

Leonora Piper

The American medium Leonora Piper (1859–1950) holds a significant position in the literature of psychical research, having submitted for decades to scientific investigation. Unlike so-called ‘physical’ mediums, those that created [psychokinetic phenomena](#) in dark or dimly-lit séance conditions, Piper produced veridical [‘mental’ phenomena](#): accurate and detailed information about people unknown to her. She was studied for nearly two decades by scholars and scientists, among them the American psychologist and philosopher [William James](#), the renowned British physicist [Oliver Lodge](#), and the American psychologist and professor of logic [James Hyslop](#). The reports of their investigations fill several volumes and include transcripts of hundreds of sittings.

Then, as now, people with little or no connection to Piper speculated that she was an accomplished charlatan practising ‘cold reading’ and other well-known tricks. However, unlike some other mediums, she was never caught in fraud or suspected of it by serious investigators. The phenomena was seen to occur only when she was in a self-induced trance, whose genuineness they were able to verify beyond doubt, and in which she was unconscious of what she was saying or doing.

The investigators’ decisive verdict was that telepathy was the minimum needed to explain her feats. Some, notably Lodge, Hyslop, and [Richard Hodgson](#), an Australian who had been teaching law and philosophy in England, came to believe that she was genuinely in touch with the surviving minds of recently deceased humans. Others such as William James were less convinced.

Early Life

Leonora Piper was born in Nashua, New Hampshire, USA, as Leonora Evelina Simonds, the fourth of six children. Within her family she was known as Leonore. A later memoir describes her having clairvoyant experiences as a child, such as gaining inward knowledge of the death of an aunt two days before the family received the news.^[1] She also spoke of seeing bright lights and faces in her bedroom and of her bed being continually rocked.

Piper’s parents were of English ancestry and devout members of the Congregational Church, into which Leonora was baptized (her father gave her a small Bible on her ninth birthday as a reward for having read the book from cover to cover). In her teens she enjoyed sports and became an expert needlewoman. As a young woman she is described as tall, slender and graceful, with Grecian features and golden tresses. In 1881, aged 22, she married William Piper of Boston, giving birth to daughters Alta in 1884 and Minerva in 1885.

Shortly after Alta’s birth Piper contracted a persistent ailment and was persuaded by her father-in-law to consult a psychic healer, a blind medium named JR Cocke. During her first visit in June 1884, Piper experienced curious twitchings, and felt she was on the verge of fainting. On a second visit the medium placed his hands on

her head, and shortly she became unconscious. An investigator to whom she later described the experience wrote:

As she was losing consciousness she was aware of a flood of light and saw strange faces, and a hand moving before her. The 'flood of light' she had experienced once before, a few months previously; it immediately preceded a swoon, caused by a sudden blow on the side of the head.^[2]

Still in a trance (unconscious) state, Piper rose from her chair, walked to a table in the center of the room, picked up a pencil and paper and wrote rapidly. She then handed the paper to another person present, Judge Frost, and returned to her chair, still entranced. Having regained consciousness, and with no recollection of what had taken place, Piper learned from Frost – a respected jurist – that what she had written was a coherent and meaningful message from Frost's deceased son, who had been killed in an accident some thirty years earlier.

As word of Frost's experience spread, Piper herself began receiving requests for sittings. She tried doing this at home with relatives and friends, with some success.

Investigations Overview

In the autumn of 1885, Piper was visited by two ladies who had heard about her from their maidservant, a friend of a servant of the Piper family. They were the mother-in-law and sister-in-law of Professor William James of Harvard University, who was himself interested in claims of psychic phenomena and had earlier set up an American branch of the British [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR).^[5]

Their sitting was successful, and James was sufficiently interested by their description to book a sitting for himself. He considered this also to have been successful, and went on to hold a total of twelve sittings, arranging for friends, relatives and associates to be present. Of these people, twelve received only unknown names or trivial talk. The other fifteen received meaningful information, of a kind which James believed the medium could not have come upon by any normal means.

Lacking time to do more, James arranged for the investigation to be continued on a full-time basis by Hodgson, who now took over the management of the [American Society for Psychical Research](#) (ASPR) as its executive secretary. Hodgson had previously investigated cases on behalf of the SPR and had established a reputation for a sceptical approaches regarding psychic claimants such as William Eglinton and Helena Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, whose claims [he concluded were fraudulent](#).

In 1888, Hodgson arranged with Piper to give regular sittings for the purposes of research. On average she gave three sittings a week for individuals sent to her by Hodgson under pseudonyms (he observed her almost continuously until his death eighteen years later). In some cases Hodgson would sit in and take notes. In others he obtained detailed reports from the sitters afterwards.

At Hodgson's urging, senior members of the SPR invited Piper to stay with them in England so that they too could observe her mediumistic activity. She arrived in Liverpool together with her two children in November 1889 and remained until early February. Sittings were held with [Frederic WH Myers](#), [Walter Leaf](#) and Oliver Lodge (who had 83 sittings, the largest number), and with guests invited by them (but not identified to Piper). These sittings were described in a 214-page report by Myers, Lodge and Leaf titled 'A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance', published in the SPR's *Proceedings* in 1890.

In 1892, Hodgson produced his own 168-page report, 'A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance'. In 1897, he published a follow-up report, 'A Further Record of Certain Phenomena of Trance', of nearly 300 pages.

Hodgson continued to work with Piper and it was expected that he would eventually publish a third report. However he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1905, and his notes were found to be indecipherable, ruling out posthumous publication. Subsequent investigations were led by James Hyslop, whose 785-page report, 'A Record and Discussion of Mediumistic Experiments', was published by the ASPR in 1910; this was a report and analysis of seventeen sittings in which he believed himself to be in regular communication with the deceased spirit of his father and other family members.

Also in 1910 appeared Amy Tanner's *Studies in Spiritism*, a sceptical assessment of Piper's mediumship based on six sittings carried out by G Stanley Hall, president of Clark University, and Tanner, his assistant.

