
Book Reviews



Ghost Stories and 'Ley Lines'

Poltergeist! By Colin Wilson. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1981. 382 pp. \$14.95.

Reviewed by Michael R. Dennett

The movie *Poltergeist*, produced by Steven Spielberg, attracted considerable attention as well as millions of patrons last summer. Although it was endorsed by psi researchers Charles Tart, William Roll, and D. Scott Rogo and billed as the "first real ghost story," I doubt that many movie-goers viewed it as anything but fiction. However, Colin Wilson's book *Poltergeist!* may be taken seriously. Unlike the cinema version, the book is not intended as fiction but rather as the subtitle states: "A Study in Destructive Haunting." As an author of more than fifty books, three of them best-sellers, Wilson's credentials sound impressive. The dust jacket states that "Colin Wilson has compiled a striking study of the phenomenon of ghosts and the powers of the mind, examining the evidence of similar haunting tales recorded throughout history." The reader is further promised that "Mr. Wilson develops the elements of a masterful and definitive theory . . . and draws startling and convincing conclusions . . ." *Poltergeist!* is published by the long-established and reputable G. P. Putnam's Sons, which is in itself an endorsement.

At first glance, *Poltergeist!* resembles one of Frank Edwards's assemblages of wild and woolly tales. On closer examination, the reader will realize that it is much more than a collection of inexplicable events. What Colin Wilson has done in this book is to present science with a unified-field theory for paranormal phenomena!

The central theme deals with the manifestation of spirits and, in particular, mischievous ghosts (poltergeists). The author derives his unified-field theory in his analysis of where and how spirits obtain their energy. Others who investigated goblins before Mr. Wilson did failed to perceive the big picture. As a dowser,

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Wilson claims to possess a special advantage in his search for hidden powers. The key, as it turns out, is in what the author calls "Ley Lines." Ley Lines, Wilson explains, are "in fact, lines of 'earth force.'" Ghosts are able to obtain their power through the Ley Lines that crisscross the earth's surface. According to Wilson, Ley Line hunters have noticed that "a remarkable number of reported hauntings, poltergeist occurrences, and sightings of 'unidentified flying objects' seemed to happen on them, particularly at the crossing point of one or more 'Leys.'"

Wilson believes that some spirits are discarnate humans. Living people, according to the author, produce an excess of energy that the body does not always control. When a leakage of this human force occurs, ghosts are able to siphon it off through the Ley Lines. Telepathy, psychokinesis, and clairvoyance are examples of this not fully explained human force. Not content with a theory that connects ESP and the spirit world, Wilson proceeds to link virtually every paranormal phenomenon to his interconnected energy field. Psychometry, levitation, and the existence of gnomes can be tied to the unified field. Not surprisingly, the Great Pyramid and Stonehenge turn out to be intersections of many Ley Lines. Ancient peoples, we learn, were more in tune with nature and therefore more aware of the forces that surrounded them. Medieval peoples, it appears, were on to something also; for Wilson confirms that there is evidence for possession by spirits. Reincarnation is a possibility, too. Perhaps most frightening is Wilson's revelation that black magic, Voodoo, and the casting of death spells are a reality.

Unfortunately, although Wilson is adept at making extraordinary claims with reckless abandon, he is not willing to back them up. The reader will search in vain for the slightest whiff of evidence about "possession by spirits" or for any data suggesting that an "earth force" actually exists. The author indeed holds himself above the facts. For anyone who might doubt the existence of goblins, Wilson writes that "the poltergeist is undoubtedly a reality, and that anyone who thinks otherwise . . . is being wilfully blind or stupid."

All of this is not to say that Wilson has not done any research. Investigation in this area was not easy, for as the author tells us "spirits are liars more often than not." Fortunately, there is Guy Playfair. Playfair, with whom Wilson met at length, has done a great deal of study into spooks and assorted types of black magic, most of it in Brazil. Playfair's work, judging from Wilson's description, was hopelessly incompetent in method and infantile in its conclusions. As an example, Wilson relates a story told by Playfair of a young woman who incurred a black magic curse or "trabalho" for removing a small statue of the sea goddess Vemanjá from its correct place. Although subjected to significant misfortune, according to the story, the woman was saved just in time by returning the idol to its rightful place and thus breaking the curse.

