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OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

## WAITING FOR GHOSTS

*The many careers of Joe Nickell, paranormal investigator.*

BY BURKHARD BILGER



*Frauds use similar tricks, Nickell says, whether they're faking U.F.O.s or Jesus Christ.*

The village of Lily Dale, New York, has been home to strange doings for so long that it hardly calls attention to itself anymore. Its brightly painted Victorian homes, clustered by the cobalt waters of Cassadaga Lake, an hour southwest of Buffalo, could belong to almost any artists' colony or vacation retreat. On summer days, the volunteer fire department throws barbecues and pancake breakfasts, and the citizens sun themselves on their front porches, calling out to one another across the narrow, sloping streets. Were it not for the wooden signs that hang from nearly every house—"Virgil Patterson, Medium," "Ghost Crossing," "Readings Available"—you might never guess that this is the world's largest center for the religion of Spiritualism. Yet, for ten weeks

every summer, nearly twenty-five thousand visitors come here to talk to their dead. Lily Dale, they believe, is a kind of satellite dish for the spirit world.

On a recent afternoon, a hundred and fifty people were gathered in a forest clearing near the town's pet cemetery, facing the remains of an ancient oak known as Inspiration Stump. For the past hour, a succession of mediums had come before the crowd, conveyed a few messages from the dearly departed, and disappeared into the trees again. Now a woman with red hair and a flowing white blouse glided onstage, her eyes bulging with precognition. "You, in the violet shirt," she shouted, lifting a bony finger toward an elderly woman with thick glasses and white curls. "I see a man with silver hair. He's worried

about something in your basement, something structural. He's saying you can't put off fixing it anymore." The old woman blinked and braced for more, but the medium had already moved on to the next spirit in line. The afterlife, it seemed, was thronging with communicants.

Looking around at the crowd, I didn't see a single sideward glance or quizzical smile, and the strength of all that belief was a little unsettling. Already that morning, a man with snow-white hair and a blissful mien had ministered to me at a "healing service" in the Spiritualist church, mumbling incantations as he laid his hands on my forehead. Later, during a private reading by the Reverend John White, a vice-president of the Spiritual Science Fellowship, I was told that I was an Anglo-Saxon crusader in a previous life, that I had a Native American spirit guide, that I would one day go bungee-jumping on a "spiritual warrior quest" to cure my fear of heights, and that my body needed more antioxidants. I couldn't really see myself in what he said (though I am afraid of heights), or bring myself to believe, as one medium put it, that educated people give off a pink aura, while extroverts glow yellow. But the people at Lily Dale listened with rapt expressions. When the spirits advised one man to go back to school, another to lay off sweet pickles, they nodded their heads and waited for the next revelation.

All except one. As the crowd got up to leave, I caught sight of a curious figure standing at the back. He was tall and bulky, with dark shades and a battered straw hat. When I walked down the aisle past his row, he fell in step beside me, his lips pursed beneath a trim gray mustache. "I changed my look in the car before I came over," he murmured, as the crowd dispersed. "You wouldn't want them to recognize me."

His name was Joe Nickell, and this was one of his simpler disguises. He has been known to shave his mustache, walk with a cane, or do any number of things to fool his suspects, who know his usual persona all too well. At the age of fifty-eight, Nickell is the country's most accomplished investigator of the paranormal. He has appeared on "Oprah," "20/20," "Larry King Live," and dozens of other television shows—a sharp-tongued and amiably pompous old gumshoe, with

thinning gray hair and shopworn tweeds. He has written or co-written sixteen books, all of which are still in print. The latest is called "Real-Life X-Files."

Like a lot of people, I first heard of Nickell through one of his alter egos. I'd been told that he is an expert on antique ink and paper, and the forensic analysis of historic documents. His Ph.D. dissertation was on literary investigation, and in 1990 he published one of the few sourcebooks in the field, "Pen, Ink & Evidence." Nickell has since been asked to authenticate everything from manuscripts of the Gettysburg Address to "The Bondwoman's Narrative," which is believed to be the first novel written by a black woman in America. When I met him, he was embroiled in a debate on the authorship of the poem "An Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas," which is better known as "The Night Before Christmas" and is perhaps the country's most famous poem.

