

In Memoriam: Alan Gauld (1932–2024)¹

Tom Ruffles

Society for Psychical Research



Courtesy of the Society for Psychical Research

Alan Ogilvie Gauld, distinguished British psychologist, historian, and psychical researcher, was born on June 17, 1932, in Portland, Dorset, UK, and died at the age of 92 on December 22, 2024. Both prolific and erudite, he has left an indelible mark on psychical research, his scholarship blending psychological, philosophical, and historical insights. His influence on psychical research has been significant.

After school in London, followed by compulsory National Service, Alan read history and psychology at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He spent a year at Harvard as a postgraduate before returning to Cambridge as a Research Fellow, where he completed a Ph. D. in 1962. He went on to teach psychology at the University of Nottingham, where he spent the rest of his career.

Interested in the paranormal from childhood, Alan joined the Cambridge University Society for Psychical Research. There he met Tony Cornell, who became a lifelong friend and frequent collaborator, and did his first investigations (some of the joint efforts undertaken with Cornell are described in Cornell's *Investigating the Paranormal*).

¹ Address correspondence to: Tom Ruffles, Ph. D., Society for Psychical Research, tom.ruffles@google-mail.com

Having joined the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1954, he was elected to its Council in 1962, was president from 1989 to 1992, and thereafter a vice-president. He edited its *Journal* and *Proceedings* from 1965 to 1970 and served on several committees.

I met Alan when I joined the SPR's Council in 1989 and was impressed not only by his careful weighing of issues but also his approachability and readiness to share his knowledge. When handling requests for information sent to the SPR by members of the public, I occasionally asked for his advice. He was always ready to draw on his expertise and the resources of his impressive library and many researchers will similarly attest to his assistance.

It is Alan's publications, though, that are his enduring legacy, offering meticulous evaluations of psychical phenomena and their historical context. In addition to his depth of knowledge, he was an elegant stylist, making all his writings highly readable. He was skeptical in the best sense of the word, acknowledging complexity and ambiguity but leaving the reader well able to consider the implications of the subject at hand, even if firm conclusions were not forthcoming.

Almost 60 years on, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (1968) remains a cornerstone of the field, an investigation of the intellectual atmosphere in which the SPR was formed in 1882 and its early, extremely productive, outputs. It humanizes the lives and work of the SPR's pioneers, particularly Henry Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, and Frederic Myers, offering a nuanced view of their endeavors. The treatment of Myers in particular highlights the complex interplay of personal and professional motives that drove these figures.

With Cornell he co-authored *Poltergeists* (1979), a detailed enquiry based on extensive research and firsthand investigations. In a groundbreaking enterprise, Alan applied cluster analysis to a collection of 500 cases. The authors found that while many poltergeist cases can be attributed to natural factors, a number resist conventional explanation. White Crow Books recently reissued the book, making it accessible to a new generation.

Part of a series celebrating the SPR's centenary, Alan's 1982 *Mediumship and Survival: A Century of Investigations* synthesizes research into mediumship (mostly mental) from the SPR's foundation. It weighs survivalist interpretations against alternatives, including what is now referred to as living-agent psi, contending that it is the tension between the remarkable nature of the evidence and the difficulty of offering conventional explanations that makes psychical research compelling. Exposure to

mediumship was not confined to the library, as he sat with several mediums, and his practical experience informed his academic studies.

A History of Hypnotism (1992) is a monumental 700-page work tracing the intellectual development of mesmerism and hypnotism, examining key individuals and schools from 18th-century origins to decline and incorporation into modern psychological theories. Widely praised for its depth and clarity, it cemented Gauld's reputation as a painstaking historian. A later chapter on memory in *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (2007), a volume building on the pioneering thought of F. W. H. Myers, explores a non-reductive model of mind.

Alan's final book, published in 2022, is *The Heyday of Mental Mediumship, 1880s-1930s: Investigators, Mediums and Communicators*, dealing with a key period in psychical research. It serves as a summation of Alan's thinking, covering the mediums, their phenomena, and the scrutiny to which they were subjected, employing a critical yet sympathetic perspective. The theoretical approaches to the phenomena he outlines are as relevant today as they were in the 1880s. Etzel Cardeña's *JAEX* review rightly calls the book a "masterwork... demolishing on the way ignorant, nonsensical, and dogmatic critiques." (Cardeña, 2023, p. 204)

In addition to his books, Alan contributed a wide range of papers to the SPR's *Journal* and *Proceedings*. These showcase a broad engagement with psychical research, covering such diverse topics as drop-in communicators, super-ESP (as it was then called), G. W. Lambert's geophysical theory of poltergeists (the film of the experiment is very entertaining), phantom armies, hauntings, historical studies, and much else, as well as numerous book reviews.

He was a critic of the controversial 1999 *Scole Report*, published as an issue of the SPR's *Proceedings*, to which he added a 20-page commentary. This investigation documented a series of séances held mainly in Scole, Norfolk, which claimed to produce genuine physical phenomena. Although the verdict of the three principal investigators was positive, Alan exposed flaws in certain experimental controls and considered there was indirect evidence of fraud, though he did not level direct accusations at individuals.

Alan was awarded the SPR's Myers Memorial Medal in 1998, a rarely-bestowed recognition of those who make significant contributions to the field. His papers, containing unpublished cases and correspondence, are housed at Cambridge University Library. There is a bibliography of his significant publications in Melvyn Willin's article on him in the SPR's *Psi Encyclopedia*.

References

- Cardeña, E. (2023). The definitive account of early mediumship: A review of *The Heyday of Mental Mediumship: 1880s–1930s: Investigators, Mediums and Communicators*, by Alan Gauld. *Journal of Anomalous Experience and Cognition (JAEX)*, 3(1), 204–214.
- Cornell, A. D., & Gauld, A. (1961). The geophysical theory of poltergeists. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 41, 129–146.
- Cornell, T. (2002). *Investigating the paranormal*. Helix Press.
- Gauld, A. (1968). *The founders of psychical research*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Gauld, A. (1971). A series of drop-in communicators. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 46, 181–203.
- Gauld, A. (1977). The 'phantom army' cases. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 49, 689–714.
- Gauld, A. (1982). *Mediumship and survival: A century of investigations*. Heinemann.
- Gauld, A. (1992). *A history of hypnotism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gauld, A. (1999). Comments on the Scole Report. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 58, 404–424.
- Gauld, A. (2022). *The heyday of mental mediumship*. White Crow Books.
- Gauld, A., & Cornell, A. D. (1979). *Poltergeists*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kelly, E. F., Kelly, E. W., Crabtree, A., Gauld, A., Grosso, M., & Greyson, B. (2007). *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology for the 21st century*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Willin, M. (2021). Alan Gauld. *Psi encyclopedia*. The Society for Psychical Research. (<https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/alan-gauld>)