

ESSAY

**Ian Stevenson: Recollections**

KERR L. WHITE

*Charlottesville, Virginia*  
*e-mail: klw2j@virginia.edu*

Memories are fallible, but fragments, however biased, may help to provide insights in our attempts to understand and remember one another. Ian Pretzman Stevenson was born in Montreal, Canada, on October 31, 1918, and died in Charlottesville, Virginia, on February 8, 2007. He (my brother—our different surnames is another story) and I as children, bundled in heavy winter gear, enthusiastically constructed snowmen in the chilly Ottawa winters and in summers fished for bass by a beautiful waterfall on the Rideau River that courses through Canada’s capital city, where our parents lived. But all was not play; the serious business of childhood was education. Our mother, years ahead of her time, schooled us initially at home, using Montessori methods and equipment, before we began our formal education. Even that was ahead of its time. We started at the so-called “Normal” school—a government-sponsored experimental teachers’ training institution. Although we both, I believe, enjoyed the experience and flourished, it was short-lived. When Ian was about five (and I two years older), his health became a major issue. I recall him having frequent bouts of bronchitis, for which our mother applied a hot, gooey, plaster-like substance labeled “antiphilogistine”—larded onto huge planks of cotton batten—applied to the chest, front and back, and replenished every two days or so. I don’t recall Ian having a chronic cough at this stage, but it was determined that the cold Canadian winter climate was too harsh for him. Our mother insisted that she, Ian, and I must de-camp for California. Our father’s job as a political newspaper journalist for the *Toronto Star* made accompanying us impractical, he is said to have argued. In retrospect there is strong reason to believe that, after seven years, our parents’ marriage was none too blissful.

In 1923, when Ian was five, we had the thrilling experience of our first train trip, the International Limited followed by the famous Santa Fe Chief, on our way from Ottawa, via Toronto and Chicago, to Los Angeles. Our father said good-bye as we boarded; it was a sad evening. One day Ian could not be found in our usual sleeping car quarters. Duly dispatched by our mother, I found him learning to play poker with our Pullman car porter! On arrival, we settled into

a pleasant bungalow that still exists at 2453 Beechwood Drive in Hollywood. Shortly thereafter our mother became deeply depressed and spent large parts of each day in bed. Somehow we got ourselves up, breakfasted, and off to school. First there was a public school where, among other experiences, we observed the first Zeppelin overhead and then a cow that was brought in on a flat-bed truck to demonstrate that milk did not originate in a bottle. Later we went to a private school, but we still faced a dismal home life. There was some relief afforded by, for example, watching a movie being made of *Keystone Cops* seeming to raid our neighbor's home as the husband fled before his wife, chasing him with a rolling pin held high. Ian and I became friends with the famed Peter the Hermit, who lived with his dog in the Hollywood Hills close behind us. During our frequent visits to Peter's cave-like abode, he treated us from large tubs of nuts, figs, apricots, and raisins. There were opportunities to meet movie stars like Mary Pickford (a fellow Canadian whom our father knew) and Douglas Fairbanks. We also were able to shake the hand (a.k.a. "hook") of the Pirate Captain in the first film made of *Peter Pan*. These outings added interest to a somewhat bleak period. Our father visited periodically as our mother slowly recovered from her depression. She believed she was helped by a circular gadget consisting of a bundle of multiple wires covered in velvet, worn around the waist, and plugged into an electric outlet. Although the treatment was accompanied by a faint rumbling sound, no one was electrocuted.

The most fascinating aspect of that two-year period was our mother's encounters with Richard and Isabella Ingalese. There is, indeed, some reason to believe that her desire to meet them may have been added to Ian's poor health as a reason for our sojourn in California. The Ingalese wrote at least five books that our mother gave each of her children. In them they recounted the logic for their belief in reincarnation and the ubiquitous influence of karma as an explanation for the many diverse expressions of the human condition. They also spoke and wrote earnestly about a coming global "cataclysm." These dire predictions seemed to cloud our mother's viewpoint so that she acquired a cache of gold coins that we helped her bury in our garden behind the bungalow. When Ian was seven and I was nine, we returned to Ottawa, probably at the insistence of our father, who refused to continue the expensive trips to California. Ian's health also may have improved a little. By this time, there seems little doubt that our mother was now well fixated on the Ingalese's view of the cosmos and on the veracity of reincarnation.

