

Tribute to a Remarkable Scholar

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I have known and greatly respected Ian Stevenson and his works over many years. Although my direct contacts with him have been less frequent than I should have liked, he was always generous with advice and donations of inscribed copies of his works, the last of which arrived with a faltering inscription very shortly before his death. It was for me a happy circumstance that I was able to support an invitation to him from Darwin College, Cambridge, to become a visiting scholar and dine with us during the times he spent in England. He was immensely well read, aware of academic concerns in many different spheres of humanities and science, and over the years he became a much appreciated visitor. During his final illness, I received various anxious inquiries about him from the college.

Ian took a keen interest in my attempt to distribute to a Cambridge population a version of the Society for Psychical Research's (SPR) Census of Hallucinations question, which confirmed the impression that vivid visionary experiences are as prevalent today as they were in the late 19th century. He was plainly disappointed when I found it impractical to obtain further information and confirmation about one particularly interesting veridical vision. He was indefatigable in the pursuit of evidence that might confirm or refute a paranormal interpretation. While obviously pleased when mundane explanations could be ruled out, he was meticulous in recording the data, whatever the outcome. This was a valuable feature of his studies of cases suggestive of reincarnation. He never shunned consideration of points that invite scepticism, such as the culture-bound features of many cases, the claims to have had a much higher status in a previous life, and the theoretical confusion between a moment of fresh incarnation and the "possession" of an already developing personality.

Ian had an abiding concern with mind-body relationships and took a particular interest in such phenomena as the somatic expressions of emotion (including hypnotically induced skin eruptions), "recovered" memories, cryptomnesia, "multiple personality," and near-death experiences. These topics featured prominently in the early publications of the SPR, but, being less available to the investigatory techniques of contemporary experimental psychology, are somewhat neglected today. Ian has done more than anyone to remedy this.

Never frightened to think beyond currently fashionable scientific theories (such as the supposedly illusory nature of the will and the mind), he saw the far-reaching implications of his discovery of the inheritance of physical blemishes in some reincarnation cases. If true, this would suggest the development of physical as well as mental characteristics being derived from individuals other than parents. The difficulties of investigating such cases, particularly in view of the impossibility of observing or measuring the wounds or abnormalities of the deceased, would have deterred many researchers, but Ian pursued this research with his customary tenacity and, in the face of much derisory scepticism, has published some challenging evidence. Whether this work will be followed up and prove to be, as he believed, his most important contribution remains to be seen.

Although at one time I thought otherwise, I now share Ian's belief in the importance of looking beyond effects that can be conveniently reproduced in laboratory experiments. He was out of sympathy with J. B. Rhine's policy of neglecting field research, especially when particular lines of experimentation were yielding insubstantial results and contributing little to an understanding of the phenomena. When Rhine retired from Duke University and could find no place in his new unit for my friend the late Gaither Pratt, a senior experimental researcher with a wider outlook and experience than most, Ian found a place for him at the University of Virginia.

Ian's powerful intellect, academic accomplishments, and enormous drive enabled him to become a well-respected figure in university establishments, attract fund-givers, and provide facilities for some who might otherwise be lost to the field. He wanted and strived for improved acceptance of researches of the paranormal in mainstream academic publications, arguing that it was unhelpful to have parapsychological reports buried in specialist journals unread by those in the academic establishment. In my opinion, one of his greatest legacies is that his Division of Perceptual Studies, situated in a fine university, is providing places for a new generation of productive workers to carry on where he was finally forced to leave off.