But all that, I found, was just moonlighting. Nickell's day job is with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP, for short). Lily Dale wasn't among his current targets, but it was a good example of the kinds of communities he tends to infiltrate. We had arranged this rendezvous earlier that day. Now, as we walked back into town, Nickell said nothing for a while. He has an odd fondness for Lily Dale. Its mediums are believers rather than showmen or frauds. They have to be active members of the Spiritualist church in order to own a house in town, and their psychic abilities must be tested and approved by the Lily Dale Board of Directors. Any medium who has had three or more complaints lodged against him in a year has to be retested.

Still, few mediums can stand up to careful scrutiny. Two years ago, "Dateline NBC" asked Nickell to serve as a consultant for a segment on the medium John Edward, the host of the show "Crossing Over." At Nickell's urging, the producers kept Edward and his audience apart before the show, so that he couldn't glean any information for his psychic readings. During the taping, though, Edward surprised everyone. He communicated with a spirit named Anthony, who appeared to be the dead father of one of the show's cameramen. When Edward mentioned a ring, the camera-



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man recalled that he had slipped one on his father's finger at the funeral. "That did seem kind of amazing," Nickell told me. Only later did Edward admit that he had talked to the cameraman about his father once before, while they were shooting a roll of background footage for the show.

"We caught him cheating," Nickell said, but his voice held an odd disappointment. Someday, he insists, his investigations may unveil a wonder that even science can't explain away. Yet his subjects inevitably fail him. A hundred and twenty-three years ago, when Lily Dale was founded, the dead at least had style. Western New York was known as the "burned-over district" then—a crucible for Mormonism, Christian Science, Seventh-Day Adventism, and countless cults and utopian colonies. To attract audiences, Spiritualists levitated objects during séances, conjured "spirit paintings" of the dead out of thin air, and covered entire slates in ghostly Victorian prose. "Oh, my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I'm through," Harry Houdini's dead mother told him when she contacted him through a medium in 1922. Never mind that she had spoken only German and broken English when she was alive.

Now, after a long decline, Spiritualism has made a comeback. Every major network has put mediums on prime time, and cable is filled with tales of the paranormal. Last year, a Gallup poll found that half of all Americans believe in E.S.P., more than forty per cent believe in demonic possession and haunted houses, and about a third believe in astrology, clairvoyance, and ghosts. The dead have our full attention, it seems, yet the most they can muster is some stale pop psychology and a few tips on home repair. "If they've crossed to the other side, why don't they have anything meaningful to say?" Nickell said. Then he added, in a lower voice, "And, if they do, for heaven's sake why can't they speak up?"

Nickell calls himself a skeptic, but he means the word more as a term of affiliation than as a habit of mind. Since CSICOP was founded, in 1976, it has spawned an international movement of humanists and rationalists. The committee, headed by Paul Kurtz, a retired philosophy professor, supports scholarly

critiques of pseudoscience and publishes the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*, for which Nickell writes a regular column. (He is the committee's only full-time investigator, and he has a small endowment for that purpose.) At last count, CSICOP and its offshoots had some fifty thousand donors and subscribers. Together, Kurtz says, they represent "the largest free-thought movement in the history of this country."

The CSICOP headquarters are situated on the outskirts of Buffalo, in a modern glass-and-stucco building that seems meant to suggest the purity and rigor of a rational mind. Nickell doesn't have much patience with its pretensions. Leading me down an enclosed walkway that connects to an older section of the building, he pointed to a small courtyard off to the side. "That's our combination picnic area and U.F.O. landing pad," he said. "We ask that only small U.F.O.s land there. For the larger ones, there's a wilderness area on the other side." When we came to a door that had a sticker of a crossed-out alien on it, he stopped. Above the lintel, a small sign had been posted: "AREA 51. Top-Secret Research Facility. No Trespassing. Violators Will Vanish Without a Trace." Nickell reached for the knob and paused, fixing me with a hard stare. "Prepare yourself," he said.

