

Hamlin Garland

Hamlin Garland authored 52 books, including *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1922. He was also heavily involved in psychical research. His 1936 book, *Forty Years of Psychic Research*, describes numerous mediumistic phenomena he had observed and studied during the preceding four decades, while his 1939 book, *The Mystery of the Buried Crosses*, details one of the most intriguing cases in the literature of psychical research.

Background

Hannibal Hamlin Garland was born in a squatter's cabin outside of West Salem, Wisconsin, and grew up on the American prairie there and in Iowa. His early education was limited by farm chores. In 1881, at age 20, he graduated from Cedar Valley Seminary, a secondary school founded by Baptists to provide college-preparatory classes. This went far beyond today's secondary schools, offering courses in Greek, Latin, history, rhetoric, algebra, trigonometry, zoology, botany, chemistry, natural philosophy, moral sciences, logic, astronomy, and surveying. Its literature courses included Cicero and Virgil. Some travelling and odd jobs followed graduation, including a position teaching oratory at the Morris Normal and Scientific School in Morris, Illinois. He eventually found his way eastward to Boston, Massachusetts, where he took more courses at the Boston School of Oratory and then, in 1885, a teaching position, followed by a promotion to director of the school's department of literature, a position which would occupy him for the next five years.

His first book, *Main-Travelled Roads*, a collection of short stories published in 1891, focused on the hardships of farm life. According to Keith Newlin, a recent biographer, Garland became 'the nation's most outspoken advocate of realism, vigorously promoting a literature that accurately represented the conditions of American life.'¹ Books about the American West and American Indians quickly followed. In 1896, he was commissioned to write a biography of Ulysses S Grant, the Civil War hero who became President of the United States. By the turn of the century, Garland had authored 14 books. He moved to New York City in 1915 to be closer to his publishers. During those early years, he became a student of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, taking pride in his scepticism and agnosticism.

He lectured widely on literary, social, and artistic matters, receiving honorary doctorate degrees from the University of Wisconsin, Beloit College, Northwestern University, and the University of Southern California. The latter institution now houses the Hamlin Garland Collection in its Doheny Memorial Library. The Hamlin Garland Society exists today to disseminate information on Garland's literary works, and his early home in West Salem, Wisconsin is a national historic landmark and museum.

Psychical Research

In 1891, while he was still living in Boston, Garland was asked to join in the formation of a new organization, the American Psychical Society (APS), being created by members of the [American Society for Psychical Research \(ASPR\)](#) who were frustrated by the fact that [Richard Hodgson](#), its executive secretary, was keeping all the best cases for himself to investigate. Garland said he had not given much thought to the 'dark side of the moon', but was intrigued by the idea of investigating 'the world of hidden outlaw forces' and so agreed to join, becoming one of the organization's chief investigators.²

Garland was unimpressed by the first case assigned to him for investigation. It involved a [poltergeist](#), what he referred to as 'a rollicking spirit who throws things about.'³ He believed that the episode was genuine, at least in part, but also considered it unconvincing as evidence of the paranormal. On a visit to California the following year, Garland met Mary Curryer Smith (whom he refers to as 'Mrs Smiley'), a direct-voice medium, and witnessed some dynamic physical and mental mediumship. He was so impressed by this that he arranged for Smith to travel to Boston to be studied by other members of the APS. The first two sittings were for the most part unproductive. In a third sitting, at the home of Professor Amos Dolbear, a fellow APS member who was head of the department of astronomy and physics at Tufts College, the two men and Mrs Dolbear witnessed two dozen books fly off the shelves in Dolbear's library and 'shadowy hands' stacking the books on the table in front of them. They heard from two male spirits, one calling himself 'Mitchel', who claimed to be the medium's chief guide, and the other 'Wilbur', another of her guides, who identified himself as Jefferson Thompson, a brigadier general in the Confederate army before his decease. According to Garland, 'Wilbur' spoke in a manly voice and as clearly as if he were a living human being.

For two mortal hours this invisible kept us wondering at his power and laughing at his "wise-cracking". He was philosophic as well as humorous. At intervals he played jokes upon us. At my request he touched my face on the side away from the psychic and six feet from her. As a still stronger test I asked that the small end of the cone touch me on my right nostril. This was done with such gentle precision that it seemed a caress.

During all of the activity, Garland monitored the medium's position and noted that she remained in a 'deathly trance' while Professor Dolbear sat dumbfounded.⁴ Garland later wrote of Dolbear:

He is shaken, astounded, almost convinced, but as he meets his fellow instructors he will not mention any of these baffling phenomena; or if he does he will jest about them. They will have taken on the fantastic character of a dream.⁵

Garland did not publicly write about his study of the paranormal until 1904, when he produced a series of articles for *Harper's Weekly*, under the title *The Tyranny of the Dark* – a work of fiction based on the three most impressive mediums with whom he had experimented, also the experiences of an aunt. The articles were made into a book in 1905. A more factual account of his research was set forth in a 1908 book, *The Shadow World*. 'Garland was initially reluctant to put his psychic interests to fictional use, fearing he would be branded a crank,' explains Newlin, his

biographer, 'but with twenty books behind him, an established reputation, and a publisher who believed he was golden, he decided to risk it.' [6](#)

One of the more dramatic demonstrations of physical mediumship reported by Garland took place in 1907 and involved Daniel Peters (possibly a pseudonym), a young New York medium and recent law school graduate. Garland observed invisible hands unbutton the shirt of one of the sitters, then saw a table in front of the sitters rise and drop outside the circle, after which signatures of deceased friends and relatives were produced. Garland was given the signature of his deceased father-in-law, written in the peculiar up-and-down script that he well remembered. 'I had not been thinking of him,' he commented. 'I had not attempted to visualize his signature, and no one in the circle knew his writing or that he was related to me. There was something inexplicable in this fact.' [7](#)

A month later, Garland sat with Peters in his Sunday evening family circle, which called for the medium to be in a cabinet.

