

# Newsletter of the National Capital Area Skeptics, Inc.

Volume Two  
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January 1988



Cast and crew of "Seance: Or Things That Go Bump in the Night." From left, Grace Denman, D.W. "Chip" Denman, Randall Lockwood, Jamy Ian Swiss, Julie Stern, Pat Lockwood; kneeling, Jack Lass.

## Seance: Entertaining, Scary, Educational

By Stephen R. Dujack

NCAS's production of "Seance: Or Things That Go Bump in the Night" was a variety show in which the featured performers were human credulity and the charlatans who promote the occult. Playing for 12 performances concluding the night before Halloween, this intimate magical mystical tour took for its motto H.L. Mencken's aphorism that one horselaugh is worth a thousand syllogisms. Persuasive but not preachy, it managed to scare the pants off close to 300 skeptics and high-school students alike, while giving the audience a few peeks at the machina behind the deus.

The cast, at least those present corporally, starred Jamy Ian Swiss as The Medium and D.W. "Chip" Denman as his assistant. The former is a professional local magician, the latter a talented amateur, and both are NCAS founders. The two led the audience through eight segments of spooky legerdemain, ghost stories, and the decidedly devilish history of spiritualism. At a time when belief in the paranormal seems to be again approaching a peak, they managed to shine a needed light in the darkened corners of the occult movement.

The proper mood is essential if spirits are to cooperate, and "Seance" begins at the door to the theatre, in Silver Spring's Armory Place civic center. Grim-faced attendants escort the audience, restricted to no more than 30 people, to their seats. With a music box playing mordently, the lights dim till the room is in total darkness. Suddenly, a voice is heard, only inches away from the audience, and the person behind it lights a candle on a small, plain table. The candle's glow

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## NCAS Member Activities

Various NCAS members have maintained high profiles recently. Phil Klass's exposure of the Majestic-12 hoax has been covered by the media (more on this elsewhere in this issue), and he has written a new book on alleged UFO abductions that will be published by Prometheus Press this month.

We see from the August issue of *Skeptical Briefs* that CSICOP is disseminating NCAS Archivist Dan Knauf's recommendations on methods for getting the *Skeptical Inquirer* into libraries and periodical indexes.

Rob Boston, a member of NCAS's Astrology SIG, has written a letter to several publishing trade journals, decrying newspapers' irresponsibility in publishing daily horoscopes. His letter was carried in the widely read weekly, *Editor and Publisher*, and he has been told that it will also appear in *Quill* magazine.

## Members Teach Courses in Thinking

Georgetown University's School of Summer and Continuing Education now offers an eight-session course called "The Art of Clear Thinking" that should be of interest to those who wish to improve their ability to express ideas clearly and concisely, to formulate arguments rigorously, and to scrutinize them carefully; that is, to think logically. Certainly these are skills that all skeptics should cultivate!

Taught by NCAS member Kevin Kraus, the course's basic premise is that, with practice, all of us can develop the habit of thinking clearly and the capacity to distinguish good arguments from

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## National Capital Area Skeptics, Inc.

### Statement of Purpose

NCAS attempts to encourage the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public.

NCAS does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but rather examines them objectively and carefully.

Signed articles represent the opinions of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NCAS. Unsigned articles are the responsibility of the NCAS Newsletter Committee. Only articles clearly marked as such represent positions of the NCAS Board of Directors.

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## Editorial Note

We are sorry to see that the *New York Times* is withholding essential information from investors. On October 16, the *Times* published a long article by Georgia Dullea, in which she described a three-hour psychic business cruise. The cruise, hosted by William Flanagan, a senior editor of *Forbes* magazine, and Judy Kuriansky, a clinical psychologist with whom Flanagan hosts a talk show on WABC radio, enabled 120 representatives of Manhattan's business elite to get together with a half-dozen psychics for some serious business analysis.

Although it gave the impression of presenting a detailed review of the discussion, the article made no mention of the worst stock-market crash in history, just one week in the future! Could it be that the *Times* was selfishly retaining this obvious prediction in order to profit from the coming debacle? Wouldn't such an abuse of this kind of insider information warrant an SEC investigation?—Lee J. Rickard

## Letters to the Editor:

Dear Editor:

I have just read issue No. 2 of your newsletter and would like to congratulate you on your efforts.

The newsletter is everything a group newsletter should be.

Mark Plummer, Executive Director, CSICOP

Dear Editor:

As a skeptic, I am often accosted by friends and relatives who defy me to account for some ghostly and mysterious experience in their lives ("...a-HAH! But how do you explain...." and so forth). Their anecdotes sound quite baffling, but in the absence of any further information or proof of falsehood, one is obliged to fall back on the "coincidence" argument, which is satisfying neither to oneself nor to one's listeners. They depart in triumph, convinced that they have won their argument, and their belief in psi remains undiminished. It's a discouraging business, and I would be interested to hear whether NCAS members have any suggestions as to how to deal with confrontations of this kind.

Neil L. Inglis

You might find NCAS member Kevin Kraus's course, "The Art of Clear Thinking," useful. (See the notice in this issue.) The Newsletter invites NCAS members to respond to this letter, and encourages readers to send all comments and further questions to NCAS Newsletter, 2214 Tulip Drive, Falls Church, VA 22046.—Editor

## Name-the-Newsletter Contest!

Until now, this publication has gone under the descriptive, if somewhat mundane, title of *Newsletter of the National Capital Area Skeptics, Inc.* Now is your chance to give it a new name. We're looking for a title that has some ZIP—something easily recognizable, descriptive, and, we hope, fun.

Send all ideas, including suggestions for a logo to accompany the title, to Julie Stern, editor, 2214 Tulip Drive, Falls Church, VA 22046. Entries will be judged by the editor and a panel of interim board members.

The winner of the contest will receive a one-year extension of his or her NCAS membership, and of course, recognition in the newly named publication.

