



## QUESTIONABLE STATISTICS

Luck, and math, are both “four-letter” words but are in every other respect diametrically opposed. The cover story by Anne Summers (“Luck is a four-letter word”, *SAM* Spring 2009) was important and confronting, not least because it revealed something deeper about Australia’s “obsession with gambling” and its enduring self-concept as “the lucky country”.

What this reflects is a particular kind of national innumeracy, which stymies healthy critical understanding of mathematical odds. Somewhere in our numeracy education it seems we’ve failed to develop, in a considerable proportion of the population, a comfortable relationship with mathematics as a practical utility. Depressingly, confident numeracy is often still perceived to be steeped in an elitism that characterises it as the domain of a gifted “lucky” minority. It is of more significance that this affects lives and many practical decisions, rather than perceptions about access to prestigious career choices.

Stronger collective practical numeracy would better critically evaluate: the odds of getting “lucky” and the irrationality of gambling; the odds of sustaining long term national wealth through mining rather than serious investment in education, research, and human resources; the accumulation of excessive personal debt; the ongoing effects of obscenely inflated real estate values due to investment mania versus development of affordable housing for the majority; the odds that future

generations – our children – will continue to benefit from reliance on national “luck”, and, questionable statistics publicised by pollsters, advertisers, corporations, lobbyists, the media and political spruikers.

Our national characterisation as “the lucky country” has been difficult to criticise because it’s been perennially misinterpreted and confused with optimism. But there’s no escaping that “luck” is a nebulous, impractical and finite human construct that runs out, while math should be a tool of infinite practical application and appraisal for all.

**Robyn Dalziell**  
(MSc Med (RHHG) ‘04)  
Castle Hill NSW

## THE AUDIBLE EFF

I have been vastly entertained by the Godspoke of various authors in the past few issues. As a believer, it is good to see God getting such great publicity, especially as no argument can shake the conviction of most orthodox believers.

Here’s another thought. David Hume showed centuries ago that our most cherished assumptions, such as causality and the inductive principle, have no rational basis, being

reducible to constant conjunction and psychic habituation. Put in terms of PH 101, the future is not necessarily like the past. However you cut it, physics and probability relate to the past, not the future.

Sure, no one expects the moon to weep blood or chickens to hatch from cabbages, nor do we regard the rising of the sun as equivalent to winning the lottery. Just don’t tell me it’s rational, is all.

Do I hear that dreaded “F” word again?

**Peter Barnes (MBBS ‘59)**  
Bassendean WA

## THE LAST WORD

None of the letters published in previous issues of *SAM* provide a logical response to my letter published in the Autumn issue. Clearly, there is none. In the context of infinity, however, it is pertinent to quote from news coverage that the Hubble telescope has “seen some of the earliest galaxies as they were more than 10 billion light years in the process of formation” and to note that it has not yet found any boundaries. But even if boundaries were to be found, the concept of infinity remains intact for the still

## Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor should include: full name, address (not for publication), degree(s) and year(s) of graduation where applicable, daytime phone number and/or email address.

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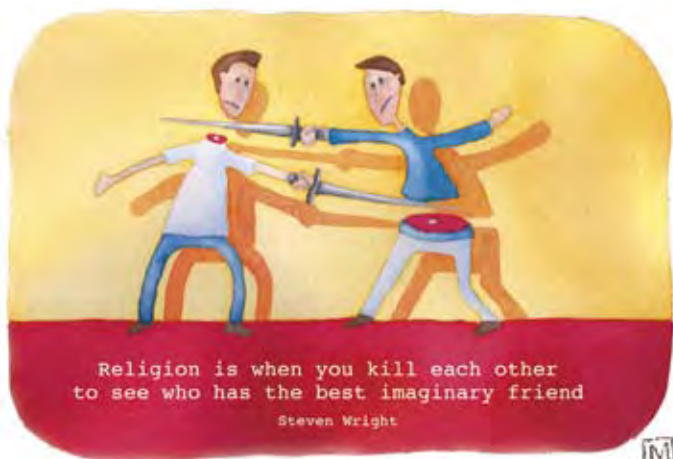
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Illustrations by Maggie Renvoize



boundless space that by definition must lie beyond. The question (of space as distinct from "faith"), has and still has, sufficient interest in mankind's thirst for knowledge to warrant the continued expenditure of huge sums of money in the exploration of the universe.

In the context of religion, all respondents appear to argue from the basis of an acceptance of the Christian Bible – an argument from within the closed mind of "faith" as distinct from the open mind, which awaits proof of the validity of any of the world's competing religions. The parallel is the proposition of a theory and then using that theory to prove its validity. Maybe "God is" but in some other manifestation than that current at the time of the Biblical "creation", only "revealed" as a God of love by Jesus so belatedly afterwards. Meanwhile, "history has demonstrated" that this God (of "love") has tolerated the practice of a variety of bloodthirsty religions, practices (burnings at the stake, etc) plagues and natural disasters; indiscriminately punishing (?) believers and non-believers alike. In any case, Christianity itself remained in a state of flux until the 4th century when, in 325 CE, Constantine called the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea to resolve some of the disagreements between the warring bishops of the time. I note that there still remain other recognised differences between the Synoptic Gospels within themselves (minor as they are) and that of John.

