

Psychical Research—A Lifelong Interest

IN the early fifties of the last century there was formed in Trinity College, Cambridge, a 'Ghost Society'. The founder was Brooke Foss Westcott, Fellow of Trinity College and afterwards Bishop of Durham. The principal members included Edward White Benson, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, Alfred Barry, afterwards Primate of Australia, Joseph Barber Lightfoot, Westcott's predecessor as Bishop of Durham and Fenton John Anthony Hort, the greatest English theologian of the last century, one who 'aimed at arriving at truth not at confirming opinion'. Others less clerically-minded were Henry Bradshaw, Fellow of King's College, afterwards University Librarian, Henry Richards Luard, afterwards University Registrar, and the Hon. Arthur Gordon, afterwards Governor of New Zealand. They were obviously a very able group of earnest investigators, but that did not prevent them from being called by outsiders the 'Cock and Bull Club'. Somewhere between 1855 and 1860 Henry Sidgwick, then an undergraduate of Trinity College, joined this 'Ghost Society' and became actively interested in the investigation of alleged supernatural appearances and effects.

In Oxford a 'Phasmatological Society' for investigation of the Occult was founded in 1879. The name, derived from the Greek word **PHÁSMA** a ghost, links it in a sense with the Cambridge Society. Although the Oxford Society more immediately precedes our own Society in date and some of its members at once joined us when we were formed in 1882, the fact that Henry Sidgwick, the first President of the S.P.R., was a member of the Cambridge 'Ghost Society' justifies us in tracing back our ancestry to the earlier body.

A comparison of the Circular issued by the Cambridge Ghost Society with the statement of the objects of our Society, given in Volume I of our *Proceedings*, shews a change of emphasis, though the spirit of honest and fearless enquiry underlying the activities of the two bodies is much the same. The programme of the Ghost Society included appearances of angels, queer feelings, and a limited group of physical effects; thirty years later these are replaced for our Society by the phenomena of spiritualism, hypnotism and the general influence that one mind may have on another, apart from the generally recognized mode of communication and perception.

One important piece of work was the study and the exposure of the methods of fraudulent mediums, who were imposing on the public for money. In this the Society was helped by some first-class conjurors who carried out, avowedly as conjurors the tricks which the mediums claimed to be the work of spirits. One well-known performance was to fasten two children's school-slates together with a piece of chalk between them. Subsequently the slates

were separated and so-called spirit-writing was found on the inside faces of the slates. Observers would affirm that once the chalk had been put inside the slates, they remained under constant observation and were never touched by the medium until they were opened up. As a matter of fact the trick was one of substitution of prepared slates for those used at the start of the performance. Davey, one of the members of the Society carried out the trick successfully as a conjuror: while the audience would agree that he never touched the slates, observers stationed outside and looking through a window, but not subject to his pattern would see him change the slates. It seems that constant unbroken observation over a length of time is beyond the power of most human beings.

My own earliest research after I joined the Society in 1902 consisted of a series of experiments with a set of discs marked with numbers from ten to ninety for quantitative guessing experiments.

They had been used originally for a game of lotto, which I had been familiar with as a child: the game is now frequently played under the name of 'Bingo' to amuse passengers on board ocean liners. Experiments with these discs supervised by Mrs. Sidgwick and carried out in 1889 by Mr. G. A. Smith and two subjects, whom he had hypnotised, are recorded in Volume VI of the *S.P.R. Proceedings*. The results are interesting and well worth study and analysis even to-day. The chief point that struck me on reading the report on these experiments was the very different degree of success on different days, ranging from complete failure to startling success. I carried out a number of experiments with these discs over a period of years (and still have the records) but never found an agent or percipient who gave significant results. I confess that after a time I lost interest in this quantitative work and gave it up—a performance in which I have been put to shame by such later investigators as Dr. Rhire, Dr. Soal and Mrs. Goldney.

Among the early publications of the Society were two valuable studies on Phantasms of the Living and Phantasms of the Dead, collections of well-evidenced cases of apparitions. These were largely the result of a widely distributed questionnaire; the answers received to this questionnaire shewed what a high proportion of people had had personal experiences, not easily explained in terms of ordinary sense data on physical causes.

