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# Philip Ewart Vernon (1905–1987)

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P. E. Vernon, PhD, ScD, LLD (Hon.), one of Britain's eminent scientist-scholars, earned universal respect for his many contributions to educational and differential psychology and psychometrics. His unremitting devotion to scholarly work throughout a long and distinguished career was interrupted only by death (from cancer), on July 28, 1987, in Calgary. He was Emeritus Professor of Educational Psychology in the Universities of London and Calgary. An editor of the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* (1956–1961), he was President of the British Psychological Society (1954) and of the Psychology Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1952), a Fellow of the U.S. National Academy of Education (1968) and of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1961 and 1975).

Vernon was born in Oxford, England, on June 6, 1905. His father, a lecturer in physiology at Oxford University, later became a pioneer in industrial psychology and encouraged Philip to study psychology, as did Philip's older sister (M. D. Vernon, formerly Chair of Psychology at Reading). Graduating from Cambridge University with honors in science, Vernon stayed on for advanced degrees in psychology, under F. C. Bartlett, writing his dissertation on the psychology of musical appreciation. (A lifelong music buff, Vernon was a good pianist and played oboe and French horn in amateur orchestras.) A Rockefeller Fellowship brought him to America to pursue his interest in measurement and personality, a year each with Mark May at Yale and Gordon Allport at Harvard, a collaboration resulting in the Allport-Vernon *Study of Values*.

Returning to London in 1933, he was a psychologist in the Maudsley Hospital's Child Guidance Clinic. While head of the Psychology Department at Glasgow University (1938–1947), during World War II, he served as Psychological Research Adviser to the War Office and Admiralty, devising selection tests and training methods, and doing factor analyses that led to his long familiar hierarchical model of abilities, comprising an overarching general factor (*g*) and the major group factors, verbal-educational (*v:ed*) and spatial-mechanical (*k:m*). Following his tenure as the chair of Educational Psychology at the University of London (1949–1968), he emigrated, at age 63, to Canada, where he was Professor of Educational Psychology in the University of Calgary, retiring (only formally) in 1978. Amidst these academic responsibilities, he traveled extensively, lecturing in 28 countries on six continents.

Vernon wrote 14 books and some 200 articles. Although educated in the Cambridge tradition of laboratory experimentation, his interests in statistics, measurement, abilities, and personality allied him with the London school of differential and quantitative psychology established by Charles Spearman and Cyril Burt. Vernon

viewed himself primarily as an applied psychologist and was overly modest about his considerable original contributions to empirical research—on personality measurement, statistical characteristics of various item analysis methods, effects of coaching on test scores, life-span changes in intelligence, and factor analyses showing that Piaget's developmental tasks, Witkin's "field independence", and Guilford's "divergent thinking" all mainly reflected Spearman's *g*.

In the 1960s, he turned to the environmental and cultural determinants of ability and achievement and conducted cross-cultural studies in various racial and cultural groups from the Arctic to the West Indies and East Africa (*Intelligence and Cultural Environment*, 1969), assisted by his wife, Dorothy, also a psychologist and co-author with him of *The Psychology of Gifted Children* (1977). The third generation of the Vernon family to go into psychology is Philip and Dorothy's only offspring, "Tony" (Philip A. Vernon), who is already a well-recognized researcher on cognitive abilities and an Associate Professor of Psychology at Western Ontario University.

P. E. Vernon's true gift, which made him famous, was as an expositor of the research literature. He could master a mountain of empirical studies and technical details and fashion a synthesis and interpretation of ascetic terseness, clarity, and coherence. Built on impeccable scholarship, his many books were noted for their civility and critical acumen, judicious balance and fairness in treating contrary views, and absence of ideological slant. His own views were never expressed dogmatically or provocatively, and even on the most controversial topics (e.g., his major work, *Intelligence: Heredity and Environment*, 1979) his cool style calmed antagonists on both sides. In this, he was quite unlike his prominent predecessors in the London school. For example, Spearman complained his career was "one long fight," and Burt had bitter opponents.

A tall, ramrod figure, gray hair, and austere mein, virtually incapable of chitchat, he seemed ill at ease with strangers, who often mistook his laconic manner for aloofness. Actually it was social shyness and what *The Times* called his "legendary introversion." His friends discovered beneath this persona a gentle and sterling quality of character that evoked admiration and affection. His travels and social life were fortunately aided and abetted by Dorothy, whose lively sociability complemented his reserved nature, making friends and facilitating Philip's interaction with those who shared his interests.

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