

Frank A. Geldard, The University of Virginia

Carl E. Sherrick

Department of Psychology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544

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Frank Geldard arrived at the University of Virginia in the autumn of 1928, and soon was welcomed as a force for advancement of Psychology as a science in the Southeast. He was by no means a native son as was his immediate predecessor, George Ferguson, Jr. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1904, Geldard went through the public schools there, then attended Clark College and completed his graduate work at Clark University by the age of 24. At the suggestion of a Virginia alumnus then teaching at Clark, Vernon Jones, Geldard applied to the University of Virginia for the position advertised as that of a "general" psychologist (see Geldard, 1980). Before Ferguson had appeared on the scene in Charlottesville, the courses in psychology had been taught by philosophers or educators - Noah K. Davis (logic), Bruce Payne (secondary education), and Albert G.A. Balz (Cartesian philosophy) was the line of antecedents - and while the field did not flourish under their tutelage, it remained a healthy and viable area of knowledge with at least an empirical if not experimental bent.

Within the next 24 months, Geldard succeeded in bringing Wayne Dennis, still completing his Ph.D. under Hunter at Clark, to teach learning and, later, child psychology, and from Columbia University, R.C. Davis as a research fellow. In the same time span Geldard directed his first Master's candidate, A.G. Wood, whose study of the course of auditory adaptation is considered to be one of the earliest contributions to this problem area of psychoacoustics (see Harris, 1969) .

An interesting anecdote relating to the research of Davis (later to become one of the grand old men of Indiana University) deserves retelling for its lessons in the perils of field research and pathognomonics. Davis (1932) had developed a circuit and electrodes for stable recording of the Galvanic Skin Response (GSR), and had been acquiring records from a number of normal and patient populations in the state. A young graduate student named James M. Porter, Jr. was assigned by Davis the problem of determining whether during an epileptic seizure the GSR followed a characteristic trajectory, or was simply random in its course. Porter is said to have visited the Lynchburg Colony, which was the state residence for both epileptic and mentally

retarded persons, where he received permission to record the GSRs of epileptic patients in resting and seizure states. Over the course of several visits he found one particular patient to be exceptionally consistent in her records, and when he noted her absence to an attendant one day was told that she was not an epileptic at all, but mentally retarded. As it turned out, the young woman had formed an emotional attachment to the researcher, and performed her epileptic act on a regular basis to get his undivided attention;

By 1936, the research and graduate programs at Virginia were advancing at a steady pace: three Ph.D.s had been granted, including one to Cecile Bolton Finley, who challenged the work of Lashley with her dissertation research, done under the direction of Dennis (see, e.g., Dennis and Bolton, 1935). Several master's degrees had been granted to persons who went on to Ph.D.s at other institutions. And the germination of what was later called the Program in Cutaneous Communication was begun. Whereas Frank Geldard himself had done his early research in vision, he believed firmly in comparative analysis across the sensory systems, and encouraged his students, B. von Haller Gilmer and R.C. Wingfield, to study the analog of visual flicker in cutaneous vibration and hearing, respectively. The problem of sensitivity to mechanical vibration quickly became a preoccupation with Geldard, and in 1940 he published his lengthy monograph on the subject in the *Journal of General Psychology* (Geldard, 1940). Although now nearly a half-century old, this paper still stands as a model of scholarly prose and gracious writing style. It may be an imposition on the chronological boundaries of this Session, but I am compelled to point out that in the post-war period of the 1940s and 1950s the research on vibratory pattern perception was one of the mainstays of the scholarly enterprise at Virginia; it is, indeed, evidence of the intellectual power and spiritual energy of the originators of the work that it has persisted to the present day in a number of laboratories across the country, many of them peopled by the intellectual descendants of Frank Geldard.

