

Ian Stevenson and His Impact on Foreign Shores

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This will be a very personal contribution. Although I am a great admirer of Ian's work, I am not a professional parapsychologist, so other people can write with greater authority about his scientific contributions. However, Ian's achievements lay not only in the corpus of his written works but also in the influence he had on colleagues whom he exhorted to take an interest in the subject from other fields. So while his supreme scientific accomplishment was to pioneer and set the standards for an entirely new type of scientific methodology and to establish a school which now continues this line, he also made a vital contribution by his interactions with individuals beyond the shores of parapsychology itself. The effects of this may be harder to assess because they are indirect, but I believe they are also an important part of his legacy.

Another of Ian's characteristics was his strong connection with the U.K. He studied at St. Andrews in Scotland, he spent much time, including several sabbatical periods, at Darwin College in Cambridge, and he had close links with—and made an important contribution to—the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London. He therefore had many friends on these (literally) foreign shores. The title of this contribution may therefore be understood in two different ways. Several of his U.K. friends have contributed to this volume, and I am proud to be among them.

In order to explain why Ian had such an important effect on my life, I need to recount briefly my own involvement in psychical research. Although my interest in the subject goes back to my schooldays, it only became a passion when, as an undergraduate in 1968, I went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, where I read mathematics and joined the Cambridge University Society for Psychical Research (CUSPR). It was through the CUSPR that I met Tony Cornell, who became my first mentor in the subject, and as a result I spent far more time in this period reading about psychical research and doing experiments with the CUSPR than I did studying mathematics.

At the end of my undergraduate studies, I had to choose between doing a Ph.D. in physics or parapsychology. I think my primary interest was in parapsychology, but my dream was to produce a theory of physics which accommodated psi, and I realized that I could hardly attain this unless I first mastered physics. Also, there was little prospect of getting a job in parapsychology at the time, and I was wisely advised by Donald West (whom I also met through the

CUSPR) that I might benefit the field more in the long run if I first established myself in a more conventional discipline. In 1972 I therefore chose to do a Ph.D. in cosmology, and I was fortunate that my supervisor was Stephen Hawking, who was already producing exciting new ideas in physics.

After completing my Ph.D.—studying the first second of the Universe—I became a Research Fellow at Trinity College, and this allowed me to continue my activities in psychical research, albeit at a rather modest level. It was during this period that I first met Ian Stevenson. In 1981 he was spending a sabbatical year at Cambridge, and I recall being introduced to him by Donald West at a dinner in Darwin College. I knew all about Ian's work, of course, so it was a tremendous thrill to meet him, and I was looking forward to discussing several aspects of his research. To my surprise, however, he seemed much more interested in talking about my own experiments with the CUSPR. He was particularly interested in two of them, which I will now briefly describe.

The first experiment, carried out with Tony Cornell in 1969, involved an attempt to detect the telepathic transmission of emotion using hypnotized subjects and psychogalvanic skin response (Carr & Cornell, 1970). The agent was an excellent hypnotic subject (called Alison) who had been trained to experience intense 20-second bursts of emotion (happiness or hate) on a prearranged signal from the hypnotist (Tony himself). The rapport was clearly good since Tony and Alison later married! The periods of emotion during each 10-minute experiment were chosen randomly, and the idea was to examine whether the psychogalvanometer trace of the percipient showed unusual activity during Alison's arousal period; this experiment might thus be regarded as a forerunner of modern DMILS experiments. Ian was interested in this work because he was very aware of the important role of emotion in spontaneous psi—a point stressed, for example, in his book *Telepathic Impressions* (Stevenson, 1970).

The second experiment, conducted while I was a Fellow at Trinity in 1978, was an investigation of the relative roles of telepathy and clairvoyance in ESP. This involved using colour-blind agents and Ishihara card targets. The cards displayed the numbers 1 to 5, but two of them would be read as different numbers by the colour-blind agents, and so one could tell whether the percipient was picking up the information directly (via clairvoyance) or through the mind of the agent (via telepathy). The experiment had given interesting results, and these had been presented at the SPR conference in Cambridge in 1978 but had not been published.