The Trance State

To enter the trance state Piper settled in a comfortable chair and closed her eyes. The onset of the trance was typically immediate, although sometimes it took several minutes and occasionally did not happen at all, especially when she was feeling unwell. It began and ended with convulsive movements that sitters often found alarming.

One sitter said that, after being seated a minute or two, her eyeballs rolled upward, her face became slightly convulsed, and then she began talking in a rough voice not her own.^[4] It seemed to him as if the voice were coming from a statue. Another described it as 'perhaps the most shocking sight I ever witnessed'.^[5]

Piper herself described the experience as follows:

I feel as if something were passing over my brain, making it numb, a sensation similar to that I experienced when I was etherized, only the unpleasant odor of the ether is absent. I feel a little cold, too, not very, just a little, as if a cold breeze passed over me, and people and objects become smaller until they finally disappear, then, I know nothing more until I wake up, when the first thing I am conscious of is a bright, very, very bright light, and then darkness, such darkness. My hands and my arms begin to tingle just as one's foot tingles after it has 'been asleep', and I see, as if from a great distance, objects and people in the room; but they are very small and very black.^[6]

The genuineness of the trance state was tested on several occasions by subjecting Piper to physical discomfort. Richard Hodgson wrote that he could not detect ‘the smallest signs of discomfort’ after she had taken several inhalations of strong ammonia (he took special care to see that the ammonia was actually inhaled).^[7] Similarly, she appeared to be quite unaware of a spoonful of salt which he placed in her mouth.

Oliver Lodge wrote:

The trance is, to the best of my belief, a genuine one. In it Mrs. Piper is (sometimes, at least) insensible to pain, as tested by suddenly pushing a needle into her hand, which causes not the slightest flinching; and her pulse is affected beyond what I can imagine to be the control of volition.^[8]

Stanley Hall and Amy Tanner used an ethesimeter to measure the tactile sensitivity of her hands, finding no response. They also pressed camphor to her nostrils, then placed a one-third teaspoonful of camphor in her mouth, neither having any effect (although she complained of painful blisters on her lips after becoming conscious). They concluded that ‘certainly her respiratory functions, taste, smell, general tactile sensibility and motor innervation are asleep’.^[9]

The ‘Controls’

Once in the trance, Piper’s voice and demeanor underwent a dramatic transformation, as if she was now a different personality. This personality purported to ‘control’ her body and use her vocal chords to communicate messages from sitters’ deceased friends and relatives.

In the early phase of her mediumship the personality was almost invariably that of an elderly Frenchman who identified himself as Jean Phinuit Scivelle, generally just Phinuit – which he pronounced ‘Finee’ – and said he had died at the age of seventy in about 1860, also that his wife was named Marie Latimer and that he had studied medicine at Metz (a French city then under German rule).

One sitter, New York artist Richard Rich, reported:

With little trouble she went into the trance – a state which was entirely new to my experience – and after a moment’s silence, which followed her rather violent movements, I was startled by the remarkable change in her voice – an exclamation, a sort of grunt of satisfaction, as if the person had reached his destination and gave vent to his pleasure thereat by this sound, uttered in an unmistakably male voice, but rather husky. I was at once addressed in French with, “Bonjour, Monsieur, comment vous portez vous?” To which I gave answer in the same language, with which I happen to be perfectly familiar. My answer was responded to with sort of inquiring grunt, much like the French, “Hein?” and then the conversation continued in English, with rarely a French word, and more rarely a French expression coming into it.^[10]

By the time of Hodgson’s second (1897) report, ‘Phinuit’ had been superseded by a personality who identified himself as George Pellew, an acquaintance of Hodgson’s

who had recently died in an accident aged thirty-two. Pellew is lightly disguised in Hodgson's second report as 'George Pelham', and is generally referred to there and elsewhere as 'GP'.

In a third phase, the controls were a group of overtly religious personalities with a tendency to sermonize. They were headed by 'Imperator', who specialized in spiritual teaching. Another who called himself 'Rector' appeared to be an elderly clergyman. They are collectively referred to as 'Imperator', or the 'Imperator band'.

Opinion about the true nature of the controls was divided. According to the 'spiritist' theory, as investigators called it, the controls were what they claimed to be, spirits whose purpose in communicating through Piper was to act as a go-between for sitters and their deceased relatives and friends. On occasion the controls stood aside, enabling the latter to communicate directly.

However, the investigators were unconvinced that 'Phinuit' had ever existed. Attempts to trace documentary evidence that would support his claims proved fruitless (although records that might have confirmed it were destroyed during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870). The name 'Phinuit' appeared to be continuous with 'Finny', the name of the control of JR Cocke, the medium that Piper had consulted, and William James noted that his rather rough and 'saucy' personality, his speech peppered with New England slang, was typical of mediums in the Boston area.^[11]

Accordingly, and especially during the initial stages of the investigation, researchers were strongly disposed to consider 'Phinuit' a secondary personality, a product of Piper's subconscious mind. They further speculated that this *alter ego* could telepathically tap into the mind of the sitter and feed back information as if it were coming from a spirit. This was supported by abundant evidence from sittings throughout Piper's career – and from other mediums – that ideas and images that were held by the sitters often emerged in the medium's utterances; also by the investigators' previous experience of the hypnotic trance in other contexts.

The behaviour of the 'Phinuit' personality, whether this was real in some sense or merely a construct of Piper's unconscious mind, was distasteful to the investigators and to visitors who experienced poor sittings. Although he was generally disposed, even eager, to be helpful, he also sometimes showed a certain low cunning in pretending to knowledge that he did not have, appearing to use methods now known as 'cold reading' (described as 'fishing' by the investigators). For instance he would sometimes note if the sitter provided a piece of information, and then later casually produce it as if it was original knowledge of his own.

Walter Leaf wrote, 'If he is not able to make a right statement, he is always ready with a guess of more or less ingenuity to conceal his ignorance, or at least with some ambiguity or subterfuge which should make a show of turning the difficulty.'^[12] This made a powerfully negative impact on certain observers, and today is widely taken out of context to portray Piper as a common charlatan.

