

Editorial

On not talking with strangers - an Editor's 'Farewell'

Throughout the twenty-odd years that I have edited this Newsletter, I have felt the task to be a very privileged one, and have greatly valued your support. However this is to let you know that this will be my last issue. My successor will be Mark Guscini, who has already very kindly agreed to take over the role, Mark's similarly expatriate location of Spain in future replacing Australia as the Newsletter's publication centre. Thanks to Michael Clift and Reggie Norton's excellent stewardships the Newsletter is financially in very good shape. The flow of contributed articles gets ever stronger, this particular issue being the biggest yet. And I am confident that with Mark's excellent communication skills and wide international contacts the Newsletter's future will be in good hands.

I have always believed it to be better to bow out of any venture before reaching your 'sell by' date, twenty years being quite long enough for anyone. However in this instance my departure is in direct protest at the current state of US-led Shroud politics.

For one of this Newsletter's prime functions is to report, comment on, and reflect the activities of leading Shroudies and Shroudie groups around the world. And while constitutionally the Society has no 'party line' on the issue of the Shroud's authenticity, it is no secret that the great majority of members favour authenticity, myself likewise. My bias as an Editor has therefore naturally favoured this, yet always mindful - and this is the crucial factor - of respecting those with sincerely differing, even conflicting views, and maintaining fairness and cordiality towards them. As but one expression of this, this present Newsletter carries two obituaries, both for individuals whom I personally knew, one, Dr. Robert Bucklin, definitely from the pro-authenticity camp, the other, Professor Edward Hall, equally definitely of the other persuasion. Despite many Shroudies regarding Professor Hall as an adversary, I certainly did not feel this. To me it is axiomatic that both he and Dr. Bucklin should be treated with equal sympathy and objectivity, and this I have tried to do. Likewise this issue includes a contributed article suggesting an interesting alternative hypothesis to my identification of the Edessa Mandylion with the Shroud. Although I do not agree with this hypothesis, I respect the writer very highly and believe it only right for members to be aware of his views in order to come to their own properly reasoned evaluation. It may be recalled from when I was living in England that I invited Dr. Walter McCrone, Professor Averil Cameron and other sceptics to address the BSTS, in much the same spirit.

Of late, amongst the current oligarchy of leading Shroudies, those (mostly American) whose activities and contributions to international conferences I am obliged to report, such a sense of fairness and openness has been in serious decline, accompanied by a preference for issues of often the most marginal credibility, let alone public interest. In 1999, while attending the Shroud conference at Richmond, Virginia, I was outraged at the organisers' denial of any platform to Shroud sceptic Dr. Emily Craig, likewise so excruciatingly bored by some of the speakers who had been allowed speaking time that I wondered whether they could be talking on the same subject as that to which I had devoted so much of life.

This set in train the erosion of a vital sense of my belonging to the world 'Shroudie' community, ultimately to snap altogether this July over the AMSTAR (American Shroud of Turin Association for Research) conference being held in Dallas, at which I had been invited to give the keynote address. After my having accepted this invitation, and agreed also to give a historical paper, I learned that the conference organisers had refused an important scientific paper from the University of Texas microbiologist Professor Stephen Mattingly. This even though Professor Mattingly is pro-authenticity, was speaking from the standpoint of his own professional expertise, and the conference was being held in his own home state of Texas. Since Professor Mattingly had lodged his application as early as April, AMSTAR's excuse that the speaking slots were full carried no credibility. All the indications were that the organisers were unprepared even to listen to an argument differing from their own 'party-line'. And only last year in Turin I had struggled far too hard persuading the late Dr. Alan Adler to take Professor Mattingly seriously (see Newsletter 51, pp. 9 & 10), to let this latest rebuff go unchallenged.

