

## The Ethical Science Without Integrity: Lessons from Investigating Claims of the Para-

*Speaker:*

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Illusion—can a rope cut in half really be made whole again? is a ghost actually present in a photograph?—was the focus of plenary speaker Joe Nickell, a former private investigator, stage magician, technical writer, and author of books investigating claims of the paranormal. The paranormal, Nickell said, is a question of good science versus bad science. Some who investigate the paranormal begin with the answer and look only at evidence that proves that answer. Good science, however, requires looking at all evidence to delve behind the illusion. Nickell explained several cases of what were originally thought to be instances of the paranormal by showing the evidence that proved them otherwise.

### **The Ghost at Mackenzie House**

Nineteenth-century Canadian statesman William Lyon Mackenzie, who had a printing press and published literature advocating independence, was thought to haunt his former house in Toronto. Caretakers of his house claimed to hear a printing press. A woman said that she saw Mackenzie's ghost wandering about one night. A ghostlike image appeared in a photograph after his death. On investigation, the printing-press sounds turned out to be made by the night cleaning crew's jangling equipment and footsteps in the adjoining building, the woman had had a waking dream, and the ghost in the photograph was the reflection of the

flash. There are no haunted houses, Nickell concluded, only haunted people.

### **The Case of the Two Will Wests**

The widespread use of fingerprinting today is the result of this mysterious case of a person who was thought to be in 2 places at the same time. Will West was taken to Leavenworth Penitentiary to serve a term for manslaughter. Someone at the jail recognized him, and indeed a look-alike criminal named

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William West was already there. How could he have been in 2 places at once? Nickell investigated. He used experts to review the descriptive evidence: height, weight, shoe size, ear shape, and fingerprints. All were identical except for differences in the shape of the ears and the fingerprints, which had a rare type of swirl. The hypothesis is that there were 2 Will Wests—identical twins whose only differences were minor variations in fingerprints and ears. Nickell also discovered documentary evidence supporting the hypothesis.

### **A Case of Spontaneous Combustion**

In 1951, the burned body of a woman was discovered in Florida. No evidence of foul play or suicide was found, so it was thought that she must have died from spontaneous combustion. On investigation, it was discovered that she smoked, was overweight, slept in a flammable nightgown, and took sleeping pills. The theory is that the woman fell asleep while smoking and caught fire and that her body fat melted, contributing to the severe destruction of her body.

### **The Flying-Saucer Mystery**

The media reported that a flying saucer had crashed on a ranch near Roswell, New Mexico. Nickell investigated and found that the rancher on whose property the crash took place never referred to the debris as a flying saucer; only the media described it that way. The rancher described the material he found as light and consisting of foil, sticks, rubber, string, and tape. The debris matched a balloon with a radar target attached to it. Indeed, a spy balloon sent up by the US government, in what was termed Project Mogul, was lost near Roswell.

### **The Nasca Lines**

Another hoax that Nickell debunked was that of the Nasca drawings. These earth drawings in Peru can be seen only from an altitude of about 1000 feet. It was speculated that they were made by aliens in flying saucers or that the Nasca natives had invented balloons and could view the artwork from above. Nickell demonstrated how the drawings could have been made by recreating such drawings himself.

### **The Shroud of Turin**

Nickell also demonstrated how the shroud of Turin could have been made by creating a similar image himself. He reminded the audience that St John's gospel describes the wrapping of Christ differently from the way the shroud looks, that a forger during the Middle Ages admitted to making the shroud to attract religious pilgrims, and that blood on the shroud was red, not black as old blood would be. Carbon-dating tests show that the cloth dates from the time of the forger's confession.

The moral of the story is that what appears real might prove to be an illusion and that only science with integrity serves the Truth. 