On many occasions information was given that was only partly right, or completely wrong. Sitters who attended sittings in which 'Phinuit' produced only generalities

and wrong information came away believing that there was nothing supernatural about Piper's performance.

However, as the investigators concurred, in successful sittings, 'Phinuit' could pour out quantities of correct information – names, relationships, family circumstances, trivial incidents, pet names – without any hesitation or stumbling. Myers believed that everyone who had seen enough of Piper to form a judgement would agree

(1) that many of the facts given could not have been learnt even by a skilled detective; (2) that to learn others of them, although possible, would have needed an expenditure of money as well as of time which it seems impossible to suppose that Mrs. Piper could have met; and (3) that her conduct has never given any ground whatever for supposing her capable of fraud or trickery. Few persons have been so long and so carefully observed; and she has left on all observers the impression of thorough uprightness, candour, and honesty.^[13]

The investigators were also struck by the extraordinary tenacity and minuteness of memory displayed by the Phinuit personality. William James wrote:

The medium has been visited by many hundreds of sitters, half of them, perhaps, being strangers who have come but once. To each Phinuit gives an hour full of disconnected fragments of talk about persons living, dead, or imaginary, and events past, future, or unreal. What normal waking memory could keep this chaotic mass of stuff together? Yet Phinuit does so ... So far as I can discover, Mrs. Piper's waking memory is not remarkable, and the whole constitution of her trance-memory is something which I am at a loss to understand.^[14]

The 'secondary personality' argument was somewhat weakened with the appearance of the personality identifying himself as George Pellew (referred to in the literature as 'Pelham' or 'GP' – *see above*), whose speech, mannerisms and interests were thought by Hodgson – and by many of Pellew's friends whom Hodgson invited to sit with Piper in the months and years following his death – to match those of the living Pellew. 'GP' also showed none of 'Phinuit's' 'fishing' tendencies. In his 1897 report on the Pelham sittings, Hodgson revealed his new conviction of the survival of consciousness after death.

Also tending to counter the 'secondary controls' interpretation, the controls were frequently replaced by other personalities who identified themselves as deceased friends and relatives of sitters, talking and behaving in ways that the sitters often found completely convincing. These direct interactions tended to be brief, but were sometimes routine, as in the case of the communicator claiming to be James Hyslop's deceased father. Another sitter described her frequent conversations with a communicator she believed to be a deceased friend, a church minister whose interests and mannerisms were distinct from both 'Phinuit' and Piper.^[15] (*See below for further discussion.*)

Automatic Writing

In the sittings described in Hodgson's second (1897) report, the entranced Piper showed a preference for writing over speaking as a means to communicate. To facilitate this, before going into the trance state she rested her head on a pillow on a table in front of her, her face toward the left. Writing material was arranged on the right side, usually a hundred blank sheets and four or five soft-lead pencils. Once entranced, Hodgson or another person present would place a sheet of paper in front of her and put a pencil in her hand, quickly removing each sheet once it was filled and replacing it with a fresh one.

In later sittings, two personalities were able simultaneously to control the entranced Piper and conduct conversations with separate sitters, or groups of sitters. 'Phinuit' used Piper's voice in the normal way; while 'GP' or another personality communicated using Piper's writing hand. In one sitting, Hodgson reported:

Phinuit was listening to the stenographic report of a previous interview, commenting upon it, making additions to his statements about some objects, and at the same time the hand was writing freely and rapidly on other subjects, and holding conversation with another person, the hand purporting to be 'controlled' by a deceased friend of that person.^[16]

Precautions Against Fraud

On Piper's visit to England, Oliver Lodge enumerated potential cheating methods that required vigilance to prevent:

- the use of detectives by Piper to gather information on likely sitters
- requests for information about likely sitters via letters
- questioning servants or children
- researching family diaries and photograph albums
- consulting directories and biographies
- searching the house at night and picking locks to gain access to information
- bribing servants to identify a sitter

As a precaution against such eventualities the investigators took care to

- examine her correspondence (she received around three letters a week)
- ensure that their domestic servants had no connection with Piper
- search her luggage for directories, biographies and such-like (none were found)
- introduce sitters to Piper by assumed names
- refrain from loose talk in her presence

They also hid family albums and photographs, although Lodge recorded a failure in this regard. He wrote:

The photograph albums and Family Bibles [records of family events and activities] were hidden by me the morning of the day after she arrived at my house. I had intended to do it sooner. This is manifestly a weak point. Like many such things, it sounds worse than it is. The more important books were in my study, and into it she did not go till just before the first sitting.

One or two photographs she did look at, and these are noted. The safest thing is to assume that she may have looked at everything about the house.^[17]

Precautions were also taken to ensure that neither Piper nor her husband were engaged in the covert gathering of potentially useful information. Myers wrote:

Mr. Hodgson also had Mr. and Mrs. Piper watched or 'shadowed' by private detectives for some weeks, with the view of discovering whether Mr. Piper (who is employed in a large store in Boston, U.S.A.) went about inquiring into the affairs of possible 'sitters', or whether Mrs. Piper received letters from friends or agents conveying information. This inquiry was pushed pretty closely, but absolutely nothing was discovered which could throw suspicion on Mrs. Piper – who is now aware of the procedure, but has the good sense to recognise the legitimacy – I may say the scientific necessity – of this kind of probation.

It was thus shown that Mrs. Piper made no discoverable attempt to acquire knowledge even about persons whose coming she had reason to expect. Still less could she have been aware of the private concerns of persons brought anonymously to her house at Mr. Hodgson's choice.^[18]

In contrast to their views of some physical mediums, notably William Eglinton and [Eusapia Palladino](#), and despite their unease about the behavior of 'Phinuit' in particular, the investigators were uniformly respectful of Piper as a person. Lodge remarked that Piper showed no curiosity and asked few questions. Her behaviour appeared 'utterly beyond and above suspicion'.^[19]

The English Investigation 1889-90

In November 1889, Piper travelled to England at the invitation of the SPR. She remained until February, lodging first with Oliver Lodge's family in Liverpool, then with the Myers's in Cambridge, then in lodgings near Walter Leaf's home in London, before returning for a brief final stay with the Lodges. A total of ninety-eight sittings were held in the three locations. These are described in 'A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance' published in the SPR's Proceedings in 1890.

