OBITUARY

WILLIAM G. ROLL
1926–2012

BY WILLIAM T. JOINES

When Bill Roll passed away on January 9, 2012, at age 85, the field of parapsychology lost a very great man of vision and integrity. William G. Roll II was born on July 3, 1926, in Bremen, Germany, and he grew up in Denmark, where, as part of the Danish resistance to the Nazis, he helped Jews escape to Sweden. Bill earned a BA degree from the University of California, Berkeley, a master’s degree from Oxford University, and a PhD degree from Lund University. In 1957, Bill and his wife Muriel moved back to the US, where he accepted a position in J. B. Rhine’s Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University, Durham, NC. In 1961, he became head of the Durham-based Psychical Research Foundation (PRF), with the mission to explore the possibility of life after death of the body.

In 1986, Bill moved from Durham to Georgia and accepted the position of Professor of Psychology and Psychical Research at West Georgia College. But it was during his time in Durham that he made most of his major contributions to the field of parapsychology. Besides exploring the survival question, including out-of-body experiences, hauntings, and mediumship, Bill had a very keen interest in poltergeist activity. And it is for the investigation of this activity that Bill will long be remembered. With the publication of two books and numerous scientific articles on poltergeists (a few are listed at the end), Bill became the world’s leading authority on poltergeist activity.

In his writings, Bill also popularized some names and phrases that parapsychologists continue to find useful. Because “poltergeist” means “noisy ghost,” which may be inaccurate, Bill instead used the term Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis (RSPK) instead, and he used the term “psi” to refer to all psychical activity.

I first met Bill Roll in 1966, after I left Bell Laboratories to teach and do research at Duke University. Bill was Director of the PRF. I had a great interest in the topics Bill was investigating, so he and I became close associates and close friends. As a volunteer and consultant at the PRF, I was led into many awesome (to me) experiences during my years of association with Bill. How can I best honor my good friend who worked so diligently in this life to further our knowledge and awareness of psychical phenomena? What better way than to describe a few of these experiences that Bill led me into—some you may never have heard of before?

The first awesome experience occurred in the summer of 1967. Bill encouraged me to visit a spiritualist camp that I had heard about (Camp Chesterfield in Indiana). Since the stated purpose of the PRF was to
determine whether or not there is life after death, such a visit could serve that purpose.

While at Camp Chesterfield, I attended a materialization séance conducted by a medium named Charles Swan. There were a dozen sitters like myself on one side of the table in the darkened séance room. One small red light bulb was left on. Charles Swan addressed us for some time on spiritual matters before the séance was started. This gave us time to be fully dark-adapted. I could clearly see detailed features of all objects and people within the room. Charles Swan instructed us that the prophet Amos (Old Testament) would materialize and deliver to us a spiritual message. Swan said that he did not go into a trance during the materialization, but would remain fully conscious. He asked us to observe a spot on the floor that was just across the table from me and the other sitters. After a short time a smoke-like substance started from this spot and slowly spiraled toward the ceiling. The substance then filled out in diameter and took on the well-defined features of a man. He was as solid looking as anyone else in the room. He was dressed rather like my vision of a genie, in a manner that I would not have guessed for an Old Testament character. He was dressed in a turban and a rather fancy shirt or tunic with three red, ruby-like jewels down the front where buttons would be today. He wore something like a cummerbund around his waist.

Immediately after becoming a completely formed body, Amos spoke to us for several minutes. Amos had a well-modulated, pleasant speaking voice in unaccented English. He addressed us in a quite serious and sophisticated manner, but I did not pay attention to the message. I was too busy looking for the trap-door, the projector, or other ways this might have been staged. I was quite startled to observe that Amos was a bit taller than the room and that his turban protruded into the ceiling. As his body swayed with natural speech gestures, I could see the turban moving horizontally or vertically, but always with a bit of it extending into the ceiling. After Amos delivered his message, he said: “Good bye. God bless you.” He then slowly spiraled back into the spot on the floor from where he started.

This incident puzzles me to this day. Returning home, I related all the details of this experience to Bill. He was impressed, but he could not offer a plausible explanation either (other than drawing energy from the sitters to form ectoplasm into the materialization of Amos, as Charles Swan stated). I rule out trap-doors, projectors, mass hypnosis, and any other form of deception that I can conceive of. I spoke with some of the other attendees just after the séance. We all observed the same details. No one saw or heard anything that would suggest the materialization was staged. To me, this materialization was as real as real could be.

In 1968, Bill invited me to a meeting at his home in Durham. This is where I met the famous psychic Eileen Garrett. She was at the meeting, along with Milan Ryzl, a noted parapsychologist, Bill Roll, and me. I think
this meeting would be labeled a séance because Garrett, through her spirit guide, Uvani, gave messages to me and to Ryzl. When it came my turn, I did not pose any questions to Uvani, so he questioned me instead. He asked me if I was married, and I answered yes. He then asked if I enjoyed being married, and I replied yes, but perhaps I hedged on my answer a bit. Uvani then told me bluntly that my marriage was in deep trouble and it would require a great effort on my part if I hoped to save it. I was shocked that Uvani hit me squarely between the eyes, but not by the content of his message. I had just learned a few days earlier that my marriage was indeed in deep trouble, but I had told no one. That marriage ended a few months later.

In 1969, Douglas Johnson, a well-known clairvoyant medium from England, was a guest in Bill’s home in Durham. During a private session that I had with Johnson, he told me, among other things, that my grandfather (who died before I was born) was paralyzed on his entire right side just before he died. I had never heard anyone in my family speak of this. I carefully asked my grandmother to describe my grandfather’s condition during the days before his death. In approximately the same words that Johnson used, she confirmed that her husband was paralyzed on his entire right side. Johnson said that he got this information and more by reading and interpreting the symbols embedded in my aura.