In my opinion, *Poltergeist!* displays none of the characteristics of a work by an accomplished author. The chapters are far too long and often tedious. Some sections ramble on and at times it is difficult to understand what theory the author favors. It is clear that on page after page the author is endorsing or inferring the existence of such things as fairies (with wings), auras, witches, automatic writing, and nereids. As an example, on page 56 he writes, "There have been dozens of well-authenticated cases of 'human electric batteries.'" In his conclusion, he writes about the spontaneous combustion of humans and, in Chapter 7, about a girl who "could read with her stomach."

One suspects that the entire book is a put-on. In one case, we read about the

appearance of King Arthur's ghost and, in another, about an encounter with the Devil. Yet Wilson's vehement attacks on doubters and his past record of works favorable to pseudoscience incline me to believe he is serious. Wilson is apparently not joking when he writes about the "remarkable account of a local sorcerer named Isidoro who was able to turn himself into a cassowary [a kind of ostrich]." These outrageous tales, untainted by even the slightest skepticism, are what the publisher calls a "striking study." Wilson's "masterful and definitive theory" is nothing more than an unwarranted assumption that powers that very likely don't exist are responsible for events that very likely don't occur.

There are other significant portions of *Poltergeist!* that cast doubt on Wilson's research or intentions. For instance, he refers to the Fox sisters on four separate occasions. In each case, he infers that the sisters were a part of an authentic phenomenon. The truth is that Margaret and Katherine Fox were frauds, something of which Colin Wilson must surely be aware. The Fox sisters had faked their many episodes of spirit communications (in the form of rapping sounds), and this has been known as a certainty since the evening of October 21, 1888, when the two of them appeared in front of a crowd of some two thousand people and demonstrated how they did it.

As is so often the case with books promoting fake science and quack theories, the author makes no attempt to refute the work of critics—in this instance, that of Milbourne Christopher and others on poltergeists. The publication of *Poltergeist!* as nonfiction by such a creditable publishing house indicates that now more than ever there is a need for the counterbalance of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER and CSICOP. •

The Future That Wasn't

Jack Gillen Predicts. By Jack Gillen. Grand Trine Publications, Hollywood, Fla., 1975. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Gordon B. Chamberlain

Like doctors, astrologers bury their mistakes—in the graveyard of oral tradition or in the morgues of old videotapes and back issues. Jack Gillen, atypically and unwisely, made a book out of his, detailing future events from 1975 through 1981. Published in 1975, *Jack Gillen Predicts* presented "simple unadorned statements of things to come . . . a roadmap to tomorrow" (p. xvii); and promised a sequel covering 1981–90. Now that the time has expired for the author's next to last dated forecast (the death in 1981 of the recently reelected Democratic president [p. 212]), let's see why the sequel has apparently been canceled.

Methodology: For people who believe this sort of thing, this is the sort of thing they believe. Houses and cusps, aspects and afflictions; a sun cycle rounded

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off to 20 years to match the presidential deaths (pp. 4–5) and an arbitrary 36-year cycle that makes the years 1765–1800 weak for the United States because of Saturn (p. 13); seven working planets (pp. 4–9), including the sun and the moon but excluding Uranus and beyond. The sun also rules “the U.S. and Russia . . . power, ambition, the white-skinned peoples of the world . . . health, principle, general prosperity and position . . . authority, energy, fire, glory, gold, hope, pride and persistence.” “Yellow-skinned or Oriental peoples” rate the moon, whose other responsibilities—*yin*, it would seem, to the sun’s *yang*—include “change, home, the environment . . . liquids, the mother, emotions, family . . . changes in the weather, restlessness in people,” and of course “laundry.” Venus rules the sexy Latins; language-lord Mercury, the bright verbal Jews; malefic Saturn, the blacks. Western astrology has always been culturally blinkered (Chinese and Maya systems are quite different), but has anyone besides Mr. Gillen depicted it as blatantly racist?

