

OBITUARY

Tribute to Guy Lyon Playfair (1935–2018)

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Guy Lyon Playfair, who has died at age 83, was an independent scholar active in international paranormal research for more than five decades, specializing particularly in physical phenomena and telepathy in twins. In his career he turned up some remarkable evidence for paranormal events, most notably during the famed Enfield Poltergeist outbreak 1977–1979 in North London, which he investigated together with Maurice Grosse on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research. The author of 17 books translated into a dozen languages and numerous papers and articles, he was still active in research up to March 2018 when he was hospitalized with what proved to be a terminal illness. At his funeral held in London on May 4, 2018, tributes acknowledged that his range and depth of knowledge on psi topics was formidable; it is hard to identify an issue on which he could not lecture professionally or did not have something interesting or original to say.

Born in Quetta, India, the son of British Army Major General Ian Playfair and novelist Jocelyn Playfair, he was educated in Gloucestershire in England and studied modern languages at Cambridge University. After compulsory conscripted service in the Royal Air Force, working as a Russian translator in Iraq in 1956–1957, he pursued a career in journalism, which included from 1961 his working in Brazil for *Life* magazine and a string of international newspapers. It was in Brazil that his serious interest in the paranormal began after successful treatment by a psychic healer.

His work in paranormal investigation commenced from this time and can be divided into three overlapping phases. Between 1972 and 1976 while resident in Brazil, he actively researched paranormal phenomena across the country which (save for a few open-minded anthropologists) along with much of Latin America, was very much largely *terra incognita* for Western parapsychologists. Beginning very much as a skeptic, he observed instances of psychic surgery performed without anesthetics and followed up claims of spirit possession and influence, working closely with the Brazilian Institute

for Psychobiophysical Research (IBPP) established by civil engineer Herman Guimaraes Andrade (1913–2003) in 1961.

Residence in country placed him in a perfect position to trace the origins of a Brazilian banknote supposedly teleported to the United States by Uri Geller, a claim made by Andrija Puharich. His initial investigation and verdict was a skeptical one published in *New Scientist* magazine and in full in James Randi's *The Magic of Uri Geller* (1975). But to the consternation of skeptics he came to doubt the cogency of this explanation after extensive experience with physical phenomena with Brazil, leading him to promote the nation as 'the most psychic country on Earth.' Phenomena he researched included voluminous automatic writings by trance mediums, séance levitations and materializations, vicious poltergeist infestations, claims of black magic attacks, and cases of reincarnation.

What he saw personally, and his in-depth re-investigations of cases collected by the IBPP, convinced him of the reality of many extraordinary phenomena which he detailed in his fascinating book *The Flying Cow* (1975) re-issued as *The Hidden Power* (1976). Throughout, his personal accounts of investigations into psychic surgery, spiritism, and poltergeists show a strong awareness of the need to guard against deliberate and unconscious frauds and the logging of any lapses in controls.

But he was left with no doubt about the reality of the physical phenomena, after following up on some 20 Brazilian poltergeist cases, including at a private apartment in Ipiranga where he and his colleague Suzuko Hashizume succeeded separately in capturing unexplained rappings on tape. When subjected to acoustic analysis, his recordings show the anomalous sound signature identified as a hallmark of poltergeist effects by Barrie Colvin (2010). Having joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1973, he argued in his followup book *The Indefinite Boundary* (1976) that many of these effects matched cases recorded by psychical research and parapsychology in the Northern Hemisphere.

The second phase of his research career began with his staggered return to Britain during 1974–1976. Settling in London, close to the offices of the SPR and the College of Psychic Studies, he set off on the international psi trail. Helped immeasurably by his flair for languages (he spoke Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, and French), he traveled to the United States, Western Europe, and Eastern European countries that were then part of the Soviet Bloc, contacting other researchers and testing psychic claimants.

Taking up the opportunity to study Uri Geller first-hand, he reversed his previous skeptical opinion. However, what most convinced him was an incident after completing a series of tests when, on his going into a bathroom, a wet shaving mirror materialized and fell slowly through the air

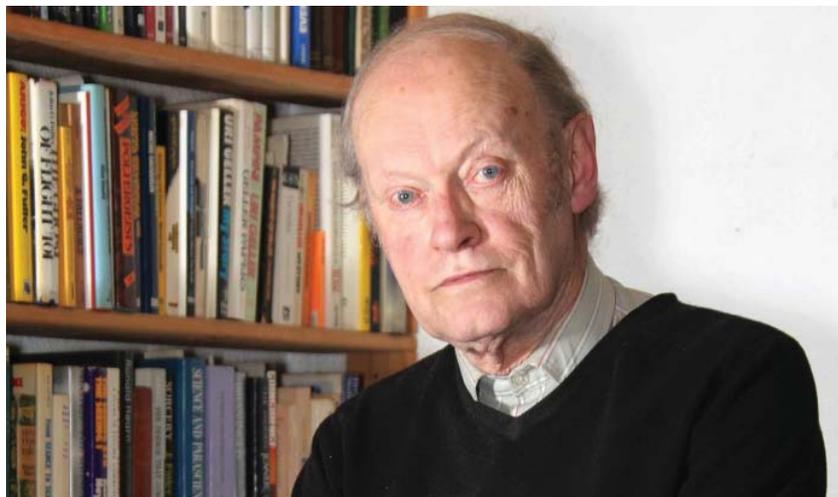
before him. He stated: 'I became convinced of something many had learned before me: Inexplicable things do happen in the presence of Uri Geller' (cited in his book *The Geller Effect* (1986) co-written with the psychic).