## Notes from Other Skeptical Groups

By Lee J. Rickard

The March 1987 issue of the *New Zealand Skeptic* arrived with some warnings about the dangers of debunking. David Marks, the group's founding chairman, did some tests to determine the psychic abilities of one Colin Amery, a tarot consultant. Asked about the results during a television interview, Marks reported that Amery apparently believed sincerely in his powers, but that they were not supported by the tests. Amery has now brought a defamation action against Marks, claiming that, as a result of the interview, his tarot readings had dropped from 20 a week to only two, effectively depriving him of his livelihood. He is seeking \$35,000 in general damages, plus unspecified special damages. Incredibly, Amery has been granted legal aid for his action. Marks, who has since moved to England, is being represented by the NZ Skeptics' solicitor; additional free assistance has been volunteered by two Christchurch advocates.

Undeterred by such hazards, Henry Gordon, chairman of the Ontario Skeptics, is fearlessly broadcasting his debunking work. Gordon is preparing a collection of video material featuring his face-offs with various psychics and parapsychologists, which eventually will be distributed by CSICOP. Such video collections might be very useful for our encounters with the press. After all, if the producers of a television program want some video of spoon bending to underscore some narration, why not give them the opportunity to show Randi instead of Uri?

Also in the news: Bay Area Skeptic Shawn Carlson was featured in the October 26 issue of *Newsweek*. Responding to reports that a painting of the Virgin Mary in Chicago's St. Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church has been weeping since last December, Carlson devised no fewer than six ways to reproduce the "miracle." He says that the techniques are quite simple and require no modern technology, but won't reveal the details because he is hoping to market a weeping Tammy Faye Bakker doll. (NCAS members interested in astrology may recognize Carlson's name: he conducted a superb experiment debunking astrology that was reported in *Nature* several years ago.)

Weeping madonnas appear to be in this year. The July/August issue of the *British and Irish Skeptic* notes several articles in the *Irish Times* reporting that 18-inch pilgrim madonnas imported from northern Italy by the Rosa Mystica cult are weeping. The *Times* adds: "A puzzled spokesman for the cult said this week that it was normally only the full-size 39-inch pilgrim madonna model which wept."

The *B & I Skeptic* also notes the passing of famed British psychic Doris Stokes. On the day of her death, they report, the London magazine *Psychic News* ran a front-page headline stating that "Doris Is On the Mend." On the flip side, skeptic Leslie Shepard notes that clairvoyant Marjorie Staves is still alive and well, advertising her skills in *Prediction Magazine*. Among her predictions is one in her autobiography that foresaw her own death on April 17, 1974.

Several newsletters offer articles of interest to some of our special interest groups. The August issue of *Basis* (Bay Area Skeptics) reprints a statement from the National Center for Science Education rebutting a booklet on evolution vs. creationism, and reviewing relevant articles in *American Biology Teacher* and *The Science Teacher*. The July/August issue of the *Rocky Mountain Skeptic* reprints an article by Michael Criss, from the Summer issue of *California Science Teacher Journal*, on whether complaints about pseudoscience classes at educational institutions could be considered threats against academic freedom. Finally, the July *Scientific American* (Sacramento Skeptics) features an article by radiation oncologist Saul Silverman about the 12 "miracle cure" cases he has encountered in the last 20 years, and why none of them can be attributed to "alternative" therapies.

## President's Message

By Stanley K. Bigman

"Skepticism is the highest of duties, and blind faith the one unpardonable sin."

—Thomas Henry Huxley (as quoted in the September 1987 issue of the *International Humanist*, and called to my attention by Pete Lins of the NCAS interim board).

Driving around the Washington, DC area, have you seen a car with Virginia plates reading "SKPTIC"? This identifies Sean O'Neill. Those of you who've been with NCAS from the beginning should remember Sean. He was the actual instigator of NCAS—first as a one-man paper organization with a name, a post office box, a ream of stationery, and a listing in the *Skeptical Inquirer*. He and I discovered each other and enlisted the help of Phil Klass to organize the group that was to become NCAS. Together we sent out a letter to 1,000 *SI* subscribers, inviting them to join us.

But before our first meeting a rash of problems forced Sean to leave us temporarily. Now he's back in action. He's been attending interim board meetings, has contributed an article to this *Newsletter*, and is looking into reported hauntings in Northern Virginia (on his own, not on behalf of NCAS). We welcome his return with pleasure.

Members will recall that NCAS is currently being governed by an interim board and interim officers, all self-appointed or elected by the interim board. We look forward to the completion of this period, so that we may proceed to the election of a membership-chosen governing group.

Much of the interim board's recent activities have been concerned with relatively routine matters. We've spent considerable time discussing what we feel should be the nature of NCAS's structure, as reflected in its bylaws. At times, heated debates have consumed a good deal of time and energy.

But not all of our time is thus spent. As you can see from this *Newsletter*, many of us are engaged in a number of activi-

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ties related to our concerns as skeptics. Let me remind you: If there are other things you feel we should be doing, let us know! What do you think we should do? And what do you want to do, as NCAS members? Please call or write to me at 4515 Willard Avenue, No. 2204 South, Chevy Chase, MD 20815 (654-7362).

On another front, several NCAS members and I have been discussing plans for several general meetings to be held over the next few months. These include a meeting on pseudoscience in the courts that Walter Rowe, chairman of the Education in Skepticism SIG, and I have been organizing; a symposium on critical thinking at which Sean O'Neill, Kevin Kraus, and Larry Littig plan to speak; and a program on medical fraud and pseudoscience that Zev Remba, chairman of the Fringe Medicine SIG, and I have been discussing for several months. Detailed announcements of these meetings will be sent to all NCAS members in time for you to put them on your calendars.

## Randi's Halloween Mishap

Halloween was just the time for a television program commemorating the death of the famed magician, Harry Houdini. Those appearing on a show airing that night, in which an unsuccessful attempt was made to "contact the ghost of Houdini" included a number of skeptical magicians: Bob Steiner of the Bay Area Skeptics; Steve Shaw of the Houston group HAST; Penn and Teller, members of the newly formed New York Area Skeptics; Harry Blackstone, Jr.; and—of course—James Randi.

