The Great Debunker

Andrew Paris' one-man crusade to rid the world of bunkum shows no signs of slowing. KAREN YU finds out more for *Witness*

Whatever else Andrew Paris has been accused of, no one has ever accused him of being boring. Within minutes of meeting the famed presenter and sceptic I'm being regaled with hair-raising tales of perilous expeditions, lost civilisations and undiscovered treasures. I'm so engrossed it takes me a while to remember why I've come here.

To most of us, of course, he's best-known for his long-running television show *The Judgement of Paris*, which sees him criss-crossing the globe debunking myths and superstitions. Over the programme's ten-year run he's battled with UFOs in the Australian outback (which turned out to be nothing more than distant car headlights), a headless ghost in Galloway forest (actually a barn owl) and the infamous Beast of Bratislava (yet another barn owl), facing each encounter with unshakable scepticism and acerbic wit. Indeed, his exposés are just as famous for his pointed put-downs and blunt-bordering-on-brutal delivery as they are for the monsters and mysteries he investigates. Did I feel a flutter of nerves as I stepped up to his front door? A little.

Turns out I needn't have been so worried. True, in person he's as direct and self-assured as you'd expect. Every movement is deliberate; every word is spoken with confidence. However, with no cameras rolling – and no shibboleths to demolish – there's a humour and humanity to Paris that somehow fails to translate onto screen. He greets me warmly, apologises for the mess and makes me a mug of wincingly strong tea before launching into a tour of his Oxfordshire home of White Gate.

His house, it should be noted, is at least as interesting as its owner. A former vicarage, its many rooms, corridors and staircases are not only concertinaed together in such a way as to defy all the laws of architecture – and quite possibly a few of physics – but they're packed to the rafters with arcane and archaic artefacts from decades of globe-trotting travel. The result is something of a cross between the Pitt Rivers Museum and an Escher woodcut.

Arabic scimitars and African swords battle for attention on the overcrowded walls; shelves groan under the weight of glittering gemstones and gloomy fossils. There are Aztec pots and Chinese porcelains, portraits of ghosts and photographs of monsters. A cast of some enormous footprint lies seemingly forgotten on the parquet flooring of the hallway.

I have to double take when I spy a tiny silver container labelled 'Witch in a Bottle.' Paris peers down his glasses at the morbid curiosity. "Oh yes. Turned out to be a mummified dormouse," he explains matter-of-factly, as if handling nothing more remarkable than a tin of baked beans. "This was kept locked in a cabinet at Harmoor Chapel. Locals claimed it was making them sick when it was in fact the lead paint on the chapel radiators. Eighteenth century I reckon. How they got it in that bottle I have no idea."

Paris replaces the bottled witch and reaches for an overloaded bookcase. "Now this one," the 51-year-old continues, gingerly picking up a vicious-looking dart, "was very nearly the end of me. Back in '82 a friend and I were investigating the so-called Basilisk of Belazas, a gigantic snake that was suppos-

KAREN YU/WITNESS

-edly spat lethal venom at any poor sod who got too close. Bunkum, of course. Turned out some illicit loggers had re-acquainted themselves with the Amazonian art of the blow dart in a bid to keep prying eyes away from their activities." He examines the feather-plumed dart with something approaching affection. "Anyway, this bugger was fired straight at me but by some miracle lodged in my belt. One inch lower and I'd have died from a blow dart to the arse." From the way he softly chuckles to himself you'd think he was recalling a fun day out with friends.

White Gate is more than a walk-in curiosity cabinet, however. For Andrew Paris, each item is a reminder of humanity's weakness for the fantastic – "our propensity to roll in bullshit," as he more pungently puts it. "A part of us always wants there to be something more to this world than what we can see and touch," he sighs, sinking into an armchair as battered as his brown corduroy trousers and blue twill shirt. "We want to believe that there are forces at work beyond science and reason. It doesn't matter whether it's crystal healing or Christianity. It all comes back to the childish hope that the universe exists to coddle and soothe us."

"As soon as we invite the supernatural into our lives we give free reign to fear and ignorance. It never ends well."

