

# **‘Very Slight Indications of a Revelation’: William James, Richard Hodgson and the Society for Psychical Research**

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## **Introduction**

*Consciousness and Society*, H. S. Hughes’ celebrated study of European intellectual culture, observed a change in critical focus among artists and intellectuals between around 1890 and 1930, from a concern with the conscious to the unconscious aspects of human experience. Among the results of this shift Hughes identifies the ‘Natural’ influences of the Art Nouveau style and the growth of Surrealism in art; the publication in 1899 of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* and the subsequent rapid growth of the psychoanalytic school; the Intuitionist philosophy of Henri Bergson and the new trends in social research, in which Durkheim’s positivism was supplanted by Max Weber’s concerns with ‘charisma’ and the sociology of power. He writes:

Psychological process had replaced external reality as the most pressing topic for investigation. It was no longer what actually existed that seemed most important: it was what men thought existed. And what they felt on the unconscious level had become rather more interesting than what they had consciously rationalized.<sup>1</sup>

Hughes’ principal concern was a general trend over these forty years, which saw a displacement of ‘the axis of social thought from the apparent and objectively verifiable to the only partially conscious area of unexplained motivation’. Yet although he identifies, through a variety of persons and *milieux*, a growing interest in the unconscious processes of the human mind and their effects upon the waking self,

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<sup>1</sup> H. S. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930*, Vintage Books, New York, 1977, p. 66.

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Hughes does not explore another important trend in this direction, the rapid growth and waxing influence during the same period of the Societies for Psychical Research (SPRs).

Psychical Research societies were a Victorian phenomenon. Among their membership were included some of the most progressive, even illustrious, intellects in Britain, the United States and Europe, mainly academic intellectuals and professional medical men whose work, I wish to argue, was to have far-reaching consequences for both science and religion through the Edwardian era and into modern times. This paper attempts to define the intellectual and cultural context wherein the SPRs were established and sustained on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing on the work of others, I hope to render some idea of the nature and diversity of interests and perspectives that informed the labours of the principal core membership of the SPRs. The personnel and opinions of the SPRs have an intrinsic value also, and the study of their significant intellectual networks is instructive, for what they reveal about their conceptions of science and spirituality, and for the light shed upon elite social groupings and the manner and ready diffusion of ideas within them, despite the barriers of distance, language and culture.

The British SPR was inaugurated on 20 February 1882 in Cambridge, England. Their avowed quest was for a deeper understanding of the latent capacities of the human mind, and the objective assessment of certain transcendental claims, especially concerning the 'survival' of the human individuality after death. Within three years, the Society had grown to a membership of 600, with Associates and Corresponding Members in several countries. After much early attention to Telepathy and Hypnotism, two events in particular during 1884-5 were to change the personnel, character and direction of research efforts within the SPR. It is these events which this paper focuses upon.

The first significant event was the investigation of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, who claimed to be a *Chela*, or acolyte of certain 'Mahtmas', alleged to produce marvels like causing apparitions of themselves to appear where they were not, as their 'astral form', or the 'precipitation' of

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handwriting on formerly blank paper, upon which words of wisdom or personal messages would be found inscribed.<sup>1</sup> It was to investigate these ‘miracles’ that in November 1884 the ‘Cambridge group’ sent Dr Richard Hodgson, an Australian expatriate and student at St John’s College, Cambridge to the Theosophical headquarters at Adyar, near Madras, in India. Hodgson’s report was detailed and unequivocal, asserting that Blavatsky was a consummate fraud, which earned him and the SPR the undying enmity of the Theosophical Society. The second significant event for the future direction of the SPR was the ‘discovery’ by William James of the remarkable Boston medium Mrs Leonora Piper in 1885. These two events are related, insofar as the exposé of Blavatsky brought Hodgson and the SPR a great deal of attention worldwide. Two years later, when a professional researcher was required to take charge of the mediumship of Mrs Piper, Hodgson’s notoriety and undoubted talents as a sleuth led to his appointment as inaugural Secretary and chief experimenter in Boston for the American Branch, as it became, when it was absorbed into the British Society in 1887.

Thus Hodgson provides the common link between the SPRs and was the principal agent in these events. More than any other single individual, he had a lasting influence for the better part of twenty years upon both the public face of psychical research and the provision of ‘raw’ experimental data, mostly through his reports in the Society’s *Journal* and *Proceedings* of his work with Mrs Piper and other American mediums. Accordingly, the paper concludes with a brief account of Richard Hodgson from the late 1870s, when he was completing a Doctorate of Laws at the University of Melbourne, to 1885 when he departed on his mission to India, to render something of the background and character, the making of the first professional psychical researcher in modern times.

### **Background of the British and American SPR**

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate Phenomena Connected with the Theosophical Society’, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. III, 1885, p. 202.

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For at least one generation, psychical research deeply influenced ideas about the unconscious. What has now become 'parapsychology' has lost some measure of scientific credibility, and today 'subliminal' refers mainly to methods of advertising. Theories of the unconscious popular at the twilight of Victoria's reign, and experimental work based upon a paradigm of 'subliminal' and 'supraliminal' regions of consciousness, which informed the work of the generation of James, Myers, MacDougall and Flournoy, failed to survive the Freudian hegemony after the Great War. Although Freud and his followers further augmented the study of the human mind and consciousness, it was within a medical and therapeutic context, and quickly the importance of the supernormal, which had figured greatly earlier, waned after the work of William MacDougall and Theodore Flournoy, until in our own era the systematic study of supernormal human behaviours has almost disappeared from mainstream science.

To the small yet influential academic and professional elite who studied the new phenomena, and to numerous others in related fields from philosophy to classical literature, the idea of the existence of 'subliminal' regions of consciousness was a rich interpretative concept, lending important insights into general laws of mental life, and providing a theoretical framework for the comprehension of a wide variety of phenomena, ranging from the pathological to the supernormal. Located chiefly in Britain and the United States, but also in France, Switzerland and elsewhere, psychical researchers introduced new methods for the investigation of a variety of mental and physical phenomena defying many of the assumptions of contemporary science, hitherto largely ignored or else treated with a mixture of hostility or contempt, and they developed a new vocabulary for their understanding, including the coining of concepts like 'mental telepathy' and 'Subliminal consciousness'.

In Britain the core group of the SPR was led by Henry Sidgwick, Knightsbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy at Trinity College. It included Cambridge men like his friends and former students Frederic W. H. Myers, Edmund Gurney and Richard Hodgson, and no less than eight Fellows of the Royal Society, among them Balfour Stewart, Professor of Physics at Manchester. His successor there Sir Oliver Lodge, and Lord Rayleigh, Cavendish Professor of Experimental Physics at Cambridge. In the United States the locus for the SPR was

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Boston, and most of the scientific medical men loosely known as the Boston School of Psychotherapy were, initially at least, associated with the American Society, along with men of stature in other fields, like the Idealist philosopher Josiah Royce and Professor Simon Newcomb of the Smithsonian Institution. The most important figure in this group was the eclectic William James, who provided a link between laboratory science and philosophy, as a medical professional and philosopher who held a Chair in Psychology at Harvard. Like Myers, James had a continental education and spoke several languages, and through letters and extensive travel he maintained contact with colleagues associated with the French experimental psychology like Theodore Flournoy, and the German school like Wilhelm Wundt, who in 1879 had set up the first psychology laboratory, with philosophers like Henri Bergson, and with the 'Cambridge group' of the British SPR.

The historical significance of the SPRs derives not only in their contributions to a scientific discourse, but also as part of a larger debate. The occult revival from which the Society emerged was in part a reaction against the triumphant positivism of the age; as Janet Oppenheim has observed, all 'resented the confidence and certainty with which science reduced nature's majesty to measurable quantities'.<sup>1</sup> The SPR aggressively established a reputation for hardheadedness, never hesitating to expose fraudulent mediums.<sup>2</sup> Eugene Taylor has shown that psychical researchers were battling on at least two fronts: they were determined to overthrow the narrow dogmatism of Victorian science, the smug scientific materialism of men like T. H. Huxley, Henry Maudsley, and W. K. Clifford, and to submit the claims of Spiritualists and others to rigorous scrutiny. He states: 'The experimental investigation of spiritualism in fact became a primary means whereby those involved in psychical research could attract the attention of their more narrow-minded scientific colleagues and at the

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, p. 139.

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same time show that respectable science was not incompatible with larger and more universal religious questions'.<sup>1</sup>

In popular culture, unusual powers have been attributed traditionally to the agency of spirits, to the mysterious workings of Providence, and to a whole host of magic, healing, and intercessions by 'wise' women and men, some of it inevitably ranking as quackery. Temporally, the most direct precursor of these *fin de siècle* psychical researchers in the systematic application of scientific method to the unconscious powers of the mind was arguably the eighteenth Century mystic and *savant* Emanuel Swedenborg, who originated the notion of science in the spiritual world, and who claimed to have brought the supernatural under a realm of law.<sup>2</sup> Following the astounding successes in the healing work of Franz Anton Mesmer and the spread of his ideas concerning 'animal magnetism' and mesmerism (hypnotism), then via homeopathy and phrenology, these ideas seeped into popular religion in the Spiritualist movement, which arose in the U.S. around the mid-nineteenth Century.