Randi had planned to perform one of Houdini's best known tricks, an escape from a milk can. But he fell during the final rehearsal, injuring two vertebrae. Hospitalized, he checked out to appear on the program lying on a stretcher. After the show he returned to the hospital for several days, then returned home for a few days' bed rest. He is now once more on the road. —Stanley K. Bigman

## Hypnosis: Gateway to Reincarnation?

By Sean O'Neill

A few months ago, I received a telephone call from a representative of a local television station. He had heard of me, he said, and wondered if I would be willing to appear on a talk show about hypnosis. (I am a registered hypnotherapist with a private psychotherapy practice in Annandale.) He shared my concern that hypnosis be presented to the public in an accurate manner, and wanted me to talk about my experiences using hypnotic regression. I soon realized, however, that he was not interested in age regression, but instead wanted evidence of *past life* regression. Sensing the siren song of New Age thinking, I suggested that research data favoring past life regression are, to say the least, sketchy, and that available evidence points to hypnosis as a potent tool that is still comparatively prosaic in application. Not surprisingly, the TV offer was retracted, but the show was aired, and presented past life regression as fact. I'm sure the viewing public was captivated.

Hypnosis is a public relations accident waiting to happen. The idea of dreamlike trance states in which all sorts of exotic memories may surface is very much in keeping with our wish, as a species, to see ourselves as special organisms removed from the natural order.

Modern hypnosis began via the attention attracted to it by Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a Viennese physician who attributed the phenomenon, and its cures, to what he called "animal magnetism." Although discredited, Mesmer's ideas sparked the interest of Englishman James Braid (1795-1860), who named the state "hypnosis" and was the first to appreciate the role of suggestion in human behavior. Sigmund Freud briefly entertained hypnosis as a method of treatment, but it took World War II, in which it was successfully used to treat traumatic neurosis and dental problems, to call significant attention to its possibilities.

What is hypnosis? Despite this history, it is difficult to define; use of jargon such as induction, trance, suggestion, command, and dissociation is not very helpful, because these words, like any used to describe states of awareness, do not yield easily to precise measurement. Yet something is surely happening during hypnosis, and the phenomenon does have discrete characteristics. According to E. Hilgard, in *The Experience of Hypnosis*, these include a reduction in planning, a redistribution of attention, a tolerance for persistent reality distortion, increased suggestibility, capacity for directed amnesia, the availability of visual memories from the past, and heightened ability for fantasy production. This latter capacity is extremely important. Hypnotic "memories" of events that did not happen do exist—these are referred to as "productive," as opposed to "reproductive," memories.

Reproductive memories during hypnosis can be impressive. Scandinavian researcher A. As reports the case of a college student who, while under hypnosis, was able to answer general questions posed in an obscure Finnish-Swedish dialect that he had not heard since childhood. Awake, the questions baffled him, as he did not recall the language at all.

The capacity for the generation of productive memories, however, likely accounts for the expansion of details seen in past life regression. Productive memories appear to be woven, at least partially, at the loom of our unconscious fantasies. These fantasies can integrate facets of actual experience, and represent, according to Milton Erickson, "psychological constructs in various degrees of formation, for which the unconscious stands ready, or is actually awaiting an opportunity, to make a part of reality."

In other words, hypnotic subjects who recall past lives are not necessarily psychotics or frauds, but may be reporting perceived experiences that they themselves find amazing. M. Edelstein, in *A Clinical Guide to Hypnotherapy*, remarks that this phenomenon may represent "screen memories," or defensive and symbolic vehicles for the expression of threatening or upsetting material. Al-

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ternatively, he suggests another interesting possibility: that these memories are the result of early childhood dreaming. Many adults have dreams that leave them with strong feelings of fear, sorrow, or other strong emotions for hours or even days after they awaken. Certainly it is reasonable to assume that young children also may have nightmares, and that they may repress the overwhelming memories of such frightening experiences, so that when hypnosis lifts the repression, the re-experiencing of the dream could seem very much like the recollection of a past life. It would not be surprising if these dreams contained bits of factual material, heard in childhood and repressed along with the fantasy.

Although a few scientists have seriously entertained the linking of hypnosis and paranormal events, the driving force behind this belief was an amateur hypnotist, Morey Bernstein, who hypnotized a woman named Virginia Tighe on November 29, 1952. Tighe was an apparently normal housewife whom Bernstein had previously found adept at age regression; on this evening, however, she began to recite detail after detail of a life in 19th century Ireland. Her name, she said, was Bridey Murphy.

Bernstein took Virginia Tighe through six hypnotic sessions over an 11-month period. He reported the results of these sessions in a book, *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, published in January 1956. Popular reaction to the book was stunning: it went through multiple printings, and tens of thousands of tape recordings of the hypnotic sessions were sold. Major magazines published feature stories, rock songs were recorded, and "come-as-you-were" parties were in vogue. The downhill slope began only two months later, when, in March 1956, *Life* magazine published an article detailing research into Tighe's childhood. Although some details of the regression could not be explained, many could. A childhood friend reported that as a little girl Virginia Tighe enjoyed Irish dancing and speaking in a brogue. The most telling blow, however, was the discovery that one of Tighe's early neighbors was a Mrs. Bridie Murphy Corkell. The publication of this material provided a very rational alternative explanation to the past life hypothesis; namely, that the Bridey Murphy story was a combination of childhood experience and fantasy memory production. Unfortunately, this case is still cited as strong evidence for reincarnation.

Some people seem determined to believe, resisting even the most obvious contradictions. For example, most cooperative hypnotic subjects seem able to recapture numerous lives, at least a few of which involve significant historical figures or an exciting period of history. But how can this be? Our world's population is now larger than it has ever been, and I do not think enough humans lived throughout premodern times to give everyone alive today even one past life. How then could each of us have had several, at least some of which were as Napoleon, Cleopatra's maid, or a member of Alexander's invading army?

That these sorts of arguments do not make a significant dent in the belief systems of true believers only serves to increase the need for continued research and accurate reporting of results in hypnosis. We will never be able to search out the limits of this phenomenon, and chain its benefits for mankind's use, in any other way.

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illuminates Swiss, seated at the table, reciting "In the Hours of Darkness." As he speaks the taper moves slowly up and down, and as he reaches the end of his short soliloquy it drops with a clear ring into its holder, suddenly plunging the room again into darkness.

