

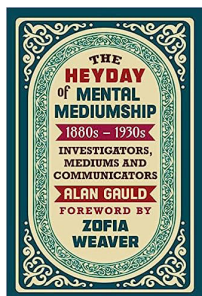


**BOOK AND
MULTIMEDIA
REVIEW**

The Heyday of Mental Mediumship 1880s-1930s: Investigators Mediums and Communications

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Anyone interested in the history of Spiritualism should read this book. Alan Gould is a former president of the Society for Psychical Research and well-known for his previous outstanding books: *The Founders of Psychical Research* (1968), *Poltergeists* (1979, with Tony Cornell), *Mediumship and Survival: A Century of Investigations* (1983), and *History of Hypnotism* (1992). *The Heyday of Mental Mediumship 1880s-1930s* extends this legacy. Gaud discusses the personalities, backgrounds, and the social interactions of major investigators and mental mediums of this era.

Although a major focus is on Leonora Piper, other mediums, and the “cross-correspondences,” are also discussed. *Cross-correspondences* refer to fragmentary phrases, written or spoken by geographically distant mediums or automatists, which can be fit together to form coherent messages. These messages, when assembled, seemed to originate from a specific deceased person (Frederic Myers, for example). The messages were complex and specific, making it seem unlikely that they originated from the minds of individual mediums. As a result, the *cross-correspondences* constitute evidence supporting belief in life after death.

Researchers during this era included William James (considered *the Father of American psychology*), Richard Hodgson (Australian-born psychical researcher), James Harvey Hyslop (professor of ethics and logic at Columbia University), William Romaine Newbold (professor of Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania), Walter Franklin Prince (Episcopalian Rector), and John F. Thomas (education administrator). Their efforts, described by Gaud, demonstrated methodological progression. For example, John F. Thomas, in the early 1930s, devised an evaluative scheme for calculating the statistical improbability associated with the relationships between séance information and corresponding facts.

To what degree were these researchers successful? Does their evidence compel belief in ESP and/or life after death? Gaud describes numerous séances during which mediums, such as Mrs. Piper, provided valid information about deceased individuals. Did she hire investigators to gather this information? Could she have guessed the information through skillful observation or shrewd guessing? Gaud carefully evaluates the historical data. His conclusion: the probability that skeptical arguments explain *all* the evidence is extremely slight. The evidence supports belief in paranormal processes.

Does the evidence support belief in life after death? Although many mediums provided information unknown to their sitters, perhaps this information was derived through ESP (the “super-ESP” hypothesis). Spiritualist investigators attempted to refute this argument. They observed that mediums sometimes took on the mannerisms, accents, verbal peculiarities, and speaking style of a particular deceased person. Many sitters felt compelled to believe that they were communicating with their loved ones.



Sometimes “drop-in” communicators (unplanned “spirits”) provided information unknown at the time, which was later verified (seemingly a refutation of the super-ESP hypothesis). How did proponents of the super-ESP theory respond? Gauld argues that they must arbitrarily stretch their arguments, twisting the known facts in quite an arbitrary way to promote their favored hypothesis. But Gauld describes cases obscuring this issue. Although Hodgson, Hyslop, and Newbold felt their finds confirmed afterlife belief, William James and even Mrs. Piper were not fully convinced.

The evidence is not crystal clear. Even the best mediums, such as Mrs. Piper, held séances with absurd, fallacious, and silly features. Spiritualist mediums often had a “spirit control,” an entity who acted as a kind of master of ceremonies during séances. Many spirit controls revealed absurd qualities. One of Mrs. Piper’s early controls, Dr. Phinuit, was “a preposterous scoundrel” with “distinctly suspicious features” (page 43). He claimed to be French and spoke with a French accent but could not speak or understand French. Another group of controls, the *Imperator Band*, claimed to be in contact with prominent Spiritualist figures but failed to pass tests evaluating this claim. Instead, they offered preposterous, sometimes contradictory, “teachings.”

