

Ian Stevenson and the Society for Scientific Exploration

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The key role that Ian Stevenson played in the Society for Scientific Exploration came about only as a result of events in two faraway cities: Montreal in Canada and Cambridge in England.

The Cambridge connection dates from 1954 to 1955, when I was a research fellow at St. John's College. There were two or three visiting scholars that year, and one of them was a Professor of Philosophy from the University of Virginia. His name was David Yalden-Thomson, born in Scotland and a fiercely proud Scotsman all of his life. David returned to Charlottesville in the summer of 1955, and I was scheduled to move to Stanford in the fall, so David invited me to visit him in Charlottesville after I was settled in California.

I do not remember exactly when my first visit occurred, but I do remember going to a horse race (in a party that included the English philosopher John Wisdom, who was a horse-racing fanatic) and climbing a small mountain called Old Rag (in a party that included David's future wife Barbara). At that time, I was working in plasma physics rather than astrophysics, so my first contact with the University was with the Physics Department. Some years later, in the 1970s, I met Larry Fredrick while he was Secretary of the American Astronomical Society (AAS). Charlie Tolbert was also an office holder in the AAS, responsible for organizing the Shapley Lecture Series. So during my fairly frequent visits to Charlottesville to visit David and Barbara, I had the privilege of developing a friendship with Larry and Charlie.

Robert Jahn, then Dean of the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences at Princeton University, came to spend a few months of sabbatical leave at Stanford in the spring of 1978. In view of my interest in the UFO problem and the great difficulty I had experienced in getting my articles on that subject reviewed – let alone published – by a scientific journal, I had begun to meditate the need for a new scientific society, and its journal, that would be open to the discussion and publication of work on topics considered improper – or even heretical – by the scientific establishment. Meeting Bob, and learning that he was facing a similar dilemma, had provided the necessary impetus to proceed with such an initiative.

Plans for what became the Society for Scientific Exploration were therefore

beginning to take shape around 1980, and I already had the generous support of Larry and Charlie at the University of Virginia. However, it was shaping up to be a society heavily weighted by physicists and astronomers, and that would have been unduly restrictive from both an intellectual and a sociological point of view. This is where Ian Stevenson came upon the scene, but that happened only because of events in Montreal.

Ian and David were both alumni of McGill University, to which they were both very attached and of which they were both very proud. This common background led to a strong social connection between David and Ian that developed over the years into a strong and affectionate bond. As a result of this connection, David and Barbara were very familiar with Ian's bold but meticulous research into evidence "suggestive of reincarnation" (to use Ian's cautious terminology). Hence, when during a visit to Earlysville (David and Barbara's new home near Charlottesville) I discussed with them the evolving plans for a new society, David told me about Ian and his remarkable research. I was of course most anxious to meet him.

In due course, David telephoned Ian to ask if he would be willing to meet an "astrophysicist from Stanford University," and Ian replied that that would be "quite agreeable." In preparation for the dinner party at which we were to meet, Barbara studied Ian's recently published book, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, to ensure that we had good discussions during dinner and over brandy (but no cigars!).

We did raise the idea of a new society at that time, but I made arrangements to visit Ian in his office a few days later. It was on that occasion that I informed him of my own "anomalous" research interests and those of Bob Jahn, and of my contacts with Larry and Charlie, and where it all seemed to be heading. Ian was very knowledgeable about experimental parapsychology, the area of Bob Jahn's research. Moreover, Ian had of course experienced his own difficulties in getting the results of his research, in either parapsychology or reincarnation studies, published in mainstream scientific and medical journals. He therefore immediately sympathized with the need for a forum that would be more open to the presentation and discussion of the results of research outside the scientific mainstream, a forum that would be free from the constraints of conventional scientific orthodoxy. By the end of our meeting, Ian had agreed to become a member of the Founding Committee of the new society, for which we did not yet have a name.

The addition of Ian to the Founding Committee added an important new dimension to the intellectual scope of the incipient society. The Committee had a big complement drawn from the physical sciences (Bob Jahn from Aeronautical Engineering; George Abell, Bart Bok, Tommy Gold, and myself from Astronomy and Astrophysics; and George Siscoe, Bill Thompson, and Jim Trefil from Physics). We also had representation from Philosophy (Bob Creegan), Psychology (Roger Shepard), and Statistics (Persi Diaconis). However, the only research being carried out by these members was in the experimental para-

psychology and UFO areas. Ian's groundbreaking research into the possible survival of physical death represented a crucial expansion of the intellectual scope of the planned society.

The Society's Dinsdale award was initiated in 1992, and Ian was from the beginning an obvious candidate worthy of that award. However, Ian served on the Council from 1989 until 1997, and the Council properly considered it inappropriate to give the award to a current member of the Council. Eventually the Society was able to bestow the award on Ian, in 1998 after he had stepped down from being a councilor.

All who came into contact with Ian were the richer for the experience. He was unfailingly polite and attentive in one-on-one conversations, and he was unfailingly attentive and wise in Council meetings. He was truly "a gentleman and a scholar." Despite – or perhaps as a result of – his difficulties with and rebuffs from the mainstream scientific and medical communities, Ian had developed a remarkable equanimity and seemed to rise above the friction that he encountered. It would have been difficult for anyone else actually to emulate Ian, but those of us who encountered similar difficulties were able to learn from him.

The Society for Scientific Exploration owes a great debt to Ian Stevenson.

References

- Stevenson, I. (1974). *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.