

A BULLETIN FOR RESEARCH ON THE PROBLEM OF SURVIVAL AFTER BODILY DEATH
PUBLISHED BY THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION, INC., EDITED BY W. G. ROLL

PLANNING CONFERENCE FOR RESEARCH WITH "MEDIUMS"

On June 22, a one-day conference was held by the Psychical Research Foundation at Duke University to plan a program of research with so-called mediums. Dr. John Artley, Associate Professor of Electrical Engineering and a member of the P.R.F. Advisory Committee, assisted in making the practical arrangements. The decision to hold the conference was prompted by offers from several mediums to participate in scientific studies in Durham.

In addition to Dr. Artley and Mr. W. G. Roll, the participants were Dr. John Altrocchi, Associate Professor of Medical Psychology at Duke; Dr. Carl Eisdorfer, Research Coordinator for the Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development at Duke; Dr. Karlis Osis, Director of Research at the American Society for Psychical Research, New York; Dr. J. G. Pratt, Assistant Professor at the School of Medicine, University of Virginia; Dr. Gertrude Schmeidler, Professor of Psychology, City College of New York; Dr. Ian Stevenson, Chairman of the Department of Neurology and Psychiatry, University of Virginia; Dr. O. Lee Trick, Resident in Psychiatry at Duke; and Dr. R. L. Van de Castle, Associate Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry, University of North Carolina. The discussion covered the following areas.

ESP TEST CONDITIONS

Pratt outlined the developments which have taken place in mediumistic research since the 1880's, when the Society for Psychical Research was founded in England. He also described ways of assessing verbal material, including the Pratt-Birge method. To provide the most favorable conditions, Stevenson suggested that subjects be tested in their own surroundings, using their own procedures. The conditions could be tightened gradually till they reached a satis-

factory level. Roll observed that the sensitives who consented to participate were originally studied under conditions of their own choice and he thought they were ready for controlled conditions. All were accustomed to working away from home. He observed that in his experience the best results were obtained when the target person (TP) was in close physical proximity to the subject. This presents the problem of excluding sensory cues. Eisdorfer suggested that the TP be placed in a soundproof box, and Trick, that he could be in a soundproof room adjacent to the one where the subject and experimenter were. Schmeidler described her experiments where the medium's statements were divided into categories beforehand, with high scores predicted only for certain categories. Van de Castle mentioned his ESP dream research and suggested that experiments be done with sleeping subjects, placing token objects under their pillows or having the TP's in the same room. The subjects would be awakened after periods of rapid eye movements, which indicate dreaming, and the dreams recorded and studied for ESP content.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROGRAM

Prior to the conference, Roll distributed summaries of psychological studies of gifted subjects made by Drs. Schmeidler, Hans Bender, and W. H. C. Tenhaeff. The participants discussed which psychological tests might prove useful in the current program. Eisdorfer suggested that a personality questionnaire such as the MMPI could be integrated into the ESP tests. The subject should fill it out according to his ESP impressions of the TP's personality. The TP should also fill out an MMPI and the two MMPI's should then be compared for ESP correspondences.

THE THETA PROBLEM

Stevenson proposed that in the case of deceased TP's, the tests might be filled out by their survivors and these compared with the medium's replies when ostensibly under the deceased TP's influence. Instead of relying on survivors, Altrocchi suggested giving the MMPI to terminal patients. After death, communication through a medium would be attempted, and the medium would fill in the questionnaire according to his impressions of the deceased. To determine if the subject is guided by telepathy from living persons who knew the deceased or by clairvoyance of his MMPI record, Eisdorfer suggested that a control group should also fill out the MMPI's. If the subjects failed with the control group but succeeded with the (experimental) group of TP's, now deceased, this would be suggestive of theta-ESP rather than ESP of the living or the MMPI records.

Trick also raised the question how to exclude ordinary ESP from mediumistic communications. Osis questioned the need for definite evidence of the limitations of ESP. We should make tentative hypotheses about what ESP can and cannot do and, on that basis, proceed with survival research. He described his ESP linkage experiments where he tried to find out if ESP can operate between persons who do not know each other. Roll remarked that his psi field theory provides a series of working hypotheses for the spatial and temporal variables that may affect ESP. Stevenson mentioned a "drop-in" case where the ostensible theta agent had no

connection with the subject or anyone else associated with the test. If ordinary ESP depends on a system of spatial ("psychometric") connections, this might provide evidence for survival. He also mentioned cases where mediums show knowledge of unlearned skills, such as the ability to speak a foreign language that was known by the ostensible communicator. This led to a discussion of Roll's memory theory of ESP, which postulates that ordinary ESP is mediated through the memory record of the subject. If he produces material that is foreign to his memory record, this suggests that it was temporarily replaced by that of a theta agent.