Back in Ottawa we returned to the Normal school and lived for a time in an apartment, until about 1925, when we moved to a house, 1 Maple Lane in Rockcliffe, a suburb of Ottawa, and started attending the local four-room public school. Life was calm and relatively pleasant. Our twin siblings, born in 1926, had a "nanny" to help with their care, and there was a live-in cook. We organized a local baseball league, helped our father care for chickens and pigeons, and went fishing with him, while our mother was a full-time homemaker. Although she had not attended university, she read avidly and continued to

augment her substantial library of volumes on the occult, religion, and the then-expanding popular arena of theosophy—"a kind of potted Buddhism for Westerners," as Ian later described it. In 1929, the start of the Great Depression, our father was appointed the Canadian correspondent of the *Times* of London—the premiere journalism job in the country. With his increase in income and professional status, we moved to a larger home at 390 Lisgar Road in Rockcliffe. This substantial spread (now the home of Russia's ambassador to Canada) provided room for more chickens, a larger vegetable garden, and our mother's beautiful English herbaceous border, as well as a generous library for her rapidly enlarging book collection. Life was comfortable for several years, although our home felt the impact of the Depression as we housed two homeless men for over two years—one in the basement and a second in the attic.

Ian and I had many friends, built tree houses, trapped muskrats, set off loud explosions from gunpowder we manufactured, let our friends use (for a fee) the paper cup and string telephone system we assembled from a roof-top balcony, helped with feeding and cleaning the chicken house (our father was big on chickens), and completed elementary schooling. In addition, we established the World Travel Bureau, with printed stationery and a purpose-built display rack for travel brochures. To stock its shelves we visited hotels in Ottawa and Montreal with suitcases that we filled with substantial supplies of duplicate brochures from their diverse racks. Ian also sought material from travel companies. An enquiry to the Cunard Steamship Line resulted in an agent appearing at our front door asking to see Mr. Ian Stevenson about his plans for the S.S. *Franconia's* annual world cruise—only to be told by the maid that he had just gone out the back door on his roller skates! After reading about a yacht J. P. Morgan had purchased, Ian wrote the builder asking for details of other yachts they might build or had for sale; still another salesman called at our home. Our father then intervened by insisting that these enquiries cease. In later years Ian did own a more modest sailboat.

About 1931 Ian was off to England to attend an innovative "public" (i.e., private) school—Bryanston, in Dorsetshire. The school employed the newly established Dalton educational system of learning. It probably was our father who advocated an English education and our mother who pushed for the Dalton system, as she had done earlier for the Montessori one. So Ian was abroad for over 10 months each year. He developed a voracious appetite for history, reading widely and memorizing almost every historical date of any importance worldwide. During this time, in 1935, Ian started keeping track of all the books he read, and this continued until about three years prior to his death; there were 3535 entries. At the back of many books he read there were notes of dates, places, persons, events, and other things that he wished to remember, as well as annotated observations on errors of all kinds. His reading was eclectic, but when he was home they included works in our mother's library on, for example, comparative religions, theosophy, occultism, sex (on the top shelf!), contraception, herbalism, homeopathy, osteopathy, gardening, and medicine. Our father's

reading covered contemporary politics, biography, and history. Although he read multiple domestic and foreign newspapers and journals as well as two or three books a week, our father kept fewer volumes of his own and borrowed heavily from the Canadian Parliamentary Library. In addition to his day job with the *Times* of London, he was the Canadian correspondent for *The Economist*, *Boston Transcript*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Detroit Free Press*, *New York Times*, *The Scotsman*, and several Australian and South African papers. Clearly we had ample exposure to contemporary domestic and international news and literature. There was also a steady stream of politicians and fellow journalists—domestic and foreign—for meals or evening talks, some of whom we met and others we were told about. Lord Tweedsmuir (a.k.a. John Buchan, the novelist), then Governor-General of Canada, used to consult our father frequently and is reputed to have said about him that “he knows everyone worth knowing in Canada and something ‘bad’ about each of them!” Our father was an incorrigible gossip, and all his life Ian shunned and took a very dim view of this behavior.