Spiritualism spread quickly to Britain and Europe, in the process influencing the religious heterodoxy of several generations, such as Christian Science, Theosophy and 'New Thought'.<sup>3</sup> From the late 1860s, in that peculiar amalgam in the popular mind arising from religious doubt and the veneration of scientific method, and with the tremendous organizational energy that characterized Victorian reformers, Spiritualist and 'Psychological' Societies were being formed from London to Melbourne, and seances were becoming a favourite form of parlour entertainment amongst all classes. It has been estimated

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- <sup>1</sup> E. Taylor, 'Psychotherapy, Harvard, and the American Society for Psychical Research: 1884-1889', *Proceedings of the Parapsychological Association, 28th Annual Convention*, Vol. 2, 1985, p. 322. I am grateful to Dr Taylor for his generous help in this research.
  - <sup>2</sup> As F. W. H. Myers acknowledges in his *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, edited and abridged by L. H. Myers, Longmans Green, London, 1913, a most influential book on the unconscious published posthumously in 1903, p. 6.
  - <sup>3</sup> G. T. Parker, *Mind Cure in New England*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 1973, p. 152.

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that Spiritualism had gathered over one million believers in the 1850s, growing to eleven millions worldwide by the 1890s.<sup>1</sup>

From the 'table tiltings' of the 1850s, the phenomena became more varied and increasingly problematic. By the late 1860s interest was growing in the phenomena of Spiritualism through the advent of 'Star mediumship', and new phenomena like the direct spirit voice and spirit writing. Mrs Guppy produced 'apports', where it was claimed that objects could be brought through solid walls and 'rematerialized' in the seance room. The most dramatic were manifested through the 'stars', the beguiling, youthful mediums, especially the 'physical materializations'. In the spring of 1873, the sixteen-year-old Hackney girl Florence Cook produced the first full materialization in Britain, whereby it was alleged that by clothing spirit-forms with a substance called 'ectoplasm' derived from the medium, they could be seen with the unaided vision by sitters. She was followed by others like Kate Cook, Rosina Showers and C. E. Wood.<sup>2</sup>

However the most astounding phenomena were produced by the male Scots medium D. D. Home. In a highly publicized seance held on December 16, 1868, and in the presence of three witnesses, including Viscount Adare, Home allegedly levitated from the rooms on the third floor at 5 Buckingham Gate, London. Adare reported that the entranced Home went out of a window in the other room, coming in at the window where the others were seated. 'We heard Home go into the next room, heard the window thrown up, and presently Home appeared standing upright outside our window; he opened the window and walked in quite coolly'. When Adare, after shutting the window in the next room, remarked that as the window was not raised a foot, he could not think how it had been managed, Home repeated the feat:

I went with him; he told me to open the window as it was before, I did so: he told me to stand a little distance off; he then went through the open space, head first, quite rapidly, his body being nearly

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<sup>1</sup> From W. C. Hartmann, *Who's Who in Occultism, New Thought, Psychism and Spiritualism*, cited in E. Taylor, 'Psychiatry and Mental Healing: The 19th Century American Experience', in E. R. Wallace and J. Gach (eds), *Handbook of the History of Psychiatry*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room, Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, Virago Press, London, 1989, p. 41.

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horizontal and apparently rigid. He came in again, feet foremost, and we returned to the other room. It was so dark I could not see clearly how he was supported outside. He did not appear to grasp, or rest upon, the balustrade, but rather to be swung out and in.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of such highly publicized wonders, and with the declaration for Spiritualism in an 1870 article in the *Fortnightly* by A. R. Wallace, and the experiments conducted on Cook and Home by the eminent physicist Sir William Crookes published in the *Quarterly Journal of Science*, of which he was then editor, there was both a surge in popularity and the calumny of the majority of scientists of the Spiritualist phenomena.

Around the same time, phenomena were being observed in asylum patients that had affinities with that being produced by 'mediums', which began to attract the attention of scientific medical men, especially in France, resulting in Jean Charcot's work on 'hysteria' at the Salpêtrière, and Pierre Janet's somewhat later work on somnambulistic trance.<sup>2</sup> This marked the beginning of a new methodology in dealing with 'lunatics', and the serious application of hypnotism for therapeutic ends. Janet's studies of hysterical women, for instance, had convinced him of a category of mental abnormality resulting from a purely mental dissociation, with no physiological origins, contrary to the common theory of the day.<sup>3</sup> It was against this background of popular religion and scientific endeavour that, a decade later, the SPRs were inaugurated.

### **Formation of the SPRs**

The formation of the British SPR arose out of a mutual desire for scientific credibility among religious outsiders, and those who laboured on the fringes of what was then considered 'respectable' science. It

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<sup>1</sup> Viscount Adare, *Experiences in Spiritualism with Mr D. D. Home*, London, Thomas Scott, n.d. [c. 1868], p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> A. R. G. Owen, *Hysteria, Hypnosis and Healing: the work of Jean Charcot*, Garrett Publications, New York, 1971, p. 29 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

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appears to have been jointly the idea of the physicist Professor W. F. Barrett of the Royal College of Science, Dublin, and his friend, the prominent Spiritualist E. D. Rogers. Barrett had been conducting some promising experiments on thought transference, and his paper presenting scientific evidence for its existence had been rejected by the Biology section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The paper was returned to him, stating that 'any phenomena which lie outside the recognised channels of sense perception also lie outside the scope of the British Association'. Through the intervention of A. R. Wallace, Spiritualist and co-originator of the Evolution theory, it was accepted by the sub-section on Anthropology.<sup>1</sup> In a discussion with E. D. Rogers late in 1881, Barrett was urged to start a new society that would attract the 'leading scientific and literary men' who had so far remained aloof from such inquiries. Barrett immediately put his considerable energies to the task; by February 1882 he had enlisted the support of many of his scientific colleagues, among them Wallace and Oliver Lodge, and persuaded Henry Sidgwick to accept the Presidency of the new Society.<sup>2</sup>

Henry Sidgwick, one of the leading British philosophers of the nineteenth Century, was inaugural President of the SPR, and served in that capacity for most of the first decade of its existence, except for 1885-7, when it was held by the distinguished astronomer Balfour Stewart F.R.S.<sup>3</sup> Among later Presidents were Bishop Boyd Carpenter, Andrew Lang the anthropologist and classical scholar, the philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Henri Bergson, the Australian-born classicist Professor Gilbert Murray, author of *The Five Stages of Greek Religion*, Dr L. P. Jacks of *Hibbert Journal* fame, and the Oxford psychologist William McDougall. The Council of the SPR in Britain comprised scientists of considerable stature like Lord Rayleigh, Eleanor Sidgwick's uncle, whose work included the redetermination of the electrical units of absolute measurement,<sup>4</sup> and J. J. Thomson,

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1 *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, no. X, November 1884, p. 173; E. Taylor, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

2 Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 137; C. D. Broad, 'Henry Sidgwick and Psychical Research', *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Pt 156, 1938, p. 138.

3 Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

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discoverer of the electron. Its illustrious membership reads like the social register, boasting a former Prime Minister in W. E. Gladstone, who believed that theirs was 'the most important work which is being done in the world - by far the most important',<sup>1</sup> and a future one in Arthur Balfour. In England, because of its social respectability, and to a large extent because of Sidgwick's endorsement, the Society attracted attention among the very highest social classes. Besides a string of earls and dukes, these included cultural luminaries like John Ruskin, Lord Tennyson, and Charles Dodgson, also known as Lewis Carroll.<sup>2</sup> In 1885, when the son of the Duke of Argyll was asked about his father's interest in psychical research, he responded that 'the Duke was completely open-minded about any subject whatsoever except Irish Home Rule!'<sup>3</sup> Subscriptions during the first two years grew from an initial three hundred to five hundred and twenty, of whom 223 were members and 258 associates. The Library held over eight hundred volumes, of which 135 were in German, and 110 in French. By 1895, the SPR had over nine hundred subscribing members including, briefly, an associated SPR in Melbourne.<sup>4</sup>

### **Formation of the American SPR**

The American Branch was no less eminent, including a gaggle of Harvard Professors: along with William James and Josiah Royce, there was in the initial group E. C. Pickering, head of the Harvard College Observatory; C. S. Minot, Professor of Embryology; H. P. Bowditch, distinguished physiologist and head of the Harvard Medical School; J. J. Putnam, Professor of diseases of the nervous system, and Morton

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 139; Gladstone is listed as an Honorary Member in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, no XVIII, July 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Sidgwick, Journal, Add. Ms. c. 97 25(82), Wren Library, University of Cambridge, 7 March 1886.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. III, 1885; Alfred Deakin, Diary, 27 April, 1894.

