



Tools of the Trade for your business  
now appearing in association with BellZinc.ca

HEADLINE SCAN | E-MAIL UPDATE | NP MOBILE | SUBSCRIPTIONS | SITE MAP | ADVERTISE | CONFERENCES & EVENTS | USER HELP

Analyze this! Check your lucky numbers' performance now.

SEARCH: National Post [GO] YellowPages.ca Canada

- NATIONAL POST HOME
- NATIONAL NEWS
- WORLD NEWS
- FINANCIAL POST
- FP INVESTING
- COMMENTARY
- SCIENCE & TECH
- ARTS & LIFE
- SPORTS
- DIVERSIONS

WEEKLY FEATURES

- SATURDAY POST
- POST MOVIES
- REVIEW
- TRAVEL
- DRIVER'S EDGE
- POST HOMES

SPECIALS

- SPECIAL REPORTS
- INSIDE ENTERTAINMENT
- NP BUSINESS MAGAZINE
- FORUMS
- CONTESTS

canada.com

- TECHNOLOGY
- HEALTH
- CLASSIFIEDS
- AUTOS
- SHOPPING
- PERSONALS



POST VOTE

POST X VOTE

» TODAY'S VOTE:  
Do you believe Jean

SEARCH RESULTS - STORY

On the other hand ...

It seems what we think we know about lefties is not right at all

Robert Fulford

National Post

Tuesday, June 25, 2002

We left-handed folk lack collective pride. We just try to get by, in our clumsy way. We make no demands, and we avoid a fuss. I used to say, whenever someone watched me sign my name and remarked that he or she was also a lefty: "You and me and Leonardo." That was a feeble joke, but it contained a wistful hint of Left Pride, a social movement that doesn't yet exist but may be awaiting its moment in the sun.

Recently, the World Wide Web has (the verb is unavoidable) empowered us. Hundreds of sites now "tell our stories," as CBC executives say of Canadians. Unfortunately, Right Hand, Left Hand: The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms, and Cultures (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), by Chris McManus, professor of psychology at University College London, informs us that many of the stories aren't true.

Someone wrote a few decades ago that Picasso was left-handed, and others keep repeating it, but the proof is all to the contrary. Einstein gets named as one of ours, also without proof. And it's untrue, alas, that the left-handed tend to be smarter and especially creative.

We know little about this subject, and what we think we know is often wrong. Around 1990, certain scientists decided that left-handedness resulted from birth trauma, but hardly anyone thinks that now. A more romantic theory made us all into doomed victims, statistically speaking; it held that the lives of left-handers are about seven years shorter than average. McManus informs us that this notion was based on a statistical error.

ADVERTISEMENT

Save time and money... all at once!



Chrétien, the Prime Minister, will survive the Liberal party's leadership review in February?

[CLICK TO VOTE](#)

He delivers the good news that we had an excellent 20th century, greatly increasing our numbers. Among those born around 1910 in Western societies, about 3% were left-handed. The proportion then increased until levelling off at around 10% by mid-century. One likely reason is that the ancient taboo on left-handers slowly disappeared. Our people married right-handers and had children.

But, like any minority, we never forget the years of oppression. A few generations ago, many schoolteachers considered that writing with your left hand was a major annoyance for the education system, and our literature abounds with horror stories of pupils' left hands tied behind their backs. This barbarity was no longer general in the Toronto school system by the 1930s, so my siblings and I, the four left-handed children of a left-handed mother, did what seemed natural.

Our brethren in England suffered severe denigration. In the 1950s, a British survey collected a long list of slang terms for left-handedness, among them cow-pawed, gibble-fisted, scam-handed, ballock-handed, keg-handed and the particularly rude cack-handed. There are, of course, no equivalent terms for right-handed, though the admiring adroit comes from a word for right while we have to acknowledge our connection to both sinister and gauche.

Researchers in this field, like McManus, soon discover it's hard to decide precisely what we mean by left-handed. Michael Peters at the University of Guelph found that about a third of those who write with their left hand throw a ball with their right (that's me), whereas those who use their right hand for writing rarely throw with their left. A difficult skill that becomes crucial at a most impressionable age, writing defines what you will call yourself. (I've never used scissors, baseball bat, hockey stick or computer mouse with anything but my right; even so, I think I'm left-handed, and so does everyone else.)

A few years ago, the late M.P. Bryden, a professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo, worked out with several colleagues a standardized questionnaire on handedness for use in any culture and then showed that it appears more often in some places than others. Their research (quoted in detail by McManus) shows that in Canada and the U.K., the proportion of left-handers is about 11.5%. As one moves eastward the number falls: 7.5% in the United Arab Emirates, 5.8% in India, 4% in Japan. In Africa, 7.9% of those in the Ivory Coast and 5.1% of those in the Sudan were left-handed. Why the differences?

It seemed obvious to me, looking around my childhood home, that genetics determined handedness, but scientists resisted that idea because they couldn't find a consistent pattern. Nor can my family: My mother's 12 grandchildren included not a single left-hander. Even so, Bryden's research, and other studies, can only be explained by variations in regional gene pools. Cultural differences just aren't powerful enough to account for those numbers. Studies of Asians born in the West show low levels of left-handedness, just as in Asia.

"I believe," McManus says, "people are right- or left-handed because of the genes they carry." But he admits he doesn't know how it works. If the question remains open, that's all to the good for McManus. Unlike many scientists speaking to a broad public, he loves conjecture, odd insights and unexplained but quirky connections. Here the World Wide Web empowers him, too; it allows him to share with us even his most peculiar interests while allowing impatient readers to ignore them. He prints only brief footnotes in his book but directs those of us who want more to his Web site, [www.righthandlefthand.com](http://www.righthandlefthand.com). There we find richly extended footnotes and sometimes excursions into subjects only marginally related to the theme of his book. At one point, a footnote becomes a charming



WEATHER

Select

STOCK

TSE	▲
Dow	-
S&P 500	▲
Nasdaq	▲
C\$ (in US\$)	▲


essay, 1,677 words long, on how computers have increased their speed over the years and how this relates to the development of the human brain.

Lord Rutherford once said, "All science is either physics or stamp collecting." Perhaps that illustrated his arrogance as a physicist, but he had a point: No matter how much data you assemble, it's not science till you begin to prove or disprove theories. McManus quotes that line as if to remind himself to follow his ostensible subject. But I like him just as much when he strays. He's the kind of writer many of us can enjoy even in those moments when we only half understand him, because we find ourselves enchanted by his dazzling performance on the high wire of scientific speculation.

© Copyright 2002 National Post

[Return to search results](#)

 [Print Story](#)

 [Send to a Friend](#)

---

Copyright © 2002 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest Global Communications Corp.](#)  
All rights reserved. [Copyright terms & conditions.](#) | [Corrections](#)  
Optimized for browser versions 4.0 and higher.