One feature may be the author’s own. Your fate is written in the stars from the moment you are born—right? Very well: to change your fate, change your birthdate. If not for individuals, this works for nations; all they need is a good political upheaval. Brazil, for instance, was born not by breaking with Portugal in 1822 or ousting its emperor in 1889, but on the “far more fortunate” April 21, 1960, when a junta took over “with the good aspects from the Sun to Jupiter” (pp. 134, 136). Comparable opportunities exist or have existed for Cambodia, Costa Rica, and Cuba (pp. 137, 149, 151, respectively). Israel might put an end to its problems with “a new and fortunate birthdate” (p. 176); but “Egypt, with a birthday of June 18, 1953, will never see peace” (p. 156). In Chinese geomancy (*feng-shui*), a family could change its luck by remodeling a house or moving an ancestral grave; the labor-saving West simply rewrites birthdates.

Now for the proof of the pudding. “I am reporting planetary influences,” the author warns (p. 56), “not making flat statements of what will occur”; but readers must have found his statements flat enough.

1975: “A National Health Insurance Program . . . will be a foregone conclusion” (p. 45); “I predicted a record high for gold in 1975 and I stand by that prediction” (p. 47; it was down all year); death of Chou En-lai (p. 49; not until 1976).

1976: Raiders in the Super Bowl (p. 61; Pittsburgh 21, Dallas 17); women’s liberation “taken for granted,” even in combat arms (p. 66); a new pope, “swarthy and very dark-skinned” (p. 60; Paul VI lived until 1978); a stock-market low on April 12 (p. 63; it was up); Castro and Sadat either ousted or dead (pp. 150, 156).

1977: “A ‘friendly’ virus will be discovered that can fight leukemia” (p. 72); King Hussein dead (p. 179) and Tito out (p. 208; he died in office in 1980); “revolt in France or Italy” (p. 77); Dow over 1000 (p. 69; not quite).

1978: “The four-day work week will be almost universal” (p. 86); “a tidal wave is expected for Miami” (p. 89); Laos ceases to exist as a nation (p. 180). Also a new emperor in Ethiopia (p. 160) to succeed Haile Selassie—who was ousted by a coup, apparently without Mr. Gillen’s noticing, in 1974.

1979: “We will be an ally . . . surprisingly, of Russia” (pp. 96–97); “a national transportation system is off the drawing boards” (p. 101); “legalized gambling . . . is now almost universal” (p. 97).

1980: Labour Party still “in firm control” of Great Britain (which the author Saxonishly alphabetizes as “England,” p. 179); Democratic president reelected

with black running-mate (p. 116); biggest California earthquake in history (p. 111); and biggest news of the year is when Russia puts "Blood on the Moon" (p. 195).

If somehow you missed all that, just think what you saw that Mr. Gillen didn't. Casting horoscopes for "selected countries through 1980" and using birth-dates he selected himself, he predicts "little or no political unrest" for Poland (p. 192), a nuclear-weapons buildup in the Shah's Iran (p. 173), and nothing at all for such unlisted countries as Afghanistan and El Salvador. An index, if there were one, would also conspicuously omit Camp David, the China-Vietnam conflict, ERA, both John Pauls, the oil glut, the 1980 Olympic boycott, single-parent families, *Star Wars* ripoffs, Margaret Thatcher, and video games.

Selections only? Certainly; only predictions big and specific enough to check. No sense giving Mr. Gillen credit for routine sports scandals, crime waves, labor troubles, or worries about inflation; no point poring over microfilms for every earthquake and plane crash; one needn't eat the whole egg to know it's rotten. Nor need we regret the aborted sequel, with its third-party presidential victory in 1984, a revolt in China, the outbreak of World War III, and the "New Ice Age" of the 1990s (pp. 211-13). For predictions up to publication date, Mr. Gillen's editors claimed 96.5 percent accuracy (p. xvi). Can it be that when an astrologer publishes in hard cover, as when a psychic performs under laboratory controls, unfriendly forces intervene to throw him off?