Summers were occupied by weekday attendance at the Rockcliffe Vacation Club organized by our mother. Here we learned to swim, camp, construct handicrafts, box, wrestle, fire rifles, cook meals, and pursue physical exercises; these were thoroughly worthwhile experiences. Our young lives were further enriched by summer train trips our mother took us on to Montreal, Quebec City, Murray Bay, Niagara Falls, Toronto, and New York. On the latter trip we met her numerous well-heeled relatives in their Fifth Avenue apartments and nearby estates. At one abode we were shown the chair occupied by Colonel Edward House, long-time personal advisor to Woodrow Wilson. To us, however, it was just another chair! An elaborate British Commonwealth Conference in the summer of 1933 brought an array of fancy politicians and diplomats to Ottawa—many of whom our parents were expected to entertain. Ian and I were required to shake hands with several of these allegedly “famous” dinner guests. I don’t recall their names, although Ian may well have since he had an almost flawless memory for places, events, dates, and names.

In 1937 Ian entered St. Andrews University in Scotland to major in history. I am uncertain why it was selected, bearing in mind that our father had attended Oxford University. It may have been because our father’s sister, Aunt Mary, who was a physician, lived nearby in Alloa; Ian could have stayed with her during short vacations. It may also have been because she could obtain medical care for his increasingly bothersome bronchiectasis—a chronic, almost incurable, lung infection. In 1939 Ian returned home for the summer, but with World War II looming he switched to McGill University in Montreal, where he completed his bachelor’s degree by continuing his preoccupation with history, in addition to the study of physics, chemistry, and biology. I think it was our mother’s interest in medicine, possibly augmented by that of our father’s sister in Scotland, that resulted in his enrollment in McGill’s Faculty of Medicine in 1940. He progressed brilliantly and in 1943 graduated first in his class with a gold medal. An internship at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal followed.

During some of this period, Ian and I both lived in a low-budget boarding home. Here the proprietor, Monsieur Mercier, served us dinner each evening that consisted of a long-running, permanent “consommé” soup spruced up daily with more water and a smattering of peas and carrots, plus an “entrée” consisting of a couple of slender slices of tough meat, a boiled potato, an anemic carrot or two, and all topped off with a slice of limp, unadorned cake. This spartan fare was augmented by our weekly attendance each Sunday at a nearby pastry shop, where we over-indulged in calorie-rich edibles that we referred to as “crud.”

Ian was ineligible for military service in World War II because of his poor health; it was sadly not improving. On the advice of his physician, who was also the medical school’s dean, Ian moved in 1944 to the warmer and drier climate of Tucson, Arizona, where he worked as a resident physician in a community hospital. Following this phase of his training, he transferred to New Orleans and the famed Ochsner Clinic. Here he embarked on training in psychiatry while pursuing an interest in biochemistry and publishing a couple of papers dealing with studies of rats—a far cry from what was to come in later years. Eclectic interest in medicine’s many facets was characteristic of Ian’s approach to his chosen profession. During this period he completed a Freudian psychoanalysis; it was, he asserted, a pseudo-scientific attempt to understand the human condition, and he later denigrated it at every feasible opportunity. Armed intellectually with in-depth experiences of biochemistry, medicine, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis, to say nothing of his devotion to viewing new and old ideas through the prism of history, Ian obtained a Commonwealth Fund fellowship to Cornell University’s medical school in New York City for further training with Harold Wolff and Stewart Wolf. Their landmark studies of so-called “mind-body” relationships, or psychosomatic medicine, were attracting increased professional and public attention. Ian studied the effect of emotional states on benign and dangerous cardiac arrhythmias. His numerous papers set new standards for cardiologists by following up on ideas introduced by one of Ian’s heroes, Sir James Mackenzie, a general practitioner who became the pre-eminent cardiologist of his day.

