

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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*Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter*

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*Edited by Michael Heap*

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### Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* is widely circulated electronically to skeptical groups and individuals across the globe. Formal and informal articles of interest to skeptics are welcome from people of all disciplines and backgrounds. Details about house style are available from the Editor. We also welcome writers who would like to contribute a regular column - e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature.



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

### Michael Heap

#### The 18th European Skeptics Congress

The 18<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress ('The Joy of Skepticism') was held in the beautiful Belgian city of Ghent from August 30<sup>th</sup> to September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, with two special Skeptics in the Pub events in Brussels and Ghent on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The Organisers were SKEPP, the Belgian skeptics society, and the Comité Belge pour l'Analyse Critique des Parasciences, in association with the Dutch skeptical group Stichting Skepsis, and the Dutch Association against Quackery. The full programme is on the congress website (<https://www.esc2019.be/>).

This is a brief summary of the congress. The main talks were video-recorded and will be available for viewing on the YouTube channel of the congress website.

The main congress began with tributes to the late Willem Betz, one of the founders of SKEPP who for many years was very active in opposing the proliferation of unproven and unethical medical practices, notably at the European level (see 'The European Scene' in the previous issue). We then welcomed Michel Naud who informed us about the activities of the French group, AFIS (Association Française pour l'Information Scientifique) on the theme of 'restoring scientific integrity in policy making'. This was followed by reflections on the astrological claims of the late Michel Gauquelin (notably 'the Mars effect') and an account of the activities of Informationsnetzwerk Homöopathie in Germany.

The theme 'The never-ending struggle against quackery' was continued in the afternoon by speakers from the Netherlands (on the proliferation of 'Vitamin B12 clinics'), Romania (anti-vaccination activists), Belgium (the extensive misuse of the diagnosis Lyme Disease by quack practitioners) and the UK (an account

by Professor Edzard Ernst of recent successes and setbacks in the campaign against SCAM, 'so-called alternative medicine').

Saturday morning was devoted to anomalistic psychology, with presentations on the study of techniques used by magicians; a review of research into near-death experiences (ketamine is, incidentally a drug that can create these); and teaching schoolchildren about the difference between science and the paranormal. The last-mentioned talk was given by yours truly in place of Chris French (who was scheduled to give a presentation on reincarnation claims by children in the Lebanon but unfortunately had to cancel his trip only a few days before the start of the congress).

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*There are people employed as time-wasters, thus reducing the time that scammers can spend conning real victims.*

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The title of the afternoon session was 'Green Skepticism'. Although skeptics as a whole are committed to conservation, environmentalism, and action on global warming (i.e. they are **not** climate change skeptics), some of the claims and campaigns of 'the Green movement' do not square with the rational, evidence-based approach advocated by skeptics. There were four speakers in this session (from Finland, France, the Netherlands and the USA) and prominent amongst the topics discussed were GMOs and nuclear energy. The presentations were of a standard worthy of a scientific conference exclusively devoted to the most recent developments in this field, as were the panel discussion and audience contributions following the four talks. If you have a particular interest in this subject I recommend

you be alert for when the talks become available for viewing on the internet.

Needless to say, there was much sampling of Belgian food and beer at various restaurants and taverns around the city on Thursday and Friday evenings and on Saturday evening there was a most enjoyable and friendly congress banquet at the Carlos Quinto restaurant (Emperor Charles V having been born in Ghent).

The final session of the congress was on Sunday morning with three speakers, all from Belgium, presenting on the theme of 'con men'. 'Con women' were hardly mentioned but the most impressive exponent of conning was actually a woman (shown on video). I am sure everyone has an interest in 'How con men operate in cyberspace, the title of the first talk, though you had to be quite IT savvy to follow much of this. Have you ever wondered why some email scams (e.g. those perpetrated by 'Nigerian princes') are so absurd you wouldn't think that anybody would fall for them? They are deliberately framed in that way so as to capture only a gullible minority. If the scams were more plausible they would attract too many 'time-wasters' (people who become involved but after much time and effort on the scammer's part, sensibly withdraw). And yes – as I often wondered - there *are* people employed as time-wasters, thus reducing the time that scammers can spend conning real victims. This talk was followed by a fascinating account of 'con men in the art world'.

The final paper was presented by a forensic psychiatrist and was an up-to-date review of psychopathy. Are criminal psychopaths really to blame for their sometimes terrible misdeeds and if not, should their sentences reflect this? During Q&A this question provoked a comment from someone in the audience (I'll not say who) to the effect that, even though this is

welcomed by their clientele, psychiatrists and psychologists should be wary about putting labels on people and providing them with caricatures and scripts that inform them how they are to regard themselves and how they are expected to feel, think and behave. You cannot *not* influence someone when you do this – e.g. by giving

psychopaths the idea that they are not responsible for their behaviour.

Thus concluded a most interesting, informative and, as always, friendly conference for which our Belgian and Dutch colleagues should be heartily congratulated. These bi-annual events are held under the auspices of ECSO, the European Council for Skeptical

Organisations and, as the ASKE representative, I was privileged to attend the ECSO Council meeting in a nearby restaurant, complete with lunch. The venue of the 2021 congress was discussed but has yet to be confirmed; the timing may be moved to spring rather than the autumn.



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### Brothers and sisters

In the last issue the puzzle was, assuming randomness throughout, do boys have more sisters than girls do?

This puzzle is the subject of lengthy discussions on the internet, sometimes unduly complicated by considerations of the influence of biological factors, parental family-planning decisions, and so on. Intuitively the answer might appear to be yes. For example, in a family with one boy and one girl (quite common) the girl is a sister to the boy but she can't be a sister to herself. On the other hand, again in two-sibling families, if both are boys, neither boy

has a sister but if both are girls, each girl a sister. You can tackle the puzzle in this laborious way by considering families of increasing size. For a discussion of the mathematical complexities of this puzzle see, for example, <http://tinyurl.com/y4n3m8uv> (where the puzzle is in the form 'Do men or women have more brothers?'). It's all very bewildering to the non-mathematician but I'm satisfied that the answer is no.

### The five presidents

'You know', said the historian, 'it never ceases to amaze me that of the

first five presidents of the USA, three died on the fourth of July'. 'Really?' exclaimed both the psychologist and the mathematician. 'Yes', the historian continued, 'and what are the odds of your correctly guessing which three they are?' After a short pause the psychologist answered, 'One in six'. 'Hang on', said the mathematician as he jotted down his calculations on a scrap of paper. 'It's actually one in ten'. Who is right?

*Answer on page 20.*



## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

### European Council for Skeptics Organisations

There are quite a number of countries with national skeptical organisations, many of which are affiliated to ECSO. Contact details for ECSO are:

*Address:* Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

*Tel.:* +49 6154/695021

*Fax:* +49 6154/695022

*Website:* <http://www.ecso.org/> (which has an email contact facility)

*Facebook:*

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu/>

ECSO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECSO website now has a comprehensive calendar of skeptical events taking place across Europe, replicated at the ESP website (below).

### The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

The number of podcasts is now up to 187 ('Antibiotic Resistance Worse than Climate Change?').

You'll also find a comprehensive calendar of event of skeptical interest taking place all over Europe at:

[http://theesp.eu/events\\_in\\_europe](http://theesp.eu/events_in_europe)

### European Skeptics Congress 2019

<https://www.esc2019.be/>

See 'From the ASKE Chair' for a brief report. Keep an eye on the congress website for the availability of video recordings of the talks.

### Appeal from SKEPP, the Belgian skeptics society

The lawsuit of Carl Van de Velde against SKEPP authors Patrick Vermeren and Bart Van de Ven is being spun out by the counter party, to try and increase our legal costs. Our fundraiser is still active and we are working on promoting it better abroad. Your help would be very much

appreciated, e.g. by promoting it among your friends and acquaintances. You could forward the link to our website (<http://tinyurl.com/y6bhgxlu>) or share the Facebook-message (in Dutch), at the top of our Facebook-page. The text on the fundraiser-page is in Dutch, English and French. We managed to collect about 15.000 €, which is insufficient to cover the costs of the defence.

**Alternative medicine in Europe**  
‘Spain wants medicines that are not proven as such to stop being called “medicines.” A recent backlash against homeopathy is sweeping the European countries that are its biggest users — and that may give Spain's efforts extra momentum.’ See:

<http://tinyurl.com/yyyxz5qz>

Meanwhile: ‘France will end funding for homeopathic remedies through its

state health system from 2021 after the government acknowledged the remedies are no better than a placebo.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y5yefpja>

Likewise: ‘German health insurers urged to end homeopathy refunds.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3cxqrqr>



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

### Scepticism about ‘revolutionary treatments’

#### The mystery of theta

I have just been reading about yet another form of therapy. It's called ThetaHealing® and is promoted as ‘a meditation training technique utilizing a spiritual philosophy for improvement and evolvement of mind, body and spirit’. The ThetaHealing® website (*note 1*) further describes how it ‘focuses on thought and prayer’ and ‘teaches how to put to use our natural intuition, relying upon unconditional love of Creator Of All That Is to do the actual “work”’. During the meditation sessions healer and client are presumed to enter a ‘theta state’ characterised by an abundance of theta waves in their electroencephalographic (EEG) frequency spectra. The claim is made that ‘by changing your brain wave cycle to include the “Theta” state, you can actually watch the Creator Of All That Is create instantaneous physical and emotional healing’.

