

SKEPTOID 5
MASSACRES, MONSTERS,
AND MIRACLES

BY BRIAN DUNNING

FOREWORD BY RONALD HAYDEN
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Skeptoid 5: Massacres, Monsters, and Miracles
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The true delight is in the finding out rather than in the knowing.

Isaac Asimov

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Thank you, friends, for your generous trust in this project and your contribution to science education.

*To Lisa – the light in my day, the moon in my night, the chocolate
in my sauce, the twinkle in my eye.*

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FOREWORD: ZOMBIES AND DOLPHIN COMBAT

BY RONALD HAYDEN

Let me tell you a secret. I don't always agree with Brian Dunning.

In fact, if we ever get a chance to have a drink together, he's going to get an earful on a couple of those topics where his conclusions are out to lunch. In my imagination, by the end of the evening he has succumbed to my superior logic and experience and has agreed to rewrite the *Skeptoid* episodes in question; in reality, I have a pretty good idea who would actually be set straight, especially given his annoying habit of falling back on research and facts and the like.

But here's the thing: I cherish these occasional disagreements. They are a good thing. If they didn't occur, I might well have stopped paying attention to *Skeptoid* by now.

When I was a young lad, over and over I would latch onto a potential "guru" who seemed to agree with me in all things. I would bask in their obvious correctness and happily accept whatever they said with the warmth that comes from knowing you are in complete synchronicity with someone...until, each and every time, I discovered one critical thing on which we disagreed, at which point I would immediately drop that guru and go through a period of massive disappointment and emotional turmoil. How could someone who agreed with me so much be SO WRONG? It just didn't seem possible.

I believed that all right-thinking people had all the same right thoughts.

As an older lad, I've gone through the looking glass. The more I find myself agreeing with someone, the more antsy I get. It means the answers — and the questions — are too easy. It means I'm letting myself get intellectually lazy. The next step is to devolve into one of those self-congratulatory conversations where we reflexively confirm each other's unexamined beliefs while smugly trashing anyone with a different point of view.

Ugh, the next morning I hate myself for those conversations.

Nowadays, it's at that moment when I find our area of disagreement that I relax and engage. That's when I know there's value to be had in the conversation, that I can trust myself because knowing it's possible for us to disagree, my brain refuses to let down its defenses. I'm going to examine each claim on its own merits and make my own decision.

So my thanks to Brian for being someone I only agree with 99% of the time. The 1% keeps it interesting.

And my thanks for his being that all-too-rare skeptic who remembers that skepticism isn't about taking the fun out of life. It's not just glumly and smugly letting the world know for the 2,010th time that ghosts don't exist and that crop circles aren't from UFOs. Skepticism is the excitement of exploring the universe and discovering what's actually out there, which is always more exciting and mysterious than the stories we make up about what's out there.

Understanding this, Brian goes wherever his curiosity takes him. So in this book he has essays on topics ranging from zombies to fracking to dolphins in combat. Dolphin combat, people!

No matter who you are, no matter how long you've followed science or the skeptical community, many if not most of these essays will surprise and delight you. And just maybe you'll find one where Brian has slipped up on a minor fact or come to a conclusion you don't agree with.

That's when the fun starts.

Ronald Hayden is a former amateur magician who grew up on classic science fiction. Both these factors led naturally to an interest in skepticism. He has worked for 20 years at a Silicon Valley technology company, where he now manages a publication department.

INTRODUCTION: WHY I LOVE SCIENCE

I was 10 or 12 years old when we were riding in a VW bus through the mountains. There were half a dozen of us, my brother, my dad, and some of his friends. Shotguns were loaded in the back, and we were on our way to a campground, I wasn't quite sure where, and it was hunting season for some animal I didn't quite know. I spent most of the ride with my nose pressed to the window, looking through the trees. The woods were unusually dark and dense; even the occasional meadows seemed closed-in and a little scary.