In "Dr. Slade's Spirit Slates," Swiss first shows the audience how the 19th-century fraud would conceal a slate with ominous writings beneath a table, a substitution trick that won him many admirers but was also discerned by a watchful mark who wrote a message for Slade on the concealed slate and forever confused the confidence man. Skeptical observers noted that Swiss does not use this technique in his version of the slate trick. A volunteer asks a question of a dead personality, the late CIA Director William Casey, asking whether he really knew about the diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan resistance. Swiss places a piece of chalk between two unmarked slates on the top of the table and rattles them around. After a minute, he separates the two, revealing the clearly legible answer: a Casey-esque "Spirits speak; spooks do not."

The show's best scene is also its least mystifying, at least to all but the one person selected from the audience to be an innocent victim of her own senses. With the lights on full, Chip Denman has the volunteer shut her eyes while he seems to remove a wooden hoop through which she has clasped her hands. He follows the simple trick, the workings of which are clearly visible to the remainder of the audience, with two similar ones. The unbelieving expression on the face of the volunteer each time she opens her eyes to see how her senses have tricked her is a convincing demonstration of "The Power of Darkness."

The show concludes with a demonstration of the power of darkness for the entire audience—a ten-minute seance. Denman and Swiss link hands with two volunteers sitting around the table. The lights are doused. With the volunteers presumably accounting for the whereabouts and innocence of the magicians, the audience is confronted with mysterious sounds, floating evanescent balls, chilling whisperings from overhead or just behind their ears, and finally a shimmering, floating essence just above the threshold of invisibility.

The show's other segments were also enjoyable, and included a ghost story set in a dollhouse; a tribute to Houdini, the escape artist without peer who devoted the latter part of his career to exposing spiritualists; and, most spectacularly, the harnessing of the science of spiritual espionage to reveal a word selected from a book on spiritualism and known only to a volunteer from the audience: "awakening," in one case, an appropriate choice.

Randall Lockwood and Julie Stern acted as consultants to the production, and Jack Lass served as lighting and sound technician. Pat Lockwood and Grace Denman were the hostesses.

**USE THE COUPON ON P.11  
To JOIN NCAS**

## News of NCAS Committees, Groups and Activities

### Skepticism Education SIG Meets Regularly

The Education in Skepticism Special Interest Group continues to meet regularly. One of the group's current projects is to develop a science fair prize that will promote NCAS's goals. In order to attract more NCAS members with expertise in the natural and social sciences, chairman Walter Rowe has sent copies of the *Newsletter* to the chairmen of 11 academic departments of George Washington University. And SIG member H. McIlvaine Parsons has directed copies of the *Newsletter* to some 50 officers of the Washington Academy of Sciences and its affiliated societies. Rowe is also working with Stanley Bigman to develop a program entitled "Pseudoscience in the Court" for a general membership meeting in early 1988.

Future meetings of this special interest group will be held from 3 to 5 PM on February 6, March 5, April 2, and May 7, at the Bethesda Branch Library.

### Newsletter Committee to Meet

The Newsletter Committee will meet next on January 24, from 1 to 2 PM, in the public meeting room of the Tysons Pimmit Regional Library, 7584 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, Virginia.

We will be planning the next issue, discussing topics that we would like to cover, and beginning to put together a set of "editorial guidelines."

Present members of the committee and all interested NCAS members are invited to attend: especially (but not only) those with editorial, organizational, or artistic skills. For more information or directions, call Julie Stern at (703) 237-8591.

### Committee on Science and Creationism Sets January Meeting

The NCAS Committee on Science and Creationism will hold its next meeting on Sunday, January 24 from 2 to 4 PM in the public meeting room of the Tysons Pimmit Regional Library, 7584 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, Virginia.

The group will be reviewing a new video entitled "The Great Debate," which features high school science teacher Terry Mondy in three roles, as Professor Evolution, Dr. Creation, and The Moderator. Mondy's one-man debate has attracted considerable interest among science teachers, and has been profiled in *Time* magazine.

Preliminary copies of an annotated bibliography on science and creationism will be distributed, and the group will discuss current procedures for science textbook selection in our area's public schools.

All interested NCAS members are invited to attend. For more information contact Randy Lockwood at (703) 237-8591.

### Wanted: Help with Science Fair Award

The Education in Skepticism SIG needs people to help set criteria for science fair project awards and to judge science fair projects. The group plans to offer two prizes at a science fair at one DC high school: one for the project displaying the best experimental design and the other for the project displaying the greatest competence in the use of probability and statistics. If you are interested in helping the group to establish award criteria or judge the projects, please contact Walter Rowe at 994-1469, or send your name, address, and phone number to him at the

### Activities, from page 1

faulty ones. By analyzing the many different ways that arguments operate in scientific, political, literary, ethical, and philosophical discourse, Kevin claims, students will learn to recognize the ways in which sound arguments can be formulated, the basic fallacies by which reasoning is led astray, and the principles that make for clear thinking, speaking, and writing. Class discussion, says the instructor, often centers on the validity of such popular conceptions as belief in the paranormal. Kevin reports that he has taught this course for six consecutive sessions.

This course will be held next on Monday evenings from 7 to 8:30, beginning on February 1. For more information about the course content, call Kevin Kraus at 333-6809. For information about registering, call the School of Summer and Continuing Education, Georgetown University, at 687-5942.

NCAS member Sean O'Neill teaches a "Learn to Think" course for area industries as a means of enhancing employees' problem-solving abilities. Sean uses the Edward de Bono thinking course as a model. (de Bono is the founder of the Cognitive Research Trust in Cambridge, UK, and sometimes teaches his methods via public television, in shows that have aired in the Washington, DC, area.)

Department of Forensic Sciences, The George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052.

### Astrology SIG to Meet

The Astrology Special Interest Group will meet next on January 19, from 7 to 9 PM, in the public meeting room of the Tysons Pimmit Regional Library, 7584 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, Virginia. For more information, contact Lee Rickard at 767-2495 (office number).