Ian’s earlier years in New Orleans had brought him joy as he courted his first wife Octavia, a pediatrician as well as a competent artist; they were married in 1948 when Ian moved to New York. By the end of his two-year fellowship there, Ian’s many talents were recognized by colleagues back in New Orleans, and he joined Tulane University’s Department of Psychiatry as an Assistant Professor. Here he continued his early start as an author of scientific articles with a continuing stream on diverse subjects. These included a classic piece in *Harper’s Magazine* in which he promoted the urgent need to critically examine both new and old ideas—especially those that did not fit rigid contemporary scientific paradigms.<sup>1</sup> Ian wrote superbly; our mother’s interests may have suggested much of the content, but our father’s example provided the style. Ian and Octavia seemed to flourish in New Orleans, and his health problems

apparently abated slightly. His interest in the paranormal and in theosophy continued as a hobby rather than as a professional pursuit.

In 1957, at the age of 38, Ian moved to the University of Virginia's School of Medicine, where he was appointed the second chairman of its Department of Psychiatry. Here he thrived as he taught medical students, trained young psychiatrists, and cared for patients. Influenced by Aldous Huxley's experiences with hallucinogenic drugs, he conducted experiments on himself and others with LSD. For Ian, his academic life was focused fervently on expanding the frontiers of knowledge and wisdom and on understanding the human condition and its never-ending travails. Not for him were the small questions, the orthodox problems, or popular issues. Perhaps he was influenced by Alan Gregg, the famed vice-president of the Rockefeller Foundation, whose funding jump-started the biomedical era. Gregg used to remark repeatedly that "if you are going to do research, you should tackle important problems. For me," he said, "the most important problem is whether there is a life hereafter, but there aren't many people pursuing such matters!"

Encouraged and funded by Eileen Garrett, a famous and well-documented English medium, later based in New York, Ian traveled to India in 1961 to investigate his first case, that of a young child's account about an earlier life or of possible reincarnation. Chester Carlson—inventor of Xerox—provided funds for further research travels by Ian and eventually endowed a chair for him at the University of Virginia. This largesse enabled Ian to give up his departmental administrative duties and establish the Division of Personality Studies (currently labeled the Division of Perceptual Studies). Shunned by most of his academic colleagues but courageously supported by Dean Thomas Hunter—a believer in freedom of enquiry in Mr. Jefferson's "academical village"—Ian persisted. Alas, his wife, Octavia, scorned his new pursuits; she would have no truck with them and spent much of her time alone in a cottage retreat they had bought outside Charlottesville. She had had diabetes since childhood, and it grew worse by the year. Ian took her to specialists near and far, and, in spite of Octavia's strong negative views about his work, Ian nursed her at home as she underwent a form of home kidney dialysis. She died in 1983, and he was greatly saddened. Ian always regretted that he never had children; Octavia's single pregnancy resulted in a stillbirth.

Ian's travails were eased beautifully in 1985 when he married Margaret Pertzoff, a professor of history at Randolph-Macon College. Although a skeptic when it came to belief in reincarnation, she has remained a steadfast supporter of his right to investigate the subject. Ian's international case-finding travels often kept them apart, but they also enjoyed the delightful home she made and they took many other memorable trips together.

For 45 years Ian and his colleagues, as well as a global cadre of "scouts" and interpreters, have amassed reports of almost 3,000 individuals who recounted memories of places, experiences, events, circumstances, and individuals for which, as he usually put it, "reincarnation is not the only explanation we have,

but it is the best explanation we have for the strongest cases.” Several documentary films, countless interviews, 15 books, and several hundred articles recount in exquisite detail his case reports, observations, experiences, and interpretations. The raw data are available at the University of Virginia for others to examine and draw their own conclusions. A long-time friend of Ian’s, the late Dr. Harold Lief, once remarked that Ian’s insights might one day be likened to those of Galileo. To Ian’s ever-enduring 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*, all those many years ago, there still are far too many Western “Scientists with Half-Closed Minds.”

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> This article, “Scientists with Half-Closed Minds,” is reprinted later in this issue.