

# OBITUARIES

IAN STEVENSON

1918–2007

BY ERLENDUR HARALDSSON

On the 8th of February, 2007, Ian Stevenson, longtime Carlson Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia Medical Center, passed away. He was a leading figure in the paranormal field for half a century and opened up a new field of inquiry. In psychical research there had been a long tradition of investigating evidence relevant to the question of life *after death*. Stevenson started a new field of inquiry into phenomena that might give evidence for life *before birth*, i.e., for the theory of reincarnation.

I first heard Ian speak at the 1968 Parapsychological Association convention in Freiburg, when he was president of the Association. Due to sickness he did not appear in person and his presidential address was played from a tape recording. A paper was also presented for him on the characteristics of cases of the reincarnation type. Both became very memorable to me.

In 1970–71 I stayed a year at his Division of Parapsychology (now of Perceptual Studies) during an internship in clinical psychology at the University of Virginia. This was the beginning of an association that lasted almost four decades. His empirical approach, his choice of research topics, and the thoroughness of his investigations all appealed very much to me. I felt enriched by every piece of work that I did with him or for him, and his personal company was always delightful. His knowledge of the field was truly exceptional and greater than that of anyone else I knew.

My first stay at the University of Virginia led to the publication of three joint papers on mediumship (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974, 1975a, 1975b). In the late 1980s, Ian asked me if I would be willing to conduct an independent investigation of cases of the reincarnation type, which I gladly accepted.

In the early 1970s I had already helped him by conducting a few interviews during my work with Karlis Osis in India. We also started a psychological study in India of children who claimed to remember a past life, which came abruptly to an end when I met with a car accident in India. In the 1990s I took up this thread again.

My association with Ian lasted until the end of his life. He offered me his house to stay in during a long visit to Charlottesville last winter, and by chance I happened to be present at his deathbed.

Ian was an extraordinarily hard and persistent worker. This was very noticeable to everyone who worked with him. Emily Kelly, his longtime personal assistant, has told me that once there came a questionnaire from the university enquiring about the working habits and workload of its professors. There was a question about how many hours they worked per day. Ian's reply was 12 hours per day. And how many days of the week? Seven days of the week, was his reply. This was in line with the observations of those of us who had the opportunity to work with him.

Ian was a meticulous notetaker. From the age of 17 he kept a logbook in which he recorded titles of all the books he had read. By 2003, when he stopped keeping it, they numbered 3,535, almost 53 books per year for 67 years. Paging through that logbook makes interesting reading.

Ian Stevenson was born in Montreal, Canada, on October 31, 1918. His father, John Alexander Stevenson, was born in 1883 in Scotland, where his father was a schoolmaster in Beith, a small town within an hour's drive west of Glasgow. Ian's mother was Ruth Cecilia Preston, born in 1891 in London. Later she moved to New Jersey where her mother had a second marriage. It was on a voyage from England to America that Ruth Cecilia met John Alexander. They married in 1916.

Ian attended a Montessori School and had a normal elementary schooling in Canada. During this time he was often sick with a lung problem and had to stay in bed, attended by his loving mother. While being tied to his bed, he became an avid reader. Around 1931, Ian was sent to England to attend an innovative public school in Bryanston, Dorsetshire. While at Bryanston, his brother writes, "he developed a voracious appetite for history, reading widely and memorizing almost every historical date of any importance worldwide" (White, 2008). White writes that Ian had an almost flawless memory for places, events, dates, and names. I noticed this myself when he was investigating cases of the reincarnation type and the drop-in cases that we studied together. Ian stayed in Bryanston until 1937, when he enrolled at St. Andrews University in Scotland to major in history. His aunt Mary was a physician and lived close to St. Andrews, and this fact may have determined the location. Ian had at this time increasingly bothersome bronchiectasis—a chronic, almost incurable, lung infection that he had suffered from since birth. He returned home for the summer in 1939. As World War II was approaching, he decided to stay on in Canada.

In 1940, Ian took up the study of medicine at McGill University, perhaps influenced by his mother or by his aunt in Scotland. He was always an outstanding student. No doubt, what he described as his "unusually retentive memory" must have been a great asset to him. He obtained his medical degree from McGill University in 1943 with a Holmes golden award for the highest aggregate grade in all subjects forming the medical curriculum.