# Proper Criticism

By Ray Hyman

Since the founding of CSICOP in 1976, and with the growing numbers of local skeptical groups, the skeptic finds more ways to state his or her case. The broadcast and print media, along with other forums, provide more opportunities for us to be heard. For some of these occasions, we have the luxury of carefully planning and crafting our responses. But most of the time we have to formulate them on the spot. Regardless of the circumstance, the critic's task, if it is to be carried out properly, is both challenging and loaded with unanticipated hazards.

Many well-intentioned critics have jumped into the fray without carefully thinking through the various implications of their statements. They have sometimes displayed more emotion than logic, made sweeping charges beyond what they can reasonably support, failed to adequately document their assertions, and, in general, have failed to do the homework necessary to make their challenges credible.

Such ill-considered criticism can be counterproductive for the cause of serious skepticism. The author of such criticism may fail to achieve the desired effect, may lose credibility, and may even become vulnerable to lawsuits. But the unfavorable effects have consequences beyond the individual critic, and the entire cause of skepticism suffers as a result. Even when the individual critic takes pains to assert that he or she is expressing his or her own personal opinion, the public associates the assertions with all critics.

During CSICOP's first decade of existence, members of the Executive Council often found themselves devoting most of their available time to damage control—precipitated by the careless remarks of a fellow skeptic—instead of toward the common cause of explaining the skeptical agenda.

What can we do to ensure that our criticisms are both effective and responsible? I would be irresponsible if I told you I had an easy solution. The problem is complicated and there are no quick fixes. But I do believe we all could improve our contributions to responsible criticism by keeping a few principles in mind.

We can make enormous improvements in our collective and individual efforts by simply trying to adhere to those standards that we profess to admire and that we believe many peddlers of the paranormal violate. If we envision ourselves as champions of rationality, science, and objectivity, then we ought to display these very same qualities in our criticism. Just by trying to speak and write in the spirit of precision, science, logic, and rationality—those attributes we supposedly admire—we would raise the quality of our critiques by at least one order of magnitude.

The failure to consistently live up to these standards exposes us to a number of hazards. We can find ourselves going beyond the facts at hand. We may fail to communicate exactly what we intended. We can confuse the public as to what skeptics are trying to achieve. We can unwittingly put proponents of the paranormal in the position of underdogs

and create sympathy for them. And, as I already have mentioned, we can make the task much more difficult for other skeptics.

What, then, can skeptics do to upgrade the quality of their criticism? What follows are just a few suggestions. I hope they will stimulate further thought and discussion.

**1. Be prepared.** Good criticism is a skill that requires practice, work, and level-headedness. Your response to a sudden challenge is much more likely to be appropriate if you have already anticipated similar challenges. Try to prepare in advance effective and short answers to those questions you are most likely to be asked. Be ready to explain why skeptical activity is important, why people should listen to your views, why false beliefs can be harmful, and so forth. A useful project would be to compile a list of the most frequently occurring questions along with possible answers.

Whenever possible, try your ideas out on friends and "enemies" before offering them in the public arena. Rehearsing your arguments with other skeptics can be an effective exercise. For more general preparation, read books on critical thinking, effective writing, and argumentation.

**2. Clarify your objectives.** Before you try to cope with a paranormal claim, ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish. Are you trying to release pent-up resentment? Are you trying to belittle your opponent? Are you trying to gain publicity for your viewpoint? Do you want to demonstrate that the claim lacks reasonable justification? Do you hope to educate the public about what constitutes adequate evidence? Often our objectives, upon examination, turn out to be mixed. And, especially when we act impulsively, some of our objectives conflict with one another.

The difference between short-term and long-term objectives can be especially important. Most skeptics would agree that our long-term goal is to educate the public so that it can more effectively cope with various claims. Sometimes this goal is sacrificed because of the desire to expose or debunk a current claim.

Part of clarifying our objectives requires us to decide who our audience is. Hard-nosed, strident attacks on paranormal claims rarely change opinions, but they do stroke the egos of those who are already skeptics. Arguments that may persuade readers of the *National Enquirer* may offend academics and important opinion makers.

Try to make it clear that you are attacking the claim and not the claimant. Avoid, at all costs, creating the impression that you are trying to interfere with someone's civil liberties. Do not try to get someone fired from his or her job. Do not try to get courses dropped or otherwise be put in the position of advocating censorship. Being for rationality and reason should not force us into the position of seeming to be against academic freedom and civil liberties.

**3. Do your homework.** Again, this goes hand in hand with being prepared. Whenever possible, you should not try to counter a specific paranormal claim without getting as  
(Continued on page 9.)

## NCAS Goes to a Party: International Fortean Organization's 1987 "Fortfest" Held in Tysons Corners

By Greg Summers

At the risk of enunciating the obvious, it can surely be said that scientists are fallible. At times they make mistakes of observation, draw illogical conclusions, and even let personal beliefs creep into their hypotheses, thus causing them to ignore contradictory data. On a more dramatic level, well-accepted theories may be severely altered or even discarded altogether as modern evidence accumulates against them. Probably because such events have occurred and will continue to occur as science progresses, the attitude that science offers little real hope in understanding nature sometimes arises. That scientific debate, the use of controlled tests, and the demand for repeatability of results tend to rectify the problems caused by the idiosyncrasies and fallibilities of individual scientists is not universally recognized. If any theory is subject to modification, some people argue, then perhaps any theory is just as good as any other. This point of view, of course, lays the groundwork for embracing any paranormal theory.

One group espousing such views is the International Fortean Organization (INFO). Founded in 1965 and based in Arlington, Virginia, this group dedicates itself to the ideas originally laid down by Charles Hoy Fort, a private researcher who spent some 26 years in isolated study, gathering information on what he considered to be strange phenomena that had been ignored (or "damned," as he called it) by conventional scientists. Fort, who died in 1932, believed that no scientific idea was worth anything, except as evidence of the general ridiculousness of the scientific enterprise. He believed that those who practiced science excluded many "real" events, of the type he had uncovered in his research, because they "embarrassed" accepted theories. INFO, which is now headed by Ray Manners, adheres to these basic Fortean precepts. On October 11, INFO held its annual "Fortfest" in a Tysons Corner hotel.

