

# 44 An Exceptional Memory

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*I have saved my favorite memorist for last. Aitken may have been less bizarre than S, less "eidetic" than Elizabeth, and less famous than Toscanini, but his talents were still "awesome," as the sportswriters say. Best of all, he inhabited a particularly "natural context," at least from my point of view. He was a professor!*

Professor Alexander Craig Aitken, FRS (1895–1967) was a man of far-outstanding intellect. He was a brilliant mathematician (Whittaker and Bartlett, 1968) who had 'in large measure the kind of mystical insight into problems which characterized, for example, Isaac Newton' (Collar, 1967). He was a uniquely able mental calculator (Aitken, 1954; Hunter, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1968). He was an accomplished violinist. He was also legendary for his memory. The purpose of this paper is to give an account of his exceptional memory.

To say that a man has exceptional memory is like saying he has exceptional athletic or artistic ability: it only roughly delineates his prowess. Thus, exceptional memory can rightly be claimed for the Russian, Shereshevskii (Luria, 1969) [see Selection 38], the American, V.P. (Hunt and Love, 1972) [see Selection 39], and Aitken; yet each man has a different pattern of memorial talent integral with a different style of mental life. So, in what sense did Aitken have exceptional memory? Briefly, he was unusually erudite with a scholar's disposition to

become absorbed by, and retentive of, things relating to his spheres of erudition. He could readily produce, out of his head, much detailed information and could rapidly learn new information that interested him. His memory was (and this was also his own view) exceptional in degree rather than in kind.

## OVERVIEW OF AITKEN'S MEMORY

Aitken could produce a host of recondite facts about numbers, calculative methods, mathematics and mathematicians; play, on the violin, many pieces by heart; recall many musical compositions; securely identify many snatches of music heard or seen in written notation; quote extensively from English literature; and recite tracts of Latin and English verse. He could recall details of many events he had witnessed, so much so that committees often consulted him as an unofficial minute book. In daily affairs, he was conspicuously, but not officiously, precise about names, dates, locations. The following excerpt from his reminiscences about the First World War illustrates his characteristic precision and his recall of details that would elude most people (the platoon mentioned would comprise 39 men). On 14 July 1916, he was in France, lying in a dug-out trying to sleep.

Sleep proved impossible; each time I closed my eyes I heard again, as though it were in the dug-out itself, the whistle of the falling mortar-bombs, and I saw Hughes, Robertson, Sergeant Bree, Harper, and the line of trees. But gradually, through and across these repercussions, I became aware of a conversation in low tones going on somewhere behind me, apparently between Captain Hargest and Mr Rae, and perhaps occasionally someone else—but I am not sure of this. However that may be, something was missing; a roll-book; the roll-book of Platoon 10, my old Platoon. Urgently required, it seemed; Battalion had rung up, requesting a list of the night's casualties and a full state of the Platoon. Apparently surnames were available, but the book was nowhere to be found. This being suddenly clear, I had no difficulty, having a well-trained memory now brought by stress into a condition almost of hypermnnesia, in bringing the lost roll-book before me, almost, as it were, floating; I imagined it either taken away by Mr Johnston or perhaps in the pocket of Sergeant Bree in no-man's-land. Speaking from the matting I offered to dictate the details; full name, regimental number, and the rest; they were taken down, by whom I do not know (Aitken, 1963, pp. 107–108).

Many stories are told about the range, tenacity, rapidity and precision of Aitken's seemingly effortless memory. Two typical, and reliable, stories relate to the early 1920s.

He taught me Classics at Otago Boys' High School and he used to amuse us at our lessons by demonstrating how he could associate line numbers in our Virgil with the words in the line or conversely could recite the words in any specified line (personal communication from Dr Harold Taylor, sometime Vice-Chancellor of Keele University).