

area may still harbour Eurasia's rarest bird of all, the slender-billed curlew, which has been seen nowhere since 1998, when one turned up in Northumberland.

Western environmentalists want to see the lost marshlands reflooded. They are making common cause with western enthusiasts for the Marsh Arabs' 5,000-year-old way of life, dependent as it was on growing rice and dates, raising water buffalo, fishing, and building boats and houses from reeds. The Iraq Foundation, which enjoys the support of non-Iraqis as well as Iraqi expatriates, has set up a project called Eden Again, dedicated to the restoration of the marshlands, supposedly the site of Adam and Eve's garden, for the benefit of their traditional inhabitants.

Andrew Natsios, the boss of Usaid, the agency with lead responsibility for physical reconstruction in Iraq, has said that recreating the marshlands should be a top priority. However, Major General Tim Cross, the top Brit in the operation, says the marshes are "an issue for the future Iraqi government and the people of this region themselves". And there's the rub.

Birdwatching isn't big in Iraq, and nor, for that matter, are the Marsh Arabs who, like troublesome minorities elsewhere, are considered something of a nuisance. Draining the marshes was not an unpopular move. Saddam promised that land would be reclaimed for agriculture, and some of the land released does now produce wheat. The farmers who have benefited will not want to be dispossessed. Yet recreating the marshes, 90 per cent of which have now disappeared, would mean relocating not just the farmers but hundreds of thousands of other people as well. It would also involve redesigning the water system at huge cost.

It would increase pressure on fragile river systems and might be fiercely resented in Kurdish areas upstream. It might also provoke difficulties for Iraq with Turkey and Syria, which would probably have to release water as well. And there are oil reserves under the marshes which might produce three million barrels a year.

Still, the Marsh Arabs want their marshes back, or so their clan leaders say. However, only a minority of their 400,000 followers remain in the area. Most of the

rest, if they are not dead, are now dispersed through the rest of Iraq or over the border in Iran. What's more, there must be real doubt about whether the younger generation would want to return to a way of life which, though picturesque to outsiders, was punishingly hard on those who had to endure it.

The recreation of the Mesopotamian marshes, if it is to happen at all, will need to be an imperial project, imposed on the Iraqi people by their enlightened conquerors. America and Britain (in whose sector the marshes lie) have the levers to make it happen: whatever form of administration Iraq ends up with, the country will be desperately dependent on outside aid for many years to come. But should the liberators champion biodiversity and vulnerable minorities? Or democracy?

#### sexual abuse

## When the mind plays tricks

ROSIE WATERHOUSE

**W**hat do stories of alien abduction and false memories of child sexual abuse have in common? Most of them, it seems, emerge during some form of psychotherapy.

The dangers of misguided therapy were highlighted when psychologists from

Britain and the US met at a conference, Remembering Trauma, at the Royal Society of Medicine in London this month. According to one survey, 3.7 million Americans believe they have been abducted by space aliens and experimented upon, or forced to have sex to produce hybrid children as part of an extraterrestrial fast-breeder programme. A recent BBC poll found that at least 300 people in Britain hold similar beliefs.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in a panic that spread across the English-speaking world, people claimed to have recovered long-forgotten memories of "Satanic" abuse in bizarre rituals by devil-worshipping cults which raped and murdered children, drank blood, ate faeces and impregnated women to breed babies for sacrifice. As no forensic evidence has been found anywhere to corroborate any such stories, most of us would conclude they, too, were false.

But claims by adolescents and adults that they have suddenly realised that they were sexually abused in their childhood are less easily dismissed. During the 1990s, many psychotherapists latched on to a theory that victims of incest and sexual abuse had been so traumatised that they repressed the memory. And so therapists used techniques including hypnosis and regression therapy to assist memory recovery. Most doctors in the mental health field now accept that some so-called recovered memories can be false memories unwittingly induced in therapy by leading questions and suggestions.

Now some researchers go further, arguing that it is impossible to have forgotten a truly traumatic event. All recovered memories are therefore necessarily false in the same way as memories of alien abduction. Richard McNally, professor of psychology at Harvard University, says: "The notion that the mind protects itself by repressing or dissociating memories of trauma, rendering them inaccessible to awareness, is a piece of psychiatric folklore devoid of convincing empirical evidence." McNally studied Vietnam veterans who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and concluded that their memories were all too clear and had never been forgotten. But research on people who claimed to have been abused ►

### next week in the newstatesman

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on Orson Welles

**WILL SELF** on Nick Cohen

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on the terrorist outrages to come

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on Damien Hirst

**MARK LYNAS**  
on whaling in Iceland

**DOUGLAS KENNEDY's** diary  
and **MARK THOMAS's** column

► during rituals of secret Satanic cults showed that most of them recovered the “memories” during psychotherapy. And when he studied people who believed they had been abducted by aliens, he found that the majority had undergone “quasi-hypnotic” memory recovery sessions.

