

# GW Fisk

GW Fisk (1882-1972) was a British experimental parapsychologist who made a notable contribution to ESP research.

## Life and Career

George William Fisk was born in Liverpool and studied at London University and Victoria University, first in medicine, then in divinity. He taught in China for the China Inland Mission, and lectured in physics at Chi-lu University, Shantung, between 1908 and 1915. For the remainder of World War I he served as British vice-consul at the Chinese Emigration Bureau Centre in North China. He was labour superintendent of Kailan Mining Administration from 1919 to 1930.

In 1930 Fisk returned to the UK and began carrying out ESP research with the Society for Psychical Research, which he had joined while in China. During the 1940s he worked at the Ministry of Aircraft Production, returning to research activities in 1949.

## Psychical Research in China

In China, Fisk became fascinated by the ESP capabilities he observed in some Chinese people. He carried out rough experiments, with results that he said were sometimes 'remarkable'. He was also struck by people who could correctly indicate the points of the compass, even in complete darkness. He experimented successfully with 'some dozens' of his Chinese students but when he used Europeans as controls they failed.[1](#)

Fisk was also impressed by the many tales of poltergeist activity that seemed to occur in China.[2](#)

## ESP Research

He returned to England in 1930 and in 1934 was asked by GNM Tyrrell to take part in ESP tests with Gertrude Johnson. He later stated that '...her scores were of a significance sufficiently high to undermine my persistent lingering doubts as to the genuineness of ESP phenomena'.[3](#) He devised an electronic machine which according to Tyrrell seemed to facilitate significant results.[4](#)

The following year he published a critique of radiation theory as an explanation of telepathy and clairvoyance,[5](#) citing information he had gained while in China.

Fisk believed that quantitative research was more likely to produce tangible results than working with 'gifted' individuals and looked for innovative ways of boosting positive scores. Collaborating with Fraser Nicol and Donald West, he introduced into his ESP experiments a new technique of scoring with 'clock-cards' that allowed the assessment of near-misses as well as direct hits.[6](#) Another innovation was the use of erotic symbols as ESP targets, following Freud's suggestion that 'repressed

emotional complexes provide good material for telepathy'.<sup>7</sup> (This approach has since often been used by parapsychologists, for instance Daryl Bem, on the premise that erotic material has a stronger impact than ordinary images.)

Fisk continued his ESP experiments with a vigour that was only limited by his other work as a member of the SPR council (from 1950) and the editor of the SPR Journal and Proceedings from 1957 until 1965. He was a vice-president of the SPR from 1963 until his death in 1972.

Donald West, bewailing the state of parapsychology in Britain, wrote: 'The yield in the last few years would have been poor indeed but for the work of one individual in particular, Mr G.W. Fisk'.<sup>8</sup> In 1958 he received the McDougall Award for distinguished work in parapsychology (jointly with West) for their paper 'Psychokinetic Experiments with a Single Subject'.

Fisk was tentative about the reality of ESP at first but became convinced of it by his experiments. He considered that the faculty for it is widely, if sparsely spread, and that

the mood of a percipient is an important factor in success; that some sort of sympathetic rapport between agent and percipient is of value; and also, although it cannot be considered proved, it appears likely that the mood [and] personality ... of the experimenter himself, apart from the agents and percipients employed, has some bearing on the success or failure of the experiments performed.<sup>9</sup>

All of these views, now commonplace in parapsychology, were at the time just beginning to become established.

## **Selected Publications**

### **Articles**

Correspondence: The Ear of Dionysius (1924). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 21, 335.

Correspondence: The psychology of testimony (1932). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 291.

Correspondence: Spirit photography (1933). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 28, 45-46.

Correspondence (1934). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 28, 241.

Criticism of a radiation theory as an explanation of telepathy or clairvoyance (1935). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 35-36.

Note on Mr Tyrrell's remarks (1938). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 30, 226-27.

Correspondence (1950). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 35, 198-99.

Home-testing ESP experiments: A preliminary report (1951). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 369-70.

ESP experiments with an infant as subject (1951). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 502-504.

Home-testing ESP experiments second report (1951). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 518-20.

An ESP experiment with a double target (1951, with D.J. West). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 520.

ESP experiments with clock cards: A new technique with differential scoring (1953, with A.M.J. Mitchell). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 37, 1-14.

The application of differential scoring methods to PK tests (1953, with A.M.J. Mitchell). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 37, 45-61.

Experimental work (1953). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 37, 65-67.

ESP experiments with clock cards: A correction (1953, with A.M.J. Mitchell). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 37, 95.

A dual ESP experiment with clock cards (1953, with D.J. West). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 37, 185-97.

ESP tests with erotic symbols (1955, with D.J. West). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 1-7.

ESP tests with erotic symbols corrections (1955, with D.J. West). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 134-36.

Poltergeists: Some simple experiments and tests (1956). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 201-11.

ESP and mood: Report of a 'mass' experiment (1956, with D.J. West). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 320-29.

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How primitive is ESP? (1957). *Tomorrow*. Spring.

We card-guessers (1957) *Tomorrow*. Winter.

Psychokinetic experiments with a single subject (1957, with D.J. West). *Parapsychology Newsletter*, November-December.

Correspondence (1958, with D.J. West). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 39, 257.

Dice-casting experiments with a single subject (1958, with D.J. West). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 39, 277-87.

## Book Reviews

*The Rhodes Experiment: Linkage in Extra-sensory Perception*, by M.C. Marsh (1960). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 219-39.

*Training the Psi Faculty by Hypnosis*, by Milan Ryzl (1962). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 41, 234-52.

*Hidden Channels of the Mind*. by Louisa Rhine (1961). *Journal of Parapsychology* 25, December.

*Psychodynamic Experiments in Telepathy*, by Berthold E. Schwarz (1964). (Reprinted from *Corrective Psychiatry and Journal of Social Therapy*. 9 April 1963.) *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 42, 309-16.

*Parapsychology from Duke to F.R.N.M.*, by J.B. Rhine and Associates, and *Ten Years of Activities*, by the Parapsychology Foundation, Inc. (1966). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 43, 367-70.

*The Unexplained: Some Strange Cases of Psychical Research*, by Andrew MacKenzie (1967). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 44, 38-41.

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*The Evil Eye: The Origins and Practices of Superstition*, by Frederick Thomas Elworthy (1971). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 46, 195-97.

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## Literature

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West, D.J., & Fisk, G.W. (1953). A dual ESP experiment with clock cards. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 37, 185-97.

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1.](#) Heywood (1973), 24-25.
- [2.](#) Heywood (1973), 25.
- [3.](#) Heywood (1973), 26.
- [4.](#) Tyrrell (1936), 162.
- [5.](#) Fisk (1935), 35-36.
- [6.](#) West (1973), 21-22. Also see Fisk & Mitchell (1953) and West & Fisk (1953).
- [7.](#) Cited in Fisk & West (1955), 4.
- [8.](#) West (1954), 345.
- [9.](#) Heywood (1973), 27.