

Donald West

Donald West (1924–2020) was an English psychiatrist and criminologist, noted for works that contributed to the decriminalization of homosexuality. West had a lifelong interest in parapsychology, publishing his first ESP results in 1941 when he was just 17, and remaining an active member of the Society for Psychical Research almost until his death – a career spanning eight decades.

Life and Career

Donald West was born on 9 June 1924 in Liverpool, where he studied medicine. He undertook part-time training in psychiatry and in 1951 took up a post as a trainee psychiatrist at London's [Maudsley Hospital](#), followed by other appointments in psychiatry. In 1960 he was appointed as an assistant director of research at the newly established [Institute of Criminology](#), becoming the institute's director and professor of clinical criminology until his retirement in 1984. He was also a fellow of Darwin College, Cambridge.

West published widely in the fields of criminology, notably from the perspective of sexual crimes, and was a leading exponent for the decriminalization of homosexuality. His book [Male Prostitution](#) (1992) explored the subject with a sympathetic approach then still uncommon.

Psychical Research

West became interested in psychical research through his friendship with a student whose mother was active in spiritualism. He writes:

My own fascination for psychical research developed through reading books by Conan Doyle and other uncritical enthusiasts while I was still a medical student in Liverpool in the 1940s. Like many others, I was first attracted by the prospect, held out in books such as Sir Oliver Lodge's *Survival of Man*, that religious teaching about an after-life might not be delusory and that the orthodox scientific picture of man's place as an insignificant and individually doomed particle in a vast, inhuman universe might be wrong.

Later, like many others, I began to realize how exaggerated were most of the claims for communication with spirits. Nevertheless, good evidence exists that some individuals, not necessarily mediums, can sometimes obtain information by unexplained or paranormal means.¹

In 1941 he joined the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR), publishing his first report (on ESP testing) in that year when he was just 17. In 1946 he was appointed full-time researcher, with accommodation provided in the SPR headquarters in Tavistock Square, London. Differences with colleagues led to him resigning the job, but he remained on good terms with the SPR and retained his rooms until the SPR moved to a different address.

West served three terms as SPR president (1963-65, 1984-88 and 1998-2000). He was awarded the Myers Memorial Medal in 1997.

Sceptical Views

At the SPR, West quickly acquired a reputation for (moderate) scepticism. As he later showed in his book *Psychical Research Today* (1954), he distrusted physical mediums: he exposed one by inking his own hand before grasping that of a supposed spirit entity, the ink transferring to the hand of the medium.² He also argued for psychological explanations of spontaneous psychic impressions. A subsequent book, *Eleven Lourdes Miracles* (1957), maintained that miraculous healings associated with the French shrine remained unproven (see below).

However, as he acknowledged in *Psychical Research Today*, and despite the limited success of his own experiments, he believed that ESP had been scientifically demonstrated. He maintained this view throughout his life, writing in 2012 that 'sufficient positive results have been obtained in innumerable well-conducted tests by so many different experimenters at widely separate academic centres, that belief in 'psi' effects is justified'.³

His final reflections were:

I have no regrets about lifetime involvement in parapsychology without reaching any final conclusions. The subject, disgracefully ignored by mainstream science, is extraordinarily challenging, with potentially revolutionary philosophical and scientific implications. ⁴

SPR Archives

West was an ardent believer in the importance of maintaining the SPR's archives at its London offices and at Cambridge University Library. He established a committee to maintain their continuation as a means to ensure the preservation of documents, recordings and artefacts, which led to the appointment of Melvyn Willin as permanent archives liaison officer.

Investigations and Reports

ESP

West carried out informal ESP testing during the early 1940s, but with only occasional success. He became discouraged with the state of ESP research, commenting that the *SPR Journal* featured 'a series of monotonously negative reports' and that a summary of telepathic guessing experiments over several years showed only chance results.⁵

His interest was renewed later when he travelled to the US at the invitation of [Gardner Murphy](#), a prominent psychologist who was also active in parapsychology and had recently served as SPR president. West now observed positive results in ESP tests being achieved by [Gertrude Schmeidler](#) at the psychology department of New York's City College, and also at [JB Rhine's](#) Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke

University. This encouraged him to continue with ESP experiments when he returned to London and took up his post as research officer at the SPR, sometimes collaborating with GW Fisk.