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Prince, who would later achieve fame with his studies of psychopathology and multiple personality.<sup>1</sup>

The first connections between the British and American SPRs were forged during the winter of 1882-3, when William James was travelling in Europe. Upon hearing that his father was ill, and while waiting in London for a signal from his brother, the novelist Henry James, whether to sail for America, he met Sidgwick, Gurney and other members of a group calling themselves the 'Scratch Eight'. From them he learned of the SPR, formed at the beginning of that year, and its work on hypnotism, haunted houses, apparitions and the like.<sup>2</sup> Upon his return to Boston, James set about interesting his colleagues in a similar venture, at first meeting with little success.

The impetus for the formation of the American SPR came once again from the indefatigable W. F. Barrett. After giving a paper at the BAAS meeting in Montreal in 1884, Barrett was invited by C. S. Minot, co-secretary of its American counterpart, the AAAS, to address their annual meeting in Philadelphia, this time in the Biology section, trusting he was 'neither a long-haired man nor a short-haired woman', that is, a crank. The sole objection came from two English biologists, that if thought transference were true they 'would have to abandon science, as it was opposed to all we knew'.<sup>3</sup> Among those present were Professors E. C. Pickering and Simon Newcomb of the Smithsonian Institution, and Professor Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone. Along with Barrett and William James, enthused by the rapid progress made by the British SPR, Mr R. Pearsall Smith, a wealthy and respected merchant in Philadelphia, was also instrumental in the launching of an American Society. And three years later, impressed by the rigour of his exposé of Madame Blavatsky, Pearsall Smith was also to figure in obtaining Hodgson as Secretary of the ASPR, which later became the American Branch of the British SPR. After Philadelphia, the peripatetic Barrett was invited to a similar meeting in Boston. The invitation seems to have come from N. D. C. Hodges, co-editor of the magazine *Science*. At Dr Minot's house in Boston, Barrett met Professor Stanley Hall of Johns Hopkins University

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1 Taylor, 1986, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

2 Taylor, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

3 *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, no. X, November 1884, p. 173.

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and William James, who already knew Sidgwick and Gurney from his visit to London.<sup>1</sup>

As so often before in American experience, the Philadelphia/Boston connection proved powerful. Committees were organized, similar to the English committees, with H. P. Bowditch chairing the thought transference committee, and William James the committee on hypnotism; the committee on apparitions was chaired, perhaps appropriately, by the Idealist philosopher Josiah Royce.<sup>2</sup> Though never reaching the social eminence of its sister British society, the members and associates of the ASPR included the acerbic founder of Pragmatist philosophy, Charles Sanders Peirce, and future President Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>3</sup>

Hodges and his fellow co-editor Samuel Scudder at *Science* were sympathetic to the aims and difficulties of the nascent Society. Its editorials depicted the SPR struggling 'to steer safely between the Scylla of scoffing and the Charybdis of charlatan spiritualism'. From the beginning, the aims of the American society were different, as admirably encapsulated in a Presidential address by Simon Newcomb in January 1886. Whereas the work of the English parent was to 'prove the existence of supernormal phenomena in response to a philosophical crisis of the age', in America, even if such phenomena as thought transference and apparitions were disproved, he believed that 'the product of the investigation could still yield systematic new laws about mental life'.<sup>4</sup> Newcomb's statement was to prove prophetic, and it may suggest the greater pragmatism of the Americans and other cultural differences between the two societies, but perhaps this divergence was due to the preponderance of literary and philosophic men in the early English society, Sidgwick himself, then Myers, Gurney, Podmore, and Hodgson, in contrast to the weighty representation of medical men in the American society. The alliance in the U.S., at least, between psychical researchers interested in the 'supernormal' and psychotherapists interested in the 'abnormal', although short-lived, as R. Laurence Moore observed, 'promised to produce some enormously

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1 Taylor, 1985, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-5.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 327.

3 Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

4 Taylor, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 329, p. 330.

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useful results ... and left some important intellectual residues, especially in Jungian analysis, which have not disappeared'.<sup>1</sup> Within five years, the enthusiasm of the initial group, with the exception of James and Royce, had waned and, strapped for funds, the ASPR became a Branch of the British Society.

Another important difference between the two Societies was in the relative weight of Spiritualists in the original English group. The SPR expected to be treated like any other scientific society. They organized themselves into Committees and published a *Journal* for members and *Proceedings* for Associates. They conducted experiments, which they claimed to control, and in this aspect, they could cooperate with the Spiritualists, represented on the first Council by E. D. Rogers, the Rev. Stainton Moses, whose pseudonymous *Spirit Teachings*, signed 'M.A. Oxon' was a runaway best seller among Spiritualists, and by Spiritualist sympathizers among the scientists like Sir William Crookes, Oliver Lodge and A. R. Wallace, as well as within the general membership. As one historian has put it, Spiritualists believed in communication with the dead, and they wrote up their seances like scientific experiments.<sup>2</sup> And although Spiritualists had been involved initially, they quickly withdrew. Rogers and Moses, distressed by the SPR's attitude to 'survival', resigned their places, and were followed in 1886 by a mass walkout.<sup>3</sup> As one Spiritualist believer put it, to the SPR 'the idea of spirit communion, of sweet converse with dear departed friends - so precious to Spiritualists - has no present interest ... they are studying the mere bones and muscles, and have not yet penetrated to the heart and soul'.<sup>4</sup> The American SPR especially was regaled by Spiritualist journals like the *Banner of Light* in Boston, which argued that the methods of science always destroyed the personal aspect needed to bring on and sustain the phenomena; hence any attempt to prove the existence of the supernatural by orthodox scientific and medical means would be sure to end in failure, as with Michael Faraday and 'table

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> G. Serle, *The Rush to Be Rich*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1971, p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> A. Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 2 vols, London, Cassell & Co., 1926, Vol. 1, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

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tiltings' in the 1850s, which movements, on the basis of rather perfunctory experiments, he concluded were nothing more than the result of involuntary muscular actions on the part of the sitters.<sup>1</sup>

One reason for the mass exodus of Spiritualists in 1886 was the paucity of research efforts devoted to 'survival' of bodily death. There was no committee instituted on the subject, and of the six committees established during 1882, the Physical Phenomena and Reichenbach 'Od' (or Odylic force) phenomena committees were less active than others, especially those on which the dynamic Gurney and Myers served. Through a multitude of reports, articles and books, these two collaborated closely, until Gurney's untimely death in 1888. Amassing a bewildering quantity and variety of information, which was then forged into statistical shape by Mrs Sidgwick and published in the *Proceedings* and elsewhere, they tried doggedly to bring psychical research within the recognized domain of experimental psychology. Their repudiation of simple models of neurological reductionism to explain the relation between mind and matter set the parameters for this type of research, and their work on thought reading and Mesmerism, along with the French experiments of Richet and Charcot, played a significant role in resurrecting the serious study of hypnotism in England during the 1880s and 1890s, and for a time helped to propel the Society into the forefront of such research.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from their scientific aspects, the activities of the SPRs mark also a new formulation in that ongoing tension between the outlooks of science and religion that characterized the age. Although the men and women who founded and sustained the SPRs did not consider theirs a religious movement, and though, to the ire of the Spiritualists, early on they resisted the demands to investigate 'survival', spiritual questions clearly arose from some of their conclusions. They were nearly unanimous in the conviction that the claims of some 'mediums' to possess knowledge beyond the empirical realm constituted a wide range of augmented capacities, that remain latent in most human beings, but were proper objects for scientific scrutiny. For some of these researchers at least, such knowledge pointed to the possibility of contact between this world and another putative spiritual reality. As I

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1 Taylor, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

2 Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

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intend to argue in a more developed essay, this was to give rise to ambiguities among the core of the Societies regarding the ultimate aims of their enquiries. The capacity of some human beings to exhibit preternatural powers was accepted, while their wider significance would remain a more contentious issue. For many, the question became whether 'mediums' and others seemingly gifted with powers like telepathy and prevision, frequently exhibited in conditions of somnambulistic or 'deep' trance, were simply testimony to an untapped human potential, or whether they suggested that they were agents for a Greater Reality.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly their positions of status gave the SPRs on both sides of the Atlantic, contradistinguished from the plebeian Spiritualists, the social advantages of an academic and cultural elite. Many of them had the benefit of independent means. Not only did this allow them sufficient leisure for the time-consuming pursuits of psychical research and the writing up of results and conclusions; it also meant that as members of a socially and intellectually respected elite, their opinions would be taken seriously and debated by their more orthodox colleagues. Perhaps most importantly, their extensive professional and academic networks provided a ready conduit for persons and ideas. For the American Branch, the close links with the British SPR, especially through personal contacts and the ready availability of the *Journal* and *Proceedings*, meant that experimental work in England and new developments throughout Europe reported therein could be read immediately by the Americans.

It has been convincingly argued that the American Branch of the SPR was the first organized scientific body in America specifically devoted to experimental psychology. Seeking to uncover consistent laws of mental life, and employing what were considered sound scientific methods, they drew heavily on the British SPR's work on hypnosis, and on the French Experimental Psychology of the Subconscious.<sup>2</sup> It was via this ready conduit that the work of Pierre

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<sup>1</sup> See also A. Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research*, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p. 275 and *passim*, on differences within the Sidgwick group as to whether the phenomena pointed to human survival of bodily death.