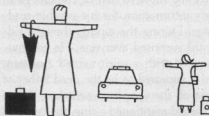
Inside were two radically different spaces, like parallel universes brought briefly into contact. Nickell's laboratory was to the right: small and brightly lit, with white counters and walls, an array of microscopes and burners, and a cabinet filled with chemicals. Directly ahead were the holdings of the Skeptisium: an online exhibit of mementos and artifacts, collected over a lifetime of snooping around haunted houses, revival tents, and U.F.O. conventions. Its shelves and bookcases overflowed with astrology kits, voodoo dolls, energy stones, religious fetishes, shrunken heads, and pyramid power devices. Across the room, a ghostly blond boy, long deceased, gazed

sadly from a spirit painting at a miniature shrine to "The X-Files." What space remained had been invaded by aliens of all sizes and species—stuffed, inflated, ceramic, and quilted; shaped into pencil boxes, night-lights, and gumball machines.

It was a detailed inventory of American superstition, a catalogue of a century's mad invention. It was also, quite literally, a little boy's dream. Growing up in West Liberty, Kentucky, in the foothills of the Appalachians, Nickell was an exceptionally curious child. "I dreamed of becoming a magician," he told me. "I dreamed of becoming an investigator. I dreamed of becoming lots of things, and eventually I became most of them." His father was a postmaster, a science buff, and an amateur magician; his mother was the valedictorian of her class, and they indulged his obsessions to a fault. When Joe became interested in magic, his father taught him some of the tricks that he knew. When he turned to detective work, his parents bought him a professional fingerprinting kit and let him cover the house in black and white powders. (He sent his five best sets of prints to J. Edgar Hoover, who sent him a congratulatory letter.) Before long, he had set aside a room as a crime lab, stocked with the kinds of combustibles that are now carefully tracked by the C.I.A.

"I never did get a formal chemistry background," Nickell said, as he showed me his lab. "But all those things have stayed with me." He uses sodium hydroxide and potassium ferrocyanide, for instance, to test the composition of inks in suspected forgeries. To search for "forger's tremor" and other signs of fraud, he lays documents under a microscope or enhances their script with ultraviolet light. Like most of his areas of expertise, this one is largely self-taught. He learned to recognize antique inks by re-creating them with oak galls and rainwater. He developed an eye for forgery by learning to mimic the world's most famous signatures. "Your Washington is even more magnificent than your Hitler," Charles Hamilton, who exposed the Hitler diaries as frauds, once wrote him. "Soon you will be able to reproduce Shakespeare, and then we can both retire to the south of France and luxuriate with beautiful girls."

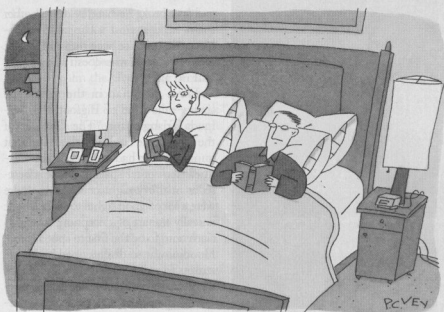
Forgers and frauds tend to use similar tricks, Nickell says, whether counterfeit-



ing Hitler, U.F.O.s, or Jesus Christ. The Shroud of Turin, for instance, is said to have had Christ's image burned into it by a burst of radiance at his resurrection. The image looks so much like a photographic negative, believers say, that no medieval forger could possibly have made it. Tests have shown, however, that the "bloodstains" on the shroud are really ochre and vermilion paint, and carbon dating has placed its manufacture between 1260 and 1390 A.D. In his book "Inquest on the Shroud of Turin," Nickell explained how a similar image could be made with powdered pigments and a bas-relief sculpture. To illustrate, he created a Shroud of Bing Crosby.

As we talked, Nickell reached across the counter and pulled out a test tube that was half filled with a congealed, reddish-brown substance. "Have you ever heard of the miracle of San Gennaro?" he asked. In the early fourteenth century, the Cathedral of Naples, in Italy, began to covet one sacred relic above all others: the blood of St. Januarius, or San Gennaro. This blood, sealed inside an ornate reliquary, is said to remain perfectly solid until a priest who is truly inspired by God prays over it. Only then does the blood begin to flow. The effect has baffled generations of observers—even if it can be explained scientifically, how could a medieval Italian have achieved it?—and their bafflement has been taken as proof of the miracle's authenticity.