‘Theta’ refers to frequency components in the 4–7 Hz range. There are two sources of theta rhythm in the human brain and the one referred to here is cortical theta, which is associated with drowsiness and certain meditative states. Judging from the testimonials on the ThetaHealing® website, its healing properties are boundless.

The creator of ThetaHealing® is Vianna Stibal, ‘a world renowned spiritual teacher/ healer’. Another of this woman's claim to fame is that several years ago she was found guilty of fraud by an Idaho court and was made to pay \$100,000 in punitive damages.

There is no scientific evidence to support the theory or efficacy of ThetaHealing®. A small study, reported in an alternative medicine journal, found that during the healing sessions ‘theta frequency band did not increase in healers or in clients. Rather, the contrary was found, with a significant decrease in theta-2 band during healing in healers’ (*note 2*).

#### Biofeedback

Reading about ThetaHealing® reminded me of the excitement generated by biofeedback in the 70s and 80s. Treatment by biofeedback is based on the idea that amelioration of a range of medical and psychological conditions can be effected by training patients to control the autonomic nervous system activity associated with their particular problem. Physiological responses that are commonly targeted include palmar sweating (via skin resistance), blood pressure, vasodilation (usually by hand-warming), heart rate, and muscular tension. During sessions of biofeedback, patients monitor the

targeted activity; their awareness of any change in the desired direction constitutes positive reinforcement. Conditions treated by these methods include anxiety, hypertension, migraine, tension headaches, and Reynaud's disease.

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*The place now occupied by biofeedback is very much on the fringes of medicine; in the UK.*

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Quite early on, EEG biofeedback generated much interest, although there was also an equal amount of scepticism as to what monitoring one's EEG rhythms could achieve. This did not restrain some individuals (notably on the US west coast) from making extraordinary claims about its psychological and spiritual benefits. There was a particular fetish for the alpha rhythm; it was claimed that by ‘entering “an alpha state”’ one was capable of a range of paranormal and transcendental abilities and experiences. In the US, group sessions of alpha biofeedback training used to be held in special places called ‘alpha temples’. Theta feedback was less commonly used, but when spoken of at all it was endowed with even more mysterious qualities.

During this time, biofeedback was widely promoted as having the

potential to revolutionise the treatment of an extensive range of common medical and psychological disorders (*note 3*). But doubts soon emerged about the procedure's clinical efficacy and whether any genuine beneficial effects were not simply due to a general relaxation response that could be achieved without using any equipment. There was also a disconcerting tendency for studies to report that clinical outcome correlated poorly with the patients' success in altering the targeted physiological activity.

When all the dust has settled on a new treatment that is initially hyped as some kind of revolutionary breakthrough, it usually takes its place, if there is to be one at all, amongst all the existing treatments, though without fulfilling its early promise. The place now occupied by biofeedback is very much on the fringes of medicine; in the UK at least, I don't think there can be many NHS clinics where it is on offer. The same can be said for what is now known as neurofeedback. I can't imagine that either will be making much of a comeback.

### **The Edinburgh Masker**

While we are on the subject, whatever happened to the Edinburgh Masker? No, this wasn't some notorious person who prowled the streets of the capital. The Edinburgh Masker is a simple device that can have an immediate and dramatic effect on stammering. It has been known for centuries that people who habitually stammer are much more fluent when they are unable to hear their own voice (hence the Greek orator and statesman, Demosthenes, is said to have practised his speeches standing near the roar of the sea). The Edinburgh Masker consists of a small portable noise generator, a throat microphone, and a pair of headphones. While you are wearing this device and it is turned on, whenever you speak the noise generator is triggered by activity of your vocal cords, thus preventing you from hearing your voice (or anything else for that matter). The noise stops when you cease speaking.

The instrument was developed by speech therapists at Edinburgh University in the 1970s. It featured on a television documentary at the time; the improvement in fluency of stammerers when they turned their masker on was astonishing and the improvement was often maintained for some time after the device was turned off. The media were greatly impressed and the masker was understandably heralded as a breakthrough in the treatment of stammering.

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At that time I was working in a hospital clinical psychology department and was attempting to treat a person ('J') with a stammer under the supervision of someone who had specialised in this problem. J saw the TV documentary and asked me if it would be possible for him to try this procedure. I thought this a reasonable request, particularly as I imagined that the instrument could well become the treatment of choice for many stammerers. I therefore went up to Edinburgh University, did the training, and became a registered user. My department purchased the instrument (one non-portable, for use in the clinic, and one portable for use by the client). I have to say that, despite much persistence by J and myself and although its efficacy has been clearly demonstrated by clinical trials and convincing personal testimonials, J did not take to this device and we eventually gave up on it, although it remained available to any other person referred to the department.

The Edinburgh Masker did *not* become the treatment of choice and ceased to be available in the 1990s. There have been other types of feedback devices since and, rather than being accepted as the treatment of choice for stammering, these have

taken their place amongst the range of techniques used by speech and language therapists.

Here's a couple of telling anecdotes. Quite some time ago I was listening to a radio programme in which some commentators (of 'the chattering classes') were discussing various matters and one of them told the story of how he went to see an old school friend who, as a youngster had a severe stammer. The friend still stammered but was now using an auditory masker. A recording was played of this person speaking without the masker and then with it turned on. The difference was dramatic. One of the other commentators said something to the effect that psychiatrists and psychoanalysts had 'a lot to answer for' for treating stammering as a psychological problem when it had now been demonstrated that it could be eliminated by 'a simple physiological device'. I think that speech and language therapists would say that it's not really as straightforward as that.

Now fast-forward 20 years or so. I am reading a newspaper article about a man who devised a behavioural treatment programme to ameliorate his stammer and is now successfully using this to help other stammerers. The article lists all the unsuccessful treatments this man has had in the past, including 'a machine that made a loud noise in his ears every time he spoke!' (The exclamation mark was in the original piece, presumably to convey a mocking tone.)

**Depression and 'the inflamed mind'**  
Still in relation to this theme, a book was published last year titled *The Inflamed Mind: A Radical New Approach to Depression* (London: Short Books). The author is Professor Edward Bullmore of the University of Cambridge and he makes a strong case for the role of immunology in clinical depression. Hence, 'depression is not all in the mind' and in a significant number of cases may be associated with 'inflammation of the brain' and therefore treatable by anti-inflammatory medication.

Professor Bullmore's book and his thesis received immediate acclaim by the media and has been described as a revolutionary approach to understanding and treating depression. I read the book and it's certainly exciting stuff. But there was more than a whiff of zealotry and confirmation bias in the author's account. Maybe unfairly, I could not help thinking, 'Here we go again' and it was helpful to read a

critical (maybe overly so) analysis by an informed reviewer (*note 4*).

Maybe Professor Bullmore's inflammatory approach will overtake the current combined neuro-physiological and psychological approach to understanding and treating depression. More likely, I suspect, it will find a useful but more limited niche.

## Notes

1. <https://www.thetahealing.com>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/y54sb2c7>
3. Brown, B. (1974) *New Mind, New Body: Bio Feedback: New Directions for the Mind*. New York: Bantam Books.
4. <http://tinyurl.com/y3mhmao3>



## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

### Riders on recent entries and other items

#### Review of Scranton, L. (2016) *The Mystery of Skara Brae. The Skeptical Intelligencer 21:1, 2018*

A genuine, genuinely mysterious inscription is known from mainland northern Scotland. The Newton Stone is a pillar found by chance in Aberdeenshire in 1804, bearing two texts. The first text, probably inscribed in Late Antiquity, is written in the Ogham script first used in Ireland in C4 CE and later transplanted from Ireland to Scotland; it consists of words which mostly seem to be personal names (there is apparently no grammar; the text is presumably an unstructured list). The second text is in a script which has never been authoritatively identified. It appears that this second text was added to the stone after the first text, according to some (see below) as recently as C18-19.

Many different decipherments and theories concerning the second text have been advanced since the discovery of the Stone, mostly by fringe writers. In mid-C19, when linguistic scholarship was still in its infancy, there was discussion of proposed links with the Phoenician abjad script; Phoenician was again invoked as late as the 1920s by the arch-diffusionist Laurence Waddell (who was taken to task for this notion).

But readings in other scripts and interpretations of the text as representing Gaelic (Scots or Irish), Greek, Latin, etc. were also offered. Even Buddhist associations were proposed, recalling Scranton's much more recent (but equally dubious) diffusionist theories along these lines.

#### *A striking case where legend has been partially confirmed by archaeological discoveries ... is that of Troy.*

In 1935, Stewart McAllister (best known for his work on Shelta, the mysterious language of the Irish Travellers) declared the second text a modern forgery. However, in a series of papers and excursions published over the next thirty years, the archaeologists W. Douglas Simpson and C.A. Gordon disputed Macalister's claim, identifying the text as genuine – but not managing to offer decipherments. Then, in 1984, in a book on the 'symbol stones' of Scotland, the anthropologist Anthony Jackson urged a non-linguistic (numerical) interpretation, which would obviously obviate the need for **linguistic** exegesis but would hardly locate the Stone within any known local tradition. Jackson suggested Pictish provenance (not unreasonably given the location); but, as I have

stated before, the known Pictish inscriptions cannot currently be reliably read, in linguistic or any other terms.