<sup>2</sup> The leading adherents of the French experimental psychology of the subconscious included Pierre Janet and the physiologist Charles Richet, who were active

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Janet on somnambulism and later the first reports of the early work of Breuer and Freud became widely known.<sup>1</sup> Indirectly, this resulted in Freud's invitation to Clark University in 1909, and the consequent rapid dissemination of his theories of the unconscious in America. Indeed, the network sustained by persons of the stature of Henry Sidgwick among the Oxbridge community, by William James among the American universities and the Boston psychotherapists, and by the multilingual F. W. H. Myers with just about anyone who mattered in France, Switzerland, Germany and the United States in regard to the study of the unconscious, made the spread of the Societies and their ideas both rapid and eminently respectable.

The work of the SPRs therefore represents an important moment in intellectual history, and in the history of Psychology, since ideas about the human unconscious for the better part of three decades were deeply influenced by the SPR, relying to a considerable degree on the investigative work carried out on the Boston medium Mrs Piper by Dr Richard Hodgson and other members of the SPR from the mid 1880s. A different theoretical formulation concerning the human mind and its powers was coming into being, which sought to take into account the startling phenomena which their investigations of Mrs Piper and others had turned up, and a reassessment of their earlier scepticism regarding proofs for a continued existence beyond the grave. This reorientation was to culminate in Myers' theory of the 'Subliminal'. As Myers himself succinctly put the problem:

The question of the survival of man is a branch of experimental psychology. Is there, or is there not, evidence in the actual observed phenomena of automatism, apparitions and the like, for a transcendental energy in living men, or for an influence emanating from personalities which have overpassed the tomb? This is the

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members of the SPR, along with Ribot, Tissie, and Burnheim; Taylor, 1986, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

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definite question, which we can at least intelligibly discuss, and which either we, or our descendants may some day hope to answer.<sup>1</sup>

The tenor, substance and direction of psychical research, especially following the consolidation of the respective Societies in the late 1880s, were the results of the efforts of a very small group. In England they comprised the Sidgwicks and Frederic W. H. Myers, and in the U.S. William James and Richard Hodgson. We turn now to consider their contributions, and conclude with a brief sketch of Hodgson, the common link between the two Societies, from his student days at Melbourne until he was sent on his first major assignment to India to conduct the investigation of Madame Blavatsky.

### **Henry Sidgwick**

The principal asset of the British SPR from the beginning was Henry Sidgwick. In his life and experiences, Sidgwick seemed to manifest all that was best in British intellectual and moral life, and to personify that crisis regarding science and religion through which the best progressive minds in Britain passed during the 1860s and 1870s, the ‘defection of the educated’ from the church. A gifted teacher and moral philosopher, after a period of inner turmoil Sidgwick had resigned his Fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1869 because he could no longer subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles, which were a formal condition of appointment for all Fellows. To others, adherence to the tenets of the Church of England could be elastic, but to a man of Sidgwick’s honesty and moral sensibilities, it was a matter of great principle. He was too valuable to Cambridge, and posts of Praelector and Lecturer were created for him, which did not require the same oath. By 1883, when he became Knightsbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy, subscription to the Articles was no longer required. His contributions to the SPR were invaluable, not so much for his investigative work, although he took painstaking care in this as in all areas of his life and work, but because his reputation for probity and fairness lent the Society a high

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in J. T. Hackett, *My Commonplace Book*, T. F. Unwin, London, 1919, p. 340.

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intellectual and moral status; anything that Sidgwick was involved in could not be low sham.<sup>1</sup>

Sidgwick's style is evident, for instance, in his Presidential address in 1889: 'My highest ambition in psychical research is to produce evidence which will drive my opponents to doubt my honesty or veracity. I think that there is a very small minority of persons who will *not* doubt them, and that, if I can convince them, I have done all that I can do'.<sup>2</sup> William James believed that Sidgwick's 'obstinate belief that there is something yet to be brought to light communicates patience to the discouraged; [and] his constitutional inability to draw any precipitate conclusion reassures those who are afraid of being dupes'.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Sidgwick's high connections in academia and in English society generally, added to the even higher connections of his wife Eleanor, sister of Arthur Balfour and niece of Lord Salisbury, the Conservative leader, provided the SPR with distinct social advantages. The Sidgwicks were active in other areas, like higher education for women - Eleanor Sidgwick was appointed Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge in 1892, following the retirement of Miss Clough - and proportional representation. But for both, psychical research was to become truly a life's work. Trained as a mathematician, Eleanor had met Henry while working as assistant to her uncle Lord Rayleigh at Cambridge, where she had a significant part in the work of redetermining the absolute values of electrical units, the volt, the ampere and the ohm. Now she turned her considerable talents and meticulous patience to the analysis of the evidence for psychical manifestations, as in the massive statistical study the 'Census of Hallucinations'. After Henry's death in 1900, she continued for another three decades to publish and to work for the cause of psychical research, including a term as SPR President.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. D. Broad, 'Henry Sidgwick and Psychical Research', *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Pt 156, 1938, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152

<sup>3</sup> G. Murphy and R.O. Ballou (eds), *William James on Psychical Research*, The Viking Press, New York, 1960, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

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### **Frederic W.H. Myers**

If the Sidgwicks provided academic standing and moral leadership, Frederic W. H. Myers was without a doubt the engine room of the English movement, especially after the death of his enthusiastic co-worker Edmund Gurney in 1888. He has been described by one scholar as 'one of those odd, vaguely disconcerting men [of a type] whose energies are spent trying to achieve, sustain, and perfect purely subjective forms of experience'.<sup>1</sup> Myers was, according to a contemporary, 'an essayist delicate and penetrating, a poet of high inspiration...'<sup>2</sup> His lucid talent and mystical proclivity are evident in his poem 'St Paul':

Whoso has felt the spirit of the Highest  
Cannot confound nor doubt Him or deny.  
Yea with one voice, O world, though thou deniest,  
Stand thou on that side, for on this am I.

Trained as a classical scholar, a deep admirer of Plato, and gifted with a prodigious memory, Myers amassed an enormous fund of knowledge on scientific issues, and was especially well versed in psychological literature.<sup>3</sup> He could recall the exact date when he resolved to devote his life to the investigation of the mysteries of Being. It was on 3 December 1869 during 'a starlight walk' with Henry Sidgwick, then his tutor at Trinity College, that:

I asked him, almost with trembling, whether he thought that when tradition, intuition, metaphysics had failed to resolve the riddle of the universe there was still a chance that from any actual observable

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<sup>1</sup> J. Cerrullo, *The Secularization of the Soul; Psychological Research in Modern Britain*, Philadelphia, Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> T. Flournoy, *Spiritism and Psychology*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1911, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Gauld, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

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phenomena - ghosts, spirits, whatsoever there might be - some valid knowledge might be drawn as to a world unseen.<sup>1</sup>

Sidgwick responded that he had already thought upon the matter, and believed this to be possible. From that night, Myers resolved to pursue this quest, hopefully with Sidgwick's participation, to establish the certainty of another world, and another life, which he considered 'the preamble of all religions'.<sup>2</sup> For over a decade, they attended scores of séances, often coming away in disgust at the banality of the proceedings and the thinly disguised chicanery they frequently observed. On one occasion Myers and Gurney witnessed a dematerialisation at the end of one of Miss C. E. Wood's Newcastle séances. They recorded how 'Pocky' (short for Pocahontas) stationed herself in front of the cabinet, 'then dematerialises herself - sinking away into a slight white mark on the ground in about half a minute. This mark soon disappears'. However, in 1877 Wood was discovered impersonating the same spirit at a Blackburn séance.<sup>3</sup> Yet there were enough inexplicable phenomena to sustain their bruised interest, and they persevered, for if true, the implications of even a tentative proof were vast.

As the eminent French physiologist Charles Richet, a close associate, put it, Myers had 'the faith of a mystic and the ardour of an apostle, in conjunction with the sagacity and precision of a *savant*'.<sup>4</sup> His massive two-volume opus *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, though left unfinished, was published posthumously in 1903 with judicious editing by Hodgson. The subliminal consciousness theory that it expounds was based upon the idea of a continuum, a set of gradations between facts which everyone accepts and facts which might be called 'paranormal'.<sup>5</sup> The contents in its eight chapters are grouped as antinomies; hence 'Disintegrations of Personality' are considered

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in F. W. H. Myers, *Fragments of Inner Life*, E. Myers (ed.), Cambridge, private publication, 1893, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Flournoy, *Spiritism and Psychology*: pp. 49-50.

<sup>3</sup> Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 58, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Flournoy, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> What follows is adapted from Flournoy's lucid exposition of Myers' theory in Flournoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-67.