A general introduction by Myers is followed by a detailed description by Lodge of the Liverpool sittings, and a shorter account by Leaf of sittings held in London. James concludes by describing his initial contacts with Piper and the views that he formed about her. Detailed stenographic reports are given of Lodge's sittings, along with general descriptions and analysis of these and others.

Some details of the sittings are as follows:

In an attempt to exclude the explanation of direct telepathy between medium and sitter, Lodge wrote to an elderly uncle requesting that he send any object that once belonged to the uncle's twin brother, who had died some twenty years earlier. He received by post a gold watch, and later on the same day, having in the meantime shown it to no one, produced it during a sitting with Piper.

I was told almost immediately that it had belonged to one of my uncles – one that had been mentioned before as having died from the effects of a fall – one that had been very fond of Uncle Robert, the name of the survivor – that the watch was now in possession of this same Uncle Robert, with whom he was anxious to communicate. After some difficulty and many wrong attempts Dr. Phinuit caught the name, Jerry, short for Jeremiah, and said emphatically, as if a third person was speaking, ‘This is my watch, and Robert is my brother, and I am here. Uncle Jerry, my watch’.^[20]

Responding to Lodge’s suggestion, ‘Phinuit’ then produced a number of details from the uncle’s boyhood that he said were passed to him by the deceased ‘Uncle Jerry’. These included episodes such as swimming in a dangerous creek; killing a cat in Smith’s field; the possession of a small rifle, and also of ‘a long peculiar skin, like a snake-skin’, which he thought was now in the possession of Uncle Robert. All this was unknown to Lodge and also to Lodge’s father, who had known his elder brothers only as adults. The items were also only partially confirmed, and in some cases quite unrecognized, by Uncle Robert. Lodge wrote:

His memory, however, is decidedly failing him, and he was good enough to write to another brother, Frank, living in Cornwall, an old sea captain, and ask if he had any better remembrance of certain facts – of course not giving any inexplicable reasons for asking. The result of this inquiry was triumphantly to vindicate the existence of Smith’s field as a place near their home, where they used to play, in Barking, Essex; and the killing of a cat by another brother was also recollected; while of the swimming of the creek, near a mill-race, full details were given, Frank and Jerry being the heroes of that foolhardy episode.

^[21]

Lodge invited Dr Gerald Rendall, principal of University College, Liverpool, to attend one of the early sittings, introducing him to Mrs Piper as ‘Mr Roberts.’ After she entered the trance state, ‘Phinuit’ correctly gave the names and specific details pertaining to Rendall’s brothers. Rendall then handed the medium a locket, and was rewarded with accurate statements about the deceased friend to whom it had belonged. The medium’s utterances included some apparently incorrect statements. But many were entirely accurate, and, in Rendall’s view, impossible for the medium to have guessed by chance.^[22]

Another sitter was Professor ECK Gonner, a lecturer on economics at Lodge’s university. To test the possibility that Piper might have researched the background of likely sitters beforehand, Lodge introduced him to her as ‘Mr McCunn’, the name of a different work colleague; in that case, Piper might have been expected to provide details pertaining to the actual Mr McCunn. However no such mistake was made. Phinuit correctly gave information relating to Gonner, including a description of how Gonner’s Uncle William had met his death, ‘with a hole in his head, like a shot hole, yet not a shot, more like a blow’^[23] – a true description of his being struck on the head by a large stone during an election riot.

Walter Leaf was impressed, among many others, by a sitting in which Piper conveyed facts to a Mrs Clark, the German wife of a man with whom she had previously been acquainted, but that pertained entirely to the woman’s early life

and relatives in Germany, of which her husband himself was largely ignorant.^[24] Similarly,

My sister-in-law, Mrs. H. Leaf, was introduced to Mrs. Piper at the lodgings in Manchester-street, where Mrs. Piper had arrived the day before, and was immediately told a number of facts of almost all of which I was myself quite ignorant, as they referred to various cousins of hers whose names I had not to my knowledge ever heard.^[25]

All four authors confirmed their belief in the medium's honesty, commenting on her straightforward behaviour and the absence of any suspicious signs of interest in their lives and doings. However they also agreed about the dubious behaviour of the control 'Phinuit', which Leaf in particular dwelled on. Leaf also considered that simple telepathy could most likely account for the phenomena, unlike Lodge, who believed the matter was less certain.

Hodgson's First Encounter

Before he left London for Boston, Richard Hodgson was confident that he would expose Piper as a cheat.

I was compelled to assume in the first instance that Mrs. Piper was fraudulent and obtained her information previously by ordinary means, such as inquiries by confederates, etc. ... Not only was this assumption as to Mrs. Piper's fraud necessary, but it was also needful to suppose that she worked herself into a hyperaesthetic state during which she obtained much further information given in various ways by the sitter, consciously or unconsciously, by speech gesture, and other muscular action.^[26]

Hodgson held his first sitting on 4 May 1887, taking care not to reveal his name or his purpose for being in America. After she went into the trance state, 'Phinuit' began to give accurate details about Hodgson's family members, living and deceased.

Phinuit mentioned the name 'Fred'. I said that it might be my cousin. 'He says you went to school together. He goes on jumping-frogs, and laughs. He says he used to get the better of you. He had convulsive movements before his death, struggles. He went off in a sort of spasm. You were not there.' [My cousin Fred far excelled any other person that I have seen in the games of leap-frog, fly the garter, &c. He took very long flying jumps, and whenever he played, the game was lined by crowds of school-mates to watch him. He injured his spine in a gymnasium in Melbourne, Australia, in 1871, and was carried to the hospital, where he lingered for a fortnight, with occasional spasmodic convulsions, in one of which he died.]^[27]

In a later sitting, 'Phinuit' commented that there was something in Hodgson's pockets 'connected with a loss'.^[28] Hodgson produced the items one by one, eventually coming to a bunch of keys. 'Phinuit' grabbed them, saying Hodgson had lost some of his keys near some mountains, and describing the location where they were and the ring that bound them. Hodgson had once lost his keys on a hiking trip

in the Adirondack Mountains, although they were in fact later found, and on a spot answering to this description.

