

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE SOCIETY FOR  
PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

The British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) is the historically most influential organization dedicated to the study of ‘psychic’ and supernormal events. Founded in 1882 by a group of Cambridge-based scholars, the SPR set out to bring the torch of science to the dim region of the occult: the phenomena of spiritualism, apparitions, haunted houses, and psychic abilities were to be the focus of their careful investigations. From the very start the Society consisted of esteemed scientists, philosophers, and scholars, and was organized as an academic learned society that strove for serious recognition by the broader scientific community (cf. Gauld, 1968). The SPR was very much an *elite* phenomenon, fully networked not only with the upper echelons of higher education, but with the ruling classes of late-Victorian Britain. The SPR could sport the names of some of Britain’s top intellectuals, cultural personalities, and politicians on its membership lists and board of officers. The considerable amount of work and resources that these people invested in the elusive endeavor of ‘psychical research’ resulted in a large number of articles and lengthy reports published in the Society’s *Journal* and *Proceedings*, and numerous books written for broader audiences. In doing all this, the SPR established some intellectual credibility for belief in paranormal events; it popularized concepts such as ‘telepathy’ (coined by one of the SPR’s founders, Frederic Myers), and laid the foundations of experimental parapsychology that would emerge in the twentieth century. Ironically, perhaps, by opening up for empirical and experimental study of occult phenomena, the SPR also contributed to the emergence of the modern skeptics movement. Thus, the legacy of the SPR is equally felt in contemporary spiritualism and psychic mediumship, in the methodologically rigorous parapsychological laboratory, and in the contemporary skeptics movement’s debunking of psychics.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: VICTORIAN  
PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

While unrivalled in terms of cultural influence and longevity, the SPR was not the only, and not the first society of its kind. It took part in a discourse of ‘psychical

research' that had emerged from the encounter between spiritualism and Victorian scientific naturalism in the 1860s, and addressed vital questions concerning the possibilities of scientific knowledge, and the relation between religious beliefs and rational knowledge about the world (see Asprey, 2013, 392–321). Scientists and other intellectuals who got interested in the phenomena of mediumism in this period – including such men as Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-designer of the theory of natural selection – did not thereby abandon reason and scientific method, but sought instead to approach ostensible contact with the dead through novel applications of science (cf. Noakes, 2004). For these men (the psychical researchers were, unlike the mediums they studied, mostly men), the activities of spirits and magical powers could be made proper objects of naturalistic science: the possible reality of spiritualism and other occult phenomena would not constitute a break with a naturalistic worldview, but rather indicate that our picture of the natural world had to be radically expanded. Psychical research was, in this way, predicated on an *open-ended* naturalism (cf. Asprey 2013, 302–10).

Victorian psychical research thus arose from a genuine scientific and philosophical interest in the phenomena associated with spiritualism and related currents. In Britain, serious intellectual interest in this body of beliefs, practices, and behaviors began when the London Dialectical Society established a special commission to investigate spiritualism and psychic phenomena in 1869. The commission's report, written by thirty-three learned gentlemen, concluded that the bulk of evidence concerning spiritualistic phenomena could not at present be discounted as fraudulent, and it advised that more research be conducted on the topic (London Dialectical Society, 1871, 5–6). In 1875, only a few years after the publication of the report, the lawyer Edward Cox established a scientific organization for this type of research entitled the Psychological Society of Great Britain (Richards, 2001; Luckhurst, 2002, 47–51). It is notable that the words 'psychological' and 'psychic' were both associated with spiritualism at this point, with the establishment of psychology as a wholly 'secular' academic discipline still decades away (see Sommer, 2012). Cox's Psychological Society was an important forerunner for the SPR, as it aimed to translate the 'spiritual' and 'occult' into the language of science, and locate it within the strictures of a new scientific society (cf. Richards, 2001). Cox's pamphlet from 1871, *Spiritualism Answered by Science*, is characteristic of this scientizing approach: here he launched the influential concept of 'psychic force' (often falsely attributed to the physicist William Crookes, who was another important pioneer of psychical research prior to the establishment of the SPR), which was conceptualized as a scientifically acceptable alternative to the spiritualist hypothesis that mediumistic phenomena were caused by the activity of the disembodied spirits of the dead. By contrast, psychic force was a completely 'natural' force, connected to the biological organism and fit for naturalistic rather than 'supernatural' explanation.