When I first joined the Society for Psychical Research its President was Sir Oliver Lodge. There is no need to say anything here of his distinction as a scientist nor of his devoted service to psychical research in general and to the Society in particular. As President he steered us through the critical years following the deaths of Myers and Sidgwick. He reached positive convictions, which he was never afraid to utter, though he knew that they would bring him discredit in the world of orthodox science. But at least he

had studied carefully and deeply the evidence which underlay his beliefs and he had the right—and, as he also felt, the duty—to give expression to them. After the First World War, in which he lost his son Raymond, a belief grew up that under the stress of personal emotion he had changed from an impartial observer to a somewhat credulous believer. That this was not a true judgment may be shewn from the statement that he made in his Presidential Address in 1902, after he had been an active investigator for some twenty years: 'I am', he said, 'for all present purposes convinced of the persistence of human existence beyond bodily death and though I am unable to justify that belief in a full and complete manner, yet it is a belief which has been produced by scientific evidence, that is, it is based upon facts and experience, though I might find it impossible to explain categorically how the facts have produced that conviction'. That was his personal view, but of the Society itself, which he regarded as a successful machine for the spread of scientific truth, he said: 'Belief is not our business, but investigation'.

Lodge's share in the practical research work of the Society was concerned with experiments in telepathy, sittings with Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Leonard and also with Eusapia Paladino, an investigation along with Lord Balfour of the scripts of Mrs. Willett and a series of studies of cross-correspondences. I feel that his experience with Mrs. Piper and his acquaintance with her trance communications in the United States were the principal factors that led early on to his positive convictions.

Sir William Crookes, who was President of the Royal Society and of our Society, was convinced as a trained scientific observer of the genuineness of the phenomena that he observed with D. D. Home and certain other mediums. To the end he remained courageously ready to state that fact despite the ridicule that he received from scientific colleagues. In his Presidential Address to the British Association in 1898 he gave his confession of belief in the following terms: 'Outside our scientific knowledge there exists a Force, exercised by intelligence differing from the ordinary intelligence common to mortals', and he added that 'to stop short in any research that bids fair to widen the gates of knowledge, to recoil from fear of difficulty or adverse criticism, is to bring reproach to Science'.

Records of his sittings with D. D. Home are to be found in our *Proceedings*, Vol. VI;—and of Home's sittings with the Earl of Dunraven in Vol. XXXV. I will not quote from them, but I cannot forbear from drawing your attention to a recent account by Dr. Dingwall in the *British Journal of Psychology* (Vol. XLIV, Part I, p. 61, February 1953) of a letter from Lord Lindsay (later Earl Crawford) giving a statement that he had just received from his brother-in-law Robert Lindsay. At a sitting with Home in full lamplight a heavy table at which seven people could sit comfortably rose to a height of

five feet, higher than the heads of the sitters at it; Robert Lindsay stooped down and crawled under it to see that nothing visible was holding it up. Later, when all the party was gathered round the fireplace talking, a table with a loose marble slab on top at the further end of the room rose to the height of three feet, then descended and tilted over. Robert Lindsay tried with all his strength to force it back into its natural position and had the greatest difficulty in doing so. No simple explanation offers itself for these observations.

Life in the Society was exciting when I joined. The interest roused by the records of Mrs. Piper's trance scripts and of the cross-correspondences has only been equalled in recent times by the thrill felt on the publication of the results of the experiments of Dr. Soal and Mrs. Goldney with Mr. Shackleton and Mrs. Stewart. I well remember the impression that the simple case of 'Hope, Star and Browning' made upon me. The ingenuity and scholarship displayed by Piddington in the more complex cases did not appeal so directly, though they went a great deal further to convince one that some intelligence outside the automatists themselves was at work. Perhaps the most striking case of all was that of 'Lethe'. Here Myers—the so-called Myers control of Mrs. Piper—had more or less to force, by repetition of his clues, the interpreters (Piddington, Gerald Balfour and Mrs. Verrall) to realise the inner nature of the cross-correspondence developed in the scripts of Mrs. Verrall, Mrs. Holland and Mrs. Piper.

The 4th Baron Rayleigh who, like his father, was one of our Presidents, was interested mainly in physical phenomena. Though well aware of the fraudulent nature of many of the phenomena of trance he held the view that 'there seems to be an appreciable residue which has not been successfully dissolved by the acid of destructive criticism, which has been so freely poured over it. The evidence seems to stand and if we dogmatically reject it, we shall be open to the reproach of laying down what *ought* to be the order of nature instead of observing what *is*'. In conversation he expressed himself disappointed at the general indifference to the subject of his scientific colleagues.