#### **A creationist blast against linguists!**

##### *Op cit, 21:3, 2018*

Some fringe writers who believe in a short-time depth for human languages as a group do seek to identify Proto-Indo-European with their version of the supposed single original language, the *Ursprache* (just as some amateur non-Indo-Europeanists such as Isaac Mozeson seek to do this with **their** favoured 'family'-specific proto-language). Some go further, treating specific, apparently later languages from their favoured 'families' as proto-languages. For example, Nicholas De Vere, who believes in an 'antediluvian' civilisation ruled by the dynasty of the 'Grail Bloodline', bizarrely identifies early Gaelic as the same language as Proto-Indo-European and also as a pre-/proto-Sumerian general *Ursprache* (see his 2004 book *The Dragon Legacy*).

Although *evolution* might not be the best term in this context, it is notable that some specific changes in some languages in historic times are adaptive in a quasi-evolutionary sense. For example, where words with meanings in the same domain come to be homophonous, new words or word-meanings arise either from scratch or out of the existing word-stock to

eliminate the ensuing ambiguity. Thus alternative words for the rooster came into use in rural French dialect communities where the original Latin word, *gallus*, came by way of a general phonological change to be pronounced the same as the word for ‘cat’, originally *gattus*. On a farm, ambiguity at this point obviously had to be avoided!

**The status of oral traditions. *Op cit*, 21:4, 2018**

A striking case where legend has been partially confirmed by archaeological discoveries (one of Alan Garner’s themes) is that of Troy. The C19 discoveries at Hisarlik in Turkey (the digs were motivated in large part by Heinrich Schliemann’s personal enthusiasm for the Homeric poems and were over-interpreted in those terms) do not themselves necessarily represent the settlement allegedly besieged and eventually sacked by the Greeks around 1200 BCE (the site is complex and multi-layered), and scholarly debate continues; but the broad outline of the story of the Trojan War does seem to have been confirmed. On my own visit in 2015 I found the Homeric associations taken for granted. A large hollow wooden horse welcomes visitors, and tour-guides tell tales of Priam, Hector, Agamemnon, Achilles, etc., sometimes humorously modernised for popular consumption (‘Achilles dragged Hector’s body around the walls of Troy tied behind his Harley-Davidson’). And Troy is now typically treated as a ‘given’ to which more controversial claims can be linked. The best-known work of this kind is that of Eberhard Zangger, who holds that Plato’s Atlantis was really Troy! On Troy, see also my review in Mark’s Bookshelf in this issue.

**Language and the arts revisited. *Op cit*, 22:1, 2019**

The scenario portrayed in Frank Herbert’s 1966 sf novel *The Green Brain* may not be too far from the truth! A recent exhibition called ‘Spare Parts’ at London’s Science Gallery (at Guy’s Hospital, near the Shard) included extracts from papers arguing

that colonies of insects can be understood as closely parallel in many ways with single individually much more intelligent larger animals such as mammals.

**Merlin and Arthur (The Sinclairs in America: inconsistent usage or worse? *Op cit*, 22:1, 2019**

Graham Phillips, the long-standing Shropshire-based ‘alternative historian’, argues in his 2005 book *Merlin and the Discovery of Avalon in the New World* that ‘a site believed to be Merlin’s grave was found by the first British settlers in North America’ (specifically, in New England), and that this information is ‘preserved in the works of William Shakespeare and the coded writings of the Freemasons’. Merlin allegedly visited Iceland and Greenland *en route*, as the C4 BCE Greek voyager Pytheas may actually have done (without getting as far as the American continent). The combination of various apparently unrelated legends and suppositions, in this case those surrounding King Arthur and Rosslyn Chapel, is not of course unusual. Needless to say, mainstream archaeologists and historians have found nothing that confirms these ideas.

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*The combination of various apparently unrelated legends and suppositions, in this case those surrounding King Arthur and Rosslyn Chapel, is not of course unusual.*

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Another novel claim regarding King Arthur emanates from the Ukraine. Using the impressionistic methods which are usual on the fringe, and driven by the all-too frequent nationalistic bias, Igor Tsar has produced a book with the English-language title *Ukraine is the Ancestral Home of Humanity*. The contents can be imagined. A locally-produced summary states: ‘Numbers were also invented in Ukraine. From Ukraine, they came to India, and from there to Europe under the name of Arab. “Rig

Veda” was written on the banks of the Dnieper. Tribes of Aryans from Ukraine founded Iran in the 4th millennium BC. Ukrainians gave rise to Sanskrit. English also originates in Ukraine’. Etc., etc. And one of this author’s allies, Sergei Dmitriev, holds that Arthur, specifically, was from a Ukrainian background!

**A secret vice. *Op cit*, 22:2, 2019**

The recent ‘biopic’ *Tolkien*, while disowned by the late professor’s family, contained some interesting elements. Much to my pleasure, Joseph Wright, Tolkien’s early philological mentor, featured heavily. Wright was a born historical linguist who rose from being an illiterate teenager in a village outside Bradford to become a scholar of German/Germanic and later the Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford and the editor of the English Dialect Dictionary and Grammar. As is portrayed in the movie, he never lost his Yorkshire accent or (despite his at times fierce academic rigour) his plebeian good humour.

And, in a conversation with his sweetheart Edith, the young Tolkien is shown urging that the ‘power’ of some pieces of language – exemplified by one of his favourites, *cellar door* – lies wholly in their **sound** (compare his ideas as later set out in ‘A Secret Vice’), whereas his beloved urges that if their **meaning** is unknown or is ignored their significance is doubtful or diminished. Edith was no linguist, and I do not know if she ever actually espoused such opinions divergent from Tolkien’s own; but the scene is interesting and provocative. Despite family opposition, the lovers married, and eventually died in 1971 and 1973 (Edith first); they are buried together in Wolvercote Cemetery in North Oxford in a striking grave bearing the names Beren and *Lúthien*, those of a devoted couple in the first of Tolkien’s many posthumous Middle-Earth books, the *Silmarillion* (1977). (The great linguist and phonetician Henry Sweet, who was in part the model for Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, is more unobtrusively buried nearby.)

## **A new perspective on the Voynich Manuscript**

The Voynich Manuscript is a genuinely mysterious, apparently medieval book-length work in an unfamiliar script, including illustrations; the topic may be botanical. It has been the subject of widespread discussion since the WWI years and since 1969 has been held by Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Many decipherments have been advanced, mostly by non-specialists; it is still considered possible that the work is in fact a modern fake. For a select bibliography up to 2013, see the notes to Chapter 4 of my book *Strange Linguistics*, published that year; see also online sources.

Gerard Cheshire is a biological scientist at Bristol University who has published on the VM in the past; in mid-2019 he announced major conclusions about the document. Cheshire is extremely forthright and indeed bombastic about his views, especially considering his lack of professional expertise in linguistics (which emerges at the outset of the new paper in his amateurish use of terms such as *diphthong* to refer to features of spelling rather than of phonology); he believes that he has deciphered the script, has identified the language as 'Proto-Romance' and can read the text. In the manner of some 'decipherers' of the Phaistos Disk, he castigates earlier 'unsuccessful decipherers' and commentators as having been misled/confused, in this instance by failure to grasp one key point: the language and script were, in his view, in normal use (at least in some areas) at the time of composition but are now extinct and (amazingly!) otherwise unrecorded. The VM is, he proclaims, a C15 treatise on herbal remedies combined with the story of an adventure which occurred in 1444.

'Proto-Romance' is Cheshire's term for the varieties linking late 'Vulgar' Latin (which naturally came to vary considerably across Europe during the 'Dark Ages') with the modern Romance languages such as

Italian, Spanish and French. But these modern languages had come to exist as linguistic entities separate from Latin itself and from each other long before C15. It is true that few texts in these intermediate varieties survive, chiefly because Latin remained the main language of formal writing long after it ceased to be in everyday use; but by C15 such usage would not have been normal at all. And if it had been, there would surely be many more extant samples of it. Cheshire holds that the script itself was that of Ischia, near Naples, but of course it is not otherwise attested even there.

In addition, much of the detail of Cheshire's account of the language is obscure or confused in linguistic terms, and he (like many non-linguists) appears much more confident (even if without real justification) in dealing with orthography and vocabulary than with, say, grammar (which he largely ignores). He uses basic terms such as *grammar* and *transliteration* oddly or wrongly.

Initially, Cheshire's academic employer proclaimed his proposal as a major achievement; but in fact his earlier work along similar lines has been severely criticised, for example by Nick Pelling. Pelling has met with heavy counter-criticism from amateur VM enthusiasts and their allies on the 'fringe', and he himself evinces a most peculiar negative perception of mainstream historical linguistics (very ineffectual, according to him); but his complaints about Cheshire appear very largely justified, as do those of other linguists. And in the wake of the flurry of renewed criticism, accompanied by references to the old, Bristol University speedily disavowed Cheshire's work, pointing out that (though peer-reviewed) it lay well outside his professional remit. Cheshire reacted sharply to this change of tack: 'It was inevitable and expected, given the passion that the manuscript arouses, that a marginal group would find it difficult to accept new evidence ... Given time ... the small tide of resistance will wane'. Such over-optimistic comments are typical in this

area. And, **given** the evidence, the verdict on Cheshire's work must currently be: at best, not proven at all!

For more on Cheshire's claims, see *Fortean Times* 391 (July 2019) p. 4 and the online critical reviews cited there; further references from me on request.

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*Written channelling or 'automatic writing' ... is regarded by 'believers' as generated by spirits or other parapsychical entities rather than by the physical writer.*

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### **Automatic writing in late C20!**

Susan Hiller died at the age of 78 in January 2019; she was an American-born artist (installations, video, photography, performance, writing) who lived in London. The relevance of her work for skeptics centres upon her book *Sisters of Menon*, which was apparently generated by 'automatic writing', with Hiller acting as the 'medium'; it was produced over the period 1972-79 as part of a collaborative telepathy experiment called 'Drawn Together', and was published in 1983.