Seemingly good evidence was often mixed with absurdity. One of Mrs. Piper’s controls, George Pellow, correctly identified his former friends, a remarkable ability. Mrs. Piper’s investigator, Richard Hodgson, believed Pellow’s spirit was authentic. Another researcher asked the Pellow spirit about an important philosophical manuscript that Pellow had authored. The spirit seemed unaware of this text. During further conversations, the Pellow spirit revealed deficiencies in his philosophical understanding, a knowledge inferior to that of the living Pellow. The living George Pellow knew Latin and ancient Greek, but the spirit struggled to translate simple Latin and Greek sentences.

Perhaps most amusing among these absurdities was the strange saga surrounding Dean Bridgman Conner. Conner, an American working in Mexico, fell ill and died in 1885. His father had a vivid dream in which Conner told him that he was not dead but was a captive. Richard Hodgson took Dean’s effects to Mrs. Piper, seeking to gain insights regarding the story’s validity. Mrs. Piper’s spirit control, George Pellow, provided Conner’s name (demonstrating ESP, it seems). Pellow’s spirit then provided a series of cues with the goal of helping investigators locate Conner. An agent, following these cues, searched specified locations. He was told by Pellow’s spirit that he was extremely close. In the end, the endeavor turned out to be completely bogus. Dean Conner was confirmed to have

died in Mexico City. Gauld writes, “The Piper communicators would maintain errors and absurdities with great persistence, preferring to wriggle and find excuses rather than admit they had been wrong; and they would do this despite the trouble and distress that their continued errors might cause to those involved on ‘this side.’ Such behavior was all the odder in that Mrs. Piper herself seems from all accounts to have been a decent and sympathetic individual” (page 131).

What should we conclude? William James states (with reference to Mrs. Piper and Hobson’s spirit), “I remain uncertain and await more facts” (page 177). We have waited many decades. Gauld presents the available facts. He notes that the types of powerful mediums investigated during the Spiritualist era do not exist today. In reference to life after death, he writes: “We... find ourselves with a hypothesis that no empirical investigation can confirm or disconfirm, which is a situation most scientists would regard as undesirable if not unscientific” (page 242).

Gauld mentions possible paths toward resolution. Some people pin their hopes on quantum theory. My opinion: Progress within quantum mechanisms seems to lead to increasing levels of puzzlement. We must wait for resolution. Other theorists argue that ideas from pantheism, coinciding with quantum theory, offer an answer. In harmony with this, the ancient Hindus stated, “Everything is consciousness, and thou art that.” My question: Does this allow testable hypotheses?

The quirkiness within the Spiritualist “evidence” coincides with what George Hansen (2001) has labeled the “Trickster.” The *Trickster* is an archetype within mythology, folklore, and anthropology, associated with disruption, deception, psi phenomena, and marginality. The *Trickster* is mischievous, crafty, deceitful, and clever. The *Trickster* rejects established doctrines, boundaries, and norms. Some parapsychologists argue that the *Trickster* explains parapsychology’s difficulties with replicability. The Spiritualist *Trickster* seems equally powerful. It tarnishes both super-ESP and Spiritualist explanations through its absurdity.

What does the evidence imply? Gauld refers to a “scientific stalemate,” an inability to reach satisfactory conclusions. My opinion: the evidence offers an unacceptable image of the afterlife. The evidence suggests that some deceased people, probably a minority, survive bodily death. Mediums’ messages portray them as suffering from selective memory loss, reduced empathy, and moral deficiency, possible symptoms of brain damage. This idea is unsatisfactory. Who wants to believe this?

The *Trickster* idea, present throughout history, provides a hypothesis. It predicts that future psychological researchers will not generate evidence acceptable to the

mainstream scientific community. My opinion: Social scientific research strategies regarding belief allow testable hypotheses (McClenon, 2002). Anomalous experiences shape belief in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities.

No matter what the reader's predisposition regarding ESP or life after death, I predict that most readers will find this book to be well-written, informative, and historically well-grounded. Gauld offers a clear-eyed portrayal of the information he evaluates. This book constitutes a major contribution to the literature regarding mental mediumship.

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