British producer Harry Alan Towers on two of Lee's five films as Fu Manchu, as well as *The Bloody Judge* (1969), in which Lee played the sadistic Judge Jeffreys, and on the actor's sole non-Hammer *Dracula* (1970), which was reportedly also his favourite.

Franco spent most of the 1970s making international co-productions free from the restrictions of his own country, and eroticism and gore progressively became more prominent in his works. He was a keen reader of the Marquis de Sade – forbidden, of course, in Fascist Spain – and adapted a number of his works for the screen: *Justine* (1969) and *Eugenie* (1970) were also produced by Harry Alan Towers. Towers asked Christopher Lee to play the part of the narrator in the latter. The actor accepted and only found out that the film was essentially softcore pornography after some friends told him it was being shown in Old Compton Street in London's Soho. Lee was furious.

In 1971, Franco met his muse Lina Romay, then just 17. She became the star of *Female Vampire* (1973) and his lifelong partner, whom he finally married in 2008. She died in 2012. It was easy to guess why they seemed made for each other: Romay was at least as fearless as Franco. She starred in over 100 of his films and was a legend in the hardcore porn industry of the time, working as an actress, director, producer and writer.

When asked which of his films he would save from a fire, Franco always referred to *Venus in Furs*, not an adaptation of the Von Sacher-Masoch novella, but a hallucinogenic thriller with cult actor Klaus Kinski. But his favourite was probably *Necronomicon* (also known as *Succubus*), a surreal trip with a nightclub stripper, mannequins, S&M and dancing midgets (before David Lynch made them mainstream). *Metropolis* director Fritz Lang called it "a beautiful piece of cinema". It was largely improvised by Franco,



who started shooting without a script, with most scenes quickly sketched in Spanish the night before filming and translated into English by actor Jack Taylor the following morning.

Lang wasn't the only "serious" film-maker who admired Franco's work. In 1965, Franco was hired as the second unit director in Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*. They worked together on several occasions, including the incomplete *Treasure Island*, with Welles as Long John Silver. Franco regarded his time with Welles as "the most important vital experience in my life". In 1990, he purchased the rights to some of the footage of Welles's unfinished *Don Quixote*. The American director had spent several decades of his life,

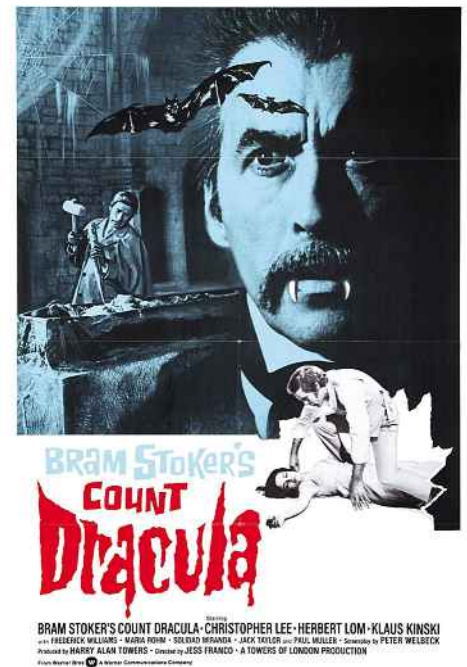
until his death in 1985, trying to complete what initially was going to be a 30-minute TV special.

After it was cancelled by CBS, Welles decided to go ahead and create his own version of the Spanish classic, set in the 20th century and sponsored by Frank Sinatra. But the project was never completed.

Franco worked on a new edit that included scenes of his own creation. The result premiered in Cannes in 1992 under the title *Orson Welles' Don Quixote*. Critics hated it and remarked upon the superior

quality of the original material. But critics' opinions never had any impact on Franco. He thought that it was his job as a director to entertain people, not to try and achieve the artistic heights of Cervantes or Shakespeare – though he recognised that Welles or John Ford came close.

Artwork from Franco's 1977 contribution to the *Ilsa* exploitation series starring Dyanne Thorne, *Ilsa the Wicked Warden* (aka *Wanda the Wicked Warden*, *Greta the Torturer*, *Greta - Haus ohne Männer* etc).



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In 2009, Franco received the honorary Goya, an award given by the Spanish Film Academy to celebrate a lifetime achievement. With this gesture, the Academy rewarded the creativity, productivity and pioneering efforts of the master of grindhouse cinema. In his speech Franco was humble, as usual, acknowledging Romay's support and encouraging the efforts of young would-be film-makers. "To make a film", he said in several interviews, quoting the words of director José Luis Berlanga, "you only need two things: a camera and freedom". The quote captures the two most important principles of his career: his love of cinema and his hatred for Spain's Fascist regime. In the 2010 documentary *Llámame Jess* he recalls how he was offered several propaganda films that he emphatically rejected: "I won that battle against those sons of bitches. I've always done whatever the fuck I wanted".

In the last year of his life he completed three films, among them *Al Pereira vs the Alligator Ladies*, released in Spain just before his death. Franco was busy until the end and even though he didn't care about posterity, he'll be remembered for his films, his authenticity and his fearless attitude. FT

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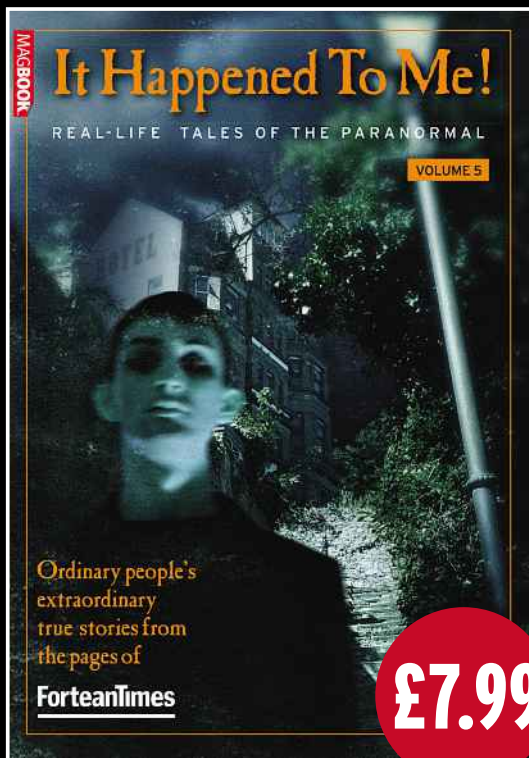
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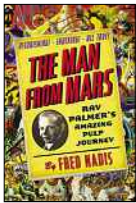
This month's books, films and games

reviews



The Martian and regular guy

A warts-and-all portrayal of the outsider who did not invent flying saucers (though he helped invent science fiction fandom) but enjoyed paradoxes and sowing confusion



The Man from Mars

Ray Palmer's Amazing Pulp Journey

Fred Nadis

Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin 2013

Hb, 304pp, illus, bib, ind, \$28.95, ISBN 9780399160547

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £20.00

Ray Palmer, who barely towered above four feet, was a Martian. Or so he would inform children who gawked at this curious spectre as he ambled past. Then again, he might tell the truth, which was that he looked that way because as a child he had failed to check in both directions before crossing a street. The result was a grisly encounter with a moving vehicle and spine-crushing injuries which would stunt his growth. Then again, even the first explanation contained a degree of truth. In private, and sometimes in a rare public admission, he thought of himself as an outsider who might as well have landed on Earth from another planet. Late in life, a planned autobiography was to be titled *Martian Diary*.

On the other hand, people who came to know him tended to pronounce him a “regular guy” after all. In many ways, Palmer had a normal life: a marriage of long standing, three children, friends, career success. On yet another hand – this Martian had an abundance of tentacles – he would not have merited a biography, and preceding that

endless controversy about his personality and motivation, if he had been only a regular guy.

In *The Man from Mars* popular-culture scholar Fred Nadis offers up a sophisticated portrayal of one who contained worlds, many of them in collision, and resists the temptation, which the subject of Palmer often excites, to hyperbole. In these pages years ago, the late John Keel fatuously proclaimed Palmer “the man who invented flying saucers,” which he didn’t, even in the loose, metaphorical definition. Still, it’s true that he was the first to exploit their commercial potential as co-founder, with Curtis Fuller, of the still-extant paranormal digest *Fate*. Nadis makes no grandiose pretence to Palmer’s status as a cultural mover; yet he was there, and we – well, some of us – are still talking about him.

One thing Palmer, who was born in Milwaukee in 1910, did help to invent was science fiction fandom. In 1928, with a friend and fellow enthusiast of the emerging genre then (if briefly) known as “scientifiction,” he created the “Science Correspondence Clubs” which within two years had evolved into the first SF fanzine, *The Comet*. His large and active role in SF (not then “sci-fi”) promotion landed him a job as editor of Ziff-Davis’s *Amazing Stories*, the original SF pulp founded by Hugo Gernsback in 1926. It was 1938, and Palmer was not quite 28 years old.

Reinventing himself as “Rap” – for Raymond Alfred Palmer – he fashioned a lively, personal editorial style which defined him in various publishing contexts until his death in 1977. Casual readers who had stopped by for the space monsters and ray

Shaver “was one nut among many who felt compelled to communicate their irritating delusions”

guns got hooked as much on the editorials and correspondence pages as on the fiction, lurid stuff often labelled (not flatteringly) “space opera”. Those who were not enthralled were repelled, and soon critics – those who sought literary respectability for SF – chided him as a cynic who catered to readers without taste or even brains. Yet he revived a failing magazine and kept many a hack writer, and even the occasional master, in groceries during the lean years of depression and world war.

But it was the Shaver mystery that pushed his critics beyond the brink. Richard Shaver steps into the story in 1943. To other Ziff-Davis editors he was only one nut among too many who felt compelled to communicate their irritating delusions to *Amazing*. As Nadis interestingly documents, however, he arrived just as Palmer was seeking a way to stimulate SF with some fresh concepts. With his weird tales – said to be based on Shaver’s experiences – of ancient astronauts and their demented descendants who torment unsuspecting humanity from caverns under the earth, Palmer believed he now knew how he could fuse SF with occult beliefs and “true mysteries.”

The Shaver mystery lasted for about five years in the pages of *Amazing* and its companion

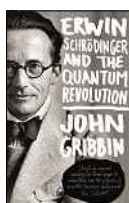
Fantastic Adventures. Along with it, Palmer planted seeds that flowered in *Fate* and other magazines, not least *Fortean Times*, which, if eschewing Shaver’s outlandish claims (with their roots in what looks very much like paranoid schizophrenia), highlighted unexplained phenomena. (Oddly, Charles Fort is mentioned here only once, and in passing within a quote. Yet Fort and the Fortean Society were at least as important as Palmer – who also drew on their material in his magazines – in generating broad cultural interest in anomalies and the paranormal.) By 1949 Palmer was out from *Amazing*, laying plans for a move to rural Wisconsin and his own series of SF and true-mystery magazines. He sold his share of *Fate* to Curtis and Mary Fuller, who quickly ratcheted down the content to a level that saner readers could more easily entertain.

For the rest of his days, Palmer had a lower profile and a smaller audience, but if they were so inclined, those who were interested in UFOs (he published *Flying Saucers*) and the occult (*Mystic*, later *Search*) could keep abreast of the legend of Ray Palmer. Palmer kept their interest by hinting at profound secrets he would one day divulge and by challenging readers to puzzle out his true beliefs. Shaver made occasional appearances, but Palmer also promoted the hollow earth (which he was doing when I boarded the mystery train as an adolescent) and anything else that he thought would stir discussions and subscription renewals. In his sad final years, Palmer was reduced to spinning

Continued on page 61

Quantum man

A guide to Schrödinger's life and work is better at his science than his life



Erwin Schrödinger and the Quantum Revolution

John R Gribbin

Black Swan 2011

Pb, 383pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, £9.99, ISBN 9780552777599

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £9.49

John R Gribbin is a British science writer, astrophysicist, and author of biographies and science fiction. He was one of Fred Hoyle's research students at the Institute of Theoretical Astronomy around the time of the discovery of pulsars. He is no stranger to taking theory a little too far: his co-published *The Jupiter Effect* predicted that planetary alignment could cause gravitational effects that would trigger earthquakes, possibly wiping out Los Angeles. He later distanced himself from this theory. In 1984, Gribbin published *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality*, which continues to sell.