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against 'Genius'; and 'Sleep' is contrasted to 'Hypnotism'. Given its importance to psychology, and the colossal bulk of empirical research upon which it was based, much of it originating in mediumistic séances and related investigations, it is useful to understand something of the assumptions which guided it, and the theoretical conclusions to which some thirty years of reading and experimentation had led Myers. The fundamental supposition was that each of us is, in reality, a spiritual and permanent entity, a 'soul'. Early in the book, in sonorous style, and choosing his words carefully, Myers established his bold claims:

I claim ... that the ancient hypothesis of an indwelling soul, possessing and using the body as a whole, yet bearing a real, though obscure relation to the various more or less apparently disparate conscious groupings manifested in connection with the organism ... is a hypothesis not more perplexing, not more cumbrous, than any other hypothesis yet suggested. I claim that it is conceivably provable - I myself hold it as actually proved - by direct observation. I hold that certain manifestations of central individualities associated now or formerly with certain definite organisms, have been observed in operation apart from their organisms, both while the organisms were still living, and after they had decayed.<sup>1</sup>

Myers worked out his theory of consciousness from his work with Gurney on *Phantasms of the Living*, from the 1894 'Census of Hallucinations', based upon some thirty thousand replies to a questionnaire, from voracious reading and contact with a wide variety of persons, and attendance at thousands of seances over a number of years. He claimed that our ordinary or 'Supraliminal' personality, our conscious self, is only a small fragment, selected or differentiated through time, from a much larger 'Subliminal' remainder by the struggle for existence in the course of organic evolution on this planet. The waking self represents but a small portion of the individual:

the stream of consciousness in which we habitually live is not the only consciousness which exists in connection with our organism.

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<sup>1</sup> Myers, 1913, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

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Our habitual or empirical consciousness may consist of a mere selection from a multitude of thoughts and sensations, of which some at least are equally conscious with those that we empirically know.<sup>1</sup>

Myers' favourite illustration of his view that human consciousness is a maelstrom, the aggregate of a multitude of regions or layers, was an analogy with the solar spectrum. Just as light, though limited to our sight, extends on one end to the infra-red, and on the other to the ultra-violet rays, so too he argued, beyond our ordinary waking self there exist other levels of consciousness. On the lower end these are the inferior faculties that belonged to our animal ancestors, lost in the process of our organic evolution, and relating to the direction and modification of physiological functions, such as nutrition and secretion. At the other extreme are those superior faculties which, for most people, remain latent or appear only occasionally in flashes, the most dramatic being exhibited in supernormal phenomena like clairvoyance and prophecy. Our total Self infinitely surpasses what is revealed to the empirical consciousness in the waking state, extending into what Myers called participation in a 'metethereal' or transcendental world, and this totality remains in potential the fruit of our evolutionary development. But there is no rigid demarcation between ordinary and latent regions of consciousness, they are not impervious, and there is a constant flux in their thresholds. So that in many persons messages from both inferior and superior subliminal regions appear, whether in dreams, hallucinations or irrational impulses, and in some persons, they manifest as the sources of prophecy and sometimes as the inspiration of genius.

Hence the ordinary self is a fragment, more or less mobile and unstable, of our much larger individuality, and both hysteria and genius, which he conjoins as antinomies, were for Myers the result of 'an exaggerated penetrability of the psychical diaphragm'. In cases of hysteria, this created confusion between the waking self and diseased strata of consciousness that could even lead at times, as in the famous

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<sup>1</sup> Flournoy, *op. cit.*, p. 51; see F. W. H. Myers, 'The Subliminal Consciousness', *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. VII, 1891, pp. 298-355; and Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

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Ansel Bourne case, to the irruption of a vastly different personality; in instances of genius, this permeability occurs between the ordinary self and subliminal strata which are sound and healthy, and sometimes endowed with exceptional abilities, as with mathematical prodigies, or with supernormal faculties, such as prevision and clairvoyance.

It is in relation to sleep and hypnoid states that the implications of a meta-psychical dimension are most apparent in Myers' theory. In dreams, and cases of hypnotic phenomena, which Myers calls 'a successful appeal to the subliminal self' through suggestion, the ability to directly influence the deeper strata of consciousness are apparent in the curative efficacy of such methods. Moreover, to Myers and many of his colleagues they were further evidence that we all live simultaneously in two worlds, the waking and, in proportion to our evolutionary state and mental health, the varying strata within the subliminal regions. The 'Census of Hallucinations' especially showed the implications of this theory in encompassing all manner of phenomena as a discrete series, a gradation extending from the morbid or pathological to the supernormal. William James said that Myers possessed '... a genius not unlike that of Charles Darwin for discovering shadings and transitions, and grading down discontinuities in his argument'.<sup>1</sup>

Once convinced of the existence of telepathic phenomena between the living it was but a short step to postulating telepathic communications between the living and the so-called 'dead'. This perspective, built upon a conviction arising from a huge body of empirical evidence, that aspects of consciousness could independently impress other minds at a distance, was carried forward to the hypothesis that such influence could emanate from discarnate to incarnate beings.<sup>2</sup> As James put it in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, being especially careful not to reduce such experiences to mere epiphenomena:

... *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might* be our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them -

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<sup>1</sup> Gauld, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> Flournoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-7.

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The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain ajar or open.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the significance of Myers' work, James was to write in 1902: 'I don't accept all Myers' opinions as 'gospel truth'- quite the reverse. But I think Myers' *problem*, the 'exploration of the subliminal', to be the most important definite investigation open of late in psychology, and I think Myers' way of going at it on the whole admirable'.<sup>2</sup>

### **Richard Hodgson at Cambridge**

The task of lifting the study of psychical phenomena to a scientific and respectable venture in America fell to an Australian expatriate who spent the remainder of his life as 'Secretary for America' as the letterhead proclaimed, of the American Branch of the SPR. It is instructive to consider the origins and character of the first professional psychical researcher of modern times.

Richard Hodgson was born at Melbourne in the colony of Victoria in 1855. His father was an importer in the city, and the family were practicing Methodists, a faith that Richard abandoned fairly early when he could no longer subscribe to its tenets, but he never ceased to believe. He matriculated at the University of Melbourne in 1871. Always a brilliant student, Hodgson was one of the first L.L.D.s produced by the young University, graduating in 1878 aged twenty-two. His fellow student-at-law Alfred Deakin, a future Prime Minister of the Commonwealth, took him to his first séance, though Hodgson long maintained a healthy scepticism in such matters, unlike Deakin, who quickly embraced the movement, even claiming to be a 'medium'

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1 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature*, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, Longmans, Green, New York, 1929, p. 242.

2 Robert C. LeClair (ed.), *Letters of William James and Theodore Flournoy*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1966, p.105.

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for a brief period.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that through his friendship with Deakin, Hodgson heard some of the many Spiritualist mediums and lecturers from overseas who regularly visited the colony during the 1870s.

A female contemporary described Hodgson as a very handsome man of fair complexion, with light brown hair and of rather large build. He wore a beard, very fine and well cared for. Athletic, loquacious, and vital, he always impressed one as being in excellent health. 'He was an extremely interesting talker, very quick in his replies, good natured and very frank - in fact, almost rough at times...'<sup>2</sup> Hodgson, a product of the solid colonial middle class, was in many ways atypical of both the cultures he was henceforward to mediate between, at the fringes of Empire, culturally as well as geographically: already an L.L.D., he was required to enrol as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Though he would never practice at the Bar, his legal training would prove useful in the profession into which he was propelled, with a judicious shove from his mentor Henry Sidgwick. In America, where his new mentor was the likeable, and extremely astute William James, Hodgson would discover the work of a psychical researcher to be part detective and advocate, part administrator, publicist and fund-raiser, as well as experimenter and writer. He had a fine command of language, if somewhat showy in his early days. Writing from Cambridge to a friend in Australia, he dismisses a mutual acquaintance as 'bisulcous ... sternutatory ophicleidical froth' and speaks of others 'guzzling together in cyclostomous merriment, crescive crepitation of ignescent spinach!'<sup>3</sup> (both relating to breaking wind). The older Hodgson was remembered by his American friends as a devotee of psychic communications and, on the more physical plane, 'of pool, of long swims, of late hours of

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Deakin's Spiritualist beliefs and religious life in general, and their relation to his political career, see A. J. Gabay, *The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Manning Robbins, *Both Sides of the Veil, A Personal Experience*, Sherman, French & Co., Boston, 1909, pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, *Good Friday 1881*; unless otherwise indicated, all correspondence between Hodgson and Hackett cited in this paper is lodged in the Richard Hodgson papers, American Society for Psychical Research, New York, Series 7, Box 1, folders 1 and 2.

