

Edmund Gurney

Edmund Gurney (1847-1888) was an English psychologist, psychical researcher, musical theorist and philosophical writer. Almost forgotten today, Gurney was a well-known and widely respected intellectual in his time, a friend of Frederic Myers in England and William James in America, among others. Together with Myers, Gurney adopted an original English approach to the study of the human mind, at a time when modern psychology was coming into existence as an academic profession, and when its scope and methods were still being negotiated.

Life and Career

Edmund Gurney was born on 23 March 1847 in Hersham, Surrey.¹ After studying Classics at Cambridge he was awarded a Fellowship at Trinity College in 1872, which he resigned in 1877. In the same year he married, and enrolled to study medicine in Cambridge and University College London. There he took classes in physics taught by [Oliver Lodge](#) whom he introduced to psychical research and later himself became a noted investigator.

Gurney was forced to abandon his medical training, being too sensitive to cope with continuous exposure to human suffering. In 1881, he reluctantly embarked on the study of law. Together with his Cambridge friends [Henry Sidgwick](#) and Frederic [Frederic WH Myers](#) Gurney became a founding member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882. Sufficiently wealthy to take the leap, the following year Gurney abandoned his legal studies and a promising career as a philosophical writer, and accepted the unpaid role of the Society's Honorary Secretary, becoming the first ever full-time psychical researcher

Until now, Gurney's greatest passion had been music, and although he was frustrated by his limited abilities as a performer and composer - he played the violin and the piano - he was beginning to gain recognition as a music theorist and philosophical writer. In 1881, he published the monumental *The Power of Sound*, a treatise on the psychology and philosophy of music, which was highly regarded by psychologists such as James Sully, Carl Stumpf and [William James](#), and is still held in esteem by music theorists today.² He discussed the evolution of musical sentiment with Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, and published on philosophical topics ranging from vivisection to aesthetics in *Mind* and other leading Victorian periodicals.

Among Gurney's other interests were conceptual issues in psychology. He was friends with important figures in British psychology of the time, such as James Sully (who would later serve, with Myers, as Secretary of the second International Congress of Experimental Psychology) and George Croom Robertson, the editor of *Mind* (the first British journal to provide space for psychological discussions in a modern sense). With Robertson, Sully, the philosophers Shadworth Hodgson, Leslie Stephen and other intellectuals connected to *Mind*, Gurney formed the 'Scratch Eight', an informal philosophical circle. Here in 1883 he met William James, who

was to be one of his greatest friends, and whose famous theory of emotions he critiqued in *Mind* in 1884.³

Gurney died on 23 June 1888 in the Albion Hotel at Brighton, from an overdose of chloroform, which he was said to use to alleviate facial pains resulting from neuralgia. His death was generally considered to be accidental, although some believed it might have been suicide, a claim that has since been exploited by those anxious to discredit his thought and work. He left behind his wife Kate (née Sibley) and a daughter, Helen, who died unmarried and childless.

Character and Philosophy

From contemporary accounts Edmund Gurney emerges as a man of high intellectual independence and abilities, scientific rigour and candour, and an almost legendary capacity for empathy. Tall, charming and of athletic build, Gurney's appearance was not that of an introverted intellectual, let alone a brooding mystic, and his humour and compassion appeared to have endeared him to many. There are indications that his prodigious outbursts of industry were often followed by phases of melancholy, which tempted some twentieth-century writers to retrospectively diagnose him as a victim of manic depression (bipolar disorder).

Gurney doubted the existence of a benevolent God, while entertaining a deep interest in the concrete implications of faith as a resource to help cope with the hardships of existence. His difficulties with theistic religions seemed to spring from the sentiment that no first principle – call it the 'Godhead' or 'Nature' – warranted worship if it allowed – let alone required – suffering as a condition, or necessary by-product, of evolution. This, Gurney felt, was particularly true if life was limited to the material realm with no prospect of possible compensation in a hereafter, let alone the hope thereof.⁴ Hence, Gurney was initially somewhat reluctant to join his friends Myers and Sidgwick in the investigation of spiritualist mediums, hauntings and apparitions; a decisive factor in this choice is likely to have been the tragic loss in 1875 of three sisters, who drowned in a boat accident on the Nile. Like Sidgwick, however, Gurney remained highly sceptical of spiritualism, and died unconvinced of post-mortem survival.

Gurney's deep frustration with traditional religion, philosophical materialism and Huxleyan agnosticism alike was epitomized in his radical approach – characteristic of his independence of mind – to a great variety of disputed philosophical matters not limited to scientific and religious problems. Hence the title of his book *Tertium Quid: Chapters on Various Disputed Questions* (a compilation of previously published essays on topics ranging from music to ethics and religion): rather than trying to find middle ground between two extreme positions, Gurney sought to arrive at genuinely novel alternatives – a third way of thinking (*tertium quid* meaning 'third thing'):

In most of these questions, I am conscious of 'a great deal to be said on both sides', and also of a strong aversion to saying it in the ways which have chiefly attracted the public ear. In most of them, the truer view seems to me to depend on taking a standpoint, or in recognising facts and principles, other than those which partisans have usually recognised or taken. And this truer view, if such it

be, is not one that would extenuate differences, or induce lions to lie down with lambs, or generally tend towards compromise in the ordinary sense; its immediate tendency, on the contrary, is rather to make each of the duels triangular.⁵