Also in 1969, Bill and I took Johnson to a reputedly haunted house in Mayport, Florida. I had previously spent several nights and days in this house (at Bill’s urging). During that time I had interviewed quite a number of visitors to the house, to take note of what they may have seen or heard. The house was owned and occupied by a man named John King, living alone, who seemed to enjoy having visitors. Many of the visitors described seeing ghostly appearances in the house: an elderly lady in a rocking chair, wearing a shawl on her head and appearing at the top of the stairs; a small man in a red suit at the bottom of the stairs; and a man wearing a white shirt and a bowler hat, appearing often in the upstairs hallway. There were also reports of furniture being moved within an upstairs bedroom when no one was in the room. With everyone out of the house, we had Johnson walk through the house, upstairs and downstairs, carrying a tape recorder. Johnson had not been told of any of the apparitions reportedly seen within the house, but he clearly recorded sensing two of the three entities mentioned earlier. We also took with us on this trip an undergraduate student who had been kept uninformed about any events within the house. Again with no one in the house, this student, while seated in a downstairs room, reported loud movements of furniture in the same upstairs room where others had previously reported furniture movement.

In 1970, Bill encouraged me to investigate a reported poltergeist disturbance in Queens, New York. I spent most of one day there. The activities centered around two teenage boys, and consisted mainly of coins being thrown against the wall or onto the floor. Since such activity could
easily be staged, I kept the two boys well within view at all times. But another observation may be more important than the coin activity. After two of the incidents where coins were thrown against the wall, I was able to detect a region of energetic activity near where the coins struck the wall. I made this detection using a hand-held transistor radio tuned to 146 MHz. The energy was detected as loud static within a region of space approximately 2 feet in diameter at approximately 2 feet off the floor. This signal or static occurred only at 146 MHz, and I had to probe the region near the coin impact to locate the 2-foot sphere of energy. The 146 MHz frequency is curious to me because the average human skull has the right diameter and electromagnetic properties to make it absorb electromagnetic energy most efficiently at 146 MHz. It would also transmit most efficiently at this same frequency. Bill was quite excited when I reported these findings to him, and he knew of other instances where signals near 146 MHz had been detected during paranormal events. This is something we kept in mind, but it remains more of a curiosity than anything else.

In October 1984, Steve Baumann, a neurophysiologist at the University of North Carolina (in collaboration with Bill Roll) was setting up PK tests for poltergeist agent Tina Resch at Spring Creek Institute in Chapel Hill (a nonprofit company founded by researchers Ed Kelly, Ross Dunseath, and me, all close friends of Bill and Steve). The previous March, 14-year-old Tina had been the center of massive poltergeist-like destruction in her home in Columbus, Ohio. Bill had arranged for a psychotherapist, Jeanie Stewart, to accompany Tina during the testing. Most of the testing would center on target items arranged on a table within a laboratory room. When the target items were ready, Tina was invited to participate.

During the testing, the heaviest target to move was a 12-inch crescent wrench. When Stewart and Baumann were standing between Tina and the target table and facing her, there was a loud noise from down the hallway behind the girl. The wrench from the target table had hit the open door to a laboratory room, several feet down a hallway behind Tina, and had landed inside. An indentation showed the point of impact. Thus, after passing Baumann, Roll, Stewart, and Tina without notice, the wrench had supposedly traveled 18 feet down the narrow hallway, taken a curved path to enter the open door of the laboratory, and then moved another 4 feet after hitting the open door to land on the floor of the lab.

I report this incident because I observed part of it. One of my graduate students from Duke University (Randall Takemoto-Hambleton) and I were assembling a piece of equipment in this laboratory room during the flight and crash of the wrench. We were facing a glass window on the hallway that ran the full length of the laboratory wall. After hearing voices at the end of the hallway to my right, I observed what I took to be movement of some object along the hallway just before the wrench crashed into and bounced off the opened door. This was an impossible path of movement by normal physical means. Certainly, no one was near the wrench during
its flight and crash into the door. Bill, Steve, and Tina came rushing to the wrench lying on the floor a few moments later.

A bit later this same day, as Randall was walking down another long hallway to leave Spring Creek Institute, he observed that Tina and Stewart were also leaving and walking down the same hallway some 30 feet behind him. Just then he heard a loud crash behind him, and he turned to observe that a heavy fire extinguisher had jumped from its moorings on the wall to crash onto the floor midway between him and Tina. Randall did not see how this could happen by any normal means. It is noteworthy that Randall and Tina had a lively and friendly conversation earlier in the day. It could be that the wrench and fire extinguisher occurrences had to do with Tina’s need for attention.

There are many other experiences that could be related, but these are the ones that I still ponder, and perhaps Bill does as well. After Bill moved from Durham to Georgia, we still communicated frequently by e-mail and telephone. Over a period of about ten years we traded revisions on a manuscript (RS PK and Consciousness) we were writing. We were in no particular hurry, and it was a way to keep in touch.

Thank you, Bill, for all these great experiences! I loved working with you and having you as a friend. Drop in some time if you are able to do so. You would be more than welcome.

Bibliography

These are some, but not all, of Bill’s publications. To my knowledge, Bill never wrote a work of fiction. These publications report the observed and recorded facts as accurately as Bill could present them. Bill always first looked for a known physical explanation of observed phenomena, but when none could be found he would offer theories of different ways in which the phenomena might have occurred.


Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Duke University
Durham, NC 27708
wtj@duke.edu