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abundant talk'.<sup>1</sup> Ever the individualist, he insisted on wearing brown suits in an era when everyone wore black, proud that 'I have never smashed my own sense of freedom or fed the tumours of others' foibles by going anywhere in full dress or fool dress either'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he nearly missed out on getting his Cambridge degree in 1881 because the ceremony required kneeling to the Vice-Chancellor, and he refused to kneel to any man. His friends persuaded him to change his mind with the greatest difficulty.<sup>3</sup>

Like many young men of his era, Hodgson's early passions were for the literary life, and he felt a dichotomy between the rational and the imaginative in his nature. His devotion to the ideas of Herbert Spencer was exceeded only by his love of Wordsworth's poetry. Yet his comment that 'Spencer ignores moral relations between us and other moral forces of the universe'<sup>4</sup> in a letter to his friend James Hackett in 1877, reveals a tension already between adherence to Spencer's arid positivism, and his growing conviction of the moral economy of the universe. Just prior to leaving Australia for Cambridge the next year, he would wonder whether 'my metaphysical proclivities will swallow the mite of poesy which is within my swelling bosom, and whether that cold confounded cute critical physical science will eat up both...'<sup>5</sup> For a time Hodgson was active in the Y.M.C.A., serving as Secretary of the Library Committee.<sup>6</sup> Like Deakin, he was possessed of a deep philosophical curiosity. At University, both were active in the Eclectic Association, founded a decade before, the main forum for debate on philosophical and religious questions in the colonial capital. For one lecture, drawing on his legal education, he discussed 'Bentham and Ancient Law'. At another he spoke on Wordsworth, his intention being to:

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<sup>1</sup> M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *History of the Tavern Club 1884-1934*, Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1934, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 22 October 1879.

<sup>3</sup> A. T. Baird, *Richard Hodgson: The Story of a Psychological Researcher and His Times*, Psychic Press, London, 1949, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 30 May 1877.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 18 March 1878.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 7 August 1877.

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confine myself to pointing out those characteristics in external nature which he took note of. These produce corresponding feelings in the 'human' and some of them are *beauty, silence and calm, joyousness, generosity, freedom, grandeur, and Spirituality*. These he found in Nature, and W. saw them and in the growing familiarity with them a man's soul becomes *beautiful, calm, joyous, generous, free, grand, and spiritual*.<sup>1</sup>

Hodgson added that 'the first ones, of course, all depend on and grow from the last, and the Spirituality is God immanent'. Another address on 'Mechilzedek's Pyramid' to the Baptist Church Association, met with less success. Drawing mainly on the elaborate speculations of Flinders Petrie and of Piazzi Smythe, former Astronomer Royal for Scotland and author of *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid*, he argued for the existence of an occult symbolism and prophetic significances in the dimensions of the Great Pyramid at Gizeh; he agreed that 'it was too much for them'.<sup>2</sup>

Hodgson's boyhood friend James Hackett, who had recently moved to Adelaide, became for the better part of a decade his distant yet intimate confidant, first in Melbourne, then in England and, less frequently, after Hodgson settled in Boston. At the end of 1877 Hodgson was finishing the L.L.D. degree. Whilst he drank in 'the nectar of the Roman Law', he wondered at times that: '[t]here seems something deeper than the depth of me, which is in myself but is too subtle for me to touch in anywise. It is here that the fundament[al] proof for God must be, and not in anything eternal whatsoever. The divine God being in every man...'<sup>3</sup>

Steeped in the vigorous free thought of 1870s Melbourne, which drew upon the debates over *Essays and Reviews*, evolutionary theory, and Spiritualism, his current views on the Atonement indicate the distance Hodgson had traversed from the Methodism of his youth. If we are to believe in Christ, he pontificated to Hackett, it cannot be 'in the sense that the flowing of a little blood on the cross could have any

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 1877, cited in Hackett, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 14 September 1877.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 29 October 1877.

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efficacy with our Everlasting Father'.<sup>1</sup> Christ had come 'to tell us of the Loving Fatherhood of the "Unknowing Unknowable Power" and to give us assurance, by after-manifestation, of a future life, but to give us also an example of a straight life'.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere he wrote that the assertion that there are '*three persons and one God* is simply, in our sense of the word *persons*, ridiculously absurd and inconceivable', and that the Bible, or any part of it, is infallible 'is, of course, ridiculous'.<sup>3</sup> And while Christ was 'something more than any other man that has ever lived', to assert 'that he was God "walking about in disguise" of a man, is an absurdity...' Moreover he regarded as 'a monstrous growth of literalism and bigotry and fanaticism' the common belief that Christ's death should 'give a man an *exeat* from hell and a free pass to the cakes of Heaven'.<sup>4</sup> Yet in some areas, as in his relations with women, early influences remained strong. In 1880 the twenty-four year old Hodgson informed Hackett: 'I don't blame anyone for dancing unless on very good grounds. I think that I couldn't clasp a woman as in dancing with an unstained conscience, and believe many are like myself constituted'.<sup>5</sup>

Hodgson was now eminently qualified in the Law and, with University graduates in the small colonial city numbering under three hundred, he could have commanded an influential place, like his fellow L.L.D. Dr John Quick, who was to achieve distinction in the Federation movement. But philosophy and not the Law drew Hodgson's deepest interests. He advised that: 'I should like to take a part in the coming, or rather come, warfare on the subject of God and a Future Life' and, taking up a current debate about the existence of a theological Hell, he condemned '... the madness, the awful lunacy of those benighted individuals who look for a never-ending torture to the wicked'.<sup>6</sup>

Through Professor Hearn, former Cambridge man, political economist and jurist, and author of the celebrated *Plutology*, Hodgson was encouraged to continue his studies as an undergraduate at

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 14 December 1877.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 31 July 1879.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 14 December 1877.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 20 October 1878.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 23 March 1880.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 23 November 1877.

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Cambridge to take the Moral Sciences and History branches.<sup>1</sup> He chose St John's College because Wordsworth had studied there also. In his first letter to Hackett in October 1878, Hodgson described life at Cambridge: '... we are compelled to wear our caps, i.e. trenchers and gowns every day till 11 am if we are outside our lodgings, - every day after dark, and all day Sunday, and of course always at lectures or hall or seeing any College Authorities'.<sup>2</sup>

Though he came from the colonial fringe, Hodgson was in no sense overawed by the august serenity of Cambridge, nor was he tongue-tied, like some of his fellow colonials, at finding himself at the centre of Empire. On one occasion, returning from the laboratory in the College grounds late one evening wearing an old robe, skullcap and slippers, Hodgson was confronted by the Assistant Dean, who in 'a very mild tone asked if I was a member of the College, then my name, and then complained of my dress', explaining that some of the Fellows frowned on this sort of laxity. Hodgson objected, whereupon he was given to understand 'that I should change at the laboratory, and keep slippers there etc, and ended up by saying "It is my wish, please, that you should"', to which Hodgson replied sarcastically: 'Oh, of course if it is your wish there can be no alternative!' The Dean immediately went off, apparently delighted, and Hodgson related that 'of course, I have gone about in slippers and skullcaps and no caps etc just the same'.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the Tripos work he complained that 'some of the work set down includes Ancient Ethics - which is almost entirely grossly wrong and great rubbish also'.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more significantly the examiner, identified as an 'old fogey' was strongly anti-Spencerian '... so that instead of *criticism and originality*, he avowedly preferred *mere reproduction*, a good example of the slavishness of that method of examination predominant mostly, which', Hodgson adds somewhat self-importantly, 'as Spencer wrote to me some time ago, is devised for testing a man's "power of acquisition instead of using that which has been acquired"'.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 15 May 1878.

2 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 20 October 1878.

3 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 25 August 1879.

4 Hackett, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

5 Hackett, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

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Hodgson liked the British upper classes. He was fond of getting away to the ancient manorial houses from which some of his classmates derived, and always a keen hiker and climber, he made good use of such invitations. At Taunton in September 1879, he had 'a grand week, roaming the hills of Somerset by day, joking and roaring and hearing fine music by night.' He observed that a man called Savoury, who had been married for only two or three months to one of his host's sisters, had soon fallen into the habit of continually calling his wife 'Ma!'<sup>1</sup>

Hodgson soon took to Cambridge life, including its collegiate loyalties and the perennial high-jinks of undergraduates. At the end of a typical week, after lectures in Biology, Logic and Botany, he prepared a frugal dinner and 'read Spencer till 2 am.' The following morning he 'purchased peas in the market walked the 3 miles to the boatraces, waited for some time, ran along the bank lunatically shouting out "Go it John's!", till I was puffed, and then returned and had tea ...' Later, using two foot-long glass tubes he put the peas purchased earlier to use, firing them along with three others, through the Venetian blinds of his darkened bedroom. They scored hits at various individuals 'old men and maidens, young men and children', and ultimately at a Bobby 'who wandered about disconsolately after being spit and evidently intending dire vengeance...'<sup>2</sup> Hodgson also took advantage of more refined aspects of English culture. At London's Lyceum Theatre, arriving early to secure a cheaper pit seat, Hodgson saw Irving performing *Hamlet*, with Ellen Terry as Ophelia. In his opinion Irving 'mouthed somewhat, and trod the stage rather tragically, otherwise he was magnificent. His facial action, his gestures, the emphasis of words and looks were very fine ... Of course at the end of the tragedy Irving died superbly'.<sup>3</sup>

The gregarious Hodgson soon developed lasting friendships. He liked Myers the poet and classicist, and was particularly fond of his tutor in Moral Sciences, Henry Sidgwick of Trinity. In one letter he recounts how during that week he had spent '26 hours' on a paper for Sidgwick 'The Relation of Intellect to Moral Action', which he describes as 'chiefly a bag at Mill's Utilitarianism, written in the "I am Sir Oracle" style'. Sidgwick evidently thought it was 'very cheeky for

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1 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 25 September 1879.

