

OBITUARY

William Roll Leader in Parapsychology Research

January 9, 2012, saw the loss of one of Parapsychology's luminaries, William G. Roll. He passed away at age 85 at a nursing home in Normal, Illinois.

Born of an American father and Danish mother in Germany in 1926, William George Roll became a major player in Parapsychology, though probably best remembered for his work with poltergeist phenomena.

While in his teens in Denmark, Roll began having out-of-body experiences which led to his more academic interests. After gaining his B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1949, he moved to Oxford, England, to study under H. H. Price and to begin making his mark on the field. He remained at Oxford for eight years, in part due to grants from the Society for Psychical Research and the Parapsychology Foundation. He received the M. Litt. Degree from Oxford.

In 1957, he was invited by J. B. Rhine to join the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory, working with Rhine until 1964. In early 1958, he encountered his first poltergeist case with J. G. Pratt, a case that set him on a direction leading quickly to what would become a major focus for his career and research. Out of that case came the term *recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis* (RSPK), which crystallized the lens through which parapsychologists view poltergeist cases.

After the Psychical Research Foundation was created in 1961, Roll was appointed the Project Director in charge of research (Roll 2010). His work at the PRF over the years included several high-profile poltergeist cases, most notably "The Miami Disturbances" (Roll & Pratt 1971) and the controversial case of Tina Resch, the "Columbus Poltergeist," later the subject of the book *Unleashed: Of Poltergeists and Murder: The Curious Story of Tina Resch* (Roll & Storey 2004). 1972 saw the publication of his best-known work, *The Poltergeist* (Roll 1972).

His other work included research on OBEs, psychometry, and ESP, theoretical models for psi in general and for apparition and haunting cases, and field research and investigation of hauntings with consideration for anomalous electromagnetic fields. His theoretical work includes his Psi

Field Theory, first presented in 1964 as Roll's Presidential address to the Parapsychological Association.

In 1986, he joined the faculty of West Georgia State College, which later became the University of West Georgia. Roll received his Ph.D. from Lund University in Sweden in 1989 for a dissertation dealing with Survival Research. The Parapsychological Association (Parapsychological Association 2012) awarded him their "Distinguished Career in Parapsychology" Award in 1996. He received SSE's Dinsdale Memorial Award in 2002.

While others have contributed to the RSPK model of poltergeists, it is William G. Roll's name that is most associated with it, and rightly so. His work with poltergeist agents and their families has furthered our understanding of spontaneous PK and the connection between the unconscious and PK, and set some excellent standards for field investigators of the phenomena. He also had much to say about how and why field researchers must consider the mental health of the agent and family (or other witnesses) in the process of the investigation. This latter focus helps researchers understand the motivations for those reporting such incidents in their lives, what they really want, and what they need from us as investigators.

When I interviewed him for one of my own books in 1985, he had this to say:

People essentially don't want an investigation, they want to be rid of "it." We have been able to provide some understanding to people with open ears. "It's not demons, it's RSPK, and PK's a natural sort of thing." Then we would suggest that they see somebody after we left, some psychologist in the area that's open to these sorts of things. We haven't been able to do that to the extent to which we would like to have it done. These people really suffer; the families suffer and the central persons suffer. (Auerbach 1986: 385).

Roll's work with poltergeists, along with his haunting and apparition cases, truly has had a lasting impact on parapsychological field research and investigation methodology and ethics. With rare exception, the RSPK model as delineated by Roll and others has shown itself to be a practical working model not just for how the phenomena run their course in cases, but as a way to achieve resolution for the people who experience the phenomena. His work with apparition and haunting cases, and his attempts to discern a working model for those as well, has raised some important questions about how people experience such things and the role the environment plays in the experiences.

With his published books, work as an editor in the field, more than 100 scientific papers, and contributions to various anthologies, William G.



Bill Roll, Charlie Tart, & Steve Braude at the Parapsychological Association Convention in 1980, in Reykjavik, Iceland

Roll has indeed made his mark on the field of Parapsychology (L. Roll 2012). However, the general public also came to know his work as well. Numerous appearances on network and cable television, coupled with other appearances in the news media cemented Roll in the public mind as a leading investigator of paranormal phenomena.

On a personal note, Roll had a great influence on my own education and work and continues to do so.

LOYD AUERBACH

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