Ebullient and gracious, Manners opened the conference with a truly Fortean statement: "I don't believe in anything." He went on to observe that his organization takes a broad and skeptical view of all phenomena and theories meant as explanations. In particular, it is a home for researchers of the bizarre, because "where else could they go?" for serious attention. One might, at first, think that this goal coincides somewhat with those of both CSICOP and NCAS, organizations that do not "reject [the paranormal] on a priori grounds." But, as Don Berliner pointed out in an article in the March 1978 issue of *Science Digest*, INFO "takes no stand, pro or con, preferring to collect and sort data for others to weigh." This is certainly in keeping with Fort's central idea that one theory is no better than any other, and seems to relieve the group of the responsibility of having to determine in which direction the evidence points.

Speakers at the Fortfest spoke on topics as varied as spirit photography, science fiction, geomancy, and whether the medieval magician Merlin really existed. The two speakers billed as the conference's main attractions, John Keel and Budd Hopkins, spoke about different aspects of the problem of alien visitors.

Keel, an author of several books on paranormal topics, has been investigating cases of pregnant teenage girls who claim never to have had sex. One explanation for this—that the girls are covering up—seems obvious. But Keel has a much more plausible (to him, at least) explanation: these girls were impregnated by men from outer space. This is a well-hidden but very real and chilling aspect of the general UFO problem, according to Keel, who blames UFO buffs for suppressing evidence for fear that such stories would discredit their work.

UFO pregnancies are quite numerous, stated Keel. The women themselves rarely have any knowledge of how and when they were impregnated, but many have experienced the phenomenon of "missing time." In the most dramatic cases, entire towns can experience missing time: people mysteriously and simultaneously fall unconscious and, nine months later, the town's women start giving birth to strange babies. (If this sounds familiar, you have probably seen the 1960 film, "Village of the Damned.") "This type of thing happens all the time," Keel casually related, though he did not cite any actual towns by name. He is looking into cases of two towns, one in New Jersey and one on Long Island, where the initial indicators of these events have been observed—but where no mysterious babies have yet been born.

Keel also has met with several families who claim to have been cursed (or blessed?) with UFO children. The evidence that led him to conclude that these children are the products of UFO entanglements is sobering. For one thing, some of these families were visited by "men in black" (an almost forgotten group from UFO history). Others saw various passers-by taking photographs of their children—but were never presented with bills for the service! In yet other cases, "strange, emaciated visitors" were observed calling on these families, arriving on foot in regions where, according to Keel, a vehicle would have been necessary.

The conference's most prominent speaker was Budd Hopkins, author of the recent best-seller, *Intruders*, and primary advocate of the UFO abduction theory. The title of his talk, "Intruders and Ethical Considerations," at first led me to think that he would be responding to questions that UFO critics (notably Phil Klass) have raised concerning the present focus by UFO believers on abductions—essentially, whether it is ethical for individuals untrained in psychology to hypnotize subjects who may be psychologically unstable and who thus may be harmed by this "treatment."

(Continued on page 9.)



## ***Criticism, from page 7***

many of the relevant facts as possible. Along the way, you should carefully document your sources. Do not depend upon a report in the media either for what is being claimed or for facts relevant to that claim. Try to get the specifics directly from the claimant.

**4. Do not go beyond your level of competence.** No one, especially in our times, can credibly claim to be an expert on all subjects. Whenever possible, consult appropriate experts. We, understandably, are highly critical of paranormal claimants who make assertions that are obviously beyond their competence. We should be just as demanding of ourselves. A critic's worst sin is to go beyond the facts and the available evidence.

In this regard, always ask yourself if you really have something to say. Sometimes it is better to remain silent than to jump into an argument that involves aspects that are beyond your present competence. When it is appropriate, do not be afraid to say, "I don't know."

**5. Let facts speak for themselves.** If you have done your homework and have collected an adequate supply of facts, the audience rarely will need your help in reaching an appropriate conclusion. Indeed, your case is made much stronger if the audience is allowed to draw its own conclusions from the facts. Say that Madame X claims to have psychically located a missing person and you have obtained a statement from the police to the effect that her contributions did not help. Under these circumstances it can be counterproductive to assert that Madame X lied about her contribution or that her claim was "fraudulent." For one thing, Madame X may sincerely, if mistakenly believe that her contributions did in fact help. In addition, some listeners may be offended by the tone of the criticism and become sympathetic to Madame X. However, if you simply report what Madame X claimed, along with the response of the police, you not only are sticking to the facts, but your listeners will more likely come to the appropriate conclusion.

**6. Be precise.** Good criticism requires precision and care in the use of language. Because, in challenging psychic

claims, we are appealing to objectivity and fairness, we have a special obligation to be as honest and accurate in our own statements as possible. We should take special pains to avoid making assertions about paranormal claims that cannot be backed up with hard evidence. We should be especially careful, in this regard, when being interviewed by the media. Every effort should be made to ensure that the media understand precisely what we are and are not saying.

**7. Use the principle of charity.** I know that many of my fellow critics will find this principle to be unpalatable. To some, the paranormalists are the "enemy," and it seems inconsistent to lean over backward to give them the benefit of the doubt. But being charitable to paranormal claims is simply the other side of being honest and fair. The principle of charity implies that, whenever there is doubt or ambiguity about a paranormal claim, we should try to resolve the ambiguity in favor of the claimant until we acquire strong reasons for not doing so. In this respect, we should carefully distinguish between being wrong and being dishonest. We often can challenge the accuracy or the validity of a given paranormal claim. But rarely are we in a position to know if the claimant is deliberately lying or is self-deceived. Furthermore, we often have a choice in how to interpret or represent an opponent's arguments. The principle tells us to convey the opponent's position in a fair, objective, and nonemotional manner.

**8. Avoid loaded words and sensationalism.** All these principles are interrelated. The ones previously stated imply that we should avoid using loaded and prejudicial words in our criticism. We should also try to avoid sensationalism. If the proponents happen to resort to emotionally laden terms and sensationalism, we should avoid stooping to their level.

This is not a matter of simply turning the other cheek. We want to gain credibility for our cause. In the short run, emotional charges and sensationalistic challenges might garner quick publicity. But most of us see our mission as a long-run effort. We would like to persuade the media and the public that we have a serious and important message to get across. And we would like to earn their trust as a credible and reliable resource. Such a task requires always keeping in mind the scientific principles and standards of rationality and integrity that we would like to make universal.