Many of Gurney's characteristics – intellectual independence, hard-nosed empirical and analytical rigour, aversion to dogmatism and lofty absolutist philosophical systems, and a deep interest in concrete human experience – are reminiscent of William James, the Pragmatist philosopher and 'father' of modern American psychology. James repeatedly expressed feelings of intellectual and emotional kinship with Gurney, as can be seen in his reviews of some of Gurney's works and in his private correspondence.⁶ Shortly after learning of Gurney's death, James wrote to *Mind* editor GC Robertson:

I think, to compare small things with great, that there was a very unusual sort of affinity between my mind and his. Our problems were the same, and for the most part our solutions. I eagerly devoured every word he wrote, and was always conscious of him as a critic and judge. He had both quantity and quality, and I hoped for some big philosophic achievement from him ere he should get through.⁷

Psychology and Psychical Research

While nowadays Gurney is primarily remembered as a pioneer of parapsychological research, it is important to note that the early SPR work on hypnotism, hallucinations and psychological automatisms (spearheaded by Gurney and Myers) was for a short (but historically significant) time discussed internationally as a legitimate variant of nascent experimental psychology. Janet Oppenheim comments on Gurney's and Myers's work: 'With psychology in its infancy, it still seemed in the late nineteenth century that psychical research ... might play a legitimate and important role in the growth of a new science', adding that 'the line between Gurney's contributions to psychical research and to the emerging study of psychology is often difficult to draw'.⁸

In fact, eminent early representatives of the psychological profession, such as William James in the US and [Théodore Flournoy](#) in Switzerland, adopted the research programme of Gurney and Myers, favouring it over physiological psychology, the dominating Germanic variant of psychological experimentation. Gurney and Myers collaborated extensively with French psychologists who were interested in hypnotism (figures such as HE Beaunis, H Bernheim, C Féré, Pierre Janet, A Liébeault, J Liégeois, T Ribot and H Taine all figure in the early list of Honorary Members of the SPR). After Gurney's death, leading SPR figures such as Myers, his brother Arthur T Myers, Henry Sidgwick and his wife Eleanor were actively involved in the International Congress of Psychology, from its first session in 1889 to Frederic Myers' death in 1901. This group in effect represented the community of British psychologists at the first four Congresses by continuing Gurney's researches.⁹ Had Gurney lived to see the birth of the International Congresses, his intellectual standing, and especially his bonds with British and

foreign psychologists, would have made him the natural leader of the SPR's participation.

Gurney's absence from histories of psychology can be understood in the context of the emergence of psychology as a modern professionalized science, then at a fragile stage. The tendency of some historians of psychology to reconstruct the past through the lens of the present - viewing it solely in terms of developments within universities - has led them to overlook important figures who resist simple classification, such as Gurney, the Myers brothers, the Sidgwicks, [Charles Richet](#) and Julian Ochorowicz - elite psychical researchers who were significantly involved in the making of modern psychology but with no thought of forging careers as paid professionals.

Hypnotism and Telepathy

While physiological psychology came to dominate the university-based approach to the study of the human mind (particularly in Germany and the US), hypnotism was also viewed as a potential tool for psychological experimentation. This was especially the case in France, where medical approaches merged with psychological questions much more strongly than elsewhere. In England, Gurney was the first Englishman since James Braid (the modern 'father' of hypnotism) to systematically study hypnotic phenomena. However, whereas Braid's conceptual transformation of animal magnetism into hypnotism strove to cleanse it from its occult aspects - to make it compatible with contemporary rationalist-Christian intellectual mainstream culture - Gurney and colleagues pursued a more radically empirical and integrative approach, in line with Gurney's *tertium quid* maxim, paying close attention to both conventionally psychological and oft-reported parapsychological phenomena associated with animal magnetism.

Upon co-founding the SPR in 1882, Gurney became head of the Society's Committee on Mesmerism, the leading early British forum for studies of hypnotic phenomena. With Frederic and Arthur Myers, Gurney travelled to Paris and Nancy to study hypnosis, contributing three essays on hypnotism to *Mind*.¹⁰ Under his editorship, from 1883 to his death in 1888, the SPR *Proceedings* became the leading scholarly periodical in England devoting space to the problem of hypnotism and automatism in general. An analysis of materials published in the *Proceedings* between 1882 and 1900 shows that out of 204 papers and notes, 79 (39%) were devoted to hypnotic and other phenomena indicative of divisions of the self, more than the combined total published in the *Journal of Mental Science* and *Mind*, the only other English periodicals that discussed these topics.¹¹

In experiments in post-hypnotic suggestion with healthy volunteers (usually young working-class males), Gurney identified two discrete stages of hypnotism: a state of hypnotic alertness, and the hypnotic trance proper. Gurney found that, in these states, mutually exclusive, state-specific memory chains would be overt, which seemed to imply that apparent nuclei of alternate personalities in hypnotism were not unconscious in themselves, but merely in relation to other states of consciousness, an idea later developed in detail by Frederic Myers. With the exception of the two stages of hypnotism observed by Gurney, his main findings

regarding divisions of the self were independently confirmed by other psychologists, such as Pierre Janet and Alfred Binet in France, [Max Dessoir](#) in Germany, and William James in the US.¹²

More controversial were Gurney's experiments to test assumptions of a quasi-physical influence in hypnosis, and the transference of thoughts and sensations between a hypnotist and his subjects. These phenomena had been frequently reported since the late 1700s by medical practitioners of animal magnetism, particularly in Germany and France, but seldom systematically scrutinized: Gurney and SPR colleagues introduced more rigorous standards of testing.¹³ To examine whether in some cases hypnotic phenomena were affected by some quasi-physical influence, or 'nervous induction', between hypnotist and patient, in a series of experiments Gurney carefully shielded his subjects' hands from their view and instructed a hypnotist (usually his secretary, the former stage hypnotist and later cinematographer GA Smith) to induce anaesthesia in randomly selected fingers of subjects by applying 'mesmeric passes' at a distance of at least an inch, usually with one finger only. Controls were imposed to rule out visual and tactile perceptions (such as drafts produced by the hypnotist's finger movements), yet Gurney reported that participants consistently failed to respond to stabs, burns and electric shocks applied to the 'mesmerized' fingers. Although he did not embrace Franz Anton Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism, he nonetheless doubted whether suggestion was the only principle at work, and urged independent replications of his experiments be carried out.¹⁴