When I saw the first of them, it gave me a bit of a rush but I don't remember it being particularly scary. It seemed a natural enough looking animal, something that belonged there. But it struck me as very unusual to see.

It was only after I saw a second and a third, very clearly out in one of the meadows, looking at us unconcernedly, that I was hit with the first pang of fear. *This is real*, I thought. *This is no dream. This is happening. There are Sasquatches all around us, and we're in grave danger.*

When I cried out and told everyone in the car what was out there, they didn't seem to care. I jumped wildly from window to window. A Sasquatch was to be seen in virtually every direction, stepping casually over a log, walking along the side of the road, shaking a tree. I pointed them out specifically. Nobody could have cared less. My companions hardly responded at all. Sasquatches aren't real; it was scarcely even worth acknowledging the small boy's cries. They weren't even concerned when one crossed the road right in front of us; they just drove blindly on, continuing their conversation, aloof to the monsters outside.

This has happened to me many times. It's a recurring dream that I've had most of my life. Dreams offer no relief from the virtual reality they present. The emotions they trigger are every bit as real as those in the waking world. There is no refuge in the realization that the images we dream are only phantoms, for when dreams happen, they are all too real. Despite having no concern about Bigfoots in the comfortable light of day, I can honestly say that I know the horror of coming face to face with one.

This aptly illustrates the value of myths, urban legends, and popular pseudosciences. It's not the subject of the legend that holds the wonder; it's the science behind how and why the legend exists, and its sociological manifestations. There's nothing to be found of any interest if you treat Bigfoot as a real animal and go looking for it; it isn't there. But there is a lot to be learned from dreams, for example; how and why they form, what need does the brain have that the dream fulfills.

When a diet fad spreads through society like wildfire, taking over the store shelves and the daytime talk shows, there is rarely anything science-based to the diet itself. But the life cycle of the fad teaches us about psychology and marketing. Believing the claims made by the diet's proponents will rarely do you any good, but understanding the reasons for the fad will indeed make you better able to navigate through life.

You're making a documentary film about a ghost said to inhabit a particular hotel room. You rent the room, set up your camera and infrared gear and time lapse, and... nothing happens. There is nothing to be learned from belief in a legend; but there is in the study of the legend. If you'd gone down and interviewed the bartender or the head proprietor about how they first heard of the story, you'll get a real history lesson and learn about real people. If you're lucky, you might even find out about a perceptual phenomenon that tricks us into seeing, hearing, or feeling something that isn't there.

INTRODUCTION: WHY I LOVE SCIENCE

You have a young daughter and your pediatrician tells you that it's time for scheduled vaccines. You've heard on the television and from friends that vaccination carries more risk than benefit. What do you do? Should you believe the popular anecdotes, or should you understand the science behind the recommendation? Often in life, the stakes are higher than just whether or not you choose to believe in a ghost or spend some time throwing money at a fad diet. Sometimes when we decide whether to believe what's popular or to take a science-based view, it's a matter of life and death.

Applying science to our daily encounters has proven richly rewarding for me, time and time again. One subject I'll discuss in later chapters is the Abominable Snowman, which for most people, is a question of whether or not there's a snow monster roaming around the Himalayas. But that's the wrong question to ask. Instead, how do we know whether there is (or not) an Abominable Snowman? The study gave me unexpected insights into both psychology and zoology.

I'll discuss topics as varied as the science of voting. Countless statisticians and game theorists have, for thousands of years, sought ways to sway free elections, and surprising theorems exist. The one that most opened my eyes is that, when there are more than two candidates and you're only allowed to vote for one (as we do it here in the United States), there is no fair way to hold the vote: blocs can successfully control the outcome to hand the victory to a less popular candidate; and even when they don't, the Condorcet candidate (the one who would beat all others in a head-to-head election) is often not the winner. It's a fundamentally broken system, but it turns out there are at least a couple of possible easy fixes to assure that the Condorcet candidate will nearly always win.