Yet *Jack Gillen Predicts* may still be useful. Social historians will find it a rich lode of the wish- and fear-fulfillment syndromes of the seventies. The author fears atomic war and overpopulation, but also inflation and crime; he hopes for fewer and cleaner cars, national health insurance, recycling, and women's lib; he believes in the California quake, the Age of Aquarius, and the Russian menace: in two words, granola populism. And a science-fiction writer could do worse than use Mr. Gillen's predictions for alternative history. A world without either Camp David or Khomeini has already served as the background for Paul Erdman's best-selling *Crash of '79*; now for one where technicians in Paraguay revolutionize the world energy problem (p. 189), "possible licensing for parenthood" sparks controversy in the U.S. (p. 74), Canada hosts the 1980 Olympics (p. 139) to the accompaniment of a superpower war scare and Russian nuclear tests on the moon (pp. 117, 195), and in 1981 a black vice-president succeeds to the White House (pp. 116, 212). If every astrological forecast designated only a single future out of the infinitude—one choice of forking paths in Borges's garden, one imaginable fate for Schrödinger's cat—how much less would true believers need to explain away!

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Some Recent Books

Listing here does not preclude more detailed review in a future issue.

Abell, George O. *Exploration of the Universe*, 4th ed. Saunders College Publishing, Philadelphia and New York, 1982. 721 pp. New edition of leading astronomical textbook. Excellent and thorough primer on all aspects of astronomy and an introduction to the rational exploration of nature for the liberal-arts student.

Broad, William, and Nicholas Wade. *Betrayers of the Truth: Fraud and Deceit in the Halls of Science*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982. 256 pp. \$14.95. Perceptive report on the recent cases of scientific fraud and the issues raised by them. (See listing in Spring *SI*, p. 74, based on a prepublication excerpt.) Only a few pages, in a chapter on "Self-Deception and Gullibility," are concerned with paranormal and nonmainline science subjects (the Levy fraud at the Rhine laboratory, the SRI tests of Uri Geller, and the Shroud of Turin Research Project). But the wider issues discussed are of concern to all. Also, if, as the authors suggest, the traditional scientific method is not adequate to detect fraud and self-deception in mainstream science, how much worse is the problem in the fringe- or proto-sciences?

Hardin, Garrett. *Naked Emperors: Essays of a Taboo-Stalker*. William Kaufmann, Los Altos, Calif., 281 pp. \$15.00, cloth; \$8.95 paper. Thirty essays on immigration, evolution, human ecology, and language by the always provocative Hardin. The essay "'Scientific Creationism': Marketing Deception as Truth," is of special interest here.

Parker, H. and D. *The Secret Self*. Self-published, Sydney, Australia. (Available from P.O. Box 68, Pendle Hill, NSW 2145, Australia.) 125 pp. \$5.95. Said to be the first book published on this worldwide sect also known as the "Nameless House Sect," "The Cooneyites," and "Two by Two preachers." Examines the claims of this sect to be directly descended from the time of Christ and finds it actually to have been founded in 1899 by William Irvine.

Webner, Klaus. *Die Nagora Fotoserie*. Klaus Webner, Zugspitzstrasse 56, 6200 Wiesbaden, West Germany, 1982. 32 pp. \$7.00, booklet. (Price includes airmail postage.) Study disproving the authenticity of the series of twelve UFO photographs made in 1971 by Rudi Nagora and his wife, widely published as real evidence of a flying saucer. In German. With 24 photos and 3 drawings.