The contributions of Geldard's students were not confined to experimental studies of sensory processes: Several individuals, among them Haller Gilmer, Charles Gersoni, Rains Wallace, and Joseph Weitz, have been distinguished by their work in industrial, organizational, and military psychology- Others like R.C. Wingfield carved out prominent careers in teaching and administration, and one, as Geldard himself put it "...who wisely paused at the M.A. level and never regained momentum, made his living by competing successfully in newspaper and magazine puzzle contests (Geldard, 1972, p. 238)."

Throughout the 1930s Frank Geldard strived to extend the influence of scientific psychology

within the University of Virginia, where he collaborated with the noted physicist Jesse Beams on extension to high frequencies of the observations of the Talbot-Plateau law in visual flicker, and with John Howe Yoe in the chemistry department on problems involving visual methods for measurement of stereochemical properties of saccharides. Outside the university walls, Geldard sought alliances with colleagues at many of the southern universities, both within and beyond the State boundaries. He was very active at the meetings of the Virginia Academy of Science, and served for a number of years on its board. The Southern society for Philosophy and Psychology was one of his favorite regional organizations, and he served it well and truly as secretary, board member, and president (see Hinton, 1972). He contributed regularly to the scientific programs of these organizations, and he encouraged his departmental colleagues to do so. The graduate students under his direction felt even more pressure to prepare for these occasions, and the coming of Spring was heralded by the rehearsal sessions at the Journal Club, which was the weekly meeting of the Psychology Department Faculty and Graduate Students. The one thing you could be sure of when you were through with your paper was that the chances of anyone at the actual meeting making you more uncomfortable than you had just been, were well beyond the statistically acceptable level for even an obsessive-compulsive!

To consider the contributions of Frank Geldard to national and international matters psychological would take us beyond 1940, but I think it important to note one activity that took place just after World War II, in fact on the day that Geldard was discharged from the USAAF. This was the project, underwritten by the Rockefeller Foundation, to study the feasibility of establishing a University Center in Richmond, VA like those already in operation in Ithaca, Toronto, Nashville, and Atlanta. These were centers that pooled resources of a number of small colleges to provide library and other physical and intellectual facilities that otherwise could not be afforded by any one college alone. Geldard was asked by President Newcomb of the University of Virginia to represent him on the committee that was to tour the already-existing centers being supported by the Foundation. It was Geldard's contention that the viability of such centers was greatly strengthened by the presence of local committees to foster research activities, and his belief that continuing this policy at Richmond did much to, in his own words "... (trigger) research efforts that never would have existed otherwise (Geldard, 1980)."

One of Frank Geldard's favorite stories was about Carl Murchison, the expatriate Tarheel (and Wake Forest alumnus) who chaired the Clark University Psychology Department during Geldard's graduate student days. It was Murchison's habit to take a tub bath upon arising, and to

plan systematically his entire day's activities while so immersed. Geldard, too, was a planner, but not a solitary one. In his later years at least he preferred to lay out his strategies in close collaboration with his colleagues, particularly in matters of research. As one who has had to struggle with a natural tendency to rely on memory for details of meetings, I have never ceased to admire the reportorial skills that he applied to these conferences. No better record of what went on has ever been compiled, and I include the present recording technology. This talent Geldard has credited to his summer as assistant to Joseph Jastrow, when he gathered information for a column on popular psychology at Harvard's Widener Library (Geldard, 1980). I suggest that the discipline acquired from hours of practice at the piano keyboard had much to do with it also. The sum of these and similar felicitous experiences was a charming, accomplished, and gracious human being who was greatly admired by his southern colleagues for his contributions to psychology as a science and profession.

After more than thirty years of devoted service to Virginia, Frank Geldard elected to spend his last twenty-two years at Princeton University (which, I hasten to point out, is sometimes described as the northernmost Southern university in the USA!). Despite the move across the Mason-Dixon line, Frank Geldard never lost touch with old colleagues, whose numbers, alas, dwindled steadily with time. As affirmation of his loyalty and devotion to her, he directed that his remains be placed in the cemetery near the University to which he gave his first allegiance. I am sure that he rests content there, flattered if he be thought a true and steadfast son of the South.

References

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