

OBITUARY

A Parapsychological Naturalist¹
A Tribute to Mary Rose Barrington
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Mary Rose Barrington was born in London; her parents were Americans with Polish–Jewish roots who decided to settle in England. By her own account (she very considerably left a biographical note for her obituary writer), her childhood was idyllic, mostly spent riding her pony and playing tennis, as well as reading her older brother’s science fiction. Later she became interested in classical music (she was an accomplished musician, playing cello in a string quartet and singing alto in a local choir) and in poetry, obtaining a degree in English from Oxford University. She then studied law, qualified as a barrister and a solicitor, and spent most of her professional life as a lawyer; her duties included acting as charity administrator for a large group of almshouses.

Having a career in the law helped in pursuing two interests of special significance to her, animal protection and the right to voluntary euthanasia. She was responsible for drafting three parliamentary Bills relating to these subjects; none of them passed, but they produced some useful discussions.

However, her main interest was in psychical research. When she was 15 she read Sir Oliver Lodge’s *Survival of Man*, and at Oxford she joined the Oxford University Society for Psychical Research, at that time

headed by the philosopher H. H. Price and run by Richard Wilson, later a physics professor at Harvard. The society was very active and hosted knowledgeable invited speakers such as Robert Thouless, Mollie Goldney, and Harry Price. Eventually Mary Rose herself became the Oxford society's President.

She became a member of the London Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1957, and Guy Lambert, joint Honorary Secretary at that time, would often take her along on poltergeist investigations, and instruct her in the art of looking for natural causes of the phenomena, such as cracks in buildings and underground water. However, her all-time favorite poltergeist investigation was the 'flying thermometer' case where, while the initial and central event was not spectacular, the subsequent events she followed over a number of years led her to the idea of "thwarted creativity" in the family relationships being a factor in the phenomena, a theme she observed in a later poltergeist case she investigated with Maurice Grosse (Barrington, 1965–1966, 1969, 1976; Barrington & Grosse, 2001).

She was elected to the SPR Council in 1962 and, in association with George Medhurst, and later John Stiles and other members of the ESP Committee, she devised or cooperated in a number of experiments. They included sheep/goat testing (using the Monte Carlo statistical method to assess the outcome), a remote viewing experiment, a chair test using six scripts as cross-controls, and a telepathy experiment using ambiguous drawings.

Her main focus, however, was on spontaneous cases and the evidence for the paranormal provided by outstanding mediums and psychics; this was essentially historical research, since she did not personally encounter such individuals. The one exception was Matthew Manning, who suddenly produced in her presence a large-scale effect on an infrared beam in the course of experiments at the City University in London in the 1980s. In that instance, Mary Rose played the role of an unwitting catalyst, when she irritated him by remarks intended to console and, according to her, he took out his frustration on the beam instead of on her (Barrington, 2019, pp. 188–189).

In fact, she was a remarkably positive catalyst in many ways and in many lives. A Vice-President of the SPR from 1995, she was very unassuming and self-deprecating when it came to assessing the value

of her ideas and contributions, and I don't think she had any idea of just how much she had achieved and how much she mattered as a person to those who knew her. Perhaps it was her openness to people, to concepts, and to the world that made her so oblivious to her own worth. Fluent in French and German (Peter Mulacz reports that in 1999 she gave a lecture in impeccable German to the Austrian Society for Psychical Research), over the years she provided the readers of the SPR's *Paranormal Review* with ninety "Archives" articles on the history of psychical research and its main figures. Many of us were introduced to the subject through Mary Rose's informal experiments (which traditionally involved a break for tea), and the study days and discussion groups she organized. Indefatigable researcher, she studied the cases that came her way with the perseverance and attention to detail worthy of Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers, as in the puzzling story of Iris Farczady (where a totally new personality speaking a different language seemed to take permanent possession of the body of a young girl involved in mediumship), which she investigated with Peter Mulacz and Titus Rivas (Barrington et al., 2005a). Judging by the response to my request for reminiscences of Mary Rose, it seems that those of us who were lucky enough to work with her and exchange ideas with her remained friends with her for life.

I was fortunate to have worked with her on a project very dear to her heart, a book on the Polish clairvoyant Stefan Ossowiecki, which she wrote in collaboration with the late Ian Stevenson and myself, entitled (Ian Stevenson's happy choice) *A World in a Grain of Sand* (Barrington et al., 2005b). In her own chapter in that book, "Answers and Questions," she put forward her view that Ossowiecki's clairvoyance was effected by retrocognition, and that this implied the persistence of the past in a cosmic memory, and a memory implied the existence of a universal mind.

This view fitted in with the evidence she collected for the existence of JOTT, her acronym for the seemingly trivial Just-One-of-Those Things, when objects seem to disappear and sometimes reappear in inexplicable ways. Despite the rather dismissive nomenclature, she took JOTT seriously, as a collective name for various kinds of spatial discontinuity, and perhaps making the case for the inclusion of such phenomena in the "bigger picture" of reality may turn out to be her

most important achievement. She felt that well-authenticated JOTT supported the idealist philosophy of George Berkeley that the universe and its inhabitants were thoughts in the mind of what Bishop Berkeley called God, although she described the entity responsible for “reality maintenance” in less exalted terms as the Environmental Control (Barrington, 2019, p. 176).

However, being a true parapsychological naturalist, Mary Rose was more concerned with non-conforming facts than theory-building—she called hers “a small theory of everything” (Barrington, 2019, pp. 163–185). One could say that she was pushing the envelope out in both directions: seeing a deeper meaning in everyday events that usually go unnoticed on the one hand and, on the other, championing evidence for macro-events that goes beyond many people’s boggle threshold if she found it compelling. She produced incisive point-by-point responses to destructive and fanciful modern appraisals of research reports from the past, such as Richard Wiseman’s reinterpretation of the Feilding et al. sittings with Eusapia Palladino (Barrington, 1992) or Michael Coleman’s attack on Gustave Geley’s competence and integrity in the matter of Franek Kluski’s hand moulds, which she described as “scraping the barrel of speculation” (Barrington, 1994, p. 106).

It is not uncommon and quite natural to veer toward facile and simplistic explanations when faced with quite outrageous phenomena that defy common sense. However, for Mary Rose such an approach was not acceptable, since every case had to be established on its own merits, while reports of all kinds, including those relating to scientific facts, in the final analysis depended on the testimony being trustworthy and as full as possible. As she put it, “That atoms fit into a coherent system and materialisations appear to conflict with that system is not a good argument for rejecting good testimony” (Barrington, 2013, p. 12).

It was her abiding interest in the phenomena produced by two Polish psychic virtuosi, the clairvoyant Stefan Ossowiecki and Franek Kluski, an extraordinary physical medium, that shaped my involvement in psychical research from the day I first met Mary Rose at an SPR Study Day many years ago. Ever eager for more information that only Polish sources could provide, Mary Rose spurred me on, pushing me over my boggle threshold and making my intellectual life much more fun in the process. As some of us know from experience, working with her

and talking to her was a delight. A cherished friend, at the end she was at peace with herself, leaving behind a body of valuable and highly readable writings, happy memories, and the heartfelt gratitude of many for having had her with us.

NOTE

- ¹ This is Stephen Braude's very apt title of his review (Braude, 2019) of Mary Rose's book: *JOTT: When Things Disappear . . . and Come Back or Relocate—and Why It Really Happens* (Barrington, 2018).

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