In this new work, Gribbin rekindles his fascination with Erwin Schrödinger, best known for his eponymous cat paradox. The book is described as "The first accessible, in-depth biography of the Nobel Prize-winning Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger." It promises to explain "the captivating world of quantum mechanics, which underpins all of modern science."

Biographies of the scientists who shaped the last century's breakthroughs in physics are fascinating because they give an insight into the often volatile period of change, and the theories, experimentation and argument. When I was learning

about the Schrödinger equation and quantum mechanics, they were presented as immutable fact – they might as well have been written on stone tablets.

Gribbin's biography is a blend of science history and revelations about Schrödinger's colourful life. The book lacks emotional insight into Schrödinger, though it is clear he loved women, the great outdoors and financial security.

On the subject of science history there are some excellent commentaries on the personalities of the leading scientists of the age. We get an insight into their views about what might be true in this abstract new world of quantum mechanics. The argument raged about the wave-particle dualism of sub atomic 'particles'. It is fascinating to consider that strength of personality and personal popularity play such a massive role in the rate at which theory develops. And inability to pay for publication in a highly respected journal led to several years of delay before an important idea was picked up.

Gribbin attempts to discuss the underlying science behind this bizarre world. Readers with a strong grasp of quantum mechanics probably find this very instructive; to those like me who know a little, it is at times helpful; people new to the subject will probably be baffled.

On the subject of the benefits of quantum mechanics and the revolution that Schrödinger was a part of there can be no argument. However, I will hide behind Blackadder and reveal that quantum mechanics is to me as 'The Ravelling Nancy' is to cotton: "I am one of these people who are quite happy to wear cotton, but have no idea how it works".

Paul Little

Fortean Times Verdict

A LIFE OF THE MAN WHOSE IDEAS UNDERPIN MODERN SCIENCE

6

Who Was Dracula?

Bram Stoker's Trail of Blood

Jim Steinmeyer

Tarcher Penguin 2012

Hb, 336pp, refs, ind, \$26.95, ISBN 9780142421888

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £18.00



Certain subjects in Victoriana are so well studied they have all but crumbled to dust through over-handling.

The title of Jim Steinmeyer's book doesn't inspire confidence. Yet get beyond the name and this exploration of the origins of Dracula is insightful, never resigned to providing simple answers. Steinmeyer is best known as an historian of stage magic. By approaching Bram Stoker's creation from the theatre stage rather than literature professor's study or psychoanalyst's couch, he brings a fresh perspective.

In his introduction he asks us to pity Bram Stoker, laying out the workaday reality of Stoker's life, before discussing the storm of investigation that has dissected the world's most notorious blood-sucker. As he points out later in the book, "Perhaps Stoker's most remarkable achievement was composing a novel called *Dracula*, while writing almost nothing about Dracula."

Over the years the vampire has been picked over again and again, so what is fresh about Steinmeyer's study? In the past many of the explorations of Dracula have tried to frame his origin around a single source, whether that is Henry Irving's relationship to his Acting Manager or unidentified 15th century manuscripts.

The strength of *Who Was Dracula?* is in capturing the complexity of influence on the writing process. The chapters are organised around themes such as his relationship with Henry Irving, his obsession with the poetry of Walt Whitman and the court case that saw Oscar Wilde residing in a prison cell.

A large part of his exploration revolves around the Lyceum Theatre, London, where for many years Stoker was Acting Manager, and it is here that Steinmeyer's experience and knowledge makes the story of Stoker's most famous novel come to life. For example,

his descriptions of how visitors were co-opted onto stage as extras, including Stoker himself, and, on one occasion prime minister Gladstone, help capture the chaos and energy of the 19th century theatre.

Although Stoker never went to Transylvania, Steinmeyer tracks the influence of journeys to Whitby, Nuremberg, and the United States. He also lays out how the world came to the Lyceum, as guests at the Beefsteak Room, and Stoker in his role as Acting Manager came into contact with people such as the adventurers Arminius Vambery and Henry Morton Stanley.

Two chapters stray into riskier territory – Jack The Ripper, a topic that causes many researchers to stumble, mainly through their own certainty. In such a short section it is impossible for Steinmeyer to present an in-depth argument about the influence of the case on Stoker's work. Instead, he uses the example of a single suspect and demonstrates how he and Stoker could have come into contact socially. Even then, he ably shows the ambiguity of the evidence without losing the reader's trust.

There are no simple answers here, but the book is stronger for it. The clarity of Steinmeyer's writing and his exhaustive knowledge of the theatrical community of the late 19th century make this book a pleasure to read.

Who was Dracula? Bram Stoker's Trail of Blood could have ended up as literary criticism, another autobiography of Stoker, or a potted history of the Lyceum Theatre. It succeeds in being none of these. Steinmeyer has written a book that articulates the complexity and messiness of influences on the writing process, clearly showing how this influential novel grew in the rich soil of the 19th century London theatrical community. An excellent investment for anyone interested in theatrical history, cultural icons and symbols, Victoriana or the origins of modern horror.

Steve Toase

Fortean Times Verdict

GRIPPING FOR FANS OF THEATRE, VICTORIANA AND HORROR

9

Continued from page 59

conspiracy theories, embracing far-right politics, and flirting with anti-Semitism while maintaining just enough distance to allow for plausible deniability.

Outside observers wondered what Palmer's beliefs were. The Fullers told me it was impossible to know, in good part because Palmer took perverse delight in fooling people even over inconsequential matters. Non-admirers within SF, who never forgave him for the excesses of his *Amazing* tenure, were confident he was a charlatan; the late debunker Martin Gardner proclaimed that Palmer didn't believe a word he wrote.

This is almost certainly a false reading, Nadis argues. While Palmer undeniably possessed carnival-barker instincts (in one part emanating from his early life in the freewheeling magazine culture of the pulps, in another from his outsider's psyche), he also was an authentic spiritual seeker, privately captivated by the channelled epic *Oahspe* and driven by his own encounters with (as he called it) the "hidden world," including dramatic psychic experiences and a sighting of an elfin figure along a Wisconsin highway. In Nadis's analysis Palmer's critics failed to grasp his love of paradox and confusion, visible both in his hucksterism and in his sincere convictions.

Though he also exploited him, Palmer was honestly intrigued by Shaver's alleged experiences. The two remained close for most of the rest of their lives. Palmer was keenly aware of Shaver's history of mental illness. He thought, however, that this wasn't the end of it. Perhaps madness opened up realms not ordinarily visible.

Palmer could not have asked for a more sympathetic chronicler, or a better one, than Fred Nadis. His prose and his pronouncements are everything Palmer's practically never were: restrained, nuanced, intelligently considered. Nadis has a great story, and he relates it exquisitely. Jerome Clark

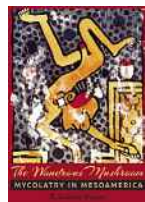
Fortean Times Verdict

EXEMPLARY INVESTIGATION OF A CONTRARIAN PUBLISHER

9

Mushroom and ritual

Interesting – though maybe untethered – speculation and some more supported theories about mushrooms in Mesoamerica



The Wondrous Mushroom

Mycolatry in Mesoamerica

R Gordon Wasson

City Lights Publishers 2013

Pb, 280pp, £16.99/\$24.95, ISBN 9780872865921

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £15.29

In the 1950s R Gordon Wasson and his wife Valentina Pavlovna became the first Westerners to describe shamanistic cultures of Russia and Mexico, where traditions of entheogenic mushroom use persisted. Despite the decades that have gone by since then, and Wasson's death in 1986, the recent news that David Nutt, professor of neuropsychopharmacology at Imperial College London, is deploring the British government's stance on psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, which he wants to trial for the treatment of depression, makes this a timely edition in the discourse on psychedelics, giving cultural perspective on a subject mostly bedevilled by mainstream media.

Beginning with an account of an all-night Mazatec mushroom ritual led by a female shaman in central Mexico in which Wasson participated, his comparisons of the effects of mushrooms with those of alcohol allow the reader to draw their own conclusions. For despite seeing the potential for therapists to "find some lasting use for the extraordinary substances we have discovered in these strange plants", Wasson's interest in the mushroom stayed strictly within historical and ethnographic boundaries – defined on his own terms.

Although his careful avoidance of proselytising language, by today's expectations possibly rendering the book rather impersonal, hard research was Wasson's main strength, combined with an appetite for venturing into geographic and speculative areas that scholars dared or cared not to, pushing back or dissolving boundaries in a true psychedelic spirit.

Each chapter is a self-contained inquiry, from the reportage of the mushroom ritual, to a mycological reinterpretation of the Xochipilli 'Prince of Flowers' statue in the National Museum of Mexico, seeing in floral decorative devices tobacco and morning-glory depictions, and mysterious double-spiral motifs as the sacred mushroom.

In pre-conquest Nahuatl poetry and various codices, 'flowers' become linguistic devices for mushrooms, as do themes of children dressed as birds and butterflies. Wasson's persistence, fleshing out his thesis with a steady persuasion as he goes onto examine the syncretism of the ancient mushroom tradition with Christianity in the resplendent decoration of certain churches and their icons, could be stunningly insightful or over-speculative since no mushroom literally appears in these contexts. With no way of telling for sure, secondary sources of evidence must suffice.

Possibly on firmer ground, the labyrinthine complex and reconstructed murals of Teotihuacan in which Wasson sees "a vast sanctuary dedicated to

two or three hallucinogens that enjoyed superlative prestige", refuting "our Western fixation on alcohol", is well-argued with good illustrative support.

Even stronger evidence for the esteem in which mushrooms were held by early Mesoamericans are the carved mushroom stones of the Maya, from which Wasson finds links with toads (a 'cthonian deity') and the female sexual organ (a theme that recurs in Hieronymus Bosch's Seven Deadly Sins and even the ceiling mosaic of the Baptistery in Florence), and the Mayans' infamous rubber ball game: a path not half as bizarre as it might sound. The worst drawback is that the generously sized illustrations are not in colour as intended.

If one of the effects of the sacred mushroom on Wasson was to impel him to put as much distance as possible from his previous life, it could hardly have found a more suitable candidate than in this former JP Morgan banker.

In him, the mushroom found its earliest, and most historically rigorous 'Western' convert, a man who upon entering "portals to the playing fields of the gods" bequeathed a mountain of validating background knowledge to the next generation of psilocybin explorers – notwithstanding the political cowardice currently belying their progress.

Jerry Glover

Fortean Times Verdict

PROBING, SCHOLARLY INQUIRY – LONG DELAYED BUT RELEVANT

8

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Partick polts

It's no longer believed that an infestation is a sign of witchery – bohemia's to blame



Poltergeist Over Scotland

Geoff Holder

The History Press 2013

Pb, 224pp, bib, ind, £9.99, ISBN 9780752482835

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKCLUB PRICE £9.99

Geoff Holder has authored many excellent books on the slightly offbeat, fortean side of Scotland. This one is of equally high quality. A comprehensive breakdown of Scottish poltergeist cases since the 1600s to the present, it takes the reader on a fascinating journey.

Several famous cases are covered in the 134 selected for the book, including that of Christian Shaw of Bargarran, the young girl who was an alleged victim of possession and psychic attack, eventually leading to the final mass witch-burning in Paisley in 1697.

Other cases featured are the Rerrick Poltergeist, Ballechin House, Aleister Crowley's infamous Boleskine House of Loch Ness and the strange enigma that is the Mackenzie Poltergeist, still haunting Greyfriars Kirkyard in Edinburgh to this day.

Holder is not fussy, and includes smaller cases, even if the only information available fills a few lines; for example, the odd case where a Highland granny had her tea things thrown about for a brief few moments. There are also cases where the decidedly human origin of 'polt' activity is caught. The reasons are quite intriguing; a family feud often at the heart of it. But several are not so easily explained. There is also a bizarre

propensity for poltergeists to populate Partick in Glasgow, as some of the more contemporary cases illustrate – perhaps it's the slightly bohemian air of that neck of the woods.

Holder highlights how many of the cases fit into the era in which they occurred, providing a valuable insight into how Scottish culture at least has responded to the polt phenomenon.

Things have certainly come some way from the days when it was believed an infestation was the result of witchcraft; the dawning of the Enlightenment saw those who used the witch scares to promote religious zealotry gradually lose their tight grip.

