

# John Poynton

John Poynton (b 1931) was born in South Africa where he is professor emeritus of biology at the University of Natal. He later became a research associate of the Natural History Museum, London, and a scientific fellow of the Zoological Society of London. He is much published in the fields of zoology and psychical research. Two amphibian genera have been named after him (*Poyntonia* and *Poyntonophrynus*), along with four amphibian species.

## Life and Career

John Poynton was born on 16 May 1931 in Pretoria, South Africa, into a family long established there. He matriculated at Michaelhouse School, Natal, in 1948 and subsequently majored in botany and zoology at the University of Natal. After gaining a master's degree in zoology he studied music at the University of Cape Town where he won a prize for composition. He returned to zoology as a lecturer at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, having gained a PhD on the amphibian fauna of southern Africa. Subsequently he was invited to the University of the Witwatersrand as a senior lecturer in zoology. After three years he resigned to take up research in parapsychology.

In 1971, a lecturing appointment at the University of Natal, Durban, permitted continuation of this work while teaching medical biology. He also resumed taxonomic and zoogeographical research in the Department of Biological Sciences of Natal University, where he taught biogeography, other environmental subjects, and philosophy of science. The position of associate professor was awarded in 1981, later an ad hominem professorship in 1987. He married a colleague in the department, Margaret Wyllys Black, in 1980.[1](#)

At the end of 1991 he retired from the University of Natal as an emeritus professor of biology and moved to London in 1992. He received the Order of Meritorious Service from the South African State President in 1992.

He published extensively in the fields of biology and zoology, and is recognized internationally as a leading African zoologist.[2](#) A selection of his publications includes articles in *Nature*,[3](#) *The South African Journal of Science*,[4](#) *The African Journal of Herpetology*,[5](#) *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*[6](#) and *The Annals of the Natal Museum*.[7](#)

## Psychical Research

Poynton's interest in psi started with encounters with dowsing for water which is widely practised in South Africa. He concluded from his informal researches that information gained by dowsing could not have been accessed by physical or geological means, and that details of depth of available water and yield could come only through non-physical or extrasensory perception.

Dowsing set him thinking about the possibility of the mind operating independently of matter. This in turn led to an interest in what he believed to be outstanding evidence from the literature on out-of-body experiences (OBE). As a result of an invitation to a senior lectureship in the department of zoology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (1965), he joined the South African Society for Psychical Research, centred at Wits, where he met Michael Whiteman when he was invited to give lectures. He was impressed that Whiteman's ontology, 'based on the potentiality/actualization thinking of Heisenberg and others, provided the basis for understanding OBE, in that a clear distinction was made between the physical domain and non-physical domains; OBE is not experience in a physical world but some non-physical world, which might resemble the physical but is ontologically different from it.'<sup>8</sup>

Full-time research in parapsychology followed his resignation from the university in 1968, and a grant from the Parapsychology Foundation of New York enabled him to carry out research among the Zulu people of Natal.

When back at the University of Natal, Poynton in 1987 formed the Natal Branch of the South African Society for Psychical Research, combining this activity with an interest in Buddhist philosophy and practice. He also gave winter school courses in parapsychology on the Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses of the university. He served on the council of the South African Society for Psychical Research, and on moving to London joined the council of the Society for Psychical Research, serving as honorary secretary from 1997 to 2004, then as president until 2007, and again between 2015 and 2018.

Whiteman's treatment of non-physical states and out-of-body experiences led Poynton to a study of Emanuel Swedenborg, known for his detailed descriptions of other-world states. Whiteman's experiences match those of Swedenborg in major respects, and Swedenborg's accounts seem more easily comprehended following Whiteman's analysis of non-physical states. Poynton's chapter article (see below) and his *Psi Encyclopedia* entry on [Swedenborg](#) aimed to link Swedenborg's work with psi research.

