

In the air

PM rebirths in Mexican mud ...

Ariel Wagner-Parker

„The ceremony took place at dusk. Mr Blair and his wife, wearing bathing costumes, were led to the Temazcal, a brick-coloured pyramid on the south end of the beach. (...) Within the Temazcal, a type of Ancient Mayan steam bath, herb-infused water was thrown over heated lava rocks, to create a cleansing sweat and balance the Blairs' energy flow.

Ms Aguilar chanted Mayan songs, told the Blairs to imagine they could see animals in the steam and explained what such visions meant. They were told the Temazcal was like the womb and those participating in the ritual must confront their hopes and fears before rebirth and venturing outside. The Blairs were offered watermelon and papaya, then told to smear what they did not eat over each other's bodies along with mud from the Mayan jungle outside.

(...) Before leaving, the Blairs were told to scream out loud to signify the pain of rebirth. They then walked hand in hand down to the beach to swim in the sea.

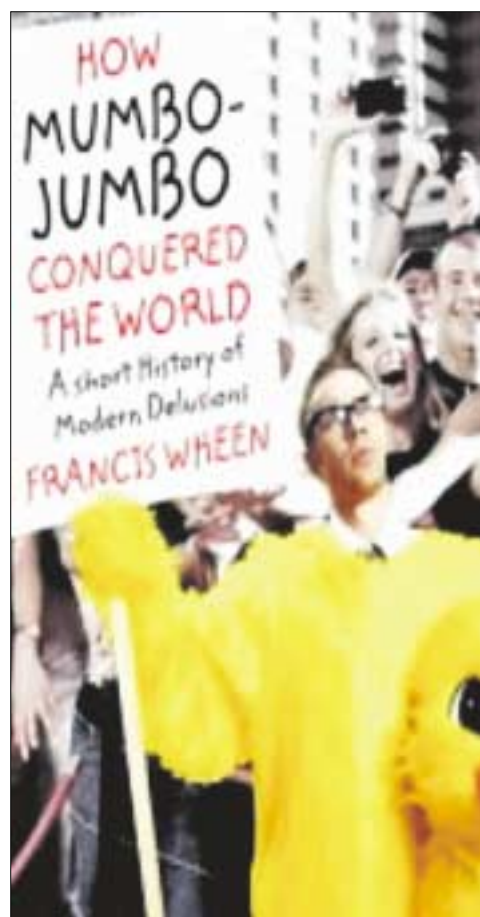
As a rational reader of „k“ you probably think this is a sick joke, but I assure you it is a quotation from The Times' account of a „rebirthing experience“ undergone by the British Prime Minister and his lawyer wife during a Mexican holiday in August 2001 – as quoted by Francis Wheen in his riveting book *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World* (A Short History of Modern Delusions) (1).

As one reviewer put it, you are „torn between contempt and hilarity“ reading this toe-curling tale of a man who has the power to commit his country to war and send young people to their potential deaths. There can be no „re-birthing“ for the British soldiers killed in Iraq – or for Ken Bigley, beheaded as a result of British involvement.

A former Guardian journalist, Wheen describes the war of attrition that has been waged on rationalism for the last quarter century. He describes with pitiless lucidity the whole spectrum of „delusions“ that beset today's society, from the „voodoo economics“ of stock marketeers during the dotcom bubble of the late nineties, through the incapacitating relativism with which post-modernism has check-mated intellectual and moral debate, to the growing dependence on „snake-oil merchants“, self-help gurus and alternative therapies of no proven value.

Reading this book is like being tickled: you laugh but feel despair mounting inside – as for instance in the chapter on

self-development manuals. The genre started with *The Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, which exploded into the charts in 1991, wowing wannabe leaders with such insights as „You must have resilience to overcome personal misfortunes, discouragement, rejection and disappointment“. The resulting tidal wave cast up all manner of tosh from *If Aristotle Ran General Motors* to Anthony Robbins' *Giant Steps*: „365 lessons in self-mastery“. Lesson 364 is typically profound: „Remember to expect miracles...because you are one.“



It is particularly disturbing to read of people who enjoy power and influence engaging in activities so batty it beggars belief: Cherie Blair calling in a „dowsing healer“, who treats her swollen ankles by swinging a crystal pendulum over them while feeding her strawberry leaves grown within the „electromagnetic field“ of a Neolithic circle he has built in his back garden. Or the „no-nonsense“ Margaret Thatcher being „a devotee of mystical 'electric baths' and Ayurveda therapy.“ Or the Reagans being completely dependent on Nancy's astrologer. Or Hillary Clinton being persuaded into talking to the spirits of Eleanor Roosevelt and Gandhi to help her achieve „self-healing“... and only calling a halt

when she is invited to chat to Jesus Christ.

The wackiness becomes even more alarming when it invades governance itself. Autumn 1998, London: lateral thinker Edward de Bono, invited to lecture to 200 department of education officials, explains to them they should put on different coloured hats for talking about instincts (red) or the advantages of a project (yellow), or for playing devil's advocate (black) and so on. De Bono modestly describes this as „the first new way of thinking to be developed for 2.500 years since the days of Plato, Socrates and Aristotle.“ The master's other insights include „You can't dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper“, and „With a problem, you look for a solution“.

January 1999: the Blair government recruits a feng-shui consultant to advise on how to improve inner-city council estates. The lady pronounces „Red and orange flowers would reduce crime and introducing a water feature would reduce poverty. I was brought up with this ancient knowledge.“

There's much more to laugh – or weep – about: consult the index to locate the theory that divides the world into chocolate cakes and chocolate cake recipes that so impressed Tony Blair, the logical absurdity of homeopathic medicine, the role played in our lives by angels and extra-terrestrials (2% of Americans in the 1990s claimed to have been kidnapped by them, some several times – „an air-traffic control nightmare“, as one sceptic wrote) ...

Wheen's book is timely: *The Da Vinci Code*, a monument to mumbo-jumbo if ever there was one (cf. *inter alia*, *Cracking The Da Vinci Code* by Simon Cox), is currently Britain's best-selling book. My newspaper's website recently invited readers to „brush up on your spells for Halloween with our quiz on witchcraft and wizardry“.

Against the madness of crowds, wrote Schiller, the gods themselves contend in vain...

The other day I read an article about the death of lighthouse keeping as a profession and couldn't help recalling that the heroes of the Enlightenment were known as the „Beacons of Humanity“...

HMJTOTW confirms the worst fears of those of us who believe the lights are going out for good and we are heading back to the Dark Ages.

-> (1) **Francis Wheen: *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World*, Harper Perennial 2004, ISBN: 0007140975, 352 p. Now issued in paperback.**