

A Final Interview with Milbourne Christopher

Michael R. Dennett

Milbourne Christopher, who died June 17, 1984, in New York City at the age of 70, was an internationally renowned magician. He had been interested in magic from the age of six, when he performed his first trick. A professional conjurer since the 1930s, he earned a reputation as one of the best. He held six trophies for professional originality, and in 1975 he was elected by a conclave of the Society of American Magicians to magic-dom's "Hall of Fame." He won the Magic Circle Silver Wand award and was named "Magician of the Year" and a "Star of Magic." He was awarded the Royal Medallion of the All-India Magic Club and was an honorary vice-president of the London Magic Circle.

Milbourne Christopher was also a leading critic of the paranormal. He had long been in the forefront of the investigation of psychic claims, and when CSICOP was established in 1976 he became a founding Fellow. His interest in psychic phenomena stemmed from his discovery, as a teenager, of deception and trickery employed by local mediums. Throughout his career, he investigated crystal-gazers, future-tellers, clairvoyants, fire-walking, and living burials. His work in this field led him to call for stringent precautions by parapsychologists when attempting to research the area of psychic phenomena. He urged that parapsychologists employ qualified magicians as "observers."

Christopher was a frequent guest on television and radio. He performed on many TV specials as a magician and co-hosted both the "Today Show" and the "Mike Douglas Show." He was a biographer of Houdini, and he maintained an outstanding collection of memorabilia about the great escape-artist's career.

*He was the author of more than twenty books, including *Mediums, Mystics and the Occult* (Crowell, 1975), *ESP, Seers and Psychics* (Crowell, 1970), *Search for the Soul* (Crowell, 1979, reviewed in SI, Spring 1980), and *Houdini: The Untold Story* (Crowell, 1969). His most recent book is *Houdini's "Magic in Boston, 1792-1915"* (Meyerbooks, 1983). His books on psychics and mediums are entertaining and readable critiques and are gentle in tone and spirit. He will be missed.*

This final interview with Milbourne Christopher was conducted for the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER in 1983 by Michael Dennett, chairman of the Northwest Skeptics.



Christopher concentrating on ESP cards

SI: You have been an outspoken critic of the paranormal for many years. Do you have any regrets?

M.C.: Certainly not. I have always given an honest opinion about whatever phase of it I've been asked.

SI: As a magician and the chairman of the Occult Investigation Committee of the Society of American Magicians, do you feel that conjurers have an obligation to speak out about the paranormal and particularly ESP?

M.C.: I do not think that magicians have an obligation to speak out against the occult, but I do believe that magicians frequently can help the public by pointing out that alleged psychics are using trick devices and tricky procedures.

SI: In your work on the Occult Investigation Committee, have you ever run across a trick you couldn't do?

M.C.: Thinking back, there may have been some feats through the years that I could not do, either because my hands were too large or too small or because of some other physical restriction. But I've never run across any proof of extrasensory perception.

SI: Recently, on a national television show in which James Randi

appeared, there was a demonstration of fire-walking. You have investigated fire-walking; can you comment?

M.C.: The fire walk on the show, I think, could have been explained by Randi had he wished to do so. I have done a great amount of research on this topic and I have walked on fire myself.

SI: What was the most intriguing case of an alleged paranormal phenomenon you have ever been involved in?

M.C.: Possibly the Enfield case in England. I was there when the "strange" things started happening in this little suburban section of London. It was one of the few alleged poltergeist cases in which I was involved where the strange things happened when I was in the house. Normally, when I go to a poltergeist house the "haunting" influences disappear immediately. But there I had a chance to observe the techniques.

SI: What were the techniques?

M.C.: A little girl who wanted to cause trouble and who was very, very clever.

SI: In Colin Wilson's latest book, *Poltergeist*, he mentions the Enfield case. Mr. Wilson does not make any reference at all to you regarding this incident but does rely on the research of Guy Playfair.

M.C.: I think it would be illogical that Wilson would mention me. I should add that Playfair wrote an entire book on this one case.

SI: Wilson makes Playfair the hero of his latest book and strongly implies that Playfair's research is sound.

M.C.: My feelings are just the reverse of Wilson's. I have no confidence in Playfair's writing at all. When I was in England I spent most of one night with Playfair on the Enfield case and came to the conclusion I already mentioned. I should add that there were many others who were critical of the Enfield case.

SI: You recently appeared on the Candy Jones radio show in New York City as a skeptic of the paranormal. Do you feel that this type of public appearance is effective?

M.C.: Yes. I frequently have been on the Candy Jones show and before that the Long John Nebel show and many programs all across the country. Some I do by telephone, most when I am in a particular city. Recently, the ABC television station here had a week devoted to the occult, and they asked me to make comments, which I did, and these comments were inserted throughout the programs.

SI: You once had a close encounter with the prominent parapsychologist J. G. Pratt. Could you relate to us the circumstances of this meeting?

M.C.: Yes. This was at the time of another celebrated poltergeist case: the Seaford [New York] case. Pratt and his wife visited my apartment, and I caused a number of things to happen here that had been reported earlier in Seaford. The business of a figurine flying across the room, the toppling of bottles in the bathroom, etc. It was very interesting to see his

reaction. I let him go throughout the house. He went into the next room and asked to have the lights turned off so that he could see if there were any holes in the wall; which there weren't, by the way.

SI: Now, as I understand it, you had caused a figurine to fly across the room, as is common in the poltergeist phenomenon?

M.C.: You say I caused it. Let me say that we were talking about the [Seaford] case and I called attention to the figurine, and suddenly it took off, apparently on its own. Again, later when we were talking about bottle-tops popping, suddenly there was a popping noise. He went down the hall and into the bathroom, and there was a bottle on its side with its contents pouring out.