The fact that there are very few cases featured in the chapter on the 18th century is quite striking, though we see the numbers soar again by the 20th- and 21st centuries.

However, where psychology and science are key to explaining poltergeists in every other part of Scotland, in the Highlands, folk superstition holds sway, and polts appear to be just another part of life.

Other publications tend to make their chosen cases seem somewhat distant owing to a lack of social and historical context. Holder makes his meaningful by explaining the cultural milieu.

For the beginner looking to find out more, this is a great introduction. The extensive bibliography and cited sources certainly offer a good idea of where to go next, as many of the classics are mentioned.

It's also an entertaining read, which helps in getting to grips with the unpredictable nature of poltergeists, whatever they may be.

Mandy Collins

Fortean Times Verdict

DOES WHAT IS SAYS ON THE TIN – AND VERY SUCCESSFULLY

9

Alfred Watkins' Herefordshire

In his own words and pictures

Intro: Ron & Jennifer Shoesmith

Logaston Press 2012

Pb, 180pp, illus, ind, £12.95, ISBN 9781906663674

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKCLUB PRICE £12.95



Alfred Watkins is best known for his discovery of leys: *The Old Straight Track*

has remained in print since 1925. He began touring Herefordshire in the 1880s with a plate camera, recording a way of life that was already fading. He co-founded a Herefordshire bee-keepers association that promoted bee-keeping from a horse-drawn 'bee van'. At the end of WWI he campaigned against proposals to introduce a decimal currency; *Must We Trade In Tenths?* argued that a system of 12ths or eighths was more useful, as it allowed easier division into smaller units.

Watkins' first love was the Herefordshire countryside; he spent hours in conversation with farm labourers, craftsmen and poachers, later transcribing their stories. He particularly admired three poets who shared his connection to Ledbury – John Masefield, William Langland and Elizabeth Barrett Browning – and often photographed places that featured in their work.

When Masefield became Poet Laureate in 1930 he was awarded the freedom of Hereford; his acceptance speech inspired Watkins to write *The Masefield Country*. The Watkins manuscript forms the core of this volume. It is extraordinarily good, and perfectly complimented by the many fine photographs.

Steve Marshall

Fortean Times Verdict

THE OLD STRAIGHT TRACK IN BLACK AND WHITE

8

Worlds of Arthur

Facts & Fictions of the Dark Ages

Guy Halsall

Oxford UP 2013

Hb, 377pp, illus, bib, ind, £20.00/\$34.95, ISBN 9780199658176

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKCLUB PRICE £16.00



Fed up with books claiming to reveal the 'truth' about the 'real' King Arthur, Guy Halsall has set out

what can actually be known about the putative leader of the Britons (which is virtually nothing), while providing a thorough debunking of the 'real Arthur' industry.

In the first of four parts, he examines the traditional view of the 'Arthurian period', shortly after the collapse of Romanised Britain, examining the pre-Norman historical sources, which barely mention Arthur, and the views of 20th century archaeologists and their historical model of 'the Britons retreating westward before waves of invading Saxons'. The second shows how more recent studies have overturned much of this traditional view, and particularly how untrustworthy historical sources such as Gildas and Nennius are, while pointing out that it's exactly this model that remains in use by the 'real Arthurians'. Part three is a savage debunking of some of the wilder excesses of his opponents, while the fourth, almost half the book, presents Halsall's view of what happened between AD 400 and 600, and in particular that the Saxons were already here before the Romans withdrew anyway. This, by his own admission, is somewhat controversial, but seems to make sense and is certainly just as fascinating as the more directly Arthurian material.

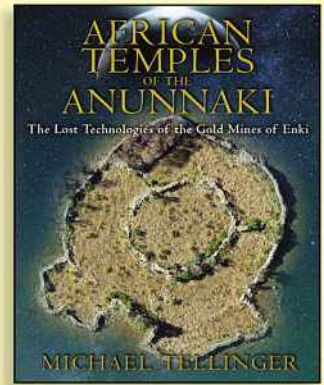
Obviously aimed at the general reader, the book has no notes or direct references, though a 'Further Reading' section discusses Halsall's sources in more detail, and there's an extensive bibliography. If it has a fault, it's that in the first three parts Halsall addresses the reader as if he or she is actually not very bright; a tone that is thankfully absent from the last part, which is addressed to both the general public and the specialists. Beyond that, this is an excellent overview of the subject, though as the main conclusion is that if an Arthur existed at all it's impossible to know anything about him, one suspects the 'Campaign for Real Arthur' will go their own sweet way regardless.

Steve Moore

Fortean Times Verdict

AN EXCELLENT ANTIDOTE TO FANTASISING

8



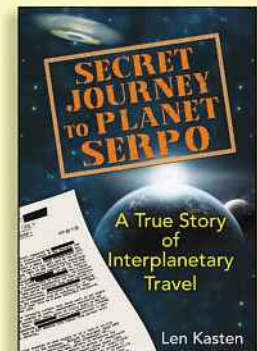
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Tuttle 2012

Pb, 192/208pp, illus, index, \$15.95/£9.99, ISBN 9784805312186

A delightful set of popular legends, each 'guide-book' entry illustrated by noted manga artists and with much traditional illustration besides. *Yokai* and *Ninja* are new editions with 16 extra pages and now in colour throughout; *Yurei* is a new addition. From 'wet women' to haunted umbrellas, Yoda and Alt have packed the books with ripping yarns and absurd snippets, and the illustrations are, frankly, bizarre. Highly recommended.

Impossible Realities

Maureen Caudill

Hampton Roads Publishing 2012

Pb, 237pp, ind, bib, \$18.95, ISBN 9781571742821

Caudill – a veteran of artificial intelligence and neural network research – evaluates the eight 'black swans' of the 'paranormal': psychokinesis, remote viewing, energy healing, telepathy, animal telepathy, precognition, survival after death and reincarnation. She believes that unequivocal proof of any one of these will topple the orthodox view of reality (by which she means scientific materialism). Caudill's opinions are considered and informed and certainly deserve to be read.

A Discovery of New Worlds

Bernard de Fontenelle

Hesperus Press 2012

Pb, 123pp, £9.00, ISBN 9781843936665

De Fontenelle's 1686 classic – in which an astronomer undertakes to teach a young noblewoman about other (possibly life-bearing) worlds in five nightly lessons under the stars – was a best-seller of the late 17th century. This mode of fiction as a vehicle for fact was a popular vehicle for literature-minded scientists and historians seeking to address a wider public. It was translated, two

years later, into English by Aphra Behn, a pioneering female Restoration dramatist, who was attracted to it "by the novelty of the subject in vulgar language" and because it suggested that woman (albeit a privileged one) could understand the principles of astrophysics. This is a reprint of Behn's translation, with a foreword by Paul Murdin.

Death by Chili Sauce

Richard Germain

Old Street Publishing 2012

Pb, 261pp, notes, £8.99, ISBN 9781906964955

This book discusses 101 preposterous moments from movie history and rates them on whether they are feasible. Could Hannibal Lecter wear someone else's face? Was IAD a good year for wine? Could Forrest Gump jog non-stop for three years? Do redheads have terrible tempers? Could a man burst from eating too much? Can an aphrodisiac make you see through peoples' clothes? Did Withnail drink lighter fluid? Can you fall out of a plane and survive? Other tropes include slipping on banana skins, Bond's jetpack, speaking in tongues, lobotomies and wiggling ears. Lots to amuse a fortetean here, including the charred corpse in a forest fire, surviving burial, the perils of puffer fish, an elephants' graveyard, and teleportation. Great for young minds.

The Other Side of Truth

Paul Kimball

Redstar Books 2012

Pb, 234pp, index, bib, illus, \$15.95, ISBN 9780991697502

Here is a personal account of a bright young mind's journey out of scepticism toward a belief that the 'paranormal' "is actually a form of artistic expression created by an advanced non-human intelligence". Kimball – a lawyer, historian and filmmaker – has noticed that experiences of the 'paranormal' frequently involve elements of punning, symbolism, coincidences and association redolent of intellectual creativity and playfulness. Some of us may be wary of personifying this process as Kimball has, but there is no doubt the process can be interactive; the more you try to pin it down or explain it, the more elusive it becomes, disguising its identity behind ever more tantalising meaningfulness. In the end, there is little left to grasp except personal relevance and subjective experience. There is nothing tangible here that would convince even a fortetean agnostic. Kimball, though, has a darned good try.

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Star Trek: Into Darkness

Dir JJ Abrams, US 2013
On UK release from 9 May

JJ Abrams has become the ultimate TV series and film-maker from the goggled-eyed point of view of stereotypical fanboy geekdom. *Alias*, *Lost*, *Fringe* (and any number of espionage series on TV), *Super 8*, (effectively his *Duel* and indeed co-produced with Steven Spielberg) and now the *Star Trek* reboots. The only mystery is why he hasn't yet had a full cameo role in *The Big Bang Theory* during which Sheldon can take him to task concerning Zachary Quinto's depiction of a young Spock getting it on with Uhura.

In *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, Star Fleet Command suffers a crippling attack at the hands of the mysterious John Harrison and Kirk, having in the film's opening prelude been demoted to First Mate after violating several Star Fleet directives to save the day, is reinstated as Captain of the Enterprise and ordered to track the heinous Harrison down. The only problem is that the location to which Harrison has fled is in volatile territory, to enter which will be considered an act of war by nearby Klingons, should any Star Fleet craft venture there.

It is a tribute to Abrams's film-making chops that considering the number of ongoing conversations between Spock and Kirk (with Karl Urban's Bones providing his

colourful asides; "Enough with the metaphors!" he is told to his face at one point) that in action terms you can't fault the film. It rattles along with state of the art CGI woven seamlessly into frenetically kinetic action scenes with references to the 'old stuff'. And if you know *Star Trek* of old, it will not take you long to cotton on to what Harrison (Benedict Cumberbatch in fine form) is all about. There's a knowingness about the whole exercise in places (it's the blockbuster equivalent of post-modern self-referentiality) which is all part of the fun (and, ultimately, part of the problem). Set pieces astonish: the opening prelude which sets up a moral conundrum which will be paralleled and played out at the film's climax; the attack on Star Fleet command and the fire-fight with the Klingons; and – dare I say it and, indeed, dare they do it? – a suicide bombing of a capital city by an aerial craft. Chris Pine as Kirk is more, well, adult in this one than the last and very good he is, too. Zachary Quinto as Spock makes heroic efforts to fill those big ears. Simon Pegg as Scotty is given free comic rein by the plot (and seems convinced he's playing a mischievous leprechaun), while Alice Eve and Zoe Saldana provide the (brainy as well as beautiful) female presences in a still seemingly male-dominated rebooted future.

By the end of it all, with the death-defying chase through the city skyscrapers (pure *Attack of*

the Clones via the taxi chase in *The Fifth Element*, going some way to show why Abrams is perfect to pick up the mantle of the *Star Wars* franchise, as he soon will), a *mise-en-scène* in breakneck motion which, could it talk, would be crying out, arms raised, Maximus-fashion: "Are you not entertained? Are you not entertained?" The answer to which – when you get your wind back – is: "Yes, I am."

I was undoubtedly entertained, but I remained curiously unmoved and the ultimate experience, for me, was an empty one. And here's why: this particular reboot owes much to one of the greatest – perhaps the greatest – moments in all the original *Star Trek*'s slow, sure, implacably, even unintentionally accrued, mythos. The solution to which, originally, was played out not just over a couple of films but between series and films. Here, something which ought to be so gut-wrenching and moving that it stays with you for some time is resolved within a couple of scenes. Text book, as current blockbuster screenplay dictates demand: pacy, paired down, containing quickly recognisable and readily digestible paradigms of life experience ("This is the moving bit"; and "This is the moral dilemma bit.") that don't linger long enough for today's audiences to start shuffling their bums on the seats. It's all brilliantly executed. But that moment, yes, that moment: that moment simply hasn't been earned, because it is

pure hand-me-down and it left me not only cold but something akin to angry.

For all the money and the technology and the talent involved, *Into Darkness* is the ultimate in fan fiction on screen. And like fan fiction, while it might offer an amusing or clever twist on its original source, there is not an atom of genuine originality in its whole being. What Abrams's reboot does is stand on the shoulders of an aged and flawed giant – but a giant, nonetheless – and by that very act of presumption, demeans its own stature.