Cox's Psychological Society was, however, largely a one-man show, and when its founder passed away in 1879 the society was buried with him. Three years later the SPR emerged, taking up the mandate established by the London Dialectical Society, mobilizing those who were already active in the field of psychical research and recruiting new allies. Indeed, the success of the SPR, which is enormous when compared to the preceding Psychological Society, is not due to a radically new approach to psychic events – the essential discursive and theoretical tools were

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already at hand, provided by the pioneering efforts of men like Cox, Crooks, and Wallace. The SPR added a strong *social* base, built on the investment of a group of independently wealthy, well-established scholars, with ties to the upper echelons of Victorian social, cultural, and political life. This secured the institutional stability and social respectability of the new society, providing a stable platform for the study of psychic phenomena, as well as significant cultural capital bestowed by the class distinction of its key players.

## NOTABLE MEMBERS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

### The Sidgwick Circle

Who were these distinguished advocates of a science of the supernatural? The core group of the SPR in the 1880s centered on the influential Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) and his wife, Eleanor (1845–1936), and is informally known as the ‘Sidgwick circle’ (Gauld, 1968). Henry was a leading utilitarian moral philosopher, but also an influential advocate of educational reform: he actively supported the entry of women into higher education, and played a role in the campaign against the religious tests that were required for teaching in most British universities until 1885 (cf. James, 1970). He oversaw the establishment of Newnham College, which was the second Cambridge college to accept women. Henry’s wife, Eleanor, would later serve as principal of Newnham. Eleanor, whose maiden name was Balfour, belonged to one of the most powerful political families of Victorian Britain. Her brother, Arthur Balfour (1848–1930), would later become Prime Minister of Great Britain. He was an influential ally of the Sidgwick circle, and even served as the SPR’s President between 1892 and 1895. Another powerful member of the extended Sidgwick–Balfour family, Lord Gerald Balfour (1853–1945; Member of Parliament, Chief Secretary for Ireland, President of the Board of Trade, member of the Queen’s Privy Council, etc.), was in charge of some of the SPR’s most extraordinary experiments in the early twentieth century, known as the ‘cross-correspondences’ (more on which below).

The Balfour family connection was no doubt useful for establishing a status of high distinction for the SPR, but other members of the Sidgwick circle were more important for actual scientific work during the first decades of the Society’s existence. In addition to Henry and Eleanor, the most prolific and intellectually influential scholars were the Cambridge classicists Edmund Gurney (1847–88) and Frederic Myers (1843–1901), and the Australian émigré Richard Hodgson (1855–1905), who had enrolled at Cambridge in 1878. Collectively, this small group of people had their names attached to half of the approximately 14,000 pages of research reports, theorizing, and experimental notes that were published by the SPR’s journal and proceedings between 1882 and 1900 (Gauld, 1968, 313). These publications were, moreover, made possible by avail of the group’s independent financial means, particularly those of Edmund Gurney. In other words, the level of activity that the SPR was able to uphold in this period would have been completely unimaginable without the enormous financial, intellectual, and social investment of this most elite group of people.

### Notable Contributions, 1882–1902: Phantoms of the Living, Skeptical Exposés, and Subliminal Selves

The first really significant work produced by the SPR was a massive two-volume book edited by Edmund Gurney (with Myers and Frank Podmore), entitled *Phantoms of the Living* (1886). The book collected thousands of case stories of paranormal events, mostly apparitions of the dead, impossible communications between minds over large distances, strange meaningful coincidences, and eerie premonitions of impending crises. The sheer magnitude of this survey suggested that the kind of experiences the SPR was interested in were indeed very common. The editors also made an attempt to apply probability analyses of the likelihood that these cases were due to chance. These analyses were, however, deeply flawed even for the period, amounting to rather absurd figures. In one case Gurney et al. wrote that ‘the odds against the occurrence, by accident, of as many coincidences of the type in question... are about *a thousand billion trillion trillion trillions to 1*.’ Sometimes the authors did not even bother spelling the figures out: ‘[t]he argument for thought-transference... cannot be expressed here in figures, as it requires 167 nines – that is, the probability is far more than the ninth power of a trillion to 1’ (Gurney et al., 1886, vol. 2, 17; vol. 1, 34). These amateur uses of probability sparked a sharp debate in the first volume of the *Proceedings* of the American branch of the SPR, where the philosopher, logician, and mathematician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) lashed out at the SPR researchers: ‘I shall not cite these numbers, which captivate the ignorant, but which repel thinking men, who know that *no* human certitude reaches such figures of trillions, or even billions, to one’ (cf. Hacking, 1988, 444–45).