"It's a classic example of an argument made from ignorance, which is the whole basis of the paranormal," Nickell said. "They're not selling you an answer; they're selling you a mystery." In the late nineteen-eighties, Nickell, together with a forensic analyst from Orlando named John Fischer, set about re-creating the miracle, using only the simplest substances and techniques. After nearly three years of research, they hit upon a solution. By heating olive oil and beeswax in a double boiler, combining the liquids in precise quantities, and adding some iron oxide as a dye, they could make a blood-red liquid that would congeal in the cool air of a church vault. "But if a priest took the reliquary out and placed it on the altar, surrounded by candles, it would heat up again," Nickell said. He took the tube from his left hand, where he had been warming



*"Perhaps we should start reading books about having a child."*

it, and gave it a quick shake. "It's a simple thing, really," he said, watching the "blood" flow down the inside of the glass tube. "And it's a miracle."

It's doubtful that Nickell's experiment convinced many believers. The Cathedral would not allow the blood to be removed from its vial for testing. (A group of Italian chemists came up with another solution at around the same time—a "thixotropic gel" that turned solid when at rest, liquid when shaken—but that, too, was ignored.) Even if they had, the examination itself might have been said to dispel the blood's virtues. Miracles, like subatomic particles in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, seem to change form in the very act of analysis.

This doesn't bother Nickell much. Although he has an abiding contempt for paranormal frauds, he feels a certain kinship with true believers. His mother was a devout member of the Disciples of Christ, and he knows, at first hand, the appeal of unreasonable devotion. "Anything I've ever done, I've done fanatically," he says. "Anything worth doing is worth doing to the extreme." After his boyhood worship of J. Edgar Hoover, he grew to despise what the government stood for. He opposed the Vietnam War, even when his older brother became a

captain in the Marines. (The two didn't speak for thirty years.) In 1967, he was teargassed beside the steps of the Pentagon, in the protest described in Norman Mailer's "The Armies of the Night." He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., and kept the draft board at bay for a while by becoming a VISTA volunteer in the Deep South. When he was finally called for military service, in 1968, he fled to Canada.

It was in Toronto that he fell back on the tricks he had learned as a boy. He put together shows as Janus the Magician, Mendell the Mentalist, and Mister Twister the Magic Clown. In the summer, he worked as the house magician at the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame, in Niagara Falls. In later years, he headed out to the Yukon Territory, where he dealt cards, prospected for gold, ran riverboats, and m.c.'d the cancan show at Diamond Tooth Gertie's casino. "God help us if Nickell ever has an identity crisis," one of his friends joked at the time. "There'll be twenty of him running around not speaking to each other."

There is a picture of Nickell in those days, slouched against a wall in a magic-and-novelty shop, with a cigarette hanging from his lips. His body is thin and rangy, and his face has a wolfish look, with small, bright, eager eyes. He got into a lot of fights back then, he told me,

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and once broke his hand beating another man's head against a bar table in Toronto. "I guess I've been the kind of guy, most of my life, who doesn't like to take guff off anybody."

For a magician in the nineteen-sixties—the time of Bigfoot, the Bermuda Triangle, and "The Chariots of the Gods" (the book, which argued that human culture had been seeded by creatures from outer space, became a best-seller in thirty-eight countries)—there were a lot of good fights to pick. Magic is really the art of deception, so magicians tend to be the first to spot a fraud. Houdini was so disillusioned by his attempts to contact his dead mother that he offered five thousand dollars to anyone who could demonstrate true supernatural powers. Then he chronicled their failures in his book "A Magician Among the Spirits." When Spiritualism began to reemerge from the sideshows, in the nineteen-sixties, magicians were there to greet it once again. Three of the founding members of CSICOP were magicians—Ray Hyman, Martin Gardner, and James (the Amazing) Randi. They quickly exposed psychics like Uri Geller, who claimed that he could bend silverware with his mind. When Geller visited the staff of *Time*, Randi posed as a reporter and caught him bending a fork by hand.

