

Malcolm Bird

Malcolm Bird (1886–1964) was an American mathematician and parapsychologist, notable for his involvement in controversial investigations of the Boston medium Mina Crandon.

Early Life and Career

James Malcolm Bird was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1866. He studied mathematics and subsequently taught at Columbia University. He was appointed an associate editor of the *Scientific American* magazine in 1922, resigning in 1925 to take up an appointment as research officer for the [American Society for Psychical Research](#) (ASPR).

Mina Crandon ('Margery')

In 1922 *Scientific American* offered a prize of ,500 to anyone who could convincingly exhibit an ability to produce a visible psychic manifestation. Bird was charged with choosing an applicant, and in November of the following year he selected [Mina Crandon](#), a Boston woman reputed to produce strong physical mediumship phenomena under the pseudonym 'Margery'. He also recruited a six-man judging committee, including himself. Some ninety investigative sittings were held, at which Bird was one of the most regular attendees.

Bird quickly emerged as one of Crandon's most enthusiastic supporters, publishing articles in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* about the phenomena he said he witnessed during sittings. In 1925 he published a book about Crandon entitled '*Margery' the Medium*. A reviewer for the British [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR) commented that it contained 'an immense number of rather disconnected accounts of alleged supernormal events', but few clues about how reliable they were or, if genuine, the mechanisms by which they were produced.¹

As the investigation progressed, Bird increasingly came into conflict with more sceptical committee members, notably the stage magician [Harry Houdini](#), who published allegations of cheating by Crandon. Bird contested Houdini's claims and resigned from the committee, leaving *Scientific American* to work for the ASPR. The committee eventually declared that it was unpersuaded that Crandon's phenomena were genuine, and the prize remained unclaimed. Bird continued to attend sittings with Crandon, and as editor of the ASPR journal published further laudatory articles about her, again arousing antagonism among more critical members. These included [Walter Franklin Prince](#), one of the most sceptical of the original investigating committee, who resigned and set up a rival organization, the Boston Society for Psychical Research (BSPR).

In 1927, Bird himself became suspicious of Crandon at a sitting that took place on 15 July, where he and another sitter noticed a 'thread-like connection' attached to a cable on a weigh-scale.² Disillusioned, Bird submitted a lengthy paper to the ASPR trustees, in which he admitted being aware of normal means being used to create the phenomena not only at the July sitting but several others, and stated that Crandon had even asked him once to produce a phenomenon in case she could not.³ In the paper, he wrote:

This proposal was clearly the result of Margery's wrought-up state of mind. Nevertheless it seems to me of paramount importance, in that it shows her, fully conscious and fully normal, in a situation where she thought she might have to choose between fraud and a blank séance; and she was willing to choose fraud.⁴

Fearing for its reputation, the ASPR refused to publish the paper, and an anonymous blackmail letter was sent to Bird threatening to reveal his alleged dalliance with an 'immoral' woman if he did not keep quiet.⁵ Bird nonetheless offered the paper to the BSPR, which declined to publish it in the hope of ending the controversy, though Prince recounted the request from Crandon to Bird to produce a fake effect in an article published in *Scientific American* in 1933.⁶ The SPR also refused to print Bird's paper. Bird resigned from the ASPR In December 1930.⁷

Other Research

Bird was involved in the investigation of other spiritualist mediums, namely Ada Besinnet, John C Sloan, [Gladys Osborne](#) and William Hope. In *My Psychic Adventures* he made a case for the genuineness of some of the phenomena witnessed, while also taking into account the possibilities of hallucination, collective hypnosis and fraud.⁸

Bird abandoned psychical research after 1930 and little is known about his later activities.

Works

Books

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Psychic adventures at home (1923). *Scientific American* (1 September).

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Another mediumistic failure (1923). *Scientific American* (1 December).

Psychic adventures at home (1924). *Scientific American* (1 January).

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[Mr Dingwall and 'Margery'](#) (1925). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 19, 309-14.

[In reply to Dr Boring](#) (1925). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 19, 536-38.

[Dr Richardson's voice-control machine](#) (1925). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 19, 680-89.

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[Observations on the Moss Case](#) (1926). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 20, 41-54.

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[The 'Margery' mediumship](#) (1926). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 20, 385-406.

[The methodology of psychical research](#) (1926). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 20, 531-33.

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[Some recent psychical activities in England](#) (1927). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 21, 297-300.

[A criticism of the philosophy of endless recurrence](#) (1927). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 21, 523-36.

[A message from a living communicator](#) (1927). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 21, 166-69.

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[Some philosophical aspects of psychical research](#) (1928). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 22, 580-90.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Woolley (1926), 140-41.
- [2.](#) Tietze (1973), 128-9.
- [3.](#) Cited in Tietze (1973), 137-9.
- [4.](#) Cited in Tietze (1973), 137.
- [5.](#) Cited entire in Tietze (1973), 140-41.
- [6.](#) Prince (1933), 261-63.
- [7.](#) Tietze (1973), 142.
- [8.](#) Bird (1924), 292-317.

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