And what's wrong with a bit of coddling? Paris' light blue eyes look at me with a fierce, searching intelligence, and for a second I have the unnerving feeling he can read my thoughts. "The problem with comfort blankets," he answers in his firm baritone, "is that we hold on to them so tightly that we end up smothering ourselves with them. Superstition and myth might seem harmless but they've caused no end of misery for our species." He springs from his armchair and rummages around a bashed roll-top desk, returning with a flat stone blade in his hand. "This is an Aztec knife that was used solely for cutting out human hearts." I jump a little. Is everything in this house a potential murder weapon? "Now, how many innocent people do you think had their hearts torn out on Aztec altars to appease imaginary gods? For that matter, how many people right here in England were killed as witches?" Another icy blast from those eyes. "You know when the last murder of a suspected witch took place in England?" I shake my head, unprepared for the history quiz. "1945. A 74-year-old man was found with a pitchfork through his chest and a cross carved into his throat." He contemplates the dull blade. "As soon as we invite the supernatural into our lives we give free reign to fear and ignorance. It never ends well."

Fired by this hatred of superstition, Paris has taken it upon himself to snatch away humanity's comfort blankets. What's more, he seems determined to go about it with as little sensitivity and sympathy as possible. "I've never suffered fools gladly," he once told a reporter; "but I'll gladly let them suffer."

It's no wonder that he's managed to make as many enemies as friends over the years. I fish out a recent philippic by the historian Julian Fields from my bag and read some choice snippets to Paris. 'Andrew Paris is a fossil,' declares Fields; 'a dinosaur who lumbers around the world telling people what to believe. It betrays a cultural insensitivity bordering on the obtuse. Someone should let him know that this kind of colonial, white-man's-burden mentality ought to have died out with the British Empire.'

I look in vain for a reaction in Paris' expression, but it's as if I'd just read him the weather forecast. I have to prompt him for a response. Paris runs a hand through his wiry grey-blond hair and shrugs. "People believe nonsense; I disabuse them of that nonsense. I make no apology for that." He grins. "And I take no offence at being called a dinosaur. They really were remarkable creatures. In fact, I think I have a stegosaurus tooth around here somewhere."

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In line with his wild adventures, Andrew Paris' path to Debunker-in-Chief was suitably dramatic. Older viewers of his show may still remember him as the younger brother of John Paris, the self-styled adventurer whose breathless accounts of his exploits – encounters with savage tribes, beautiful women and other assorted derring-do – made him a household name in the years before Indiana Jones whipcracked his way into cinemas. It was thanks to John that Andrew was first able to see the world, kindling a wanderlust that has burned brightly ever since.

"I was something of John's sidekick, if that," recalls Andrew. "He'd let me tag along, and in exchange I'd help with the grunt work of the expeditions – carrying bags, pitching camp, arranging flights – that sort of thing. It was hard work, but I go to see many remarkable places that way." He picks up a framed black and white photo balanced precariously on a mantelpiece. "Here we are in New Caledonia, for instance. '65, I seem to recall?" I try to make him out from the row of khakied white men standing awkwardly for the camera. "That's John," he says, pointing out a tall, powerful, dark-haired man. "In the centre, of course. And there I am." I follow his finger to a sullen young man at the edge of the frame. "Afraid

I've never been the most photogenic chap. I'm still not sure how I got a job in front of a camera."

Other adventures saw the John and Andrew trek across the Sahara in search of the lost city of Zerzura and descend into Ukraine's Optymistychna Cave, thought to be the longest cave system in Eurasia. In 1970 they joined an expedition to try and find the HMS *Erebus*, a ship that vanished while looking for the fabled northwest passage in the arctic wastes of northern Canada. In this way the Paris brothers looked set to continue indefinitely. Then, to everyone's surprise, John was found dead one October night in 1973, having locked himself in his study and shot himself with his own pistol. He was 38 years old. Andrew, four years John's junior, discovered the body.

As conversation turns to his brother's death, Andrew Paris' self-assurance falters for the first time. It's a subject he's always been reluctant to discuss. For a moment he says nothing, but simply looks out the window onto his rambling, overgrown garden. "You know, our relationships with people – friends and family – continue to develop even after death," he muses, his gaze still fixed outside. "What can I say about John? The man had such a larger-than-life personality that even now, almost twenty years later, I'm still not sure if I've managed to step out from his shadow." He turns to face me again, hands in his pockets.

