

HENRY THOREAU'S FORESKIN



"For 2400 years patients have believed that doctors were doing them good; for 2300 years they were wrong."



— David Wootton, *BAD MEDICINE: DOCTORS DOING HARM SINCE HIPPOCRATES*,
Oxford, June 2006

Was the infant Henry Thoreau subjected to a circumcision? In the absence of direct evidence, I offer here that we may legitimately presume that he was not. The reason for drawing such an inference is that in general, for Gentiles, our present practices of male infant circumcision did not begin until some time after Thoreau's death — the practice of universal male circumcision seems to have begun as part of the great evil-of-childhood-masturbation scare of the 2d half of the 19th Century and the 1st half of the 20th.

1716

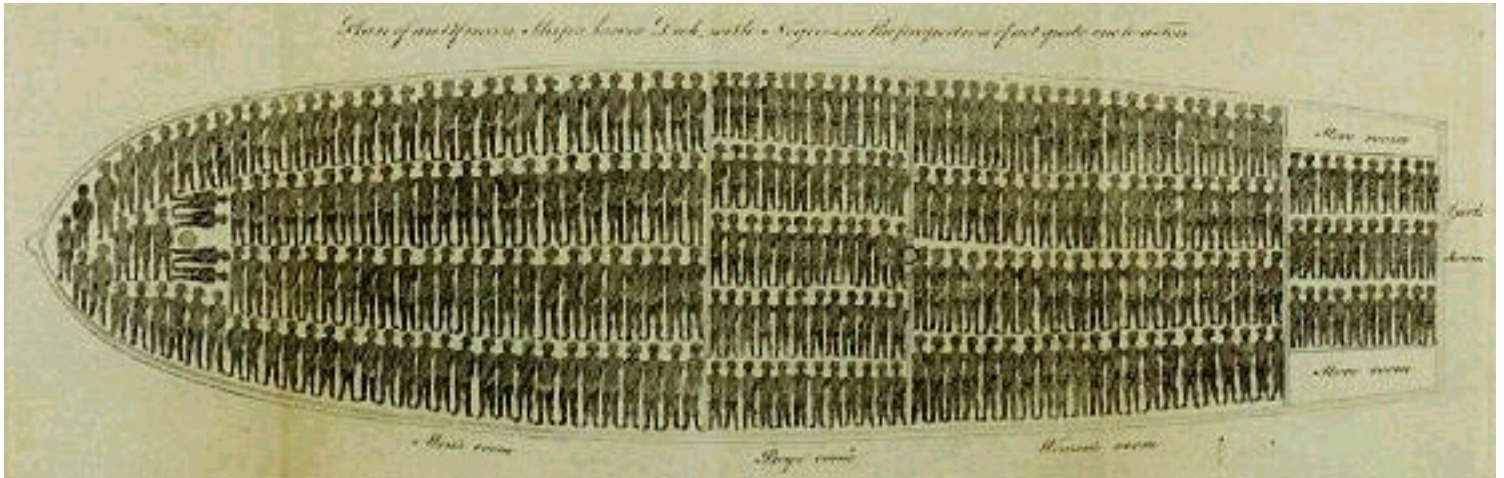


A British pornographer who had evidently converted to Judaism, Edmund Curll, infuriated Alexander Pope by falsely attributing to him a poem entitled "The Toilet." Pope responded by distributing a piece of "rich as a Jew" anti-Semitism entitled *A STRANGE BUT TRUE RELATION / HOW EDMUND CURLL WAS CIRCUMCISED*. In this piece Jews circumcise Mr. Curll by force, then preserve his foreskin for humiliating display.



1750

A [Quaker](#) in [Newport](#), one of the two major [slave](#) importing centers of the USA, was put under dealing by the elders of his monthly meeting of the [Religious Society of Friends](#), on account of his firm's continuing to engage in the [international slave trade](#).¹



[Aaron Lopez](#), who would be known as the “Merchant Prince” of early American commerce, and his family, at this point arrived in [Newport](#) from Lisbon, Portugal, where as a [Marrano](#)² he had been being required to use the Christian name “Don Duarte Lopez.”