I agree with the second paragraph of Dmitri Perno's letter to the extent that the onus of proof lies with the affirmative side. In the absence of proof of the Christian

claims, I am content to remain, with Richard Dawkins, an agnostic-atheist and retain company with many great minds – from Abu-Ala' al-Marri to Albert Einstein, who also required proof. The former, who died in 1057 CE, is recorded as having written, "Humanity follows two world-wide sects: one, men intelligent without religion, the second, religion without intellect". Of course I do not accept the generalisation of his division of "Humanity" – there are many other great minds that had (have) "faith" in Christianity or some other religion.

Religions commonly borrow from predecessors. Christianity takes its "Christmas Day" from the Festival of Sol Invictus (the cult followed by Constantine who, though having issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, tolerating the practice of Christianity, was only baptised on his deathbed in 337 CE, so becoming the first Christian Roman Emperor). The Christian Easter has its "pagan" (non-Christian) origins probably named for Eastre, a Teutonic goddess of fertility. Even the days of the week are named for Nordic gods and for the life-giving sun, the latter worshipped by the monotheist, Akhenaten (an 18th Dynasty Pharaoh of Egypt, circa 1300 BCE) as did the old polytheistic religions of the Aztecs, etc and the Incas, of South America. Christianity includes the Old Testament in its Bible as Islam does, in essence, in its Qur'an. The Old Testament recognises genocide, human sacrifice (Christianity is based on one), pack-rape, the inferiority of women – though of course none of these is accepted in the practice of Christianity today.

Obviously faith and its absence will always lie in the area of "never

the twain shall meet". For my part, I hereby withdraw from the fray.

Clyde Philip Long (LLB '40)  
Castle Cove NSW

### ENTER THE LOONG

I found it ironic to read, in the article by Professor Dexter Hoyos (SAM Spring '09), that my surname features prominently in the "educated classical *Latin* pronunciation" for "alumnus" (uh-loong-nus) and its variants eg "alumni" (uh-loong-nee), when my surname itself is variously and constantly mispronounced often, for example, as Loong as in Waterloo and seldom, as preferred, as Loong as in Wahroonga.

Incidentally, in Chinese, "Loong" means dragon, a caricature of which, co-incidentally, appeared on this SAM's cover.

Edward Loong (BA '66 LLB '69)  
Milsoms Point NSW

*Ed: the cover image is a ceremonial lion – albeit rather dragonlike.*

### REALITY BITES

Love *Family Matters* (SAM Spring '09). Perfect timing for me: full time career gal having to admit defeat after returning to work with a 12-month-old in Jan '09. I lasted until this August and have since resigned, expecting second bub any day. I just couldn't pull it all off. It's the first time I've been unemployed since school days. Bit scary but also very content that full time motherhood is the way to go. The juggling and stress of not doing any job well nearly killed me!

Linda Fagan (BA (Hons) '92)  
Bungendore NSW

### A NUCLEAR DETERRENT

How relieved should one be now that the old dander-raising questions have apparently been settled, and we now have an acceptable model of family for our society? How relieved are the readers of SAM (Spring '09) to learn that the editor does consider that "of course, families do matter"? Back in the '70s – my days at uni – the concept of the nuclear family was under fierce attack even while the nucleus itself was splitting, so to speak. How freely we can breathe to know that the big issues

and questions now are assurance that work/life can be balanced, and deeper thought is needed on school choice.

Of course we look forward to the changes in SAM, while *Family Matters* may mean we have to draw our own confusions. As Groucho Marx once said, "It isn't so much that hard times are coming: the change observed is mostly soft times going."

Teresa Varjavandi (BA '82)  
Balgowlah Heights NSW

### THE ANDERSON CONNECTIONS

It was a delight to read (SAM Winter '09) of Professor John Anderson. It brought back many memories of when I had the privilege of attending his lectures during the subject labelled "Scientific Method". We had John Passmore, who made it all sound easy. Then John Anderson took over next term and really stretched our inadequate thinking.

He did not hesitate for a word during the 40 minute period and at the end of a sentence, strode out of the room as the period ended. A week later he strode back into the room and continued where he had left off. And he had no written notes. That was up to us, furiously attempting to understand his reasoning.

One of the stories circulating about him then was of his sitting in the Quadrangle with the cryptic crossword in front of him when asked could we have the paper after he finished the crossword?

He handed it over saying he had finished the crossword and didn't need to write it down. A man I'm sure that none of us will ever forget and regret that many of us really were not able to understand his philosophy.

James LO Tedder (BEC '51)  
Grassy Head NSW

### A CARTESIAN OOPS

Perhaps you have a policy of publishing corrections in a later issue: I was pleased to see my piece on Anderson published (SAM), and especially pleased you put it under its own rubric.