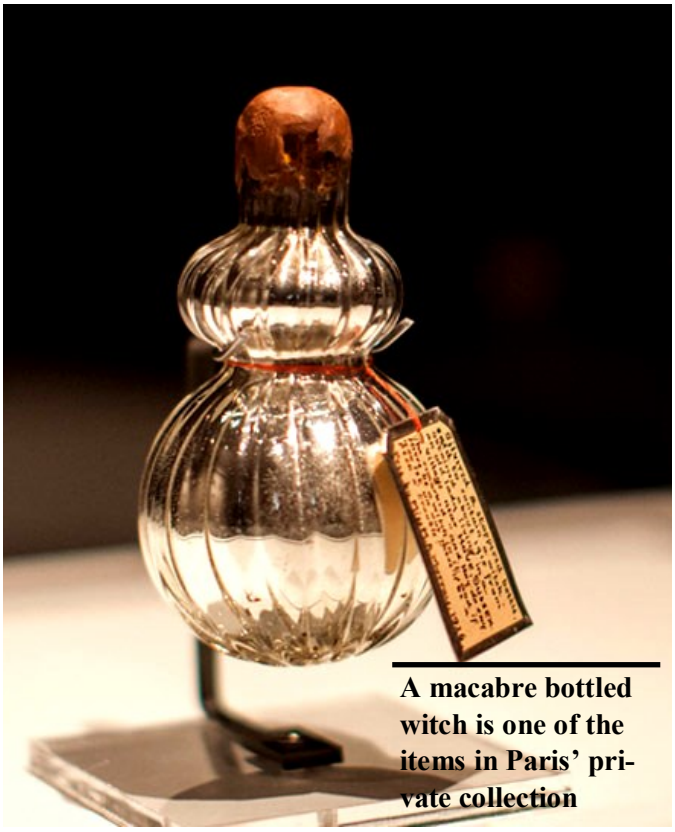
"John's death changed everything. It seems terrible to say, but I probably wouldn't have done half the stuff I have were he still alive." It's hardly an exaggeration. Much of John Paris' considerable fortune – including White Gate and its 300-acre grounds – fell to Andrew. (John's wife, who had filed for divorce months before his suicide, had been written out of his will and received nothing.) For the younger Paris, who was renting a bedroom off his brother at the time, this was a change in fortunes of Cinderella proportions. "I was always scared that John would finally kick me out of this place," he admits, a faint, sad smile on his lips. "And truth be told I had no idea where I would go. Then, aged 34, I was suddenly handed a new lease of life. I had the means to do whatever I wanted."

With this freedom, however, came a less welcome inheritance: John's legacy. With his elder brother no longer around to soak up the limelight, the glare of expectation shone brightly on the unexpected scion of the Paris name. "Talk about big bloody boots to fill," he laughs, and suddenly Andrew Paris the unflappable sceptic is back in the room. "I think at first there was a presumption that I would follow in John's footsteps, but I was never going to be able to pull that off. John was always a showman first and foremost; his stories were designed dazzle rather than inform. When he encountered local legends and superstitions he'd exaggerate them to make it more exciting and mysterious for the reader. But I'd always been more interesting in explaining tricks rather than performing them. I began to investigate the various legends we'd encountered to see whether they could be explained rationally – which, of course, they could. I wrote a couple of books, shot a television pilot, and I've been doing it ever since."

I ask whether he's ever thought of slowing down. Paris thinks for a second. "You know, I don't really see what the point of it would be. I've never married, I've no children, so it's not as if I've got a decent reason to distract myself. I'll keep making my television show so long as they pay me. I'll keep writing books so long as they publish me. It's not as if the world is at risk of running out of bullshit any time soon."

He glances around the room as if looking for someone. "Besides, who would take over from me? The Paris family tree is looking rather sparse these days. In fact, there's only me and Lisa, John's daughter, left. And the New Age movement swallowed her whole, I'm afraid." Paris suddenly jerks alert, eyes wide. "God almighty, she and her husband are coming over from the States in a few days. How did I forget that?" He collapses into a chair with an air of defeat, massaging his furrowed brow. "I'll have to spend the next few weeks listening to her rearrange her chakra with feng shui, or whatever the latest nonsense fad is."

Again that soft chuckle. "I'm sure some of my detractors would consider that a most exquisite punishment for my sins." ■



A macabre bottled witch is one of the items in Paris' private collection