## **Views on Life**

Poynton describes his general views as follows:

I have an underlying view of life that one's existence on earth is for some purpose, which the individual has to try to discover, and to fulfil to the best of his/her ability. Cultivating an individual's interests helps to clarify and serve one's life-purpose. My life-long interest has been in African wildlife and in classical music, added to later by an interest in psychical phenomena and in mysticism. A critical view of the dogmatic materialism promoted both by current science and by current philosophy culminated in an interest in the philosophy of science. To cultivate and serve this wide range of interests became the purpose I see in my life.<sup>9</sup>

Poynton often speaks of his admiration for his long-standing friend Michael Whiteman (1906-2007) and his mystical approach to life; he devoted a book to

Whiteman's outstanding contributions to psi, physics, philosophy and religion,[10](#) as well as several articles (see Michael Whiteman in *Psi Encyclopedia*). Whiteman's extensive diaries came into Poynton's possession following his death; these are now in the SPR archives in Cambridge University Library.[11](#)

Poynton has published four novels (and one in press), which take issue with the dominating materialist culture of contemporary society.

## Works

This list includes a selection of his many publications within the field of psychical research. In addition to the items below, Poynton published regular columns in the *Paranormal Review* between 2004-2007 and 2015-2018 in his capacity as SPR president.

## Books

*Parapsychology in South Africa: Proceedings of a 1973 Conference* (ed., 1975). Johannesburg: South African Society for Psychical Research.

*New Creation* (2012). Clovelly, Cape Town, South Africa: Kima Global.

*Brief Authority* (2012). Clovelly, Cape Town, South Africa: Kima Global.

*The Life Play* (2013). Clovelly, Cape Town, South Africa: Kima Global.

*New Enlightenment* (2013). Clovelly, Cape Town, South Africa: Kima Global.

*Make All Things New* (2021). London: Austin Macauley.

*Science, Mysticism and Psychical Research: The Revolutionary Synthesis of Michael Whiteman* (2015). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

## Articles

Non-evident psi and phenomenology (1983). *Parapsychology Review* 14/6, 9-10.

Holistic thinking in medicine: Pitfalls and possibilities (1989). *Holistic Medicine* 4, 137-44.

Making sense of psi: Whiteman's multilevel ontology (1994). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 59, 401-12.

Towards a statement of purpose for the Society for Psychical Research (1996). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 61, 94-102.

The Rubik cube and the T: Aspects of personality structure relevant to psychical research (1999). *Paranormal Review* 10, 12-14.

Science betrayed: The 'iron rule of the mechanistic regime' (1999/ 2000). *Holistic Science and Human Values* 4, 37-40.

Acceptable evidence in psychical research (2000). *Paranormal Review* 14, 18-21.

Challenges of out-of-body experience: Does psychical research fully meet them? (2001). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 65, 194-206.

A case of an apparently shared out-of-body experience: Questions and possible answers (2003). *Paranormal Review* 28, 19-21.

What survives? An essay review of Goswami's *Physics of the Soul* (2003). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 67, 143-54.

Long shadow over psychical research: An essay review of Johnson's *Kant on Swedenborg: Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Other Writings* (2004). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 68, 262-68.

Towards a taxonomy of psi investigation (2008). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 72, 60-62.

Science, politics and psychical research (2011). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 59, 97-107.

Many levels, many worlds and psi: A guide to the work of Michael Whiteman (2011). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 59, 109-39.

Precognition and the Daryl Bem furore (2011). *Paranormal Review* 59, 29-31

Reflections on the history and philosophy of psychical research (2016). *Paranormal Review* 79, 4-5.

Michael Whiteman's scientific mysticism (2016). *Network Review* 120, 7-9.

The 'attitude of incredulity' (2017). *Network Review* 122, 21-22.

## **Book Chapters**

Parapsychology in South Africa (1973). In *Parapsychology Today: A Geographical View*, ed. by A. Angoff & B. Shapin, 106-20. New York: Parapsychology Foundation.

Parapsychology and the biological sciences (1974). In *Parapsychology and the Sciences*, ed. by A. Angoff & B. Shapin, 116-34. New York: Parapsychology Foundation.

Results of an out-of-body survey (1975). In *Parapsychology in South Africa: Proceedings of a 1973 Conference*, ed. by J. Poynton, 109-23. Johannesburg: South African Society for Psychical Research.

