Materia Non Medica

Rocky Mountain high

Aspen Colorado, December 1977. The scenario, so to speak, is remarkable. The major part of the United States is in the grip of ice, wind, and snow. Boston is 4° below zero, Minneapolis 17° below, even Orlando, Florida, is only 36°F. Wind chill indices (as ubiquitous on TV weather reports as the cardiac stroke work index in the intensive care units of the US) of 50 to 80 below zero are being reported from everywhere. Here in Aspen, however, at 7900 feet, we seem to be above it all.

After a week of snow, the skiing conditions are very good, though not excellent, on most of the slopes. The glaring sun shines all day with temperatures on the mountain-tops as high as 40°F by day, and no lower than 28°F by night.

Aspen, "ski city" of the western US, was originally established in 1879 as a silver-mining town. In the old tradition of the wild west, it boomed until the silver ran out, $105 000 000 worth later, and it became a ghost town. It was revived as a summer cultural centre, the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, shortly after the second world war. Since then it has again boomed, the modern silver being the now-renowned Colorado powder snow. Even as a ski resort it retains the wild west influence, and cowboy boots and hats are worn in all the restaurants and on many of the ski runs. As an Irishman one of my best memories is of the second question asked by all my southern states ski-lift partners, "Y'all ski in Ireland?"

The American approach to skiing reflects their approach to most aspects of life. They ski hard, use only the latest and best skiing equipment, and have a detailed scientific explanation for everything. They are "into" the psychology of teaching skiing. The psychological approach known as "inner skiing" continues to develop hot on the heels of "inner tennis." In addition, no criticism is ever directed against a single individual in the ski class. Errors in technique are rather pointed out to the class in general as common problems, and this prevents the reawakening of difficult toilet training experiences for any one. Thankfully absent are the prima donna instructors so common on the ski slopes of the Alps.

In the evening, in a nation in the midst of an energy crisis, relaxation is taken in outdoor swimming pools heated to 110°F. In the cold air of the evening, this is a delightfully pleasurable experience, and seems on superficial examination to be neither immoral nor fattening and perhaps even healthy. This is followed by dinner in superb restaurants, and thence to dusky bars echoing to the strains of country and western music, including such memorable songs as "Up against the Wall, Redneck Mother."—DENIS MEHIGAN (surgical research fellow, Baltimore).

Continuing tradition in Terra Australis

In the United Kingdom traditional celebrations begin with Christmas Day and go on from there, but for the Scot living in Australia, or indeed, in any of the Commonwealth countries with a strong Scottish background the festive season is preceded by respectful recognition of the patron saint, St Andrew. On 30 November the Society of St Andrew of Scotland holds an evening of homage, wherein Scots and those of Scottish descent pay respect with great fervour to their country of origin by way of fellowship, food and drink (Scottish fare), and traditional songs.

After this emotional experience Christmas Day sails in very quickly. Again, tradition is very strong, and despite the sunshine and great heat, most Australians take great delight in tackling roast turkey, mince pies, plum puddings, and all the dyspepsia that goes with it.

And is this not enough? Once more the Scot comes in to his own. Hogmanay dare not pass without due recognition. The "Wha's like us" fraternity gather together before midnight to farewell "The year that's awa" and welcome in "The New." Again tradition is all demanding. Thus there are bagpipes, eightsome reels, gay Gordons, draps o'brandy—all in the early hours of a hot summer morning. This year, with a shrewd eye for a good thing, Paul McCartney slipped in his latest song, "Mull of Kintyre." Ex-patriates could be seen swaying from side to side singing of "Mists rolling in from the sea" with a far-away look in moist eyes.

And it's not yet finished. Australia Day, which commemorates the foundation of that large continent as we know it today, falls on 31 January. Luckily, the Australians, being sensible, practical, and by then much overweight, make this particular public holiday one of quiet, rest, and recovery—J P COLQUHOUN (Cleveland, Queensland, Australia).

Let's keep it to ourselves

Millions of people believe in a god without demanding raw data to prove his existence, so why should so many disbelieve other things that cannot be explained with facts and figures? As a child, Brian Inglis thought the supernatural was all quite natural and was surprised when he left Ireland to find that his English schoolmates scoffed at ghosts and such things. Now, in *Natural and Supernatural: A History of the Paranormal* (Hodder and Stoughton, £9·95) he endeavours to persuade the sceptical that things like ghosts, poltergeists, telepathy, and precognition have always been around. The number of doubters increased as countries became developed, but his history goes up only to 1914, and the next volume may well show that scientists—who sometimes don't believe even the evidence of their own eyes—are now becoming less sceptical.

Among Mr Inglis's most astonishing investigations are those on levitation: innumerable tests were made on Daniel Dunglas Home, who floated in and out of windows, and on Eusapia Palladino, who lifted heavy tables without touching them. One thing I missed was mention of those kindly ghosts or spirits who keep a house or a room happy, and the ghosts that many children see but (so far as I know) never fear. The author obviously wants to convince everyone of the veracity of such phenomena, but I'm not sure that this is advisable. I predict (without ESP) that more and more scientists will get "into" the paranormal (more acceptable word than supernatural) and that soon it will become a "science"; they will try to harness psychic energy (and there is evidence that this is already happening) for everyday use. As Mr Inglis says in his chapter on hypnotism, it took a long time for doctors (and medical journals) to accept its use—but it may be a short step before scientists use extra-sensory perception, and particularly precognition, for more unscrupulous purposes. This well-researched book is interesting, but why try to convince the unbelievers? Why not leave to some of us the occasional experiences of knowing the layout of a house we've never entered, the words about to be said in a conversation we've never heard, the knowledge that there is someone in an apparently empty room, or the feelings of sadness, pain, or joy that are simultaneously experienced by a distant friend or relation? We don't mind if people believe us or not—we *know*—but we have no intention of *using* this extra knowledge—HEATHER WINDLE (London).