

ROBERT A. MCCONNELL
1914–2006

BY RICK E. BERGER¹

On July 31, 2006, Robert A. (“Bob”) McConnell passed away at age 92. He was involved with, and consumed by, parapsychology for over 60 years. He cared deeply about the Parapsychological Association, its work, and the field of research which he believed had profound consequences for the future well-being of humanity. Bob served as the first President of the Parapsychological Association (1957-1958). He was also a Life Senior Member of the IEEE, a Fellow of the American Psychological Society, Research Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences (University of Pittsburgh), and a Fellow of the AAAS.

He was born on April 6, 1914, in a small town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He attended Carnegie Institute of Technology (now called “Carnegie Mellon University”), and graduated with a BS degree in Physics in 1935. He subsequently received his PhD in Physics in 1947, at the University of Pittsburgh. (As a piece of trivia, Dr. E. U. Condon, an eminent nuclear physicist, served on his doctoral committee. Condon later became perhaps more popularly well known as the namesake of the “Condon Report”—a four year project in the late 1960s examining the reality of unidentified flying objects. The report officially concluded that UFOs all could be explained by conventional explanations.)

Bob first became aware of parapsychology in the 1930s, hearing about the ESP card-guessing experiments that J. B. Rhine conducted at Duke University in Durham, NC. Though the phenomena interested him on an intellectual level, it was not until later (around 1943) that psychokinesis experiments on willing the outcomes of thrown dice caused McConnell, himself a physicist, to realize that these phenomena, if true, would clearly be a domain of interest to physics. At the time, McConnell, then 29 years old and contributing to the war effort by designing and building radar equipment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, decided to become seriously involved in studying these new and potentially world-changing phenomena.

THE WAR YEARS

Shortly before the start of WWII, he voluntarily left his position as a civilian employee at the Philadelphia Navy Yard (possibly not the best career move in light of the peacetime draft and the impending war), and without a guarantee of another position, contacted the Radiation Laboratory at MIT where he was put on the technical staff. During the course of the war, he

¹ I'd like to offer deep-felt thanks to Robert's son, Tron McConnell, for his invaluable and gracious contributions and help in providing and editing this information.

was in charge of the group developing "Moving Target Indication" (MTI), the technique that used the Doppler shift of the returned radar signal resulting from the motion of an object to differentiate between stationary and moving objects.

It was while he was at MIT, during 1943, that he became aware of the work that Rhine was doing at Duke, possibly through articles in *Time* magazine or other popular magazines. He visited the Widener Library at Harvard to more thoroughly investigate the literature and this was the "trigger" of his subsequent professional lifetime interest and participation in the field. McConnell then read the entire collection of journals on psychical research that dated back to 1882 (which took him from 1943–1947). From this study, he concluded that psychic phenomena do indeed occur, even if we do not understand the mechanisms.

During the war, many physicists started to "disappear" from the Radiation Laboratory staff, with no hint of where they had gone. They were all heading west to Los Alamos to work on the Manhattan Project. In fact, Bob had been quietly asked if he was interested in a position on the new project (without being told what the project was about) but he declined, having figured out what the project was, and constrained by the fact that his wife was, by that time, in the Trudeau Tuberculosis Sanatorium at Saranac Lake in New York, and she would not have been able to follow him westward.

He decided that after the war ended and he had his doctoral work in physics completed, he would formally begin to study parapsychology on his own. He noted, in a memoir:

From the beginning of my experimental research in 1947, I spent a substantial part of my time in writing to scientists and journal editors, seeking support for the field and for my research. In the beginning, I still naively believed that scientists were what they claimed to be: open-minded and always searching for truth. I was confident that they had merely overlooked the journal evidence for psi phenomena and that they would be pleased when it was properly brought to their attention. It was not until I had completed a major experiment and spent four years trying unsuccessfully to get it published in a journal of physics (before finding a sympathetic editor in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*) that I realized that, with rare exceptions and except within their chosen specialty, scientists are like the rest of humanity. For peace of mind they believe what they want with little regard for evidence. Except within their own fields, reality is of little concern to them. (*Joyride to Infinity*, pp. 7–8)

While he was at MIT, Bob did much of the research that he eventually used as the basis for his PhD in Physics, which he obtained in 1947 at the University of Pittsburgh. He had returned to Pittsburgh in 1946, as the Radiation Laboratory was being closed down.

