

Erlendur Haraldsson

Erlendur Haraldsson (1931–2020) was an Icelandic academic psychologist and psi researcher. He was one of the most experienced field researchers in parapsychology and wrote over one hundred articles and a half dozen books on apparitions, mediumship, reincarnation and other psychic phenomena.

Erlendur's Name

In Iceland, there are no surnames. People are called by their first names, followed by a patronymic (a name formed from their father's name). Even in that country's telephone directories, entries are listed by first name. Consequently, Erlendur preferred to be called Erlendur.

Erlendur's father's name was Haraldur, so he was known as Erlendur Haraldsson. Reference to him and his work in Europe and the United States follows convention, however, so in academic writing he is Haraldsson and in reference lists his works are listed as by Haraldsson, Erlendur. However, this is technically incorrect.

Life and Career

Early Life

Erlendur was born in Seltjarnarnes, near Reykjavik, Iceland, on 3 November 1931, to Haraldur Erlendsson, a labourer, and Anna Elimundardóttir, a housewife.^{[1](#)} In his childhood and early youth, he had several psychic experiences.^{[2](#)} He described one particularly transformative experience in an interview with Michael Tymn for White Crow Books:

When I was around 15, I became like reborn to myself, and became aware of some inner reality that was also mysteriously external, and so immensely greater than anything I had experienced or been aware of before. It started suddenly in heavy rain during the middle of the day, near some banks of pebbles on the seashore that lit up as the sun suddenly shone and reflected on them. Then I had the experience of being filled with light that was immensely delightful and beyond words. After a while this faded away but a vivid trace of it remained with me and would sometimes – especially in my youth – sweep over me again. After that there was never a doubt that there existed a superior/supernatural reality that was sometimes closer and sometimes further away from my normal self.^{[3](#)}

Academic Studies and Journalism

As a young man, Erlendur was interested in astronomy, but after contemplating the reaches of space he turned to philosophy and the problems of mind and existence.^{[4](#)} He studied philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, from which he graduated in 1954, and later at the universities of Edinburgh and Freiburg. In addition to the academic philosophers, he read unorthodox figures such as Martinus, Paul

Brunton and PD Ouspensky, as well as theosophical writings and Evans-Wentz's translations of Tibetan texts. At Freiburg he also attended the lectures of [Hans Bender](#) on parapsychology and was impressed by Bender's empirical approach and the significant amount of research that had been done in the field.

After a year and a half at the University of Freiburg, Erlendur returned to work in Iceland, mostly as a journalist. Early in 1962 he went to the Freie Universität Berlin to continue his studies, switching to psychology. The Berlin Wall had just been built, and the city was a major locus of friction between the superpowers. His newspaper colleagues wanted first-hand news from Berlin and soon he found it more interesting to follow events there than to study. He gained access to the Berliner Pressekonferenz where he could listen to Willy Brandt, the mayor of West Berlin and later Germany's chancellor. He also attended press conferences of famous directors and film stars at the Berlin Film Festival.

The Freie Universität required foreign students to attend a German language course. There Erlendur met students from Kurdistan, particularly those from the Iraqi and Iranian regions. (Kurds are minorities in four countries – Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.) He came to like the Kurds and developed a keen interest in their politics. At the time, a civil war was raging in Iraq between Kurds fighting for autonomy and the government in Baghdad. Erlendur became a freelance writer and travelled widely through the Middle East, amongst other things writing reports on the Iraqi Kurd rebels, particularly their struggle for autonomy in Iraq. There followed travels through Iran and Pakistan, then to India where he stayed for a year, writing his first book, on Kurdish political history. Erlendur returned to Germany in November 1963 to study psychology at the University of Freiburg, largely because Bender was there, and later transferred to the University of Munich.⁵

Entrance into Parapsychology

In 1961 Erlendur wrote to [JB Rhine](#) to purchase a pack of ESP cards,⁶ apparently his first direct contact with parapsychology. He elected to pursue parapsychology for his doctorate under Bender and in 1968 attended the annual meeting of the professional [Parapsychological Association](#) in Freiburg, West Germany.⁷ In autumn 1969 he went to Durham, North Carolina, to work with Rhine at his [Institute for Parapsychology](#) at the [Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man](#), which he had founded when he retired from Duke University. During a year at Rhine's Institute, Erlendur conducted experiments on psychophysical (plethysmographic) responses in telepathy tests. He also did an experiment using a random number generator, obtaining significant results with selected subjects and with himself as subject.⁸