As a result of these early personal encounters, Hodgson's sceptical attitude began to soften, without however extending to a belief in survival of death. But he also wondered how telepathy could explain the medium's ability to give information about his affairs that at the time were unknown to him but later turned out to be true. For example 'Phinuit' informed Hodgson that his sister in Australia would soon give birth to a fourth child, a boy. This proved to be the case, but Hodgson was not aware at the time that his sister was pregnant. Hodgson noted too that most of the things mentioned by Phinuit were not things he had been thinking about.

More Examples of 'Phinuit' Sittings

Hodgson's first study of Piper contains a detailed account by J Rogers Rich, a New York artist, of eleven sittings he attended between September 1888 and July 1889.

Rich pointed out that he was reluctant to sit because he disliked the idea of mediumship, but was persuaded by Hodgson to undertake the experiment. He reported that 'Phinuit' began diagnosing a medical ailment that he (Rich) had been experiencing at the time, and prescribed a herbal remedy, with details of how it should be prepared.

My profession (painting) was described, and my particular talents and mannerisms in design were mentioned. I was surrounded with pictures – 'Oh! pictures everywhere!' At this interview my mother was clearly described! She was 'beside me, dressed as in her portrait (painted a year or two before her death), and wearing a certain cameo pin, the portrait of my father.' Two living aunts, who are very dear to me, my brother and his wife 'Nellie' were well described, and in such a way as to have made it impossible for Mrs. Piper to have so minutely informed herself about them.^[29]

At his second sitting, Rich was told that he would soon hear from an old friend, Frank Lennox. When Rich asked if Frank was still in California, 'Phinuit' struggled with the answer, saying he had 'gone across the water to Al – Aul – Aula – how you call that?' Rich suggested 'Australia'. 'Phinuit' hesitated and then said, 'Yes, Australia.' Rich later learned that Frank had gone to Alaska.^[30]

In his seventh sitting, Rich informed 'Phinuit' that the medicine he had prescribed for him was not working. 'Phinuit' retorted that Rich's cook had not used the proper proportions, as he had not properly instructed her. On inquiry, Rich found that to be a fact, as his cook had understood him to say a quart instead of a pint, and confessed to having forgotten the proportions, allowing the mixture to 'boil down'.^[31]

A couple visiting from Detroit, strangers to Piper, called on her without an appointment (the woman described herself as having been until this time an 'absolute sceptic'). 'Phinuit' greeted them by their names of Frank and Mary, and passed an intimate message from a woman he identified correctly by her full name. They recognized this person as a beloved aunt who had died recently.

He described her perfectly, even to a peculiar motion of the hand, and spoke of much pertaining to the home and of persons in my husband's family and my own, calling each one by Christian name – describing them or saying something of each one – of at least fifteen or twenty individuals. He spoke so rapidly, and of so many, I became confused, and from surprise was dumbfounded.^[32]

'Phinuit' then described a man who was lame, one leg noticeably shorter than the other, which they recognized as a correct description of the woman's father.

Then came the greeting from my father and a description of the life there, and of his first day there, and that his only unhappiness was that he could not tell me how well it was with him. He had found so many of his friends there – his father and mother and my mother. He spoke of the home here and of my step-mother, and of much known to him alone. He spoke of the life at some length and in words and manner peculiar to himself. My father had been a great student, with an intense love of books, and always expressed his thoughts with a piquant, caustic, ready eloquence, as rare as it was peculiar to himself. Anyone who had ever heard my father speak could not mistake the beautiful and rounded phraseology of his address to us. It could be no one but my father.^[33]

Another sitter reported as follows:

Asked to give some test that I could tell Dr. Hodgson, he said: 'Do you know Dr. Hodgson?' and he continued: 'You had a fire at your camp at night some time ago; it did not last very long, but caused some confusion. I tell you this because nobody could possibly have informed me of it.' This is perfectly correct. About four months ago, in a very windy night, in Mexico, a fire started in my camp, near the kitchen fire. The cook got his blankets and some of his clothes burnt, and most of our scanty provisions were destroyed, but the damage was nothing much to speak of, and I cannot recollect I ever mentioned this event any more.^[34]

'George Pelham' (George Pellew)

As mentioned above, 'George Pelham' was the pseudonym used by Hodgson for George Pellew, a young writer with whom he became acquainted during his early years in Boston. Since Pellew is generally referred to in the literature as 'Pelham' (or by the abbreviation 'GP') the pseudonym will continue to be used here.

Pelham studied at Harvard, going on to work as a lawyer and journalist. The two met when he joined the ASPR. An atheist, Pelham told Hodgson that he could not conceive of an afterlife, but that if he died before Hodgson, and found himself 'still existing', he would attempt to let Hodgson know.^[35]

Pelham died in 1892 aged thirty-two, after falling down a flight of concrete steps.

On 22 March, a little over a month after Pelham's death, Hodgson brought Pelham's friend, John Hart, for an anonymous sitting with Piper. Early in the sitting 'Phinuit' remarked that 'George' was there and went on to give Pelham's full name, also

Hart's name and the names of several of Hart's living friends. As proof of Pelham's identity, 'Phinuit' mentioned that the studs Hart was wearing had once belonged to him (Pelham) and had been given to Hart by Pelham's parents. Hart confirmed this to be true.

Through 'Phinuit', the personality that identified itself as Pelham then mentioned some mutual friends, Jim and Mary Howard, and asked Hart if he could get them to attend a sitting. 'Pelham' also brought up a discussion he had once had with the Howard's fifteen-year-old daughter Katharine about God, space and eternity. Katharine was not present, and neither Hart nor Hodgson, who was taking notes, was aware of this discussion, suggesting that something more than simple telepathy was involved in this exchange. Among many other personal references, Pelham alluded to a book which he had been writing and never completed. Hart was impressed by the sitting, pointing out that various greetings and speech mannerisms were characteristic of the living Pelham.^[36]

From this moment 'Pelham', or 'GP', became an active control, taking over much of the business previously handled by 'Phinuit' of (apparently) mediating for other spirits.