S.F.F. CONVENTION

In May, W. G. Roll was a guest speaker at the annual convention of the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship in Chicago. The title of his address was "The Survival Problem: Prospects for a Scientific Solution." The S.F.F. is a religious society which encourages the study of psychical phenomena within the framework of Christianity. Its activities are described in a monthly publication, *Gate Way* (18520 Stewart Avenue, Homewood, Illinois).

Roll extended his visit in order to conduct exploratory studies of three mediums, Mrs. Irene F. Hughes, Mr. Herbert Beyer, and Rev. C. M. Royle. Mr. D. Techter of the Illinois S.P.R. and Mr. L. T. Heron, editor of *Gate Way*, assisted in contacting the mediums. Promising results were produced with all three, and they volunteered to participate in controlled testing in Durham.

of the part played by subterranean waterways in producing poltergeist-like effects has been available to supplement Podmore's naughty-little-girl-or-boy hypothesis.

But now, with the publication of this scholarly treatise by Dr. Owen, which, incidentally, won him both the Parapsychology Foundation Award and the McDougall Prize, poltergeists can look forward to enjoying something of a revival. For, it is not just the mere fact that someone of Dr. Owen's academic standing (he is a lecturer in mathematics and genetics and a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge) is prepared to defend the authenticity of certain poltergeist cases but, more to the point, is the fact that he is in a position to base his argument on one case of recent occurrence which, assuming human testimony means anything at all, can stand scrutiny in the light of all the known counter-hypotheses. This is the Sauchie poltergeist which flourished for about two months from the end of 1960 at a small town not far from Edinburgh, Scotland, and which centered around an eleven-year-old girl, Virginia Campbell.

Unfortunately, Owen was not himself a witness of the phenomena, but he carefully cross-examined each of the five witnesses involved while the case was still in progress and, since all five witnesses were persons of good standing (a clergyman, three qualified physicians, and a school teacher) their testimonies cannot lightly be set aside. I, myself, recently met one of the witnesses, Dr. Logan, a young doctor in general practice, who impressed me favorably as a man of good sense. Typically, the main phenomena consisted of loud knockings and other noises but there were also a few remarkable movements of objects that included some quite heavy furniture. These manifestations occurred only when Virginia herself was present but in three different localities: her bedroom, her classroom at school, and at another house belonging to relatives in a nearby town where she once went to spend the night. A close analysis of the evidence definitely rules out the possibility that the little girl could have contrived these disturbances and gone undetected. In the course of one all-night vigil, Dr. Logan tried, but without success, to use a cine-camera to get a record of certain unaccountable movements of the bedclothes; he did,

however, succeed in getting a tape-recording of the knockings which proves, at least, that these were not hallucinatory.

Having thus satisfied himself that he had at least one indubitably genuine case in his collection, Owen, in Parts I and II of his monograph, takes a fresh look at some of the classic cases of the literature to see what can reasonably be salvaged from the evidence as it has come down to us. He has little difficulty in showing that Podmore was far too hasty in dismissing claims in those instances when the case presented some suspicious or unsatisfactory features. Even the Sauchie case produced a few accretions that one need not take seriously but this in no way invalidated the primary allegations. As Owen reminds us, once the child has become the center of attention, "the temptation to perpetuate the situation both for self-importance and for the sheer fun of it becomes irresistible." The point is, I think, that Podmore, convinced at the outset of his enquiry that poltergeists were impossible, was reluctant to accept at face value even such strong cases as his Workshop case, where he had to confess that he could find no obvious flaw in the evidence. Owen, starting out with no such presuppositions, is less prone to assume automatically that positive testimony implies that the witness is either lying or his memory is deceiving him. Owen is impressed, moreover, with the similarities he discerns in the poltergeist literature of different periods and different countries, for example, the frequent references to the abnormal trajectory of objects in flight, similarities that would be hard to account for if all such cases were spurious.