Analogously to oral channelling, written channelling or 'automatic writing' (also known as 'inspired writing', 'trance writing', 'spirit writing', 'autography', etc.) is regarded by 'believers' as generated by spirits or other parapsychical entities rather than by the physical writer, who is often in a trance-like state at the time of production. Automatic writers (or typists) typically claim to receive communication from the spirit world by way of involuntary handwriting or typing, allegedly guided by spirits. These phenomena may involve languages known to the writer (which is the most usual scenario), identifiable languages (modern or other) **not** known to the writer (very interesting, if genuine) or unidentified languages or 'languages'. Writers often claim no understanding of the material where it is not in a language which they



themselves know. Some cases of automatic writing are interpreted by believers as communication with deceased persons, including long-dead individuals as well as now-dead acquaintances; but there are also cases involving ‘spirit guides’, spiritual entities which were never corporeal, etc. For more on this subject, including discussion of various earlier cases, see Chapter 5 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.

The messages transcribed by Hiller supposedly emanated from a ‘collective’ of women (‘sisters’) from the ancient Greek city of Thebes, often repeating each other’s words or talking as a group rather than as individuals. Hiller was involved in feminist circles which took an interest in women who functioned as oracles in ancient Greece; and communication at a group level was a common practice among radical feminists in the 1970s.

If the story is accepted at face value, attempts by Hiller’s male partner to participate were rebuffed by the ‘spirits’ with the words ‘No Men!’ (see below on the language used). Hiller’s supporter and preface-writer Lucy Lippard claims in commentary that ‘when automatism is used by men, it is often ideologically validated as science, but when used by women it is denigrated as the non-productive, threatening activity of mediums’ – but

this seriously exaggerates the degree to which automatic writing is accepted as valid at all outside paranormalist circles.

Lippard observes further that the phrase *No Men* is an anagram of *Menon*, the term reportedly used by the spirits for their group, and might also be read as *nomen* – a Latin word meaning ‘name’. But a Latin word would have been unknown to most Greek-speakers of the day (the Greek word for ‘name’ is *onoma*), and, if known as a foreign word, would surely not have been regarded as culturally significant. In addition, the name/word *menon* has no strikingly relevant meaning; it is a personal name used for **males** and adopted by Plato as a title for one of his dialogues (usually called *Meno* in English) which deals with the theory of knowledge as recollection from past lives. A character called Menon features in the dialogue but is not involved in the philosophical issues. And very many short words are homonyms/ homographs or mutual anagrams by pure chance, especially if multiple languages are involved. Lippard’s second point thus appears unlikely to be of real relevance.

Perhaps suspiciously, the material is presented in Modern English. As noted above, it is in fact quite normal for automatic writing (like allegedly channelled oral material) to manifest

itself in the first or main language of the medium. Sometimes an explanation is offered for this in terms of intelligibility to the medium or to readers untutored in the spirits’ original language, but this would certainly complicate the ‘theory’ involved (how did these entities acquire competence in a language which arose long after their lifetimes?). It appears more likely that such material is generated by the medium (not necessarily consciously or by way of deliberate fraud).

One late-C20 case where languages unknown to the medium **were** used involved Ann Walker, who claimed that messages were channelled to her written in various ancient scripts and languages, notably Greek, Coptic (late Egyptian) and scripts which Walker identified as the demotic and hieratic Egyptian scripts. However, the characters given by Walker bear very little resemblance to genuine demotic or hieratic. And, although Walker’s versions of sequences in Greek are in genuine Greek script (readily accessible, of course), they do not correspond with Greek expressions carrying the relevant meanings; indeed, the sequences are meaningless as Greek, and some are phonologically impossible.

The onus is clearly upon all those who make claims of this nature to justify them.

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## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



**The Hidden Half: How the World Conceals its Secrets** by Michael Blastland. Atlantic Books, 2019, pp [7], 295. ISBN: 9781786497772, trade pbk. 9781786496379, e-book 9781786496386. £14.99, hbk.

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### Reviewed by Ray Ward

Blastland wrote, with David Spiegelhalter, *The Norm Chronicles* (2013), which I called ‘excellent and thought-provoking’ when I reviewed it in the *Skeptical Intelligencer*, 17:2, 2014. Its main theme was that highly-publicised but in fact very rare events

make people overestimate and misunderstand danger: children are thought safer with their parents, who are actually a greater danger than strangers; when people took to cars after 9/11 more were killed than if they had flown, etc.

This book’s rather gimmicky presentation (only half the title is visible on the front cover, the rest on the flap, but one should perhaps blame the publisher) is off-putting, but it makes similar points: why vital economic data is often hopelessly

wrong; young criminals turn out unpredictably different; scientific research produces lots of false findings; prescription medicines do nothing for most people, etc. The answer, says Blastland, lies in 'The Hidden Half' - or, as Daniel Boorstin, quoted herein, said, the greatest obstacle of progress is not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge.

Blastland begins with marmorkrebs, a kind of crayfish. When genetically identical ones were laboratory-bred, with fanatical care taken to ensure they all had the same environment, they nonetheless turned out very different in appearance, anatomy, behaviour, lifespan, size and weight (one was 20 times the weight of another). So is what we think we know about genes and environment in need of serious revision?

Blastland advances three ideas or arguments: we need to face up more readily to the many mysteries and surprises that humble human understanding, put aside questions of rationality and labels like chance and noise, and ask how to cope if we know (and can know) less than we think and the world falls into line less readily than we suppose.

After quite a lot of general stuff we get specifics: hidden influences, unexpected causes, obscure differences subverting knowledge, what 'finding out' through research doesn't see, hidden limits of what's probable, hidden complexity in simple stories.... Some young people get into serious trouble, others of similar backgrounds don't. Identical twins (genetically the same) and with the same environment - even conjoined ('Siamese') twins - can be quite different. Apparently tiny 'sliding doors' effects (from the film of that title in which a woman's life develops very differently depending on whether she does or doesn't get through a train's doors before they close) can have big consequences. Smokers get lung cancer; a heavy smoker lives to be 100. Similar schemes to combat

malnourished babies worked in one place, but failed in another because apparently small differences were not taken into account. Nearly 90% of peer-reviewed studies on cancer in leading journals didn't stand up. Catching cancers early seems an obvious good idea, but can lead to false positives, harmful treatment, even unnecessary mastectomies.

Blastland tries to answer the criticism that he is knocking down a straw man. Of course regularity fails sometimes. Taking a prescribed drug when ill doesn't guarantee we'll get better, but is more likely to help than doing nothing. He does not, he says, claim that probabilities are never useful but, while some are genuinely powerful, we overstate the practical significance of many others, are poor at distinguishing between those that do and don't matter, and gloss over how ignorant they leave us and the modesty of their effects. And he is honest enough to admit he too may be guilty of confirmation bias - searching for scraps of evidence to support a prior belief.

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*Catching cancers early seems an obvious good idea, but can lead to false positives, harmful treatment, even unnecessary mastectomies.*

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Blastland certainly has a point that people like apparent simplicity (sugar causes obesity; tax sugar!). But the same facts can lead people to diametrically different conclusions. Some said the Fukushima incident showed that nuclear power was inherently potentially catastrophic, still threatening thousands years after Chernobyl; others that it was clear evidence of how very safe nuclear power had become: the plant weathered a tsunami (and an earthquake, like others in Japan), and nobody died as a direct result. Both

sides were entirely convinced that the now overwhelming weight of hard evidence was in their favour, even choosing the same form of argument: numbers, risk.... He also discusses the huge fall in teenage pregnancies in Britain, and the large range of explanations put forward. But, of course, with this as with many aspects of human behaviour, there can be no single 'cause' - a point which could apply to much of what Blastland says.

In his postscript Blastland mentions the old joke that one should never talk to someone successful in business about luck, reminding me of the story of the man who had indeed achieved much through his own efforts and was understandably irritated when told how 'lucky' he was, saying how amazing it was that the harder he worked the 'luckier' he became. Blastland ends by rejecting utterly what he calls the misinterpretation that everything is so fickle that nothing can be done.

The book has technical faults. Some direct quotations are footnoted but, for some mysterious reason, many are indented, in a different typeface, and not footnoted. And Blastland is too fond of verbless 'sentences'. This book is also interesting and thought-provoking, but, when all is said and done, the world does seem to manage reasonably well on the *visible* half!

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## MARK'S BOOKSHELF

### Mark Newbrook

#### **The Discovery of Troy and its Lost History**

Bernard Jones

Kefallinia, Greece: Trojan History  
Press, 2019, pp viii + 388  
(with comment on earlier works of  
the same kind)

Various non-mainstream theories involve the Greek legends regarding the Siege of Troy (normally thought to be represented by one layer of the ruins at what is now Hisarlik, on the Aegean coast of Turkey) and its aftermath (the victorious Greek leaders returning home). These legends are recounted in the long epic poems attributed to the (himself possibly legendary) poet Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were originally oral works and very probably pre-date, in their earliest (lost) forms, the revival of Greek literacy arising from the introduction of the alphabet. Indeed, Barry Powell (*note 1*), expanding upon earlier notions, argues that a single ancient scholar, maybe indeed the author later identified as Homer, actually developed the Greek alphabet (from the Phoenician abjad = consonantal alphabet) precisely for the purpose of recording these poems (perhaps around 700 BCE). Other classicists, while admiring Powell's erudition, generally find his often technical arguments obscure, speculative and unconvincing. There are numerous other works of varying degrees of scholarship, proposing a wide range of non-standard claims about the poems.