Of course, old farts like me exist in a JJ Abrams-like parallel universe to that of today's young multiplex masses. There will be many, too, in my own age group who will vehemently disagree with my viewpoint. "The man's a genius!" the cry may sound. Abrams is undeniably an astonishingly multi-talented and intelligent operator. And he undoubtedly does *have* a surpassing genius for all of this sort of thing; but, as yet, he hasn't in his own right, proved himself to be such a genius.

Star Trek: Into the Darkness, when all's said and done, is a multiplex dream film. And there ain't nothing wrong with that. After all: the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or the one.

Nick Cirkovic

Fortean Times Verdict

BIG, BRILLIANT BLOCKBUSTER;
BUT ABRAMS IS NO GENIUS

7

Iron Man 3

Dir Shane Black, US 2013
On UK release from 25 April

First of all: it's better than *Iron Man 2*, which made the mistake of 'doing a Tim Burton' – becoming more enamoured on the franchise's second outing with its principal villain (at the time a career-resurgent Mickey Rourke) to the detriment of its titular superhero: Robert Downey Jnr's Tony Stark, aka Iron Man. No such missteps here, although a protracted set-up, relying on Downey Jnr's effortless throwaway quipping and irksome charm and involving a flashback to 1999 to put the plot into place, does have you wondering. But we're soon back in the post-*Avengers Assemble*-alien-invasion-thwarting present and Tony Stark is getting his arse kicked. He finds himself not only trying to cope with panic attacks brought on by post-traumatic stress disorder, but also in hiding after terrorist Mandarin takes on Tony's challenge to come on down to play. And then there is Guy Pearce's Aldrich Killian who has a score to settle with Tony stretching back to '99, when his proposal for a DNA-transforming human alchemy called 'Extremis' was not even given the chance to be rejected by the billionaire playboy philanthropist genius because Stark was too busy party-hopping with Rebecca Hall's brilliant bio-scientist to have time to listen to Killian's pitch.

From the moment the man of metal and all his toys are dumped into the Pacific, the film is fast and funny, and the frenetic action sequences, courtesy of some awesome CGI, fly all over the place. Ben Kingsley's Mandarin has taken Bin Laden fan boy worship to a whole new level and has nothing less than a dead US president and global destabilisation in his sights. Meanwhile, Pepper Potts is in serious peril and there's seemingly nary another superhero on the continent to help Tony out; things are looking grim for the Tin Man.

Kingsley's entrance, once he steps from behind the grainy terrorist threat videos and reveals his madman Mandarin, is a show-stopper. But the script, courtesy of director Shane Black and Scottish screenwriter Drew Pearce (due to write *Sherlock Holmes 3*), while incident-packed and full of hilarity,

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth **REVEREND PETER LAWS** dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!
(www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com)

SCANNERS

Dir David Cronenberg, Canada 1981
Second Sight, £19.99 (Blu-ray)

SCANNERS II / III

Dir Christian Duguay, Canada/US 1991
Arrow Films, £15.99 each (Blu-ray)

Cameron Vale struggles with the voices in his head and when he's angry he can cause old ladies to have nose bleeds, just by glaring at them. Stressed by his condition and unable to handle the pressure, he lives as a homeless derelict. Until he's picked up by a shady security company called ComSec, who show him that he is one of the many 'Scanners': unique humans with powerful telekinetic and telepathic powers.

David Cronenberg's 1981 thriller rattles along with car chases, gun fights and, in the film's most tense and effective scene, a magnificent exploding head. It's a moment that works not just because of the superb effects, but also because of Michael Ironside's dominating performance. He plays power-hungry baddy-Scanner Darryl Revok, and manages to light up pretty much every scene he's in. Which only goes to highlight one of the film's major problems: lead actor Stephen Lack is, well, lacking. He delivers his lines

in such a deadpan, wooden way that you wonder if he's doing something really clever... maybe even profound. One hour in and you realise he just can't act (a judgement backed up by most of the people who comment in the extras). And for a Cronenberg film it's surprisingly flimsy, thematically speaking. Films like *The Brood*, *Videodrome* and *Shivers* have such powerful socio-psycho subtexts that they're as beloved by art-house film geeks as they are by gore-hungry teenage boys. Yet *Scanners* is one of the rare occasions when Cronenberg plays a little too much to the latter crowd. Yes, it's an effective science fiction thriller with some iconic scenes (and a great electronic score by Howard Shore) but the lack of a meaningful subtext leaves it feeling less substantial and affecting than his other work.

But while *Scanners* might be average by Cronenberg's standards, it's a bonafide masterpiece compared with its two sequels, also released on Blu-ray. *Scanners II: The New Order* pitches good guy Scanner David Kellum against a dodgy politician, scheming to use the Scanners for his own ends. David Hewlett does his best



in the lead role (catch him in the far superior psycho-thriller *P1M*) but it's not enough to save a confused and ultimately boring sequel. *Scanners III: The Takeover* sees a female Scanner try an experimental drug which turns her into a murderous villain. It might be a little more fun, but, it still sucks.

The original looks great on Blu-Ray, with some absorbing extras, while the sequels have that early 90s 'TV Movie' haze to them. Still, kudos to Second Sight for the release of *Scanners* (and *The Brood* is slated for later in the year). Here's hoping *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *Videodrome* get the HD treatment too. Body horror is at its visceral best when you see the queasy detail.

Fortean Times Verdict

A CRONENBERG CLASSIC AND ITS AWFUL SEQUELS

7/3



involves a redemptive story arc for Tony Stark which allows Downey Jr's talents full reign across the film's two-hour-plus running time. Some of the jokes for the British audience, involving such incongruities as *Downtown Abbey*, are the best of the lot. And while the finale on an oil platform might, courtesy of Stark Industries, feel literally like *deus ex machina* with a fistful of girl power thrown in, *Iron Man 3* sees the franchise back to its original, polished, heavy metal best.

Nick Cirkovic

Fortean Times Verdict

MARVELLOUS MAYHEM FROM THE MAN OF METAL **8**

No One Lives

Dir Ryūhei Kitamura, US 2012
On UK release from 31 May

The blonde running for her life in just her vest and pants gives the genre of this film away in the first few minutes. It's a horror flick, of course. And it's by Japanese filmmaker Ryūhei Kitamura, who some of you may know as the director of 2000's *Versus* and 2008's adaptation of Clive Barker's short story, the attractively named *The Midnight Meat Train* in 2008.

This movie is difficult to explain without giving the game away. All I can say is that there's a at least one psychopath, the aforementioned blonde, and a group of no-good thieves and villains. Someone is murdered in the first instance and this sets off a chain of events involving murder, mayhem and a twisted love story. The action centres on a house in the woods in the Louisiana swamps and takes place during the course of one night.

Cliches abound, blood spills in enormous amounts, there's a wide range of ways to die, including a completely gratuitous shower scene in a motel room (can't think where they got that one from) and torture scenes aren't lacking. However, there are things to recommend. The first half hour has some great fast-paced action. And the twist in the storyline at this point is genuinely a shocker. The lead, Welshman Luke Evans, is obviously a very good actor who makes the most of the lines he's given (some were darkly funny, but I did wonder if they were supposed

to be serious. Who knows?). And Adelaide Clemens (the blonde) is watchable.

Cinematographer Daniel Pearl has a horror pedigree, having filmed the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and the fact that this is shot on Super 16 film gives it a slightly more interesting look than your average glossy Hollywood movie. And there's at least one special effect that the prosthetics department did a very good job on. Overall, this is an entertaining and gory, if not entirely original, horror film that, at just short of 90 minutes, doesn't overstay its welcome. Julie McNamee

Fortean Times Verdict

YOU WON'T BE SCARED TO DEATH, BUT GOOD, GORY FUN **7**

Knightriders

Dir George Romero, US 1981
Arrow, £19.99 (Blu-Ray)

George Romero's non-zombie 1981 movie *Knightriders* has a clever concept at its core, but it is buried in an over-indulgent, over-long, rambling film that ultimately fails to engage – which may explain why it flopped on original release and is now something of a minor cult movie. Ed Harris (in his first major role) is the King Arthur-like leader of a disparate group of pseudo-Arthurian performers who joust at Renaissance Fairs – on motorbikes. In a rare leading role, make-up maestro Tom Savini is Morgan, the thorn in Harris's side who believes he should be King (the group's leader) instead and is tempted by a commercial opportunity to convert their low-key engagements into major crowd-pleasing events. The story follows the effect of this ideological split on the group, making for a nice ensemble feel, but leading to a diffusion of the film's impact. There are simply too many over-long sequences of the jousting motorbikes (although petrol-heads might get more from this). It's an idea that would have been better suited to a comedy sketch than a feature film.

Brian J Robb

Fortean Times Verdict

MOTORCYCLE JOUSTING: NOT A GREAT GIMMICK, IS IT? **6**

SHORTS

THE HELPERS

Fremantle Media, £15.99 (DVD)



Yet another film turning up several years too late to take advantage of the short-lived torture-porn phenomenon: a group of (deep breath to accommodate cliché) American youngsters travelling by car break down, and instead of finding help get horribly murdered. The film has almost nothing to recommend it, apart from reasonably inventive *Saw*-style killings. The writing is shoddy, and the entire cast unlikeable and untalented. Add lots of hand-held footage and you can add *REC*, *Hostel* and *Vacancy* to the list of films this wishes it could be. If you'd like to save yourself the time of wading through it and go straight to the scene in which someone is torn apart by trucks, I'll happily provide the reference. **TW 4/10**

ALPS

Artificial Eye, £15.99 (DVD)



This quirky film from Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos may not be to all tastes. It focuses on an odd group of people who offer a service that you might not think there's much call for: they impersonate the dead, to help the living cope with their grief (but only for a month or so). Aggeliki Papoulia (who featured in the director's previous film, *Dogtooth*) is a nurse who has involved herself with the 'Alps' group – depicted almost as a kind of cult – for a very specific reason in order to deal with a personal loss. It's a strange film, focusing on death, bereavement, grief and how people variously cope, but also a surreal attempt to pass comment on modern Greece and even a meditation on the business of 'acting' (in life and on screen). The characters are ghosts in people's lives, but they're played by the living, who should perhaps be busy getting on with their own lives. It doesn't all work, by any means, but under the sometimes wilfully surreal mannered posturing there are some intriguing ideas and a disturbing strain of very dry wit. **BJR 5/10**

RAY HARRYHAUSEN: SPECIAL EFFECTS TITAN

Arrow Films, £15.99 (DVD) / £17.99 (Blu-ray)



The style of this feature documentary may be rather pedestrian (talking heads and chronological clips), but the subject is anything but. Ray Harryhausen must be the only technical contributor to film (directors aside) whose name and work are so well known. His movies – featuring stop-motion hand-animated creatures of legend and myth – from *It Came from Beneath the Sea* to *Clash of the Titans* – are known simply as 'Harryhausen films', and few could name their actual directors. In the days before CGI, Harryhausen was single-handedly responsible for each hand-made skeleton fight, flying harpy or Ymir attack that thrilled movie audiences from the 1950s to the 1980s. Among those paying tribute to Harryhausen as their movie-making inspiration are Steven Spielberg, James Cameron, and Peter Jackson. Seeded among the clips there are some rare gems, including test footage for never realised projects, as well as concept art and storyboards. Extras offer further material, including the original models for many Harryhausen creatures (the term he always preferred to 'monsters') being handled gingerly by archivists. Harryhausen – now aged 92 – comes over as a modest man who is nonetheless only too aware of his achievements and the awe in which he is held. **BJR 8/10**

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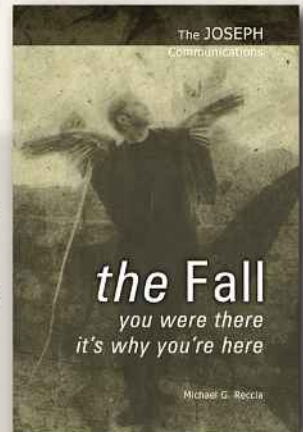
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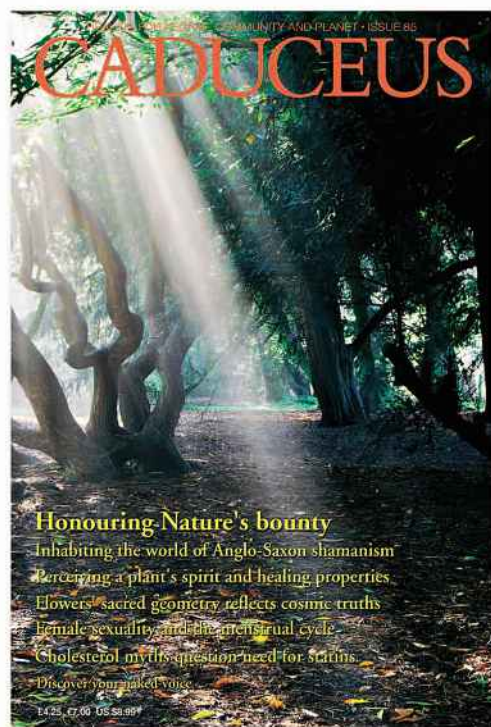
John Michell (1933–2009) was a Fellow of Temenos Academy whose writings uniquely combine elements of the thought of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato and the modern writer on anomalous phenomena Charles Hoy Fort. The author of some twenty-five books and many other works, he is most widely known for *The View Over Atlantis* (1969), a paradigm-shifting vision of ancient science.