Ian asked to see the reports of these experiments and evidently read them very meticulously, because some weeks later he returned them to me, with many pages of detailed comments. Even more significantly, he invited me to visit his group at the Division of Personality Studies in Charlottesville with the specific intention of preparing reports for publication. I was delighted to accept this invitation.

My month in Charlottesville in July 1982 was a wonderful experience. I remember staying in the laboratory at the back of the Division, and this became

a haven where I could focus on parapsychology undistracted. (There is also an astronomy group at Charlottesville, but I deliberately made no contact with them—partly because I wanted to focus on parapsychology, but also perhaps because I was not keen to advertise my unconventional interests to fellow astronomers!) Not only did I get a chance to browse through the extensive collection of books in the Division's library—including Ian's own works—but I also met his charming young colleagues Emily Kelly and Satwant Pasricha, and enjoyed many stimulating discussions with them. Another interesting visitor during my stay was Carlos Alvarado, who came for a job interview. All three became good friends and remain so to this day.

Ian was a wonderful host, and I can vividly recall trips with him to the Blue Ridge Mountains and the home of Thomas Jefferson. (My attempt to hide from astronomers was not entirely successful, because I recall a social event at which Ian introduced me to some of the ones from the University of Virginia who played a prominent role in the founding of the Society for Scientific Exploration.) I also managed to complete my reports. The Ishihara card paper was published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research* the following year (Carr, 1983), in the same issue as Ian's Myers Memorial Lecture to the SPR (Stevenson, 1983). His modesty is typified by a remark he made in a letter to me around that time: "Readers looking up your article as an original contribution may come across mine in the same issue." Such praise was unwarranted but very encouraging. Regrettably, the earlier paper by Tony Cornell and myself on ESP and emotion never appeared (the experiments were deemed unpublishable because they were already a decade old), but I did give a lecture on the topic to the SPR, and follow-up experiments were carried out by the CUSPR and reported at the SPR centenary conference in 1982 (CUSPR, 1983).

Over the following years I met Ian on many occasions during his visits to Darwin, when he was writing *Reincarnation and Biology* (Stevenson, 1997). He was a very hospitable man, and he often used to invite friends back to his flat in Cosin Court. He also had strong connections with the SPR—having joined the Society in 1961 and contributed to its *Journal* since 1964—and this gave me further opportunities to interact with him since I was on the SPR Council. He gave frequent lectures to the Society, and he also participated in some of the Study Days which I organized. (Recently a set of CDs with his 12 talks to the SPR has become available; these include four on near-death experiences, three on survival, three on the decline effect, and two on maternal impressions.)

In 1988 Ian was elected President of the SPR. He was not the first American to have achieved this distinction—most recently before Ian, J. B. Rhine had served as President in 1980 (followed by Louisa Rhine when he died in office)—but previous American Presidents had only been figure-heads. Ian, by contrast, was able to be a very active President since he was spending a sabbatical year in the U.K. The SPR was encountering financial problems at the time (it still is), and I vividly recall his launching an initiative to persuade members to donate money at the Annual General Meeting in 1989. He asked for

a show of hands from people willing to contribute £100 per year for the next seven years, and this direct (if rather un-British) approach proved remarkably effective!

His SPR Presidential Address focused on the decline of major paranormal phenomena in the West (Stevenson, 1990). He speculated that this might be partly because psi is inhibited by the scepticism born of the philosophical materialism so prevalent in industrially developed countries. After his Presidency, Ian became a Vice-President and continued to give the SPR much support. His standing within the Society was recognized when he became the first recipient of the prestigious Myers medal in 1995.

My other connection with Ian was through my role as Secretary to the Perrott-Warrick Fund, which is administered by Trinity College and was set up from bequests from Frank Perrott in 1937 and Frederick Warrick in 1956 for “the investigation of mental or physical phenomena which seem *prima facie* to suggest the existence of supernormal powers of cognition or action in human beings in their present life, or the persistence of the human mind after bodily death.” This, of course, precisely describes Ian’s own research remit—indeed, as Emily Kelly (2007) points out, theirs is the only survival-focused, university-based research group in the world. The fund usually supports only U.K.-based research, but I am pleased to record that we did occasionally pay for summer students to codify Ian’s collection of near-death experiences and reincarnation-type cases.