On the whole men of science keep aloof from psychical research, even when they are not openly hostile to it. And I may be allowed to spend a short time in discussing some of the reasons for this state of affairs. One reason lies in the sporadic, unrepeatable nature of many of the phenomena that we examine. Lord Rayleigh, the former President of the Royal Society, in his Presidential Address to our Society referred to an analogous set of phenomena—the falls of stones from the sky, recorded from the earliest times but not accepted by men of science until last century. 'The witnesses of such an event have been treated with the disrespect usually shewn to reporters of the extraordinary and have been laughed at for their supposed delusions'. Meteorites are now firmly established in the world of science. Hypnotism, whose early treatment

by the medical profession seems to a layman like myself a sad blot on medical history, has now passed from the doubtful field of psychical research to an accepted position in the world of psychological medicine. Indeed claims have been made from time to time during the last thirty years that the practice of hypnotism should be restricted to the members of the very profession which once refused it any recognition. The position of scientific respectability attained by meteorites and hypnotism has not yet, however, been reached by the unrepeatable spontaneous phenomena with which our Society is frequently called upon to deal. We are still at the stage of a dim beginning through which many sciences have had to pass in their turn. Do not let us despair because we have not made all the progress that we could have wished in our seventy years of existence as a Society. Think of the hundreds of years that the alchemists patiently pursued the problem of changing one element into another, before the answer came with the development of nuclear physics. When we find our philosopher's stone, the discovery may come from a very unexpected quarter.

Can we bring our evidence, which at present must be judged according to the canons of the historian and lawyer rather than of the scientist, to the point where we can appeal to the latter also? We can follow the lines adopted by Professor Rhine, Dr. Soal, Mrs. Goldney and others and produce quantitative results which are convincing to those who are willing to study them. We can follow up these results in the light of the psychological build up of the percipients, as has been done at Harvard, New York and Duke Universities. That is one promising path of progress that must be followed through, towards the discovery and establishment of laws which govern the successful production of results. But is the laboratory method not limited in its nature? If we restrict ourselves to such types of investigation may we not miss some of the key factors which underlie some of the remarkable recorded cases of extrasensory perception? Some sensitives through whom valuable qualitative results have been secured are not interested in such experiments as card-guessing and are not successful at it. It lacks any dramatic element, any human touch such as may be required to set other factors to work. If we are to discover laws governing some of the happenings examined in psychical research, I am confident that we must continue unabated our collection of well-evidenced spontaneous cases.

As Tyrrell put it we are pioneers in unexplored virgin territory. Our duty is to make a rough map of the terrain and then we can see where best to drive our railways through it. One difficulty that we have to face in securing an interest in our work among the outside public, scientists and philosophers alike, is to overcome the feeling that the Universe is limited to that of our sense data, the external world to which we have become adapted

in the course of evolution. We do need to get a deeper insight into the spontaneous phenomena so that one day they may become predictable, if possible, or at least as normal and as well understood, as the fall of a meteorite. More experimental telepathy such as the transmission of pictures or the production of apparitions—where success has been attained in the past—may help to establish a link between the qualitative and the quantitative studies.

In time we may find clues which will enable us to regulate the conditions governing some of these phenomena and the value and trustworthiness of fresh phenomena and of some of the earlier phenomena may both increase. The meteorites, once the subject of scoffing disbelief, now play a part in discussions of the age and origin of the solar system. Psychical phenomena may one day play an important part in the understanding of mental processes.

I have already mentioned the fact that the unrepeatability of many of our phenomena gives men of scientific training one reason for ignoring our work. But there is more in it than that. There are a number of other factors at work. There is the feeling that a research worker has more valuable work to do along the path that he is opening up in other fields; he has no time to give to the study of our case, which still in his mind carries with it some stigma of charlatanism—that very stigma that it has been our endeavour for seventy years to remove from the subjects of our research. Many people are anxious not to appear to their colleagues as nonconformists or heretics. It was not without reason that last year at Belfast Professor Macbeath uttered a Plea for Heresy to the British Association for the Advancement of Science: 'The function of the heretic and critic', he says, 'is to force us to keep examining and testing, revising and perfecting our beliefs and ideals. His attitude is the attitude of science whose conclusions are always on trial, and this is the only safeguard against error and degeneration. It has performed an indispensable part in the slow progress of mankind towards civilization; and the day it is no longer allowed to perform that function stagnation will set in, and freedom and science and all that they stand for will decay and die'.

