

# OBITUARY

MICHAEL A. THALBOURNE

1955–2010

By PETER R. PHILLIPS

The Editor has asked me to write this obituary for Michael Thalbourne, who was well known throughout the parapsychological community, because I worked with him during a critical period in his career. I am not a parapsychologist myself, and would have been quite unsuited for this task were it not for the help I have received from friends and colleagues of Michael, notably Carlos Alvarado, William Braud, and Lance Storm. Michael himself wrote a short autobiography that can be found at <http://www.pflyceum.org/143.html>.

Michael died on May 4, 2010, in hospital in Adelaide, Australia, at the age of 55. For more than 20 years he had suffered from bipolar disorder, and his constant struggle with that terrible affliction probably contributed to his early death, though the actual cause remains uncertain.

He first came across parapsychology during his years in high school, while going through a personal crisis of religious faith. During his undergraduate years at the University of Adelaide, he was able to design and carry out experiments in parapsychology, and his honors thesis based on that research earned him a prize in social psychology.

After a number of difficulties, all too familiar to parapsychologists, Michael went to the University of Edinburgh for graduate study. His supervisor was John Beloff, who welcomed him but also warned him about career difficulties that would surely follow if he persisted in the field. Michael had his mind made up, however, and continued with drawing reproduction experiments for his dissertation.

Following his PhD, Michael worked with Erlendur Haraldsson in Iceland and India, where he spent some time investigating the alleged paranormal phenomena associated with Sai Baba. He then moved to the McDonnell Laboratory at Washington University in St. Louis, which is where I first met him.

The McDonnell Laboratory was set up for a 5-year term at the request of J. S. McDonnell, the founder of the aircraft company, and a major influence on Washington University. He had hoped for a large research center, but the most eminent scientists at the university, predictably, refused to have anything to do with such an enterprise. In the end, only one faculty member, myself, a physicist, was willing to take on the task of directing the laboratory, and most of the funds that were intended for parapsychology were reassigned at that time to general use. It seemed quite likely to me that McDonnell, being 81 years of age, would die during the 5-year period, and the laboratory would then close, as I had no plans myself to devote my life to parapsychology. That is, in fact, just what happened.

For a man as self-motivated and hard working as Michael, this situation in St. Louis was perfect. But as many readers will remember, the laboratory was the main focus of James Randi's Project Alpha, in which two young magicians were sent to us claiming to have PK ability, but in fact to simulate such effects by trickery. By the time Michael arrived, only formal experiments with strict controls were under way, and he never saw anything that seemed to him to be paranormal. Randi went public with this project in 1983, judging, quite correctly, that the public would be fascinated by the hoax, but largely uninterested in the serious science.

When the laboratory closed in 1985, most of us left parapsychology and went our separate ways, putting Project Alpha behind us. This was not possible for Michael, who had long been committed to a career in parapsychology. He was deeply offended by the way Randi concentrated on our initial mistakes, and paid less attention to the process of science, by which errors are corrected. He recognized, as all of us at the laboratory did, that Randi was determined to attempt to discredit parapsychology by ridicule rather than by making a serious effort to confront the best data. Michael's article in *JASPR*, "Science versus Showmanship" (Thalbourne, 1995), was his first attempt to redress the balance. It infuriated Randi, who informed us that henceforth he felt under no obligation to mention that we had ever done any good work. This made Michael even more determined to bring all the facts before the public. At the end of his life, he was planning on publishing a collection of articles about Project Alpha, giving both sides of the controversy, so that readers could make up their own minds about it. Unfortunately he did not live to complete this project.

Michael returned to Australia in 1987 and took a position as tutor in psychology at the University of Adelaide. This suited him quite well, but after a few years, according to his own account, he first became aware of the bipolar disorder that was to disrupt the rest of his life. It may seem strange that he did not recognize this condition earlier, but there was no obvious sign of trouble during the years I knew him, from 1982 to 1985.

In view of Michael's illness, the psychology department at Adelaide was unwilling to continue his contract, and suggested instead that he take a disability support pension and the position of honorary research fellow. This paid no salary, and limited Michael's teaching responsibilities to Honors students and postgraduates, so he had plenty of time for research. Michael held this position at the University of Adelaide for about 20 years. During this time, in addition to publishing many articles, he supervised the Honors thesis, and later the PhD, of Lance Storm, who became his close collaborator.

Michael continued to be fascinated by religious and mystical experience, and its possible connection to psi, as well as his own condition. This is indicated by the title of an article from 1994: "A common thread underlying belief in the paranormal, creative personality, mystical experience, and psychopathology" (Thalbourne & Delin, 1994). From this time we see a steady stream of articles concerned with the notion of transliminality. Michael coined this word from

"trans," meaning "across," and "limen," meaning "threshold," without realising that the same word had been used, with very similar intent, as far back as 1909. He conjectured that everyone has a threshold, or barrier, between conscious and preconscious mental processes, and that with some people this barrier is more easily and frequently crossed. Such people are said to have high transliminality, and Michael suspected they also tend to rank high on other measures, such as creativity, openness to mystical experience, susceptibility to manic-depression and psychosis, and belief in psi. Using factor analysis Michael was able to show from surveys that this single factor was the most significant one. We can see here how Michael's own experience directed his interests in parapsychology.

Notice that Michael did not suggest (at least publicly) that people of high transliminality were more likely to experience psi, only that they were more likely to believe in it. He discussed this distinction in his autobiography, and it seems to me that he restricted the interpretation of transliminality in this way in large part to get around the resistance of many editors of mainstream journals to the possibility that psi might really exist. At the same time he recognized that studies of belief might shed little light on the psi process itself.

Michael later became fascinated by the apparent goal-directed nature of psi, and in developing these ideas coined the term "psychopraxia," as presented in his article in *Parapsychology in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by him and Lance Storm (Thalbourne, 2005). I think it is fair to say that this new word has not gained wide acceptance. Many parapsychologists consider it to mean essentially the same thing as teleological causation, which itself is an idea that not everyone believes is useful.

In 2001, Michael (with Robb Tilley's assistance) launched the peer-reviewed *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*. At that time Michael had already taken on the role of President of the Australian Institute of Parapsychology, Inc. (AIPR), and his first task was to consolidate the AIPR (founded in 1977) as the leading institute in parapsychological research in Australia, providing an environment for academic research and collaborating with parapsychological communities on the international scene. For 5 years, Michael edited the journal before handing over this task to Lance Storm in 2006.

Eventually, to his great distress, Michael was pressured to give up his position at Adelaide. I do not know the details, but the process is all too familiar to parapsychologists. The opposition, even hostility, to parapsychology in the academic community seems to be as high now as ever. When Michael resigned his post, he lost his main contact with the university and the academic life that suited him so well. In semiretirement, he continued to publish, in spite of the restrictions forced on him by not having the resources of the university behind him.

Michael's legacy lies in his vast *oeuvre*. He wrote or cowrote a great many peer-reviewed articles, papers, and letters; coedited two books on parapsychology; compiled his glossary of terms used in parapsychology (Thalbourne, 2003); and wrote a monograph for the Parapsychological Foundation, "The Common Thread Between ESP and PK" (Thalbourne, 2004).

Those of us who counted Michael among our friends will miss his gentle personality, his honesty, his encyclopedic knowledge of parapsychology, his capacity for hard scholarly work, and his courage in the face of great difficulties and disappointments.

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