Results continued to be mixed. In one successful test, a young man, found to be sexually disturbed, produced significant results guessing cards that represented erotic symbols rather than standard Zener cards.⁶ Another test demonstrated a significant effect of good mood on ESP scoring.⁷ A mass experiment carried out by means of a television programme indicated that ESP ability is not widely distributed, and that ESP evidence varies markedly depending which of the two researchers was carrying out the experiment.⁸ Other experiments were unsuccessful.⁹

In a consideration of ESP research published in 1965, West acknowledged that successes are sporadic and hard to build on, but argued that the evidence is too persistent, and sometimes of too high a quality, to be dismissed. He lamented researchers' inability to establish any consistent characteristics in ESP. He only felt certain about two points: that the phenomenon seemed to disappear under repeated scrutiny and the results could be affected by the experimenter, in what became known as the experimenter effect.¹⁰

During the 1990s West took part in ganzfeld ESP experiments conducted by Melvyn Willin and on at least one occasion scored a hit, joking that this would harm his reputation as a sceptic.¹¹ In his later years he continued to believe that scientific studies had confirmed the existence of ESP.¹²

Trial of Helen Duncan

Helen Duncan was a controversial medium who was active in the first half of the twentieth century, specializing in the production of 'ectoplasmic spirits'. In 1944 she was prosecuted under the 1735 Witchcraft Act, as a result of fraud allegations arising from séances two months earlier. The trial by jury, held at the Old Bailey in London, attracted national media attention; Duncan was found guilty and sentenced to nine months in prison.

West examined the 300-page official report of the trial and published a commentary in the SPR *Proceedings*. The article gives the background to Duncan's mediumistic activities, including claims by a sceptical investigator that the 'ectoplasm' consisted of regurgitated cheese cloth, then goes on to describe the witness testimony.¹³ While clearly dubious about Duncan's activities, West doubts the reliability of the main prosecution witness, pointing out that his claims were dramatically contradicted by that of many other witnesses, whose testimonies, by contrast, were generally consistent with each other. He also finds it hard to reconcile explanations in terms of cheesecloth with the phenomena they claimed to have seen. He concludes that Duncan is 'a mass of irreconcilable contradictions' and that no impartial judge could possibly know what or who to believe.¹⁴

Lourdes Miracles

In 1956, West examined eleven claims of miraculous healings associated with the [Lourdes shrine](#) in France.¹⁵ Applying his medical knowledge, he found all of them to be ‘bedeviled by problems of uncertain diagnosis, an absence of relevant medical information, and sometimes conflicting opinions’.¹⁶ Although the recoveries were sometimes unexpected, the evidence came nowhere near to being proof of a paranormal event; in his view, this could only be achieved through double-blind trials and suitably stringent scientific protocols.

Pilot Census of Hallucinations

In 1990, West published a report on a new census of hallucinations, extending previous such surveys by SPR researchers, but with the more limited goal of determining whether waking ‘hallucinations’ or ‘apparitions’ were as frequently reported as a century earlier.¹⁷ Over a thousand questionnaires were distributed and 840 completed; of these, 275 respondents reported an experience, of which 123 were considered to have been ‘hallucinatory’. The examples cited also include near-death experiences and unexplained (putatively psychokinetic) movements of objects. West concluded that ‘waking hallucinations’ were as prevalent as before, but that there were fewer instances where these coincided with the death of a friend or relative – a notable feature of the SPR’s 1894 census.¹⁸

Soal Report

West was suspicious of the possibility of fraud in experimental research. Like many others, he wondered about the highly successful results in ESP testing reported by [SG Soal](#) with two subjects, Basil Shackleton and Gloria Stewart during the 1940s and 1950s. Soal was discredited in 1978 when a computer analysis carried out by SPR statistician Betty Markwick showed that he had fraudulently manipulated Shackleton’s test records. In 2018, West and Markwick published a detailed 170-page report in the SPR *Proceedings* that found a similar pattern of fraudulent activity in relation to the testing with Stewart¹⁹ (see [West’s article on Soal in the Psi Encyclopedia](#)).

Works

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Melvyn Willin

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) West & Markwick (2018), 3.
- [2.](#) West (2012).
- [3.](#) West (2012), 218.
- [4.](#) West (2012), 227.
- [5.](#) West (2012).
- [6.](#) Fisk & West (1955).
- [7.](#) Fisk & West (1956).
- [8.](#) West & Michie (1957).
- [9.](#) Eg. Fisk & West (1952), West (1952).
- [10.](#) West (1965).
- [11.](#) Personal communication.
- [12.](#) West (2012).
- [13.](#) West (1946-49), 32-64.
- [14.](#) West (1946-49), 51.
- [15.](#) West (1957).
- [16.](#) West (2012), 56.
- [17.](#) West (1990), 164.
- [18.](#) West (1990), 203.
- [19.](#) West & Markwick (2018).

Attachments