Most relevantly in this present context, several authors have sought to re-assign the location of the Trojan War and associated legendary events to distant areas, in the Atlantic and elsewhere – as indeed others have done with the narratives of the Bible, with other Greek legends such as that of the voyage of Jason (see below), etc. Perhaps predictably, such authors often identify their own homelands or other areas dear to them as the true locations of these stories (just as many amateurs

seek special statuses for their own languages). The **precise** location of Troy was not established in the mainstream until C19, and the 'facts' of any genuine 'Trojan War' and the locations of many associated places remain disputed and indeed often conjectural (see the rider to my earlier piece 'The status of oral traditions' which appears in 'Language on the Fringe' in this issue.). But of course it is universally accepted by professional scholars that these events, or the genuine events upon which they were based, did indeed occur in the Mediterranean world, where they appear to be set. Amateur enthusiasts, however, are not deterred!

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*He also argues that the (almost certainly legendary) voyage of Jason itself took place in the North Sea near the British Isles, not in the Black Sea as normally understood.*

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Perhaps the best known revisionist work of this kind is that of Iman Wilkens (*note 2*). On less than persuasive grounds, Wilkens maintains that the main actions of the Trojan Cycle really occurred in Eastern England, Northern France – and his native Netherlands! He argues that the locations and the weather described in the poems fit in much better with Northern Europe than with the Mediterranean. On the linguistic front, he identifies Homeric place-names etc. with later British (Celtic), English, Dutch and other local names, using the usual amateur impressionistic methods. For instance, he equates the Greek place-name *Ios* (pronounced 'ee-os') with a Dutch location with the name *Joos* (in Dutch the letter J is pronounced as consonantal Y is in English, and -oo- represents a long O sound); and he equates Cambridgeshire river-names with the superficially and

unsystematically similar Homeric Greek names of rivers in the Trojan Plain.

In contrast, Felice Vinci (*note 3*) unconvincingly re-interprets the actions of the Trojan Cycle as occurring in the area surrounding the Baltic Sea. More recently, in 2014, Adam Nicolson (*note 4*) has proposed that Homer's works refer to a wider area than the Mediterranean and in addition to a much earlier period: Bronze Age Eurasia, around 2000 BCE (800 years before the accepted date), when nomads from the Steppes confronted the pre-Greek societies of what later became Greece. Nicolson's work is relatively sober and scholarly, but he is not a specialist in the relevant subjects and clearly overstates his case (his occasional use of linguistic data is egregiously flawed); as far as his historicity is concerned, strongly positive reviews have come only from non-specialist readers.

The latest work of this kind, under review here, is due to the Welshman Bernard Jones, described in online 'blurb' as 'a retired multi-disciplinary professional, Chartered Practitioner and Chartered Fellow, with a lifetime of scientific, technical, investigative and research work behind him' and 'a historian of some 35 plus years who completed his post graduate research in ancient philosophy/mythology and ancient history'. As far as I can see, Jones provides no details of his post-graduate studies, which is hardly encouraging (if they are genuinely relevant, why not be 'upfront' with them?). He has apparently been working on the matter of Troy 'for the last three decades', and has arrived at conclusions rather similar to those of Wilkens, locating the events of the Trojan Cycle in North-Western Europe and more specifically in the 'Celtic' lands (see below), the British Isles; Troy itself was on the coast of East Anglia, and the various Homeric Greek peoples were located in Scotland (and

indeed were the ancestors of the Scots and the Irish; see his Chapter 5).

This book has begun to attract online reviews, so far mainly positive if not wholly uncritical in nature; Jones has put some of these reviews on his web-site (*note 5*). Some of the reviews raise some of my own points of criticism, albeit soft-pedalled, and one (which to his credit Jones has on his site) not unreasonably questions Jones' failure to identify any archaeological remains of the 'real Troy' (and wonders as to the actual identity of the ruined city normally identified as Troy). One thing which reviewers (understandably) do **not** so far discuss is Jones' specifically linguistic argumentation, on which see below.

Jones begins his book (Chapter 1) with a discussion of the early history of Britain. Naively, he talks as if pre-Roman Britain is little known or studied by mainstream scholars, perhaps because his own focus is upon written texts (very sparsely represented for this period) rather than upon archaeological finds (see previous para) – though he does refer later to some such finds. He then introduces the 'history' attributed (probably mistakenly) to the C9 Welsh monk Nennius and apparently compiled from various sources. Some of Nennius' stories were followed by the C12 Welsh bishop and scholar Geoffrey of Monmouth, to whom Jones refers later. The main relevant story involves the legends of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who fled from the sack of Troy and founded the city in Italy which eventually became Rome, and the adventures of his descendant Brutus, who is reported as settling in Britain in late M2 BCE. Relying on tendentious arguments involving the details (or lack of same) in Virgil's C1-BCE literary (and politicised) re-telling of the story of Aeneas in his *Aeneid*, Jones reinterprets this story, which he treats as historical in character, as referring to the Atlantic rather than to the Mediterranean, and by way of expanding upon his ideas on this front he has written a second book which is forthcoming as I write: *The Voyage of Aeneas of Troy*. Of course, his re-

interpretation of the Homeric epics themselves supports this view. And in addition Jones essentially accepts the C9-12 story of Brutus settling in Britain.

Later, in Chapters 10-11, Jones treats as historical another literary epic, Apollonius Rhodius' C3-BCE *Argonautica*, which is a version of the story of Jason. He also argues that the (almost certainly legendary) voyage of Jason itself took place in the North Sea near the British Isles, not in the Black Sea as normally understood. (In his 1959 fictional work *The Land Beyond The North*, Roger Lancelyn Green, the classicist and junior member of J.R.R. Tolkien's group 'the Inklings', portrays Jason's ship *Argo* as **visiting** the British Isles and other Atlantic locations on its way home from Colchis – but leaves the main action in the Black Sea. Charles Kingsley, in his 1855 re-telling *The Heroes*, tells a similar story, much more briefly.)

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*Apart from his reliance on dubious sources, Jones ... follows Wilkens in interpreting the inclement weather as described in the Aeneid, the Iliad etc. as unlikely to be encountered in the Mediterranean.*

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Of course, these conclusions oblige Jones to **divide** the ancient history of the Greek-speaking world between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic – especially if he were to acknowledge the 1952 decipherment of the Cretan 'Linear B' script as archaic Greek (now very generally accepted) and the well-established findings regarding identified 'Homeric' sites such as Mycenae on the Greek mainland. It is difficult to see how this scenario would make sense.

But the main problem with all this is simply that there is no hard evidence of any kind that supports these Atlantic locations in this context. In fact, such evidence of early British history as survives (archaeological, etc.) tells a very different tale. The account of

British history given by Geoffrey of Monmouth in particular includes otherwise obscure figures such as King Leir or Lear and 'Old King Cole' and some highly fanciful material about Merlin and King Arthur which seriously conflicts with what is known of late- and post-Roman Britain. Geoffrey claimed to have obtained his information from an earlier Welsh-language treatise, but no such book is known. Although others have done likewise (notably some of the recent Russian 'chronological revisionists'), Jones is quite out of order in presenting the work of Nennius and Geoffrey as genuinely/straightforwardly historical. (See the work of Anthony Adolph (*note 6*) on the possible **politically**-motivated origins of the story of Brutus.)

At the other end of his book, Jones presents a series of appendices (pp 326-372) providing largely fanciful lists of kings etc. for various relevant territories including the British Isles. These lists are presented without sources, with impossibly vaguely described sources such as 'British histories' or 'Spanish histories' (this format also occurs in the body of his text, for example on p 138, and is a familiar pattern of 'referencing' on the fringe; but if Jones knows of the texts in question why does he not name them?), or with obviously suspect sources such as Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth (in one case supported by a modern fringe book, Bill Cooper's 1995 Christian fundamentalist work *After The Flood*). In Appendix 17 Jones equates Germans with Assyrians (!), following unsourced/undefended claims made on p 281.

In fact, this problem recurs throughout Jones' treatment of historical evidence. On p 281 itself, for example, he refers back to his Chapter 12 ('Druidism'), which asserts that along with Welsh writers German authors preserved the early history of Western Europe but refers neither to credible primary sources nor to mainstream-scholarly secondary historical works. The bibliography of secondary sources on pp 313-329 is also egregiously short on mainstream-scholarly historical works dealing with

points of detail – but includes various pseudo-historical works; these are treated in the body of the text as authoritative, as are uncorroborated legends from various countries. Whatever the nature of Jones' post-graduate experience, overall he certainly gives a non-scholarly impression in these respects, and it is difficult to take his material as seriously as he evidently expects.