1. So, exactly **who, by name**, was this interesting Friend? We know that Friend [Abraham Redwood](#) needed to be dealt with by the elders of his meeting, on account of his refusal to give up the ownership of beaucoup black slaves on his sugar plantation in Antigua, but I have not heard that this Friend Abraham was engaged in any trade other than the sugar trade — so presumably this [Quaker](#) slavetrader of unspecified name was some **other** Newport Quaker. Below, for your interest, appears the rotting hulk of the slave ship *Jem*, as of the Year of Our Lord 1891 at Fort Adams near [Newport](#) on [Aquidneck Island](#):



2. [Marrano](#) = a Spanish or Portuguese Jew of the late Middle Ages who converted to Christianity, especially one forcibly converted but adhering secretly to [Judaism](#).

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(Probably, the family came to the port of New-York first and then went on up to [Rhode Island](#).)



The father of the family immediately underwent ritual [circumcision](#). Within twenty years he would own or have interests in nearly a hundred sailing vessels. Aaron and his nephew Moses would wholly own 27 square-rigged vessels, including whale-ships — although they would lose nearly all of these during the Revolutionary War. Like the aforementioned Newport [Quaker](#), he would be heavily involved in the international slave trade. He would be one of the original founders of and contributors to [Touro Synagogue](#).



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1860

April 7, Saturday: In this year merely 0.001% of the US male population was circumcised (that statistic would presumably represent the male Jewish and Moslem population). The following remark, however, appeared in The Lancet, in an article about masturbation, “an injurious habit occasionally met with in infancy and early childhood”:

In cases of masturbation we must, I believe, break the habit by inducing such a condition of the parts as will cause too much local suffering to allow of the practice being continued. For this purpose, if the prepuce is long, we may circumcise the male patient with present and probably with future advantage; the operation, too, should not be performed under chloroform, so that the pain experienced may be associated with the habit we wish to eradicate.

In the absence of direct evidence I would offer therefore that in all probability the infant Henry Thoreau, born in Massachusetts in 1817, had not been subjected to a circumcision. The practice of universal male circumcision seems to begin as part of the great evil-of-childhood-masturbation scare of the 2d half of the 19th Century and the 1st half of the 20th (only after it would become a general practice would it be re-legitimated as being performed for reasons of general health).



April 7: The purple finch [*Carpodacus*  *purpureus*], — if not before.
P.M. — To Annursnack.

This is the *Rana halecina* day, — awakening of the meadows, — though not very warm. The thermometer in Boston to-day is said to be 49. Probably, then, when it is about 50 at this season, the river being low, they are to be heard in calm places.

Fishes now lie up abundantly in shallow water in the sun, — pickerel, and I see several bream. What was lately motionless and lifeless ice is a transparent liquid in which the stately pickerel moves along. A novel sight is that of the first bream that has come forth from I know not what hibernaculum, moving gently over the still brown river-bottom, where scarcely a weed has started. Water is as yet only melted ice, or like that of November, which is ready to become ice.

As we were ascending the hill in the road beyond College Meadow, we saw the dust, etc., in the middle of the road at the top of the hill taken up by a small whirlwind. Pretty soon it began to move northeasterly through the balm-of-Gilead grove, taking up a large body of withered leaves beneath it, which were whirled about with a great rustling and carried forward with it into the meadow, frightening some hens there. And so they went on, gradually, or rather one after another, settling to the ground, and looking at last almost exactly like a flock of small birds dashing about in sport, till they were out of sight forty or fifty rods off. These leaves were chiefly only a rod above the ground (I noticed some taken up last spring very high into the air), and the diameter of the whirl may have been a rod, more or less.

Early potentilla out, — how long? — on side of Annursnack.

1863

[Joanna Southcott](#)'s follower John Wroe, who had in 1823 failed to walk on water and who had undergone a public [circumcision](#), had calculated that the [millennium](#) was to begin during this year (Skinner, Stephen. *MILLENNIUM PROPHECIES*. Stamford CT: Longmeadow Press, 1994, page 109).