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*Ray Hyman is a fellow and member of the executive council of CSICOP and professor of psychology at the University of Oregon. This article originally appeared in the May 1987 issue of Skeptical Briefs, the CSICOP newsletter.*

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## ***Fortfest, from page 8***

But this was not Hopkins' concern. The ethics he referred to were not his own or those of anyone else in the UFO movement. Instead, he spoke of his concern with the lack of ethics shown by UFOnuts. Why haven't the aliens, he demanded, intervened in human affairs in a positive way? Why aren't they stopping wars, preventing pollution, or becoming engaged in any constructive activity at all? (How does Hopkins know that they haven't?)

Hopkins is also concerned because his research seems to show that aliens might be unaware of the existence of human emotions, and that it may be appropriate to compare them to human scientists running experiments on animals.

## **Erratum**

An error appeared (through no fault of the author) in "The Brown Mountain Lights," by Alexander White in the last issue of the *Newsletter*. G.R. Mansfield did *not* see auto headlights as pairs, because of the distance at which they were viewed.

## Recent News from the Scientific Literature

By Lee J. Rickard

Some recent scientific results bear on perennial issues in the battle with creationism: the existence of transitional forms in the fossil record, and the age of the earth.

The October 15 issue of *Nature* reports new studies on the Taung "child" skull, which was first described in *Nature* by Raymond Dart in 1925. Although Dart found it to be ape-like in many of its facial structures—hence the name *Australopithecus africanus*—he also identified a number of undoubtedly hominid-like features, including strong suggestions of an upright posture. The skull thus was identified as the "missing link" in the evolution of humans from apes. We now believe *A. africanus* was the immediate descendant of *A. afarensis*, the earliest hominid.

One of the controversial questions about *A. africanus* is how quickly it matured. (Delayed maturation is a key difference between modern humans and apes.) In studies begun in the late 1960s, Alan Mann of the University of Pennsylvania determined that the dental growth characteristics of early hominid juveniles were slow, like humans. But several subsequent studies disputed this work. Bromage and Dean (1985) identified a weekly periodicity in the ridges in the tooth enamel that implied much younger ages at death for the australopithecines, implying a more ape-like growth pattern. Smith (1986) applied revised human dental standards to Mann's data to reassess the pattern of tooth eruption, finding it more ape-like than human. Mann disputes both sets of results.

Now, Conroy and Vannier, of Washington University, report computerized x-ray tomography of the Taung child skull which provides a much improved image of the intracranial structures (which were previously obscured by dense mineral deposits in the skull). They conclude that the time and order of appearance of molars and incisors and the development of the sinuses are indeed ape-like. They state that, rather than being a fuzzy intermediate between ape and human, the Taung skull has a mosaic of features, some clearly ape-like and some clearly hominid-like. As Conroy and Vannier put it, "the Taung 'child' is not a little human, but just as important, it is not a little ape."

Of course, it is this mosaic structure that is often misunderstood or misrepresented when creationists argue that the fossil record shows no transitional forms. They demand that such transitions should be a blend of the starting and final forms, as if evolutionary development were like the cinematic process transforming Jekyll into Hyde, or Larry Talbot into the werewolf. In fact, the fossil record is surprisingly rich in transitional forms (which is especially surprising if you adopt the rapid rates of speciation proposed by the punctuated equilibriumists), but they are generally of this mosaic variety, with most of the characteristics of the initial organism plus a few fully altered characteristics like those of the final form.

One of the best known mosaic fossils is *Archaeopteryx lithographica*, which is believed to represent the origin of true birds from dinosaurs. The first *Archaeopteryx* fossil was discovered in the 19th century in the Solnhofen limestone quarry, and identified as the "missing link" between reptiles and birds by Richard Owen, director of the British Museum, on the basis of the faint impressions of wing skeletons surrounding the bones. In fact, the skeleton's form is so reptilian that other specimens without wing impressions had been discovered earlier, and categorized as dinosaurs. *Archaeopteryx* is thus another mosaic type of transition fossil.

*Archaeopteryx* has recently been in the news, most recently the October 23 issue of *Science*, because of claims by the British scientists Sir Fred Hoyle and N. C. Wickramasinghe that the wing impressions were faked (presumably by a forger who wanted to enhance the fossil's sale value), and that Owen knowingly perpetuated the hoax because he hoped it would eventually be discovered and would thus discredit Darwinian evolution. Members of the British Museum staff are unhappy about the impugning of Owen's reputation; although not a partisan of the Darwinian theory, he is widely held to have been an honorable and objective scientist with no truck for frauds. They are also none too pleased to be spending much time and energy composing detailed rebuttals of the claimed forgery. Last year, they published a detailed study pointing out that the feather impressions appear on both of the rock slabs between which the fossil was sandwiched; that cracks in the feathered areas on the two slabs match precisely (and are filled with calcite crystals, which proves that they were formed in the rock and not afterward); and a host of other arguments. Now, to counteract continuing press activity by Hoyle and Wickramasinghe, the museum has prepared an exhibit that summarizes both the charges and the counterarguments in a form accessible to the general public. *Archaeopteryx* is now on public display for the first time in 21 years.

It is widely believed that Hoyle and Wickramasinghe are attacking *Archaeopteryx* as part of their general assault on the Darwinian theory. (Skeptics will recall that Wickramasinghe appeared for the state of Alabama in the defense of the law mandating "balanced treatment" for evolution and "creation-science.") Hoyle and Wickramasinghe are not creationists themselves—they believe that life originated in space and was seeded on Earth rather recently—but they share the creationists' debating trick of claiming that whatever is bad for evolution must be good for its opponents.

In other news, the October 15 issue of *New Scientist* reports that absurdly young ages for the earth can now be ruled out by tree ring studies. Of course, there is no reason to worry about the conflict between the results of radioactive dating (indicating an age of 4.5 billion years or so) and the

(Continued on page 12.)

## A Proposed Reading List

The following books were suggested by NCAS members Yvonne Dixon, Mac Parsons, Julie Stern, and Sean O'Neill. We invite other readers to send in additional suggestions for inclusion in future issues of the *Newsletter*.