At this time too, Piper began using writing as a means to communicate in preference to speaking (*see above*). This innovation was seemingly made by 'Pelham' as a means to enable other personalities to communicate directly, without the need of a go-between (he remained close by, to assist them and to help resolve difficulties). However, he maintained that the difference between talking and writing was not apparent to him. 'GP' also stated that 'Phinuit' continued to help, by stopping others interrupting.

Since, unlike 'Phinuit', Pelham had been known to many people who attended sittings, the emergence of the 'Pelham' personality added a new dimension to the question about whether deceased spirits actually were communicating through Piper, or whether the phenomenon could be adequately explained in terms of telepathy and the powers of unconscious minds.

Hodgson noted that the communicator appeared to be lifelike. He also remarked that among a total of a hundred and fifty individuals whom he arranged to sit with Piper, from the time of Pelham's first appearance to the time of writing, as many as thirty had been known to Pelham: in each case Pelham recognized them and greeted them by name, with one single exception, a woman who had been a child when Pelham knew her. Pelham did not, however, recognize, or greet by name, any of those whom he had not known. Hodgson argued that this was consistent with what would be expected if Pelham had survived death and found himself able to communicate.

Hodgson reasoned there was too much individuality, too much purpose and persistence, expressed by the personality of 'GP' to explain its emergence in terms of telepathy, whether of a limited or expanded nature. Another mind, or super-mind, might conceivably hold fragments of relevant information, he agreed, but it was difficult to see how that mind could recreate the complex semblance of a personality that had been known to many people.

The 'Imperator Band'

During the course of 1895, the quality of communications began to deteriorate, with a growing number of intrusions apparently caused by 'earthbound spirits'. By this time 'GP' and 'Phinuit' had been giving way to 'Rector', one of the new group of controls who purported to be advanced spirits long departed from the earth plane (*see above*). 'Rector' told Hodgson that Piper's organism was weakening and needed a rest. 'Phinuit' made his last appearance in January 1896, but 'GP' remained as an assistant to 'Rector' until 1904.

'Rector' and other members of the Imperator band communicated primarily through Piper's hand, but at times they used her voice. 'Rector' was described by William James as sounding like 'an aged and, when he is speaking instead of writing, like a somewhat hollow-voice clergyman, a little weary of his experience of the world, endlessly patient and sympathetic, and desiring to put all his tenderness and wisdom at your service while you are there'.^[37]

Piper's 'Confession'

On 20 October 1901, the *New York Herald* carried a statement that had been given by Piper to one of its reporters, in which she denied being a spiritualist.

Piper began by saying that she intended to give up the work she had been doing for the SPR, in order to devote herself to other and 'more congenial pursuits'. She went on to say that it was on account of her own desire to understand the phenomenon that she first allowed her trances to be investigated and submitted to scientific tests. After fourteen years, no definite conclusion having been reached, she felt disinclined to continue.

As to her own view of the phenomena, she wrote, 'I must truthfully say that I do not believe that spirits of the dead have spoken through me when I have been in the trance state.' She further said that she found the explanation of telepathy more appealing than that of communications from deceased spirits, and that her 'spirit controls' were most likely 'an unconscious expression of my subliminal self'.

I never heard of anything being said by myself during a trance which might not have been latent in my own mind, or in the mind of the person in charge of the sitting, or in the mind of the person trying to get communication with someone in another state of existence, or of some companion present with such a person, or in the mind of some absent person alive somewhere else in the world.^[38]

The *Boston Advertiser's* issue of 25 October reported that Piper had written to the *Herald* to object, having heard that it had billed the statement in advance of publication as a 'confession'. She forbade it to publish the item. The *Herald* however reassured her that it would not use the contentious word, and published the item under the heading 'Mrs Piper's Plain Statement'. The *Boston Advertiser* quoted her as saying,

I did not make any such statement as that published in the *New York Herald* to the effect that spirits of the departed do not control me ... My opinion is to-day as it was eighteen years ago. Spirits of the departed may have controlled me and they may not. I confess that I do not know. I have not changed ... I make no change in my relations.^[39]

Another paper, the *Boston Journal*, reported that Piper planned to maintain relations with the SPR, and that the sittings would continue. This followed a meeting between Piper and Richard Hodgson the previous day.^[40]

Piper's dramatic intervention was later attributed by William James to a deterioration of her relationship with Hodgson, whose manner with her, he said, was often somewhat 'brusque' and 'secretive' – partly owing to a need on his part to avoid giving away information – and whom she may have felt was taking her for granted.^[41]

In a report of the incident in its *Journal*, the SPR pointed out that no accusation of fraud had been made by the *Herald* in its article; on the contrary, the paper had been highly 'laudatory' of her throughout. The report also pointed out that Piper's preference for telepathy over spirit survival as an explanation for her trance phenomena simply reflected a common divergence among investigators. It in no way amounted to a genuine 'confession', which was nevertheless how the matter was reported by some British newspapers.

William James and 'Hodgson'

On 20 December 1905, aged fifty, Richard Hodgson died of a heart attack during a strenuous game of handball. On 28 December, a message purporting to come from the deceased Hodgson was delivered in a Piper trance. Hodgson had often joked that he understood better than anyone the difficulties of communicating, and that if he died he would control her better than anyone. 'Hodgson' subsequently appeared in many of Piper's sittings.

William James collated 69 of these sittings and analyzed them in a 120-page paper published in the SPR Proceedings of 1909. The record shows an excited, brief and largely incoherent first appearance quickly becoming more articulate in later appearances, carrying a strong indication of Hodgson's mannerism and character.