In 2000 I organized a Perrott-Warrick-hosted interdisciplinary conference at Trinity College entitled “Rational Perspectives on the Paranormal,” involving a select group of active parapsychologists, informed sceptics, and interested scientists from other fields. I was very keen for Ian to present his work on birth defects and biological markers in cases of the reincarnation type and was delighted when he accepted. With a sprinkling of Nobel Laureates, Fellows of the Royal Society, and Knights of the Realm, as well as coverage in *Physics World* (a prestigious science journal), the event certainly had a positive impact, and I believe he judged it a success. A full report of this meeting later appeared in the *JSE* (Carr, 2002).

This was the last time I met Ian in person, but my interactions with him continued through correspondence and e-mail. During my Presidency of the SPR in 2000–2004, I often received good advice from him, and he would occasionally comment on my Presidential Notes in the *Paranormal Review*. He also took some interest in my theoretical attempt to link psi and physics. This involves the notion that psi needs some sort of higher-dimensional space, which I relate to the higher-dimensional space currently invoked by theoretical physics (Carr, in press). I believe this sort of approach appealed to Ian because it complied with Myers’s ideas of a metetherial space, and Ian felt that souls needed somewhere to reside between incarnations (Stevenson, 1974). Indeed he explored this theme in some depth in his Presidential Address to the Parapsychological Association in 1980 (Stevenson, 1981).

I have stressed the U.K. connection in this contribution, and so I would like to end by linking Ian's work to that of the three founding fathers of psychical research in Britain: Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney, and Henry Sidgwick. At the SPR centenary conference, held in conjunction with the Parapsychological Association at Trinity in 1982, Ian organized a session on the historical roots of psychical research entitled "Then and Now," and he was intimately aware of the links. However, it seems to me that no one in our age has better embodied the aspirations of these three colossuses than Ian himself.

In his perspective on human personality and the science-religion interface, he was undoubtedly the intellectual descendant of Myers (Kelly, 2007), for perhaps the unifying theme of all Ian's work was the inadequacy of the reductionist materialistic world view. This supposes that there is no more to the Universe than matter and that all aspects of human personality can be explained in terms of brain function. Reincarnation studies do not provide the only evidence for this—Ian also studied such diverse topics as near-death experiences, deathbed visions, apparitional phenomena, telepathic impressions, poltergeist cases, and trance mediumship—but they perhaps provide the *best* evidence. (Of course, this evidence was not available at the time of Myers, who seems to have been rather opposed to the notion of reincarnation.)

The link with Gurney is equally striking because Gurney was the SPR founder who most ardently stressed the central role of spontaneous cases and the importance of human testimony. Ian's meticulousness in assessing relevant evidence and his remarkable energy in traveling all over the world to interview witnesses at first hand was the very epitome of Gurney's approach. Throughout his career he strove to identify all kinds of evidence that could shed light on the survival question, but the emphasis was always on *empirical* data.

Ian emulated Sidgwick because he understood the importance of obtaining the support and respect of influential people from other areas of science. This is why he put so much effort into encouraging scientists in other fields (such as myself) to get interested and involved in the field. I believe this is one of the reasons he shifted his allegiance from the Parapsychological Association to the SSE. He felt that the former was too narrowly focused and that more effort to make contact with mainstream science was necessary if the field was to advance significantly. I agree with this exhortation, and indeed it was at his instigation that I joined the SSE myself. That is why I have strived to be an emissary for the subject in the domain of physics—because I believe that parapsychology will not have come of age until it has a theoretical basis which accords with physics.

For Ian Stevenson to have embodied so effectively the aspirations of the three founders of the field is no mean epitaph, and doubtless those he inspired by his example and scholarship will carry on the flame. He may sometimes have been frustrated at how difficult it was to attract the interest of people from other shores, but, in my case at least, he was successful, and I'm grateful for the passion he instilled in me for psychical research.

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