After leaving Rhine, Erlendur went to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville for another year's internship in clinical psychology with [Robert van de Castle](#). While at the University of Virginia he came to know [Ian Stevenson](#). From 1972 to early 1974 he was a Research Associate at the [American Society for Psychical Research](#) (ASPR) in New York, working with [Karlis Osis](#).⁹

University of Iceland

Erlendur received his PhD in 1972 with a thesis on 'Vasomotoric Indicators of ESP'.¹⁰ He was appointed assistant professor of psychology in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Iceland and began teaching there in 1974. He was promoted to associate professor in July 1978 and to full professor in April 1989. He mainly taught courses in experimental psychology, psychological testing and methodology. Besides his teaching duties, he served as chairman of the Promotion Committee for the Faculty of Social Science and as a member of the University's grant-giving Research Fund Commission. Erlendur spent a sabbatical year in 1982–83 with Stevenson as guest professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia. He was research professor at the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene in Freiburg, Germany, from 1993 to 1995.¹¹ At the University of Iceland, Erlendur helped to standardize psychological testing instruments for use in his country.¹²

Retirement

Erlendur retired from his professorship at the University of Iceland in 1999 but remained active as a researcher, writer and lecturer. In 2007, he helped establish an endowment at the University of Iceland to support research into psychic experiences in the spirit of the research he had conducted throughout his career.¹³

Erlendur died on 22 November 2020, of cancer, at a hospice in Reykjavik. He had just passed his 89th birthday. He is survived by a son and a daughter.¹⁴

Website

Erlendur maintained a detailed website covering all aspects of his career. This has been removed from the University of Iceland server, but its contents have been transferred to [a German site](#) hosted by his friend Gesa Dröge.

Parapsychological Research

Experimental Studies

Erlendur is one of the few parapsychologists who have made significant contributions both to the experimental side of the field and to case studies. At the Institute for Parapsychology in 1969–70, he did studies of both ESP and psychokinesis.¹⁵ Later, he studied psi performance in relation to psychological testing instruments, especially the Defense Mechanism Test.¹⁶ He found results that suggested that religiosity and belief in postmortem survival might be better predictors of positive scoring in psi experiments than the belief in ESP.¹⁷ He was himself a good subject and appears to have been a psi-conductive experimenter.¹⁸

Psychic Experiences and Folk Beliefs

Erlendur wrote extensively about psychic experiences and beliefs in Iceland.¹⁹ In 1975, he conducted a large national survey of psychical and religious experiences and beliefs in Iceland. He found that 31% of his respondents reported encounters with someone who had died.²⁰ These findings were confirmed and extended by the multi-national European Values Survey, which revealed that one-fourth of

the population believed they had had an encounter with someone who had died. Erlendur mined that survey for data on a variety of psychic experiences^{[21](#)} and compared its findings to his 1975 study.^{[22](#)} Separately, he reported on the survey responses to spiritual healing practices in Iceland.^{[23](#)}

The reports of a considerable number of contacts with the dead promoted Erlendur to undertake another survey aimed at exploring after-death communications. This provided the basis of an analysis of the significance of violent death in apparition cases^{[24](#)} and his 2012 book, *The Departed Among the Living*, for which he followed up exceptional cases for additional information.

Deathbed Visions

When Erlendur was at the ASPR in 1972, Karlis Osis invited him to collaborate on a large-scale study of deathbed visions that patients had reported to doctors and nurses in India. Osis had already conducted such a study in the United States^{[25](#)} and wanted to see if his findings held up cross-culturally. This collaboration resulted in a book, *At the Hour of Death*, which has been translated into fourteen languages and is still in print in an English edition from White Crow Books. Erlendur describes the project and how it came about in his memoir, *Towards the Unknown*.