To orthodox science we are heretics and while accepting that fact we must make sure that we are heretics of the right sort, those from whose actions and beliefs progress will ultimately follow. It may mean a reshaping of some of the cherished beliefs of science. That has often been the result of heresy in the past in other fields—politics or religion. And in the need for this reshaping, I believe, lies the real opposition of the scientist to our investigations and conclusions. He sees, and I feel rightly, that our work will lead to a setting up of a new framework for the Universe, and against such an idea he instinctively reacts. He has at the back of his mind a certain system of knowledge and belief. Science is making rapid progress in all directions with its present fundamental basic preconceptions. Against any phenomena which may force

him to reconsider these basic ideas the man of science sets up a kind of defensive mechanism which prevents him from looking at them. I need only quote Helmholtz's remarks about thought-transference to illustrate this point. This was his conclusion to a discussion with Professor Barrett: 'I cannot believe it. Neither the testimony of all the Fellows of the Royal Society, nor even the evidence of my own senses would lead me to believe in the transmission of thought from one person to another independently of the recognized channels of sensation. It is clearly impossible'. Against such a position evidence and argument alike are of no avail. There is something to be said for the charge made by A. N. Whitehead that 'To-day scientific methods are dominant, and scientists are the obscurantists'.

There have been however, distinguished scientists ready to help in the study of the phenomena of psychical research. Sir Ronald Fisher has helped us in the matter of scoring coincidences in quantitative tests with cards. Two Lord Rayleighs—father and son—have been Presidents of our Society; the elder Lord Rayleigh stated that he had never felt any doubt as to the importance of the work carried on by our Society. A similar view was held by John Couch Adams, the discoverer of Neptune. 'He was', wrote Myers, 'sure that what we are doing was right to do; he held unwaveringly that through these adits lay an unassailable, if a slow, advance into the knowledge of things unseen'. Sir William Crookes remained to the last convinced of the reality of phenomena such as the fire test which he had witnessed along with Sir William Huggins (both Presidents of the Royal Society) in the presence of D. D. Home.

I do not wish to ignore the strides towards recognition that have been taken during the last forty years or so. First we may mention the acceptance in 1912 by Harvard University of a fund in memory of Richard Hodgson, the income to be devoted 'to encourage the investigation and study of mental or physical phenomena, the origin or expression of which appears to be independent of the ordinary sensory channels'. This was the first recognition of psychical research by a University of the first rank. A large endowment for psychical research was accepted by Stanford University, California, which published a volume *Experiments in Psychical Research* by Dr. J. E. Coover (1917). Then there came the establishment of the psychical research laboratory under Professor J. B. Rhine at Duke University. This came about through the stimulus of William McDougall, F.R.S., a former President of our Society. What it has meant in the development of quantitative studies of psi-phenomena is known to you all. Next came the foundation at Trinity College, Cambridge, of a Perrott Studentship in Psychical Research as a memorial to F. W. H. Myers. This continued the close connexion of Trinity College with our Society which has been so marked throughout our life. Interesting and valuable results well known to you all have already come from the holders of the Perrott

studentship, Whateley Carington and Dr. Soal. Much interest has also been raised by the investigations of the last holder, Mr. Spencer Brown, though it is not yet clear what will be the ultimate significance of his results. Then we must record the foundation for Professor Tenhaeff of a Chair of parapsychology at Utrecht University. In addition we must note that at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London doctorates have been conferred for research in subjects coming well within the range of psychical research. Lastly, I must mention a grant made by King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the University of Durham to Dr. Gerhard Wassermann for experimental work in the field of parapsychology.

On a wider basis hope has been raised by the recent revival of international co-operation in psychical research: owing to the generosity of the Parapsychology Foundation of New York, of Mrs. Eileen Garrett and of the Hon. Frances P. Bolton, a member of the Congress of the United States, an International Conference of Parapsychological Studies was held this summer in Utrecht, under the Presidency of Professor Gardner Murphy. A publication centre and secretariat have been established there, charged with arranging subsequent meetings of specialised groups. This establishment of a European centre under the auspices of the Parapsychology Foundation is a welcome development which will be watched with much interest from this country.