Nickell himself toyed with tarot cards as a young man, but the claims for the paranormal soon grew too suspect for him to ignore. Inspired by Houdini, he set about investigating some local superstitions. In Toronto, for instance, he showed that the haunted footsteps in the infamous Mackenzie House were really coming from a late-night cleaning crew in the building next door. But he soon got tired of dabbling. He wanted to master detective work, to study it like a science—and to keep getting paid for putting on disguises.

"The local detective agency didn't have any openings at first," he recalls. "But when the supervisor heard I was a magician he was putty in my hands." During the next two years, Nickell was sent out on long undercover assignments as a tavern waiter, a steelworker, a shipping clerk, and a forklift driver. "I would infiltrate these theft rings, set them

up, and bust them," he says. "And the irony was that I was a federal fugitive the whole time." By 1977, when Jimmy Carter granted draft dodgers an unconditional pardon, Nickell had known every species of con artist and true believer, even as he had learned the cost of sticking to his own beliefs. He was ready to be a paranormal investigator.

This past June, I joined Nickell at the Fourth World Skeptics Conference, in Burbank, California. It was hard to believe such gatherings exist, but the skeptics, for once, had quelled their doubts and made the pilgrimage. The Hilton convention center had three large halls devoted to sessions on creationism, urban legends, fringe psychotherapies, and other topics. Many of the speakers were eminent scientists—Marvin Minsky, a world authority on artificial intelligence, gave the keynote address—and the assembled mind power was impressive. Still, attendance was disappointing. "I can go to almost any 'Star Trek' convention and get fifty thousand people," one skeptic was heard to say. "This is the World Congress and you've only got five hundred."

I asked Ray Hyman, who is now a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Oregon, why his colleagues were so few, so old, and so predominantly white and male. He shook his head sadly. "The big question is why there are any of us at all," he said. Science is hardly a safeguard against gullibility, he added. Some of the most persuasive

kooks are those who have mastered one area of research and presume to make pronouncements about another. The chemist Linus Pauling, for example, won two Nobel Prizes yet spent the last years of his life touting vitamin C as a cure-all. Humans have evolved to be a credulous species, Hyman concluded. We're dependent on social groups for our survival, and those groups tend to be based on shared beliefs. "What you have here are mavericks, genetic mutants."

Skeptics can take an almost unseemly pleasure in this characterization. In one session of the conference, a jittery British psychologist named Richard Wiseman showed a videotape of a study he



had done on firewalking. Skeptics had previously demonstrated that almost anyone can cross fifteen or twenty feet of live coals without burning his feet. But Wiseman wanted to test the firewalkers' claim of a "psychic shield." He had a sixty-foot-long pit dug and filled with burning timber, swept the ash from the red-hot embers, then invited four professional firewalkers to traverse it. "To do it safely, you have to reach a state of personal empowerment," one of them told him before setting forth. "A kind of energetic change in the structure of your body that can protect you." The experiment ended, for that contestant and two others, with a mad dash to the first-aid tent, where a paramedic tended to their second-degree burns. ("I should have had a homeopath waiting in another tent," Wiseman quipped. "And then seen which tent they chose.") The fourth contestant bowed out at the last minute, saying that her guardian angel had inexplicably fled.

Such triumphs are rare, though. The conference was largely a tale of futility—of brave but overmatched skeptics piling up sandbags of logic to slow a never-ending tide of credulity. "It is bad, it is very bad," a Siberian skeptic told me at a cocktail party one night. The media have convinced many Russians that powerful "torsion fields" can be sent through the earth to control the brains of Americans, he said. "I wonder how they fool so many people." Next to him, a Mexican skeptic was saying that government officials in his country take seminars on how to tap into the power of angels. Peru has too many psychics, France too many aromatherapists, and the Netherlands too many fad diseases. ("It's too cloudy for U.F.O.s," a Belgian skeptic said.) When I asked an Indian skeptic what problems his country was facing, he chuckled. "Problems? In India, there are always problems," he said. "Right now, we have too many god-men. These are men who say they are gods. We have hundreds, thousands . . ." He trailed off, gazing glumly at his empty glass, then went to get another drink.