Sathya Sai Baba

While Erlendur and Karlis Osis were researching deathbed visions in Indian hospitals, they heard about the religious leader Sathya Sai Baba, who was reputed to produce miraculous phenomena. They visited him twice in South India. Although they could not persuade him to take part in experiments, they heard of many strange events associated with him and made some puzzling observations of their own.^{[26](#)} Erlendur made a more extensive study of Sai Baba during later visits to India, leading to the book, *Miracles are my Visiting Cards: An Investigative Report on Psychic Phenomena Associated with Sathya Sai Baba (Modern Miracles*, in its American edition), in 1987. The book was issued in an updated edition by Hastings House in 1997 and reprinted by White Crow Books in 2013 as *Modern Miracles: Sathya Sai Baba: The Story of a Modern Day Prophet*.^{[27](#)}

Philosopher of religion David Lane wrote that Erlendur's book 'approaches the alleged miracles of Sai Baba with a critical, but open outlook' and recommended it as 'the most balanced book ever written' on Sai Baba's 'miracles'.^{[28](#)} Erlendur was interested in trying to distinguish genuine claims to macro-PK from legerdemain and wrote several papers on this topic, some with critic [Richard Wiseman](#).^{[29](#)}

Mediumship

Erlendur wrote about both mental and physical mediumship in Iceland. Along with Ian Stevenson, he studied two drop-in communicators through the medium [Hafsteinn Bjornsson](#).^{[30](#)} Together with Stevenson and others, he made several experiments with Bjornsson, checking to see if sitters could blindly identify the readings he did for them.^{[31](#)} With Loftur Gissurarson, Erlendur reviewed extensive historical and archival materials for his 2015 book, *Indridi Indridason: The Icelandic Physical Medium*.

Reincarnation

Children's past-life memories were the last topic to engage Erlendur's attention, but one to which he made significant contributions. He became involved in this research in 1988, when Stevenson asked him to be part of a project to 'replicate' his findings by looking into new cases to see if they were comparable to those he had investigated. Erlendur chose to go to Sri Lanka and reported on the cases he studied there in a solo paper and in a joint paper with Antonia Mills and Jürgen Keil, who were involved in the replication project as well.³² Later, Erlendur studied cases among the Druze of Lebanon. He and Stevenson did a formal comparison of their Druze cases, studied independently some years apart, finding strong similarities between the two series.³³

Erlendur examined the psychologies of children with past-life memories versus their peers without past-life memories in both Sri Lanka and Lebanon.³⁴ In both societies, children with past-life memories were judged to be better adjusted socially than their peers and did better in school, yet at the same time, those who recalled violent deaths often suffered from emotional problems similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. In other important studies, Erlendur looked at the retention of past-life memories past late childhood, when many children stop talking about them. He discovered that 38% of Sri Lankan subjects and 86% of Lebanese subjects re-interviewed in adulthood claimed to remember at least some of the things they had spoken about in their early years.³⁵

A list of Erlendur's journal papers on reincarnation is available [here](#). He devotes several chapters of *Towards the Unknown* to this research, which he reviewed also in a book he wrote with researcher [James Matlock](#), *I Saw a Light and Came Here: Children's Experiences of Reincarnation*. Erlendur himself had what he suspected were past-life memories, but was never able to determine where they were set. However, the cases he studied convinced him that reincarnation does occur. He said, 'Unbelievable as it may appear at first sight, the reincarnation theory best fits the data and the various features of the cases'.³⁶

Honours and Awards

Erlendur received two major awards. He was honoured with an Outstanding Career Award by the professional [Parapsychological Association](#) in 1997,³⁷ then in 2010 he was awarded the Myers Memorial Medal by the [Society for Psychical Research](#). Erlendur was the seventh recipient of the Myers Medal, which has been bestowed irregularly since 1995 'both to honour the memory of SPR founder Frederic Myers (1843–1901) and to acknowledge significant contributions by current researchers'.³⁸

Works

Books

Of Erlendur's ten books, nine describe some aspect of the paranormal or psychical research; six have appeared in English. A memoir of his experiences and activities in parapsychology was published in Spring 2021.

Med uppreisnarmönnum i Kúrdistan (1964). Hafnarfjörður, Iceland: Skuggsjá.

