

Psychiatrist criticised for giving credence to alien encounters

John Mack

John Mack, the American psychiatrist whose research gave considerable credence to accounts by people who claimed to have encountered aliens — derisively dismissed by some of his fellow academics — has died in a road accident in London, aged 74.

He had been visiting Britain to speak at a conference in Oxford, on an earlier and uncontroversial area of interest. In his acclaimed, Pulitzer-prizewinning biography of TE Lawrence, *Prince Of Our Disorder* (1977), Mack probed the subject from a psychological and spiritual — as well as a conventional — angle, aiming to relate the individual to the larger picture.

However, it was his study *Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens* (1994) that became a bestseller. It was based on the testimonies of about 100 self-proclaimed abductees, who contacted Mack at his office at Cambridge hospital, one of the teaching hospitals run by Harvard University, in Massachusetts. The book led to Harvard medical school, where he had been a faculty member since 1964 and a tenured professor of psychiatry since 1972, holding an inquiry into his methods, though he escaped censure.

Mack's interest in the testimonies of people claiming contact with non-human beings had started relatively late in his career. As he explained in an interview: "When I heard about this phenomenon in 1990, I was very doubtful. I thought it must be some kind of mental illness."

Eventually, however, he came to accept that his duty was to help those with abduction stories, known as "experiencers", to deal with their feelings. Mack said his line with such cases was to be "questioning and sceptical";



Mack... TE Lawrence study

and that he considered the abduction phenomenon "an authentic mystery", meriting more research.

While he never solved the mystery, Mack suggested two years ago that alien abductions were occurring in the context "of a planetary ecological crisis that is reaching critical proportions, and that information about this situation is often powerfully conveyed by the alien beings to the experiencers".

His peers were divided about his work, although there was general agreement that he was never afraid to be a trailblazer, or to give serious attention to what detractors considered a fringe issue or an alternative approach. Such was his academic weight that he was able to pursue his controversial interests from his base at Harvard — though, while his work on

One man claimed a female alien had taken a sperm sample from him; another that he had given birth

alien encounters brought him many media appearances and made him wealthy, there was a price to be paid.

Some of his colleagues hinted that extraterrestrial visitors, and their alleged impact on humans, were not a productive area of research. Matters came to a head when Harvard launched an inquiry lasting 14 months into Mack's methods, following the publication of *Abduction*.

Mack's work was seen as a slur on serious research by some disdainful colleagues; he had investigated, among others, the case of a man who recalled a female alien taking a sperm sample from him, and another man who claimed to have given birth to a half-human, half-alien.

In its ruling, the inquiry, conducted by a former editor of the *New England Journal Of Medicine*, Arnold Reiman, urged Mack "not, in any way, to violate the high standards... of this faculty", while reaffirming his right, as a researcher, to academic freedom. Mack felt vindicated. Certainly, he continued undaunted, as the confident title of one of his subsequent work, *Passport To The Cosmos: Human Transformation And Alien Encounters* (1999), showed.

Born in New York, Mack graduated from Oberlin College, Ohio, in 1951, and from Harvard, where he obtained his medical degree, in 1955. He was an intern at Massachusetts general hospital, and did his residency at the Massachusetts mental health centre in Boston. In 1959, he joined the US air force for a two-year tour of duty as a psychiatrist in Japan. In the 1960s, he started the psychiatry unit, which he headed from 1969 to 1977, at the Cambridge hospital.

Early in his career, Mack focused on the psychology of sleep and dreams, and began building his professional rep-

utation by applying a psycho-analytic approach to such troubled groups as children contemplating suicide and teenagers obsessed by the threat of nuclear war. This led him to become a strong advocate of disarmament; in the 1980s, along with his other roles, he became academic director of the Centre for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Age.

In 1983, he set up the Centre for Psychology and Social Change, which sponsors research projects that combine psychology with ecological or ethnic issues, and earlier this year was renamed the John E Mack Institute.

Mack, who was divorced, is survived by three sons.

John James

Steve Geller writes: I knew John from my work as director of the screenwriting programme at Boston University. In our course on sacred drama, which deals with cosmic and personal mythology, his *Passport To The Cosmos* was studied. John addressed my very large class, and was forthright, charming, intelligent, and disarmingly honest about what he knew and did not know. His humanity, compassion and solid science made themselves felt in that classroom. He was a perfect definition of the best of the methods of science and of academic discipline.

Because of the nature of his work, he made enemies in his profession, and in academia. But by his behaviour during the Harvard debacle, he proved himself to be tougher, more rigorous academically, and more the gentleman than political elements of that body of learning had themselves evinced. He won; they did not.

John Edward Mack, research psychiatrist, academic and author, born October 4 1929; died September 27 2004