The most significant contribution of *Phantoms of the Living* was, however, to launch the hypothesis that crisis-induced experiences of seeing the newly departed loved ones or learning of an accident far away just before, or just as, it happens, were a result of spontaneous ‘thought-transference.’ Apparitions were, in other words, phantoms of the *living* (or in the process of dying), rather than phantoms of the dead. The theory of mental action across vast distances became a major heuristic for the early work of the SPR (cf. Luckhurst, 2002). It got its most sophisticated expression in the work of Frederic Myers, who coined the new term ‘telepathy’ (literally ‘distant touch,’ or ‘distant feeling’). The concept inspired much of the early quantitative work of the Society, through card-guessing trials and other attempts to experiment with the transfer of mental content (images, words, numbers, scenes) from one mind to another. This work became the object of much theoretical and methodological controversy in the SPR and beyond.

SPR researchers were, however, not only looking to create evidence for obscure mental faculties. They were also skilled and critical observers who set out to find ways to debunk any fraudulent means that could possibly be involved with the production of various ‘occult’ phenomena. The so-called *physical* phenomena of spiritualism were a particularly common target for SPR investigators, who took pride in finding the techniques of stage magic employed to fake phenomena such as levitation, materialization of objects, and the playing of instruments from a distance. It was Richard Hodgson, an energetic and forthright Australian who had little patience for Victorian courtesy (a trait which almost cost him his Cambridge diploma), who was the chief debunker of the early SPR. Hodgson’s first and perhaps most significant contribution to this critical side of the SPR’s work, at least from the perspective of the

history of modern occultism, was the famous exposé of the methods of Theosophy's founder, H. P. Blavatsky, in 1884–85. After relocating to Adyar, India, Blavatsky had started receiving mysterious letters containing esoteric knowledge, which purportedly came from secret chiefs known as the Mahatmas. Hodgson went to India to investigate; he found hidden doors installed in the shrine where the letters materialized, and internal evidence suggesting that it was Blavatsky herself who was writing the letters (Hodgson, 1885; cf. Coleman, 1895). Another noteworthy and influential work of skepticism came ten years later, when Hodgson accused his fellow researchers Richet, Myers, and the physicist Oliver Lodge of having been fooled by the Italian medium Eusapia Palladino (1854–1918) during séances in France in 1894. In follow-up trials run at Myers' house in Cambridge the year after, Hodgson proceeded to thoroughly expose Palladino's fraud with the help of the professional stage magician Nevil Maskelyne (1863–1924; cf. Carrington, 1909, 51–57). Together, these two episodes had serious repercussions for the credibility of two of the most influential occult movements of the late nineteenth century: Spiritualism and Theosophy.

The crowning achievement of the SPR's first two decades was nevertheless Frederic Myers' posthumously published *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1902). This book represents Myers' remarkable attempt to systematize all the knowledge that had been gathered and all the theories and hypotheses that had been tried and tested in the work of the SPR, and embed them in an overarching theoretical and philosophical framework. It is the *locus classicus* of a number of neologisms on the border of parapsychology and mainstream psychiatry, including 'telepathy,' 'cryptesthesia,' 'hypnopompic,' 'retro-cognition,' 'cosmopathic,' and many others (see Myers, 1902, vol. 1, xiii–xxii). Myers' book also launched the notion of the 'subliminal self,' which was essentially a psychological theory of personality and selfhood related to Romantic notions of the unconscious. According to Myers' theory, our everyday conscious selves are only a small fraction of a vast entity that lies mostly submerged under the threshold (*sub-limen*) of consciousness. This monumental subliminal self may from time to time erupt – in dreams, automatisms, during hypnosis, and in creative ruptures. Some people had easier access to their subliminal selves, and could make it manifest more or less at will. This is what the psychic mediums, clairvoyants, and telepaths did, according to Myers, and it was also the mechanism of religious prophesies, and the visionary abilities of great artists and writers. In short, the subliminal self was the source of what Myers called 'genius.'

Although a curious work of romantic, 'gothic psychology,' *Human Personality* and Myers' theories in general had a significant influence on several noteworthy thinkers of the early twentieth century. Myers' concept of telepathy was an important influence on Sigmund Freud and the broader psychoanalytic movement. Freud, Ferenczi, and Jung all wrote on the topic of telepathy, and incorporated it in one way or another into their psychological theories. But the most significant influence of Myers' work in psychical research was on William James – well-known today as a towering figure in American psychology and pragmatic philosophy, but also a deeply committed psychical researcher and the main representative of the SPR in the United States (cf. Blum, 2006). James' famous *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) draws considerably on Myers' theory of genius, and rests, as James himself pointed out at the end of the book, on Myers' notion of the subliminal self (for more information on this topic, see the article on Myers elsewhere in this volume).