Basic science literacy and a grasp of critical thinking methodology certainly do provide real-world applications. But that's only one reason I love science. The main reason is simply the rush of excitement from learning something new and amazing. Every topic I've ever covered on my show has given me the gift

of a marvelous tidbit. There's a unique satisfaction to be gained from learning a new fact in which you can have confidence in its ability to withstand scrutiny – a satisfaction certainly *not* to be found in the popular supernatural explanations that bombard us all day long.

I hope you enjoy these chapters. Be prepared for two things: First, that you will be as excited as I was to find out some crazy details about our world; and second, that there will probably be at least one sacred cow of yours in here for which I'll find an alternate explanation. That's the nature of the journey: you never quite know what's around the next corner.

– Brian Dunning

1. FINDING THE LOST COLONY OF ROANOKE

One of the early attempts of the English to colonize America ended with every person simply disappearing from the Roanoke colony.

When a relief party sent from England arrived at the Roanoke Colony on the East coast of the United States in 1590, they found the settlement neatly dismantled, and not a soul to be found. Some 115 men, women, and children had simply disappeared. The only clue was the name of a nearby island, Croatoan, carved into the trunk of a tree. And thus was launched one of history's great mysteries: The Lost Colony of Roanoke.

Around 1580, the English mogul, explorer, and all-around famous guy Sir Walter Raleigh made a deal with Queen Elizabeth I to establish an English colony in America. He was given ten years to do it, and the deal was that they'd share in the riches they hoped would be found, and also create a base for English ships fighting



Spain. Raleigh did not personally go, but his first expedition sailed in 1584 to find a good location.

And find one they did: Roanoke Island, off of North Carolina. It's located inside the outer banks, a long string of narrow sand spit islands that shelter half the coast of North Carolina. Roanoke is fertile, defensible, well wooded, and offers substantial protected anchorage for ships. But Raleigh's expedition made some poor choices. Among the first things they did was to pick a fight with the local natives, charging them for some petty theft, burning their village, and beheading their chief. This was perhaps not the best way to establish friendly relations.

Sir Francis Drake happened by during some of his pirating exploits, and finding the men in poor condition, he gave them a lift back to England. Strike 1 for the New World colony. What nobody knew was that Raleigh's second ship was already on its way. The two ships passed each other in the Atlantic, and the new group found an abandoned settlement. They returned to England, but left a small garrison of fifteen men on Roanoke to protect Raleigh's claim. The garrison was unaware of the bad diplomacy they'd inherited, and it should come as no surprise that they were never seen or heard from again. Strike 2 for the New World colony.

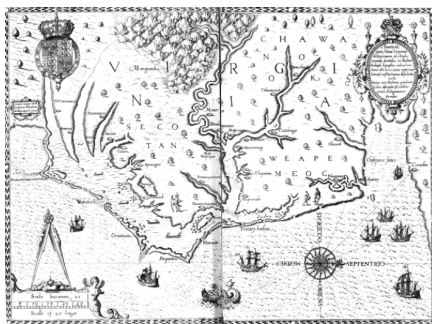
Raleigh sent a third expedition to Roanoke in 1587, larger and better provisioned than the predecessors, commanded by Roanoke veteran John White, a prolific artist and cartographer who had originally been hired to document the colonization through his artwork. White re-established the Roanoke settlement, but failed to rebuild relations with the natives. They sometimes skirmished, and being vastly outnumbered and completely on their own, feared for their lives. As this was the first colony to include women and children, including White's daughter and her family, he was persuaded to return to England with a skeleton crew to ask Raleigh for help. With relocating the colony as an acknowledged possibility, White left instructions that if the colonists did choose to move in his ab-

1. FINDING THE LOST COLONY OF ROANOKE

sence, to carve their destination on a certain tree; and that if they were in trouble, to also carve a Maltese cross. Arrived in England, White found that the war with Spain had complicated matters, and it was three long years before he was finally able to return with an armed party and the needed supplies.