As a student in 1941, Ian had already published his first paper in the *McGill Medical Journal*. It was a long historical paper on William Harvey, who revolutionised medicine when he discovered blood circulation. This finding had met with considerable resistance, which Ian did not fail to discuss, fighting as he did most of his life with those he described as having a “half-closed mind.”

It must be considered quite remarkable that at the time Ian graduated from McGill in 1943, he had already published five papers in medical journals. From this time on he published an average of four papers per year until 2006, when he was 87 years old. (More precisely, there was no paper in 2004 but five in 2005.) In addition, he wrote 17 books. This is enormous production, especially when one considers the high quality of scholarship that was so characteristic of Ian. He did not write his papers only once; he went through them several times, rewrote them, and even asked for comments by his coworkers before he completed the final version that he submitted for publication.

Due to his continuing lung problems, he moved from Canada to Arizona in 1944 for the warm and dry climate. Later he moved to New Orleans and New York, where he became increasingly involved in medical research, particularly psychosomatic medicine.

In 1949, Ian became Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Louisiana State University in New Orleans. In 1952 he was promoted to Associate Professor. During this period, Ian underwent psychoanalysis and soon became critical of Freud’s basic ideas. American psychiatry was dominated at the time by the Freudian view that human personality is more plastic in infancy and childhood than in later years. After considering many empirical studies, Ian concluded that this assumption is unproven (Stevenson, 1957). The paper aroused much attention within psychiatry, and it brought him considerable fame, as well as some enemies and a reputation as a maverick. His first book, *Medical History-taking* (Stevenson, 1960a), became a widely used textbook.

In 1957, at the age of 38, Ian was appointed joint Professor and Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville.

Ian’s first published paper on the paranormal is entitled “The Uncomfortable Facts about Extrasensory Perception” (Stevenson, 1959). By this time he had behind him 76 papers in medical journals dealing with a wide range of issues, even some experimental studies with rats—radically different from what was to come. In the 1959 article he promoted the urgent need to critically examine both new and old ideas, especially those that do not fit rigid contemporary scientific paradigms, such as extrasensory perception.

Ian’s second paper, “The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations” (Stevenson, 1960b, 1960c), dealt with the paranormal and turned out to be the beginning of a long journey

that he is not likely to have foreseen. It was a winning essay of a contest in honour of William James. It is obvious when reading this paper that Ian had for a long time been searching for written accounts of memories of past lives.

In this essay he wrote about the types of evidence for which reincarnation has been invoked as an explanation, such as extraordinary talents at a young age; statements made by ostensible discarnate communicators through sensitives; predelictions, fears, and so on, possibly related to former incarnations; *deja vu* experiences; and apparent memories of former incarnations.

He analysed 44 cases that he had found scattered in obscure places in the literature, and he briefly described seven of them.

With his characteristic thoughtfulness, Ian discussed nine hypotheses that might possibly explain these alleged memories, such as fraud, racial memory, extrasensory perception, retrocognition, possession, and reincarnation. Furthermore, he made proposals for further research.

When Eileen Garrett read this paper, she invited Ian to conduct an original investigation of a case that she had heard about in India. Ian accepted. He found more cases in India and Sri Lanka, as well as in other places such as Brazil, Alaska, and Lebanon. Soon Ian was deeply involved in the study of these cases, and Mrs. Garrett (but primarily Chester Carlson) gave him the needed funding. From this time on, the major thrust of Ian's research concerned memories of a previous life. He went around the globe in search of them.

This line of research was shunned by most of his academic colleagues but courageously supported by the President of the University and the Dean of the Medical School.

Chester Carlson, Ian's benefactor, died in 1968. Ian then, to his surprise, learned that Carlson had bequeathed to the University of Virginia one million dollars for Ian's research on paranormal phenomena. This led to the chair named the Carlson Professor of Psychiatry, and the founding of the Division of Personality Studies. Now Ian was able to devote all his time to research, hire coworkers, and continue unhindered with his worldwide studies of reincarnation cases.