After a few moments silence, I observed a cloud of glowing vapor slowly forming on the floor just in front of the portieres. It resembled, as it rose, a cone of fire-lit steam, like that which rolls from a locomotive smokestack on a winter morning. It expanded as it slowly rose, and at last out of it the dim figure of a man emerged. He spoke in a foreign tongue, and I observed that his voice resembled that of the psychic. The Pole who sat beside me on the couch called out, "It is my brother!" [8](#)

Garland noted that the materialization appeared to be almost an exact twin of the sitter.

When this form faded out, the materialization of 'Evans', Peters's spirit guide, took place.

This dimly seen figure appeared enveloped in a cloud of vapor, but his voice was distinct. At his invitation I went forward to shake hands with him. He seemed taller than the psychic, but his manner of speech was distinctly similar to that of Peters. I could not see his face. The hand he offered me was draped in an exceedingly fine, faintly shining material, cobwebby in texture, which appeared to melt away between my fingers and his. The hand was narrow and pointed. I felt its bones for a moment. When I released it, the figure vanished like a bubble. It made no sound when it appeared and none as it disappeared. One instant it was there, the next instant it was not. [9](#)

Peters later explained to Garland that he struggled to hold on to the form as long as he could, so that Garland could study it, and that he could feel the force go out from his forehead and solar plexus before he collapsed. Garland anticipated that sceptics would say he was duped by a skillful arrangement of sheets and wires. However, there was no doubt in his mind that this was not the case. Moreover, Garland considered that his observations were in harmony with similar reports of materializations by [William Crookes](#) and [Charles Richet](#), both world-renowned scientists.

Over the next three decades, Garland witnessed a variety of phenomena with different mediums, including materializations, slate writing, trance voice, direct voice, and clairvoyance. However, while ruling out fraud and recognizing that something supernatural was taking place, he remained sceptical as to whether spirits were responsible for the phenomena. Like other researchers, Garland took the 'intellectual' approach, which held that the phenomena might somehow result from a not-yet-understood aspect of the medium's subconscious. Again like other observers, he may have accepted the spiritistic hypothesis while being reluctant to publicly acknowledge this. He concluded his 1936 book by saying:

I concede the possibility of their (spirits') persistence, especially when their voices carry, movingly, characteristic tones and their messages are startlingly intimate. At such times, they seem souls of the dead veritably reembodyed. They jest with me about their occupations. They laugh at my doubts, quite in character. They touch me with their hands.¹⁰

On the dissolution of the APS Garland joined the ASPR. During February of 1927, he was elected to its Board of Trustees and asked to arbitrate in divisions among board members as to the genuineness of a Boston medium [Mina 'Margery' Crandon](#), who had been the subject of a long-running and disputatious investigation. Garland sat with Crandon during May 1927 and held a lengthy conversation with 'Walter', her primary spirit control (said to be Crandon's deceased brother). Garland reported:

While he could not be seen, he was to my other senses as much a personality as the 'Katie King' of Sir William Crookes. He presented himself as a youth, humorous, powerful, impudent, and testy. He ordered us about like children. He assumed the tone of a master, as though by the mere act of dying he had become possessed of all the wisdom of Lodge and Edison, and yet he busied himself with tricks to astonish us like a boy of twelve.¹¹

Garland decided in favour of the reality of Crandon's mediumship, but his vote did not serve as a tie-breaker, as the dissenters refused to accept his judgment.

Buried Crosses

Garland moved to Hollywood, California in 1929. Following the publication of *Forty Years*, he began investigating a case which he documented in his final book, *The Mystery of the Buried Crosses*, published the year before his death. He had been shown some 1,500 crosses and other artifacts allegedly unearthed by Gregory and Violet Parent between 1914 and 1924. It was explained to him by Gregory Parent that Violet, his now deceased wife, began communicating with 'dead souls' in 1914, just after she recovered from a serious illness. The communicating spirits directed her to buried treasures and artifacts all over southern and central California, said to have been buried by North American Indians during the missionary period.

According to Parent there were more artifacts to be found. Through a direct-voice medium, Sophia Williams, Garland then communicated with the deceased Violet Parent and with long-deceased missionary priests, and was led to additional crosses and artifacts buried around California and Mexico. He was directed to the general location and then to the exact spot, where he was told to dig. He found sixteen

additional artifacts, similar in substance and design to those collected by the Parents, in ten widely separated locations throughout California and Mexico. Some were in deep gullies, others high on cactus-covered hills far from the highway. One was hidden in a ledge of sandstone behind a wall of cactus plants which Garland had to chop away before finding it.

Other deceased figures with whom Garland believed himself to be in contact included [Arthur Conan Doyle](#), [William James](#), and [Gustave Geley](#) – all of them psychical researchers saying they were there to help Garland in his search. Several of the crosses are now displayed at the museum in West Salem, Wisconsin.

Michael Tymn

Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Newlin (2008), 4.
- [2](#). Garland (1936), 1-3.
- [3](#). Garland (1908), 10.
- [4](#). Garland (1936), 54-62.
- [5](#). Garland (1936), 70.
- [6](#). Newlin (2008), 273.
- [7](#). Garland (1936), 160.
- [8](#). Garland (1936), 171.
- [9](#). Garland (1936), 172.
- [10](#). Garland (1936), 392.
- [11](#). Tietze (1973), 126.