Unfortunately, there was nobody on Roanoke to receive them. The camp had been tidily dismantled; there had been no sudden massacre. White went to the tree and found a single carved word, Croatoan, and no carved cross. Wherever they'd gone, their departure appeared to have been orderly and planned, and they had not been in any immediate danger.

Croatoan was a barrier island on the outer banks, now called Hatteras Island, about 35 nautical miles south of Roanoke. Today its flat dunes are covered with hurricane-hardened vacation homes. Sport fishing boats come and go,



Map by John White

and kite boarders take advantage of its strong winds. But in the colonial days, it was one home of the Croatan natives, who were friendly to the English. It would seem to have been a logical destination, had food run out on Roanoke or if there had been some other cause to leave.

Unfortunately, the weather had plans for John White that did not include allowing him to make the short hop to Croatoan to find his colony. A storm came in just as they arrived at Roanoke, and White's ship lost its main anchor. The combination of storm waves and wind, and a lost anchor, made it impossible to safely navigate the coastal islands and to land anywhere. The captain of the ship hired by White was anxious

to get back to the more profitable business of privateering against Spain, and rather than risk his vulnerable ship in a dangerous and fruitless coastal search, he opted to return to England. White arrived home empty handed. It was Strike 3, and nobody ever again heard of Sir Walter Raleigh's lost colony of Roanoke. It was the end of their story, and also the beginning of their legend.

But colonies ultimately did take root in America, and it seems that those early colonists closest to Roanoke may have learned something of what became of them. The lost colony did eventually have neighbors, but they came some 25 years later and some 125 nautical miles of sailing to the north. It was 1607 when a more permanent colony was finally established in Virginia: Jamestown, named after King James, later famous for Captain John Smith, Pocahontas, and John Rolfe's tobacco. Jamestown struggled badly in its first years, and most of its colonists died from starvation or disease. They had few resources and never mounted an expedition to Croatoan to see what had become of their predecessors.

Jamestown was in Powhatan native territory. Shortly before the Jamestown colonists had arrived, or at about the same time, the Powhatan had attacked and exterminated the Chesapeake (yes, the lovely Pocahontas was from a genocidal tribe). If any English or half-English had survived and been living with the Chesapeake, Powhatan killed them too. Relations between the English and the Powhatan were frosty, but the English were able to gain some small amount of information about what had become of the Roanoke colony.

According to the Powhatan who were willing to talk, the original colonists had integrated into the mainland Carolina tribes to the west of Croatoan. There were a number of stories that supported this. John Smith was told there was a town where men dressed as he did, and another Englishman, William Strachey, wrote that he was told of:

1. FINDING THE LOST COLONY OF ROANOKE

“...howses built with stone walles and one story above another, so taught them by those Englishe who escaped the slaughter at Roanoak, ...where the people breed up tame turkeis, about their howses, and take apes in the mountaines, and where, at Ritanoë, the Weroance, Eyanoco preserved seven of the English alive, - fower men, two boyes, and one yonge mayde (who escaped and fled up the river of Chanoke), to beat his copper of which he hath certaine mynes.”

Copper working was indeed known to the Native Americans at that time. Further evidence for these stories was found later by Spanish agents, whose job it was to eliminate evidence of the English occupying and possessing America. They recovered a chart drawn by a Jamestown man, now known as the Zuniga Map, and sent it to Europe in 1608. The chart was inscribed with the place names mentioned by Smith and Strachey, but also mentions “four clothed men from Roonok.”

There is only one account of the Jamestown colonists actually encountering a person who appeared to be of English descent. He was seen in Powhatan territory in 1607, and was described as:

“a Savage Boy about the age of ten yeeres, which had a head of haire of a perfect yellow and a reasonable white skinne, which is a miracle amongst all the Savages.”

If this is a true account, and the witnesses were not mistaken in their observation and reporting, then this boy would have been born some seven years after John White found the deserted colony. It seems probable that the boy was a descendant of the Roanoke settlers who had either been spared by the Powhatan or was raised by them. Either way, it would be evidence that some of the Roanoke colonists did seek refuge to the north.