Apart from his reliance on dubious sources, Jones (starting on p 9) follows Wilkens in interpreting the inclement weather as described in the *Aeneid*, the *Iliad* etc. as unlikely to be encountered in the Mediterranean. (Wilkens is one of the few recent commentators on Homer to whom Jones actually refers.) He wrongly suggests that Virgil would not have been aware of Atlantic conditions, but this point does not itself obviate his notion that these conditions would not be found in the Mediterranean locations which are apparently mentioned in his poem and in Homer. However, he certainly exaggerates the force of this notion. The climate in the Mediterranean was cooler and wetter in 1200 BCE (and indeed in C1 BCE) than it is today; even nowadays, stormy winter weather is not unknown in the region (in 2015 I myself saw the devastation left by a wintry storm on the coast of Turkey near the accepted site of Troy). In addition, some of the Homeric descriptions (in various sections of the poems) are clearly metaphorical. And Jones' idea that the Mediterranean could not be described as 'salty' is simply wrong. Jones also argues (see p 14) that Homer's words for the colour of the sea (including the word often mistranslated as *wine-dark*) and other words descriptive of the sea indicate Atlantic rather than Mediterranean conditions; but this claim is again exaggerated to say the least, and indeed Jones appears naïve about the long-discussed, fraught issue of Homeric Greek colour terminology. These critical points have been raised by the very astute skeptical historian Jason Colavito (*note 7*), and I endorse his comments.

Colavito makes various other forceful points, arguing that Jones is again naïve in assuming that the Aegean and Mainland-Greek peoples of the time of the Trojan War (or even the Greeks of Homer's own day some 500 years later) did not engage much in maritime travel and trade and therefore had access only to limited ranges of materials and artefacts (and thus could not have been the peoples described in the poems). He also quotes Jones as stating that the poems depict a 'warrior aristocracy' of the kind portrayed in 'Celtic' stories such as the Irish 'Ulster Cycle' dealing with the deeds of the legendary Cúchulainn. But these legends are not recorded prior to C7 CE; and in fact Celtic-speakers (and the term is essentially a linguistic one) were not living in Northern Europe in 1200 BCE or even in the time of Homer. These peoples arose in central Europe after 1300 BCE and did not arrive on the Atlantic seaboard until the middle of M1 BCE. Even Atlantic-based sources for Homer (if any existed) would not have been aware of them. Celtic-speakers did eventually occupy most if not all of the British Isles, including all of what is now England, but this was later.

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*Celtic-speakers did eventually occupy most if not all of the British Isles, including all of what is now England, but this was later.*

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Like Wilkens and many other authors promoting non-mainstream history, Jones includes many linguistic arguments in support of his thesis. I have already identified his problems in dealing with Homeric colour-words. More generally, Jones reveals that he is untutored in historical linguistics, relying on the impressionistic comparison of superficial and unsystematic similarities between words which I have critiqued many times previously in these columns, and ignoring matters of phonological structure, grammar, etc. For example,

on p 67 he treats the Homeric Greek term *Danaoi* ('Greeks'; often translated into English as *Danaans*) as obviously being the same word as Irish *Danaan* as in *Tuatha Dé Danaan* ('people of the goddess Danu'), regarding both expressions as referring to an early colonisation of Greece from Palestine which is unknown to scholarship. On the same page, Jones follows Robert Graves in identifying the Latin word *Graeci* ('Greeks') as originally meaning 'crone-worshippers'; but this is undemonstrated, and is part of Graves' highly dubious theory of the pre-classical Aegean as a benevolent theocratic matriarchy.

On pp 208-209 Jones interprets the term *Doric*, used in Scotland to refer to the 'broad' Scots dialect of areas such as Aberdeenshire, as indicating the presence in early Scotland of speakers of 'Dorian' Greek (Spartans and such), even though there is a well-established explanation for the name in quite other, much later-dated, unspectacular terms – and of course no actual trace of ancient Greek in Scotland! In the same section Jones glibly interprets various Scottish place-names commencing with *Dor-* as containing the same Greek root, ignoring their known or strongly-supported (mostly Gaelic) etymologies (which can readily be obtained).

On pp 170-171 Jones adopts without argument another of Graves' notions, involving the 'Irish Tree-Alphabet', in the context of a brief, confused, unreferenced account of the archaic alphabets of Greece which apparently relies in part on legends such as that of Cadmus (regarded as factual by the Afrocentrist Martin Bernal but not by mainstream classicists). (In fact, Jones cites Graves as authoritative in various places.) And on p 181 he engages in a thoroughly confused discussion of the name *Peddar* (as in *Peddar's Way*, the somewhat mysterious ancient path across East Anglia) in which he rejects the unproven but not implausible etymology in terms of the Latin root *ped-* ('foot', as in *pedestrian*) on the ground that *-dd-* does not occur in Latin (within roots/morphemes; it **does** occur

at morpheme boundaries following the prefix *ad-*) – as if such ‘corruptions’ of words ‘borrowed’ between languages were inconceivable! He then speculates as to the identity of the final *-ar* or *-dar*, without giving any evidence. In Chapter 11 Jones glibly equates the female name *Helle* as in *Hellespont* (the straits between Troy and the peninsula where Gallipoli lies, now known as the Dardanelles) with the Germanic word *Hell* (as in English), re-analyses the (Latinised) Greek word *Corybantēs* (referring to worshippers of the goddess Cybele; we admittedly lack an etymology for this word) as Welsh *cor y bantes* ‘choir of the heights’ (there is also a grammatical issue here involving singular versus plural number; but as noted Jones pays little attention to grammar); etc. – all simply to suit his own agenda. On p 207 he equates *Argos* with *Argyll*. And he cites pseudo-historians such as Comyns Beaumont as

if they were authorities on etymologies. Etc, etc.!

Jones also makes occasional sheer errors involving place-names; for instance, he does not seem to realise that the word *Propontis* was an ancient name for the Sea of Marmara, and treats it as referring to a separate body of water.

All in all, a linguist will take the view that Jones’ use of linguistic data in this context is of no account. If he is to make out a case for his claims, it must be on other grounds. But it has already been argued that these other grounds are themselves weak, to say the least. Jones may have an online following, but if he wants attention from the genuinely well-informed (other than active skeptics out to critique him) he must try much harder. The **very** strong likelihood is that he is simply mistaken. His work should not be taken seriously by non-expert readers. It is a pity that a qualified person has engaged in so

many years of study, only to arrive at an altogether untenable conclusion.

#### Notes

1. Powell, B.B. (1991) *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York and Oakleigh, VIC.
2. Wilkens, I.J. (1991) *Where Troy Once Stood: The Mystery of Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey Revealed*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. St Martin’s Press: New York.
3. Vinci, F. (2006) *The Baltic Origins of Homer’s Epic Tales* (F. Vinci and A. de Francesco trans.). Inner Traditions: Rochester, VT.
4. Nicolson, A. (2014) *The Mighty Dead: Why Homer Matters*. William Collins: London,
5. <https://www.trojanhistory.com/>
6. Adolph, A. (2015) *Brutus of Troy and the Quest for the Ancestry of the British*. Pen & Sword Books Ltd: Barnsley.
7. <http://tinyurl.com/yxzmf38n>

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)
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#### Sense About Science

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for new developments:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/>

#### Good Thinking

Make sure that you are on Good Thinking’s Newsletter email list:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

#### Science fraud

‘A lab run by one of Britain’s foremost academics published fraudulent scientific papers for more than a decade, according to investigators. Work at Prof David Latchman’s laboratory at UCL Institute of Child Health came under scrutiny from senior academics after an anonymous whistleblower alleged that dozens of papers from the lab were doctored.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yxex836q>

See also:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3hfhftog>

#### Fake news

‘Disinformation proliferates online - and like the mythical unicorn, often blends some plausible elements in conveying untruths. This CBC News guide will help you identify disinformation and misinformation online.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yxapudud>

And: ‘Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it’s learned may be crucial to Western democracy.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6cn42us>

#### Website of interest

‘Metafact is a fact-checking platform. You ask a question, we source many independent experts to verify the evidence.’

<https://metafact.io/>

#### Pseudoscience

‘Pseudoscience is taking over social media – and putting us all at risk.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y58b7grf>

#### Statistics

‘What Statistics Can and Can’t Tell Us About Ourselves: In the era of Big Data, we’ve come to believe that, with enough information, human behavior is predictable. But number crunching can lead us perilously wrong.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y4p3gelz>

MEDICINE
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#### The Nightingale Collaboration

Keep visiting the Nightingale Collaboration website. If you have not already done so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter?

<http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/>

## **Whistleblowers in the Health Service**

Peter Wilmshurst: ‘The role of whistleblowers in improving the integrity of the evidence base.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y489eq2q>

### **Stem cell treatment**

‘YouTube spreads “misleading information” about experimental stem cell treatments: Health Canada has warned unlicensed clinics are offering unauthorized cell therapies and making unproven, outsized claims that may pose serious risks to people.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y36hzb3v>

Also: ‘Clinics claim that expensive stem cell therapies can help patients with dementia, autism, multiple sclerosis and even cerebral palsy - and crowdfunding campaigns to pay for the treatments are increasingly common. But are the patients and the donors being misled about the benefits and the risks?’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y27qmyrg>

### **Medical errors**

‘The exact number of patients in the USA who die from preventable medical errors each year is highly debated. Despite uncertainty in the underlying science, two very large estimates have spread rapidly through both the academic and popular media. We utilize Richard Dawkins’ concept of the ‘meme’ to explore why these imprecise estimates remain so compelling, and examine what potential harms can occur from their dissemination. We conclude by suggesting that instead of simply providing more precise estimates, physicians should encourage nuance in public medical error discussions, and strive to provide narrative context about the reality of the complex biological and social systems in which we practice medicine.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6dvu3br>

Also: ‘Why Doctors Make Mistakes (Medical Bias)’: one of several videos at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y5kvtpto>

And: ‘Who Are the Medical YouTubers? ... a round-up of medical yootoob’ at.