Stevenson gradually developed a team of interpreters and coworkers in the various countries he visited, and he got some of his staff at the Division of Parapsychology at the University of Virginia involved in this work, including Emily Kelly (born Williams), Antonia Mills, and Jim Tucker. In the late 1980s, he convinced Jurgen Keil and myself to do independent studies of children claiming past-life memories. This resulted in the publication of several papers. Our independent studies revealed the same features of the cases as Ian had already found and described.

Ian also made several contributions to the study of near-death experiences, many of them in cooperation with Bruce Greyson, who succeeded him as Carlson Professor of Psychiatry.

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS ON THE PARANORMAL

*Spontaneous Telepathy*

Ian's foremost interest was the study of spontaneous paranormal phenomena. His book *Telepathic Impressions* (Stevenson, 1970) was one of his major contributions.

*Mediumship*

Ian had great interest in mediumship, particularly in cases of the drop-in kind. These are cases when communicators that are unknown to the sitters and the medium appear in seances. Such cases, he argued, cannot be explained by telepathy from the sitters, and hence they provide impressive evidence for survival. He also emphasized the great importance of the *purpose* and *intent* expressed in many drop-in cases. As there were often difficulties in excluding possibilities of latent subconscious memory (cryptamnesia) and fraud, thorough investigation was required. Ian's first paper on mediumship (Stevenson, 1965) was on a well-known 19th-century case, published in 1875 by the highly regarded medium Stainton Moses. Ian revived this case and gave it a new importance through a fresh and thorough investigation of contemporary obituaries, archival records in Washington, DC, and at Greenwood Cemetery, where the communicator, Abraham Florentine, was buried in 1874.

In this paper, Ian wrote that he was preparing a monograph reviewing some 60 cases of this type, mostly from the published literature but some not yet published. A draft of this monograph with extensive notes exists among Ian's extensive collection of files. He had apparently been collecting these cases for many years, and long before this 1965 publication.

In the early 70s I had the memorable opportunity to work with Ian on the investigation of two cases in Iceland involving the medium Hafsteinn Björnsson (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1975a, 1975b). We also conducted one tightly controlled (double-blind) and successful experiment with this medium (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974). Ian likely would have made a much greater contribution to the study of mediumship had he not become deeply involved in investigating cases of the reincarnation type.

*Apparitions*

Ian made a lasting contribution to the study of apparitions, particularly of the dead. In his paper "The Contribution of Apparitions to the Evidence for Survival" (Stevenson, 1982) he discusses the two main interpretations of veridical hallucinations (or apparitions), namely the theories of Gurney (all explained by telepathy) and of Myers, who argued that the perceived discarnate plays a part in generating the apparitional

experience. Myers's theory implies some activity on the part of the agent, who is in some sense present at the physical site of the apparition. This deceased agent thus creates a "phantasmogenetic effect." For Ian, collective experiences and post mortem apparitions, particularly those with evidence of purpose, could in some cases provide evidence for survival after death.

### *Xenoglossy*

*Xenoglossy*, speaking in a foreign language that the person involved was never known to have learned, was one of the phenomena that greatly interested Ian. He wrote two books on the subject, *Xenoglossy* (Stevenson, 1974) and *Unlearned Language* (Stevenson, 1984). They describe in great detail three cases, two American ones in which the phenomena were evoked through hypnosis, and one Indian case with no hypnosis involved. In *Xenoglossy*, Ian also discusses minor cases, including cases of *xenography*, writing by the medium in a language unknown to him/her. Several instances of xenography are described from the heyday of spiritualism. With Ian's cooperation, I studied one example of xenoglossy in Hafsteinn Björnsson's mediumship.

### *Special Participants*

Ian was primarily interested in real-life phenomena and highly gifted individuals. He gave considerable attention to four very different psychics. He initiated or took part in experiments involving three of them. In the case of the fourth, Stefan Ossowiecki (1877–1944), Ian was instrumental, with Mary Rose Barrington and Zofia Weaver, in making available in English numerous reports on him that were originally in Polish. The book was entitled *A World in a Grain of Sand: The Clairvoyance of Stefan Ossowiecki* (Barrington, Stevenson, & Weaver, 2005).