Our symposium 'Dancing with Plato and Fort' focuses on the numerical and geometrical underpinnings of the works of John Michell through the lens of some of his main continuators and collaborators. We will make forays into the story of the 1992 Crop Circle Making Competition conceived by biologist Rupert Sheldrake; the geometry of the solar system and post-Keplerian harmonies of the spheres; the New Jerusalem Diagram; and ancient metrology explained as evidence that the ancients knew the dimensions of the whole Earth. We will also ask why such studies are important.

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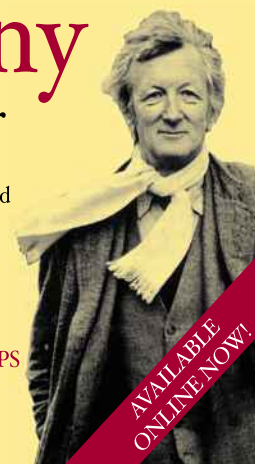
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Dear FT...

letters



Hill abduction

Greg May argues [FT296:73] that the Betty and Barney Hill report of aliens could not have been inspired by an episode of *The Outer Limits* because their experience occurred in 1961 while the TV series did not premiere until 1963. However, Barney Hill's first session of hypnosis, and the first occurrence of a mention of an alien with eyes that wrapped around the side of the face, did not occur until 22 February 1964, 12 days after the *Outer Limits* episode "The Belleró Shield", which featured an alien with similar eyes, as noted by sceptic Martin Kottmeyer www.csicop.org/sb/show/eyes_that_spoke/.

Further, as Kottmeyer notes, in that episode the alien says: "I cannot read your mind. I cannot even understand your language. I analyse your eyes. In all the universes, in all the unities beyond all universes, all who have eyes have eyes that speak." In the hypnosis session, Barney Hill stated that: "They won't talk to me. Only the eyes are talking to me."

Jim Lippard

Phoenix, Arizona

Frogmen

Frog-like, amphibious-looking beings with a humanoid stance and gait have figured in numerous UFO close-encounter incidents according to David Ritchie, author of *UFO: The Definitive Guide to Unidentified Flying Objects and Related Phenomena*. Ritchie cites an incident that occurred in either 1938 or 1939 in Juminda, Estonia, where two witnesses "reportedly saw a strange 'man' resembling a frog, about 3ft [90cm] tall having a round head without a neck; a lengthy straight slit for a mouth; and smaller slits for eyes. The skin was greenish-brown and the creature had a curious gait". When pursued, the creature fled and disappeared.

This incident calls to mind the 3 March 1972 sighting of the "Loveland Frog" by two police officers who encountered a similar being lying in a road that jumped

over a guard rail and descended an embankment into a river. This bipedal reptoid was first sighted in 1955 when a driver returning home from work spotted three of these frog-like creatures. One of them was allegedly holding a 'spark-generating bar-shaped device' above itself. However, UFO sightings do not figure in the Loveland, Ohio, incidents. I would be interested to know biologist Roy Mackal's thoughts as to the Loveland Frog actually being a giant salamander.

Greg May

Orlando, Florida

Flixborough

Your obituary of Reg Presley [FT300:26] stated that his interest in paranormal phenomena began on 1 June 1974, when he had a premonition of the disaster at the Flixborough chemical plant in Lincolnshire. He said he saw a news bulletin about the explosion at the lunchtime news that day, but later discovered it didn't happen until just before 5pm.

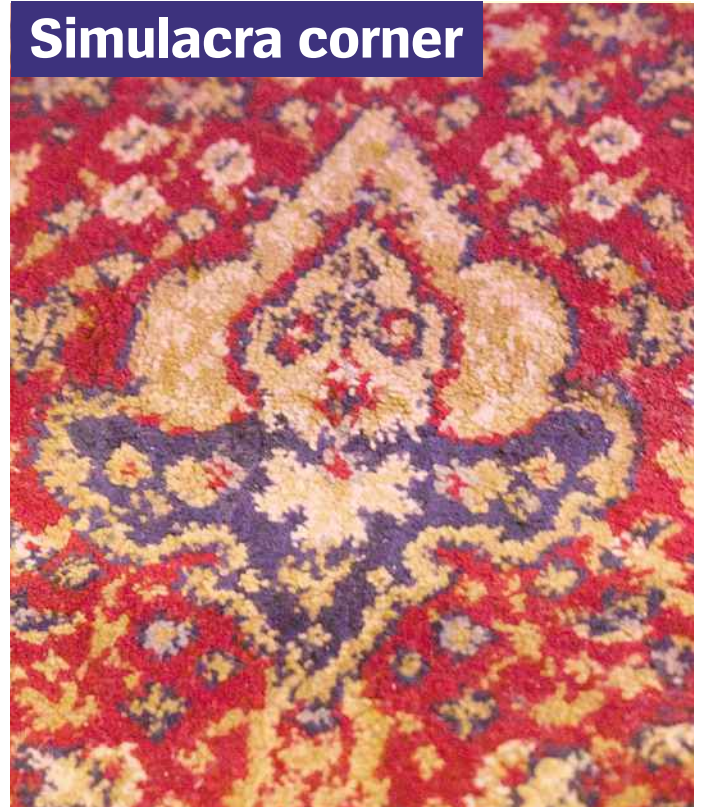
I remember reading the same story in *Arthur C Clarke's World of Strange Powers* (1984, p52) [which was also a TV series – Editor]: Mrs Lesley Brennan was watching a Western on TV at lunchtime when it was interrupted by a news bulletin about the explosion at Flixborough (which killed 28 people). She remembers being a little annoyed at the interruption, but also distressed by the story, especially as she lived near Flixborough. She watched the news that evening and heard it said the accident occurred in the evening. She commented to a friend that the news was wrong; the accident happened at lunchtime. It wasn't until reading a newspaper the next day that she realised the accident was at 4.53pm and that she might have had a premonition.

I wonder what is going on here; did both Brennan and Presley have a premonition of the same disaster – or did Presley 'borrow' the story from Brennan?

Scott Alden

Bradford

Simulacra corner



Lisa Fryer writes: "I have a zombie Maggie Thatcher in my rug (thanks for that, Ikea). We've had this rug for years and only noticed it after she'd died."

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them to the PO box above (with a stamped addressed envelope or international reply coupon) or to sieveking@forteantimes.com – and please tell us your postal address.

Making up Philip

Alan Murdie's excellent column [FT300:18-19] finished with a loaded speculation about research groups potentially generating psychokinetic effects themselves. This brought to mind the case of The Owen Group from the Toronto Group for Psychical Research, who in 1972 created the fictitious Philip Aylesford, but despite him being a "made up" person, the group allegedly experienced raps and knocks, with the table moving itself during sittings in which contact was attempted [see FT61:41, 64:61]. Other group members reported a presence felt in the room. Quite an accomplishment for an

imaginary person who committed suicide in 1654 following an affair with a Gypsy girl. The Catherine Cookson backstory aside, it is a fascinating subject.

I first read about it in Rosemary Ellen Guiley's excellent *Encyclopaedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience* (1993), with further references to *Conjuring Up Philip* (1976) by Iris M Owen with Margaret Sparrow. Does anyone know of similar experiments – or is this type of research discouraged lest it provide too much fuel for sceptics and naysayers, so that it falls into the "they're making it all up" camp?

David Newell

Headingley, West Yorkshire



I was riding home from work one day when I spotted this tree, not far from Birmingham International Airport. Not sure who lives there (or who decided to put a number and knocker on the “tree door”). Are there other trees like this?

Paul Dutton, Birmingham, West Midlands

Dirty tricks

Regarding sex with aliens [“50 Shades of Grey”, FT296:30-37]: has anyone made a link between alien abductions, or perceived alien abductions, and the experiments carried out by the MK Ultra programme [a covert CIA research operation from the early 1950s to 1973]? It is known that hallucinogens and sexual observation were of interest. It would be easy to switch civilian subjects’ medication and test how far someone’s beliefs can be pushed. A few alien costumes, a hypnotist with Darren Brown’s capabilities and some LSD could make subjects extremely suggestible. Although the recounting of such far-fetched tales would have met with scepticism and derision, it

would still have added to the Cold War paranoia being intentionally generated at the time.

Mat Britton

By email

Jim Moseley

Jerry Clark’s dismissive and bitchy obituary for Jim Moseley [FT297:28] does a disservice to a fascinating ufologist. Jim deserves better.

In *Saucer News* (later *Saucer Smear*) and his excellent memoir (*Shockingly Close to the Truth: Confessions of a Grave-Robbing Ufologist*), Jim chronicled 50 years of flying saucer brilliance and buffoonery. The ufologists themselves were the cast of characters, and frequently these self-styled experts resented being

called twits. Jerry Clark was one of them. Clark dislikes the book, and he should, given his frequent appearances therein. Jim named names and recorded history. He enjoyed reporting on the likes of Budd Hopkins, who compared sceptics of the “Brooklyn Bridge” abduction case to al-Qaeda terrorists in the pages of Clark’s *International UFO Quarterly*. Earlier, Clark and Moseley were both taken in by a notorious character, but Moseley exposed Todd Zechel as a fraud long before Clark was announcing “the most important figure in ufology”. *Saucer Smear* back issues remain the most honest history of the subject of UFOs in the United States, and Clark should realise that humour and profundity can go out and have a fabulous evening together.

Jim, like a lot of elderly people, didn’t get out as much as he used to, so he talked to friends on the telephone, in a social life made up largely of *Saucer Smear* “non-subscribers” and UFO conferences. Clark finds this pathetic. Of course, most people enjoy the company of peers, and Jim was always fun-loving and approachable. Heavy fortean discussions were indeed conducted between drinking participants late at night on the phone. What marvelous rants and rows! The last time we talked I was sending him material on the Emma Woods/David Jacobs abduction fiasco. Jim didn’t want to bother with that, he wanted my opinions on DMT and abductions. Jim knew about Fatima, psychedelics, history, grave-robbing, and popular culture, among other things. His attention span may have been short, and the depths he would swim in complex cases shallow; but his curiosity for the mysterious was deep and his passion for humour infinite. Jim’s reputation, including the drunken “Straith letter” hoax on George Adamski, was no more or less honourable than any other would-be authority in what Jim lovingly called “the Field”. He also made you laugh.

Perhaps Clark indulges a personal grudge when he calls Moseley a writer of “little enduring value” with “no discernible intellectual curiosity”. I beg to differ.

In 2004, Jim wrote to me: “I do think there is a reality behind UFOs and the paranormal, but we do not yet have the scientific tools to pin it down and prove it. Eventually this will be done, but probably not any time soon. Life goes on for most people, whether there is an ‘other realm’ or not, so there is no pressure to find a solution to these strange things that happen occasionally – and have happened occasionally throughout the ages, apparently. Just what they actually represent, I do not know, but I don’t think they are space men or space ships or anything like that. We are sharing this Earth with another realm of reality that only manifests itself in peculiar ways, and very occasionally. The human mind is also involved in this interplay, somehow.” This doesn’t sound like a dull mind to me. Future historians will judge whether Jim’s writing was shockingly closer to the truth than Clark’s oft-credulous UFO encyclopaedias.

