

John E Mack

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Psychiatrist who wrote a biography of T E Lawrence, but caused a stir with his interest in alien abductions

JOHN E MACK, who has died aged 74, was a professor of psychiatry at Harvard and won a Pulitzer prize for a biography of Lawrence of Arabia; he created more controversy, however, with his investigations of accounts of alien abduction.

Mack spent five years interviewing more than 100 "experiencers" to produce his book *Abduction - Human Encounters with Aliens*. It made him a rich man, and a regular guest on television talk shows, but his emergence as a guru for UFO believers caused his university acute embarrassment. Paul McHugh, the director of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Medical School, said: "I've known John since the 1950s. He's a brilliant fellow who occasionally loses it, and this time he's lost it big time." Malkah Notman, Mack's head of department, was only slightly more guarded. "People have great respect for John's other achievements," he said. "But the perception is that this is not a productive area of research." But Mack was unrepentant, telling *The Sunday Telegraph*: "Look, something is really going on here."

Mack's conclusion that there was "no conventional explanation" for case studies such as Ed, who remembered an alien woman taking a sperm sample from him; Jerry, who had given birth to a human-alien hybrid; and Peter, who had an alien wife in a parallel universe, led some colleagues to launch the "Knife the Mack" movement.

Their concerns led to an inquiry at Harvard Medical School led by Arnold Relman, a former editor of the *New England Journal of Medi-*



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cine. After a year-long investigation, in which Mack won the support of, among others, Alan Dershowitz, the Harvard law professor best-known for his involvement in celebrity trials, the school's ruling body "urged him not, in any way, to violate the high standards... of this faculty". But it also reaffirmed his ac-

ademic freedom, and allowed him to continue his work on aliens. This he did with gusto, producing *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters* in 1999.

Reaction to his biography of Lawrence, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, which appeared in 1976, had been markedly different, and several publications, including *Time* and the *Contemporary Review*, hailed it as the most insightful yet produced. But like his work on aliens, Mack concentrated on the psychology of the individual, and the spiritual aspects of character. He did not neglect factual research, however, interviewing Lawrence's brother and travelling to his birthplace at Tremadoc, and to Aqaba (by camel). He concluded that Lawrence's heroism derived from an attempt to live up to ideals he had created in his childhood, partly from shame that his parents, though strict and religious, had never married.

John Edward Mack was born in New York City on October 4 1929 into an academically ambitious Jewish family. He was educated at Oberlin College before going on to Harvard, where he obtained his medical degree *cum laude* in 1955. He was an intern at Massachusetts General Hospital and did his residency at Massachusetts Mental Health Center.

He served in the US Air Force from 1959 to 1961, rising to the rank of captain and marrying his wife, Sally Stahl. In 1964, he joined the Harvard Medical School faculty, becoming professor of psychiatry in 1972. He was founding chairman of the department of psychiatry

at the Cambridge Hospital. In 1983, he founded the Centre for Psychology and Social Change, to research "the full breadth of human experience, including spiritual experience not generally accepted by more conservative branches of psychiatry". It was renamed the John E Mack Institute this year.

His most recent article, two weeks ago, compared the leadership qualities of T E Lawrence and George W Bush; not to the latter's advantage. That weekend, he enjoyed canvassing in the rain for John Kerry.

He published almost a dozen books, including *Nightmares and Human Conflict*, which became a standard text, and edited *Borderline States in Psychiatry*.

Mack was speaking at the T E Lawrence Society Symposium in Oxford on Sunday, where his afternoon talk was so well received that he was invited to give an additional speech that evening. The next day he was returning from dinner with friends in London when he was run down and killed.

Asked what his message would be if he could broadcast to the world, he replied, "I would be humbled", but offered the following prescription: "Wake up, find your way, whether it is with prayer or psychedelics or abductions or shamanic journeys or talking with gurus or seeing movies like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*, whatever it is, find your way to break out of the program, the commercial materialist program."

His marriage was dissolved in 1995. He is survived by his three sons.