Philip Ewart Vernon (1905–1987)

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 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 about 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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