Pessa heims og annars. Könnun á dulrænni reynslu Íslendinga, trúarviðhorfum og þjóðtrú (1978). Reykjavík, Iceland: Bókaforlagið Saga.

Á vit hins ókunna. Æviminningar Erlendar Haraldssonar (2012, with Hafliði Helgason). Reykjavík, Iceland: Almenna bókafélagið.

Land im Aufstand Kurdistan (1966). Hamburg, Germany: Matari Verlag.

At the Hour of Death (1977, second author, with K. Osis). New York: Avon Books. [Reprinted 2012 by White Crow Books, Hove, UK].

Miracles are My Visiting Cards: An Investigative Report on Psychic Phenomena Associated with Sathya Sai Baba (1987). UK: Century Hutchinson. [U.S. edition, *Modern Miracles: An Investigative Report on Psychic Phenomena Associated with Sathya Sai Baba*, 1987. New York: Fawcett Columbine. Updated ed. 1997 from Hastings House. Reprinted 2013 as *Modern Miracles: Sathya Sai Baba: The Story of a Modern Day Prophet* by White Crow Books.]

The Departed Among the Living: An Investigative Study of Afterlife Encounters (2012). Guildford, UK: White Crow Books.

Indridi Indridason: The Icelandic Physical Medium (2015, with L.R. Gissurarson). Hove, UK: White Crow Books

I Saw a Light and Came Here: Children's Experiences of Reincarnation (2016, with J.G. Matlock). Hove, UK: White Crow Books.

Towards the Unknown: Memoir of a Psychical Researcher (2021). Hove, UK: White Crow Books.

Articles

Erlendur published about one hundred papers in mainstream as well as psi journals and contributed numerous chapters to books, listed [here](#). Many of his papers may be downloaded in PDF format.

Web Posts

Erlendur wrote thirteen [articles for the Psi Encyclopedia](#). Most summarize his reincarnation case studies, but he also wrote about his [psychological studies of children with past-life memories](#), his research with [deathbed visions](#), [Sai Baba](#) and with the Icelandic physical medium [Indridi Indridason](#).

Lectures: Podcasts and Videos

Erlendur was an active lecturer, especially in his years of retirement from teaching. He maintained a list of his [speaking engagements and conference presentations](#). Several were audio- or video-taped and are available on the web.

Podcast interviews include:

[Past Lives, Apparitions and Sai Baba](#). The Out-There Hour on Alternative Future Radio, 23 July 2012. Erlendur is introduced about 35 minutes into the program.

[Erlendur Haraldsson on Reincarnation](#). Erlendur is interviewed by Roberta Grimes on her Seek Reality radio show, 21 September 2017.

[Reincarnation and Deathbed Visions](#). The Past Lives Podcast with Simon Bown, 30 May 2018. This interview starts out as a discussion of *I Saw a Light and Came Here* but moves on to the deathbed visions described in *At the Hour of Death*.

[Children's Past-Life Memories](#). Provocative Enlightenment with Eldon Taylor, 25 June 2017. The interview with Erlendur starts about 14 minutes in and mainly concerns *I Saw a Light and Came Here*.

Videos of interviews of events in which Erlendur participated include:

[Belief in Life after Death and Reincarnation, For and Against](#). Address to a Buddhist organization, 22 October 2013.

[The Extraordinary Physical Mediumship of Indridi Indridason](#). Lecture for Paradigma, 20 July 2016.

[Reincarnation and Belief in Life after Death](#). Re Reincarnation and European Values Survey, 5 June 2016.

[The Departed Among the Living and the Evidence for Life after Death](#). Address to the Spirit Release Forum in February 2017.

[Children Who Claimed to Have Lived Before](#). Erlendur is interviewed by Christina Buchner, 2018.

[Fantastic & \(Almost\) Unbelievable Phenomena in Old Reputable Sources: Is There Anything Comparable Since Then?](#) Lecture to the Society for Psychical Research, September 2018.

In addition to lectures, Erlendur's field research was featured in [several documentaries](#), three of which are available on the web.

[In Search of the Dead](#). This program was produced by Jeffrey Iverson in 1992 for BBC Wales in cooperation with PBS, WXXI-TV Rochester, New York. It features the reincarnation research of Erlendur, [Ian Stevenson](#), [Antonia Mills](#), and [Satwant Pasricha](#).

