

Stella Cranshaw

Aged 23, Stella Cranshaw (1900-1986), a London nurse, acted as a physical medium in an investigation organized by psychical researcher Harry Price between 1923 and 1928. Abundant phenomena were observed. She was never suspected of faking it, and no such accusations are known to have been made.

Life

Dorothy Stella Cranshaw was born near Woolwich, London, on 1 Oct 1900. Her parents were James Henry Cranshaw and Elizabeth Eleanor Best. She was employed as a nurse during the first period of mediumship tests, later as an office secretary.

Cranshaw became involved in mediumship after a chance encounter on a train with [Harry Price](#), a paranormal investigator. Price engaged her in conversation after she showed interest in the spiritualist periodical *Light*, a copy of which was among his papers: she mentioned that she occasionally experienced psychical phenomena, at which he persuaded her to undertake experimental testing. He described her as 'a normal, healthy girl, twenty-three years old, of a quiet and unassuming disposition ... reserved in her manner, pleasant in her speech, and very willing and tractable in her endeavor to help the investigators in every way.'^[1]

Thirteen sittings took place in London between 22 March and 14 October 1923. Price stated that she was paid 'no more for her sittings than she would have received at her ordinary occupation, which was that of hospital nurse and dispenser'.^[2]

Cranshaw terminated sittings in October 1923, possibly at the urging of her new fiancé Leslie Irving Deacon. She later agreed to resume: further sittings took place in 1926-1927, and a third series in 1928 (see below, Later Sittings)

The investigation ceased altogether following Cranshaw's marriage to Deacon and the birth of their child, Robert Cranshaw. She died on 17 July 1986 in Portsmouth.^[3]

First Series (1923)

A record of the first series of sittings, in 1923, was published by Price in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, and can be read in full [here](#).

Spontaneous Experiences

Price stated that, by her account, although she knew nothing of (and had little interest in) psychical research, spontaneous phenomena had occurred around her infrequently (two or three times per year) for some years:

- Strong 'breezes' seemed to blow around her, particularly when she was near flowers, which she loved; these would happen even when outdoor air was absolutely still, or when she was in a room with all doors and windows tightly closed.
- Sudden movements of objects occurred: for example, a box of matches jerked away from her 'as if it had been flicked by a finger' as she was about to grasp it.
- Raps sounded on her bedstead or various parts of a room she was in.
- Infrequently, slight percussive sounds accompanied by blue sparks similar to electrical discharge were heard and seen around her.

These occurrences had little effect on her and she thought little of them, she told Price.^[4]

Conditions of Sittings

The first series of sittings was held in a room lit only by a red light (as was the norm in such investigations at this time). The light was extinguished on occasion to enable the phenomenon of flashing lights. Incense was burned and a musical box set to run, as Price felt these would be pleasing to the medium and perhaps help induce positive results. After the first sitting, the following items were recorded in the notes (with occasional exceptions):^[5]

- date, place, start and finish times
- temperature
- medium's state of health, pulse-rate and temperature
- state of weather
- nature of the experiments, lighting and control
- names of the sitters, and the order in which they sat

The seven regular sitters were four men and three women all of status considered respectable, including Price and [Eileen J Garrett](#), an Irish clairvoyant medium. Among many others who joined occasionally were [Everard Feilding](#), [Eric Dingwall](#), and other councillors and members of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR).

The door of the room was kept locked with the key removed. Typically, Price sat on one side of Cranshaw, while LE Pratt, a nurse, sat on the other. Those present all held hands and touched feet. Price notes that Cranshaw did exactly what she was requested to do, made no comments and simply entered a self-induced trance state, in which her respiration became weak and her hands icy cold, and she sank gradually into the arm of Pratt.

Recorded Phenomena

Key phenomena recorded at individual sittings were as follows:

Sitting 1 The table dipped, then shook and levitated about two inches; by its movements it responded to simple questions. Garrett said she saw a tall column of pale phosphorescent light behind Cranshaw.

Sitting 2 The table seemed agitated as if it were alive, or like running water with 'waves' as Price described it. It answered questions with its movements and levitated several times, once with a three-foot lateral movement. One of Garrett's hands was observed to go dark as if obscured by ectoplasm. All present felt cool breezes, despite the door and windows being tightly closed.

Sitting 3 A lighter table was used to see if it could be more easily affected. All present sat with only their fingertips touching the table-top. The table levitated several times, once far above their heads, forcing some of them to stand. Later, two of its three legs broke off, then the table-top broke into two pieces with a violent snap, and the other supports crumpled, turning it into a heap of splinters.

Sitting 4 By means of raps, the medium's 'control' personality identified itself by the name 'Palma'. The most striking event in this sitting was a reported vision by the medium: she saw a page of a newspaper named 'Daily Mail' and dated 'May 19th, 1923', with the name 'Andrew Salt' in large letters. Further, she 'saw' a boy falling and a doctor bending over him, pouring a white powder out of a bottle or tin to give to him.

