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# SKEPTIC

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE SKEPTICS SOCIETY, DEVOTED TO THE  
INVESTIGATION AND PROMOTION OF SCIENCE AND RATIONAL SKEPTICISM

December 20, 1993

Philip Klass  
404 "N" St. Southwest  
Washington D.C. 20024

Dear Phil:

Since I now seem to be "in the loop" of correspondence I thought you might want to see the actual letter from L. Pearce Williams (photocopy enclosed). I spoke with Dr. Williams a couple of weeks ago and he confirmed that the letter was his and that everything in it is true as far as he knows, with one exception. Since the letter, Seckel called him and, naturally, was upset that someone he respected could say so many negative things about him. Seckel pointed out to Williams that he actually did take one class from Williams and received a grade of B-. This, as Williams points out, is a far cry from being a Cornell graduate. Williams said he knows for a fact that Seckel never graduated from Cornell. One of my close contacts in the history department at CALTECH says that when he realized Seckel was not actually enrolled in his course (on the history of science) he investigated and discovered that Seckel was not even enrolled at CALTECH. He immediately terminated their relationship.

Elie Shneour called me about the letter, after Seckel told him it was a hoax, and seemed intent on defending Seckel, until I read him the letter in full and explained that it was not a fake and that Seckel is exactly what Williams says he is. Elie then admitted that Seckel has had numerous personal and intellectual problems that have led him to take the route he did to try to gain respect and self-esteem. Obviously it did not work, though he seems to have retained the friendship of some of the old skeptics despite his questionable behaviours.

Personally I have had very few dealings with Seckel, but for the most part they were not positive. I found him to be quite arrogant, to the point where it seemed like he was compensating for something, an observation that turned out to be correct ("shallow brooks run noisy" and all that). In 1987 I contracted to author a book entitled "Teach Your Child Science," which has since been published and has sold quite well. At the time of writing I asked Paul MacCready to write a foreword for the book, if he liked the manuscript. He read through the entire manuscript, had numerous small changes, but said he was quite impressed and would be happy to do the foreword. (I knew Paul, not through the skeptics, but through cycling—he and I served on a panel discussion on the aerodynamics of racing human-powered vehicles; he the aerodynamicist, me the bicycle racer.) In the meantime, I met Seckel through MacCready and, like so many others, was initially impressed with what seemed like his authority on science. I gave him a copy of the manuscript of my book to read for feedback. He absolutely hated the book. He said he could not find a single item in the entire manuscript to praise. It would be stillborn from the press, he said. Well, two days later I received a call from MacCready saying he had suddenly changed his mind about the foreword and that he would not be willing to write it. He could articulate no specific reason, other than he had changed his mind about his initial response. I then asked him if he had been speaking to Seckel about the manuscript. He said that he had, but this had nothing to do with it. Further discussion led him to agree to give an endorsement of the book on the cover (which is there) but that he no longer had the time to write a foreword.

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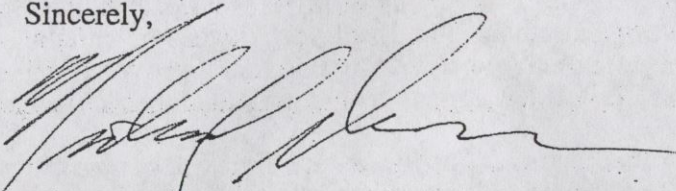
*Sum ergo cogito—I am therefore I think*



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Well, many years later I met Pat Linse, who, the first day I met her, began to tell me the incredible stories of Al Seckel (she lives near me and had dropped by to pick up a reprint of an article I wrote on creationism). One of the stories was about people he would try to ruin. Now, I can assure you that she had no idea it was me she was talking about with this one story, but it was about this college professor with a manuscript on teaching children science. She recalled that Seckel and this professor sat on his lawn and discussed the book (correct) and that when he came back in the house he laughed and said he was going to call MacCready and talk him out of doing the foreword. He promptly went to the phone, called MacCready, and bad-mouthed me and the book until MacCready agreed to drop his name from the project. I then revealed to Pat that the college professor was me! She was shocked, as was I, at the connection just made. It confirmed what I had suspected all along. I never dealt with Seckel after that incident. He is, in my estimate, a sad and pathetic individual in need of psychological counseling. If I never hear from or about him again it will be too soon. I have never met anyone who can evoke such venom from so many people. A week does not go by that someone doesn't tell me yet another horrible Seckel story. It is difficult to believe that anyone could have achieved such an ignoble status in such a short time. The amazing aspect of the story is how the skeptical community, including myself at first, was so easily taken in by him. There is a story here for some sociologist to study about how groups can be easily duped by insiders who appear so much like themselves. I have seen this in Christian groups as well. Someday the whole story should be told, but it is probably too early, with too many emotions still evoked, to do so objectively or without lawsuits flying around.

Sincerely,



Michael Shermer

P.S. This letter is not for publication or distribution.

cc: TOM McIVER