Gurney's experiments in telepathy (including the transference of sensations such as tastes and pains) with and without hypnosis were also specifically designed to rule out fraud and other conventional explanations, such as muscle reading, involuntary gesticulation and auditory clues, and various subtle codes between 'agent' and 'recipient'. Although contact was occasionally allowed in some of the earlier experiments, the possibility of conscious and unconscious signalling was gradually excluded.¹⁵ Though Gurney was also involved in telepathy experiments not using hypnosis, it seems clear that he thought altered states of consciousness were not only particularly conducive for the occurrence of supposed telepathic effects, but also a fruitful basis for conceptual discussions in conventional psychology. In a letter to William James in January 1887, Gurney talked of writing a book on hypnotism,¹⁶ but it is uncertain how far this endeavour had progressed by the time he died in the following year.

Hallucinations and *Phantasms of the Living*

Gurney's most ambitious project was a large-scale survey of non-pathological hallucinations - the first of its kind in the mind sciences. Results were published in 1886 under the somewhat peculiar title *Phantasms of the Living*, with Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore figuring as co-authors. Gurney was responsible for the general plan of research and wrote the bulk of the two volumes (over 1,300 pages). Myers wrote the introduction and a theoretical chapter regarding 'a suggested mode of psychical interaction'. Podmore's name was included in acknowledgement of his function as the most active investigator of cases besides Gurney (though the

Sidgwick, Myers, Richard Hodgson and other SPR members were also involved in the collection of cases).

The main focus of *Phantasms* was on the problem of 'veridical hallucinations': vivid visual, auditory and tactile impressions that convey specific information not accessible through the known channels of perception. A central aim was to evaluate anecdotal reports of apparitions of persons in life-threatening, fatal or otherwise emotionally significant situations, to relatives and loved ones who were not at the time aware of the crisis. Gurney's and Myers's guiding idea - complemented by findings from their simultaneous exploration of the psychology of automatic writing and hypnotically-induced hallucinations and dreams - was that, if veridical hallucinations did occur, they might be understood as recipients' idiosyncratically dramatized expressions of telepathic impressions, received below the threshold of conscious awareness.

The project involved two consecutive phases. The first, relatively uncontroversial step was a general survey of the prevalence of hallucinatory experiences in the general population. This census of hallucinations formed the baseline for the second and more difficult step, the assessment of the reality and frequency of veridical impressions. To obtain a robust inferential baseline for their assessment of the occurrence of telepathic hallucinations, Gurney and colleagues collected 5,705 cases largely in England (participants were recruited personally with the help of the wider SPR membership, as well as through notices and articles in leading papers and reviews), of which 702 veridical cases were found solid enough to be considered evidence for the occurrence of telepathic hallucinations.

These were cases that had survived a set of exclusion criteria: Percipients were required to be of flawless reputation, reasonable intellectual standing and sober judgment. Claimants with a history or indications of mental illness, or a suspected penchant for the wondrous, were excluded, as were vague and ambiguous impressions that failed to stand out as vivid, unusual and ideally unique in percipients' lives. As a rule, percipients were personally interviewed and cross-examined, while external and circumstantial evidence in the form of written statements and interviews of secondary witnesses, as well as letters and other serving as independent corroboration, were reproduced whenever available. Large portions of *Phantasms* were dedicated to thoughtful observations on the psychology of error and perception, and Gurney explained at length efforts taken to eliminate these problems.

Gurney's survey of veridical hallucinations extended the application of statistical inference that had been pioneered by the SPR's Committee of Thought-Transference in England and by Charles Richet in France.¹⁷ With the mathematician [Eleanor Sidgwick](#), the economist and pioneer of statistics Francis Ysidro Edgeworth, and William James as consultants, Gurney discussed at length the role of chance coincidence as a confounding factor in the interpretation of the data.¹⁸ For instance, calculations of probabilities that hallucinations corresponding with the actual death of a person appearing to a loved one could be due to chance were based on correlations between subjective variables (such as the percipient's claims regarding the uniqueness of the experience) with objective measures such as national death statistics. The spontaneous cases, which formed

the main part of the study, were supplemented by a chapter summarizing results from hitherto published telepathy experiments in England and abroad. On this basis, Gurney and colleagues concluded that there was a strong initial indication for the reality of telepathy, and they urged scientific readers to collaborate in further research and attempt independent replications.

Shortly after completing *Phantasms*, Gurney initiated the SPR 'Census of Hallucinations', an international replication of *Phantasms* based on a sample of 17,000 sane persons. The international Census, which the SPR continued after Gurney's death, was the first truly international project commissioned by the International Congress of Psychology; it was published by Henry Sidgwick and colleagues in 1894 in the *SPR Proceedings*.¹⁹ Independent of their confirming conclusions regarding the existence of telepathy, the results of *Phantasms* and the 'Census of Hallucinations' seemed to provide overwhelming evidence for the prevalence of hallucinations in the general public, thus rendering traditional medical notions of hallucinations as clear-cut indication of mental disease problematic if not obsolete.

