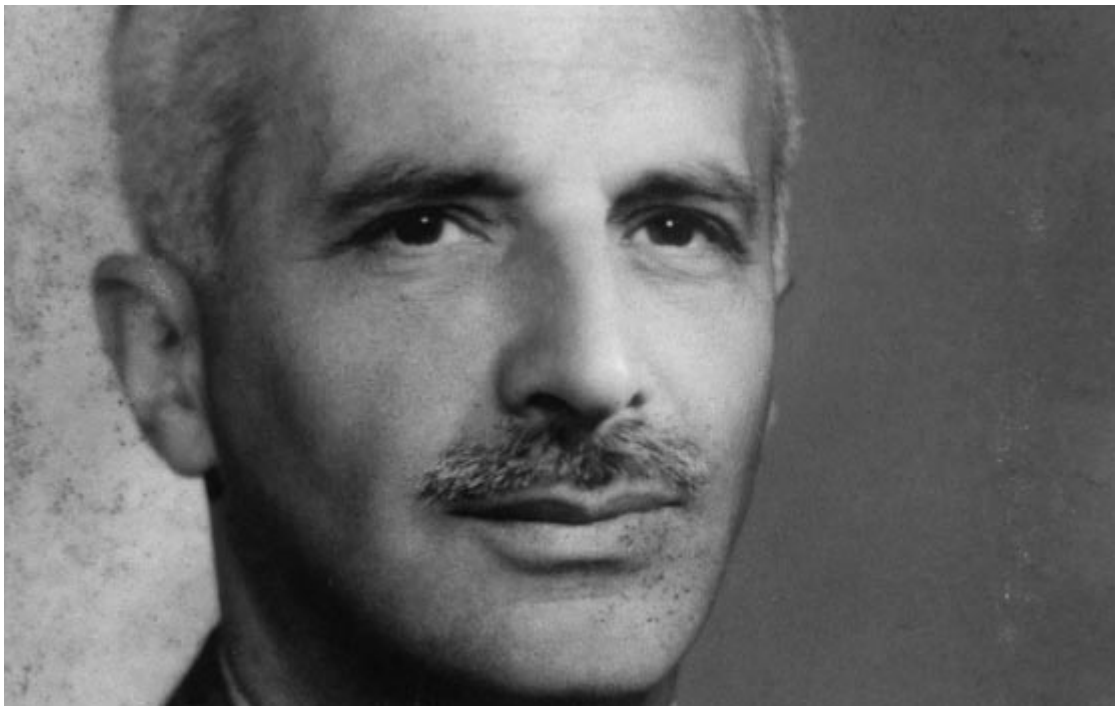
Theodore Besterman



Theodore Besterman (1904-1976) was an author, translator and psychical researcher, who investigated mediums and wrote books and articles on paranormal topics.

Life and Career

Theodore Deodatus Nathaniel Besterman was born in Łódź, Poland, on 22 November 1904 and he moved to London during his youth. He taught at the London School of Librarianship in the 1930s and served in the British army in World War II. In 1945 he became the first editor of the *Journal of Documentation*, a publication concerned with cataloguing and organizing academic information.

From the 1950s, Besterman devoted himself to the works of Voltaire which he translated and edited as *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*. He instigated the Voltaire Foundation at Oxford University which contains his large collection of books and manuscripts. In 1954, he published a biography of Voltaire.[1]

Psychical Research

Besterman joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1925, acting as librarian, journal editor and investigations officer. In the following years he contributed numerous articles about psychical research, and books on crystal gazing, dowsing, mediumship, and the theosophist and women's rights activist Annie Besant.

Besterman was open to the existence of psychic phenomena, but his writings are noted for a cautious and often sceptical approach. The author and spiritualist

campaigner Arthur Conan Doyle took such exception to a critical review by Besterman of GK Hack's *Modern Psychic Mysteries, Millesimo Castle, Italy* that he resigned from the SPR, complaining that Besterman's arguments were 'absurd', 'essentially unscientific' and 'biased', and displayed 'puerile perversity'.[2] Besterman defended his comments in a subsequent reply.[3]

Investigations

In 1931, Besterman published negative results of clairvoyance experiments using playing cards.[4] The following year he published details of an experiment to test the accuracy of witness observations at a spiritualist séance, in which he reported the sitters made numerous errors.[5]

In 1934, Besterman reported on sittings arranged by SPR investigators with the Austrian physical medium Rudi Schneider, the results of which were inconclusive.[6]

Also in 1934, Besterman visited Rio de Janeiro where he took part in sittings with the internationally known physical medium Carlos Mirabelli.[7] His subsequent report is notable for charges of fraud, although it also describes phenomena that he was unable to explain. The report was critiqued by an SPR colleague Eric Dingwall, an experienced investigator of mediums. The records of three of the sittings attended by Besterman were later found to describe the materialization of a woman in London known to him, and a reasonably clear photograph which, he is said to have agreed, bore a strong resemblance to her – none of which is mentioned in his own account (Details of this episode can be found here.)

Works

Books

Cristal-gazing: A Study in the History, Distribution, Theory and Practice of Scrying (1924). London: William Rider and Son Ltd.

A Bibliography of Annie Besant (1924). London: The Theosophical Society.

The Divining Rod: An Experimental and Psychological Investigation (1926, with W. Barrett). London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Some Modern Mediums (1930). London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Inquiry into the Unknown (1934). London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Mrs Annie Besant. A Modern Prophet (1934). London: Kegan Paul.

