

Fraser Nicol

J Fraser Nicol (d 1989) was a British parapsychologist who carried out statistical experiments in ESP and psychokinesis, often in collaboration with his wife Betty Humphrey.

Life and Career

John Fraser Nicol, a Scot, was educated at Heriot-Watt College, Edinburgh, and the University of Edinburgh. For most of his professional career he was a full-time parapsychological researcher in Britain and the USA. He married Betty Humphrey, a psychologist and fellow researcher, in 1955.¹ He died in 1989.

Psychical Research

Nicol joined the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR) in 1934 and became a council member in 1948. In 1951 he started a year-long visit to the [Parapsychology Laboratory](#) at Duke University, and subsequently won research grants from the [American Society for Psychical Research](#) (ASPR), the [Parapsychology Foundation](#) and the Rockefeller Foundation.

At the SPR he became involved with statistical psi experiments using cards and dice,² collaborating with [Whately Carington](#); however, these achieved only marginal significance. He continued dice experiments with JB Rhine at Duke, collaborating with Humphrey, but became disillusioned with what he considered inadequate methodological rigour in Rhine's dice experiments, and the resulting friction led to his and Humphrey's departure.

Nicol was then invited to join the research team at the American Society for Psychical Research, where he continued experiments and compiled an in-depth index to its publications.³ His extensive experimental work included tests in [precognition](#),⁴ aspects of randomness and success in ESP,⁵ and the search for correlations between psi performance and psychological variables,⁶ one of which found a striking link with self-confidence and was assessed by a reviewer as one of the most 'ambitious' experiments of its kind to have been conducted until that time.⁷

However, Nicol became increasingly sceptical about the ability of quantitative experiments to provide convincing proof of psi, and often expressed dissatisfaction with the methods followed by parapsychologists in this regard.⁸

In other activities, Nicol explored mediumship and spiritualism⁹ and wrote about the history of psychical research.¹⁰ His essay review of Alan Gauld's *The Founders of Psychical Research* was published in the SPR proceedings.¹¹

Trevor Hall

[Trevor Hall](#), an author and sceptic of paranormal phenomena, aroused controversy with books claiming to expose fraudulence and gullibility in key episodes of psychical research. Nicol was one of the most vocal of Hall's many critics. Of Hall's book on [Edmund Gurney](#),¹² he wrote in the *International Journal of Parapsychology*,

It is difficult to recall any other book on psychical research that contains within its covers such a multiplicity of multiform errors ... [It] is a small monument to lack of knowledge, inadequate preparation, confused thinking, unfairness, and worse. For it is little more than an outpouring of propaganda against persons, long dead, whom the author chos[es] in his singular way to dislike.¹³

Hall issued a writ for libel against the journal's publisher, the Parapsychology Foundation, which in an eventual out-of-court settlement agreed to publish Hall's rebuttal of Nicol's criticisms,¹⁴ but refused to give Nicol the right to reply to which Nicol considered he was entitled. As a consequence, Nicol resigned from his research post at the Foundation.¹⁵

Works

Articles

Some experiments in will[ed] die-throwing (1947, with Whately Carington). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 48, 164-75.

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The Fox sisters and the development of Spiritualism (1948). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 34, 271-86.

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The feeling of success in ESP (1955, with B. Humphrey). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 49/1.

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Obituary: Professor Hornell Hart (1967). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 44, 165-66.

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The founders of the SPR (1972). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 55, 341-67.

Fraudulent children in psychical research (1979). *Parapsychological Review* 10/1, 16-21.

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History of psychical research: Britain (1982). In *Psychical Research – A Guide to its History, Principles and Practices*, ed. by I. Grattan-Guinness, 17-39. Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press.

Book Reviews

The Cheltenham Ghost, by B. Abdy Collins (1949). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 35, 85-86.

Melvyn Willin

Literature

Alvarado, C. (1990). Obituary: J. Fraser Nicol: *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 56, 318-19.

Gilbert, M. (1990). Obituary: J. Fraser Nicol: An appreciation of his dedication to psychical research *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 56, 113-24.

Grattan-Guinness, I. (1982). History of psychical research: Britain by J. Fraser Nicol. In *Psychical Research – A Guide to its History, Principles and Practices*, ed. by I. Grattan-Guinness, 17-39. Wellingborough: Aquarian Press.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Pleasants (1964).
- [2.](#) Gilbert (1990), 115.
- [3.](#) Gilbert (1990), 118.
- [4.](#) For instance, Nicol (1947; 1961).
- [5.](#) For instance, Nicol (1955a) and Nicol & Humphrey (1955b).
- [6.](#) e.g., Nicol & Humphrey (1953).
- [7.](#) Soal (1954), 3078.
- [8.](#) Gilbert (1990), 114.
- [9.](#) For instance, Nicol (1948).
- [10.](#) For instance, in Grattan-Guinness (1982), 17-39.
- [11.](#) Nicol (1972), 341-67.
- [12.](#) Hall (1964).
- [13.](#) Nicol (1966), 56.

- [14.](#) Hall (1968), 149-64.
- [15.](#) Gilbert (1990), 120-22.

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