—Kendrick Frazier

Articles of Note



- “Archaeological Chemists Grapple with Shroud of Turin.” *Chemical and Engineering News*, Feb. 21, 1983, pp. 34–35. Report on the continuing dispute between members of the STURP project and other scientists over interpretations of chemical microanalysis of the shroud.
- Cowling, T. G. “Astrology, Religion and Science.” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 23(4):515–526, December 1982. Article by mathematician tracing the history of astrology from the Chaldeans—for whom, given the state of their knowledge and traditions, “astrology provided a reasonable model”—to today. Because the need to compare astrological tenets with nature at each fresh step was too little appreciated, astrology is now a “stale, superstitious relic of what was once . . . a glorious philosophical attempt to understand and rationally explain the universe.”
- Dietz, Robert. “Scientists, Gamblers, and Magicians: Allies Against the Irrational.” *Humanist*, March–April 1983, pp. 9–11+. Interesting and important article from viewpoint of a professional gambler and handicapper about the skills and thought-processes they and magicians have cultivated that are helpful in analyzing paranormal claims and detecting deception and self-deception in paranormal experiments. As a matter of financial survival, professional gamblers, at least as much as scientists, have “undergone rigorous training to minimize their perceptual and reasoning biases,” says Dietz. “Gamblers and magicians can provide the sensitizing touch and trained eye science needs when studying paranormal claims and irrational beliefs.”
- Donnelly, Fred. “What the Suns and Stars Don’t Tell.” *Policy Options* (Canada), March/April 1983, p. 39. Commentary laments widespread publication of astrology columns and lack of science columns in newspapers.
- Downey, Charles. “UFOs Are Bunk!” *Kiwanis Magazine*, February 1983, pp. 34–37. The half of this article that actually deals with UFO claims (the first half is about scientific arguments over the likelihood of extraterrestrial intelligence) draws on the critical analyses of Alvin Lawson, James Oberg, and Phillip J. Klass.
- Dutch, Steven I. “Notes on the Nature of Fringe Science.” *Journal of Geological Education* 30:6–13 (1982). Excellent essay that includes sections entitled “Why Study Fringe Science?” “Fringe Science and Scientific Method,” and “Major Logical Fallacies of Fringe Science” (Dutch lists 11 types).
- Gardner, Martin. “Anti-Science: The Strange Case of Paul Feyerabend.” *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1982–83, pp. 32–34. Interesting discussion of the Berkeley philosopher who contends science is more like a church than a rational undertaking. To most philosophers, says Gardner, Feyerabend is considered a “brilliant but tiresome, self-centered, repetitious buffoon whose reputation derives mainly from the noise and confusion he generates and the savagery with which he pummels everybody who disagrees with him.”
- Gould, Stephen Jay. “Unconnected Truths.” *Natural History*, March 1983, pp. 22–28. Essay on what Gould considers one of the best examples of the difference

between science and pseudoscience. It concerns geologist-clergyman William Buckland's 1823 treatise contending that widespread gravels and organic remains in caves were evidence of a universal flood. But his theory was testable. When empirical evidence showed it to be wrong—the gravels and cave deposits were produced by episodes of continental glaciation, not a universal flood—he subjected his earlier arguments to rigorous self-criticism, found they did not hold up, and he and his leading supporter, the Rev. Adam Sedgwick, forthrightly recanted. Buckland, in fact, became one of England's first converts to glacial theory. The case illustrates the difference between dogmatism, which cannot change, and true science, which of course does. "The final irony and deep message," concludes Gould, "is simply this: flood theory, that centerpiece of modern creationism, was disproved 150 years ago, largely by professional clergymen who were also geologists, exemplary scientists, and creationists. The enemy of knowledge and science is irrationalism, not religion."

Patterson, John W. Review of "Creationism in the Science Class," a TV documentary on the creationism vs. evolution issue by KWVL-TV, the NBC affiliate in Waterloo, Iowa. Unpublished. (Review available from Patterson at Materials Science and Engineering, 110 Engineering Annex, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011.)