A Bibliography of Sir Oliver Lodge (1935). London: Oxford University Press.

Water Divining. New Facts and Theories (1938). London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Voltaire (1954). Geneva: Les Délices Genève.

Collected Papers on the Paranormal (1968). New York: Garrett Publications.

Voltaire's Correspondence (1968-77). Oxford: Voltaire Foundation.

Translations

Mind and Body: A Criticism of Psychophysical Parallelism. An Authorized Translation with a Bibliography by the author by H. Driesch (1927). London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Articles

In addition to the articles cited below, Besterman published regular detailed library catalogues in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research.*

The divining rod (1923). *The Occult Review* 38, 155-61.

Dr Dee's Shew-Stone (1924). *Notes & Queries*, London, 223-25.

Two coincidental dreams (1925). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 22, 123-25.

D.D. Home (1925). *Theosophical Review* March 1925, 141-47.

Divination by fingernails (1925). *Notes & Queries*, London, 120-22.

The divine voice of Socrates (1925). *The Occult Review* 41, 215-25.

The belief in reincarnation: its history and distribution (1926). *Theosophical Review* September 1926.

Clairvoyance amongst primitive peoples (1926). *The Occult Review* Oct.-Dec. 1926, 235-41.

Savage telepathy (1926). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 23, 2-4.

The folklore of dowsing (1926). *Folklore* 37/2, 113-33.

The present status of dowsing in the British press (1927). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 152-55.

Report of a pseudo-sitting for physical phenomena with K. Kraus (1928). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 388-92.

Sitting with Janusz Fronczek (1928). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 36, 34.

On clairvoyance (1928). *Psychic Review*, New York, 33-38.

Evocation of the dead and kindred phenomena among the natives of Madagascar (1928-29). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 209-23.

The Margery cross-correspondences (1928-29). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 399-408.

Report of a four-months tour of psychical investigation (1928-29). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 38, 409-80.

Dowsing in Bombay (1929). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 25, 129-30.

A historic case: Clairvoyant phenomena associated with St Columba (1929). *Psychic Review* 23, 104-11.

Swedenborg as a clairvoyant (1929). *The Link* 2, 300-10; 372-82.

The phenomena of psychical research (1930). *The Link* 3.

Report of a series of experiments in clairvoyance conducted at a distance under approximately fraud-proof conditions (1930-31).

Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research 39, 375-414.

A notable booktest obtained at a sitting with Mrs Leonard (1931). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 59-69.

Towards a theory of dowsing. The psychical and physical theories of dowsing (et al, 1931). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 142-60.

An experiment in long-distance telepathy (1932). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 235-36.

Preliminary notes on the trance mediumship of Fru Ingeborg (1932). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 338-45.

Further inquiries into the element of chance in booktests (1931-32). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 59-98.

A prophecy in *Old Moore's Almanac* (1931-32). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 27, 182-83.

Evidential extracts from sittings with Mrs Leonard (1931-32, with Rev. W.S. Irving). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 129-61.

The psychology of testimony in relation to paraphysical phenomena. Report of an experiment (1931-32). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 363-87.

The mediumship of Rudi Schneider (1931-32). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 428-36.

Report of an inquiry into precognitive dreams (1932). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 41, 186-204.

An experiment in 'clairvoyance' with M.S. Ossowiecki (1933). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 41, 345-53.

Notes on an attempt to locate in space the alleged direct voice observed in sittings with Mrs Leonard (1933-34, with G. Heard,). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 28, 84.

The investigations of R. Chambers (1933-34). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 28, 105.

How psychical research is done (1934). *The Listener* 24 January, 154-55.

Report of an investigation into the mediumship of R. Schneider (1934, with O. Gatty). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 42, 251-85.

The mediumship of C. Mirabelli (1935). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 141-53.

Mrs H. Sidgwick's work in psychical research (1936-37). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 44, 96-97.

R. Schneider's recollections and communications (1958). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 39, 206-7.

Book Reviews

The Case For and Against Psychical Belief, edited by C. Murchison (1927). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 24, 104-7.

Modern Psychic Mysteries, Millesimo Castle, Italy by G.K. Hack with a preface by E. Bozzano (1930). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 26, 10-14.

The Enchanted Boundary, being a Survey of Negative Reactions to Claims of Psychic Phenomena, 1820-30 by W.F. Prince (1930-31). *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 39, 416-18.

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Besterman, T. (1930). Reply to A.C. Doyle circular (1930). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 26, 50-52.

Besterman, T. et al (1931). Report of a series of experiments in clairvoyance conducted at a distance under approximately fraudproof conditions, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 39, 375-414.

Besterman, T. (1932). The psychology of testimony in relation to paraphysical phenomena. Report of an experiment. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 40, 363-87.

Besterman, T., & Gatty, O. (1934). Report of an investigation into the mediumship of R. Schneider. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 42, 251-85.

Besterman, T. (1935). The mediumship of Carlos Mirabelli. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 29, 141-53.

Besterman, T. (1954). *Voltaire*. Geneva: Les Délices Genève.

Doyle, A.C. (1931). Correspondence. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 26, 45-46.

Endnotes

Footnotes

1.^ Besterman (1954).
2.^ Doyle (1930), 45-46.
3.^ Besterman (1930), 50-52.
4.^ Besterman (1931), 375-414.
5.^ Besterman (1932), 363-87.
6.^ Besterman & Gatty (1934).
7.^ Besterman (1935), 153.

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