Is the same true of many “victims” of “ordinary” childhood sexual abuse? Janet Boakes, head of psychotherapy services at St George’s Hospital, London, told the conference: “Most clinicians now accept the reality of the ‘false memory syndrome’, but few recognise that they could themselves be responsible for creating or fostering false memories.”

In the past five years, Boakes has been retained by the defence in nearly 100 cases involving “historical” allegations of sexual abuse. Of these, 65 cases involved criminal prosecutions and, in more than three-quarters of them, the complainant had received a “therapeutic intervention” that ranged from counselling to long-term psychiatric in-patient care.

And those responsible for engendering false memories were not just unregistered, unqualified quacks. Boakes reported that 73 per cent of the therapists involved were employed by the NHS and 7 per cent by social services departments, with just 20 per cent in private practice.

“Sometimes,” she said, “clinicians seem to suspend all critical faculties when given a history of abuse and fail to recognise a *prima facie* unlikely tale. I think of a young woman who claimed that her father raped her on the grand piano in the garden shed. Her father was a local music teacher working from home. One imagines that if he really kept his piano in the garden shed, he would have been the talk of the neighbourhood.”

Boakes cited another “but not untypical” case of a woman with gynaecological problems, who, after hearing a talk about incest, became anxious when she saw a pillow and hot-water bottle. As her mental health deteriorated, she was referred to a community psychiatric nurse who gave her *The Courage to Heal*, known as the bible of the recovered-memory movement. The book encourages a belief that many of life’s problems are rooted in forgotten sexual abuse. Over a few weeks, the patient recovered “memories” of being

sexually abused by her grandfather, father and husband. Eventually, she accused five men and two women of abusing her. “Often, she would announce a couple of days in advance that she felt a memory coming through,” said Boakes.

She advises therapists: “Avoid any treatment aimed at facilitating or recovering memory. If the patient gets worse, review the case from the beginning. Consider whether you could have got it wrong. There is good evidence that the mental health of patients treated for sexual abuse that did not happen may deteriorate alarmingly as their view of themselves and their world is rewritten. Some of them never recover.”

#### heathrow

## Welcome to slovenly Britain

THEODORE DALRYMPLE

**I**f Britain is so rich, why is it such a dump? It is clear that GDP per head doesn’t tell you very much about a country. The febrile dinginess of Britain is immediately apparent on landing at Heathrow from abroad, as I did recently. There are few uglier concatenations of buildings in the world than this airport, permanently struggling to keep pace with its traffic. I know this must be a difficult task, but Heathrow is not the only busy airport in the world. It is, however, one of the most dispiriting and unpleasant.

I had been to five airports other than Heathrow in the previous three weeks, and I saw more litter within 30 seconds of alighting at Heathrow than in all the others combined. It is as if British retinas now screen out litter automatically, without having to think about it. The British, therefore, need make no effort to remove it: for them, it removes itself by parapsychological means.

Many of the ceiling tiles of the corridors were down, revealing pipes. I considered the possibility that it was an experiment in gimcrack postmodernist aesthetics of

the kind beloved of British architects, but then I decided it was just plain, old-fashioned dilapidation.

The first moving walkway I encountered in Heathrow was out of order – the only walkway out of order that I saw in all the six airports. There was a notice apologising for the inconvenience, but no sign of any activity to repair it. This is a manifestation of what might be called our “sorry culture”: “Sorry for the delay to your journey”, “Sorry for the inconvenience”, etc, but never any improvement.

The lighting in some parts of the airport brought back to me the Prague of good old Dr Husák’s days. The floor around the baggage carousel was sticky, presumably because someone, unable to tolerate more than five minutes without refreshment, had spilt a sweet soft drink on the floor and it had dried there.

In each of the four other countries I visited, the immigration officials were smartly uniformed, but at Heathrow they were in civvies – of a sort.

The woman who looked at my passport was wearing a £3 T-shirt that was far from clean. She was dressed for reclining on a dirty sofa, watching telly with tins of beer and a cat giving birth to kittens all around her. The other officials were scarcely better-dressed.

The informality of appearance, however, should not be mistaken for friendliness. Anyone who has observed how British immigration officials treat people who come from countries with smaller GDPs per head than Britain will know that friendly is not the word to describe them. Bureaucrat, proud bureaucrat, drest in a little brief authority! Slovenly arrogance is not pleasing to behold.

Outside, everything is dirty, grey, chaotic, mean-spirited and obviously inadequate to the function it is supposed to perform. Everything has been done to the lowest possible specification, without thought of anything but some kind of short-term bottom line. Just as the people evince no self-respect, so the country evinces no pride.

One thing, and one thing only, can be said in favour of Heathrow: it gives the visitor to Britain an accurate foretaste of what is to come once he or she leaves the airport.