Thirty-seven days later, on 19 May, the front page of the *Daily Mail* was taken up by a full-page

advertisement for Andrew's Liver Salt, featuring the name of the product in large letters and the picture of a distressed boy who had spilled a tin of the salt, scattering it on the ground. Quizzed by Price, the advertising company affirmed that it had not exhibited the poster until May, more than two weeks after the sitting; likewise, newspaper affirmed that it first learned of the company's plan to run the advertisement some three weeks before it ran (again, more than two weeks after the date of the sitting). Price pointed out that the precognition was literally correct on ten points, and symbolically on an eleventh, if the 'doctor' seen by Cranshaw was interpreted to represent the product's medicinal nature.

Sitting 5 This sitting featured more vigorous and fervent action from the table than before: it levitated, spun and turned over on request, without being touched by anyone; pinned one sitter against the wall; stood on two legs, against sitters exerting their full strength to push it down; and beat one man's knees red. It became so violent while trying to extricate itself from two chairs that the door had to be opened to admit daylight, which had the effect of calming it. Other recorded phenomena included 'pencils' of blue seen beneath the table and around the medium, and the largest temperature fluctuation recorded, a drop of 21.5 degrees to 43 degrees fahrenheit (6 celsius). During the first and second sittings it had dropped 13 and 15.5 degrees respectively, these three being the largest coolings recorded in all the 1923 sittings.

From the sixth sitting, the amount and type of equipment used was expanded to include such easily-affected items such as toy musical instruments, writing paper, modelling clay, and devices invented by Price and others to confirm that the activity was not caused by normal physical force.

Sitting 6 A table was used with deep vertical sides that made it impossible for sitters to put their fingers under it. It immediately began to move around the room, compelling the sitters to push their chairs back to the walls. A fresh sprig of lilac fell from the ceiling, apparently sourced from a vase of lilacs in the library. Flashes of 'electric' light were seen, described as blue by some present, and as yellow by others.

Sitting 7 A celluloid trumpet, aluminium bell, mouth organ and set of metal pan pipes were placed under the table. These all moved and sounded unmusically. Marks appeared on writing paper. Garrett said she saw a vision of a tall girl of dark complexion wearing a bright robe standing behind the medium, and this was taken possibly to be the medium's control, Palma.

Through motions of the table, Palma claimed responsibility for playing the instruments.

Sitting 8 A new table was used that was in effect a table within a table, the inner one made impossible to manipulate either by feet or knees. Musical instruments were placed within it, and many sounded. A trap door in the top of the table opened and closed.

Some sitters felt finger-like forms, and one felt her hand touched by a very cold hand.

Sitting 9 This sitting used a 'telekinetoscope', a device fashioned by Price that indicated the completion of an electrical circuit without the application of physical force.^[6] In addition to sounds from the musical instruments, flashes of light and passage of objects through the trap door on the table top, the telekinetoscope's red indicator light lit up for about a second.

Sitting 10 A sealed box was introduced in which a contact rang a bell when closed, as subsequently happened. Also in this sitting an apparatus was used that show markings if subjected to pressure: lines and circular marks indicated it had been touched by something fibrous. Dingwall lying under the table saw an egg-shaped white-opal body crawling under the table, apparently connected to the medium by a thin white cord.^[7]

Sitting 11 Cranshaw had been ill for some days, and the phenomena were observed to be weaker than usual.

Sitting 12 The venue was changed to a room provided by the Society for Psychical Research. Relatively few phenomena were observed, of which the most successful were imitations, apparently by the control 'Palma' of different types of 'rapping' noises made by the investigators.

Sitting 13 The top part of the inner table suddenly broke with a rending sound. By raps, the control 'Palma' indicated an objection to a plan by Dingwall (subsequently revealed by him) to introduce a new female sitter to the company.

Later Sittings

Cranshaw now informed Price by letter she was discontinuing the sittings, as she had started a new job (her new fiancé may also have objected).^[8] However, in February 1926, after a successful test sitting with RJ Tillyard FRS, an Australian entomologist, who wrote favourably of her abilities in *Nature*, she was persuaded to make herself available for further investigation. Nineteen sittings were held between February 10 and July 2, and one the following year on May 5, at Price's newly-opened National Laboratory of Psychical Research. A further nine sittings took place in 1928 between March 21 and July 4. The final sitting took place on July 5.^[9]

Recorded details of these later sittings can be found in the Harry Price archive. Edited versions were published in 1973 by James Turner, a poet and novelist who, having purchased the grounds of Borley Rectory, had become friendly with Price.^[10] The phenomena were generally weaker and less frequent than in the first series. Regular sitters included the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley.

