

# Ian Stevenson: An Old Soul



Dr Ian Stevenson studied medicine at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, transferring to McGill University in Montreal after the outbreak of World War II. His studies in medicine and biochemistry led to an interest in psychosomatic illnesses (although his mother should also be credited, as Stevenson once said “my mother had believed strongly in the influence of thoughts on psychological well-being, and I may owe to her my initial interest”). It was largely this research which prompted Stevenson to abandon his reductionist philosophy, and it showed him the degree to which modern science has unnecessarily ignored ancient knowledge:

*In these researches we thought of ourselves as pioneers, but we could not long sustain this view unless we stopped reading and also forgot what we had already read. Solomon has said in Proverbs: “A merry heart doeth good like medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.” References to what we call psychosomatic medicine occur frequently in Shakespeare and in many other writers outside the medical profession . . . what needs emphasis is not the frequency of references to the effect of the mind on the body, but the acceptance without question through centuries of this relationship. Doubts and neglect of this knowledge came later, at least within the medical profession, with the discovery of the role of microorganisms in disease . . . it was the middle of this century before physicians discovered again the power of the mind on the body.*

When the prospect of permanent employment

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in the field of psychosomatic medicine began to look distant, Stevenson began studying psychiatry as a means to continue with his interest in the effects of mental states on the body. As a part of his studies into psychoanalysis, he began experimenting with psychedelic drugs such as LSD and mescaline (remembering that in the 1950s, these were still legal and many people thought there was great promise in therapy using these drugs). While offering caution about the conditions under which one administers psychedelics, Stevenson said “they increased my conviction of the dual nature of mind and body.”

However, Stevenson’s distaste of reductionism in scientific and medical circles was followed now by his annoyance at the importance given to Freud’s theories in psychiatry, at the expense of practically every other idea. Stevenson conveyed the problem with a short quote: “where all men think alike, few men think at all.” Some might say that line has been a driving force for Stevenson throughout his life, from the psychosomatic research, to his experimentation with hallucinogens, and his departure from the ‘orthodox’ theories of Freud – but most significantly, in the research he was about to undertake . . . into the evidence for reincarnation.

Stevenson has had a life-long interest in parapsychology, and had been familiar with the con-

*Can you imagine dedicating more than four decades of your life to investigating a subject, only to have your work ignored, even ridiculed, by your peers? Would it be frustrating? Take that a step further, and imagine if those four decades of research had in fact resulted in a solid amount of evidence for an existence of the ‘soul’ after physical death, in the form of reincarnation. You might wonder how it is that your work, of such obvious importance, could slip through the cracks of a world enamored with ‘reality’ television, plastic music and ‘celebrity scientists’. Such is the lot of Dr Ian Stevenson, Director of the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia. Born in Canada in 1918, the now 87-year-old researcher has devoted more than half of his life to investigating reports from individuals of past-life memories – and has continued to do so, at a pace that would make someone half his age weary.*

cept of reincarnation since childhood. In 1960, he published an essay in the Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, reporting his observations on the history of research into reincarnation. This investigation brought to the fore such ideas as the now well-known fact that the majority of persons claiming to remember past lives are children, and that these memories generally disappear between ages 5 to 8. Concluding his essay, Stevenson recommended that further research be undertaken to evaluate the claims made by children of past lives, pointing out that . . .

*. . . in mediumistic communications we have the problem of proving that someone clearly dead still lives. In evaluating apparent memories of former incarnations, the problem consists in judging*



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*whether someone clearly living once died. This may prove the easier task.*

His essay won him a prize from the American SPR, and garnered much attention concerning the idea of collecting evidence for reincarnation. Even so, Stevenson said “I do not think it occurred to me then that I would be the person to undertake the task”. However, Eileen Garrett – the founder of Parapsychology Foundation – personally requested that he go to India to investigate an alleged reincarnation case she had heard about. Despite undergoing a severe case of culture shock, Stevenson’s voyage to India and Sri Lanka turned up a surprising fact: “I soon found that the cases were much more numerous than I had been led to expect from the scattered reports I had summarized for my essay.”

Subsequent visits to the subcontinent continued to turn up more cases, demanding Stevenson’s full-time attention. In a stroke of fortune, at this time a wealthy benefactor came forward. Chester Carlson, the inventor of xerography, began to offer funds to help pay for his research. Later, he then offered matching funds for an endowed chair at the University of Virginia which enabled Stevenson to devote himself full-time to the research – a decision which he says he has never regretted.

Since that time, Ian Stevenson has traveled the globe – he has investigated cases in India, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Brazil, Turkey, Thailand, Europe and North America. He and his team have more than 2600 investigated cases on their books – though he is quick to point out that they are of varying quality and thoroughness. This is what makes Stevenson stand out from most other researchers of ‘fringe’ topics: his scientific professionalism. He avoids any sort of ‘hyping’ of his data, going as far as to say:

All the cases I've investigated so far have shortcomings. Even taken together, they do not offer anything like proof. But as the body of evidence accumulates, it's more likely that more and more people will see its relevance.

Nevertheless, Stevenson does say "I think a rational person, if he wants, can believe in reincarnation on the basis of evidence". This is no doubt due to the convincing nature of some of his cases. Take the case of Swarnlata Mishra, born in India in 1948. Not long after turning three years old, she began suggesting that she lived at a different address and with a different family. On the basis of the information she provided, Stevenson was able to track down this 'previous life'. What's more, she then provided more than 50 specific facts about this person which were verified by the 'former' family. In particular, she identified members of the family from a large group of visitors, and even her 'son' despite him protesting for more than a day that he was not.