## SCHISMS AND DECLINE: THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

### The Demise of the First Generation and the Return of Spiritualism

The Sidgwick circle was the ‘hard core’ of the SPR, guaranteeing stability and a minimum of progress in the Society’s scientific work. With the exception of Eleanor Sidgwick, who lived to 1936, all its members were dead by 1905. The dawn of the twentieth century thus marked a generational shift for the Society, and it was not an easy transition. The Society had no problems keeping an active membership: new branches were opening up in new countries, and sister and daughter organizations supporting similar work were taking shape in countries such as France and Germany (for these contexts, see Lachapelle, 2011; Wolfram, 2009). But the consistency of the Society’s research focus was suffering from a lack of continuity, and the new generation tended to open up old avenues that their forbears had already closed, with good reason and after due consideration, as being unproductive and riddled with methodological dangers (cf. Asprem, 2013, 322–84). Thus the spiritualist hypothesis made its return, and verified fraudsters such as Palladino found new support among an enthusiastic younger generation.

We may list three reasons for the increased popularity of spiritualism in the SPR after 1900. The first reason is theoretical, and concerns the failure of the generally mechanistic theories of telepathy. When Gurney et al. had suggested that thought-transference explained apparitions of the (newly) dead, it was generally assumed that this was a mental faculty that worked through the transmittance of ‘brain-waves’ in electromagnetic fields in the ether. The main theorist here was the physicist Oliver Lodge, who was also one of the leading developers of the Maxwellian field theory (see Hunt 1992). Taking the physics seriously, Lodge and other physicists in the SPR grew concerned when noticing that the *positive* studies of telepathy did not seem to respect the inverse square law: telepathic effects did not diminish with distance. This meant that whatever was going on, it could have nothing to do with the fields and waves of physics. In a presidential address to the SPR in 1902, Lodge instead opened the door to non-physical theories, whether in the style of Myers’ ‘subliminal self’ or the disembodied souls of the spiritualists (cf. Asprem, 2013, 213–14).

The second reason for the return of the spiritualist hypothesis was experimental (and perhaps a little sentimental), and had to do with the ghostly return of Frederic Myers and other first-generation SPR researchers through the mediation of spiritualists. In what became known as the cross-correspondence experiments, the spirit of Myers spoke through a number of mediums working as far away from each other as Boston, Bombay, and Cambridge. The statements were collected at the central offices of the SPR and analyzed through an increasingly esoteric set of hermeneutical strategies. When the data were massaged in this way, SPR researchers convinced themselves that dead Myers had invented a clever way of proving the survival of *his* personality by planting different hints to different mediums, requiring the researchers to collect all the pieces to make out the whole. While leaving strict experimental and quantitative methodologies behind, the hermeneutic evidence of the cross-correspondences was persuasive for many in the Society, including some of the most scientifically minded researchers, and the experiments would continue well into the 1920s (see e.g. Saltmarsh, 1938).

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The third reason for the return of spiritualism is of an altogether different order: the horrors of the First World War. The killing of a generation of young boys in the trenches boosted the enterprise of crossing the veil of death. Many who had been mildly sympathetic to spiritualism before the war emerged as zealous advocates in its wake. Among these were Oliver Lodge, who lost his son Raymond in the trenches in 1915. Lodge believed he had made contact with his son through a number of different mediums, and wrote the bestseller *Raymond, or Life and Death* (1916) to bring the evidence to the world. The now retired physicist would spend the 1920s giving incredibly popular lectures on spiritualism, and writing countless articles, pamphlets and books on the survival of death and related topics (cf. Asprem, 2013, 206–23).

### Science vs. Spiritualism: A Parting of Ways

The SPR continued to maintain a high public profile throughout this period, and attracted a number of internationally known intellectuals to serve as presidents of the society. The list of SPR presidents between 1900 and 1939 include Nobel laureates such as the philosopher Henri Bergson (1913) and the physicist Lord Rayleigh (1919), famous politicians such as Gerald Balfour (1906–7), and well-known public intellectuals such as the German biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch (1926–27), the British pioneer of academic psychology William McDougall (1920–21), and the analytic philosopher Charlie Dunbar Broad (1935–36).