Although at the suggestion of Mrs. Sidgwick I tried my hand unsuccessfully some fifty years ago at quantitative experiments in thought-transference, my real interest has always lain on the qualitative side. Sporadic phenomena have always seemed more stimulating; and it is surprising how many cases one can pick up from one's friends, if conversation turns in the direction of psychical research. Within less than three weeks recently I picked up six new cases. That may have been because I had arranged to visit an allegedly haunted farmhouse every night for a week and that fact had naturally come up in conversation and had led to the mention of other cases. As is usual not all the cases could be followed up—some were second-hand stories and the original percipients were no longer living. But they were told me convincingly by close relatives of those concerned. I am, however, still working at three of the cases—one poltergeist case, one case very reminiscent of what I may call the Dieppe raid case, and one of a haunted room.

In my experience it is a hard task to get written evidence, up to the standard required by the Society for publication, even from friends, still more from strangers. But I believe that it is well worth the effort except when one comes across a complete stone wall of silence or an unwillingness to answer questions; sometimes this unwillingness arises from a desire not to reawaken memories that are still emotionally unpleasant, sometimes from a fear that some friend's property may lose value if a story of a haunt gets published or even spoken about.

Though my own experience so far has been uniformly negative I do not doubt the existence of definite cases of haunted houses. You will find in the *Journal* of the Society a number of cases which have gone on over a long period of time and in which a number of people have had abnormal experiences: the usual phenomena include phantasms of figures, both human and animal, unexplained sounds, voices or bangs, experiences of unseen beings apparently stopping and brushing past a percipient and sometimes unexplained scents or smells. Any of the four senses of sight, hearing, touch and smell may be hallucinated. I have not met with a case of more than three senses being affected at the same time. But one friend of mine saw and heard a figure of a nun walking across his bedroom floor: the figure stopped at the end of his bed and bent over to touch his feet. This statement occurs in the account of the most interesting house that I have investigated. Over a period of more than forty years four different families or in many cases visiting friends and even apparently animals have had strange experiences in this house.

I should like to repeat here a request that has often been made in the past. Would members of the audience try to follow up cases that they may hear of from friends or through friends? A case may prove to be just a single happening of an unexplained nature, or it may refer to a house which is already on the files of the Society: two records of haunts in the same house are—if they can be shewn to be independent—of much greater interest and value than two single haunts at different places. It may be that by comparison of the details of repeated haunts from one year to a later year we may find out some general law that governs them, say, for instance, a gradual weakening in intensity.

But it is not merely haunts, or poltergeists, of which the Society wishes to hear but also cases of apparent thought transference or clairvoyance, either experimental or spontaneous, and again simple phantasms of the living or the dead. Complaints appear from time to time in our *Journal* that we have fewer cases reported than in years gone by. That is certainly my own feeling after looking through the *Journal* for the last fifty years.

But here in the East you may be able to supply us with cases which are of a type with which we are unfamiliar and which may in their turn provide the key to some of our unsolved problems. That is one reason why I welcome the formation of this group of workers in Peradeniya and I shall be happy to give a report of this meeting to the Council of the *S.P.R.* when I return to England. I can assure you of their readiness to help you in any way that they can.

We do need today more sensitive mediums and automatists, who can produce results of the quality and evidential value to be found in the past records of the Society. We have to find them and to encourage them: we

have to learn how to train them and educate them. They form a rare group of beings. I cannot believe that they are a group that is dying out though we have found it of late growingly difficult to find the right members of the group for our needs. There is a changing pattern in our psychical research and one is inclined to wonder whether this lies primarily in the investigators and their interests rather than in the shadowy realm that is under study.

We are used to the idea in the writings of physicists that in reality man is largely the creator of the physical universe or at least of that universe as pictured by him. Is it possibly also true of the wider universe of our studies? The picture (or rather the shadowy picture) that we have of it is in a constant state of flux, like the scientist's picture of his universe. We need not be troubled by that. What we really desire is to develop our dim and shadowy outline picture into something more clearly outlined, something more readily acceptable to mankind as a whole.

Professor G. A. Coulson in his recent Riddell Memorial Lectures on the relations between religion and science appeals for the co-operation of all who 'wonder'—the philosopher, the scientist, the artist, the musician, the poet, the theologian: I would add to that list the psychical researcher. He belongs supremely to the brotherhood of those who 'wonder' and he appeals for help from all other 'wonderers' as he steps boldly forward into his special region in the world of the unknown.

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