Late that night, back in my hotel room, I gave my mother a call. She's a historian and a lapsed Catholic, and I thought she might appreciate some of the stranger superstitions I'd heard. I told her about a palm reading

that Ray Hyman had given me, as a demonstration of how fortune-tellers work. He had said that my left palm represents the person I was born as, the right palm the person I've become. By looking at both palms, he could tell that I had been born with a weak heart but had strengthened it through exercise.

I was about to go on when my mother interrupted. "Have you had your cholesterol checked lately?" she asked. I told her that wasn't the point, that Hyman was just guessing—he had admitted as much. But she ignored me. I had a great-aunt, she said, who went to Germany as a refugee from Romania and had a powerful sixth sense. After the war, when most of her family was starving, she made a good living reading coffee grounds for the wives of missing soldiers. My great-grandmother had a similar gift. One night during the First World War, when her son Josef was off fighting in France, she awoke to the sound of footsteps in the house. Heart-stricken, she roused her husband and told him that she had heard a ghost. "Josef is dead," she said. The Army later confirmed that he had been killed that night.

Tap the surface of almost any family history and such stories will pop out like secret compartments in an old jewelry chest. We are born believers, as Hyman said, apt to affix meaning to all our coincidences. My mother doesn't think that mediums can talk to the dead; she would never go to Lily Dale for spiritual self-help. But neither is she willing to say that psychic connections don't exist. She believes in an intuitive bond between parents and children and those of great sensitivity—a sixth sense of the vaguest sort—and in the limits of modern science to perceive it. Her stories exasperated me at first, but there was comfort in them, too, a relief from all the smug certainties of the conference.

I thought of André Kole, a magician and skeptic whom Nickell had pointed out to me earlier that day. Kole looks like a more ascetic Pat Boone, fastidiously groomed and remarkably preserved for a sixty-five-year-old. Part of the year, he lives in Arizona and designs illusions for David Copperfield; the rest of the time he travels the world, per-



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forming his own magic and exposing the tricks of local charlatans. Kole has debunked witch doctors in Uganda, faith healers in India, and psychic surgeons in the Philippines, often to crowds of many thousands. But there's a catch. At the end of every show, he makes a pitch for the one magician whose miracles, he says, cannot be explained away: Jesus Christ.

When I asked Kole why he had come to the conference, he shrugged. "I'm kind of here incognito," he said. "All those slurs and jokes about Christianity... just filthy, filthy stuff." He said that the skeptics, "in spite of being humanists and atheists and agnostics," are doing the good work of exposing supernatural fraud. Then he fixed me with the same unblinking eyes that have mesmerized crowds in Calcutta. "It won't get them to Heaven, though," he said. "That's the bottom line. And what value is there in gaining the whole world if you lose your own soul?"

Hunched over a bowl of granola and yogurt in the hotel restaurant the next morning, Nickell looked tired and uneasy. I couldn't tell why at first: he was a celebrity at the conference. In the hallways and lecture rooms, grizzled old skeptics would grab his arm and shout, "Why, if it isn't Joe Nickell! The world's greatest paranormal investigator!" Nickell would smile and pass out wooden nickels with his name on them, or take business cards and make them vanish from his hand. Yet the conference was a kind of crossroads for him—an intersection of two careers, two philosophies of life, that once seemed parallel.

After returning to the United States from Canada, in 1977, Nickell tried his hand at stunt work in Los Angeles—"not one of my successes," he admits—then went to graduate school at the University of Kentucky. For his Ph.D. dissertation, he solved a number of literary mysteries, among them the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce. (Legend holds that Bierce went to Mexico and never came back. Nickell argued that the author committed suicide in a canyon along the Colorado River, using a German revolver that he had long carried for that purpose.) He soon found, though, that English

departments had little need for a literary detective, much less a paranormal investigator.