SI: Obviously Mr. Pratt did not think a poltergeist phenomenon had taken place, but he could not explain the events. Correct?

M.C.: He did not know how I had accomplished these effects. The fact that I was critical of the subject and was a professional magician and made no psychic claims naturally did not lead him to believe that this was supernatural. But if he couldn't explain what had happened here, which in essence was what happened at the house in Seaford, why would he be eligible to explain what happened there?

SI: Uri Geller, among others, has been financially very successful as a psychic. He is also a former magician, how do you react to his success?

M.C.: When you say that he is a former magician, I disagree with you. To the best of my knowledge, throughout his career he has professed to have some mysterious power that he still claims to have. He uses magicians' methods: trickery. In my opinion, he was never a magician but is an outright charlatan.

SI: You have taken shots at quite a number of fake scientists, including phrenologists, teacup readers, and numerologists. What about graphologists? Is it not possible that one's handwriting can reveal his or her character?

M.C.: Whether or not character can be revealed by graphology, I don't know. Certainly someone who is very, very familiar with handwriting and the nervous system can learn from the handwriting a lot about the nature of the person. In other words, in my opinion, if you had a certain illness you would write one way and if you were perfectly healthy you would write another way. When you get into that area it is worthy of study.

SI: What would you say about the person who generally represents him or herself as a graphologist?

M.C.: I am very unimpressed. I was speaking of people who have actually made a study of handwriting and writing under stress. Those who claim to delve deep into the human being and tell what will happen in the future do not impress me at all.

SI: It has been said that Houdini was the greatest magician of all



Milbourne Christopher is seen here at work as a magician with his "poltergeist cabinet." The cabinet was used in an act from the show "Christopher's Wonders," which toured the British Isles after its New York premier in the 1960s.

time. As one of his biographers, can you set the record straight about where he stood on the occult?

M.C.: Houdini was the greatest showman among magicians to date and it is doubtful that he will be topped. As a young man he was intrigued by the occult, until he found that there was fraud in it. There is a parallel here. As a boy in Baltimore, when I began studying conjuring, I also heard of people who were doing marvelous things. That led to my interest in investigations into the occult. Getting back to Houdini, after the death of his mother, he had a real reason for going to those who claimed to communicate with the dead. If he could have reached her, he certainly would have been delighted, but again he saw fraud. I have many of his unpublished reports on his investigations, which one of these days I must write up. I think he was completely sincere in these investigations, and he was greatly distressed by the trickery he found.

SI: Houdini met Sir Arthur Conan Doyle on a trip to England. Doyle, who was a strong believer in the paranormal, was convinced that Houdini possessed some extrasensory powers. Is this accurate?

M.C.: Yes. Doyle did believe that Houdini could cause himself to disintegrate or that he could seep out through a crack in a door or a keyhole and then reassemble his body on the other side. Doyle was a

brilliant writer and very rational when he wrote about Sherlock Holmes, but in his investigations of the occult another side of the man is shown. This other side is still evident today in scientists and investigators who are brilliant chemists or analysts, and so on, but have this blank spot in their reasoning. When they are up against what they think are psychic phenomena, the casual observer is amazed by what these people say they believe.

SI: You have been involved in investigating some psychic healers. What is your opinion of them?

M.C.: This healing business is a great, great problem. What causes healing is known in some areas, but in others we don't know. I abhor the psychic surgeon type of healer who allegedly plunges his hand into the body of someone and removes an organ. This is obvious fraud. On the other hand some ailments of a nonphysical nature can be, I think, cured by suggestion.

SI: Do you mean psychosomatic illnesses?

M.C.: Yes.

SI: What about astral projection?

M.C.: I think it is nonsense. It's one thing to claim to project yourself to a distant place and another to give proof that you were there. It seems to me it would be very simple to prove under test conditions if you could really do it.



Milbourne Christopher on NBC's "Tonight Show" demonstrating how "mediums" create certain effects. In this photo, with Kay Ballard and host Johnny Carson, Christopher was using a collapsible metal pole, or "reaching rod," produced from his pocket with his free hand. The reaching rod, used in the dark, is employed so that a "spirit" can touch someone's arm.

SI: Have you ever met Ingo Swann?

M.C.: I have been in his company, yet I have not talked with him.

SI: On that occasion did he offer to prove that astral projection is possible?

M.C.: No. He is, by the way, one of the cleverest in the field. In my book *Search for the Soul*, there is an account of tests run on him by the American Society for Psychical Research in New York, which should be required reading for anyone fascinated by the topic.

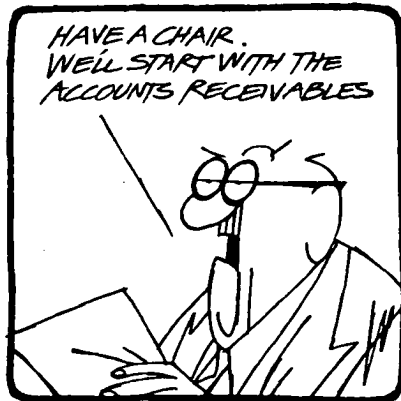
SI: Can you give any advice to the average person on how to handle claims of the paranormal that he or she might encounter.

M.C.: My recommendation would be to study the subject. Look at the critical side as well as the affirmative side. Knowledge is the essential thing.

SI: You have been investigating the paranormal a long time. There seem to be more active skeptics today. Can you offer any advice to the younger skeptics.?

M.C.: Quite frequently skeptics can appear to the public as unreasonable as the believers. I think it is very important that whoever discusses a case should present it in such a way that it will not antagonize the readers or listeners. ●

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