Rashly, therefore, I decided to take a stand. First I offered up my own history paper timeslot so that Professor Mattingly could give his microbiological paper in its place. Then I surrendered my keynote speech. Finally, when both offerings proved to no avail, I withdrew from the entire conference with a formal 'on record' declaration that should the Shroud be found to have suffered irreversible microbiological damage when next opened up, I would consider AMSTAR directly culpable, particularly given that the Dallas conference provided a unique opportunity for Professor Mattingly's microbiological insights to be heard by Cardinal Poletto's leading scientific advisor, Professor Bruno Barberis.

What happened next was positively Machiavellian. Without the slightest reference to my self-sacrificial lobbying, AMSTAR suddenly flurried to find a slot for Mattingly, as if this had always been intended. At the same time it put about that my stand had been directed, not at giving Mattingly a speaking platform at the conference, but at securing him a place on the AMSTAR board of directors. My first reaction was to suppose there had been a genuine misunderstanding, since a year earlier I had conversationally suggested Mattingly as a replacement for the AMSTAR board's then recent losses of Dr. Alan Adler and Don Lynn. However not only did AMSTAR insist - untruthfully and, to me, utterly ludicrously - that my intention was a full-blooded board 'coup', as events further unfolded, including the refusal of a paper from Joe Marino and Sue Benford, it became clear that AMSTAR and I shared absolutely no philosophical common ground. Instead of any scientific openness and fair play in the selection of speakers their so-called 'peer review committee's deliberations are conducted in secret, and by scientists whose identities apparently can under no circumstances be revealed.

The idea, therefore, of my giving a keynote speech to such a 'closed shop, closed mind' organisation, even should any reconciliation have been possible, violated every principle of the fairness and openness that I hold most dear. One remark in particular, by the AMSTAR peer review committee's chairperson, said it all: 'We [i.e. AMSTAR] will neither invite nor accept papers from controversial people. No Walter McCrone, Emily Craig, no C14 maniacs, has-been STURP members who lost their faith, or anyone else who wants to bring outdated contact image ideas.' Put simply, this means 'we will not listen to strangers'.

Having become more and more weary of the bulk of material that is selected for Shroud conferences, and gaining absolutely no satisfaction from my sounding forth ever-more strident criticisms, I therefore decided that it would be altogether for the best, not least in the cause of general harmony, for me to quit not only the Dallas conference, but the entire scene of 'Shroudie' politics. Underscoring the rightness of this was the response to an explanatory round robin which I sent to a number of those whom I knew to be attending the Dallas conference. While this produced some kind notes of sympathy, which were greatly appreciated, no-one except Joe Marino was prepared openly to support my stand against AMSTAR on the fundamental principles of fairness, openness and honesty. So if not talking to outsiders, and positively debarring any dissident opinion is to be the colour of Shroud politics for the future, then I can no longer feel any sense of belonging, and must take my place outside, with the subject's outcasts and even its sceptics.

This said, please be assured that my departure is neither from the Shroud as such, nor from my continuing publicly to uphold its authenticity. In fact, I am hopeful of being able quietly to research and serve the subject rather better than has been possible for the last two decades. But at least until the emergence of a very different political mood in the subject, my days as a regular Shroud conference speaker and attendee, and as a general commentator on Shroudies via the medium of this Newsletter, are very firmly over. I know that most of the present Shroudie oligarchy positively welcomes this.

Thankfully I can now bow out on a yet larger Newsletter than has been published before. So large, that I have had to forego my earlier intention to include a poetry supplement. Also some material gathered by Mark Guscini at Dallas is being held over until the next issue. Included in this Newsletter is the text of the paper as given at Dallas by Professor Mattingly that 'AMSTAR' originally tried so hard to block'. Also included is the text of the paper by Joe Marino and Sue Benford which the Dallas Conference did block successfully. To this latter is appended a very supportive appraisal by Dr. Ray Rogers, who played a leading role in the 1978 STURP examination, and who personally holds many of the sticky tape samples applied to the Shroud's surface during the 1978 STURP scientific examination.

Now for a word from your future Editor, Mark Guscini, followed by his preliminary remarks on the Dallas Conference