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1870

February 9, Wednesday: According to <http://www.cirp.org/library/history/gollaher>:

An omnibus procedure, supposedly effective against dozens of disorders which were widely feared yet poorly understood, circumcision lent itself naturally to sexual diagnoses, which in turn helped complete the transition to routine care for male infants. Late Victorian America was of course notoriously ill at ease with human sexuality. The infamous Comstock Act of 1873 captured an attitude toward sex, awkward and censorious, which was widespread within the middle and upper classes. For a culture nervous about sex, manifestations of infant and child sexuality seemed especially disturbing, contradictions of children's pristine purity. In ages past, the most common expression of sexuality in children –masturbation– seldom had caused much comment or concern. Amidst a general transformation of sexual attitudes in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, however, the popular view of masturbation darkened. Since the Enlightenment, doctors in Western Europe and America had identified masturbation as a cause of illnesses. In the course of the nineteenth century it was linked to madness, idiocy, epilepsy, and from these to a multitude of other psychological, behavioral, and pathological conditions. "The most serious forms of disorder attributable to this cause are spinal paralysis, locomotor-ataxia, and convulsions," declared a physician at Virginia's South-Western Asylum. "Besides these, masturbation, does occasionally, induce an intractable form of insanity." This was so-called "masturbatory insanity," a label many American and British physicians used for psychotic illnesses they could not otherwise classify. For ages the Catholic Church had taught that masturbation, because it existed apart from marriage and procreation, was a mortal sin. But the medical theory that masturbation caused disease presented a more immediate threat. Fittingly in the age of Darwin, biology joined God as the punisher of transgression.

The evidence for this view, which was surprisingly well accepted, was derived in part from physicians' experience with mentally ill patients. It was unnerving, one doctor wrote, to see that among the feeble minded their "hands seem instinctively drawn to those parts." So logic seemed to indicate that masturbation somehow led to feeble-mindedness. As Remondino said, "it may be a question as to whether the feeble-mindedness be not a reflex condition from this excessive morbid irritability of the sexual organs." Other commentators, pediatricians prominently among them, warned parents that the habit of masturbation was often learned in infancy, and that the foreskin was chiefly to blame. "The fact that children under two years of age can and frequently do contract the habit of masturbation is a revelation to many physicians," declared J. P. Wester in a



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paper he read to the Ohio Pediatric Society. He went on to profile a typical masturbator: a three-year-old boy who was "small, had a scowl on his face, looked wearied and bloated; he was nervous and fretful, a poor eater and a very poor sleeper." The sickly child had developed his habit before he was a year old, according to Webster, evidently "due in the first place to the condition of the prepuce."

One physician who described a successful circumcision of an infant to cure urinary tract lithuria also remembered having detected similar "oxalic acid deposits in the urine of masturbators, and offspring-shunning husbands, who practice onanism." This observation not only reconfirmed the theory that masturbation was connected with neurasthenic disease but, more important, implied that masturbation was itself less a moral failing than a response to a basic physiologic aberration. In the view of many practitioners, [masturbation](#) became an intermediate link in a chain of cause-and-effect that originated in the foreskin. Writing in support of this theory in the prestigious Philadelphia Medical Bulletin, a physician who specialized in treating neurasthenia claimed that in a sample group of 192 men with nervous disease, "including neurasthenia in all its varieties, epilepsy, etc., there were 60 cases of phimosis or redundant foreskin."

When in 1896 a popular book, *All about the Baby*, advised mothers that circumcision of baby boys was "advisable in most cases," it recommended the operation mainly for preventing "the vile habit of masturbation." L. Emmett Holt, professor at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and a distinguished expert on pediatric medicine, told his fellow physicians that "adherent prepuce... is so constantly present that it can hardly be called a malformation. It is, however, a condition needing attention in every male infant." The perils of neglect, he said, included "priapism, masturbation, insomnia, night terrors, etc.," and for that matter, "most of the functional nervous disease of childhood." Remondino, for his part, was certain that "circumcised boys may, in individual cases ... be found to practice onanism, but in general the practice can be asserted as being very rare among the children of circumcised races ... neither in infancy are they as liable to priapism during sleep as those that are uncircumcised."

Strange as it may seem in light of their using circumcision to suppress masturbation, Remondino, along with many other physicians, also endorsed circumcision as prophylaxis for impotence. Recently some scholars have argued that middle- and upper-class men in late Victorian America suffered a sexual crisis typified by fears of impotence and lost manhood. [57] Whether or not impotence and anxiety about impotence became more widespread, and can be correlated with broad social changes in the 1890s, remains a point of debate. But it is clear that impotence, a condition commonly devoid of any specific pathophysiological cause, fit neatly into the medical framework that supported circumcision. After all, phimosis and paraphimosis (the latter being a condition in which, according to one surgical textbook, "the prepuce gets behind the corona



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glandis, threatening the strangulation of the organ") were thought to predispose boys to impotence and sterility. "Sexual relations are much more to man or woman than is generally acknowledged," Remondino declared. And he maintained that freeing the male organ from "a constricting, unnatural band" would surely enhance sexual performance and pleasure.