2 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 17 May 1879.

3 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 12 February 1879.

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one who ought to reflect that he was a Freshman and should sit at his feet and be taught whatever he thought proper'. Clearly Hodgson was no ordinary freshman, and his confident manner, his easy-going style, along with his rapid and fertile mind attracted Sidgwick. He continues: '[o]n one point I trod unwittingly upon a small corn where Sidgwick agreed with Mill in differing from Spencer. Against my point here Sidgwick had put "shallow" and told me he had argued otherwise and against Spencer in his *Method of Ethics* which I have not read yet. However I preferred being shallow with Spencer to being deep with Sidgwick and Mill!!' Sidgwick agreed with Hodgson's general slap at Mill's book '... but in several places thought I was wrong and tried in a way to sit upon me'. Hodgson was rather amused 'because he seems a goodly fellow, and I thought I detected a feeling that he had better be rough on me with the intention of diminishing my confidence...'<sup>1</sup>

Confidence was one quality that the Freshman Hodgson had in plentiful supply. But toward the end of his undergraduate course in 1880 disaster struck: 'A girl (from Girton College) was bracketed ... fourth in the First Class in the Moral Science Tripos, [an]other got First Class in the History Tripos (no men being in First Class at all)'.<sup>2</sup> Hodgson, although at the head of the men, was placed only in Second Class. Hence there was no hope for a Fellowship. As he explained: 'I wrote, it appears, much too fully about some questions, and not fully enough on others and in one or two questions I gave a portion only instead of the whole of someone's views ... what chiefly lost me a First was I believe the fact that in stating Butler's Ethical Psychology I entirely forgot the main branch of it. So at least I gather from Sidgwick'.<sup>3</sup>

It seems odd that Hodgson should make a botch of an undergraduate examination. But perhaps his L.L.D., his dogmatically Spencerian perspective, added to his boundless self-confidence, had made him careless. Indeed in his final year he was moving among the very elite among British philosophers, weighing in on a debate between Herbert Spencer and the Idealist T. H. Green, with an article in *Mind*, where he defended Spencer's ideas. In one letter he gloated: 'Professor

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 30 March 1879.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 8 February 1880.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 4 May 1881.

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Green of Oxford will not relish being thus sat upon by an *undergraduate of Cambridge*'.<sup>1</sup> The article came to Spencer's favourable attention, and this led to a correspondence with the great man himself, and a reply to Green by Spencer, following on from Hodgson's. In January 1881 Hodgson was '... waiting in expectation to seeing a crusher of a few pages with Spencer's fistograph at the end in February *Contemp...*'<sup>2</sup> It was around this time that Hodgson began serious psychical investigation. At one séance, having heard nothing from Hackett for several weeks, Hodgson accordingly took the last letter received, and 'while sitting with Matthews, he in trance, gave him it, and told him I thought some letters had miscarried from the person who had written that letter. He immediately said it had come from a friend in Adelaide, and that you had postponed writing, and then been unwell...'<sup>3</sup> The summary of facts, which proved to be accurate, both impressed and puzzled Hodgson.

Professors Venn and Sidgwick sympathised with Hodgson on the unfairness of the Tripos result. In 1882, with no immediate prospect of a Fellowship, they encouraged him to continue his studies in Germany, to perfect his command of the language and for that exposure to German Idealism considered invaluable to philosophical work; perhaps also, the suggestion came with the hope that it might dampen Hodgson's dogmatic Spencerian outlook. On learning he was not in a position to do this, Sidgwick insisted - as he said, 'in the interests of philosophy' - on defraying the whole of Hodgson's expenses during his residence in Germany. Sidgwick insisted, and Hodgson accepted the generous offer, and arrived at Jena University with a very flattering letter of introduction from Herbert Spencer himself to Professor Haeckel, declaring that this same youth 'promises to be of great value in the cause of evolutionary philosophy'.<sup>4</sup> Besides Haeckel and evolution, Hodgson studied Hegel with Professor Eucken, one of the leaders of the 'New Idealism' and author of *Mystical Adventures*.

It was while Hodgson was in Germany in 1882 that the SPR was formed, although he had been active with Gurney, Myers and the rest in

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1 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 7 November 1880.

2 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, January 1881.

3 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, January 1881.

4 Richard Hodgson to J. T. Hackett, 2 April 1882.

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attending various séances while studying at Cambridge. On his return from the University of Jena, Hodgson had a short stint as University Extension Lecturer in the North of England. By then the SPRs, to which he was to devote the whole of his working life, were well underway in both England and the U.S.A. Hodgson soon abandoned his former hope of securing a Fellowship. Following Sidgwick, he came to the conclusion that the work of the SPR was more important than any other study, while probably it would also be of fundamental assistance to philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

### **Theosophy**

The first truly controversial item of the SPR research was the investigation by Hodgson of Madame Blavatsky. After completing the Moral Sciences Tripos and following his study at Jena and an unsatisfying period as University Extension Lecturer, Hodgson embarked on his first 'assignment'. He was sent to India, again at Sidgwick's expense, to investigate the miracles of Mme Helena Blavatsky, a large Russian woman, the *soi-disant* tool of invisible 'Masters' and co-founder of the Theosophical Society a decade before.

Sidgwick's personal impressions of Madame Blavatsky were at first favourable. After a session with the SPR when she and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the Theosophical Society's President, came up to Cambridge while on a visit to England, Sidgwick confided to his journal that: 'if personal sensibilities are to be trusted, she is a genuine being, with a vigorous nature intellectual as well as emotional, and a real desire for the good of mankind'. If Blavatsky was a humbug, he continued, 'she is a consummate one: as her remarks have the air not only of spontaneity and randomness but sometimes of an amusing indiscretion', as in her candid description of the chief Mahatma of the Transcendental Council as 'the most utter dried up old mummy that she ever saw'. It appears that opinions varied in this Council:

... the desire to enlighten us Westerns is only felt by a small minority of the Mahatmas, who are Hindoos: the rest Thibetans, are

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<sup>1</sup> Hackett, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

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averse to it : and it would not be permitted, only Koot Hoomi, the youngest and most energetic of the Hindoo minority, is a favorite of the old mummy, who is disposed to let him do what he likes. When the mummy withdraws entirely from earth, as he will do shortly, he wants Koot to succeed him: but Mme B thinks he won't manage this, and that a Thibetan will succeed who will inexorably close the door of enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

Madame Blavatsky claimed to be a *Chela*, or acolyte of the Masters, or Mahatmas, who could cause apparitions of themselves to appear where they were not, as their 'astral form'. Among the most controversial claims was that they could also cause the spontaneous 'precipitation' of handwriting on formerly blank paper, and it was by this means that several prominent and wealthy converts were made to the Theosophical cause. One such important convert was A. P. Sinnett, then editor of the *Pioneer*, who introduced Theosophy to English readers through his book *The Occult World*.

A committee of investigation was formed in May 1884. Its initial report, circulated privately to members, concluded that a *prima facie* case existed for these marvels. This was the first truly controversial item of the SPR research. Under the SPR's auspices, and once again with the financial support of the Sidgwicks, Hodgson left for India in November 1884, returning in April 1885. At its headquarters at Adyar, where the Society had recently moved, Hodgson's investigations discovered a system of traps, holes and sliding panels, and a small passage behind the 'Occult Room' leading to Madame Blavatsky's bedroom.<sup>2</sup> The evidence strongly suggested deceit and fraud, first suspected when Madame Coulomb, Blavatsky's former housekeeper who had been fired, had handed twenty letters to the local Christian missionaries, thereafter published in the Madras *Christian College Magazine* in 1884. These had purportedly been written to her by

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Sidgwick, *Journal*, 10 August 1884.

<sup>2</sup> C. Bragdon *Episodes from an Unwritten History*, The Manas Press, Rochester, 1910, p. 44.

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Madame Blavatsky as a confederate, brazenly confessing to a number of frauds.<sup>1</sup> One detractor wrote concerning the ‘Masters’:

... apart from the Hindu belief in the brotherhood of Adepts, the assumption of their existence rested almost entirely on these alleged ‘phenomena’: on ‘occult’ letters supposed to have come from Koot Hoomi, which either dropped ‘materialised’ from the air on the heads of wavering disciples, or duly arrived at the letter-box in the ‘shrine’ which was set up at the Society's headquarters at Madras; on the mysterious duplication of cups and saucers when they were specially required; ... on the tinkling of ‘astral bells’; and on the occasional appearance ... of ‘the Master’ himself, either floating in the air or walking by the water in the moonlight. Puerile as the may seem, it was from these ‘phenomena’ that the TS gained its fame in India.<sup>2</sup>

Hodgson compared the Mahatma letters, especially those written by ‘Koot Hoomi’, one of the alleged Masters, against letters written by Madame Blavatsky, and showed examples of both to handwriting experts, including those at the British Museum.<sup>3</sup> Using his lawyer’s training, Hodgson minutely sifted the evidence, cross-examining both European and ‘native’ witnesses. He noted also certain oddities present in both scripts, in spelling, in the division of words at the end of a line, and in grammatical structure. Hodgson listed examples of spelling and other similarities in style of expression, for what he believed was the disguised handwriting of Madame Blavatsky, claimed as coming from Koot Hoomi, achieved perhaps by employing her left hand.<sup>4</sup>

Following Hodgson’s devastating report, which was published in the *SPR Proceedings*, the SPR committee of investigation concluded damningly: ‘... we regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think that she has achieved a title

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<sup>1</sup> Bragdon, *op. cit.*, p. 45; *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. III, 1885, p. 203; see also M. Coulomb, *Some Account of My Intercourse with Mme Blavatsky from 1872 to 1884*, Elliot Stock, London, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> J. Murdoch, *Exposures of Theosophy addressed to Educated Hindus*, The Christian Literature Society, Madras, 1894, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. III, 1885, p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. III, 1885, pp. 304, 306.