James notes that the robust 'animal spirits' that were characteristic of the living Hodgson – his love of argument, chaff, repartee, his frequent laughter, and his unusual habit of quoting poetry at every opportunity – were very much in evidence, although they became stereotyped as time passed, a phenomenon he also noted was true of the 'George Pelham' control. James goes on to quote at length from sittings, in order to demonstrate the many occasions when sitters who had known Hodgson received accurate information about their affairs, and about incidents known to both parties. However he notes that the successes are counterbalanced by a lot of confusion and wrong statements, which tend to dilute the favourable impression.

James points out his own vacillation between the two interpretations, of telepathic interactions between sitter and medium on the one hand, and of spirit survival on the other. He is not persuaded of the latter by the astonishing organizing power of the medium, since this can easily be attributed to a power of the unconscious mind, a phenomenon frequently observed in hypnotized subjects. He considers a certain degree of virtuosity in personating spirits to be unsurprising. But considering the phenomenon in its entirety, he finds it hard to credit that it is based on deception:

... I find that when I ascend from the details to the whole meaning of the phenomenon, and especially when I connect the Piper-case with all the other cases I know of automatic writing and mediumship, and with the whole record of spirit-possession in human history, the notion that such an immense current of experience, complex in so many ways, should spell out absolutely nothing but the words 'intentional humbug' appears very unlikely. The notion that so many men and women, in all other respects honest enough, should have this preposterous monkeying self annexed to their personality seems to me so weird that the spirit-theory immediately takes on a more probable appearance.^[42]

James Hyslop

Following Hodgson's death in 1905, the American Society for Psychical Research was reorganized by [Dr. James Hyslop](#), who had attended a number of sittings with Piper arranged by Hodgson. Hyslop now himself began to study Piper. Like Hodgson, he came to adopt a spiritistic view of her mediumship. While James, Leaf and others had regarded the constant 'fishing' as a suspicious circumstance, Hyslop argued that it occurred because the controls often did not understand what the spirit communicator was giving them in the way of mental imagery, their primary means of communication, and thus often sought clarification.

Hyslop was more accepting of the failures and mistakes on the part of Piper than some other commentators, arguing also that the obstacles in the way of communicating from a 'transcendental' realm would most likely give rise to seemingly absurd and trivial statements. He compared the situation to a man born deaf-mute trying to communicate his visual experiences to a man born blind: only the most obscure analogies would work, and even then they might have to be reduced to common emotional experiences.^[43]

Hyslop considered that the hypotheses of fraud and telepathic communication had been decisively refuted in the case of Piper, and that the reality of spirit communication was 'the most rational hypothesis'.^[44]

The Cross Correspondences

Piper was one of a handful of individuals involved in the so-called [Cross-Correspondences](#), a mediumistic phenomenon that began to emerge following the death in 1901 of Frederic Myers, a co-founder of the Society of Psychical Research. In some striking instances, fragmented and apparently meaningless statements that appeared to have been made by the surviving spirit of Myers, and also by other

deceased individuals connected to the SPR, and that emerged in automatic scripts produced by different people, when placed side by side were found to create a meaningful whole. The phenomenon continued for more than two decades, and became a particular focus of the SPR's studies. To further this research Piper made two more visits to England.^[45]

Amy Tanner and Stanley Hall

Piper's mediumship again began to deteriorate around 1908, following a second trip to England and further study by the SPR there. In 1909, G Stanley Hall, president of Clark University, persuaded James Hyslop and William James to allow him and his assistant, Dr Amy Tanner, to study Piper. The pair held six sittings. Their findings were published in 1910 by Tanner as *Studies in Spiritism*.

On this occasion the main communicating control was 'Hodgson'. Hall and Tanner concluded that the phenomenon was an unusual kind of secondary personality. They found no evidence of paranormality. The investigation is notable for the 'Bessie Beals' incident, in which Hall and Tanner asked 'Hodgson' to see if he could locate a (fictional) deceased aunt. Although the character was an invention, 'Hodgson' subsequently provided several messages from 'Bessie Beals'.^[46]

SPR researchers were critical of the Tanner report, which they regarded as poorly reasoned.^[47]

Scepticism and Controversy

Sceptics have denied that Piper was in touch with spirits, or that there was anything supernatural about her activity. Contemporary critics included Edward Clodd, a member of the Rationalist Society,^[48] and Joseph Rinn, an amateur magician, debunker and friend of [Harry Houdini](#).^[49] More recent critical commentary has been offered by historian Ruth Brandon^[50], Martin Gardner,^[51] and others.

Sceptical commentators draw attention to

- Piper's physical contact with sitters, such as holding their hands, that enabled feedback by the process used by stage-performers known as 'muscle-reading'
- suspicions about 'Phinuit', who claimed to have lived as a doctor in nineteenth century Marseilles, when no records could be found and he gave little evidence of knowing any French or anything about medicine
- blatant 'fishing' for information by 'Phinuit' and his habit of passing off details given as coming from him
- implausible claims by some communicators to be the spirits of famous personages such as Walter Scott and Julius Caesar, or even characters in novels
- failed séances in which names, dates and incidents were given, of which almost none were correct, and any that were could be explained by chance
- instances that might be explained by Piper having deliberately gathered information beforehand, or by cryptomnesia

- speculation by sceptical sitters that Piper's 'trance' was a pretence
- the 'Dean Connor' case, in which details given by Piper about a young American missing in Mexico proved to be wrong
- the sceptical Hall-Tanner investigation, in which among other things a non-existent 'relative' was 'recognized' by Piper
- the alleged disbelief of members of George Pelham's family that the personality claiming his identity was anything like him
- Piper's press 'confession' that she was unconvinced about being in touch with spirits.

Doubts have been expressed about Richard Hodgson's honesty as an investigator. Allegedly Hodgson claimed that a Professor Fiske from his séance with Piper was 'absolutely convinced' Piper's control was the real George Pellew, but that when Pellew's brother contacted Fiske about it, he replied it was 'a lie' as Piper had been 'silent or entirely wrong' on all his questions. Alan Gauld, in an analysis of criticisms of Piper, referred to this letter as published by Edward Clodd, and stated that it was 'wholly unreliable'. He noted that Hodgson in his original report wrote that Fiske had a negative attitude, and noted that Hodgson himself considered the Fiske sittings to be of no evidential value.^[52]

Hodgson's credibility has also been called into question on account of his 'conversion to spiritualism' during the 'George Pelham' phase of Piper's mediumship. This has been held to weaken his objectivity and cast doubt on his judgment.