1871

By this point merely 1% of the US male population was circumcised (that statistic would presumably represent the male Jewish and Moslem population). The following remark, however, appeared in NY Medical Journal, in an article about the value of the practice as a hygienic and therapeutic measure:

I refer to masturbation as one of the effects of a long prepuce; not that this vice is entirely absent in those who have undergone circumcision, though I never saw an instance in a Jewish child of very tender years, except as the result of association with children whose covered glans have naturally impelled them to the habit.

The fascination many Americans now have with protecting children from sexual pleasure isn't anything new. At this point male [circumcision](#) was being sponsored as a way to intercept what was seen at the time as self-abuse by boys. Self-stimulation was considered to be as damaging as sexual abuse by an adult. Among the most visible American physicians who opposed [masturbation](#) in the 1870s were Drs. Abraham Jacobi (1830-1919) and M.J. Moses. Jacobi was the president and founder of the American Pediatric Society, the first Chairman of the Section on Diseases of Children of the American Medical Association, President of the New York State Medical Society, President of the New York Academy of Medicine, and President of the Association of American Physicians. Jacobi and Moses, themselves Jews, claimed that circumcision made Jews immune to the health problems of masturbation, and for decades to come the opinion would be being repeated endlessly, by both Jewish and non-Jewish medical writers, that uncircumcised Gentiles were likely to become compulsive masturbators and fall victim to horrible diseases. Dr. Jacobi was able to demonstrate to his own satisfaction that if the foreskin were not removed, the result would be epilepsy, paralysis, malnutrition, hysteria, and other nervous disorders. In this year Dr. Moses published an article that would be being cited for decades in the medical literature, alleging that:

As an Israelite, I desire to ventilate the subject, and, as a physician, have chosen the medium of a medical journal, that I may not be trammelled in my expressions, as I necessarily would be were I confined to the pages of an ordinary paper.... I refer to [masturbation](#) as one of the effects of a long prepuce; not that this vice is entirely absent in those who have undergone circumcision, though I never saw an instance in a Jewish child of very tender years, except as the result of association with children whose covered glans have naturally impelled them to the habit.

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The germ theory of disease not yet being prevalent, the term “sanitary” was at that time being deployed by circumcisers to denote not an absence of germs and dirt, but the presence of moral purity. When Dr. Moses used the word “Hygienic” in his title, therefore, it is clear that his intention was to indicate a moral rather than personal hygiene. The situation would get worse and worse. By about 1880, according to B. Berkeley in CIRCUMCISION: THE PAINFUL DILEMMA, masturbation-prevention appliances were being strapped onto boys at night:

By about 1880 the individual ... might wish [to] ... tie, chain, or infibulate sexually active children ... to adorn them with grotesque appliances, encase them in plaster, leather, or rubber, to frighten or even castrate them ... masturbation insanity was now real enough – it was affecting the medical profession.

In 1885, Dr. E.J. Spratling would prescribe the method of circumcision as it is practiced in hospitals today:

To obtain the best results one must cut away enough skin and mucous membrane to rather put it on the stretch when erections come later. There must be no play in the skin after the wound has thoroughly healed, but it must fit tightly over the penis, for should there be any play the patient will be found to readily resume his practice not begrudging the time and extra energy required to produce the orgasm.... We may not be sure that we have done away with the possibility of masturbation, but we may feel confident that we have limited it to within the danger lines.

In 1903, Dr. Mary R. Melendy would weigh in with the following about “self abuse”:

It lays the foundation for consumption, paralysis and heart disease. It weakens the memory, makes a boy careless, negligent and listless. It even makes many lose their minds; others, when grown, commit suicide.... Don't think it does no harm to your boy because he does not suffer now, for the effects of this vice [masturbation] come on so slowly that the victim is often very near death before you realize that he has done himself harm. It is worthy of note that many eminent physicians now advocate the custom of circumcision....