Contemporary Controversies

Though methodologically and conceptually sophisticated, and in many respects ahead of its time, Gurney's work was mostly ignored by other psychologists. To understand this, it is important to acknowledge that his brand of psychology conflicted with late-nineteenth century mainstream sensibilities in more than one respect. Gurney's and Myers's studies of psychological automatisms, for instance, appeared to reveal processes involving multiple layers of volition and memory, and refined reflective reasoning that was sometimes superior to the capacities of the waking self. But such ideas were fundamentally at odds with contemporary standard notions of rationality and morality, following the , indiscriminate Enlightenment precept that automatisms were inherently mindless and non-conscious, and categorically inferior to conscious mental acts. Altered states of consciousness such as trance were viewed as intrinsically pathological, and major medical and psychological theorists of the late nineteenth century - Henry Maudsley and William Carpenter in Britain, Pierre Janet in France, and Rudolf Heidenhain and later Wilhelm Wundt in Germany - were deeply committed to maintaining the everyday waking self and its conscious will - the ultimate agents of moral responsibility - firmly on the throne of mental hierarchies.²⁰

Another nineteenth century cultural taboo concerned supposed social and cultural dangers of 'superstition' and 'magical thinking', which shaped contemporary academic politics at least as much as fears of materialism and determinism. At a time when science was in the process of turning from a leisurely occupation of wealthy gentlemen into a profession (the term 'scientist' was only coined in the nineteenth century), an intellectual activity that could be associated with such things, even superficially, stood little chance of a fair hearing in official scholarly discourse.²¹ Hence, while Gurney's work on the psychology of subliminal psychological phenomena was initially well received, particularly abroad, *Phantasms* and related studies concerning telepathy were usually either ignored or polemically decried as fuelling supposedly dangerous superstitions. With the

notable exception of James (and later Flournoy), early professionalized psychologists, particularly in Germany and the US, fought a ruthless public battle against colleagues who embraced psychical research as a legitimate branch of psychology. Wilhelm Wundt, for example, inaugurated his Institute of Experimental Psychology at Leipzig in 1879 with an attack on eminent scientists interested in the phenomena of spiritualism (including the founder of psychophysics, Gustav Theodor Fechner) by comparing it to witchcraft, warning: 'The moral barbarism produced in its time by the belief in witchcraft would have been precisely the same, if there had been real witches.' This was why, according to Wundt, it would be irresponsible to admit the phenomena even if they were genuine. He concluded: 'We can therefore leave the question entirely alone, whether or not you have ground to believe in the spiritualistic phenomena'.[22](#)

Moved by worries that associations of the 'new psychology' with spiritualism and other large-scale heterodox movements of the time would politically jeopardize the fledgling psychological profession, Wundt and other prominent psychologists - including Wilhelm Preyer, Hugo Münsterberg, Joseph Jastrow, G Stanley Hall, James McKeen Cattell and Edward B Titchener - actively marginalized less 'enlightened' colleagues. Instead of impartially scrutinizing the work of elite psychical researchers, or offering constructive criticism, opponents in and outside psychology - usually publishing in popular science magazines, revues and papers rather than formally academic channels - lumped together the hard-nosed, detached empiricism of investigators like Gurney and James with productions of the most naive occultists, and sweepingly pathologized any form of interest in the 'rogue' phenomena of spiritualism and animal magnetism.[23](#)

Hence, when a series of successful telepathy experiments with three young girls, the [Creery sisters](#), was tainted by the discovery of attempts by them to cheat, critics were quick to reduce psychical research to this very instance, usually neglecting to point out that the trickery was detected by the Sidgwicks and Gurney, who immediately reported the incident.[24](#) While admitting that this would discredit all previous trials in which one or more of the sisters were involved, Gurney reminded readers that success was only claimed in instances where the possibility of collusion between the sisters - by codes in the form of subtle noises such as breathing patterns and seemingly incidental gestures and movements - had been excluded by having an experimenter act as the 'agent', the person from whose mind the subject attempted to guess the target.[25](#) For instance, in a successful series of fifty experiments with Alice Creery (aged fifteen at the time), the physicist William Barrett acted as experimenter and sole agent,[26](#) and in such cases any suspicion of fraud or involuntary signalling would have to include the experimenter.

Responding to continued assaults on the SPR's work, William James later stated concerning the Creery trials that

for the most part the conditions of the earlier series had excluded signalling, and it is also possible that the cheating may have grafted itself on what was originally a genuine phenomenon. Yet Gurney was wise in abandoning the entire series to the skepticism of the reader. Many critics of the S.P.R. seem out of all its labors to have heard only of this case. But there are experiments recorded with upwards of thirty other subjects.[27](#)

While critics sought to discredit Gurney's investigations, polemically associating it with uncritical spiritualism, the spiritualist community was also unsupportive. Leaders of the movement (including Alfred Russel Wallace) accused Gurney and Myers of having invented subliminal psychological approaches in order to explain away apparitions, mediumship and other phenomena suggestive of post-mortem survival as mere manifestations of telepathy among the living.²⁸ Too psychological for committed spiritualists like Wallace, and too 'occult' for rationalist-Christian psychologists such as Wundt and G Stanley Hall, Gurney's unorthodox strand of psychological research failed to create an audience, let alone a lobby. Instead of receiving support for his *tertium quid* approach, Gurney and colleagues encountered opposition from representatives of otherwise often mutually antagonistic camps, ranging from orthodox religion and spiritualism on the one hand to Huxleyan agnosticism and philosophical materialism on the other. Writers from quite distinct schools of thought found themselves in rare accord, contributing to the modern standard notion of psychical research as an intrinsically illegitimate, and intellectually unseemly, endeavour by employing catchwords such as 'superstition', 'enthusiasm' and related shibboleths - a habit that has continued to dominate the popular and academic discourse on the subject matter of psychical research.²⁹