Jim’s amiable 50-year journey as a diarist, historian, and rabble-rousing editor produced an unusually funny and lucid account of a subculture of characters and their stories. After all these years, there are sadly no shreds of physical evidence for the Roswell saucer crash, abductions-for-hybrids shenanigans, Dulce underground bases, MJ-12 and 95 per cent of the rest of the sky-is-falling nonsense. Fortean researchers are left with a happily peculiar universe out there and some fascinating human psychology. Clark talks a paranormal game these days, but Jim Moseley got there first. I hope Jim Moseley and Gray Barker are drinking and smoking in Hyperspace, having a posthumous laugh at Jerry Clark twisting the dagger-in-the-back one last time.

Kevin Henderson

Tucson, Arizona

A political phantom

I was interested to read Alan Murdie’s Ghostwatch feature [FT299:14-15] discussing the fashionable theory that ghosts – or reports of supposedly ghostly phenomena – “moved out of historic spooky locations and into

suburbia, in reaction to challenging economic circumstances.” Like Mr Murdie, I’m wary of such crude generalisations, and have encountered at least one case where such strife has seemingly prompted phantoms to return to their former historic haunts.

For the past two decades I have researched, scripted and performed the *Stirling GhostWalk*, a guided walk around the Old Town area of the former Royal Burgh. The show is an entertainment – a mix of storytelling, comedy and drama, rather than a serious psychological or parapsychological investigation – but production of a new script every summer for 20 years means that while I’m no ghost-hunter, I have a voracious appetite for ghost stories. Because of this, I was asked by the History Press, early in 2010, to write a volume in their local history *Haunted...* series, examining the background and origins of a number of the more famous tales. The crumbling gothic facade of Mar’s Wark offered up the ‘Curse of Alloa Tower’, the Tolbooth Theatre – formerly the jailhouse and courtroom – provided me with accounts of a wealth of wraiths, and Stirling Castle the requisite mix of Stuart skulduggery, murder, mayhem and madness. The history and architecture of the Old Town, put simply, is a fantastically atmospheric backdrop for spooky storytelling: it would be more surprising if these ancient buildings did not generate apparitional accounts.

Most of these stories I know very well. In researching *Haunted Stirling*, though, I encountered one tale – from the very heart of the Burgh – which I had not heard before. In his 1948 series “A Newspaperman Looks Back: Stories of 25 Years”, published in the *Stirling Sentinel*, veteran journalist Alfred G Reilly recounted the experiences of quarrymen and miners from the nearby Millhall pits in the early months of 1926. A strange figure in white was observed on the roads coming to and from the pit, most commonly in the hours between 9pm and midnight, when workers were returning to their homes in the common lodging houses that crowded the heart of the Old Town.

A lamp-cabin attendant told

Reilly that miners “were walking in companies of 10 or 12”, so fearful were they of this silent figure who “strutted about the roads” as though “enveloped in a white sheet”. That this might simply have been a drover from one of many local farms located between the pit and the Old Town, garbed in his distinctive white coverall – or, indeed, a local joker putting his bedclothes to mischievous use – was considered by Alf and his peers, but quickly dismissed: these men may well have been unsophisticated and superstitious, but they were unlikely to be so easily or so frequently deceived. Accounts were featured in several local newspapers throughout February, March and April.

Interestingly, these reports occurred in the weeks and months where the tensions leading to the “Nine Days Wonder” of the General Strike in May were most apparent. During that dispute miners were branded as “revolutionaries”, intent – in the words of one infamous *Daily Mail* editorial (3 May 1926) – on “destroying the government and subverting the rights and liberties of the people”. In the politically Liberal but temperamentally Tory stronghold of Stirling, the troubled workers found little sympathy. The General Strike segued into a longer, bitter dispute over wages and conditions with local pit bosses. The *Stirling Sentinel* bewailed “Mad Britain!” and called the stoppage “a disaster upon a disaster”, hypocritically railing against the selfishness of the strikers at incurring a tally of £1,565 on the town for July’s Poor Relief while printing woeful accounts of their malnourished offspring and the County Medical Officer’s opinion that one in four of their rented lodgings (largely owned, incidentally, by the pit owners) was “unfit for human habitation”.

The expectation that with the mines idle, accounts of the now notorious wraith-like phantom amongst the miners would cease was mistaken. Instead the tales increased in number, but relocated to the heart of the Old Town – miles from the original reports. Even odder, I have been able to find no account of hauntings or apparitions within this area for at

least three decades prior to 1926. A woman returning from visiting a family friend was alarmed by a still and silent “white-clad figure” as she hurried home through the Ballengeich Cemetery. A lad was terrified by a similarly uncommunicative apparition in nearby Raploch. A woman from Castlehill Road fainted following the frightful appearance of a blank-faced figure at her window, prompting a 100-strong mob, armed with lanterns and cudgels, to make a furious search of the Old Town. Nothing was found. Perhaps just as well, as one wonders what the mob expected to do with their cudgels, had they actually chanced upon the furtive phantom.

On each occasion sightings of the now-transported “Millhall Ghost” were reported in those areas of the town worst affected by the deprivations of the strikes had forced upon the struggling workers and their families – the filthy tumbledown hovels of Spittal Street, St Mary’s Wynd and elsewhere – dives where all manner of all-too-real dangers lurked. In 1926 the average population per-acre in the Burgh was 14 persons. In Broad Street, the most populous working-class conurbation in the town, the figure rose to a staggering 290, and Craig Mair, in *Stirling: the Royal Burgh* (1990) quotes one local miner who wondered at the time why the town couldn’t “knock down some of these old houses... and let the poorer class have a mouthful of fresh air and perhaps a little sunshine?”

In late summer the strike was finally broken, to the benefit of the bosses. According to contemporary accounts, the ghost appeared again – albeit once, and briefly – looking down disparagingly from Ballengeich Hill upon the defeated, dispirited Raploch miners as they returned to work. Alf Reilly was persuaded by the editor of the Labour newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, to spend an evening in the cemetery: “It was a nice night,” he reported. “I spent four or five hours there but not a sound did I hear, except having a chat with the police-

man on night duty.” The constable asked him to explain his presence in the graveyard. To the officer’s surprise, the scribbler simply smiled and said that he was “waiting for the Millhall Ghost”.

Speculating on Alfred Reilly’s commentary, his protégé RJ Ritchie wondered (*A Chiel Haes Mind*, 1991) if such “ghosts” are a “creation of our subconscious mind which intrude into our consciousness as an apparition”. If so, then the disappearance of this peculiarly political phantom may be put down to the environmental exorcism provided by the urban improvement programmes of the following quarter century, as the hovels of the Old Town were demolished or renovated. Were the stories – or the spirit itself – the result of the stresses of “challenging economic circumstances”?

Accounts of the “Millhall Ghost” rekindled interest in local ghost stories amongst the Burgh population in a way that fashionable flirtation with Spiritualism in the years following World War I did not. Over time, these tales were re-told and re-packaged for visitors – tourism now being Stirling’s only significant industry – and the more grand and gothic tales of historical haunting came once more to overshadow those inexorably tied to industries and dwellings now long-vanished. That ghostly panic of 1926 is largely forgotten. While I regret this as a folklorist and a student of history, I have to curb my cultural ire by remembering that the interest it inspired in local lore is what has kept me in a job for two decades.

David Kinnaird

By email



it happened to me...

First-hand accounts from *FT* readers and browsers of www.forteantimes.com

Tucked up by ghost

In the summer of 2004 I was living on my own in an Edwardian semi-detached house in Gloucester. One evening I decided to quarantine one of my goldfish in a spare tank, as he seemed to be suffering from an affliction I didn't want to spread to the others. Whilst undertaking his relocation, I badly strained my lower back, but the full discomfort didn't become apparent until I had completed the job and sat down to relax. After 15 minutes or so I was in extreme pain and having telephoned my sister for advice, I slowly crept upstairs and very gingerly manoeuvred myself into bed. It took some time to find a tolerable position to sleep in as I felt absolutely crippled with pain. Eventually I managed to fall asleep.

At some point in the wee small hours I was awoken by 'someone' grasping my ankles and pulling my legs across the bed (like parallel hands on a clock face), until my legs and torso described a completely straight line across the mattress. Then, my quilt was pulled up my body (I had obviously pushed it away whilst asleep) and unseen hands "tucked" the quilt in along the left-hand side of my body (the side of the bed nearest the door). I could actually see the impressions made in the quilt and feel the pressure of it being tucked along my side. I can remember looking to my left to see who might be doing this, but there was no one there. I didn't feel any fear at the time, but was certainly made a lot more comfortable than I had been at bedtime and evidently drifted back to sleep until daybreak.

Some months later, I fell asleep in bed lying on my left-hand side and was awoken by someone holding my right hand and applying downward pressure along the length of my body. I was quite scared since I was unable to move. Within a few moments I felt the mattress move in the way it would if someone sat on the edge of the bed, in the "V" shape formed between my upper and lower legs with knees bent. I felt the mattress "give" under the pressure and my body tip

back slightly. Fearfulness quickly subsided and I fell back asleep.

My mother died in November of 2003 and since I have never experienced anything unusual in this house prior to her passing, it would be easy to presume it was her intervention – but who knows?

Sara Buckley
Dursley, Gloucestershire

The Midland Hotel, Manchester

My husband turned 40 in 2007 and as a special treat I booked us a night in the Midland, a fine turn-of-the-century hotel in central Manchester. I am usually quite sensitive to 'atmospheres', but felt nothing but pleasure that afternoon when we checked into our room, which was small but nicely furnished. Later we spent an enjoyable evening celebrating with his family, returning to the Midland before midnight to crash out. My husband was asleep within minutes but I just couldn't settle. For me this is not unusual as for some reason I never seem to sleep well in hotel rooms.

Fatigue must have eventually caught up with me as I suddenly awoke in the early hours with the strongest sense that a third party was in the room. Turning my head to look across to the other side

of the bed, I could clearly see a man standing literally inches from my sleeping husband. The odd thing about it was that he wasn't leaning over the bed as one might expect. Instead he was facing the wall against which the headboard was resting, with his head bowed. I couldn't see his face, but got the impression he was at least in late middle age, stocky and wearing some sort of old fashioned great coat. I somehow perceived him to be someone of note, distinguished in some way.

Weirder still was the absolutely crushing sense of despair and sadness I began to feel; I felt utterly destroyed, as if my world had come to an end. I was literally shaking, on the verge of tears and just wanted so desperately to go home. Although not a religious person, I am not ashamed to admit that I pulled the sheet over my head and prayed. Gradually the intense feelings of dread and

"I felt destroyed, as if my world had come to an end. I was literally shaking, on the verge of tears"

despair began to subside and (with sheet still firmly over my head) I finally got back to sleep. The next morning, as is the way of these things, I awoke to a warm sunny room and an oblivious husband. When I recall this incident I wonder if I had somehow accessed an imprint of this man's despair and if any other guests in that room had sensed this fleeting reminder of long ago sadness.

Vicky Holt
Whitefield, Manchester

Restless spirit

In July 2006, my daughter and I stayed overnight in a motel in Ashford, Kent. During the night, my daughter heard a strange groaning noise and was so frightened she kept her head under the duvet. I also heard groaning and it seemed to be pulling me out of my sleep. I resisted but eventually sat up in bed when I heard a whooshing sound pass by me and I then saw a shining outline of a figure at the foot of the bed. In my half-awake state I assumed it was my daughter going to the bathroom. However, I looked over to where she was sleeping and she was in the bed. Unfortunately, I was so sleepy that I simply turned over and went back to sleep. I woke in the morning with cramp in both legs, but I had forgotten about the incident. As we were in the car



park loading our suitcases, my daughter told me what she had heard and the memories came flooding back to me.

Some time later, I contacted the motel to recount the incident and ask if there was any history of hauntings there. The receptionist rang me back a few days later. I was stunned to hear that a guest had committed suicide in that very room four months prior to our stay. She also said that a dog belonging to a member of staff now refused to go to the second floor where that room was situated. I did wonder if she was winding me up, so I checked with a local newspaper. A news report confirmed the suicide and that an inquest had been held in October 2006.