Abell, G. O. and B. Singer, B., eds. 1981. *Science and the Paranormal*. New York: Scribner's.

Billig, O. 1982. *Flying Saucers—Magic in the Skies: A Psychohistory*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company.

Brunvand, Jan Harold. 1986. *The Mexican Pet*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. More urban legends (see below).

———. 1984. *The Choking Doberman and Other New Urban Legends*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Conway, Flo and Jim Siegelman. 1979. *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*. New York: Delta. Scientology, est, the Unification Church, etc.

Costa, Arthur L. 1985. *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*. Alexandria, VA: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

de Camp, L. Sprague. 1983. *The Fringe of the Unknown*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

———. 1963. *The Ancient Engineers*. New York: Ballantine Books. How real people built the pyramids, etc.

deCamp, L. Sprague and Catherine C. 1975. *Citadels of Mystery*. Great Britain: Fontana/Collins. (Originally published in 1965 as *Ancient Ruins and Archaeology*.) Scientific explanations for Atlantis, Stonehenge, Tintagel, etc.

Frazier, K., ed. 1986. *Science Confronts the Paranormal*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Gardner, M. 1981. *Science Good, Bad and Bogus*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

———. 1957. *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. New York: Dover Publications. (Published earlier as *In the Name of Science*.)

Gould, Stephen Jay. 1981. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. A refutation of pseudoscientific theories on racial, sexual, and ethnic disparities in intelligence.

Klass, Philip J. 1983. *UFOs: The Public Deceived*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

———. 1974. *UFOs Explained*. New York: Vintage Books.

Kramer, Stephen P. 1987. *How to Think Like a Scientist*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Junior Books. A book for children that encourages critical thinking.

Kurtz, P. 1986. *The Transcendental Temptation. A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Kurtz, P., ed. 1985. *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Mackay, Charles. 1977. *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. Noonday Press. (Originally published in London in 1841; also published in paperback by Harmony Press, New York.) A fascinating history that debunks fortune tellers, alchemists, magnetisers, witches, haunted houses, etc.

Marks, D. and R. Kammann, eds. 1980. *The Psychology of the Psychic*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Michell, J. 1984. *Eccentric Lives and Peculiar Notions*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Nash, Jay Robert. 1976. *Hustlers & Con Men*. New York: M. Evans and Co. An anecdotal history of fraud in the United States.

Neher, A. 1980. *The Psychology of Transcendence*. Englewood Hills, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Nisbett, R. and L. Ross. 1980. *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Randi, James. 1982. *Flim-Flam!* Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

———. 1975. *The Magic of Uri Geller*. New York: Ballantine Books.

(Continued on page 12.)

Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public. I understand that my charter membership will be good for one year and will include a subscription to this *Newsletter*.

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# Majestic-12 Labelled a Hoax

By Lee J. Rickard

Recent widely publicized documents purporting to reveal that the U.S. Government secretly recovered a crashed flying saucer and four alien bodies in 1947 have been decried as "clumsy counterfeits" by CSICOP.

In May, UFO researchers William L. Moore, Stanton T. Friedman, and Jamie Shandera released documents to the news media that seemed to confirm earlier claims of the saucer recovery near Roswell, New Mexico, and to show that the Truman administration had created a top secret group, code-named "Majestic-12," to study the craft and the aliens. The claims were widely publicized in articles in the *New York Times* and other publications and in an interview on ABC-TV's *Nightline*.

In August, however, CSICOP released a report prepared by Philip Klass, chairman of its UFO Subcommittee as well as a former senior editor of *Aviation Week and Space Technology* magazine (and prominent NCAS member), which demonstrated that the Majestic-12 documents were phonies. CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz condemned them as "one of the most deliberate acts of deception ever perpetrated against the news media and the public".

Details of the CSICOP report will be published in the Winter 1987 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*. They include

## Reading List, from page 11

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Faith Healers*. 1987. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Rawcliffe, D. H. 1959. *Illusions and Delusions of the Supernatural and the Occult*. New York: Dover Publications. (Published earlier as *The Psychology of the Occult*.)

Sagan, Carl. 1979. *Broca's Brain*. New York: Random House. Part II contains essays on pseudoscience.

Sladek, John. 1973. *The New Apocrypha*. New York: Stein and Day. A humorous reporting of pseudoscientific and occult theories and refutations by scientists.

Wilson, Clifford. 1975. *The Chariots Still Crash*. New York: New American Library. Von Daniken, watch out!

the revelation that a supposed key memorandum was unlikely to be authentic because its ostensible author wasn't in town when it was written, it lacked the standard government watermark, and it was labelled with an anachronistic security classification. Another key document, supposedly a letter from President Truman to Defense Secretary James Forrestal, also seems to be a forgery. Moore claims to have spent considerable effort determining that the Majestic-12 documents were probably genuine. Yet much of the evidence reported by Klass was compiled in just a few weeks, mostly through inquiries at the National Archives and the Truman and Eisenhower Libraries.

Although press coverage of Moore's original claim was considerable, less notice was made of CSICOP's rebuttal. *The Washington Post* made no mention of the story, although the *New York Times* did report it on August 26.

Klass notes that the fabrication of counterfeit U.S. government documents is illegal.

## Scientific Literature, from page 10

preference of creationists for a figure close to 6000 years. But it is comforting to know that the independent method of dating by counting tree rings can now be extended back at least 9000 years. One can construct a tree-ring sequence for bristlecone pines in California that goes back almost 8700 years; the limit is set by rotting of the dead wood. Recently, Bernd Becker of the Hohenheim University has constructed a sequence using oaks. Although these are much shorter-lived trees, their trunks are often preserved in peat bogs. By comparing the distinctive patterns of thick and thin rings in hundreds of "bog oaks," Becker has compiled an absolute chronology going back 7274 years, and hopes to extend it back to 11,000 years. (The limit will be set by the time of the last Ice Age.)

The chief significance of this work is its use in further calibrating the carbon-14 dating method. But it is yet another piece of ammunition to be used in the continuing battle with biblical literalists.

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