Trevor Hall

The most frequently cited source regarding Gurney is *The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney*, first published in 1964 by the surveyor and amateur historian [Trevor Hall](#). This likewise perpetuates the view that to adopt an empirical interest in ostensible parapsychological phenomena as intrinsically regressive and unscientific. Like his psychological namesake G Stanley Hall half a century earlier, Hall unscrupulously impugned the character and mental health of psychical researchers in order to get his message across. He did this by exploiting the unresolved circumstances of Gurney's death, constructing a cloak-and-dagger story in which psychical researchers were the hapless victims of an alleged obsession with the wondrous. Hall reduced the early history of the SPR to garbled accounts of experiments with the Creery sisters, a selection of early hypnotic telepathy trials, and contemporary attacks on *Phantasms of the Living*. He also dwelled heavily on a separate series of successful telepathy trials, the Smith and Blackburn experiments, which too had fallen into doubt when one of the two participants, Blackburn, in later life published a sensational, and generally implausible, claim that the pair had cheated (which Smith, Gurney's secretary, robustly denied.) (See [Smith and Blackburn](#).) Hall concluded that a manic-depressive Gurney had committed suicide after he realized that his life's work had been all for nothing, essentially built on tricks.³⁰

Other historical researchers - such as Alan Gauld (from whom Hall obtained copies of letters and archival material), MH Coleman, and especially Fraser Nicol - documented numerous omissions and distortions in Hall's account; more recently, Trevor Hamilton has thoroughly refuted his main allegations.³¹ Far from acknowledging these criticisms, in 1980 Hall published an otherwise unchanged second edition that included supposedly decisive evidence in support of his claims: a short diary entry by William James's sister, Alice James, more than a year after Gurney's death, 'They say that there is little doubt that Mr. Edmund Gurney committed suicide', and her view that it was 'a pity to hide it'.³²

Hall failed to acknowledge that the diary entry had previously been pointed out (and identified as insignificant) by [Fraser Nicol](#).³³ Nor did he explain why the invalid and bedridden Alice should be considered be a more reliable source than her brother Henry, who likewise lived in England but was far more intimately connected with Gurney's circle of friends than she, and who doubted suicide. Alice was known to be prone to perpetuating bizarre rumours (such as the often repeated but untrue claim that Myers accompanied Gurney on his honeymoon to Switzerland).³⁴ In the absence of independent support, Hall's account - hinging as it does on misrepresentation, misquotations, omissions and innuendo - should not be mistaken for serious historical scholarship.³⁵

For all this, academic writers and professional historians have been quick to accept Hall's story.³⁶ Arguably, the positive reception of Hall's conspiracy thesis points to a cultural bias: his book is one of countless examples of the way in which modern discussions of psychical research are loaded with unreflecting assumptions about its intrinsic illegitimacy.

To understand the historicity of this bias, Gurney's activities should be viewed in the context of the development of professionalized psychology. For much of the nineteenth century, opposition to psychical research has lastingly shaped and limited, not only modern habits of writing history, but also the scope of what is presently permitted in scientific inquiry.

Andreas Sommer

Literature

Alvarado, C.S. (2002). Dissociation in Britain during the late nineteenth century: The Society for Psychical Research, 1882-1900. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 3, 9-33.

Alvarado, C.S. (2009). Late 19th- and early 20th-century discussions of animal magnetism. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 57, 366-81.

Barrett, W.F., Gurney, E., Hodgson, R., Myers, A.T., Myers, F.W.H., Ridley, H.N., et al. (1883). Third report of the Committee on Mesmerism. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 2, 12-23.

Barrett, W.F., Gurney, E., & Myers, F.W.H. (1882). First report on thought-reading. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1, 13-34.

Barrett, W.F., Gurney, E., Myers, F.W.H., Ridley, H.N., Stone, W.H., Wyld, G., et al. (1883a). First report of the Committee on Mesmerism. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1, 217-29.

Barrett, W.F., Gurney, E., Myers, F.W.H., Ridley, H.N., Stone, W.H., Wyld, G., et al. (1883b). Second report of the Committee on Mesmerism. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1, 251-62.

Binet, A. (1890). *On Double Consciousness. Experimental Psychological Studies*. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Open Court.