[Children's Past Lives](#). A Zenith North Production by Laura Granditer for Channel Four, UK. October 2000.

[Past Lives: Stories of Reincarnation](#). Produced by Andreas Gutzeit for Storyhouse Productions and broadcast in the United States on the Learning Channel (Discovery Communications) on 1 April 2003 and on Discovery International on 29 December 2003.³⁹

Archival Collections

Erlendur deposited sound recordings he made of Hafsteinn Bjornsson's seances in the 1970s with the Icelandic National Library. His personal papers will be going to the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, with which he made arrangements before his death. The University of Manitoba library's Archives and Special Collections department already has a partial collection of his published works. The collection's [finding aid](#) is available online.

James G Matlock

Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Murdie (2021).
- [2](#). Erlendur (2021) describes these in his memoir *Towards the Unknown*.
- [3](#). Tymn (2015).
- [4](#). Murdie (2021).
- [5](#). Haraldsson (2013), 163.
- [6](#). Johnson (1982), 165.
- [7](#). Garrett (2002), 193.
- [8](#). Haraldsson (2013), 164-65.
- [9](#). Haraldsson (2013), 165; see also [his curriculum vitae](#).
- [10](#). Osis & Haraldsson (1977), 208.
- [11](#). See [his curriculum vitae](#) for the dates of his positions and *Towards the Unknown* for reflections on his time at the university.
- [12](#). Eysenck & Haraldsson (1983); Haraldsson & Eysenck (1987); Konráðs & Haraldsson (1994).
- [13](#). See [Nýr styrktarsjóður við Háskóla Íslands - Styrktarsjóður Erlendar Haraldssonar](#) (4 November 2010) and [Styrktarsjóður Erlendar Haraldssonar](#) (8 August 2013).
- [14](#). mbl.is (24 November 2020).
- [15](#). Haraldsson (1970).
- [16](#). Haraldsson & Houtkooper (1995).
- [17](#). Haraldsson (2021).
- [18](#). See [here](#) for a list of Erlendur's publications in experimental parapsychology. He discusses experimental studies after leaving Rhine's Parapsychology Laboratory in Haraldsson (2021).
- [19](#). For a list, see [here](#). Additional information appears in Haraldsson (2021).
- [20](#). See the unpublished summary, 'Results of a survey on psychic, religious and folkloric experiences and beliefs in Iceland' (June 1975), available [here](#).
- [21](#). Haraldsson (1985); Haraldsson & Houkoooper (1991).
- [22](#). Haraldsson (2011).
- [23](#). Haraldsson (2004).
- [24](#). Haraldsson (2009).
- [25](#). Osis (1961).
- [26](#). See Haraldsson & Osis, 1977; Osis & Haraldsson (1979).
- [27](#). The 2013 edition includes some additional information about Sai Baba, who died in 2011. See also Erlendur's reminisces in *Towards the Unknown* (Haraldsson, 2021).

- [28.](#) Lane (n.d.).
- [29.](#) Haraldsson & Houtkooper (1994); Haraldsson & Wiseman (1995, 1996); Wiseman & Haraldsson (1995).
- [30.](#) Haraldsson & Stevenson (1975a, 1975b).
- [31.](#) Haraldsson & Stevenson (1974); Haraldsson, Pratt, & Kristjansson (1978). Additional details on these experiments are given in Haraldsson (2021).
- [32.](#) Haraldsson (1991); Mills, Haraldsson, & Keil (1994).
- [33.](#) Stevenson & Haraldsson (2003).
- [34.](#) Haraldsson (1997, 2003); Haraldsson, Fowler, & Periyannanpillai (2000).
- [35.](#) Haraldsson (2008); Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin (2012).
- [36.](#) Haraldsson & Matlock (2016), 164.
- [37.](#) Parapsychological Association (26 January 2011)
- [38.](#) Ruffles (29 September 2019).
- [39.](#) In *Towards the Unknown*, Erlender says that this documentary 'was shown far and wide, such as on the Discovery Channel, on ProSieben in Germany, and in many places in Asia' also.