Gill Whittock
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

Last appearance

In October 2007, I lost my best friend to terminal cancer after a long battle. The week before she died, I received a call to go to the hospital as quickly as I could, as she was in a very deep sleep, from which she would not waken. Shortly after I arrived, she defied what had been said, and woke up, though she was quite confused.

Later that evening, I went home to bed. I had just got into the bed, and was by no means asleep, when I looked up, and there, standing behind the head of my bed, was my best friend. She was happy, glowing, beautiful, and full of energy, as she had been before the treatment had altered her appearance dramatically. She was leaning over me to touch me, and far from panicking that this meant she had passed away, I found the experience comforting and reassuring, as I felt this meant she would indeed, as I had hoped, be able to visit me in some form. The apparition was gone as quickly as it had appeared. I told her about it the next day, but she was too confused to understand what I was saying, which was a pity, as it's exactly the sort of thing she would have loved to hear about. Though I was obviously very sad when she passed away, she has visited me from time to time since, though not in a form I could so clearly see.

Name on file
By email

NULATO, ALASKA



A Dog Ghost Story

I was born and raised in Nulato, Alaska. My family lived in a small house close to the Yukon River. It's not there anymore. I remember during break-up in early May, how the river would flood and we had to leave the village. Lots of villages would flood like that. They still do sometimes. Nowadays, the government makes some of the villages move to higher ground, but back then Natives lived where they wanted to live.

When I was a little boy, around six years old I think, I had my own dog. I don't remember his name. He was the runt of a litter from good sled dog stock, and my father was going to kill him. I begged to take care of the dog, so my father let me have him – but he made me catch and dry my own salmon to feed him. I guess he was teaching me responsibility. That dog went everywhere with me.

Then, when I was eight or nine years old [in 1922/23], I was forced to go to school far away. Two older boys from my village also went. It took a long time to get to the place. Haskell. That's what they called the school. It was in Kansas, the flattest place you'll ever see. I remember looking out the windows of buses and cars and trains, and seeing how the whole world was bigger and different from how I ever imagined. I was very afraid. We were all afraid.

There were lots of other Native children at the school, hundreds I guess. I remember wondering where they all came from, those

children. The few villages I had ever visited, upriver or downriver of Nulato, had only a few children in them. To be so many at the school, I thought, there must not be a single Indian boy or girl left in any village in the world. I was sad for all the parents who had lost their children. I cried all the time at first.

In my third year, I saw my dog. He was outside my dormitory window one night. It looked like he had chased a squirrel up a tree and was barking at it like he always did. I opened the window and called to him, telling him to stop barking. I was worried the noise would wake up all the other boys in our dorm. My roommate asked me what I was doing. I told him I was telling my dog to stop barking. He said I was crazy, that he didn't hear anything. My dog trotted over to the window. He stood there looking up at me, wagging his tail. I think he was smiling, though it's hard to tell with dogs, you know. I talked to him like I always did, asking him what he was doing at the school. He just wagged his tail. Then he turned and ran away. I never saw

him again.

Many years later, after I had returned home to my village, I asked my mother about my dog. She told me that he had died about three years after I left home.

As told to John Smelcer, scholar of Native American studies, by Jimmy Peters, aged 84, Nulato, Alaska 1998. Jimmy died at the age of 88 in 2002.

Star of Bethlehem

Back in 2004 I was working in Lunn Poly Travel Agents in Littlehampton, West Sussex. It was a spring day and business was slow, so I was quite glad to see a woman open the door and approach my desk towards the front of the shop.

She sat down and requested some info on flights, but I got the distinct impression she was more interested in me as she started to ask me questions. She had an open, friendly face with bright, inquisitive eyes and I would say she was in her late 50s to 60s.

She told me I had suffered some major emotional damage and it involved my family. This shook me, as my parents' marriage was going through a rocky patch and it had upset me badly. She then said it was not my fault and I needed healing and that something called the Star of Bethlehem would help. She then left the shop.

Half an hour later she was back. She lent over my desk and gave me a small carrier bag containing a bottle of Rescue Remedy. She said this would help me calm my mind, and then quickly left the shop. One of the major ingredients of this natural remedy is the Star of Bethlehem, an extract from the Flower of Bethlehem, thought to have mental healing powers. I left Lunn Poly latter that year – and never saw the mysterious woman again.

Mark Barnes
Worthing, West Sussex

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FORTEAN TRAVELLER

86. The Williamson Tunnels, Liverpool

ROB GANDY dons his hardhat and follows in the subterranean footsteps of Joseph Williamson, the Mole of Edge Hill...

Fortean travellers are usually an intrepid lot, venturing across the globe to places like Santorini and Cambodia in search of the weird and the wonderful.

Not me. Wielding my travel pass, I crossed the River Mersey from the Wirral peninsula to Liverpool to visit a hidden gem tucked away behind Liverpool University. A 10-minute walk up Brownlow Hill from the famous Adelphi Hotel takes you past the Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral (known locally as “Paddy’s Wigwam” because of its Catholic congregation of primarily Irish descent and its resemblance to a Native American teepee) and the Victoria Building of Liverpool University, which inspired the term “Redbrick university” (because it was built with red bricks). At the very top of Brownlow Hill there is a major road junction, but the road opposite is comparatively minor. This

is Smithdown Lane, where, set back behind some new houses opposite the police station, you will find the Williamson Tunnels Heritage Centre.

Liverpool is one of the top tourist venues for people from the UK and abroad, who come for music, theatre, history and sport. Yet few of them realise that close to the city centre is a subterranean world with a fascinating history. Opened in 2002, the Heritage Centre is run by the Joseph Williamson Society (JWS) and is the entrance to the elaborate underground labyrinth of tunnels, chambers and passageways created by the wealthy businessman and philanthropist Joseph Williamson in the early 19th century. For a modest entrance fee you get a 40-minute guided tour, with (essential) hardhat. It takes you on a circular route through a section of the network, with exhibits and displays depicting the period and the life and times of the man himself. The range of information and stories



relating to Williamson and the tunnels is so great that different guides can provide different emphases around the main script (for example, social versus construction aspects), so a revisit can even provide additional insights.

What’s important to note is that knowledge about the tunnels is continually evolving as new research and excavations are undertaken. The area covered by the tunnels is roughly that bounded by Paddington in the North, Grinfield Street in the South, Overton Street in the East, and Smithdown Lane (but possibly Old Crown Street) in the West; approximately 440 yards by 330 yards (400x300m). The maximum depth below ground level for any of the tunnels is about 60ft (18m). The JWS estimates that less than 10 per cent of the whole system is currently known, and less than five per cent is accessible. Other excavations are currently being undertaken in Mason Street and Paddington by the Friends of the Williamson Tunnels, a separate organisation to the JWS. The two work alongside one another to protect the Williamson legacy.

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Edge Hill is part of a north-south sandstone ridge about 1.5 miles (2.4km) from the River Mersey, and is surrounded by boulder clay. From the 18th century it was looked after by the West Derby Wastelands Commission (WDWC); as this name suggests, it was poor ground with significant marshland, parts of which flooded in winter to a depth of over 3ft (90cm). Because it was common land, people could help themselves to the sandstone; and so as Liverpool developed, the demand for the sandstone for building purposes increased. It is now argued this resulted in wildcat sandstone slot quarries providing dimension stone for some of the grand buildings of the expanding mercantile city. Williamson saw an opportunity to develop land on the hill by building a system of arches that covered the slots and then provided the foundation for urban housing. Therefore, the tunnels are not actually tunnels, in the sense of being dug directly into the ground, but examples of the earliest and most profitable forms of quarry restorations. Because some of the slots were so deep, Williamson was forced to build multiple (support) arches above one another.

Williamson acquired his estate in 1806 and almost immediately started developments, building houses which covered many streets, primarily for rent, until 1840. There is no record of his ever employing an architect or engineer, and so it is understood that he designed and managed the building of all the houses himself. Their design



ABOVE: Joseph Williamson.

BELOW: The Double Tunnel after renovation, seen through the windows of the Heritage Centre





was somewhat bizarre, but sadly none survive. The underground complex included cellars for some of the houses and a range of chambers. Williamson's eccentricity earned him the nickname "The Mole of Edge Hill".

Following the Napoleonic wars there were huge numbers of de-mobbed soldiers returning home to swell the ranks of the poor and unemployed of Liverpool. Williamson employed hundreds of these men to build his tunnels and houses. When work dipped, rather than lay off workers, he required them to undertake tasks which served no useful purpose so he could pay them. These included pumping water (to run away), turning a grindstone (with nothing to grind) and moving stones. When there were insufficient locally-made bricks available, he got two teams of bricklayers to each dig a hole; he then got them to fill in the other team's hole. Maybe he inspired Keynes.

In the early 1830s it was decided to drive a tunnel from Edge Hill station, the then terminus for the Liverpool-Manchester Railway, through to what became Lime Street Station. The railway navvies were digging 40ft (12m) below ground when a large hole appeared in the tunnel floor. Seeing dark figures moving, they thought that they had broken through to the Underworld and disturbed the Devil, and so they fled. In fact, they had broken into one of Williamson's active tunnels. The upshot was that George Stephenson (of "Rocket" fame), who was responsible for the project, was so impressed with the workmanship in the tunnels that he employed some of Williamson's men on the remainder of the railway tunnel.

Following Williamson's death in 1840 much of his property was taken over by the Army. The 1860s saw important general sewer developments in Liverpool, but prior to this the residents of the houses in Edge Hill, which was by then a densely populated district, seemed content to have the drains of their privies and water-closets carried directly into the tunnels situated beneath their homes, together with other household detritus. Given the



They thought they'd broken through to the Underworld

capacities of the tunnels, it took time before they filled, and in 1867 the Liverpool Medical Officer of Health brought the health hazards, and the "abominable smells", to the attention of the city's Health Committee for action. This resulted in Liverpool City Council and the WDWC filling up the tunnels with ash, demolition rubble and other inert materials, to make them safe, cover the filth and prevent access. In the

TOP: Painting of Williamson's Tunnels and houses by Charles Hand.
ABOVE: The Pyramid Tunnel.

1880s, the extension of the Edge Hill railway tunnel into a four-track cutting meant further waste was put in the tunnels, followed either side of WWI with more demolition rubble from slum clearance. In the 1950s, blitz rubble from WWII and further slum clearance was added. The tunnels had evidently become a waste management version of Dr Who's TARDIS.

Interest in the tunnels returned in the 1990s with the founding of the JWS, and there are now good links with the City Council Planning Department and various university and professional archaeological organisations to ensure proper surveys are undertaken when new tracts are discovered, for example during housing development.

THE MOLE OF EDGE HILL

Comparatively little is known about Williamson, but recent research indicates that he was born in Yorkshire in 1769. He arrived in Liverpool at the age of 11 or 12 and went to work for Mr Tate, a tobacco merchant. He was successful and progressed through the company, as well as being a merchant in his own right. He married Elizabeth Tate, the boss's daughter, in 1802. The story goes that straight after the ceremony Williamson sent his new wife home while he went riding with the Liverpool Hunt. When someone commented that he looked particularly well dressed, he replied: "A man should look smart on his wedding day!" Responding to a query about his wife's whereabouts he stated: "She's at home, to be sure, where all good wives ought to be – getting ready her husband's dinner". Clearly, he was no Women's Libber.

There is some mystery about events just before the turn of the century, when Williamson is thought to have been tipped off by the notorious Banastre Tarleton, MP for Liverpool, that the United States was about to introduce an embargo or trade tariff on certain goods, probably tobacco. Whatever the detail, Williamson appears to have "made a killing", so that he was able to purchase the Tate tobacco business in 1803 from his brother-in-law. When he retired, at the age of 49, his wealth was £450,000 – the equivalent of nearly £30 million today.

The main source for Williamson is James Stonehouse's 1863 book *Recollections of Old Liverpool*, but the veracity of some details is open to question, given limited corroborative evidence. What cannot be denied is that he was a beneficent and peculiar philanthropist.