- Binet, A. (1892). *Les Altérations de la Personnalité*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Blum, D. (2007). *Ghost Hunters. William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*. London: Century.
- Broad, C.D. (1965). The life, work and death of Edmund Gurney. [Unpublished manuscript, Broad papers, Trinity College Cambridge, Wren Library, Broad D1/17.]
- Chettiar, T. (2012). Looking as little like patients as persons well could: Hypnotism, medicine and the problem of the suggestible subject in late nineteenth-century Britain. *Medical History* 56, 335-54.
- Coleman, M.H. (1992). The death of Edmund Gurney. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 58, 194-200.
- Collins, H.M., & Pinch, T.J. (1979). The construction of the paranormal: nothing unscientific is happening. In *On the Margins of Science: The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge*, ed. by R. Wallis, in *Sociological Review Monograph* 27, 237-70. Keele, UK: University of Keele.
- Coon, D.J. (1992). Testing the limits of sense and science. American experimental psychologists combat spiritualism. *American Psychologist* 47, 143-51.
- Danziger, K. (1982). Mid-nineteenth-century British psycho-physiology: A neglected chapter in the history of psychology. In *The Problematic Science: Psychology in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, ed. by W.R. Woodward & M.G. Ash, 119-46. New York: Praeger.
- Daston, L. (1978). British responses to psycho-physiology, 1860-1900. *Isis* 69, 192-208.
- Daston, L., & Park, K. (1998). *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books.
- Dessoir, M. (1890). *Das Doppel-Ich (Schriften der Gesellschaft für Experimental-Psychologie zu Berlin, I. Stück)*. Leipzig, Germany: Ernst Günther.
- Dingwall, E.J. (ed.). (1986). *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena. A Survey of Nineteenth-Century Cases* (4 vols.). London: J. & A. Churchill.
- Edel, L. (ed.). (1982). *The Diary of Alice James*. London: Penguin.
- Epperson, G. (1997). *The Mind of Edmund Gurney*. Madison, Wisconsin, USA: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Gauld, A. (1965). Mr Hall and the S.P.R. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 43, 53-62.
- Gauld, A. (1968). *The Founders of Psychical Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Gauld, A. (1992). *A History of Hypnotism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Gauld, A. (2004). Gurney, Edmund (1847-1888). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- Gregory, F. (1977). *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany (Studies in the History of Modern Science 1)*. Dordrecht, Germany: Springer.
- Gurney, E. (1880). *The Power of Sound*. London: Smith, Elder, & Co.
- Gurney, E. (1883). Natural Religion. *Mind* 8, 198-221.
- Gurney, E. (1884a). An account of some experiments in mesmerism. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 2, 201-16.
- Gurney, E. (1884b). The problems of hypnotism. *Mind* 9, 477-508.
- Gurney, E. (1884c). The stages of hypnotism. *Mind* 9, 110-21.
- Gurney, E. (1884d). What is an emotion? *Mind* 9, 421-26.
- Gurney, E. (1887a). Editorial note. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 3, 164.
- Gurney, E. (1887b). Further problems of hypnotism. *Mind* 12, 212-32, 397-422.
- Gurney, E. (1887c). *Tertium Quid: Chapters on Various Disputed Questions* (2 vols.). London: Kegan Paul, Trench.
- Gurney, E. (1887d). Thought-transference. *Science* 9, 233-35.
- Gurney, E. (1888a). Hypnotism and telepathy. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 5, 216-59.
- Gurney, E. (1888b). Note relating to some of the published experiments in thought-transference. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 5, 269-70.
- Gurney, E., Myers, F.W.H., & Barrett, W.F. (1882). Second report on thought-transference. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1, 70-97.
- Gurney, E., Myers, F.W.H., & Barrett, W.F. (1883). Fourth report of the Committee on Thought-Transference. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 2, 1-11.
- Gurney, E., Myers, F. W.H., & Podmore, F. (1886). *Phantasms of the Living* (2 vols.). London: Trübner.
- Gurney, E., Myers, F.W.H., Podmore, F., & Barrett, W.F. (1883). Third report on thought-transference. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1, 161-215.
- Hacking, I. (1988). Telepathy: Origins of randomization in experimental design. *Isis* 79, 427-51.
- Hall, T.H. (1980). *The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney* (2nd ed.). London: Duckworth.
- Hamilton, T. (2009). *Immortal Longings: F.W.H. Myers and the Victorian Search for Life After Death*. Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic.

- Haughton, G.D. (1886). C.C.M. and the Psychical Society. *Light* 6, 269.
- James, W. (1887). Review of *Phantasms of the Living* by Gurney, Myers, and Podmore. *Science* 9, 18-20.
- James, W. (1888a). Review of *Tertium Quid* by Edmund Gurney. *The Nation* 46, 349.
- James, W. (1888b). Untitled note on the death of Edmund Gurney. *The Nation* 47, 53.
- James, W. (1889). Notes on automatic writing. *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research (Old Series)* 1, 548-64.
- James, W. (1890). *The Principles of Psychology* (2 vols.). New York: Henry Holt.
- James, W. (1897). What psychical research has accomplished. In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 299-327. London: Longmans Green and Co.
- James, W. (1899). [Telepathy](#). In *Johnson's Universal Cyclopædia*, ed. by C.K. Adams, vol. 8, 45-47. New York: D. Appleton & Company.
- James, W., & Carnochan, M. (1886). Report of the committee on hypnotism. *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research (Old Series)* 1, 95-102.
- Janet, P. (1886). Les actes inconscients et le dédoublement de la personnalité pendant le somnambulisme provoqué. *Revue philosophique* 22, 577-92.
- Janet, P. (1889). *L'Automatisme psychologique. Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Jastrow, J. (1887a). Some miscalled cases of thought-transference. *Science* 9, 115-16.
- Jastrow, J. (1887b). Thought-transference. *Science* 9, 265-66.
- Kelly, E.F., Kelly, E.W., Crabtree, A., Gauld, A., Grosso, M., & Greyson, B. (2007). *Irreducible Mind. Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*. Lanham, Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kiddle, H. (1885). The 'unconscious self' *Light* 5, 376.
- Nicol, F. (1966). The silences of Mr. Trevor Hall. *International Journal of Parapsychology* 8, 5-59.
- Noël, R. (1885). Spiritism versus other theories (being an answer to Messr. von Hartmann, Myers, and Gurney). *Light* 5, 514-16, 530-31, 543, 555-56, 568, 587-88, 599-600.
- Noël, R. (1886). Hallucination, memory, and the unconscious self. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 2, 158-71.
- Oppenheim, J. (1985). *The Other World. Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Porter, R. (1999). Witchcraft and magic in Enlightenment, Romantic and liberal thought. In *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by B. Ankarloo & S. Clark, 191-282. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Richet, C. (1884). La suggestion mentale et le calcul des probabilités. *Revue Philosophique* 18, 609-74.

