

Natural and Supernatural: A History of the Paranormal from Earliest Times to 1914 by Brian Inglis. Dorset: Prism Press, 1992. 508 pp., \$14.95 (paper).

This edition is a republication of the late Brian Inglis' 1977 work that provided a comprehensive and partisan view of claims of the paranormal from earliest historical times. Even Inglis admits the partisan nature of the book when he notes that "by taking the evidence for the supernatural seriously ... a writer immediately identifies himself as a partisan." Perhaps, but I will set the tone for this review by disagreeing with Inglis from the very beginning. Even skeptics, at least the non-dogmatic ones, take evidence for the paranormal seriously. They evaluate the validity of the claims based on the reliability of witnesses and the potency of physical evidence, before coming to a conclusion. That does not make them partisans. Yes, Brian Inglis was a partisan but more than that he was an apologist for claims of the paranormal. *Natural and Supernatural* exudes apologetics from the very beginning. At times I felt as if I were in the courtroom of the King and Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*. Margaret Fox's confession was spurious. Henry Slade's conviction was unjust. There is even an example of spirit photography that "cannot be dismissed out of hand." Qualifiers abound in this book!

Heretic! Non-believer! Cynic! How dare anyone criticize a book that has been variously described as: "A scholarly and engrossing study" (J.G. Pratt); "It is bound to be a classic" (J.B. Rhine); "A tour de force" (Colin Wilson); "both scholarly and readable" (Arthur Koestler); and "An immense amount of material ... covered prodigiously well" (J. Eisenbud). The list of endorsers reads like a *Who's Who* of parapsychology. Bernard Levin, in his 1978 review of *Natural and Supernatural* in *The Times* (quoted from Ruth West's obituary of Inglis in *Fortean Times*) described Inglis' writing technique as "ruthless overkill." "He has piled up a mountain of evidence ... that it is simply not possible for any sane person to deny that there have been a vast ... number of supernatural happenings. Yet [it will be denied because of] the terror that seems to seize many intelligent and large-minded people at the suggestion that the universe may contain ... principles either beyond their control or their understanding." Wrong! My objection to apologetics in a historical document has nothing to do with fear of the unknown. It has everything to do with the way evidence is gathered and evaluated in science or in a court of law... not in *Wonderland*. I would be thrilled if evidence could prove the existence of the supernatural beyond the shadow of a doubt. It would provide a glimmer of hope and excitement in an otherwise dismal world filled with hatred, hunger, and genocide. However, do not go looking for definitive evidence in *Natural and Supernatural*, because it is not there.

The book begins with Inglis' youthful conversion away from intellectual skepticism, as a result of J.W. Dunne's *Experiment with Time* and J.B. Rhine's experiments at Duke University. Beginning to question scientific dogmas, the

born-again believer reflects on the conservative nature of science and the historical abuse received by those who questioned those dogmas. "They all laughed when Christopher Columbus said he thought the world was round; they all laughed when Edison recorded sound". True, but they also laughed at Bozo the Clown. Ridicule does not make fiction into fact, nor does it sanctify poor science. In the Introduction, he speaks in glowing terms of the revival of parapsychology, encouraging experiments with Uri Geller, recognition by the AAAS, and new developments in modern physics that make the fantastic propositions of parapsychology less preposterous. He cites "laboratory tests conducted in American universities, in Toronto, in London and elsewhere" as evidence of the reality of Uri Geller's feats of clairvoyance and psychokinesis, as well as proof of the growing credibility of paranormal phenomena. While that was indeed the consensus in the 1970s, Inglis' precognitive abilities might be questioned today. While he attempts to combine the standards of Hamlet, that there were more things in heaven and earth than he had dreamed of, with those of Laplace, that the weight of evidence needs to be proportioned to the strangeness of the facts, his judgment must be viewed in light of the standards that he sets in the Introduction, which we can now view with 20/20 hindsight. So we begin a journey of thousands of years, from the beliefs and practices of ancient tribal communities to the decline of physical research in the early part of the twentieth century. It is impossible to refute every claim made in these 400+ pages, because Inglis' approach is to inject the possibility of the paranormal into every historical record. Each example, and there are an overwhelming number of them, could be explained by the natural or by the supernatural. That is a perfectly valid approach when applied selectively to best cases, but not when applied to every case, even those in which the evidence for natural phenomena is beyond a reasonable doubt.

The early chapters deal with beliefs and practices in tribal communities and early civilizations such as the Hebrew kingdoms, Greece, and Rome, and the groundwork is laid for the entire array of supernatural beliefs prevalent in modern society. Here is the Tahitian diviner looking for the face of a thief in a bowl of clear water, the Navajo hand trembler pointing in the direction of the missing flock, and the medicine man who causes his teepee to rock and emit strange lights and spirit voices. Can anyone deny the link to modern beliefs in a clairvoyant's crystal ball, a dowser's rod, or physical mediums? Inglis clearly establishes the consistency of belief in the supernatural that extends backwards for untold millennia. However, he also seems to share the beliefs of today's megalithic mystics, who suggest that prehistoric people were in touch with a power that we have lost or neglected. He seems overawed by the ancient fire ceremonies, in which the shaman would walk over hot coals or thrust his arm in a pot of hot liquid and remain unscathed. In fact, none less than Sir William Crookes, who is glorified in later chapters as a psychic investigator, as well as John Tyndall have been quoted as to the completely natural aspects of surviving firewalking and other hot encounters (*Science*, 50, 162 (1919)). On

the other hand, I found his description of shamanism in the Old Testament to be fascinating. He quotes Moses in Deuteronomy 18:10-11 (KJV) that "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire," perhaps an early reference to firewalking (although later Bible versions describe this as human sacrifice). And Aristotle, who apparently underwent an inverse change in his belief system to that of Inglis, is quoted that "every dreamer must occasionally be right about his future, just as every gambler must occasionally pick a winner... coincidence could account for the apparently prophetic nature of many dreams."