Doubts have been raised about William James's competence. In an influential essay 'How Mrs Piper Bamboozled William James', author Martin Gardner wrote:

Had James been better informed about techniques of deception, practiced by magicians and mediums, he would not have been so impressed by Mrs. Piper's carefully contrived persona. Moreover, James had only a weak comprehension of how to conduct controlled tests of mediums.^[53]

Counter-Criticisms

James Hyslop defended the validity of the Piper research and phenomena in articles in *The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* from 1911 to 1921.^[54] Contemporary defenders include authors David Fontana,^[55] Chris Carter,^[56] Greg Taylor,^[57] Michael Tymn,^[58] Michael Prescott,^[59] and Robert McLuhan.^[60] These and others have criticized sceptical approaches to the Piper research on a number of grounds. For instance they argue that neither 'muscle-reading' nor 'cold reading' tricks would explain the many documented occasions when Piper produced names (sometimes both family and surname) and nicknames, and gave accurate details about people and incidents, with no prompting and at the first attempt. Such information could only have been acquired beforehand, and precautions were taken to ensure that this could not happen.

They also contest claims of incompetence on the part of investigators, who were well schooled in the tricks of mediums, and, before studying Piper, had considered many others to be fraudulent.

They criticize an over-reliance on the part of sceptics on the naturally negative responses of people who experienced failed sittings, but who did not have the opportunity to consider the phenomenon as a whole. A detailed description of a failed sitting may usefully create the perception of a bogus activity, if that is the impression the writer wishes to convey, but does not help explain the highly anomalous successes that the writer fails to mention.

Critics also note sceptics' tendency to overlook the fact that Piper was verifiably entranced during sittings, and that the 'cheating' by the controlling personality 'Phinuit' could therefore not reasonably be attributed to Piper herself. Assertions that begin, 'Piper claimed that ...' are misleading when they refer to statements made by Piper when she was unaware of what she was saying until informed of it afterwards.

Critics have also charged that sceptics are poorly informed, having seldom read the original records. For instance Martin Gardner appears, wrongly, to believe that William James was chiefly responsible for investigating Piper, gets key dates wrong, and makes claims that are contradicted by the primary reports.

Critics charge that the weight given by sceptics to the Hall-Tanner investigation is inappropriate, given its short duration and the pair's frankly partisan objective (in his introduction Hall wrote: 'Spiritism is the ruck and muck of modern culture, the common enemy of true science and of true religion, and to drain its dismal and miasmatic marshes is the great work of modern culture...'^[61]). With regard to the notorious 'Bessie Beals' episode (the erroneous recognition of a fictitious personality), they point out that this kind of suggestibility in the trance state was well-known to the researchers and a frequent topic of discussion by them.

Finally, they note a tendency on the part of sceptics to misrepresent the facts by selective citations. The statement: 'Walter Leaf, who attended séances with Piper, testified to her 'equally unsatisfactory sittings, leading to equally justifiable incredulity on the part of the sitter'^[62] makes it appear that Leaf disbelieved the process was paranormal, when in fact the opposite was true.

Later Years

Piper's health began to decline during this period. A third visit to England was made in October 1909, but she was sick much of the time and there was little in the way of good communication. Coming out of trance was especially difficult. In a sitting in May 1911, 'Imperator' made it known that they were suspending her mediumship.

Upon returning to the United States, Piper was able to carry out some automatic writing while not in the trance state. However by this time James Hyslop and the American Society for Psychical Research had gone on to more dedicated research with other mediums.

Michael Tymn

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Piper (1929).
2. ^ Hodgson (1892).
3. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890).
4. ^ Holt (1914).
5. ^ Hodgson (1892), 97.
6. ^ Piper (1929), 67.
7. ^ Hodgson (1892), 4.
8. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 441.
9. ^ Tanner (1910/1994).
10. ^ Hodgson (1892), 127.
11. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 655.
12. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 560.
13. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 446.
14. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 655.
15. ^ Hodgson (1892), 29.
16. ^ Hodgson (1892), 293.
17. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 446.
18. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 438.
19. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 447.
20. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 458.
21. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 459.
22. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 486.
23. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 454.
24. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 559.
25. ^ Myers, Lodge, Leaf, & James (1890), 559.
26. ^ Hodgson (1892), 6.

27. ^ Hodgson (1892), 60.
28. ^ Hodgson (1892), 21
29. ^ Hodgson (1892), 127.
30. ^ Hodgson (1892), 127-8.
31. ^ Hodgson (1892), 129.
32. ^ Hodgson (1892), 122.
33. ^ Hodgson (1892), 123.
34. ^ Hodgson (1892), 159.
35. ^ Hodgson (1892), 295.
36. ^ Hodgson (1892), 296-99.
37. ^ James (1909), 3.
38. ^ Piper (1901).
39. ^ Anonymous (1901).
40. ^ Anonymous (1901).
41. ^ James (1909), 6
42. ^ James (1909), 35-6.
43. ^ Hyslop (1910), 166-7.
44. ^ Hyslop (1911), 543-4.
45. ^ Johnson (1914–1915).
46. ^ Tanner (1910/1994)
47. ^ Taylor (2010).
48. ^ Clodd (1917).
49. ^ Rinn (1950).
50. ^ Brandon (1983).
51. ^ Gardner (1992/2003).
52. ^ Gauld (1968), 361-3.
53. ^ Gardner (1992/2003).
54. ^ Hyslop (1911, 1912 works, 1917, 1919, 1920 works, 1921).
55. ^ Fontana (2005).
56. ^ Carter (2012).
57. ^ Taylor (2010).
58. ^ Tymn (2012).
59. ^ Prescott (2007).
60. ^ McLuhan (2010), 119-28.
61. ^ Tanner (1910/1994).
62. ^ Clodd (1992).