However, my second last sentence was slightly mangled:

"Where success and effectiveness, influence and tradition, usefulness and efficiency are the

criteria, Cartesian-analytic modes of thinking win, especially over phenomenology, which has long since posed uncomfortable questions to the Cartesian scientific approach that, with its sure-footed instinct for power, invariably HAVE been ignored" was changed to "has".

The "have" in my original sentence refers back to "questions", meaning that the Cartesian scientific approach has invariably ignored the questions posed to it by phenomenology. Changing to "has" implies that "the Cartesian scientific approach" has been ignored, which is by no means the case – quite the contrary!

I enjoy reading SAM to keep up on current University affairs, and that issue was particularly colourful. Just love the "B.Y.O. water" cartoon.

**Michael Aldred**  
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Cologne Germany

*A further correction: In SAM's Adventures, Dr Paul Roche observed of Rome: "non basta una vita" and we so loved the idea it was inadvertently partially translated into French. Ci dispiace molto.*

## The Winning Letter

This issue's copy of *Museum – the Macleays, their collections and the search for order* goes to Robyn Dalziel (MSc Med (RH HG) '04) of Castle Hill NSW, for her contribution to the luck debate. Congratulations!

Please keep the letters coming: another beautiful gift for the best letter will again be given in the Autumn issue of SAM.



# editorial

This year is the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Great Hall and it was my privilege and surprise to write the script for the show that celebrated the event. Theatre director Antoinette Sampson and I collaborated to conjure up the ghosts of Sydney's past and present: William Charles Wentworth, Frances Merewether, James Blackett and James Barnet, John Challis and various unnamed citizens (including typically anonymous women!) who promenaded on the lawns, much as they did in 1859. It was a chilly but memorable September night and I sincerely thank those of you who enjoyed it, were inspired by it – and let us know.

Buildings are part of history, but the people who occupy those buildings are what keep history alive. Two letters arrived simultaneously to reinforce that thought. Eleanor Holmes (nee Putnam) (BA (Hons) '58) wrote of her mother Margaret Joan Holmes (nee Read) 1909-2009, who attended the University from 1927-32, completing two years of Arts before four years of Medicine, graduating BSc.

"Her conservative worldview was called into question by two lecturers 'Jimmy' Bruce (History) and Camilla Wedgwood (Anthropology)," writes her daughter, "and she became a convinced pacifist. She was elected to the first SRC and worked for the Settlement. She married fellow Med student T.A.G. (Tag) Holmes and they had six children. She actively championed many causes including Aboriginal empowerment, recycling and the environment, debt-forgiveness for poor nations,

humane treatment of asylum seekers and independence for East Timor and West Papua. In her 90s she maintained a vigil outside Kirribilli House in protest against our entering the war in Iraq. She was optimistic as well as compassionate, saying 'We must have hope, because unless we have hope we have nothing'."

Margaret Holmes was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2001, recognising her lifelong work for peace and justice, particularly her founding of the NSW branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Justice, an organisation formed in 1915 to promote non-military resolution to conflicts.

The second letter is from Dr Grosvenor Burfitt-Williams (MBBS '46) who writes "I thought it might be of interest that it is 100 years since women medical graduates were given equal status with male medical graduates when appointments were being made to resident staff to Sydney hospitals.

"My mother, Mary Burfitt, was one of those appointed to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, others were appointed to Sydney Hospital, they were Elizabeth Hamilton-Brown, Alexia Maclean and Clara Smith. I believe there were seven women who graduated, the greatest number in any one year up until 1909 and for many years afterwards.

"An attempt was made to curtail women doctors' treatment of male patients. Sir Thomas Anderson-Stewart, Chairman of the Board of RPAH and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine told the women they were qualified and he would not allow any attempt to stop them doing their duty as doctors. The following year, my mother was the first woman to be invited to remain on as a Senior Resident at RPAH. At the Australasian Medical Congress

in Sydney in 1911 she presented a paper 'A Preliminary Report on the Bacteriology of the Blood', one of the earliest accounts of blood culture from living patients.

"At the end of her second year she became a Resident at the Crown Street Women's Hospital, to gain obstetric experience. On completion, she embarked on what would become a large general practice at 222 Glebe Point Road. She also established the pathology department at Lewisham Hospital and served for many years as Honorary Pathologist and Honorary Physician to in-patients. In 1921 she married Grosvenor John Williams (MB '16 MS '16) and they had three sons who also graduated in Medicine.

"Mary Burfitt retired from general practice in 1924 and practiced as a Consultant Physician for the next 20 years. She played a prominent part in establishing Sancta Sophia College, having taken part in deputations to Archbishop Kelly to secure his support. She served on the College Council for many years. She also served as President of the University Catholic Women's Association and advocated that it should combine with the men's Newman Society, which later happened. She supported Medical Women in their endeavour to establish the Rachel Foster Hospital and is commemorated in the Mary Boyd Burfitt Scholarship in Microbiology at the University."

Virginia Woolf said, "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman." Not this time.

– The Editor