The next few chapters deal with aspects of the supernatural in the new Christian religion, proceeding through the Middle Ages to the Age of Reason. His depiction of early Christianity as shamanist is perceptive, as well as the movement towards doctrine and ritual that pervade it today. He surprisingly errs in the description of alchemy as "not repugnant to the Church." In fact, the Church was strongly opposed to alchemy, since its tenets were sacrilegious, and Pope John XXII issued a decree against alchemy. Inglis also is impressed by the prophecies of Nostradamus, providing a one-sided view that is unfettered by the fact that many predictions were wrong and that hundreds of predictions made covering four hundred years of history are bound to hit the mark once in a while. The evidence of paranormal phenomena from the lives of Catholic saints is documented, but without the caution emphasized by such as Fr. Michael O'Carroll (*Medjugorje: Facts, Documents, Theology*) who has said "... people do not lie about sacred things! The iron law of history is that people will, that is can, lie about anything."

The book then details the emergence of mesmerism and spiritualism, the latter of which dominates the remainder of the book. Andrew Jackson Davis, the Seer of Poughkeepsie, is described as "all but illiterate", but "displayed a range of knowledge which ... would have done honor to any scholar of the age." Indeed! In *Clairvoyant Revelations*, Davis reveals the existence of human beings on Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury. In fact, Davis notes, in a scholarly manner, that on Mercury, the excessive heat produces great commotion and excitement! The litany of mediums who show evidence of supernormal powers is extensive: the Fox sisters, Mrs. Hayden, D.D. Home, the Davenport, Florence Cook, Henry Slade, W.S. Moses, Mrs. Piper, and Eusapia Palladino. Their lives and associated claims of paranormal powers are treated credulously, with only contempt for skeptical investigators. I need not respond to specifics here. Many others, such as Houdini, Podmore, Proskauer, and Mulholland have already responded. I found these last few chapters most difficult to read, in that all semblance of critical evaluation had been abandoned.

Despite the many weaknesses, I found *Natural and Supernatural* to be a fascinating glimpse into a deep faith in the supernatural, as well as an excellent history lesson. The book is a must for anyone with more than a passing interest in beliefs and human behavior. It is perhaps most telling that Ruth West's obituary for Inglis notes that nothing paranormal ever happened to him in the 15

years that she knew him. His experiences were all secondhand. That also comes across clearly in *Natural and Supernatural*. It is a book written by a seeker, by someone hoping that he can interpret history to prove to himself and others that the supernatural does exist. To paraphrase C.D. Broad, perhaps Brian Inglis now has the answer to his quest ... or perhaps he doesn't.

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Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experiences by Susan Blackmore. Buffalo: Prometheus, 1993. 289 pp., \$23.95.

How do you like your near-death experience (NDE) books? If you have an aversion toward authors who are true believers, then *Dying to Live* is not for you, for Blackmore is a true believer in the impossibility of realities other than material ones. Her arguments are with religionists, those other true believers who argue that NDEs are evidence for personal survival beyond death.

In the illustrious company of such scientists as Stephen Hawkins or Richard Dawkins, Blackmore believes that epistemological questions have been settled by empiricism and that this philosophical perspective will soon settle the ontological ones, as well. In other words, philosophical problems regarding the nature of 'reality' are amenable, and probably resolvable, through advances in medicine and psychology.

Unlike other materialists, Blackmore is not content to simply explore and examine the neurophysiology of the NDE for what light may be shed (no pun intended) on the problems of mechanism and mediation of personal experience. Rather, Blackmore believes that she can extrapolate from these speculations to conclusions that sweep away any suggestion of an afterlife, of dualist conceptions of self, even of the very notion (after Dennett) of self itself. It is an audacious, provocative, obviously overstated case, but a jolly good read anyway.

Blackmore believes that the explanatory choices are between the 'afterlife hypothesis' or the 'dying brain hypothesis' (she is apparently unaware of or uninterested in any other choices). She ends her book supporting the 'dying brain hypothesis'. Most readers will not be surprised at the main evidence for this. Most of the central details for this argument have remained unchanged for some time — a combination of popular ideas about death denial, the frailties of human imagination, an update on the latest theories of temporal lobe dysfunction, endorphins and so on.

Important additions to Blackmore's particular arsenal and support for these are: Dennett's theory of self as illusion; some interesting visual puzzles apparently demonstrating the brain's need to find meaning and patterns in the 'meaningless' and 'random'; a computer-generated exercise which shows that tunnel sensations can be produced by experiences other than traveling in real