<http://tinyurl.com/y55lvach>

### **Medical device malfunction**

‘After two decades of keeping the public in the dark about millions of medical device malfunctions and injuries, the Food and (US) Drug Administration has published the once hidden database online, revealing 5.7 million incidents publicly for the first time.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yxd4dgnk>

### **Medical check-ups**

‘Despite Cigna’s recent television commercials, in which TV physicians exhorted viewers to get an annual examination, real physicians and other interested parties have debated the value of check-ups for decades.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y4bqm5ab>

### **Screening**

‘It’s intuitive to think that the earlier you detect a health problem, the better. Screening programmes are put in place for exactly that purpose – to detect health problems that have not yet been manifested in symptoms. Sometimes screening is useful, for example, to detect and treat symptomless raised blood pressure to prevent cardiovascular disease. However, screening sometimes does more harm than good. Let’s look at some examples.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yylogjh3>

### **Medical research: Misconduct and errors**

Watch Dr Peter Wilmshurst deliver his talk on research misconduct at Medicine 2019.

<http://tinyurl.com/yycrqrgr>

Also: ‘Nine reasons medical research is trash’. Biases in conducting and reporting medical research (video). At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y4gsysgs>

And: ‘Individuals who enroll in clinical trials do so with the belief that their participation will help to advance medical science. However, many trials are designed, conducted, and reported in ways that stymie this objective, a problem that can be called

“uninformativeness.” From the perspective of researchers, this is a form of research inefficiency. But from the perspective of participants, preventable uninformativeness is a serious breach of trust and a violation of research ethics.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y69vnbpg>

### **Quackery in general**

Google has announced ‘a new health-care and medicines policy that bans advertising for “unproven or experimental medical techniques,” which it says includes stem cell, cellular and gene therapies.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yy9uvydg>

and

<http://tinyurl.com/y684n88c>

Also: ‘Whether it’s dubious wellness product claims, misconceptions about basic anatomy or confusion over reproductive rights, Dr. Jen Gunter will set you straight. How this ob-gyn from Winnipeg became the most important truth teller in women’s health.’ See:

<http://tinyurl.com/yyhwx37t>

And: ‘Like a worm cut in half, its head regenerating into a new, even angrier worm, the “wellness” trend is one that refuses to die. But this week, its wiggle appeared to wane. A certain weariness had set in. Is this the end of wellness?’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yyvljjjb>

From India: ‘Why the medical fraternity is protesting against the National Medical Commission Bill....’ “It not only impinges on the rights of doctors, but it impacts the rights of patients as well and will definitely affect poor patients. Furthermore, if the government is looking to introduce Homeopathic and AYUSH practitioners into mainstream healthcare, they shouldn’t go about it by introducing bridge courses which will allow these doctors to practice in the same way and prescribe the same medications as allopathic doctors and that certainly is of concern to us,” said Dr Sanjeev Singh of the IMA.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2teujed>

From the US: ‘Presidential candidate and New Age self-help guru Marianne Williamson has been repeating a claim

that over half of our children have chronic illness and implying that the expansion of the vaccine schedule since the late 1980s is responsible. But is it true? Are over half of our children sick? Is this “the sickest generation”?

<http://tinyurl.com/yxqymwvf>

‘Medical science can find no cure for the belief in quack remedies. In this age of unreason, homeopaths and anti-vaxxers are put on an equal footing with groundbreaking research’, argues Martha Gill in a *Times* article (by subscription). At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2f73akx>

Also: Edzard Ernst has just published another book! It is entitled *Alternative Medicine, A Critical Assessment of 150 Modalities*. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yybndztq>

### **Placebo**

‘Open-label placebos reduce test anxiety and improve self-management skills: A randomized-controlled trial’.

<http://tinyurl.com/y49b4uet>

### **Cancer drugs**

‘Flawed evidence underpins approval of new cancer drugs’ (*BMJ* article).

<http://tinyurl.com/y4u2737g>

### **Cancer quackery**

‘The story of Katie Britton-Jordan is the kind of story that makes me die a little inside every time I see one like it. Regular readers will immediately recognize why. It’s the story of another breast cancer patient who probably didn’t have to die of her disease but did anyway because she chose to forego effective, science-based surgical and medical care and instead opted for quackery.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yylc7ouq>

And: JustGiving’s own figures show more than 2,300 UK cancer related appeals were set up on its site in 2016, a sevenfold rise on the number for 2015. The phenomenon has allowed less well-off patients to access expensive, experimental treatments that are not funded by the NHS but have some evidence of benefit. But many fear it has also opened up a new and lucrative revenue stream for

cranks, charlatans, and conmen who prey on the vulnerable’. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3eh2w2j>

Also: ‘How to survive the fake news about cancer. The internet is awash with ads for costly but bogus treatments – and claims that scientists are suppressing a cure for the disease.’

At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6dhyk9n>

### **Acupuncture**

A review paper on the accuracy of locating acupuncture points reports: ‘771 studies were screened of which 14 studies were identified, including 9 studies that investigated the localization of acupoints and 5 studies that examined the cun measurement system. Considerable variation in localization of acupoints was reported among qualified medical acupuncturists.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yyzkk94t>

See also Science-Based Evidence’s comments at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y498d39n>

And ‘Acupuncture Points Don’t Exist’ at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3h69z5b>

### **Homeopathy**

‘The Good Thinking Society has filed a Judicial Review claim, challenging the recent decision by the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) to grant reaccreditation to the Society of Homeopaths. Good Thinking, a charity which aims to promote science and challenge pseudoscience, is bringing the action after the PSA acknowledged that multiple members of the Society of Homeopaths continue to offer CEASE therapy – a purported treatment for autism which is targeted particularly at children and which relies on the false notion that autism is caused by vaccination, and can be cured with homeopathic treatments, high-dosage Vitamin C, and dietary restriction.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y5twzewu>

See also the following article on CEASE therapy at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yxavx7g9>

And for developments in New Zealand: ‘A homeopathic treatment regime invented to “cure” autism is in use in New Zealand. Complete Elimination of Autistic Spectrum Expression, or CEASE therapy as it is known, has drawn international condemnation and the United Kingdom advertising watchdog is now cracking down on false claims made by hundreds of homeopaths offering the treatment’.

At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3t2o6ur>

And: ‘Amazon has been accused of behaving irresponsibly for selling dozens of dubious homeopathy remedies. Customers in the UK and US are able to buy pills said to contain saliva from a dog infected with rabies, MailOnline can reveal. They can also purchase other tablets that are said to be derived from the urethral discharge from men infected with gonorrhoea. Homeopathy critics today slammed the unusual listings, attacking Amazon for not bothering to check what remedies it sells.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3omyb7l>

Berlin Wall pills, or Murus Berlinensis as one homeopathy website calls them, are made from ground-up pieces of the Berlin Wall, and are supposed to help overcome ‘emotional barriers’. They are available at Ainsworth’s, the royal family’s pharmacy of choice.

<http://tinyurl.com/y4bqynqa>

Meanwhile: The Faculty of Homeopathy is delighted to announce His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales as Patron of the Faculty of Homeopathy. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yxf5s8yx>

### **Vaccination**

‘Meredith’s mother was suspicious about vaccines and would never let her have them as a child. For a while it didn’t seem to matter, but eventually Meredith (not her real name) starting coming down with some frightening illnesses.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3d3gbyq>

Also: ‘A public health body has removed a suggestion that people seek advice from “faith leaders” over



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whether to vaccinate their children after the National Secular Society questioned it.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yycwp33p>

And: ‘The Vaccine Guide is a website and a book by Ashley Everly, a “toxicology consultant” for Health Freedom Idaho. It’s been making the rounds in the antivaccine underbelly of social media lately and basically consists of screenshots of cherry picked studies, articles, and web pages, with Everly’s highlighting passages to provide an antivaccine spin. It’s clever in a way, but also rather lazy. Don’t fall for it.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y5kjaz6n>

Also: ‘Anti-vaccine folks think that they have come up with a winning tactic, especially as they get kicked off of more and more social media platforms.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y5cyjllm>

### Psychic healing

‘An Oxford group has raised serious concerns about a self-professed “psychic healer” who claims to be able to cure people by channelling a “spirit surgeon”.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3vttl62>

See also:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2zjltt3>

### ‘Fertility drip’

‘A wellness company has withdrawn a £250 IV “fertility drip” after experts said it could “exploit vulnerable women”. Get A Drip offers therapies including the “slim drip”, “anti-ageing drip” and “mood-boost drip” at locations such as Westfield shopping centre in London. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) said there was “no evidence” its treatment could improve fertility.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yy34ghzu>

### Supplements

‘A massive new study, published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, shows that the vast majority (of supplements) won’t help you live a longer life or reduce the risk of cardiovascular problems.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yxjbbq8e>

And: ‘Dietary supplements such as vitamins do nothing to boost brain health and are simply a waste of money for healthy people, experts have said.’

At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2hj3yhu>

### Bee stings and arthritis

‘Are bee stings an effective treatment for arthritis? Many patients with arthritis have reported that their symptoms went away after they were stung by bees. There are testimonials galore from beekeepers whose arthritis resolved after they were stung and from patients who dramatically proclaim that bee venom injections cured their arthritis or even saved their life. But testimonials are notoriously unreliable and anecdotal evidence must be confirmed by controlled clinical studies. Should rheumatologists be encouraged to keep beehives on their roof as a convenient source of bees to apply to patients’ skin for sting therapy? What does the scientific evidence say?’