For the next twenty years, Nickell did his best to scratch a livelihood from his obscure fields of expertise. During the school year, he took adjunct teaching jobs at the university; in the summer, he investigated the paranormal and wrote books about what he found. It was too shaky and peripatetic a life to allow for marriage, he says. "My first one ended in divorce, and I like to think that I learn from my mistakes." But he did eventually find companionship of a sort. In 1983, Paul Kurtz published Nickell's work on the Shroud of Turin and invited him to join CSICOP. Twelve years later, Kurtz persuaded Nickell to move to Buffalo and join the committee full time.

"When the history of the twentieth century is written, I think Joe will emerge as the leading critic of the empirical claims of religion," Kurtz told me. Yet Nickell has begun to feel like a heretic of late. Under Kurtz's leadership, the skeptics' movement has made secular humanism its high church—the new creed to supplant all those which logic tears down. "My mission is the mission of Socrates: to bring reason into the public arena," Kurtz says. "Islam and Judaism and Christianity are false."

Nickell would rather leave his options open. A few years ago, he told me, he went to a skeptics' conference in La Coruña, Spain. He was walking down some stairs one afternoon, not long after investigating the statue of a local saint, which was said to protect those who embrace it, when his left leg suddenly crumpled beneath him. "It wasn't like I fell and broke my leg," he said. "It was more like I broke my leg and fell." The other skeptics gathered around as he writhed in agony. When he told them, between gasps, that he thought he had broken his leg, they were dubious. "You know, that might just be a sprain," one of them suggested. Another told him to try wiggling his toes. It wasn't until Nickell lifted his leg, revealing that it was bent at a grotesque angle to his foot, that they believed him.

"What we need is a kinder, gentler skepticism," Nickell said. "I'm tired of



these debunkers coming by my office and saying, 'Hey, Nickell, seen any ghosts lately? Har har har.' He shook his head and poked at his granola. "I'm not saying there's a fifty-fifty chance that there is a ghost in that haunted house. I think the chances are closer to 99.9 per cent that there isn't. But let's go look. We might learn something interesting as hell."

That afternoon, during his talk on paranormal investigations, Nickell showed a slide of a short, skinny man in a gray fedora: Melvin (Nervous) Purvis, the F.B.I. investigator who put away John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd. It seemed an odd detour for a talk on the paranormal, but Nickell's presentation was largely autobiographical, and he appeared to feel a deep kinship with the man. At the height of his fame, Purvis was assigned to a desk job by J. Edgar Hoover, who couldn't bear to share the agency's limelight. Nickell, too, is responsible for his organization's greatest coups, yet some skeptics say that his work is an exercise in futility: for every superstition he lops off, two new ones crop up.

"I've spent thirty years investigating the paranormal," Nickell told the crowd, "and I kind of resent this idea that I've been wasting my time." He let the words ring in the hall for a while, until you could hear the microphone hum. And, for a brief, tense moment, the old fire was in his eyes again, the barroom brawl rising to a challenge. Then he smiled quickly and went on with the show.

When Nickell was a boy, his grandmother used to send him letters from Santa Claus, smeared with soot to suggest that they had come down the chimney. By the time he finally uncovered the ruse ("It was my introduction to forensic science"), his friends had been wise to Santa for years. It's hard not to think that the experience shaped his career, and he has never quite managed to shake Santa Claus off. Cynics and sentimentalists say that Nickell is nothing but a spoilsport, that he's like the older kid on the playground, telling the kindergartners that Santa doesn't exist. Humanists take the opposite tack. How many chimneys do you have to go up, they say, before you're con-

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vinced that there's no one on the roof?

"You don't work as a skeptic this long without getting hate mail from all quarters," Nickell told me one afternoon. "When I published my book on the Shroud of Turin, I had people who wanted me tortured and put to death." We were standing in the archives of the Museum of the City of New York, flanked by rows of gray flat-file cabinets. On the table in front of us was a yellowed sheet of paper covered in primly elegant script. It was an epistolary poem written by the nineteenth-century author and theologian Clement Clarke Moore, but it could well have come from Nickell's own grandmother. It was called "From Saint Nicholas."