Nevertheless, the rising influence of spiritualism within the Society's membership following the First World War had lasting effects on its future development. A chasm was growing between a 'scientific' wing and a 'spiritualist' wing of the SPR. The scientific wing held that the most important thing for the SPR was to develop proper scientific methods, acceptable to colleagues in disciplines such as biology, medicine, and psychology (which were getting increasingly more sophisticated), and to withhold judgment until these had been properly tested. By contrast, the spiritualist wing held that the matter had already been resolved, spiritualism had been vindicated, and the job now consisted in spreading the message to the people. In 1925 this ideological divergence materialized in the form of a series of institutional schisms. In England, the stage magician Harry Price convinced the University of London to support him in establishing the National Laboratory for Psychical Research, which was to act as a more scientific counterpart to the SPR. Price's 'Laboratory' would, however, turn out to be more of a stage for high profile debunking than a research laboratory. The 1932 'Brocken experiment' was a highlight: a full 'black magic' operation was performed on a midsummer's eve on the mountain Brocken in Germany, traditionally associated with the witches' Sabbath. With the world press attending, the magical experiment attempted to transform a goat into a young man. Sensationally, nothing happened.

A more serious institutional schism took place in the United States in the same year, as a response to a controversy that had erupted over tests run with the famous Boston physical medium Mina Crandon, better known as 'Margery.' An investigation committee had been set down, consisting among others of William McDougall (1871–1938), perhaps the most outspoken advocate of the pro-science line in psychical research, and Harry Houdini (1874–1926), the famous escape artist and skeptic. When the committee's report concluded that Margery was fraudulent, the American SPR took a curious course of action: it disregarded the verdict of the report, fired critics from

positions of power in the Society, and started circulating apologetic articles, books, and pamphlets defending Margery against her critics (Prince, 1926; cf. Asprem, 2013, 344–45). Delicately, one of the orchestrators of this development was the influential Boston surgeon Le Roy Crandon, who happened to be Margery's own husband. One of the people who had been disowned by the board of trustees of the American SPR following the Margery case was Walter Franklin Prince (1863–1934), who had been the editor of the *ASPR* journal, a member of the Margery committee, and a clear supporter of the scientific wing of the Society. Prince, who was not an enemy of spiritualism *per se*, but insisted that scientific methods had to be respected, now became an outspoken critic of the new leadership line. In 1925, he established the Boston Society for Psychical Research (BSPR) to act as a scientific counterpart to the American SPR, which, to his mind, had been hijacked by spiritualists and turned into a propaganda machine.

The BSPR remained the standard bearer of scientific psychical research in America until it ceased operations due to its founder's premature death in 1934. Significantly, the very last thing the BSPR did was to publish a book that would become immensely influential: Joseph Banks Rhine's *Extra-Sensory Perception* (1934). This book, based on Rhine's experimental work under the supervision of McDougall at Duke University, represented a fully experimental, methodologically rigid program of psychical research, and is now generally regarded as the paradigmatic text of experimental parapsychology (e.g. Mauskopf & McVaugh, 1980; cf. Asprem, 2013, 411–22). The publication of *Extra-Sensory Perception* by BSPR thus initiated a new phase in the history of psychical research, where new institutions, often connected to mainstream research universities, pursued the scientific track through what became professional parapsychology. Although the SPR's publications would continue to host some important scientific and philosophical discussions in this field, the emergence of professional parapsychology marked the end of the SPR as an institution of any serious scientific promise.

### THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH TODAY

The SPR is still active today, and is thus by far the most successful institution for psychical research in terms of longevity. In the shadow of professional parapsychology, which depends on highly specialized methodological training in experimental psychology and statistical methods, the SPR is not directly involved with research anymore, taking an educational role instead. It hosts public lectures at its offices in Kensington, London, organizes annual conferences on paranormal research and historical issues related to the field of psychical research, and offers some minor grants for researchers. In tune with its Victorian legacy, the SPR also continues to collect anecdotes of paranormal experiences, including premonitions, haunted houses, and poltergeist phenomena.

Most importantly, however, the SPR is in charge of managing its own vast heritage, holding extensive libraries of the entire psychical research literature. In recent years, much of this has been digitized and made available to SPR members online. Thus the Society's bibliographic and archival services are indispensable to parapsychological researchers, but also increasingly important to historians working in the fields of history of science (and 'pseudoscience'), and historians of modern esotericism. The SPR is today a somewhat museal institution of primarily historical interest – but a significant one at that.



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