<http://tinyurl.com/yy9dwy4t>

### Lyme disease

‘No, Lyme disease isn’t an “escaped” military bioweapon. A health expert explains why.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y6oq9saz>

### Vaginal steaming

‘Gynaecologists are warning of the potential risks of vaginal steaming after it emerged a Canadian woman burned herself attempting one. A case study, involving a 62-year-old, was published in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada*. The woman had been suffering from a prolapsed vagina and believed the treatment could help avoid surgery.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y3rfgcok>

### Life extensionists

‘Some sleep on electromagnetic mats, others pop up to 150 pills a day. But are ‘life extensionists’ any closer to finding the key to longevity? Alex Moshakis meets some of the people determined to become immortal.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y3c4tqpm>

### Memory

‘In criminal cases involving eyewitness reports, psychologists or psychiatrists may be recruited as expert witnesses to help triers of facts to evaluate eyewitness statements, on the assumption that psychologists and psychiatrists are real experts, familiar with scientific progress about how memory works. But are they knowledgeable concerning the science of memory? We assessed the knowledge about eyewitness memory of experts from France and Norway, countries having different legal systems, that is: inquisitorial and adversarial, respectively.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yysy25tn>

And: ‘In a French survey of 1312 participants 551 reported having done therapy at some point. ‘Of that 551, 33 (6%) indicated they had recovered memories of abuse in therapy that they did not know about before therapy. Sexual abuse was the most commonly reported type that was recovered in therapy (79%). As in past research, discussing the possibility of repressed memories with therapists was associated with reports of recovered memories of abuse. Surprisingly, memory recovery occurred just as much in behavioural and cognitive therapies as it did in therapies focused on trauma.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y65z3wk5>

Also: ‘Recent news reports indicate that while campaigning for president, Joe Biden has told a compelling story of wartime heroism and of awarding a soldier a medal. Unfortunately, the story appears to be false. But Biden probably isn’t lying. Instead, Biden has demonstrated a common memory error.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y228dw66>

### Psychometric tests

‘The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is probably the most widely used personality test in the world. About 2 million people take it annually, at the behest of corporate HR departments,

colleges, and even government agencies. The company that produces and markets the test makes around \$20 million off it each year. The only problem? The test is completely meaningless.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yxmpk8qk>

‘Psychometric tests like Color Code, Myers-Briggs and DiSC have become a goofy part of corporate life. But what happens when we take them seriously?’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y238y72e>

### Deception

‘The political consequences of widespread misinformation are becoming ever more apparent, and anyone using deceptive strategies in their work should take extra care. In this series, artist A R Hopwood examines the applications of deception in visual culture, the therapy room, and the science lab and asks: are there any circumstances under which deception can be justified?’

<http://tinyurl.com/y2qrrh9d>

### Self-improvement

‘All over the world, organisations encourage kooky activities unrelated to employees’ work. I have attended workplace retreats where I learned beat-boxing and African drumming. I have heard about organisations that encourage employees to walk across hot coals, take military assault courses, and guide a raft down dangerous rapids. There are organisations that force their employees to stage a lingerie show, take part in a ‘bush-tucker trial’ by eating insects, and dress up in giant animal costumes to act out fairy tales. My cynical fellow participant in the mandala-colouring workshop described it as ‘bullshit’. She had chosen her words wisely.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y3srvaca>

### Research on anti-depressants

‘Do outcomes of clinical trials resemble those "real world" patients? A reanalysis of the star\*d antidepressant data set.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y396p86c>

## POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

### Universities

‘Never before has Britain had so many qualified graduates. And never before have their qualifications amounted to so little.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yxvcesks>

## EDUCATION

### Creationism

‘Sign the petition 2Tell the Welsh Government: Teach evolution, not creationism!’”

<http://tinyurl.com/yvka6dk>

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

### Moon landings

‘It took 400,000 Nasa employees and contractors to put Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon in 1969 – but only one man to spread the idea that it was all a hoax. His name was Bill Kaysing.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yy4kwx3t>

And: ‘Around the world, fact-checkers are popularly known for their work fighting political misinformation. But for the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11, many of them have prepared lists of moon-related debunks you just can’t miss. Now it’s your turn to check out the work of some of the International Fact-Checking Network’s verified signatories, and make sure that the information you’re consuming and spreading about the moon isn’t too out of this world.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yycrqgr>

## RELIGION AND CULTS

### Christian Science

‘The anti-medical dogma of Christian Science led my father to an agonising death.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y3lsbk6x>

### Conversion therapy

‘Man who ran conversion therapy to give people “freedom from homosexuality” comes out as gay.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y318s4ra>

And: ‘The day I met a ‘gay conversion therapist.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y5myvl5g>

## ECOLOGY

### Climate change

‘Priming critical thinking: Simple interventions limit the influence of fake news about climate change on Facebook.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yxpe8vnx>

### GMOs

‘A top public sector biotech official in Tanzania has confirmed that research using genetic engineering is not banned in the country, and that work on GMO maize and cassava is continuing as normal.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yvzr2n99>

### 5G and cancer

Does 5G pose health risks?’

<http://tinyurl.com/y3j3vnmk>

### Plastic straw ban

‘Plastic drinking straws will be banned in England from next April. In light of “overwhelming public support”, the government recently confirmed the new law, which aims to reduce the “environmental impact” of straws. But does the ban make sense? How much environmental impact do straws actually have?’

<http://tinyurl.com/y4mqfy9c>

### Chlorinated chicken

‘Which? disagrees that fears around chlorinated chicken are ‘unfounded’.

<http://tinyurl.com/y4dh7tal>

## MISCELLANEOUS

### Near-death experiences

‘With better CPR techniques, more people might live to tell the tale of what happens right before everything slips away.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y255ukde>

### Flat Earth

‘Many people who believe the Earth is not round first heard the idea on YouTube. But how important was the video-sharing website in helping the flat Earth movement grow?’

<http://tinyurl.com/yxqmy7t4>

### Loch Ness Monster

‘Inspired by the mock plan to storm Area 51, Scotland now has an event scheduled to definitively prove the existence of its own elusive creature: the Loch Ness monster.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2teujed>

But: ‘Loch Ness Contains No “Monster” DNA, Say Scientists.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6h4kbdu>

### Astrology

Astrology has not been proven to work – so why do so many people believe that it really does? Chris French (*for it is he*) gives us the answers.

<http://tinyurl.com/y6xd2lrx>

### Spiritualism

‘Two real-life hoaxes managed to fool the creator of Sherlock Holmes – and they help to reveal our own “metacognitive illusions” that influence our memory and perception.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y5wljr8l>

### Fortune telling

‘A self-proclaimed fortune teller in Florida was sentenced to nearly 3½ years in prison and ordered to repay \$1.6 million to a Texas woman who was conned into believing she was cursed.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y6ruz6ht>

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### EUROPE-WIDE EVENTS

The ECSO website has a calendar of events of skeptical interest taking place all over Europe, including the UK. See: <https://www.ecso.org/european-events/> (or [http://theesp.eu/events\\_in\\_europe](http://theesp.eu/events_in_europe)).

### THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

Chris French has organised an exciting programme of seminars for this academic year. Visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/speakers/>

Also of interest (and open to the public) is the programme of seminars organised by Goldsmiths Psychology Department which can be found at:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/psychology/dept-seminar-series/>

### SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events.

<http://tinyurl.com/lwohd4x>

### NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS FOR CURIOUS PEOPLE

November 29th and 30th, The  
Lowry, Manchester

‘Nine Lessons and Carols for Curious People has been an end of year tradition playing to sold-out audiences in London for over a decade. In fact, this year will be the tenth staging of the show. So to celebrate, for the first time ever, this annual celebration of the curious and the creative, this variety night like no other, will be combining ideas, experiments, science, songs, comedy, poetry and more at The Lowry in Manchester. The event will be hosted as always by QED regular Robin Ince, alongside Brian Cox, and ticketholders can expect to see a host of familiar faces from past QED events, and the very best of the UK science communication community.’ Tickets for each evening cost £23 and can be purchased at:

<https://cosmicshambles.com/ninelessons>

### CENTRE FOR INQUIRY UK

For details of upcoming events:

<http://centreforinquiry.org.uk/>

### CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

25 Red Lion Square, London  
WC1R 4RL

<http://conwayhall.org.uk/talks-lectures>

### LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

For details of meetings:

<http://forteanlondon.blogspot.co.uk/>

### COUNCIL OF EX-MUSLIMS OF BRITAIN

For details of meetings:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8s6od5r>

### SCIENCE EVENTS IN LONDON

‘Eventbrite’ lists a series of scientific meetings in London (some free, some not-so-free). At:

<http://tinyurl.com/m8374q9>

### FUNZING

‘Funzing’ organises evening talks at social venues in London, some being of interest to skeptics. See:

<http://uk.funzing.com/>

## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

### **The five presidents**

The mathematician, being a mathematician, immediately reduces the problem to numbers and calculates the number of combinations of 3 out of

5 items. But the psychologist realises that the fifth president must be one of those who died on July 4, otherwise the historian would not include him in the puzzle (and would thus be even more

amazed that of the first *four* presidents, three were born on July 4). So the calculation is the number of combinations of 2 out of 4, which is relatively easy to do without a formula.

### **About ASKE**

Founded in 1997, ASKE is an association of people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly magazine and newsletter. To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website or email:

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email: [aske1@talktalk.net](mailto:aske1@talktalk.net)

website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>