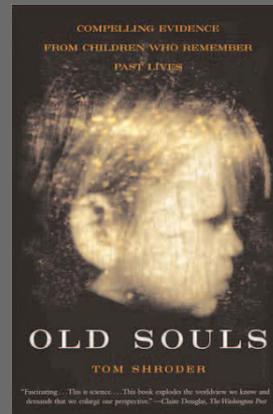
Apart from simply elucidating cases of reincarnation, Stevenson's research has also provided some recurrent features. These include:

- Most past lives are recalled by children between the ages of 2 and 8, and forgotten after this point.
- Often 'announcing dreams' occur, in which the deceased tells someone in the family they are about to be reborn to them.
- There is a high incidence of violent death in the persons whose lives are remembered.
- That birthmarks can occur which correspond closely in size and location with a wound causing

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## In-depth Reading:

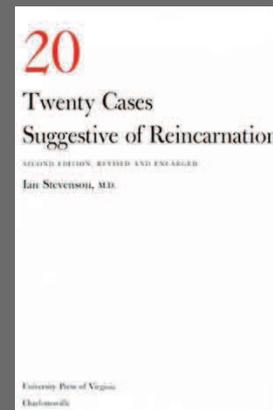
*Old Souls*, by Tom Shroder



Amazon US: [URL](#)

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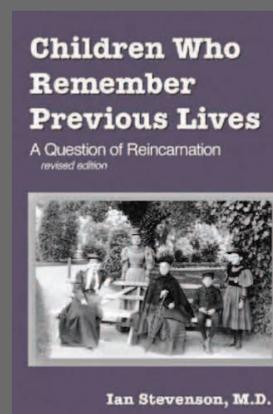
*Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, by Dr Ian Stevenson



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*Children Who Remember Past Lives*, by Dr Ian Stevenson



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death in the previous life.

It is this final point which perhaps gives Dr Ian Stevenson's research some much-needed evidential clout. Much of his more recent research has focused on identifying injuries in the claimed past life which match up to

birthmarks and birth defects on the claimant, even going back through autopsy records in order to ensure maximum evidence is available for the claims. Of these cases, he says they "provide the strongest evidence we have so far in favor of reincarnation." [see <http://www.childpastlives.org/birthmrk.htm>  URL for an

## Notable Quotes From Dr Ian Stevenson:

"Knowledge in science, as Whitehead said, keeps like a fish"

"For me everything now believed by scientists is open to question, and I am always dismayed to find that many scientists accept current knowledge as fixed forever"

"I can also believe that in mystical experiences we may have direct access to important truths or, more specifically, to the most important truth of all, which is that we ourselves are part of a Great All"

"Freud now appears to me to have been an emperor without clothes, and I am less surprised that he developed the concepts he espoused than that he succeeded in persuading so many persons to accept them"

"Everyone wants a case in Iowa. Well, I'll give them a case in Iowa. They aren't as strong as the Lebanese cases, but they do exist."

"It seems to me that it's far better to be 90 percent certain of something important than 100 percent certain of something that is trivial."

"In my experience, nearly all so-called previous personalities evoked through hypnosis are entirely imaginary and a result of the patient's eagerness to obey the hypnotist's suggestion . . . I'm not saying that hyp-

nosis is never a useful tool, but I do deplore the commercial exploitation and misleading claims that are often made."

"My idea of God is that He is evolving. I don't believe in the watchmaker God, the original creator who built the watch and then lets it tick. I believe in a "self-maker God" who is evolving and experimenting; so are we as parts of Him."

"Precognition is just a clearer idea of a possible future. Imagine a person in a canoe paddling down a river. Around the corner are rapids he doesn't see. Someone on the cliff above, seeing the whole river, can see what's likely to happen to that person."

"I have concentrated most of my effort in examining the evidence for the survival of human personality after death. I have studied and written reports on apparitions, the visions of dying persons and of persons recovered from near death, and to certain types of mediumistic communications. The evidence that I have found most promising has been that provided by children who claim to remember past lives."

"What was more distressing was that other people, instead of coming to me and saying, "I'd like to see your data," would make cracks to her at cocktail parties in my absence, tease her, and I thought that was shameful..." (on his late wife)

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essay by Stevenson on this. ]

Other convincing cases uncovered by Stevenson involve *xenoglossy*, the ability to speak a language never learned (in this life at least), combined with evidential memories of times long past.

Stevenson's dedication to his work has continued through the decades, despite complaints from his University alumni concerning the nature of his research, and even pleas from his wife to not ruin a promising career. Most people profess their amazement at the energy he devotes to the research – when journalist Tom Schroder traveled with him during the writing of his book *Old Souls: The Scientific Evidence for Reincarnation*, he could barely keep pace:

*Even though he was on the eve of turning 80, his stamina was astounding. Ranging far outside the cities in both Lebanon and India, relentlessly logging 12-hour days seven days a week in often inhospitable environments, he rarely betrayed the slightest fatigue. It was all I could do to keep from begging him to take a break.*

However, Stevenson is under no illusions as to the chances of his work being recognised by mainstream science before his advanced years catch up with him. On being questioned by Schroder on this, he dryly noted:

*There's a saying, "Science only changes one funeral at a time."*

Nevertheless, inroads are being made, and perhaps one day his contribution will receive the respect it deserves. In the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*, Dr Harold Lief wrote of Ian Stevenson: "Either he is making a colossal mistake, or he will be known as the Galileo of the twentieth century."