Emanuel Swedenborg: A human cosmology (2018). In *Cosmic Consciousness and Human Excellence: Implications for Global Ethics*, ed. by M. Masaeli & H.W. Sneller, 40-56. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

## **Book Reviews**

*Parapsychology, Philosophy and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration*, by D.R. Griffin (1997). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 62, 171-75.

*Brain Story: Unlocking our Inner World of Emotions, Memories, Ideas and Desires*, by S. Greenfield (2001). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 65, 48-50.

*The Paranormal: Research and the Quest for Meaning*, by E. Carlton (2002). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 66, 53-55.

*Old and New Evidence on the Meaning of Life: The Mystical World-View and Inner Contest. Volume 2: The Dynamics of Spiritual Development*, by J.H.M. Whiteman (2002). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 66, 185-87.

*Parapsychology, Philosophy and the Mind: Essays Honoring John Beloff*, ed. by F. Steinkamp (2003). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 67, 302-5.

*Post-Romantic Consciousness: Dickens to Plath*, by J. Beer (2004). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 68, 54-56.

*Parapsychology in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by M.A. Thalbourne & L. Storm (2005). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 69, 153-57.

*Swedenborg's Secret*, by L. Bergquist (2006). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 70, 181-86.

*Old and New Evidence on the Meaning of Life: The Mystical World-view and Inner Contest. Volume 3. Universal Theory and Life in the Other Worlds*, by J.H.M. Whiteman (2007). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 71, 167-74.

*An Introduction to Parapsychology* (5th ed.), by H.J. Irwin & C.A. Watt (2007). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 71, 175-80.

*Outside the Gates of Science: Why It's Time for the Paranormal to Come in from the Cold*, by D. Broderick (2007). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 71, 248-50.

*Science and the Near-Death Experience: How Consciousness Survives Death*, by C. Carter (2011). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 75, 50-53.

*The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry*, by R. Sheldrake (2012). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 76, 111-14.

*The Out-of-Body Experience: The History and Science of Astral Travel*, by A. Peake (2012). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 76, 116-20.

*Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality*, ed. by E.F. Kelly, A. Crabtree, & P. Marshall (2015). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 80, 40-47.

*Wild Beasts of the Philosophical Desert: Philosophers on Telepathy and Other Exceptional Experiences*, by H. van Dongen, H. Gerding, & R. Sneller (2016). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 80, 246-51.

*Prometheus and Atlas*, by J.R. Jorjani (2017). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 81, 32-36.

## **Web Posts**

Poynton has written three articles for the *Psi Encyclopedia*:

[Michael Whiteman](#) (2015).

[Scientific Mysticism](#) (2015).

[Emanuel Swedenborg](#) (2019).

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## Literature

Loader, S., Menegon, M., Howell, K.M., & Müller, H. (2013). [A celebration of the works of John Charles Poynton](#). *African Journal of Herpetology* 62/1 (April), 1-4.

Poynton, J. (1961). Biogeography of south-east Africa. *Nature* 189, 801-3.

Poynton, J. (1962). Zoogeography of eastern Africa: An outline based on Anuran distribution. *Nature* 194, 1217-19.

Poynton, J. (1964). The Amphibia of southern Africa: A faunal study. *Annals of the Natal Museum* 17, 1-334.

Poynton, J. (1967). Santa Rosalia in Africa or why are there so many African birds? *South African Journal of Science* 63, 471-97.

Poynton, J. (1987). Smuts's *Holism and Evolution* sixty years on. *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa* 46, 181-89.

Poynton, J. (2013). Afrotemperate amphibians in southern and eastern Africa: A critical review. *African Journal of Herpetology* 62, 5-29.

Poynton, J. (2015). [Michael Whiteman](#). *Psi Encyclopedia*. [Web page.]

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1.](#) See <http://johnpoynton.com/biography.html>.
- [2.](#) Loader et al. (2013).
- [3.](#) Poynton (1961, 1962).
- [4.](#) Poynton (1967).
- [5.](#) Poynton (2013).
- [6.](#) Poynton (1987).
- [7.](#) Poynton (1964).
- [8.](#) Personal communication.
- [9.](#) See <http://johnpoynton.com/biography.html>.
- [10.](#) Poynton (2015).
- [11.](#) Poynton (2015).