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1880

According to B. Berkeley's [CIRCUMCISION: THE PAINFUL DILEMMA](#), "By about 1880 the individual ... might wish [to] ... tie, chain, or infibulate sexually active children ... to adorn them with grotesque appliances, encase them in plaster, leather, or rubber, to frighten or even castrate them ... [masturbation](#) insanity was now real enough — it was affecting the medical profession."



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1887

In about this timeframe the J. Stevens Arms & Tool Company developed the .22 Long Rifle cartridge which would quickly become, for the "let's kill something" set of underachievers, the most popular rimfire cartridge ever made.

The family of origin of the toddling [Harry S Truman](#) relocated from the farm near Harrisonville, Missouri to a farm owned by Solomon Young near present-day Grandview. By this point perhaps one of every ten of the newborn males in the US population were being [circumcised](#), so the question arises, did this Truman family or did it not have their eponymous "hairy ass" toddler circumcised? (Inquiring minds do want to know details of this sort.)

The following remark appeared in [Journal of the American Medical Association](#), in an article about the value of the practice for the cure of enuresis:

Hip trouble is from falling down, an accident that children with tight foreskins are especially liable to owing to the weakening of the muscles produced by the condition of the genitals.

In addition, the following remark is to be found on page 421 of a large tome published in Philadelphia during this year, on medical care during childhood:

There can be no doubt of [[masturbation](#)'s] injurious effect, and of the proneness to practice it on the part of children with defective brains. Circumcision should always be practiced. It may be necessary to make the genitals so sore by blistering fluids that pain results from attempts to rub the parts.



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1888

The State of New York took charge of all [executions](#) within its jurisdiction. It constructed its 1st “electric chair” with no purpose whatever to diminish the pain or indignity of the execution punishment for crime (this device would not be tried out on a human subject until 1890).

COLDBLOODED MURDER

By this point perhaps 15% of the newborn males of the US population were being [circumcised](#). John Harvey Kellogg (the breakfast cereal freak!) offered a “pain and punishment are what is to be desired” attitude in a treatise on treatment for self-abuse and its effects:

A remedy [for [masturbation](#)] which is almost always successful in small boys is [circumcision](#). The operation should be performed by a surgeon without administering an anesthetic, as the pain attending the operation will have a salutary effect upon the mind, especially if it be connected with the idea of punishment.

1895

Dr. E.J. Spratling was offering the method of [circumcision](#) practiced in hospitals today: “To obtain the best results one must cut away enough skin and mucous membrane to rather put it on the stretch when erections come later. There must be no play in the skin after the wound has thoroughly healed, but it must fit tightly over the penis, for should there be any play the patient will be found to readily resume his practice not begrudging the time and extra energy required to produce the orgasm.... We may not be sure that we have done away with the possibility of [masturbation](#), but we may feel confident that we have limited it to within the danger lines.”

1900

In the course of the previous 250 years, the use of [sugar](#) had spread until it was at this point a regular part of the diet of working families. Despite the abolition of slavery, sugar was supplying approximately 20% of the calories consumed by the civilized!

SWEETS
WITHOUT
SLAVERY

By this point perhaps 25% of the US male population was [circumcised](#). The editor of the journal Medical News, copping an attitude that there’s no reason whatever, why sexual intercourse needs to be so very pleasant an activity, registered a plea on behalf of the further expansion of this surgical intervention:

Finally, circumcision probably tends to increase the power of sexual control. The only physiological advantages which the prepuce can be supposed to confer is that of maintaining the penis in a condition susceptible to more acute sensation than would otherwise exist. It may increase the pleasure of coition and the impulse to it: but these are advantages which in the present state of society can well be spared. If in their loss,



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increase in sexual control should result, one should be thankful.

1903

Dr. Mary R. Melendy issued a stern warning on the perils of “self abuse”: “It lays the foundation for consumption, paralysis and heart disease. It weakens the memory, makes a boy careless, negligent and listless. It even makes many lose their minds; others, when grown, commit suicide.... Don’t think it does no harm to your boy because he does not suffer now, for the effects of this vice come on so slowly that the victim is often very near death before you realize that he has done himself harm. It is worthy of note that many eminent physicians now advocate the custom of [circumcision](#)....”

MASTURBATION

1912

The GooGoo Cluster, a chocolate, caramel, & peanut candy, was created in Nashville, Tennessee.