After reading up on the Rhine research and the assorted criticisms and commentaries by skeptics, Bob was as taken aback by the tone and arguments of the skeptics as the work they were criticizing. This was Bob's first encounter with the often religious and irrational response of critics to parapsychology.

From 1947 to 1966, he conducted experiments (following the work of Rhine) involving subjects wishing for control of the uppermost faces, or the lateral displacement, of fallen dice. The fall of the dice was electrically initiated and the data were recorded by, and analyzed from, photographs that were taken automatically. The subjects were several hundred University of Pittsburgh student volunteers, each of whom was tested only once for a 40-minute session. Concurrently, from 1953 to 1968, he collaborated as a junior partner in ESP or PK experiments with the well-known parapsychologists G. R. Schmeidler, H. Forwald, and M. L. Anderson.

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By 1968, his laboratory experimenting was completed but not fully analyzed or reported. The reality of ESP and PK were, and had long been, in his opinion, fully established in the literature. From personal experience, he understood the nature and extent of scientists' opposition to parapsychology. At about that time, he shifted his efforts from building a scientific reputation in parapsychology to joining other parapsychologists in promoting the acceptance by scientists of the reality of psi phenomena.

By 1990, he had given gratis, an astonishing 17,800 copies of his books to scientists and to members of 29 targeted intellectual elites, ranging from 1,500 U.S. National Merit Scholar high school libraries to 1,800 National Academy of Sciences Members and Foreign Associates. Altogether, over the years, he gave away more than 38,000 pieces of parapsychological literature.

WRITINGS

Bob enjoyed writing to skeptics and hard-nosed scientists and then publishing their often amusing, but mostly troubling, exchanges. He was a firm believer that rational argument should sway peoples' opinions. He was all-too-familiar with the barriers that religiosity threw in the path of science, and frequently wrote on this topic, including in his 2001 book entitled *God.Org: Are You There?* He was a prodigious writer and thinker (though he often deviated into social commentary that some found off-putting). He self-published a series of books on parapsychology, which he freely distributed to a selected list

of people, chosen both from within the field and from knowledgeable outsiders who, McConnell believed, would profit by knowing about the seriousness of parapsychology.

My first face-to-face encounter with Bob occurred, as I recall, in 1988 in Montreal, Canada. I was chairing the annual meeting of the Parapsychological Association. Bob made a point to seek me out and "interview" me. He wanted to know who the movers and shakers within the PA were and who he could trust (and not trust) within this close-knit field. We became friends at this point, and, in his final years, I was often a confidant to him and we formed a close relationship.

Around 1999 or 2000, he approached me to ask if I would create a website for his parapsychological books and writings (www.ramconnell.com). Bob was a meticulous man, obsessed with precision and accuracy. In his final years, I was always astounded by the attention to detail of his thinking and writings, even as his memory began to fail him from disease. He surprised me many times by sending me (usually by normal mail) bound copies of letters. He would document his own decline from disease (both mental and physical) in a dispassionate and objective perspective, as if the process of watching death creep up on him was as interesting as it was painful.

He told me several times over the course of several years that he expected to die soon (presumably within days or weeks) but he hung on for several additional years. He still maintained an active e-mail correspondence with me, though I am told by his son Tron that Bob dictated most of it to be typed and that when he did it himself it involved long and painful typing by one finger.

To the end, he was producing new manuscripts and even a final one, to be published posthumously, about "Living With Psychics." He had close, personal relationships with several psychics over a long period of time and believed that much valuable insight into psi could be gained this way.

Though I often disagreed with his politics and some of his worldviews, I respected him deeply. Most of his professional life, a long and productive 60 years, was devoted to the elevation of parapsychology as a science to be placed side-by-side with physics, biology, and psychology. He will be missed.

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