Robertson, G.C. (1890). Gurney, Edmund (1847-1888) *Dictionary of National Biography* (Vol. 23, 356-58). London: Smith, Elder & Co.

Shamdasani, S. (1994). Encountering Hélène: Théodore Flournoy and the genesis of subliminal psychology. In *Théodore Flournoy. From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages*, ed. by S. Shamdasani, xi-li. Princeton, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press.

Sidgwick, H., Johnson, A., Myers, F.W.H., Podmore, F., & Sidgwick, E.M. (1894). Report on the Census of Hallucinations. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 10, 25-422.

Sidgwick, H., Marillier, L., James, W., & Hodgson, R. (1892). Statistical enquiry into hallucinations [with discussion]. *International Congress of Psychology. Second Session. London, 1892* (56-69). London: William & Norgate.

Skrupskelis, I.K., & Berkeley, E.M. (eds.). (1992-2004). *The Correspondence of William James* (12 vols.). Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: University of Virginia Press.

Skrupskelis, I.K., & Berkeley, E.M. (eds.). (1997). *William and Henry James. Selected Letters*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press.

Sommer, A. (2011). [Professional heresy: Edmund Gurney \(1847-1888\) and the study of hallucinations and hypnotism](#). *Medical History* 55, 383-88.

Sommer, A. (2012). [Psychical research and the origins of American psychology: Hugo Münsterberg, William James and Eusapia Palladino](#). *History of the Human Sciences* 25, 23-44.

Sommer, A. (2013a). *Crossing the Boundaries of Mind and Body. Psychical Research and the Origins of Modern Psychology*. [Unpublished PhD thesis.] University College London.

Sommer, A. (2013b). [Normalizing the supernormal: The formation of the "Gesellschaft für Psychologische Forschung" \("Society for Psychological Research"\), c. 1886-1890](#). *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 49, 18-44.

Sommer, A. (2013c). Spiritualism and the origins of modern psychology in late nineteenth-century Germany. The Wundt-Zöllner debate. In *The Spiritualist Movement: Speaking with the Dead in America and Around the World*, ed. by C.M. Moreman, vol. 1, 55-72. Santa Barbara, California, USA: Praeger.

Sommer, A. (2014). Psychical research in the history and philosophy of science. An introduction and review. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and*

Biomedical Sciences 48, 38-45.

Taylor, E. (1983). *William James on Exceptional Mental States. The 1896 Lowell Lectures*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Taylor, E. (1996). *William James: On Consciousness Beyond the Margin*. Princeton, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press.

Wallace, A.R. (1891). What are phantasms, and why do they appear? *Arena* 3, 257-74.

Williams, J.P. (1984). *The Making of Victorian Psychical Research: An Intellectual Elite's Approach to the Spiritual World*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, UK.

Williams, J.P. (1985). Psychical research and psychiatry in late Victorian Britain: trance as ecstasy or trance as insanity. In *The Anatomy of Madness. Essays in the History of Psychiatry. Volume 1*, ed. by W.F. Bynum, R. Porter, & M. Shepherd. *People and Ideas*, vol. 1, 233-54. London: Tavistock.

Wundt, W. (1879). Spiritualism as a scientific question. An open letter to Professor Hermann Ulrici, of Halle. *Popular Science Monthly* 15, 577-93.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). For useful biographical accounts of Gurney see Robertson (1890), Broad (1965), Gauld (1968), chapter 7; (2004), Williams (1984), and Epperson (1997). This article includes revised sections from a previous essay Sommer (2011).
- [2](#). Gurney (1880). The author of the last monographical study of Gurney, Gordon Epperson (1997), was a musicologist.
- [3](#). Gurney (1884d). James had proposed that emotions followed from bodily states rather than vice versa. James's belated reply to Gurney occurred in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), vol. 2, 469-70n.
- [4](#). See, for example, Gurney's review essay of J.R. Seeley's *Natural Religion* (Gurney, 1883).
- [5](#). Gurney (1887c), vol. 1, vii.
- [6](#). See, e.g., James's reviews of *Phantasms of the Living* (James) 1887 and *Tertium Quid* (James, 1888a), and a short obituary of Gurney (James, 1888b).
- [7](#). James to G.C. Robertson, 22 August 1888 (Skrupskelis & Berkeley (1992-2004), vol. 6, 429-30). See also James's similar letter to his brother Henry, 11 July 1888 (Skrupskelis & Berkeley (1992-2004), vol. 2, 88-89).
- [8](#). Oppenheim (1985), 4, 120.
- [9](#). On psychical research as psychology see Sommer (2013a), chapter 3). For a short time, the English brand of psychological experimentation as pursued by the SPR was influential even in conservative Germany, where the term 'Parapsychologie' was coined in the late 1880s cf. Sommer (2013b). On James and Flournoy's adopting Gurney's and Myers's research programme, see, e.g.,

Kelly et al. (2007), Taylor (1983, 1996), Shamdasani (1994), and Sommer (2013a), chapter 3.