PLANTS

Frederick Hopkins showed that there were chemical substances (additional to fats, carbohydrates, and minerals) obtained from food that are essential to human growth and maintenance, and Casimir Funk coined a term for such substances: “vitamines.”

By this point perhaps 35% of the US male population was being [circumcised](#). The practice was on its way to becoming routine. In a text on the philosophy, application, and technique of “orificial surgery,” the beneficial effect of the emerging standard was duly noted:

The little sufferer lay in his mother's lap. The dropsy ... had taken the form of hydrocephalus ... I then circumcised the child ... The head [of the child's penis] diminished in size and in two weeks the condition of hydrocephalus had disappeared and the child was once more dismissed as cured.

In a text dating to this year, on sex hygiene for the male, we find:

Circumcision promotes cleanliness, prevents disease, and by reducing oversensitiveness of the parts tends to relieve sexual irritability, thus correcting any tendency which may exist to improper manipulations of the genital organs and the consequent acquirement of evil sexual habits, such as [masturbation](#).



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1920

June 5, Saturday: By this point approximately half the male babies in the United States of America were being [circumcised](#). Taking a “we do know what little boys are like” attitude, the British Medical Journal was definitely in favor of such surgical interventions:

Circumcision is an excellent thing to do; it helps to prevent hernia due to straining, and later it helps in preventing [masturbation](#). The ordinary schoolboy is not taught to keep himself clean, and if he is taught he thinks too much about the matter.

1935

The 1st night [baseball](#) game was played.

SPORTS

This of course has nothing to do with that, but by this point perhaps 55% of male infants in the US male were undergoing [circumcision](#). The surgical intervention was praised in an article in the British Medical Journal, for the decidedly beneficial effects it would have on men’s adolescent and adult sex lives:

I suggest that all male children should be circumcised. This is “against nature”, but that is exactly the reason why it should be done. Nature intends that the adolescent male shall copulate as often and as promiscuously as possible, and to that end covers the sensitive glans so that it shall be ever ready to receive stimuli. Civilization, on the contrary, requires chastity, and the glans of the circumcised rapidly assumes a leathery texture less sensitive than skin. Thus the adolescent has his attention drawn to his penis much less often. I am convinced that [masturbation](#) is much less common in the [circumcised](#). With these considerations in view it does not seem apt to argue that “God knows best how to make little boys”.



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1971

After winning a 16-round decision over former champ Muhammad Ali, reigning heavyweight champ Joe Frazier would need to stick his head in a sink filled with ice water. After X-rays of his jaw, Ali commented to the press “I guess I’m not pretty anymore.” (But if anyone asked “Do we really need this?” — I didn’t hear them ask it.)

By this point 9 out of every 10 male infants born in the United States of America were being routinely [circumcised](#). This elective surgery was being so commonly performed on male infants, that a committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics posted a direct warning:

There are no valid medical indications for circumcision in the neonatal period.

1994

We discovered that in 1863, in a manuscript entitled “Paris in the 20th Century,” Jules Verne had written about a sort of “photo-telegraphy” which would be allowing humans of the future to be sending “any writing, signature or illustration” to the home of any addressee at a distance of 20,000 kilometers. The 19th-Century science-fiction dreamer had predicted that we could use such remote facilities even for the signing of contracts — and we’ve got a few years still left in the 20th Century in which to bring that also to pass.

U. S. News and World Report estimated that out of fear of crime, the citizens of the United States of America had \$78,000,000,000 a year to devote to their criminal justice system plus an additional \$64,000,000,000 a year to devote to private security, while spending \$55,000,000,000 a year on sport spectacles (by way of radical contrast, the citizens of the United States of America had merely \$10,000,000,000 a year to devote to recreational use of illegal drugs).

By this point the proportion of the US male population that was being [circumcised](#) had fallen from its peak of 90% back down to 60%. A letter in the Ob Gyn News of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology pointed out that this elective surgery we perform on our male offspring was not merely painful and physically harmful — it was also in disregard of standards of human dignity:

Circumcision causes pain, trauma, and a permanent loss of protective and erogenous tissue ... Removing normal, healthy, functioning tissue for no medical reason has ethical implications: circumcision violates the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 5) and the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 13).



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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: July 14, 2013

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESearch REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone's request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button.



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Commonly, the first output of the program has obvious deficiencies and so we need to go back into the data modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and do a recompile of the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process which you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place your requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>.
Arrgh.