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to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history'.<sup>1</sup>

Revealing Madame Blavatsky to the ridicule of the elite she sought to cultivate signals the depth of Hodgson's feeling for the truth, and his anger with sham in all psychic matters. Always a good Empire man, one of his most contentious conclusions was that Blavatsky was a Russian agent sent to destabilize British rule in India. A decade later, Hodgson's attitude to Theosophy had not changed, though he was now convinced of the truth of 'survival'. He returned to the subject again in 1893, following an attack on his original report by Dr Annie Besant, current President of the Society, with an article entitled 'The Defence of the Theosophists', which was even more scathing than his original contribution. And writing to his colleague Professor James Hyslop in 1899 about a Mrs C. F. Barker, he noted:

I know just the kind of person she is. I have met lots of them. They usually belong to some theosophical or other occult society; they have plenty of theories and lots of talky talk, but the supernormal facts upon which they rely consist on the one hand of the vaguest possible which are perfectly worthless, and on the other of cases that appear to be clear cut but are grossly fraudulent. Very often there will be one or two persons mixed up in a group. The group generally gets fooled by the high falutin' talk of these one or two who are just simply humbugs, and who work the racket sometimes for cash, sometimes for private glory, among the group to which they belong. The adeptship or mahatmaship, etc., of living persons is one of their favourite tenets ... I know the tribe well...<sup>2</sup>

The unwonted success of his Indian mission provided the opportunity of the American job. Hodgson's Australian origins, his characteristically direct and candid manner and gruff humour, and the trust he inspired in others arising from his circumspection and absolute integrity, added to a loquacious style and a keen analytic mind, made

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<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. III, 1885, p.207.

<sup>2</sup> R Hodgson, 'The Defence of the Theosophists', *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. IX, 1893-4, pp. 129-159; Richard Hodgson to James Hyslop, 29 November 1899.

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him a constant favourite in all assemblies of men. He lived a bachelor life, ate at the Club next door for all of his time in Boston, where he lived for the remainder of his life until his death in 1905. He moved easily among many types of persons, and enjoyed the company of some of the best progressive intellects of his time, both in Britain and the United States. The Tavern Club, where Hodgson took his meals and spent much of his leisure time, counted influential men and scions of old Bostonian families among its membership, like Matthew Luce, Henry Cabot Lodge, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the great concert pianist I. Padrewski, along with Harvard men like Morton Prince, a charter member, William James, and William Dean Howells, who served as its President in the 1880s.<sup>1</sup>

Another important link between the American and British SPR from the mid 1880s was the incomparable Boston medium, Mrs Leonora Piper, who was discovered by William James' mother in law on the recommendation of a servant. James himself went to have a sitting, and he was so impressed that within two years, the appointment of Dr Hodgson was largely intended to assist in the work of investigating the putative extraordinary powers displayed by this charming but ordinary suburban housewife. She was, by all accounts, the answer to a psychical researcher's prayer: a living experiment of some thirty years' standing, a medium who could accurately and consistently provide irrefragable proof of a continued existence and of untapped potentials in the human mind, through her trance. Much of the theoretical underpinning of Myers' Subliminal theory came from the SPR's research on Mrs Piper's phenomena over an extended period, and her work was closely guarded by Hodgson, who on one occasion even engaged detectives to determine if she had access to outside sources to obtain information on sitters; no such sources were discovered.

For instance, one of these experiments was a long series written up in the SPR *Proceedings* regarding the 'spirit-return' of George Pelham, who had been a friend of Hodgson's and had met an untimely death. Pelham, known as 'G. P.' during sessions conducted over some months in 1892-3 through Mrs Piper's instrumentality, gave astounding 'proofs' of his continued existence. In the course of these séances Hodgson introduced 120 sitters to George Pelham, all under false

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<sup>1</sup> Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

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names; through Mrs Piper he correctly identified the 29 he had known in life, with the appropriate degree of intimacy, and never claimed to know any of the other 92 presented. Even an apparent mistake added to the evidence for the genuineness of Mrs Piper's mediumship. At first 'G. P.' failed to recognize one young woman, but this was because this sitting was held some eight years after he had known her as a young girl; when Hodgson then asked if he remembered Mrs Warner (her mother), Pelham responded: 'Are you her little daughter? Ask her if she remembers the book I gave her to read, etc'. As one commentator notes, this last incident was regarded as curious and significant, in disproving the 'telepathy' explanation; for if telepathy from the sitter's mind to the medium's had been the source, the latter ought to have got the sitter's name as easily as in the case of the other 28 persons he had known in life. Indeed, if telepathy were the explanation, the same thing ought to have occurred with all 120.<sup>1</sup> It was this kind of evidence that gradually converted Hodgson from sceptic to ardent believer in the survival of the human personality after death.

### **Conclusion**

The significance of the SPRs is far wider than the study of odd phenomena. Their vitality reminds historians of the scientific respectability of enquiries into the supernatural at the turn of the twentieth century; even Sigmund Freud was an early member and contributor to the SPR. The experiments with Mrs Piper would occupy some of the best minds from the U.S., Britain, France, Switzerland and elsewhere for over thirty years. In summing up his opinions on the net results of the SPR's work, William James remarked in a 1906 letter:

... Our critics think that if we haven't a big revelation to give them we have less than nothing. In point of fact what we have is very slight indications of a revelation, mixed with a great variety of baser matter; and in my opinion we who are more or less expert must

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<sup>1</sup> J. Arthur Hill, *Spiritualism and Psychological Research*, TC & EC Jack, London, 1919, pp. 39-40; see Richard Hodgson, 'Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance', *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. XIII, 1897-98, p. 295 ff.

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accustom them first to the notion that *there is a mixture*, and only then parade *the integral raw material* before their eyes.<sup>1</sup>

James was voicing the dilemma of those who were engaging in serious psychical research, which as his famous Gifford lectures five years before made clear, spilt over into the sacred domain of religion and related areas, such as the nature of faith, and whether there was any relation of spiritual transport to pathological behaviours. As both a psychologist and philosopher, James was deeply interested in the broad area of the phenomenon of belief and its sources, and although like Sidgwick he never proved personal survival to himself, it is an index of their scientific rigour that they continued with these investigations nonetheless. James' Gifford Lectures on the *Varieties of Religious Experience* given at Edinburgh in 1902-3 were the culmination of his pioneering work in the psychology of religious experience. He was less interested in the normal religious experience of the mass of humankind, than in the 'irruptive visions and feelings as interpreted by the mystics who had them'.

Henri Bergson's speculations about time and space, and those of James regarding consciousness as a flux of mental activity and its 'fringe,' continued the trend. James applied the insights of the SPR's work on mentation to an analysis of the flux of our mental discourse. As his colleague George Santayana phrased it:

He saw that experience, as we endure it, is not a mosaic of distinct sensations, nor the expression of separate hostile faculties, such as reason and the passions, or sense and the categories; it is rather a flow of mental discourse, like a dream, in which all divisions and units are vague and shifting, and the whole is continually merging together and drifting apart. It fades gradually in the rear, like the wake of a ship, and bites into the future, like the bow cutting the water.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William James to James Hyslop, 20 June 1906.

<sup>2</sup> G. Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, Norton, New York, 1967, p. 68.

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All of these thinkers drew largely upon the work of Edmund Gurney and Frederic W. H. Myers on Hypnotism and Thought Transference, and of Myers and James on the Subliminal regions of consciousness, which in turn influenced another generation of intellectuals, among them Carl Jung, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, given the events that had catapulted him on a career as debunker, by the end of his life Richard Hodgson was firmly convinced of the truth of 'survival'. On one occasion Hodgson remarked 'I can hardly wait to die'; like Myers, he shared the joyful anticipation of Socrates that death might bring him into communication with the great men of thought and action who had passed on before him.<sup>2</sup> It is this story, of a conversion through experience, that I intend to tell in fuller detail.

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<sup>1</sup> See B. Wiltshire, *William James and Phenomenology*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 1968, p. 6, p. 120 and *passim.*, and Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> Baird, *op. cit.*, 'Preface' by Sir E. Bennett, p. xviii.