- [10](#). Cf. Gurney (1884b, 1884c, 1887b).
- [11](#). Alvarado (2002). For an authoritative overview of Gurney's work in the psychology of hypnotism, see Gauld (1992) especially chapter 18.
- [12](#). See, for example, Janet (1886, 1889), Binet (1890, 1892), Dessoir (1890), James & Carnochan (1886), and James (1889).
- [13](#). On psychic phenomena associated with early animal magnetism and hypnotism, see [Eric Dingwall](#) (1986) and [Alan Gauld](#) (1992).
- [14](#). See, e.g., Gurney (1884a, 1887b). Reports of experiments suggesting a quasi-physical influence in some instances of hypnotism continued after Gurney's death but eventually petered out. Cf. [Carlos S Alvarado](#) (2009).
- [15](#). Cf. [William Barrett](#), Gurney, & Myers (1882), Gurney, Myers, & Barrett (1882; 1883), Gurney, Myers, [Frank Podmore](#) & Barrett (1883), Barrett et al. (1883a, 1883b), Barrett, Gurney, [Richard Hodgson](#), et al. (1883), Gurney (1884a, 1888a). For overviews of initial experimental studies conducted in England and elsewhere see Gurney, Myers, & Podmore (1886), vol. 1, chapter 2, and James (1899). Gurney's subsequent studies and theoretical reflexions are presented in his final papers on hypnotism, published in *Mind* and subsequently the *SPR Proceedings* (Gurney, 1887b, 1888a).
- [16](#). Gurney to James, 16 January 1887, in Skrupskelis & Berkeley (1992-2004), vol. 6, 193.
- [17](#). Gurney, Myers, Podmore, & Barrett (1883), Richet (1884). On the emergence of statistical inference in psychical research see also Hacking (1988), though his reconstructions suffer from uncritical reliance on Trevor Hall's account (see below) and other problematic secondary sources.
- [18](#). Cf. Gurney, Myers, & Podmore (1886), vol. 2, chapter 13.
- [19](#). Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, & Sidgwick (1894). William James (supported by Richard Hodgson) was responsible for the American portion of the Census and reported initial findings at the second International Congress of Psychology (see Sidgwick, Marillier, James, & Hodgson, 1892).
- [20](#). On the Victorian dogma of altered states of consciousness as inherently pathological and threatening to traditional notions of moral responsibility see, for example, Williams (1985), Chettiar (2012) and Sommer (2013a), chapter 4. For the religious and cultural backdrop of Carpenter's concept of 'unconscious cerebration' and related notions, which Gurney's work appeared to refute, see, e.g., Danziger (1982).
- [21](#). Worries of religious and epistemic deviance have been an organizing principle behind the formation of Western mainstream cultures. For historical studies illuminating the largely conservative religious stance of nineteenth-century university cultures and philosophies of science (including positivism), see, for example, Gregory (1977) and Daston (1978). Regarding the repudiation of empirical approaches to the 'occult' since the Enlightenment for theological, political and aesthetical rather than scientific reasons, see, e.g. Porter (1999), Daston & Park (1998), and Sommer (2013a), chapters 1 and 4.
- [22](#). Wundt (1879, 592). On Wundt's lifelong active opposition to psychical research see, e.g., Sommer (2013a), chapter 4; (2013c).

- [23](#). See, for example, the dispute between Gurney and Joseph Jastrow in *Science* (Gurney, 1887d; Jastrow, 1887a, 1887b). Related episodes have been documented in Coon (1992), Blum (2007), Taylor (1996), Sommer (2012); (2013a), chapter 4. Studying the marginalization of modern parapsychology in mainstream science, sociologists Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch (1979) likewise found a strong permeability of the supposedly fixed boundaries between formally academic and popular channels of information.
- [24](#). Gurney (1887a).
- [25](#). Gurney (1888b), 270.
- [26](#). Gurney, Myers, & Barrett (1882).
- [27](#). James (1897, 308-309). See also James's reference to the Creery trials in James (1899).
- [28](#). See, for example, Haughton (1886), Kiddle (1885), Noël (1885, 1886), Wallace (1891).
- [29](#). The notion of parapsychological research as an inherently pseudo-scientific endeavour has dominated professional discussions of the demarcation problem in the philosophy of science. For a concise review and historiographical critique of this literature see Sommer (2014).
- [30](#). Douglas Blackburn, Smith's former partner in hypnotic stage performances and some of the early SPR experiments in telepathic hypnotism, in fact claimed in newspaper articles that he and Smith had systematically bamboozled Gurney and colleagues.
- [31](#). Cf. Gauld (1965; 1968), 175, and chapter 7, Coleman (1992), Nicol (1966), and Hamilton (2009) especially 167-70. For Hall's acknowledgement of his debts to Gauld for supplying archival material concerning FWH. Myers, see Hall (1980), p. xviii.
- [32](#). 5 August 1889, in Edel (1982), 52.
- [33](#). Nicol (1966), 9.
- [34](#). In a letter to her brother William, dated 21 August 1888, Skrupskelis & Berkeley (1992-2004), vol. 6, 606.
- [35](#). As observed by some of Hall's critics, it was far from uncommon to self-administer chloroform for various ailments not only in medically trained persons such as Gurney, and late-nineteenth century newspapers and medical journals were replete with notes of accidental deaths through chloroform. William James also used chloroform to alleviate his insomnia. Regarding Gurney, on 7 October 1888 he wrote to GC. Robertson: "How often have I too taken chloroform to put myself to sleep!" (Skrupskelis & Berkeley, 1992-2004), vol. 6, 449.
- [36](#). The editors of William James' correspondence, for example, were obviously unfamiliar with relevant primary sources, let alone the criticisms of Hall by Gauld, Nicol and others, else they could not thought it 'likely that Gurney, upon learning that he had been tricked by some of his associates in psychical research, killed himself and that the English researchers led by Myers conspired to hush up the affair' or embraced Alice James' diary entry as 'significant'. Skrupskelis & Berkeley (1997), 200. They also found the absence of documents 'where there should have been many' suspicious (*loc. cit.*), but did not explain why there should have been many in the first place.