### *Reincarnation*

The major thrust of Ian's research was memories of a previous life. He went around the globe and visited a great number of countries in search of them. The cases had certain recurrent characteristics, wherever they were found. The children started to talk about the alleged past-life experiences at a very early age. Most of them spoke about how they had died, and most had suffered a violent death. Many suffered from phobias, and some had birthmarks or deformities related to their mode of death. In the majority of cases, the memories faded away as the children grew older, often about the time they went to school.

*Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Stevenson, 1966) was Ian's first major publication about cases that he had investigated. He reported in great detail about cases from India, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Alaska, and Lebanon.

He concluded with a long and thoughtful general discussion of the cases and of children who claim to remember a past life. The book was translated into many languages and received considerable attention.

There followed four volumes, published in 1975–1983, on cases in India, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Turkey, Thailand, and Burma (Stevenson, 1975, 1977b, 1980, 1983). These volumes deal with the most impressive cases Ian had found in each of these countries.

In a paper entitled “The Explanatory Value of the Idea of Reincarnation” (Stevenson, 1977a), Ian suggested that reincarnation could have considerable explanatory value for several features of human personality and biology as an addition to genetics and environmental influences. The relevant features were phobias and phobias in childhood, unlearned or untaught skills, gender identity confusion, birthmarks, congenital deformities, and differences between members of monozygotic twins.

First published in 1987 and later revised, Ian’s book entitled *Children Who Remember Previous Lives* (Stevenson, 1987, 2001) gives an overview of the evidence from the cases, their characteristics, and his thoughts about the explanatory value of the idea of reincarnation. Also discussed are the methods of research, the methodological difficulties in studying the cases, and their possible interpretations. This is Ian’s best review of cases of the reincarnation type and their various aspects, problems, and interpretations.

In his later years, Ian became increasingly interested in birthmarks and birth defects that seemed to be related to past-life memories. On this topic he wrote two huge volumes collectively entitled *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* (Stevenson, 1997a). Each was over 1,000 pages, a total of 2,268! They contain extremely detailed reports about numerous cases, with long discussions about the various categories. Fortunately, Ian also wrote a popular shorter version, entitled *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* (Stevenson, 1997b), in which he leaves out most of the details of the individual cases. This is an excellent overview of his work on birthmarks and birth defects.

In his last book, entitled *European Cases of Reincarnation* (Stevenson, 2003), Ian describes European cases, both those that he investigated himself and cases from the early part of the 20th century investigated by others. His purpose was to show that cases of this kind have also been found in Europe and that they carry the same basic features as cases from Asia and West Africa, and from tribes living in the Northwest of North America.

### *Final Publication*

Ian’s last paper, entitled “Half a Career with the Paranormal” (Stevenson, 2006), was biographical. It dealt with all his research in the paranormal field. (In 1990 he had written a comparable paper on his journeys in medicine.) In this last paper, Stevenson writes, “As for the behavioral residues of past lives, I have repeatedly drawn attention to their

importance as a third component to the development of human personality, the other two being genes and the environment after conception" (p. 20).

#### CONCLUSION

To Ian's disappointment, few in today's orthodox medical establishment would even examine his data, to say nothing of embracing his conclusions. As he wrote in *Harper's Magazine* (Stevenson, 1959), all those many years ago, there still are far too many Western scientists "with half-closed minds."

Still, after Ian's death a full-page obituary appeared in the *British Medical Journal*, an indication that there were some persons in the medical establishment who appreciated his work. Also, some major newspapers, such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Telegraph* published long obituaries about him.

Ian was not spared criticism and even derision for his work. The major critics were Ian Wilson, Paul Edwards, C. T. K. Chari, and Scott Rogo. He was accused of everything from bias to superficial and sloppy fieldwork. The thrust of the criticism, though, concerned the interpretation of the cases. He was very much aware of this problem and discussed various interpretations in his many publications.

Ian Stevenson will remain best known and remembered for his work on children who claim to remember past lives. He brought that phenomenon to the attention of parapsychologists and to the wider general public. Thereby, he added an empirically researchable phenomenon to the discussion about survival. He opened up the question of preexistence and discovered an empirical approach to it.

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