Price's Theories

Price stressed that the temperature decrease observed in sittings with other mediums had here been confirmed 'beyond cavil or contradiction'.^[11] He hypothesized that 'the medium in some way absorbs large quantities of energy from the surroundings, giving it back later on.'^[12]

With regard to the locus and mode of application of the psychic force that caused motions of objects, Price offered two possible models:

- That the force was of the nature of external pressure applied to the under surfaces of the table, by telekinetic power. This view presupposes something in the nature of ectoplasmic rods having a fulcrum or support either in the bodies of medium and sitters, or on the floor of the room.
- That the force was of the nature of internal traction, applied to the molecules or cells of the material, by 'endokinetic' powers, i.e., power of movement from within. This view presupposes an accumulation of psycho-psychical or ætheric energy, acting more in the manner of electricity or magnetism, and having its motive centre and fulcrum in a region outside space.^[13]

He noted that the two theories are not mutually exclusive, and the second might be tested by discerning signs of internal tension in the wood from which objects such as the tables were built.

Statistical Review

Parapsychologist [John Randall](#) revisited Cranshaw's mediumship in a 2001 monograph, applying newer statistical techniques to look for patterns and test Price's observations. As a first step he

created a scale for measuring the strength of the mechanical activity that occurred during each sitting, with ratings ranging from 0 for no paranormal phenomena observed to 5 for breaking of furniture.^[14]

Using this scale, he first tested for an apparent [decline effect](#) (gradual weakening of psychic activity over the course of the run of tests). This was found to be strongly statistically significant ($p = 0.0076$) for the first series, but not for the second, suggesting that Cranshaw's ability had settled to a steady level by the second series. Randall also notes that the presence of Eileen Garrett might have had a reinforcing effect in the first series. In the third series of just nine sittings, there is an increased effect instead, which Randall speculated was an effect of a different venue more congenial to the medium being used for the last four sittings.

Randall next looked into whether apparent telekinetic phenomena corresponded with the flashes of light, noting that similar light effects have been noted with other noted mediums. At $p = 0.06$, the correlation fell just short of the conventional level of significance.

Randall cautioned that for the apparent thermal effects to be truly convincing, the sittings would have needed to be conducted in a properly-constructed thermal chamber. Nonetheless, he tested for the correlation that Price had noticed and found it to be very marked at $p = 0.0085$ by one method of calculation and $p = 0.026$ by a second, concluding that the relationship between psychokinetic activity and local temperature descent must be real.

In reference to the first series, Price remarked that more violent activity took place when male and female sitters were equal in number or women predominated. Randall found evidence for this in all three series ($p = 0.00023$ combined).

Randall concurred with Price that heat in the air was somehow being converted into kinetic energy during the sittings, citing more recent calculations by other scientists showing how a surprising amount can be produced by modest cooling. He refrained from speculating how it is converted, however. He conjectured that Cranshaw's ability might be affected by the balance of the sexes of the sitters, potentially indicating that psychokinesis is an interpersonal process and possibly influenced by sexuality.

Reception

Methodological criticisms and accusations of faking are strikingly absent in the Cranshaw investigations, possibly because Cranshaw was not an established or professional medium, and sought neither fame or enrichment.^[15] Price biographer Paul Tabori notes that Price's report of the first series of sittings was published in America, France and Germany almost simultaneously, and when it came out in book form it was reviewed widely and appreciatively. He writes of her, 'She was one of the very few mediums in whose genuineness all the people who sat with her believed without reservations.'^[16]

KM Wehrstein

Literature

Ancestry.com (n.d.). [Dorothy Stella Cranshaw \(1901–1985\)](#). [Web page.]

Price, H. (1924). [A Record of Thirteen Sittings for Thermo-Psychic and Other Experiments](#). *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 18/5 (May), 305-362. [Webpage reproduction by Paul Adams.] [Reprinted in book form in 1925 as *Stella C.: An Account of Some Original Experiments in*

Psychical Research. London: Hurst & Blackett.]

Randall, J.L. (2001). The mediumship of Stella Cranshaw: A statistical investigation. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 65, 38-46.

Tabori, P. (1950). [Stella C.](#) In *Harry Price: The Biography of a Ghost Hunter*. London: Athenæum Press, 79-84. [Webpage reproduction by Paul Adams.]

Turner, J. (ed.) (1973). *Stella C.: An Account of Some Original Experiments in Psychical Research*. London: Souvenir Press.

References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Price (1924), 305.
- 2.^ Price (1924), 307. In September 1923 he wrote to Cranshaw, who was then seemingly unemployed, offering a much more generous 45 shillings per session (now around £160), but the first series ceased a month later.
- 3.^ Ancestry.com (n.d.)
- 4.^ Price (1924), 306.
- 5.^ Price (1924), 313. The temperature was monitored by use of a recording thermometer placed out of reach of all sitters. All information in this section is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- 6.^ A full description of the device is given in Price (1924), 351-2.
- 7.^ Full descriptions of other devices can be found in Price (1924), 354-58.
- 8.^ Randall (2001), 40.
- 9.^ Turner (1973), 39-41.
- 10.^ Turner (1973), 123-53.
- 11.^ A table of temperatures for the first series of sittings is given in Price (1924), 308.
- 12.^ Price (1924), 309.
- 13.^ Price (1924), 342.
- 14.^ See Randall (2001), Table 1, 41.
- 15.^ Randall (2001).
- 16.^ Tabori (1950).