Rotton, James, I. W. Kelly, and James Frey. "Geophysical Variables and Behavior: X. Detecting Lunar Periodicities: Something Old, New, Borrowed, and True." *Psychological Reports*, 52(1983):111-16. Critique of errors in studies on phases of the moon and abnormal behavior. Extends and supports an earlier review by Campbell and Beets, which suggested that chance alone was operating in studies that found apparent relationships between phases of the moon and behavior. Rotton et al. find that "computational errors, inappropriate analyses, and violations of statistical assumptions are also responsible for positive findings in this area." They propose more appropriate procedures.

Shine, Adrian. "The Biology of Loch Ness." *New Scientist*, Feb. 17, 1983, pp. 462-67. Field leader of Loch Ness and Morar Project reports data "consistent with the presence of large animals." He suggests that technical means are now at hand "perhaps to show that there are monsters, perhaps to find, at least beyond reasonable doubt, that their existence is too unlikely to warrant further study."

Strentz, Herb. "What the Seers Thought They Saw." *Des Moines Register*, December 31, 1982. Column by Drake journalism dean finding that of 55 "psychic" forecasts he kept track of in 1982, two were half-right, a score of 1 for 55. The all-star psychics Strentz has tracked since 1978 are now 1 for 315.

Following are some of the notable articles in the media about James Randi's Project Alpha Experiment: "Psychic Abscam," *Discover*, March 1983, pp. 10-12 (this was the first article announcing its results); "Magician's Effort to Debunk Scientists Raises Questions," *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1983, p. C3; "The Amazing Randi Hoodwinks the Spoonbenders," *New Scientist*, p. 287, February 3, 1983; "Magicians Score a Hit on Scientific Researchers," *Washington Post*, March 1, 1983. Randi's two-part formal report on the experiment begins in this issue of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.

—Kendrick Frazier

Films/TV Programs

"I Am No God." CM Films, Perth, Australia, Carmelo Musca, producer. 72 minutes, 1982. A film about the visit by a group of Australians to Filipino psychic surgeon Alex Orbito. The film shows their expectations before leaving Australia, their operations, and their reactions to the operations. The producer filmed the operations with a hand-held camera in front of the surgeon while secretly running a hidden camera without the knowledge of the surgeon. The film shows sleight-of-hand trickery so clearly that even parapsychologists have had to admit that Orbito uses trickery "sometimes." The film has been shown on Australian television. — *Review note by Mark Plummer.*

"Magic or Miracle." NBC Television Network, 9-10 P.M., E.S.T., February 8, 1983. Executive Producer, George Schlatter. A George Schlatter Production. The first half of this television special was billed as a confrontation between "psychic" Uri Geller and master magician James Randi. Unfortunately, the producers let Geller, who was paid an enormous sum for an afternoon of filming at his home, get away with too many bald assertions that "what magicians do is trickery, what I do is real." Randi was not allowed to confront Geller in person, which would have made for a lively encounter. The following segment was spent with Randi on "a search for a genuine miracle" among the fire-walkers of Sri Lanka, psychic surgeons of the Philippines (a blatant verdict of fraud was convincingly presented), and faith healers. The final 15 minutes came alive with a newly filmed segment about Randi's just-revealed Project Alpha. Included were interviews with Michael Edwards and Steve Shaw, the two young magicians-posing-as-psychics Randi arranged to have tested at Washington University and who easily managed to deceive the scientists into believing they had real paranormal powers. This redeemed the program from a skeptical observer's point of view.

—K.F.

The Wonder and Magic of the Truth About Nature

There are some not-very-bright and/or badly educated people who complain, with apparent sincerity, that scientific research destroys the wonder and magic of nature. One can imagine the indignant reaction of such poets as Tennyson or Shelley to this nonsense, and surely it is better to know the truth than to dabble in delusions, however charming they may be. Almost invariably, the truth turns out to be far more strange and wonderful than the wildest fantasy.

—Arthur C. Clarke, in *The View From Serendip* (New York: Random House, 1977), originally in *Mars and the Mind of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

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(other names are being added)

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Stephen Barrett, M.D., *Co-chairman,
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Mario Bunge, *University of Montreal*
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