Part III is devoted to a discussion of the "powers and limitations" of the poltergeist. By this time we begin to realize how much cosier it would have been to have stayed with Podmore on the brink rather than going forward with Owen and face the dizzying prospects that he opens up before us. All poltergeist phenomena are incredible but some, it would appear, are more incredible than others. Thus, although the great majority of physical effects are paranormal only in the sense that the mechanical agency that would normally be required to produce them is lacking, there are certain rare and way-out phenomena that are paranormal in the absolute sense in that they could not be replicated by any

CAN WE EXPLAIN THE POLTERGEIST? BY A. G. R. OWEN¹

Reviewed by John Beloff²

The reputation of the poltergeist as a paranormal phenomenon is one that has undergone considerable fluctuations over the years as each new researcher has grappled with the problem. Thus, Podmore, whom the present author salutes as "one of the greatest figures in 19th century psychic research," had this to say of

poltergeists in his *Modern Spiritualism* (1902): "we have, broadly speaking, *no good evidence* for anything having been done which could not have been done by a girl or boy of slightly more than average cunning and naughtiness" (author's italics). In general, one could say, the S.P.R. has always been very guarded on the question of poltergeists. Quite recently, D. J. West, in his *Psychical Research Today*, (published in 1954, but revised and reissued in Penguin Books about a year ago) was still of the opinion that "the only reasonable attitude is one of severe scepticism." Moreover, since 1955, G. W. Lambert's theory

¹New York: A Helix Press Book; Garrett Publications, 1964, 436 pp., \$8.50.

²Dr. Beloff is Lecturer of Psychology at Edinburgh University where he also engages in parapsychological experiments. He is author of *The Existence of Mind* (London: MacGibbon and Jee, 1962; New York: The Citadel Press, \$1.95) a chapter of which is devoted to parapsychology.

known mechanical means. In particular, we meet with the sort of thing which in the seance-room would be called apportation or teleportation, but which, in the poltergeist case usually takes the form of a fall of stones, coins, or other such objects inside of closed rooms. These are often described as materializing in thin air just below the ceiling. Owen assembles a number of such cases, the earliest goes back to 1563, but they include two quite impressive cases from this century. I liked especially the Poona poltergeist (1928). Owen goes no further than to say that such cases are nonproven but considers it worthwhile to devote a little time to discussing how such a phenomenon as teleportation might best be conceptualised. In this connection he has some interesting things to say about theories of "higher space," such as the old idea of there being a fourth dimension to the space continuum, and also the theory of "paraspaces" which would postulate a special state of matter, such that a body entering this state would, for the time being, become non-reactive with ordinary material bodies.

This brings us to the final section of the book, Part IV, "Interpretation," in which the author gallantly strives to bring some sort of order into this seemingly chaotic field. While he is willing to consider any approach that might help towards this end, he declares that his own predilection is for the position he describes as "regular naturalism," a view that, in his words "seeks to explain paranormal happenings as the result of additional 'forces' and entities regarded as functioning in a regular and lawful manner, their effects being superimposed on those of known forces without suspending or overruling the latter." In line with this approach, the author considers that we may safely dismiss the spiritist interpretation of the poltergeist as an independent entity and regard it rather as an extension of the personality of the poltergeist "focus" or subject, the energy involved deriving either from the sub-

ject's body or from unknown forces in the environment that are somehow triggered off in the presence of the subject. This is, of course, a long way from suggesting a modus operandi for the phenomena but it does, at least, suggest the direction that enquiry might proceed. For, Owen comes to the conclusion that "poltergeistery and physical mediumship are essentially manifestations of the same thing;" and he further maintains that "in addition to some innate capacity for physical mediumship, anxiety operates as a precipitating factor or release mechanism." Psychologists will be interested to note that as poltergeist foci girls predominate over boys in a ratio of about two to one and that the peak age for manifestations seems to be just before puberty, though the range is fairly broad.

The book does not aim at being comprehensive. There is, for example, no reference to the Seaford poltergeist which J. G. Pratt and W. G. Roll described in *The Journal of Parapsychology* (Vol. 22, 1958, 79-124). Perhaps Owen considered that it had had sufficient publicity, but in general he seems to ignore the recent American literature. Having done so much historical research for his book, it seems a pity that Owen did not see fit to attempt some kind of a comprehensive bibliography for the benefit of future students. But this is a small complaint in view of the great service he has done parapsychology in producing such an authoritative textbook on this perennially fascinating topic.

If Owen is right in assuming that there has been no notable falling off in the incidence of poltergeists over the years and that probably one case, of a kind worth looking into, crops up somewhere or other about once a year, then the importance of the phenomenon for the future of parapsychology needs no stressing. We must hope that, as we move into the era of electronic monitoring devices and other modern scientific aids, even the poltergeist will gradually be compelled to part with some of its age-old secrets.

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