GOING UNDERGROUND

There are a number of tunnels and features relating to the Heritage Centre's public tour. Most of their names are modern, coined by the JWS:

The Corner Tunnel: This was one of two tunnels visible above ground in the

corner of the stable yard. Excavation established that other Williamson tunnels lay beneath the surface.

The Pit: This is 30ft (9m) high but was previously filled to within 8ft (2.4m) of the roof with ash and demolition rubble tipped there to bury organic material which had been dumped from the cellar of the house above via a chute on the east wall.

Biddulph's Cellar: This served one of Williamson's houses, but by the end of the 19th century the house and cellar were part of Biddulph's confectionary works. This was a rich source of period jam jars and sweet jar lids.

The Pyramid Tunnel: This was given its name due to the striking similarity between its shape and the Grand Gallery in the Great Pyramid of Cheops at Giza.

Double Tunnel: This was one of the few remains that was visible above ground. It was so named because it consists of an arch within an arch. More recent excavations revealed the remains of a third arch, which had collapsed in on itself many years before.

Kebab Tunnel: This was penetrated by two boreholes during the construction of student accommodation above in 1999. Concrete poured into these holes to form foundation piles leaked over the ash and rubble infill forming a layer 12in (30cm) thick. Following excavation of the infill and removal of much concrete, one of the two piles was left looking like kebab meat rotating on a spit!

Link Tunnel: This was constructed in 2001 to connect the Kebab and Double Tunnels and form a circular route for public tour.

In addition, work is currently taking place on the **Triple Decker (North)**, which is only triple for part of its length. It was rediscovered in 2003 during exploratory work to find the **Great Tunnel**, which lies beneath Magnet Kitchen's warehouse on Mason Street, and is believed to be one of Williamson's largest constructions with a span of 50ft (15m). The name "Great Tunnel" was first used in the 1850s, and plans drawn up by the Army in the early 20th century suggest that it was partially if not wholly collapsed and filled in. A feature known as **The Banqueting Hall** is not accessible to the public. A local video in the 1980s caused confusion by implying that Williamson held a banquet underground in this room, when records are clear that it took place in his house, but the name stuck. Finally, the **Well Tunnel** is visible, but it is not strictly a tunnel as it consists of three vaulted chambers, with the name arising from the arched niche in the sandstone block wall being reminiscent of a well.

There are primarily three main types of tunnel construction: brick, sandstone blocks, and a composite of the two. The



commonest used was brick, hand-made locally using boulder clay. Only one section has sandstone above, below and to the sides.

MYSTERIES

The Heritage Centre hosts a range of events involving music, theatre, poetry and book readings. Horror author Ramsey Campbell was there for a "Terror in the Tunnels" evening in April 2013. He was to have been joined by James Herbert, who sadly passed away just before (see p26). The event became a tribute to the late writer. At

Christmas there are special decorations; and, yes, some people have organised ghost tours.

It would be reasonable to assume that such a unique labyrinth would attract strange stories over the years, but there are very few. *Most Haunted* initially approached the JWS with a view to doing a programme in the tunnels, but did not proceed when it was realised that the 200-person capacity of the Heritage Centre was insufficient for its audience. Derek Acorah visited the tunnels as part of an Irish TV show and apparently sensed a trapped woman, but could not link with her.

However, on one occasion a guide was taking a group of about 10 people through the tunnels when a young boy

asked: "What is that man doing"? The guide responded that the figure was a mannequin dressed up as a worker of the time. The boy said that he did not mean the mannequin and pointed up to the ceiling saying he was on about "that man hanging by his neck". Everyone looked up but could see nothing, although the boy said that he could still see him.

The Williamson tunnels have been described as the largest underground folly in the world, but it will be gleaned that they were not a folly but a practical means to level the land for building development. This does not diminish their interest: How far do they extend? What is waiting to be discovered? What were all the facts and the motives? There are so many unknowns and matters that are open to interpretation, and more is being discovered as time goes by. Therefore there is much to interest the fortean visitor, and as the JWS is primarily dependent on visitor income and donations, you know that your money will be going directly to support further exploration. **FT**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All pictures used in this article were kindly provided (along with their time, advice and coffee) by Dave Bridson and Barbara Price of the Joseph Williamson Society. Information not specifically referenced was from JWS literature or provided by them. Fortean visitors who cannot get to the tunnels can make a donation if they so wish through Paypal at www.williamsontunnels.co.uk/

WILLIAMSON TUNNELS HERITAGE CENTRE, The Old Stable Yard, Smithdown Lane, Liverpool, L7 3EE
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ROB GANDY is a visiting professor at the Liverpool Business School, John Moores University. He has written previously for *FT*

on a range of fortean topics, including Merseyside doppelgängers and ghostlore.

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22. MISS VINT AND HER REINCARNATED CATS

Early October 1892 was a disappointing time from an *Illustrated Police News* point of view: there had not been a murder for several weeks, nor any other sanguinary outrages, and the rich and famous had been behaving themselves with decorum. The only thing for the *IPN* to do was to bolster its 8 October edition by publishing what today would have been termed a 'human interest' story about the eccentric London spinster Miss Vint and her extraordinary cats.

The elderly Miss Vint, who lived in a little cottage at Eden Gardens, Walworth, and was known for her belief in the transmigration of souls, freely demonstrated her eight cats to the journalists. They were all sturdy, contented-looking animals, well looked after by Miss Vint and her domestics.

Miss Vint had always been very fond of her Devonshire grandmother. This ancient lady was very odd-looking, with a large wart on her nose, and eyes of different shades of grey. She was very nervous, and since the striking of a match sent her into hysterics, she adhered to the old-fashioned flint-and-steel way of making light.

One day, Miss Vint was distraught to hear

that this strange old lady had expired, at a very advanced age. The very same day, she found a tiny kitten on her doorstep, and brought it inside. Examining the animal, she was astonished to see that it had a wart on its nose, and that its eyes were different shades of grey. When Miss Vint struck a match, it gave a squeal of terror ...

Having added her reincarnated grandmother to the household, Miss Vint kept looking for other family members in feline form. Her sister Minnie had been the beauty of the family, with large blue eyes, and a fondness for pink dresses. After she had died, Miss Vint found a pretty blue-eyed white kitten for sale at a street stall, with a frilly pink ribbon around its neck. 'Sister Minnie' was still alive in 1892, and Miss Vint introduced her to the journalists: a handsome, large white cat, very fond of her mistress.

Not long after, Miss Vint's eldest brother Micah, a very obese character, died after being hit on the head by a brick dropped from a building site. The day after, Miss Vint saw some street ragamuffins throwing stones at a very fat cat! She belaboured them with her umbrella and rescued the cat. 'Brother Micah' was also formally introduced to the journalists: a stout, whiskerless cat who disapproved of locomotion and liked to drink large saucers of cream.

The black sheep of the Vint family had been her brother Job, who had lived a dissolute life

before going abroad as a sailor; his last letter to his sister had been sent from Persia. After it had been rumoured that Job had been lost at sea, Miss Vint found a half-drowned Persian cat in her water-cistern. She saved the cat and took care of it, but 'Brother Job' showed her little gratitude, being most disreputable, with a fondness for philandering. The only person he was fond of was the cat's meat man, and he ignored the comfortable bed Miss Vint provided for him, preferring to sleep in the dustbin.

Disbelievers in reincarnation, the journalists thought Miss Vint as mad as a hatter, albeit harmless and kind. Sinisterly, they wrote that if she had possessed a fortune, her grasping relatives would surely have had her committed to an asylum to get their hands on her money. But fortunately for her, Miss Vint had an income of just over £100 per annum, and she could remain in her little Walworth cottage, living contentedly with her feline family.

The story originated in the *Daily Telegraph* before spreading to other papers, the *IPN* included. When I did some research to find out Miss Vint's first name, it turned out that no such lady resided in Walworth at the time of the 1881 and 1891 censuses; nor was there any record suggesting that a Job or Micah Vint ever existed. But surely, the honest London journalists could not have *invented* the story – or *could they?*



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Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature

of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

From the viewpoint of mainstream science, its function is elegantly stated in a line from Enid Welsford's book on the mediæval fool: "The Fool does not lead a revolt against the Law; he lures us into a region of the spirit where... the writ does not run."

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox.

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EACH MONTH WE SEND *FORTEAN TIMES* FOUNDER BOB RICKARD DOWN INTO THE DARKEST, COBWEB-RIDDEN DEPTHS OF THE VAULTS OF FORTEAN TOWERS IN SEARCH OF STORIES FROM *FT*'S PAST.

JUNE 1973

Here's a little art mystery. This month, we recorded, a painting by Degas, of washerwomen, worth £250,000 at the time, vanished during a Swissair flight from London to Zurich. Official investigations show it was loaded on board but never arrived. In 2010, a small pastel sketch by Degas – called *Blanchisseuses souffrantes des dents* ('Laundry women with toothache') – was spotted during a sale at Sotheby's New York. It too had been stolen in 1973, but from a museum in Le Havre. Two artworks of the same subject matter by the same artist stolen in the same year... what are the chances of that happening? **FT1:17**

JUNE 1983

"Sheep are not as daft as people think," said a Ministry of Agriculture spokesman. He was commenting upon rumours that sheep had been spotted using "commando-style" tactics to get across the ground-level cattle-grids intended to prevent them wandering. A couple of months earlier, a writer in the *Guardian* noted that only sheep in Wales had taken to "rolling across the grids"; outside Britain, the tactic has only been reported from the Malmö region of Sweden. This month, someone filmed a sheep in the Brecon Hills "picking his way along and across the bars as though he were walking a tightrope". Sheldrake watchers have suggested monitoring sheep in Yorkshire for signs that the knowledge is spreading. "If Sheldrake's theory of formative causation is right," notes the correspondent, "it is only a matter of time before the Falklands sheep assert themselves." We are still waiting for confirmation. **FT45:19**

JUNE 1993

A South African tribesman (not sure what tribe) called Simphiwe Khoza (the name shows up commonly in Facebook and Google apparently for both sexes) was cleared by a Johannesburg court of possessing 80lb (36kg) of marijuana after he told the judge it was for ritual burning. Khoza said he used it during thunderstorms to ward off lightning. **FT72:11**

The next story reminds us that there could be worse things in our food than horsemeat. A housewife in Moscow bought expensive frozen steak from a state store for the family's Russian Independence Day dinner, celebrated on the 12th. Her suspicions grew when, on thawing, it turned a strange colour

and the dog refused a sample of it. Cutting into the steak, she found a bullet. She took it to the police who identified it as human flesh. They raided the store only to find the whole batch had been sold. The Moscow paper that reported this wished those customers *bon appetit*. Neither store nor investigating officers were named, yet the paper insisted the story was authentic. We can't decide which stinks more: that Russian stores keep no record of their meat sourcing or that a story so iffy can be blatantly sold as truth. **FT73:8**

JUNE 2003

In Zimbabwe, Mugabe's infamous seizure of farms from white farmers encountered an obstinate occupant that his enforcers could not intimidate. Ten years after his death, Fritz Meyer's children have refused to remove the casket of his ashes from a locked room in the Moyo Ranch until they are compensated for their grabbed home. It was due to be turned into a school, but prospective teachers have been pleading with the local education office to be transferred anywhere else. They cite the mysterious sounds of a man whistling, striding about, and running a bath (even though all the plumbing was vandalised during the seizure). There are even reports of the ghost of Meyer noisily driving his Land Rover around the farm – surely a phantom 'two fingers' to the Harare government and their petrol rationing. The last we heard, a local chief threatened to call in the witchdoctors to exorcise Meyer, but we have no news on how that was resolved. **FT174:19**

Let's close this instalment with a good luck story. A lifetime of disasters for accident-prone Frane Selak, a music teacher in Croatia, began in 1962, when his train plunged into the icy Neretva River; 17 people died but Selak survived shock, hypothermia, and a broken arm. A year later he was sucked out of a DC-8 plane when a door flew open; 19 people died, but Selak landed in a haystack. More accidents followed over the years with very lucky escapes from crashing, plunging and exploding vehicles.

"I suppose my four failed marriages were disasters too," he mused. However, Selak prefers to believe that he is actually very lucky to be still alive. As if to prove it, this year, aged 74, he bought his first lottery ticket in 40 years and promptly won a jackpot of £600,000. **FT176:12**

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