Two years ago, a Vassar English professor and literary sleuth named Don Foster created a mild stir by arguing that Moore was a fraud. Moore's most famous poem, "The Night Before Christmas," was first published anonymously, in 1823. Though Moore eventually took credit for it, in 1844, Foster claimed that the real author was another nineteenth-century poet, Henry Livingston, Jr. The style and diction of the poem were typical of Livingston's work, but not of Moore's, Foster said. Besides, he explained, Moore was too much of a curmudgeon to have written so large-hearted a poem.

Foster had become well known, by then, for unmasking Joe Klein as the anonymous author of "Primary Colors." The *Times* ran a story about his work on Moore, but Nickell was less than impressed. "It's laughable, just laughable," he said. During the preced-

ing months, at the urging of a collector named Seth Kaller, he had reinvestigated the Moore case, turning up historical and textual evidence to contradict nearly every claim that Foster made. (His findings are being published by the scholarly journal *Manuscripts*.) "From Saint Nicholas" was the smoking gun, he said. He had found it buried among the other papers in the museum's Moore archives. It was clearly written in Moore's hand, yet it had never been published. More important, it seemed to have been written in 1821—a year before Moore said he composed "The Night Before Christmas." Apparently, the country's most famous poem had a prequel.

Nickell removed a small loupe from his inside coat pocket and peered at the manuscript's hand-painted border. Document research is mostly a sideline for him now, but there is something about it that sustains him. In recent years, he has helped assemble forensic teams that have exposed the Jack the Ripper diaries as frauds and found evidence that John Demjanjuk was a Nazi war criminal. Most of a skeptic's victories are inherently anticlimactic. No matter how clever the proof, the result is to replace the fantastic with the ordinary. But in documents there are mysteries whose solutions can actually lead to happy endings—to beliefs restored, manuscripts authenticated, reputations redeemed.

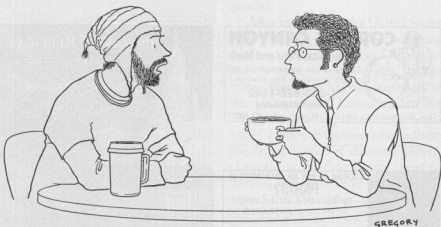
Nickell held the poem at arm's length and grinned, savoring the moment. "This is all the evidence I need," he said. Then he began to read aloud:

From Saint Nicholas

What! My sweet little Sis, in bed all alone;  
No light in your room! and your nursery  
too gone!  
And you, like a good child, are quietly  
lying,  
While some naughty ones would be fret-  
ting or crying?  
Well, for this you must have something  
pretty, my dear;  
And, I hope, will deserve a reward too  
next year.  
But, speaking of crying, I'm sorry to say  
Your screeches and screams, so loud ev'ry  
day,  
Were near driving me and my goodies  
away.  
Good children I always give good things  
in plenty;  
How sad to have left your stocking quite  
empty:  
But you are beginning so nicely to spell,  
And, in going to bed, behave always so  
well,  
That, although I too oft see the tear in  
your eye,  
I cannot resolve to pass you quite by.  
I hope, when I come here again the next  
year,  
I shall not see even the sign of a tear.  
And then, if you get back your sweet  
pleasant looks,  
And do as you're bid, I will leave you  
some books,  
Some toys, or perhaps what you still may  
like better,  
And then too may write you a prettier  
letter.  
At present, my dear, I must bid you good  
bye;  
Now, do as you're bid; and, remember,  
don't cry.

It was a strange little poem, equal parts sweet and sour. Its author had almost certainly written "The Night Before Christmas"—the diction, metre, topic, and date of composition were too close to be coincidental. Yet he seemed every bit the curmudgeon that Foster had claimed he was. When I mentioned this to Nickell, he was genuinely surprised. "This isn't the work of a mean-spirited person," he said. "Look, he's taken the time to compose this little moral lesson, to write out a fair copy. This is a loving thing." To Nickell, all the faults I had imagined were virtues in disguise. The man who had written this poem may have dashed a little girl's dreams, but he was careful to explain why. He was a spoilsport with only the best intentions, a saint who performed no miracles but who didn't discount the possibility, however faint, that miracles might occur in the future.

He was a Santa Claus after a skeptic's own heart. ♦



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