This reversal of opinion concerning Geller was all the more powerful since he had undertaken detailed studies of both conjuring techniques and hypnotism and from his willingness to collaborate with professional magicians who were actually serious about testing psychic powers; he later co-authored the book *A Question of Memory* (1983) with the internationally renowned magician David Berglas and was a close friend of veteran SPR skeptic and Magic Circle member Dr. Eric Dingwall (1896–1986).

It was Dingwall who backed his investigation into what made him most famous in the field of poltergeist activity. This represented the third phase of his career which can be fixed to September 1977 when he responded to the appeal by Maurice Grosse at an SPR Conference in September 1977 for help monitoring an active poltergeist case at the home of the Hodgson family in Enfield, North London. Although due to take a holiday, Guy immediately decided to attend, fully expecting to discover either trickery or hysteria. What he witnessed swiftly convinced him the case involved genuine PK effects. Canceling his holiday plans indefinitely, he subsequently spent 180 days and nights with the troubled family between September 5th 1977 and June 1978, including 25 all-night vigils. More than 140 hours of taperecordings were obtained, resulting in initial transcripts running to more than 500 pages (a substantial number of his original recordings have still to be transcribed). Many details of the case that became known as 'the Enfield Poltergeist' were published three years later in his book *This House is Haunted* (1980), selling 98,000 copies (re-issued in 2012 and 2015).

Particularly controversial was the appearance of a poltergeist voice. Although criticized at the time by John Beloff and others, who had only snapshot opinions of the case formed from limited visits to the property, Playfair had a number of his critics later rescind their opinions and admit that he had been right. A special committee assembled by the Society for Psychical Research, the Enfield Poltergeist Investigation Committee (EPIC), re-examined the witnesses and collected its own evidence, later issuing a 194-page report reaching the conclusion that psychokinetic incidents had indeed occurred in the house.

When later asked if skeptics who criticized the case at a distance had ever attempted to examine the original evidence upon which his book was based, Guy Playfair confirmed that in more 35 years none ever had taken the opportunity to do so. He also drew attention to much positive evidence from the case which still has yet to be published. One factor that hindered acceptance at the time among parapsychologists was his proposal that a



Guy Lyon Playfair

Latin American spiritist approach derived from French mystical writer Allan Kardec served as a better theoretical model, and that employing mediums might prove successful in quelling disturbances. In this he was almost a lone voice in the Anglo-Saxon world since most in parapsychology embraced the RSPK (recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis) model (except for a paper by Ian Stevenson in 1972). His ideas influenced a number of popular treatments of the topic such as Colin Wilson's *Poltergeist!* (1981). As Playfair stated in *This House Is Haunted*, the mere 'mention of spirits invariably polarises people into either fanatical believers or total sceptics.' Ultimately, he felt neither spirits nor PK provided a satisfactory explanation for poltergeist outbreaks. The Enfield case remains the best-documented poltergeist disturbance on record, and, to this writer, assessing the evidence from a legal perspective, the totality of evidence for paranormal effects reaches the standard of beyond reasonable doubt.

In 1983 Guy Playfair was one of a dozen parapsychologists and psychical researchers who offered evidence to the Italian court trying nanny Carole Compton on accusations of arson endangering life (see *Superstition: The True Story of the Nanny They Called A Witch* (1990) by Carole Compton and Gerald Cole).

As well as investigating other cases of poltergeists and hauntings, both independently and for the SPR, he undertook studies in survival research and mediumship and joined the experiments in inducing PK effects in séance conditions developed by Kenneth Batchelder in the period 1985–1993. A later interest was telepathy and shared sentience between twins, and he went

on to publish the book *Telepathy: Twin Connection* in 1999; identifying the biological connections between twins as particularly conducive to psi. He also wrote on meaningful coincidences, xenoglossy, and reincarnation, and despite declining health in his last decade turned to translating a large number of original texts on psi topics from Spanish and Portuguese sources and publishing studies of Brazilian mediumship (for example *Chico Xavier: Medium of the Century*, 2010).

That his work did not gain wider recognition can be ascribed partly to structural problems within psychical research; too many academic researchers are reluctant to engage in fieldwork, leaving the responsibility largely to amateurs with divergent approaches. Guy Playfair successfully spanned the chasm between the two camps, belatedly acknowledged with his appointment as a vice-president of the SPR. He did not hesitate to answer critics on their own level, eventually leading him to resign from penning the column 'Mediawatch' which appeared in the SPR's *Paranormal Review* where he assessed mentions of psi in the press and broadcast media; some of his critiques and lampoons were considered excessive. Secondly, in speaking to both the media and lay audiences, he was prepared to robustly criticize and openly express opinions which others often declined to do, at least in public; his independence meant he did was not restrained by academic pressures. Thirdly, and more controversially, in an opinion shared with Maurice Grosse, he stated that many academic critics of field investigation were actually shy of addressing positive evidence for psi and that such reluctance might have a psychological basis (see Grosse & Playfair 1988). A similar view was expressed by British psychical researcher G. N. M. Tyrell (1952).

It is a challenge that remains, along with a large archive he accumulated, which will, in due course, be made available for those interested.

Away from psychic topics, Guy Playfair had a serious interest in music and played the harpsichord and the trombone and enjoyed real ale and beer-brewing.

With regard to his own demise, during his last illness which became apparent in March 2018, Guy seemed quite relaxed, almost nonchalant. "I've put it to the back of my mind," he told me, sitting on his hospital bed after having learned it was a terminal condition, adding "There's a positive side to everything." Clearly, he had no doubts as to survival in some form, and he seemed certain it would prove yet another fascinating experience.

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